“Choking Down that Rage”: Rage, Rape, Riot and the Gender Politics of Black Resistance

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ABSTRACT

“Choking Down that Rage”: Rage, Rape, Riot and the Gender Politics of Black Resistance

James Baldwin famously stated, “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all of the time.” Baldwin identifies what Cornel West describes as the “existential dimension of black rage,” which suggests that rage is a key means of mediating blacks’ relationship to the physical and psychic violence of racism (100). I build on Baldwin’s understanding of the significance of rage to black life in my dissertation, “Choking Down that Rage”: Rage, Rape, Riot and the Gender Politics of Black Resistance. My project asserts that rage is an affective register through which black writers negotiate gender, identity, and national belonging. My argument breaks with the more commonly accepted perspective that black rage is a marker of pathology and is the property of the black male underclass. This common perspective is perhaps most evident in what is still the sole book-length examination of black rage, Black Rage (1968) by clinical psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, a book which received much attention upon its release in the aftermath of the racial riots that swept the country following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. bell hooks observes that Grier and Cobbs use their Freudian standpoint “to convince readers that rage was merely a sign of powerlessness. They named it pathological, explained it away. They did not urge the larger culture to see black rage as something other than sickness...” (12). My work expounds on hooks and seeks to intervene in this dismissal of rage: I posit that if racial violence serves to discipline the black subject into submission, then black rage—in its fierce insistence on the value of black life—represents a potentially transformative affective response and mode of political resistance.
To pursue my research questions and challenge the ways rage has been pathologized and identified as an affect of the masculine domain, I consider several literary and historical moments and movements in which rage figures as a mode of resistance to racism: The 1940s protest novels of key literary figures Richard Wright and Ann Petry, The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements (1954-1980), and lastly the artistic responses to the Rodney King beating and subsequent LA Riots (1992). I also consider the centrality of gender in constructions and expressions of rage. For example, my dissertation begins with a chapter that juxtaposes Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Anne Petry’s *The Street*. In subsequent chapters, I interrogate the registers of rage in such works as Alice Walker’s novel *Meridian*, the autobiography of Angela Davis, Nick Cave’s “Soundsuits” sculptures, and selections from Gangsta rap. I argue that there is an “ethics of rage.” In using this terminology, I call attention to the various dimensions of rage as a moral imperative, a philosophical principle, and a political strategy. My objective is to recuperate black rage as a useful and potentially healing affective response to racial terror.
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“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”

Philippians 4:13

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Sandra Ellis, whose brilliance and resilience inspires me.
# “Choking Down that Rage”:
Rage, Rape, Riot and the Gender Politics of Black Resistance

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Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore---

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over ---

Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes
INTRODUCTION

“Choking Down that Rage”:
Rage, Rape, Riot and the Gender Politics of Black Resistance

To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all of the time.

James Baldwin

The black artist in American society who creates without interjecting a note of anger is creating not as a black man, but as an American. For anger in black art is as old as the first utterances by black men on American soil.

Addison Gayle Jr.

Violence has always served a pedagogical purpose in black life. Witnessing violence enacted on the black body or hearing stories of white assaults on black humanity teaches the black subject that the ever-present threat of violence defines the black condition in America. African American literature and popular culture are replete with tales of witnessing, hearing, and even overhearing accounts of systemic violence and racial terror. Consider these familiar accounts: the iconic scene of Frederick Douglass witnessing the beating of Aunt Hester; Harriet Jacobs’ accounts of the daily indignities visited upon black women whose virtues go unprotected under the institution of slavery; Ida B. Wells’ *Red Record* of the shameful practice of lynching in the South; Malcolm X’s autobiography beginning with his mother’s account of the Ku Klux Klan’s visit to their home while he was in utero; the frequent recalling of the lynching of Emmett Till in various works such as Toni Morrison’s play *Dreaming Emmett* and Muhammed Ali’s
autobiography; Angela Davis’s reflections on the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist church and the horrific murder of four little girls (Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Roberston, and Denise McNair); Spike Lee’s use of the footage of the Rodney King beating in the opening of his film Malcolm X. The litany of examples is long. These recollections and accounts in literature and popular culture attest to the ways that violence is central to the black experience in America.

Blacks have undoubtedly experienced rage in response to this constant threat of arbitrary violence and racial terror. Black writers, artists, and theorists have employed rage as a means of mediating blacks’ relationship to violence. My dissertation, “Choking Down that Rage,” posits that if racial violence serves to discipline the black subject into submission, then black rage—in its fierce insistence on the value of black life—represents a potentially transformative affective response and mode of political resistance. Like Jose Munoz in his articulation of Latino identity in “Feeling Brown,” I am interested in the ways that blacks “‘feel’ differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register” (70). Specifically, I locate rage as an existential condition of blackness—that is, to borrow from James Baldwin, “to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all of the time” (Nat Hentoff Interview). Baldwin marks rage as not simply a visceral response but one rooted in “consciousness,” an awareness of one’s environment, existence, sensation, and thoughts. Baldwin’s quotation has generated a series of questions fundamental to this project: what does it feel like “to be in rage almost all of the time?” What does one do with this rage? Or, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, “How can rage be used?” (124) Can it be productively harnessed for transformative purposes or is it simply self-destructive?
My dissertation challenges the more commonly accepted perspective that black rage is a marker of pathology and is the property of the black underclass and males most specifically. This perspective is perhaps most evident in what is still the sole book-length examination of black rage, the 1968 text *Black Rage* by clinical psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs. Their study received much attention upon its release in the aftermath of the racial riots that swept the country following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Grier and Cobbs grappled with national anxieties about black rage, and particularly the potential that it could escalate into more rioting and violence. It is important to note that Grier and Cobbs were writing at a moment when other blacks, particularly Black Power proponents, were proffering black rage as a tool of black liberation. In many ways, although their reading of rage was more palatable to the larger American public, Grier and Cobbs were going against the tide, against those who saw psychic and political profit in rage.

Revisiting *Black Rage* roughly twenty-five years following its publication, bell hooks challenged the authors’ Freudian approach, along with their efforts “to convince readers that rage was merely a sign of powerlessness” (*Killing Rage* 12). She argued that Grier and Cobbs failed to “urge the larger culture to see black rage as something other than sickness, to see it as a potentially healthy, potentially healing response to oppression and exploitation” (12). In *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, hooks instead imagines rage as a potentially healing and transformative affect. She asserts that blacks must “claim our emotional subjectivity and that we could do this only by claiming our rage” (16).

Like bell hooks, I argue that rage is a key emotional register through which blacks navigate and interpret the material reality of racism and exploitation. I argue that rage should not be disavowed but reclaimed, as it is personally useful and politically purposeful. As hooks
observes, “Racial hatred is real. And it is humanizing to be able to resist it with militant rage” (17). Recuperating rage from the ways it has been identified with powerlessness is a key aim of this project.

Critics studying rage must confront the question of rage’s relationship to other emotions as well as the possibility that rage may find inappropriate targets. In *Shame and the Exposed Self*, Michael Lewis argues that “Rage […] is the response to prolonged shaming” (149). Classifying rage as foremost a negative and abject emotion, he continues, “People who are continuously shamed by others can develop rage. This rage may be expressed toward those causing them shame or displayed to others for a variety of reasons: the other may be too powerful, the other may pose a physical threat, the other may be someone for whom rage would be incompatible with other feelings, etc” (151). Lewis suggests that rage might be a displacement of other “negative” emotions, specifically shame, and may be misdirected to inappropriate targets, particularly when the shamed individual is in a powerless position. Emotions are not bounded or discrete; rather they can bleed into each other. For example, shame can be masked through rage, and even grief can erupt into rage. In my analysis of rage, I engage the ways, as Michael Lewis suggests, that rage may be a manifestation of other emotions as well as the moments rage finds inappropriate targets.

Still, I contend that the danger lies not in rage but in the repression of rage—in choking it down. Choking down rage represents what I call “affective asphyxiation,” an emotional self-policing that is not only self-destructive but may result in rage being misdirected to non-whites as surrogates for racists. Reflecting on her upbringing in the apartheid South where “we learned to choke down our rage” (*Killing Rage* 13), hooks observes, “If black folks did strange, weird, or even brutally cruel acts now and then in our neighborhoods … we did not link this event to the
myriad abuses and humiliations black folks suffered daily … Rage was reserved for life at home—for one another” (13). hooks identifies episodes in which repressed rage erupts into violent and destructive behaviors rather than constructive measures. She recounts episodes of intra-racial violence, “strange, weird, or even brutally cruel acts now and then in the neighborhood” in which someone would “cut someone to pieces over a card game,” or “shoot someone over for looking at them the wrong way” (14). Similarly, Audre Lorde notes, “In the 1960s, the awakened anger of the Black community was often expressed, not vertically against the corruption of power and true sources of control over our lives, but horizontally toward those closest to us who mirrored our own impotence. We were poised for attack, not always in the most effective places” (135-6). Lorde points out the dangers of misplaced rage: rather than attacking the power structure, rage is turned inwards to the self or the community with dangerous outcomes. Angela Davis, in her autobiography, recounts tales of black-on-black violence that she attributes to misdirected rage internalized as self-hatred. Still, these theorists assert and affirm the validity and ethics of anger and rage. Audre Lorde eloquently declares, “My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life. Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing, also” (124).

There is often slippage in the language of anger and rage, terms used at times interchangeably in the works I explore, including in Lorde’s theorizing of the use of anger. This is due in part to the ways that rage and anger function similarly in the cultural imaginary. The Handbook of Cognition and Emotion 1999 argues that rage is anger in its heightened form, that “anger ranges along a dimension of intensity, from frustration and annoyance to rage” (cited in
Kim 16). In my use of the terms, rage functions as accumulated anger. Rather than fear black rage, I echo Audre Lorde in asking what it can teach us.

“Choking Down that Rage” examines black rage as a phenomenon that is varied in its expressions and therefore must be explored through various frameworks: affective, ideological, political, and cultural. My work is particularly informed by developments in the study and theorizing of emotions and affects more largely. With the 2005 publication of *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai ushered in a new era of interrogating “negative” affects. In this work, she examines “‘minor and generally unprestigious feelings’ rather than ‘grander passions like anger and fear’” (6), engaging with these seemingly useless emotions in order to think through the ways that they inform our understanding of aesthetics, late modernity, race, and gender. Much of the contemporary work on emotions focuses on the more grand of the so-called negative emotions like anger and fear, or on those virtuous emotions like compassion, which have important political functions. Queer theorists in particular have been invested in recuperating such abject affects as shame, Darieck Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* being especially noteworthy. This text and works by such thinkers as Lauren Berlant (*Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*), Sara Ahmed (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*), Heather Love (*Feeling Backward*), and Sue Kim (*On Anger: Race, Cognition, Narrative*) are invested in interrogating the political life of emotions by considering the ways that emotions are “culturally and ideologically laden” (Kim 1). These works question the ways that emotions are politically employed to construct notions of race, identity, power, and citizenship. Most importantly, these theorists are committed to challenging the ways that emotions have been divorced from reason and the ways emotions can be redeployed by marginalized groups for subversive and resistant purposes.
In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explores the ways emotions are ideologically manipulated and policed through a hegemonic discourse that constructs emotions as antithetical to reason: “The story of evolution is narrated not only as the story of triumph of reason but of the ability to control emotions, and to experience the 'appropriate' emotions at different times and places” (3). Historically, a person’s ability to bring emotion under subjection is a marker of civilization; those unable to tame their unruly emotions are deemed savage. This taxonomy of emotions also informs ideas of racial hierarchy. Consider Thomas Jefferson’s suggestions, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, that blacks are inferior not only physically but also emotionally because they are only capable of base emotions, those emotions governed by the body and not the mind.¹ Ahmed further notes that, “Within contemporary culture, emotions may even be represented as good or better than thought, but only insofar as they are represented as a form of intelligence, as ‘tools’ that can be used by subjects in the project of life and career enhancement. If good emotions are cultivated, and are worked on and towards, then they remain defined against uncultivated or unruly emotions, which frustrate the formation of the competent self” (3). As unruly emotions become synonymous with unruly bodies, so black rage is constructed as undisciplined emotion in undisciplined bodies.

In fact, emotions are socially constructed and ideologically employed. In other words, they are raced, gendered, and classed in the interpretation of their merit and expression. Sue Kim’s study *On Anger* is particularly insightful for my work because anger functions similarly to rage in the cultural imaginary. Anger is often seen as something beyond reason; the characterization of someone as angry can serve to invalidate the merits of his or her affective experience as well as his or her argument. The assumption is that angry emotional responses are not grounded in reason or logical deduction and therefore do not have to be taken seriously. As

¹Jefferson offers a comparison of the physical and emotional distinctions between blacks and whites as
Kim rightly observes, this narrative of anger as antithetical to reason is particularly common in
dismissals of women and racial others as overly sensitive. Indeed, the language of “overly
sensitive” is informative as it underscores the ways that racial others are seen as “affectively
excessive” or emotionally extravagant. This language of excess also reveals the ways that
affective expressions are policed for possible trespassing beyond the normative boundaries of
expression. Jose Munoz contends that a part of being American is “feeling right,” performing a
“national affect” (69). He asserts, “this ‘official’ national affect, a mode of being in the world
primarily associated with white middle-class subjectivity, reads most ethnic affects as
inappropriate. Whiteness is a cultural logic which can be understood as an affective code that
positions itself as the law” (69). As an affective code, whiteness insists that racial others perform
the appropriate affect, or “feel right,” to become a part of the American body. Feeling right or
feeling American is often associated with a performance of national pride and patriotism that
resists critiquing the narrative of American exceptionalism. While dissent and critique are seen
as foundational to the American identity, racial minorities are not allowed the luxury of
critiquing the nation, or airing its dirty racial laundry. 2

In the American cultural imagery, rage is often constructed as affectively excessive, an
undisciplined emotion that cannot be contained. Like the black body itself, rage is seen as unruly,

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2 This was certainly at work in the characterization of Michelle Obama as an angry black woman and
unpatriotic when she expressed that “For the first time in my adult life I am really proud of my country.”
Obama was criticized ultimately because she did not “feel right”—in this case, “really proud” of her country
prior to this statement at a Wisconsin gathering following the Iowa caucus. Fox News Anchor Bill O’Reilly
would underscore the political stakes of “feeling right” when he remarked, “I don’t want to go on a lynching
party against Michelle Obama unless there are hard facts this is how the woman really feels.” O’Reilly’s
employment of the language of a “lynching party” is symbolic here as lynching is a practice associated with
the repression of black resistance often masked through an accusation of sexual transgression (rape of a
white woman); here the suggestion is that black feelings like black bodies can be politically punished for
transgressing, be it racial, economic, or affective lines. In this case, black dissent or critique of the nation is
seen as transgressive of patriotic lines, the mode of feeling American being that of national pride and an
investment in American exceptionalism. Michelle Obama is castigated for challenging this narrative and
national identity in her remarks.
a trespassing emotion that intrudes on reason and is excessive in its expression: excessively loud, excessively violent. Unlike outrage, which is a more palatable affect, a more polite and disciplined feeling, rage is often seen as offensive and inappropriate. As Kim notes, “Outrage, however, can be a conscious ethical choice based on collectively articulated group norms, such as justice and human rights, which can also lead to political engagement with the world” (12). Kim rightly observes that outrage is “outwardly” determined and based on community or collective norms. Most importantly, outrage is determined by the category of the human. Indeed, because outrage is an acceptable response to perceived wrongs, it is often expected, even required. It is not, however, broadly applicable, as rage and more specifically black rage are outlawed at least symbolically speaking, and widely considered impolite, undignified, unorganized, and dangerous. Outrage is foreclosed to blacks because it is dependent on an agreed upon set of beliefs about what is of value and who constitutes a sympathetic subject. The directive “you should be outraged” is predicated on your qualification as a worthy subject of sympathy—as Judith Butler asks in Precarious Life, what constitutes a grievable life? We are called to be outraged in defense of those who are of value and are considered vulnerable to abuse or neglect, victims. But what if a group is denied vulnerability or victimhood? Can we be outraged in defense of discarded people, those who don't matter? It is not a coincidence that the contemporary protest against the killing of unarmed blacks often deemed unsympathetic through their characterization as “thugs” is called Black Lives Matter. Blacks have been denied personhood and therefore denied the right to outrage. It is for this reason that I insist on a study of blackness and rage.

Through an examination of various texts and cultural productions, including novels, autobiography, video recordings and documentaries, and visual art (Nick Cave’s fabric
sculptures), my project asserts the centrality of emotions, and specifically the affective register of rage, as one among a range of possible strategies of resistance for marginalized peoples. To pursue my research questions and challenge the ways rage has been pathologized and identified as affect of the masculine domain and property of the black underclass, I consider several literary and historical movements in which rage figures as a mode of resistance to racism: The 1940s protest novels of two key literary figures, Richard Wright and Ann Petry, The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements (1954-1980), and lastly the Rodney King beating and subsequent LA Riots (1992). I also consider the centrality of gender in constructions and expressions of rage. My dissertation insists that we must engage rage in three key ways: 1) as an existential condition of blackness, 2) as a radical ethic or affect of protest, 3) as a hegemonic discourse/ideology that seeks to police and pathologize black expressions of discontent. In my interrogation of rage as an existential condition of blackness, or a mode of “feeling black” (to signify on Jose Munoz), I examine the ways that rage is an affective register through which blacks negotiate race, identity, gender, and national belonging. I am interested in the question of How does it feel to be in rage all the time? Secondly, I consider rage as an expression of protest against racism and state violence. I am interested in ways that black artists articulate what I call “the ethics of rage.” In using this terminology, I call attention to the various dimensions of rage as a moral imperative, a philosophical principle, as well as a political strategy. Specifically, I engage the way that rage operates as an affect of protest. It is a fierce insistence on the value of black life that is politically channeled and rhetorically employed in two key ways: 1) the advocacy of the right to bear arms and self-defense as a means of protecting black life and 2) the protests, declarations, and rhetoric of movements that insist on the value of black life, perhaps most evident in the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement but certainly having its antecedents in the work of such thinkers
as Henry Highland Garnet, Ida B. Wells, Malcolm X, and many others. Here I consider these questions: How do you use your rage? How is rage politically marshaled and communally experienced and expressed? Lastly, I consider the ways that black rage is employed as a stereotypical characterization of blacks as overly sensitive and emotionally unruly. Discourses of black rage as violent and irrational serve to police and pathologize black expressions of discontent, invalidating black rage in order to negate its political consciousness and ethical imperative.

The title of the dissertation “Choking Down that Rage” reflects the ways that rage is often represented through a language and metaphor of affective asphyxiation. Specifically, the title is borrowed from bell hook’s reading of the emotional life of Lutie Johnson, Ann Petry’s protagonist in The Street. hooks suggests that Lutie Johnson speaks to a larger black condition in her iteration that “Everyday we are choking down that rage” (Killing Rage 12). I use this motif to interrogate the ways that rage is an existential condition of blackness and an affective response to racism. In this instance, Lutie polices her own affective experience by “choking down that rage” because rage is seen as an inappropriate and unacceptable emotion to express as a black woman. The act of “choking down” rage represents what I call “affective asphyxia,” a violent image of intentional suffocation or stifling to prevent the ability to cry out or protest in ways deemed angry or violent. This manner of affective asphyxia is a reoccurring trope in characterizations of rage and is therefore a very useful theoretical framework for analysis of how it feels to be in rage all the time.

Rage is often figured through a language of asphyxiation: “choking down,” “smothering,” images of confinement and claustrophobia such as “back against the wall.” In his essay “Black Men and Public Spaces,” Brent Staples suggests that he must “smother his rage” at
being presumed a criminal by the white gaze in public spaces. He imagines that failing to do so “would surely lead to madness.” This self-policing of affective expression is a central way of gaining access to American citizenship; as Jose Munoz contends, “Standard models of United States citizenship are based on national affect” (69) and this national affect is one that reproduces norms of white middle class respectability. Blacks who fail to self-police may be externally policed; blacks who defiantly express their rage may have their rage literally and forcibly choked down. The chokehold practice of policing is an important site for interrogating the policing of black rage and expressions of protest, and I will address this practice in my reading of the chokehold death of Radio Raheem in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* as well as the chokehold death of Eric Garner, which led to the use of his final words “I can’t breathe!” as a rallying cry in the Black Lives Matter Movement. I locate the chokehold as practice of disciplining the unruly black body; the chokehold is the genealogical extension of the lyncher’s rope.

My first chapter is titled, “When One’s Back is Against the Wall: Theorizing Rap(g)e in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Ann Petry’s *The Street.*” I begin with the figure of Bigger Thomas whom Franz Fanon hails as “the prototype of black rage.” However, in juxtaposing Bigger Thomas with Petry’s Lutie Johnson, I challenge the ways that rage has been located as an affect of the masculine domain. While Lutie, as a respectable mother with middle class aspirations, appears to be an unlikely character of rage, “*The Street* is a portrait of black rage” (hooks, *Remembered Rapture* 204). Both novels catalog the daily indignities confronted by blacks in Jim Crow America. In pairing these novels, I will trace the metaphors of confinement best exemplified in the reoccurring trope of the “wall,” featured in both texts. But most importantly, I will reveal the ways that confinement is not only representative of their racial and economic condition but also their emotional condition, which is also constrained and stifled.
Petry and Wright reveal the way that Jim Crow Law punishes any expression of black rage, anger, or dissent. Specifically, I consider the language of affective asphyxiation through the images of emotional suffocation and “choking down that rage.” I interrogate the language and violent imagery of “choking down that rage” as marking rage as the existential condition of blackness as well as the ways that it represents a policing of one’s emotional subjectivity. Like the physical act of choking, choking down rage proves deadly. These novels help us to understand “how it feels to be in rage all the time” and the ways that rage is negotiated by black men and women in the Jim Crow era.

In the second chapter, “Presenting Our Bodies, Laying Our Case: The Political Efficacy of Grief and Rage During the Civil Rights Movement in Alice Walker’s Meridian,” I examine the political efficacy of rage in a historical moment when black rage is the required and telegraphed black affect. Significantly, Walker began to write Meridian in 1970 at a moment of disillusionment with the aspirations of the Civil Rights Movement and the growing fervor of The Black Power Movement. Whereas the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement called for suppressing any feeling of rage, and instead taking on the cloak of humility, the Black Power Movement sought to marshal that same rage and in fact to stoke it towards nationalist and revolutionary ends. Meridian treats both poles: the cost of the heroic suffering where rage is exchanged for often public displays of humility and mourning as well as the cost of staging “violent” rage as the basis for revolutionary commitment. Heather Love observes that, “For groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it” (1); and this is the work that Alice Walker undertakes in Meridian, through engaging the psychic and corporeal casualties of the Civil Rights Movement. Informed by Douglas Crimp’s "Mourning and Militancy,” I engage the ways that rage is related to another politically marshaled affect,
grief. Examining the novel’s use of eulogy in the reoccurring trope of the dead child and the litany of names of martyred activists, I demonstrate the way that the novel importantly critiques the mode of disciplining one’s affective expression, “choking down that rage,” and subjecting one’s body to violence, especially as a testimony of suffering to awaken the nation’s conscience.

In the third chapter, “‘A Proper and Properly Placed Rage:’ Rage as a Radical Ethic in the Autobiography of Angela Davis,” I continue my engagement with the political efficacy and ethics of rage in my examination of the autobiography of Angela Davis. Like Alice Walker’s *Meridian, Angela Davis: An Autobiography* details the rage and grief produced by experiences of racial violence; Davis’ autobiography is replete with references to these emotions. While she recuperates rage as source of psychic healing and political transformation, she also acknowledges the danger when rage turns inward or finds inappropriate targets. In theorizing the radical ethic of rage, Davis asserts the importance of what she deems “a proper and properly placed rage” (319), one that is rooted in shared social anger rather than a repressed rage that can have destructive outcomes when unacknowledged or misdirected. For Davis, rage must be effectively mobilized through political action.

In foregrounding an analysis of Davis’s autobiography as a philosophy of black rage, I seek to challenge the ways that rage has been gendered and classed. Davis, a daughter of the black middle class, was often imagined as an inappropriate and unlikely vessel of black rage because of her gender and class. I question the ways that the association of rage with the “unruly black male body” serves to strip rage of its validity and merit. Even theorists of rage who reclaim the affect as a site of cultural recovery, often identify it with the masculine subject as in Cornel West ‘s hailing of Malcolm X as “the prophet of black rage—then and now” (95). I question, what materializes if we locate Davis as also a prophet of rage? How might her autobiography
reveal a theory of rage that has implications of our current moment? Moreover, identifying Davis, a black female academic, as a “prophet of black rage” serves not only to complicate the ways that rage is often gendered and classed but also affirms its intellectual and ethical grounding.

In the final chapter, “When Fear and Weapons Meet”: Fear, Rage, and Black Bodies in Public Space, I consider the ways that racialized narratives of danger work as justification for the assault of black bodies “when fear and weapons meet” (Staples 19). I borrow this language, “when fear and weapons meet,” from Brent Staples’ essay “Black Men and Public Spaces” which is one of the most widely read—and provocative—pieces interrogating black men’s navigation and negotiation of public spaces. While the essay offers an account of Staples’ personal experience as a black man navigating public spaces in Chicago, I believe this essay has important insights into the ways fear (of the black body) and rage operate in interracial encounters where black bodies (male and female) are (mis)read as threatening. To consider the workings of fear of the black body and rage, I turn to a consideration of the discourse of fear of the black body in the trials and verdicts of the Rodney King and Latasha Harlins cases. I juxtapose these cases for several reasons, which I will further elaborate on in the chapter: together, they underscore the way black men become symbols of violence and highlight the evacuation of black women’s experiences; the cases foreground narratives of fear that shape emotions and perceptions; and these cases spawned a proliferation of artistic responses that engage with fear and rage.

I am interested in the ways that works engaging these cases reveal a critique of these racialized narratives of danger, demonstrate the vulnerability of the black body in public spaces, and offer rage as a radical ethic, as a creative and political response to racial terror. I begin with a
consideration of playwright Anna Deavere Smith *Twilight, Los Angeles*, a form she calls documentary theatre. *Twilight* engages the racial tensions surrounding the verdicts for both cases and the L.A. Uprising. I engage the work of gangsta rapper Ice Cube’s *The Predator*, in its theorizing of fear, violence, and rage in the cases of Harlins and King and the subsequent uprising. Finally, I examine visual and performance artist Nick Cave’s *Soundsuit* entitled “Twigs,” which is inspired by his witnessing of the videotaped beating of Rodney King. I examine the ways that Nick Cave articulates rage through the discordant sound produced by his *Soundsuit*, a kind of sonic armor to both protect the black body and protest its mistreatment.

The discourses in these cases have important implications for the current moment as the vulnerability of black bodies in public spaces becomes ever more pressing with escalating and lethal forms of police brutality and the discourse of “clear and present danger” that is often employed as justification for deadly force by police officers and vigilante citizens.

In the coda, I interrogate the contemporary discourse on rage. The growing discontent with relations expressed in reactions to Florida’s Stand Your Ground law following the shooting of Trayvon Martin and and more recently following the lack of indictments in the murder of Michael Brown Jr. and the police chokehold death of Eric Garner have brought the subject of black rage and its usefulness back into the forefront of American discourse. The language and underlining ideology of this discourse often polices and pathologizes black expressions of rage, anger, and discontent. I engage the rhetoric, ethical and political commitment, and strategies of the Black Lives Matter movement to investigate the ethics and existential condition of rage and the ways that it represents both a site of "mourning and militancy" and affective asphyxiation. The Black Lives Matter movement shows the way that the assault on black humanity persists and the ways that it is state sanctioned through police practices of brutality, the chokehold practice,
and laws like Stand Your Ground that allow vigilante citizens to justify assaults on black humanity through the narrative of “clear and present danger,” when fear [of the black body] and weapons meet” to deadly consequences (Staples 19).

The Black Lives Matter movement represents a political and rhetorical employment of rage through the fierce insistence on the value of black life evident in its declaration and philosophical principle of "Black Lives Matter." Moreover, the use of “I Can’t Breathe” hashtags, signs, and protest chants following the chokehold death of Eric Garner reveals the affective asphyxia of rage and the policing of the black emotional subjectivity. Blacks must either choke down their rage or risk being be choked by police and others who find their bodies threatening. hooks correctly observes that White supremacy and racial violence is the “real present danger—not black rage” (30). My objective is to challenge the discourse of rage as pathology and recuperate black rage as a useful and potentially healing affective response to racial terror.

On Race and Feeling

The subject of race and feeling has been a central one in African American thought and literary production. Perhaps the most famous articulation of race and feeling comes in the form of W.E.B Du Bois’ articulation of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk*, which comes as an answer to the unasked question of “How does it feel to be a problem?”(emphasis added 9). Du Bois formulates double consciousness as a feeling. He asserts, “One ever feels his two-ness,---an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”(emphasis added 9). Being black is a violent feeling of being “torn asunder.” It may be said that these warring ideals are related to the difficulty of choking down one’s rage, anger,
frustration—reflecting the psychic trauma of resisting one’s emotional expression.

Offering insight on blackness and emotions, Zora Neale Hurston famously reflected on how it feels to be colored, in her autobiographical essay “How It feels to Be Colored Me.” With her characteristic wit, Hurston declares, “Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company. It’s beyond me” (155). Hurston’s resolve to disavow anger is informative as it reveals the ways that anger is recognized, perhaps in Hurston’s mind, as the expected response to discrimination. In fact, anger is what Audre Lorde declares as her response to racism. Amiri Baraka in his construction of Black National Consciousness suggests that the key to revolutionary change is feeling. He asserts, “If we feel differently, we have different ideas. Race is feeling ... Art is one method of expressing these feelings and identifying the form as an emotional phenomenon” (166). Baraka’s claim that “race is feeling,” invites the question: what feeling is blackness? Emotions have important political consequences as well as personal implications for how we live and experience or lives. Black thinkers and writers continue to grapple with this question of how it feels to be black in America. I submit this dissertation as my contribution to this intellectual discourse and personal musing.

This work is deeply personal, as I try to navigate my own emotional subjectivity and what it means to be deemed an angry black woman before I ever open my mouth. For a long time, I hid from that characterization not realizing that "My fear of anger taught me nothing" (124). While anger and rage are not the full range of my emotional experience, they are undoubtedly part of it. Labels like “angry black woman” serve to invalidate my anger and rage and disassociate them from the institutional and systemic forces that produce them. This work helps me to reclaim my own rage at racism and injustice, to use my rage to inform my research
questions, methodology, and pedagogy. This work allows me to imagine the creative and restorative potential of my rage and the black rage that countless blacks feel on a daily basis.
And there is, I should think, no Negro living in America who has not felt, briefly
or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees and to varying
effect, simple, naked and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any
white face he may encounter in a day, to violate, out of motives of the cruelest
vengeance, their women, to break the bodies of all white people and bring them
low, as low as that dust into which he himself has been and is being trampled; no
Negro, finally, who has not had to make his own precarious adjustment to the
'nigger' who surrounds him and to the 'nigger' in himself.

James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

In “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch,” Richard Wright
illustrates and enumerates the daily indignities of black life in Jim Crow America. Moreover, he
details the many strategies for survival that black people develop to navigate racial terror. These
strategies include a manipulating conduct, dress, speech, and even eye contact in the presence of
whites, but most importantly for my purpose, Wright demonstrates the centrality of policing
one’s affective expression to survive. He questions the “ethics” of an existence under oppression:
what are “the ethics of living Jim Crow?”

In an illustrative story of a childhood battle between the black boys of his neighborhood
and the white boys who lived across the tracks, Wright shows the way one’s emotional
subjectivity is disciplined from an early age. The sketch begins with the line, “My first lesson on
how to live as a Negro came when I was quite small” (“The Ethics” 23). What is interesting is how much of this lesson is about what feelings are considered appropriate to express and display. This account underscores that how to feel as a Negro cannot be divorced from “how to live as a Negro” (23). The fight ends with three stitches to Wright’s head, since the white boys fought with harmful glass bottles in contrast to the relatively innocuous black cinders available to Wright and his friends. After a neighbor takes him to the doctor for medical attention, Wright describes, “I sat brooding on my front steps nursing my wound and waiting for my mother to come home from work. I felt that a grave injustice had been done me [emphasis added]” (23).

However, to Wright’s surprise and chagrin, when he relays this story to his mother, she does not meet him with the anticipated compassion but rather with a firm slap. He reflects on her response, “I was outraged, and bawled” (24). Her chastisement did not end there. He recounts, “She grabbed a barrel stave, dragged me home, stripped me naked, and beat me till I had a fever of one hundred and two. She would smack my rump with the stave, and, while the skin was still smarting, impart to me gems of Jim Crow wisdom ... I was never, never, under any condition, to fight white folks again [emphasis in original text]” (24). This scene is perversely reminiscent of the familiar whipping scene in slave narratives. His mother’s disciplinary method recalls that of the slave breaker; she strips him naked, applies force “while the skin was still smarting,” while reinforcing that defiance against and especially fighting with whites would not be tolerated. But these “gems of Jim Crow wisdom” are not only about conduct or how to be “a good boy” and never “fight white folks again”; significantly, the wisdom his mother imparts is also about how to feel appropriately, how to be “grateful” because, as his mother suggests, “[the white boys] were absolutely right in clouting me with the broken milk bottle ... and that I ought to be thankful to God as long as I lived that they didn’t kill me” (24). This state of gratitude for mere survival
not only to God but also to whites, who have the right to brutalize and kill the black body, is in direct opposition to the feeling of outrage and defiance Wright initially harbors. The mother’s discipline is not only physical but also emotional: She teaches him not only how to act but how to feel in order to survive as a black man under Jim Crow. She teaches him that fighting a white man is tantamount to suicide. Young Wright learns that the kind of outrage he felt at the “injustice” he experienced is a feeling that is foreclosed to him.

After offering various sketches of racial violence, including verbal and physical threats, humiliation, the constant anxiety and fear of brutality, and “the dread of being caught alone on the streets alone of a white neighborhood after the sun has set” (28), Wright ends with this meditation:

_How do Negroes feel about the way they have to live?_ [emphasis added] How do they discuss it when alone among themselves? I think this question can be answered in a single sentence. A friend of mine who ran an elevator once told me:

"Lawd, man! Ef it wuzn't fer them polices 'n' them ol' lynch-mobs, there wouldn't be nothin' but uproar down here!" (32)

It is a sense of defiance and rage, identified as “uproar,” that Wright locates as the hidden emotional life of blacks confronted with the brutality of racism – and these feelings are expressed only when “alone among themselves” (32). It is this question of “How do Negroes feel about the way they have to live?” (32) that Richard Wright continues to interrogate in his 1940 novel _Native Son_, which I argue is foremost a novel about black feelings. In this novel, Wright investigates the nature of the affective heritage of the black American.

The significance of Bigger Thomas as a literary figure has been well documented. In his introduction to _Native Son_, for example, Arnold Rampersad argues, “no one quite like Bigger
Thomas had ever been seen before the publication of *Native Son*” (xi). In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright writes of his intention to create a character that would “loom as a symbolic figure of American life” (447). With the publication and critical success of *Native Son*, Richard Wright was recognized as what Laurence P. Jackson describes as “the point man for black defiance in the 1940s.” (125). In *Indignant Generation*, Jackson suggests, “The *Native Son* effect --- really Bigger Thomas effect --- stimulated an enormous growth in the consciousness in American audiences and publishers” (125). *Native Son* in many ways became canonized as the representative work of black writers of the mid-twentieth century. Through this critical success, Richard Wright influenced the aesthetic choices and political interventions of a generation of writers who collectively navigated and negotiated the literary turns, aesthetic, and political concerns of segregation and the publishing market from mid 1930s through 1960.3

The ghost of Bigger Thomas has been especially evident in twentieth century popular culture. In such black films as *Boyz N the Hood* and such gangsta rap figures as Ice Cube and Biggie Smalls, one finds the ghost of Bigger Thomas.4 As Aimee Ellis suggests in *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls*, Bigger is the iconic figure of the “bad nigger,” whose symbolic import serves to bridge the past and the present; Bigger bridges “the nineteenth and early twentieth-century southern folktales of Stackolee and the ‘urbanizing’ black popular culture depicted in the ‘raunchy’ blues traditions of the Mississippi Delta and Chicago of the 1940s and 1950s ... [and] the modern-day hip-hop culture of hard-core and gangsta rap across urban America” (18). Largely because of his symbolic and enduring import, as well his

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3 Laurence P. Jackson’s study *The Indignant Generation* offers a comprehensive engagement of the ways writers and literary critics of what Jackson calls the Indignant generation, New Deal to pre Black Power and Nationalism, navigate the political landscape, racial politics, and aesthetic concerns of their era.

4 Hip hop culture and films like *Boyz N the Hood* represent the sociality and community, however vexed, evident in Bigger’s relationship to Jack, Gus, and J.H. These spaces are important in the development of urban, black male identity, as Farah Jasmine Griffin notes, “signifying and street culture provide a space where [Bigger and his predecessors] can claim verbal and physical authority denied him the white world” (125).
recognition as the quintessential figure of black rage, I begin my interrogation of (black) rage with Bigger Thomas. While certainly not the first literary figure to express or embody rage, Bigger is arguably the most famous. But while an examination of Bigger Thomas in the context of black rage appears both expedient and essential, I want to question what is lost by designating Bigger Thomas the prototype of black rage. What happens if we identify Ann Petry’s Lutie Johnson as the literary embodiment of black rage? In other words, what happens if we cease to view rage as a masculinist affect?

Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) is commonly read in relation to Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, specifically as a critique of Wright’s characterization of black female subjectivity. Black feminist scholars have been especially critical of Wright’s novel for its portrayal of black womanhood. Much the focus of their critique is Wright’s characterization of the rape and murder of Bessie Mears. Such critiques are certainly warranted. In order to counterbalance Wright’s problematic and reductive treatment of Bessie Mears, feminist scholars have turned to Ann Petry, in whose novel *The Street* some have found a more complex treatment of black womanhood and of black women’s experience, especially in the character of Lutie Johnson. Petry’s achievement in *The Street* extends beyond her creation of a complex and developed black female subject; her theory of rage in this novel, I would argue, provides a productive intervention into Wright’s masculinist reading of rage. Wright’s rage is inherited, from the African American literary tradition, broadly speaking, which has tended to privilege rage as the domain of the masculine. In this domain, black women are merely victims of violence, never agents of resistance. Lutie, as the respectable mother with middle class aspirations and a Benjamin Franklin-inspired work ethic, seems an unlikely character of rage, especially when compared to the menacing figure of Bigger Thomas. Yet *The Street*, as bell hooks suggests, is a “portrait of
black rage” (*Remembered Rapture* 204). Lutie complicates the ways that rage is classed and
gendered. Lutie Johnson may be the first black female character to exercise violence and display
a “killing rage” in defense of her person. Her experience invites us to ask what happens to our
understanding and construction of black rage and retributive violence if we place Lutie Johnson
at the center of our analysis?

While receiving favorable notices when it appeared, and some scholarly attention since,
Ann Petry’s *The Street* has not garnered the same degree of scholarly attention and criticism as
has *Native Son*. The fact that scholars have focused on—and often valorized—Bigger’s acts of
violence, placing him at the center of a masculinist struggle in African American literature,
further explains the inattention to Petry. I suggest that Ann Petry’s *The Street* affords us an
opportunity to rethink the structures of this literary tradition.

Both novels speak to the question that Wright posits in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,”
“How do Negroes feel about the way they have to live?” (32). Petry and Wright are invested in
theorizing black emotional subjectivity as their protagonists are faced with racial violence and
capitalist exploitation. Wright’s interest in emotions is immediately apparent in the first book of
*Native Son*, which is entitled “Fear.” But more generally, *Native Son* and *The Street* are littered
with references to emotions including fear, shame, resentment, hatred, anger, and most
importantly rage as a response to oppression. Both novels catalog the daily indignities
confronted by blacks in a racist, capitalist society. Through naturalist imagery and aesthetics,
they illustrate the quotidian nature of violence in urban, black life. While these novels are not

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5 In “Who Set You Flowin’?” Farah Jasmine Griffin notes that Petry’s novel was the first by a black woman to sell
over a million copies and that “Much of her success resulted from the novel’s resemblance to Wright’s realist classic
*Native Son*.” This association also proved negative, as the novel was criticized by male literary critics who “deemed
it lacking in the realism of Wright and Chester Himes” (114). Griffin suggests that this critical comparison is
unwarranted, as “In its departure from the naturalism of Wright ... Petry’s novel expands the means of representing
the black, urban female experience” (114).
traditional migration narratives in the sense of depicting the migrant’s first encounter with the
urban landscape, these novels do interrogate what Farah Jasmine Griffin describes as “an
illustration of the [protagonist’s] attempt to negotiate the landscape and his or her resistance to
the negative effects of urbanization,” as well as a vision of the limitations of the Midwestern
(Chicago) and Northern (Harlem) city (3). Wright and Petry show the ways that violence,
racism, and exploitation (particularly sexual oppression in the case of The Street) extend to these
urban landscapes of Chicago and Harlem through depictions of poverty and lack of employment
opportunities, as well as the psychic and corporeal effects on the novel’s subjects. Lutie
poignantly reflects, “Streets like the one she lived on were no accident. They were the North’s
lynch mobs ... the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place” (Petry 323). With
this metaphor, Lutie recognizes that while the methods of racial control in big cities may differ
from those of the South, they are equally intentional (“no accident”) and they work towards the
same ends: “to keep Negroes in their place” (323). The urban street, like the practice of lynching
in the South, tutors and disciplines the black subject into submission.

Significantly, both Bigger and Lutie temporarily work and live in wealthy white homes,
the Daltons’ and the Chandlers’ respectively. Wright and Petry’s critique of racism and
capitalism is most clearly achieved through the juxtaposition of the sprawling white homes that
the protagonists work in with the narrow, dilapidated conditions of Bigger and Lutie’s own
tenement apartments in Chicago and Harlem. Both novels open with a naturalistic meditation on
the urban space. For Bigger Thomas it is the confined space of the one-bedroom tenement
apartment that allows for no privacy for the members of his family, who all sleep in one room.

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6 While there is no evidence in The Street that Lutie is a recent migrant, and indeed the text seems to suggest Lutie
has been living in the North perhaps all her life, Bigger does reveal to Jan and Mary that he was raised in the South
and has only relocated to Chicago within the past five years. Wright does however seem very invested in marking
Bigger as an urban subject.
Kadeshia Matthews notes that, “The narrowness of the Thomases’ room reflects the narrowness of their lives” (281); this observation can also be extended to Lutie Johnson’s condition. The first pages of *The Street* depict Lutie in search of an apartment that proves all too confining for her and her son, Bub. In pairing these novels, I will trace the metaphors of confinement best exemplified in the recurrent trope of “the wall” featured in both texts. Both writers represent racism and exploitation through a metaphor of confinement, specifically of being walled in. Bigger articulates his theory of rape, which derives form his condition of “[his] back against the wall” (*Native Son* 227). Similarly, Petry describes Lutie’s life as a narrative of confinement: “From the time she was born, she had been hemmed into an ever-narrowing space, until now she was nearly walled in and the wall had been built up brick by brick by eager white hands” (324). In fact, their acts of violence—Bigger’s accidental smothering of Mary and his rape and murder of Bessie as well as Lutie’s killing of Boots Smith—happen at moments of confinement both literal and metaphoric. Trapped, with no place to go and no possibility of escape, both characters erupt in a “killing rage.” But most importantly I will reveal the ways that confinement is not only representative of their economic and racial condition but of their emotional condition, which is also constrained and stifled. I consider this discourse of confinement in relationship to the language of affective asphyxiation that permeates these texts, whose characters are every day “choking down that rage.”

The affective economies of these texts reveal the permeable nature of emotions. Fear, shame, anger, and rage are very much related in these texts and represent a continuum of “ugly feelings.” In these texts, rage is produced from a site of fear or shame. Bigger and Lutie are always aware of being surveilled by whites or other blacks. This awareness of the ways their bodies are always being (mis)identified as either predatory or sexually permissive and (mis)read
as failed in their masculinity and femininity (Bigger as a failed masculine subject/ Lutie as a failed wife and mother), produces both fear and shame: fear of the possible violence to the body, physical or sexual, that results from this misidentification; and shame at their powerlessness. This fear and shame later erupts in acts of murderous rage. I will consider Michael Lewis’s suggestion that rage can often be a surrogate for other emotions, specifically shame, as well as his suggestion that rage can be projected onto inappropriate targets. He argues, “People who are continuously shamed by others can develop rage. This rage may be expressed toward those causing them shame or displayed to others for a variety of reasons: the other may be too powerful, the other may pose a physical threat, the other may be someone for whom rage would be incompatible with other feelings, etc” (151). In Jim Crow America, where the slightest indication of anger, aggression, or perceived haughtiness directed at whites may prove deadly, blacks are forced to repress these “ugly feelings,” or transfer them to accessible, vulnerable, members of their race and socio-economic class.

In “‘Unashamedly Black’: Jim Crow Aesthetics and the Visual Logic of Shame,” Eurie Dahn observes, “Due to the economic and social constraints of the Jim Crow era, social class for African Americans depended not only on economic status and family background but also on affective responsiveness” (99). Shame became a particularly useful disciplinary mechanism within the race for those who did not conform to conduct, behavior, speech, dress, or affect that represented the race well. Dahn reveals the ways that discourse in magazines like the The Defender serves to police black conduct and emotional expressiveness, particularly in those recent migrants to the city who fail to quickly assimilate to the manners of city life and to notions of racial uplift and racial destiny.7 This theology of uplift, modeled through temperance and a

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7 Kevin Gaines’s Uplifting the Race offers an examination of the numerous ways blacks understood racial progress through a discourse of uplift, one strain of this thought being a kind of “uplift as liberation theology” that focused on
desire to project a positive black self-image, is most readily evident in Lutie’s dreams of a middle class life and her dissociation from the impoverished community she lives in. In a scene where she learns that Bub is shining shoes to earn money, she is filled with shame and rage and violently smacks him. “Her voice grew thick with rage. ‘I’m working to look after you and you out here in the street shining shoes just like the rest of these little niggers’” (Petry 67). The shame turned-rage evident in her voice as well as in the violent slap she gives Bub demonstrates her desire to disassociate herself and her son from “the rest of these little niggers,” whom Lutie believes lack the requisite self-respect and aspiration. While Bigger Thomas doesn’t necessarily model middle class respectability in his manners and behaviors, he is also aware of the need to police his emotions in the presence of whites. While he feels hate, resentment, shame, and violent rage in his interactions with Mary and Jan, he is careful to choke this rage down. His moments of violence (with the exception of his “accidental” smothering of Mary), as in the case of Lutie, are reserved for his family and the larger black community. As bell hooks notes, “Rage was reserved for life at home—for one another” (Killing Rage 13). Through their novels, Wright and Petry represent the emotional subjectivity of black characters.

A History of Protest: From Slave Narrative to Protest Novel of the Jim Crow Era

While Rampersad suggests that there is something originary about the construction of Bigger Thomas as a character, Bigger is a figure who follows an important established tradition of privileging retributive violence as a means of “man-making” or “making manhood” that hails the emancipatory potential of education. The black middle class ideology of uplift was rooted in a politics of respectability. Through ideals of self-help, temperance, and wealth attainment, middle class blacks espoused an ideal of “lifting as we climb” that was also predicated on distinguishing themselves from the larger black community. This philosophy of uplift and respectability should not be dismissed as a desire to emulate or reproduce white middle class ideals. Rather, as Gaines notes, “On the contrary, uplift, among its other connotations, also represented the struggle for a positive black identity in a deeply racist society, turning the pejorative designation of race into a source of dignity and self-affirmation” (3).
from Frederick Douglass. Douglass and Wright are both preoccupied with genealogy, national belonging, and masculinity. Douglass’s act of fighting back against the slave breaker Covey is scripted as the agentive moment, a moment of transformation from slave to man. Robert Stepto suggests that Douglass’s famous passage, “You have seen how a man was made a slave: you shall see how a slave was made a man,” explicitly marks Douglass’s interest in inventing manhood as well as his concern with his relationship to the nation, moving from slave—three fifths of a person by law—to a man endowed with inalienable rights. Douglass, as Kadeshia Matthews notes, “makes even more explicit the moral significance of this moment” (277) in My Bondage and My Freedom. Douglass declares, “I was nothing before: I WAS A MAN NOW ... A Man without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity” (246-7). Douglass identifies “force” as a key ingredient to masculine identity. Likewise, Wright’s interest in national belonging paired with masculine identity formation is evident in the title itself, Native Son. This title begs the question, whose progeny is Bigger Thomas? To what nation is he native? In many ways, Wright builds on a masculinist tradition in which black women lack subjectivity and interiority; rather their bodies function as a site to represent violence and domination in a way that foregrounds the emasculation of black men rather than black women’s trauma. Consider the centrality of Aunt Hester’s beating to Douglass’s autobiography. Saidiya Hartman argues, “By locating this ‘horrible exhibition’ in the first chapter of his 1845 Narrative

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8 Abdul JanMohamed makes a similar claim in his reading of Douglass’s Narrative in his essay “Between Death and Dying.” JanMohamed characterizes the slave as the “death bound subject” because slavery is defined by arbitrary violence and the ever-present threat of death that is not “definable as either homicide or sacrilege” (142). He argues that Douglass’s decision to fight Covey represents a coming to terms with his “killability” and a recognition that his “only significant freedom of choice” is “to choose his mode of death” (145).

9 Robert Stepto offers a compelling reading of this trope of black boys interrogating their genealogy, raising themselves when abandoned by their fathers, and creatively inventing manhood in black men’s literature through canonical texts from Douglass’s narrative to Obama’s Dreams of My Father. See A Home Elsewhere: Reading African American Classics in the Age of Obama. Cambridge; Harvard University Press. 2010. Print.

10 Interestingly, Bigger’s father is never named in the text. We learn that his father was killed in a riot before the family relocated to Chicago, marking Bigger as ‘a child of violence’ (Matthews 289). This inheritance of a violent death and thereby the absence of the father appears to be a part of his dysfunction, as the dominant mother figure leads to the dysfunctional family dynamic and the failed masculinity of the son.
of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Douglass establishes the centrality of violence to the making of the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement ‘I was born’” (3). In the case of the Douglass scene, this spectacle functions as a “lesson” to Douglass. If violence is the generative act for Douglass, it is also the emancipatory act. The whipping of Aunt Hester is an act of ritualistic violence that demonstrates that white (masculine) rage is sanctioned and protected by law. Importantly, this act of violence enacted on a female body is heavily eroticized in Douglass’ description of the perverse pleasures his master extracts from whipping his aunt: she is stripped naked from neck to waist, “the louder she screamed, the harder he whipped” (Douglass, Narrative 5) until the master passes out from fatigue. But the scene also leads us to ask what perverse pleasures Douglass himself extracts from this viewing. As Saidiya Haartman notes, “At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator” (4). Douglass’s vivid recounting of the event reveals his own voyeuristic pleasure and participation in the whipping. Moreover, Aunt Hester’s interiority or subjectivity is evacuated to make room for Douglass’s own musings on the self, subjugation, rage, and masculinity. Aunt Hester functions symbolically here to represent the ways that slavery un-mans Douglass; thus her own pain and abuse is in service to his development of this narrative of self-making, or more specifically man-making, as he must later perform an act of violence to be made a man.

A similar scene of violence and voyeurism marks the opening of Native Son. The “rat scene” is also one of the most memorable scenes in African American fiction. In the critical discourse on Native Son, much has been made of the importance of this scene in setting up the narrative in which the rat symbolizes the “trapped” Bigger, foreshadowing his hunting down and inevitable violent death. If this scene functions to awaken the nation “from its self-induced
slumber about the reality of race relations,” as Arnold Rampersad suggests, then we must consider the ways that violence and the black body become central to this project. This memorable opening scene to the first section of the book, “Fear,” initiates the reader into the text through violence. The spectacular nature of the first scene self-consciously reads like a play. We find a mother and her three children, Bigger, Vera, and Bud, living in a confining, one-bedroom, rat-infested slum apartment. The room is soon “galvanized into violent action” when the mother discovers a rat and Bigger is called upon to “Kill ’im” (Native Son, 4). The scene demonstrates the way that violence foregrounds Bigger’s existence. Both Douglas and Wright find it imperative to initiate the reader into scenes of violence to demonstrate the pervasive nature of violence in black life.

Central to both opening scenes in Native Son and Narrative of the Life is not simply the violence but the incestuous voyeurism at work. The perverse fascination evident in Douglass’s language reveals the complexity of power, desire, and the masculine gaze. Similarly, Bigger is constantly warned to avert his eyes as his mother and sister are dressing in the opening scene. Tellingly, in his final conversation with Max, where Bigger recalls the way Mary “shamed” [emphasis in original text] him through her familiarity, intimacy, and physical proximity to him, he recalls the way the tenement apartment he lived in with his family forbade any privacy. “He saw an image of his little sister, Vera, sitting on the edge of a chair crying because he had shamed [emphasis added] her by ‘looking’ at her; he saw her rise and fling her shoe at him” (405). Bigger is really meditating on his own “shame,” generated when Mary orders him to take her to Ernie’s Kitchen Shack. There, he is discomfited by his proximity to her in such

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11 While little attention has been paid to this moment, it is an important one in demonstrating the ways the black woman employs violence in defense of herself, particularly in the invasion of her body by the masculine gaze or attempted assaults. Lutie is described as also flinging an item, in her case an inkwell, at a white talent agent who propositions her. These scenes of female violent protest are often ignored or missed.
intimate space, while being unable to protest. In linking his own shaming to Vera’s exposed body, these moments (I include Douglass’s watching of Aunt Hester’s beating here) reveal the ways that the black woman’s body figures as a site of shame not for the black woman herself but for the black male in his emasculation. Trapped in the role of spectator and thereby unable to protect the black woman from violation, the black man internalizes her violation as his failed masculinity, castration, and racial shame. As her violated body becomes evidence of his shame, the black woman becomes a prime target for his murderous rage.

Despite the similarities to the masculine tradition of violence as emancipatory established in Douglass’s narrative, Bigger is distinctive because, as Matthews observes, “it is the way in which Bigger deploys violence that sets him apart from previous representations of black anger and violence” (277). While Douglass appropriately attacks Covey, who is both symbolically and literally a representation of domination, Bigger’s acts of violence are directed primarily at women and other marginalized blacks, like Gus.

I focus on the centrality of shame here to illuminate the ways that, as Michael Lewis suggests, rage is “a response to prolonged shaming” (149). Bigger is constantly shamed: He is shamed by the castrating figure of the black matriarch represented by his mother, by Mary’s insistence on going to Ernie’s Chicken Shack, by Mary’s proximity to his body and the prohibited sexual desire it produces, by Gus who accuses him of cowardice due to his reluctance to rob Blum’s store. These accumulated incidences of humiliation often result in violent rage: Bigger’s killing of the rat at his mother’s nagging insistence, his smothering of Mary to hide both his presence in her bedroom and his mounting sexual desire, his metaphoric rape of Gus with a knife to cover his own shame at being afraid of robbing Blum, and finally his rape and murder of Bessie. Bigger understands violent rage as the only means of channeling his shame and
humiliation. In one particularly illuminating passage, after Gus accuses him of being a “scared coward” (27), we gain an understanding of the relationships among shame, fear, and violent rage in Bigger’s psyche. Shamed by Gus’s emasculating accusations, “Mixed images of violence ran like sand through his mind, dry and fast, vanishing. He could stab Gus with his knife; he could slap him; he could kick him; he could trip him up and send him sprawling on his face. He could do a lot of things to Gus for making him feel this way [emphasis added]” (27). There are consequences for making Bigger feel shame. He reflects, “Confidence could only come through action so violent that it would make him forget [his humiliation and shame]” (29). Later, when Bigger enacts this rage-filled fantasy of violence against Gus, it is importantly depicted through a language of rape, as Bigger uses the phallic symbol of the knife to torment Gus, whose “large black eyes looked pleadingly” at Bigger (39). In his reading of this scene, Matthew Elder notes that “This figurative rape of Gus parallels the contemplated rape of Mary Dalton and the later rape and savage murder of Bessie Mears after the tensions [of choking down his rage] have finally overwhelmed Bigger and he can manage them no longer” (39). I will return to a consideration of the multiple functions of rape in the novel. Bigger’s fantasies of blotting out his family and friends represent an attempt to wipe out these scenes of humiliation and forget his fear and shame at his failed hopes and dreams.

Bigger is ever aware of the constraints on his life due to his race and class. Bigger often escapes into his fantasies or goes to the movies in order to imagine an alternative world and life outside of the narrow walls of his Chicago tenement apartment. “Bigger has dreams and desires similar to those of any white youth; to fly a plane, to get a good job, and to have an attractive woman to call his own. Indeed, Bigger may want these things more precisely because of his confinement, and it is only through the denial of the opportunity to pursue these goals that he
becomes fearful, alienated, and ultimately violent” (Matthews 280). Bigger becomes more conscious of the narrowness of his life upon working and living at the Dalton’s residence. Upon returning home from the Dalton’s luxurious mansion, Bigger compares the conditions of his tenement apartment to those of the Dalton’s home:

This was much different from the Dalton’s home. Here all slept in one room; there he would have a room for himself alone. He smelt food cooking and remembered that one could not smell food cooking in Dalton’s home: pots could not be heard rattling all over the house. Each person lived in one room and had a little world of his own. He hated this room and all the people in it, including himself. (Native Son 105)

Bigger is shamed by the lack of privacy in the tenement apartment where “all slept in one room” (105). He imagines the creative potential of a room of one’s own, to have a “little world of his own.” The sensory references of this passage reveal Bigger’s disgust and shame; Bigger observes the sight, sound, and smell of the apartment and finds it suffocating at every turn precisely because of the way its narrowness allows for sensations to invade every space of the apartment. This awareness of the lack of appropriate boundaries and the narrowness of his life leads him to declare first that he hates the room, a symbol of his improvised condition; second, that he hates all the people in it, who remind him of his state and status; and finally that he hates himself, because of his presumed failed manhood, as he has internalized his mother’s indictment that “We wouldn’t have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you” (8).

The references of confinement both spatial and metaphoric in Native Son are numerous, but of particular significance for my analysis is Bigger’s sense of being “trapped” in his interactions with Jan and Mary, who are overly familiar in their physical intimacy. As previously noted, Bigger recounts to Max the way that Mary “shamed” him on the night he killed her (405).
Bigger becomes keenly aware of his blackness as “a badge of shame” in these scenes, which produces a hatred and rage at his powerlessness and inability to escape. Why didn’t they leave him alone? ... He was trying desperately to understand. He felt foolish sitting behind the wheel like this and letting a white man hold his hand. What would people passing along the street think? ... He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame that he knew was attached to his black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man’s Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate. (67)

Bigger is completely objectified in this scene. The language of forced physical intimacy, feeling “naked, transparent,” feeling shame and concern about what others may think, the sense of “having no physical existence” — all are reminiscent of rape and other forms of bodily violation. The word “felt” is repeated five times in this passage in reference to emotions of shame, humiliation, hate, and nihilism, “he felt he had no physical existence” (67).

In its taxonomy of feelings, this passage seems to answer the question W. E. B. Du Bois notes is always silently posited in whites’ encounters with blacks: “How does it feel to be a problem?” (Souls 7). The description of the “shadowy region ... that separated the white world and the black,” as well as Bigger’s sense of feeling “naked, transparent” as if he is being held for the white man’s amusement, is also strikingly similar to Du Bois’s articulation of double consciousness, which he describes as “a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Souls 9). Bigger does not recognize the
gift of his double-consciousness; rather, to him it is simply a curse, a “badge of shame” (Native Son 67). Bigger is ever aware of the gaze of those around him, both black and white, due to his physical intimacy with Jan and Mary. He considers, “What would people passing along the street think [of him holding hands with a white man]?” (67). It is this awareness of the outside world and their shaming gaze that produces this “dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate” that is both internalized and outwardly projected onto these white bodies. When Bigger is forced to sit with Jan and Mary in Ernie’s Kitchen Shack, he is again aware of what others will think. This is revealing of the “visual logic of shame” as a means of racial control and affective disciplining in the Jim Crow era (Dahn 95).

The trope of confinement as symbolizing both hegemonic control and affective asphyxiation is evident in the observation that “Bigger felt trapped” (71), an echo of the description used to describe the rat at the beginning of the novel. Bigger is again metaphorically and physically trapped when Mrs. Dalton enters Mary’s bedroom as Bigger is kissing Mary after escorting her to her bedroom. He is immediately filled with fear and terror at the thought of being discovered and attempts to silence Mary’s moans to avoid notice by the blind Mrs. Dalton.

Frantically, he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught. Mrs. Dalton was moving slowly toward him and he grew tight and full, as though about to explode. Mary’s fingernails tore at his hands and he caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it firmly. Mary’s body surged upwards and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all his weight, determined that she must not move or make any sound that would betray him. (85)

In smothering Mary, Bigger both enacts the rape fantasy evident in the erotic language of force, submission, and orgasm (Mary’s fingernails tearing at his hands, his body growing tight and full
before exploding) and also demonstrates his own emotional confinement and desire to hide his own fear and shame. It is now Mary who is trapped. Under the pillow, she is held firmly in place by the suffocating hand of Bigger, much as Bigger felt suffocated by the hand of Jan that he was forced to hold. Mary’s forced silence also echoes the way Bigger could not move or make a sound to “betray” his true feelings in the scene at Ernie’s Kitchen Shack. In this moment, Mary’s body experiences Bigger’s condition of affective asphyxiation, which he experiences in every interaction with whites where he must police his speech, conduct, and affective expressiveness. Bigger’s smothering of Mary is a metaphoric smothering of his own fear and shame, as it occurs in an attempt to hide his presence in her bedroom because Bigger recognizes that his body in this intimate space will be read through the myth of the black rapist. Wright reveals in this moment that Mary does present a danger to Bigger and that Bigger’s body is also vulnerable to violence and violation through the rape myth.

Perhaps the most troubling but also generative passage of the text for this study is Bigger’s rape theory. After Bessie alerts Bigger to the fact that the authorities will assume that he raped Mary, Bigger contemplates a theory of rape that is pervasive and prophetic. In contemplating his predicament, Bigger offers this theory of rape:

Had he raped her? Yes, he had raped her. Every time he felt as he had felt that night, he had raped. But rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face. He was a long taut piece of rubber which a thousand white hands had stretched to the snapping point, and when he snapped it was rape. But it was rape when he cried out in
hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day. That, too, was rape.

(emphasis added, 227-8)

In Bigger’s configuration, he imagines himself, the assumed violator, as the victim of rape. Rape is abstracted to the point that its gendered and sexual connotations are completely evacuated. In other words, rape functions as metaphor for oppression. Rape becomes an affect rather than an action; the word “felt” is repeated three times early in the passage (and four times overall).

“No time he felt as he had felt that night ... rape was what one felt” (emphasis added 228). The subtle but significant distinction that Wright makes between affect and action is central to my explication of rage in the text, an explication reinforced by the dominant imagery of confinement in this controversial passage. Bigger is repeatedly described as trapped in his interactions with Jan and Mary, who are depicted as physically intrusive in their insistence on physical proximity to Bigger. Additionally, he is trapped in the cultural narrative and myth of the black rapist once Mrs. Dalton enters the room, for as Andrew Warnes notes, “Immediately upon stumbling into its white walls, the bedroom casts him as a sexual monster” (67). Notably Wright employs various images of psychic and physical violence represented through the trope of confinement: “one’s back ... against the wall,” as well as the sense of being cornered by an angry “pack” that threatens to destroy him. Additionally, rape is depicted as a cry of “hate deep in his heart” from the accumulated “strain of living day by day” in a society antagonist to his identity. Wright’s emphasis on the “strain of living day by day” is reminiscent of hooks’ reading of Lutie Johnson as the embodiment of “Everyday we are choking down that rage” (Killing Rage 12). The sense of psychological strain and emotional suffocation is evident in both characterizations.

Importantly, this abstraction of the idea of rape to encompass various forms of oppression is evidently divorced from gender politics. More important, it occurs only pages
before Bigger actually rapes Bessie. What purpose does Bigger’s rape theory and its position in the text serve? According to Robyn Weigman, in his use of rape as a metaphor “characterizing the psychological effects of racism as rape, Bigger inverts the cultural rhetoric of the mythology of the black male rapist, drawing an equation between castration (both literal and symbolic) and the form of violence most overtly gendered in U.S. culture” (103). Extending Weigman’s argument, Abdul JanMohamed draws attention to Wright’s suggestion of the pervasiveness of the call of “rape” and the employment of the lynch mob in the Jim Crow South as a mechanism of racial subjugation for any perceived transgression of racial taboos. JanMohamed argues, “‘Rape’ thus becomes the metonymic sign for all violations of the racial border” (Death-Bound Subject, 84). Indeed, it is not an uncommon practice particularly in protest fiction to employ rape as a larger metaphor of oppression, as Marlon Ross observes:

In much black protest narrative and race theory, rape becomes the symbolic shorthand for indexing both the physicality of black men’s tortured condition under slavery and Jim Crow and at the same time the psychological harm that occurs even when physical torture is ‘merely’ threatened rather than actually enacted as lynching castration. We are confronted here with the varying linguistic and conceptual resources available for observing and representing physical pain versus psychological suffering. (308)

The constant threat of violence that narrates black life in much of protest fiction including Native Son and The Street is often represented as a metaphoric rape as a means of negotiating the “varying linguistic and conceptual resources available for representing” racial trauma, as Elaine Scarry suggests of the difficulty of documenting pain through language.  

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Of course, “rape” as a word and legal term is a shifting referent. As Estelle Freeman notes in her study *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation*, “At its core, rape is a legal term that encompasses a malleable and culturally determined perception of an act ... The meaning of rape is thus fluid, rather than transhistorical or static” (3). In my analysis of Bigger’s rape theory, I am also interested in the ways that the definition of rape is “continually reshaped by specific relations and political contexts” (3). Importantly, Freeman observes that in British law, rape originally referred to “theft.” This metaphoric usage is still commonly employed and is perhaps the location of Wright’s usage of rape as a kind of “theft of personal agency” that is not necessarily of a sexual nature. In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright asserts, “If a Negro rebels against rule and taboo, he is lynched and the reason for the lynching is usually called ‘rape,’ that catchword which has garnered such vile connotations that it can raise a mob anywhere in the South pretty quickly, even today” (439). Richard Wright alludes to the ways that the word “rape” figures in the American imagination as justification for the systematic violence of lynching black men, under the pretext of retribution for the sexual violation of white female purity. However, these men were most often those who dared to transgress not sexual but economic and racial boundaries. Rape is thus a means of disciplining black defiance. Wright’s understanding of the ways that the word “rape” functions in the American imagination is the key to understanding what I argue is the linguistic conflation of rape and rage in the novel.

I would like to suggest that what Bigger expounds on in this moment is a not a “theory of rape” but rather a “theory of rage” for which rape is the only language readily available to Bigger for articulating resistance or black defiance. I return to my earlier point for further development: Bigger not only disassociates rape from gendered violence but, more importantly, he deconstructs the association of rape with an action—“it is not what *one did* [emphasis
added)” (228). In changing the part of speech of the word rape from verb to noun, he locates rape as a conceptual idea and moreover a feeling, an affect: “rape is what one felt” (228). “Rape” is employed to explicate an affective response to oppression. In fact, what Bigger seems to be describing here is a feeling of rage, a visceral and psychological desire to “strike out” at the oppressors for self-preservation. Bigger describes the sense of being physically torn apart, of being a “taut piece of rubber which a thousand white hands had stretched to the snapping point and when he snapped it was rape” (emphasis added 228). The violent image of the taut piece of rubber being stretched to its snapping point by “white hands” signifies the accumulation of injustices that leads to a breaking point when one is no longer able to repress accumulated anger typically ascribed to rage. When one “snaps” it is usually called rage, not rape.

For Wright, rage is necessary for self-preservation; one has to strike back against the “pack” to stay alive. “Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one...” (228). Here Wright seemingly invokes Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” in his allusions to having one’s back against the wall. McKay’s poem, a militant manifesto of black rage and resistance, concludes with the line, “Like men we’ll face the murderous cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying but fighting back!” (43). This poem insists on the value of black life and a refusal to be subjugated or killed arbitrarily without retaliation. McKay theorizes black rage as an ethical and political commitment to resist racism and dehumanization through self-defense. I would argue that in alluding to this poem, Wright is also articulating a theory of rage; but from the perspective of Bigger Thomas, rape and rage are confused, interchanged. It is perhaps to this “murderous cowardly pack” that Bigger refers to when he contemplates how “to keep the pack
from killing one.” Masculinity is a central theme for both works, as Claude McKay invokes the call to face the murderous pack “like men” (43).

In this theory of rap(g)e, Bigger suggests that if violence is ever-present and death is always looming, then rage is an appropriate response to the condition that Claude McKay's poem posits: "If we must die" then "let it not be like hogs." Rage resides in the space of the if/then conditional; it is a means of negotiating one’s relationship to the threat of violence and death that grounds the black man (and woman) in Jim Crow America. Yet in Bigger’s iteration, rage seems to lack intentionality or thoughtfulness; it is represented as a visceral response akin to fight or flight. Significantly, the sections of the novel are organized into Fear, Flight—and Fate, even though the reader may anticipate that the last section be titled “Flight” in accordance with the commonly associated evolutionary theory of “flight or fight” response. But Fate is a matter of inevitability rather than agency. Bigger states that “one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one” (228). Wright frames Bigger’s rage as largely an instinctive response. In the hands of this naturalist writer, Richard Wright, rage is pre-determined; it is a matter of natural law. Frantz Fanon similarly characterizes the inevitability of Bigger’s response:

It is Bigger Thomas—he is afraid, he is terribly afraid. He is afraid, but of what is he afraid? Of himself …. In the end, Bigger Thomas acts. To put an end to his tension, he acts, he responds to the world’s anticipation … The Negro is a toy in the white man’s hand: so in order to shatter the hellish cycle, he explodes.  (emphasis added, 140)

Writing deterministically about the inevitably of Bigger’s explosion, Fanon diagnoses Bigger’s fear as a motivating factor in his violence, and certainly the first section of the novel, entitled “Fear,” would seem to reinforce Fanon’s suggestion. Bigger’s fear of death along with his shame
at being emasculated leaves him no other option than to act, “to shatter the hellish cycle” (140). But where does that leave Bigger’s agency? What is the revolutionary potential of rage in this configuration?

Reading *Native Son* as a proletariat novel, Sondra Guttman suggests that Wright’s use of “rape” both metaphorically and literally serves an important political purpose in the novel. She contends, “For Wright, the most appropriate way to make clear the plight of blacks in capitalist America came via the narrative Angela Davis calls ‘the myth of the black rapist’” (169). Expounding on Wright’s use of this “myth of the black rapist,” she asserts, “*Native Son* is about what happens when black resistance is named ‘rape.’” In my interrogation of the slippage between rape and rage, which I identify as a means of black resistance, I agree with Guttman’s assertion that black resistance (rage) is named rape in the novel, but to different ends. Guttman notes that if “rape” operated only as a justification for the suppression of black resistance in the novel, then there would be no depiction of rape in the text, only “false accusations” (169).

Indeed, it would seem that a text that employs rape metaphorically would avoid depictions of rape as gendered violence, particularly with the black male as aggressor. To this question she offers this insight:

> On the contrary, I contend that in *Native Son* the word "rape" also means sexual violence against women—in particular against black women. In this novel white and black women bear the brunt of the violence precipitated by the race-class system. However, Wright distinguishes carefully between the types of violence borne by these women. While *Native Son* illuminates the violence that occurs when the white female body is figured as a symbol of capitalist power, the novel also makes clear that it is the black woman who suffers sexual violence because of it. (169)
Guttman’s reading of the text locates violence against women as evidence of the oppressive capitalistic system, where the white woman’s body becomes symbolic of capitalistic power and hence Bigger’s sexual desire for Mary cannot be divorced from his desire to possess power and agency within the capitalist market. Fanon would interpret this conflation of sexual desire and desire for power as the condition of the colonized (man), which is inevitably a condition of envy, lust. He asserts in his chapter “Concerning Violence,” “The gaze that the colonized subject casts at the colonist’s sector is a look of lust, a look of envy. Dreams of possession. Every type of possession: sitting at the colonist’s table and sleeping in his bed, preferably with his wife” (5).

Franz Fanon’s theory on violence is clearly a masculinist struggle which privileges male use of violence as resistance and appears to see the (white) female body as merely the site upon which this contest for conquest is enacted. While Fanon doesn’t explicitly speak of rape here, any sexual agency or desire on the part of the colonizer’s wife is erased. Moreover, the black female is completely evacuated from a paradigm in which white and black men fight over white women. It is a similar masculinist gesture that is at work in Bigger Thomas. His “rage,” his resistance to be being subjugated, his desire for power, are predicated on a patriarchal model that articulates rape only in its relationship to masculine power.

Bessie’s Body of Evidence

Guttman argues, “While Native Son illuminates the violence that occurs when the white female body is figured as a symbol of capitalist power, the novel also makes clear that it is the black woman who suffers sexual violence because of it” (169). This is where her reading of Wright appears overly generous. The “rape myth” exercised through lynching is an insidious strategy employed to terrorize and repress the black community. But what is not a “rape myth” is the historical abuse and assault on black women’s bodies and dignity through a history of sexual
violation, assault, and exploitation. Guttman asserts that “... the fate of the black woman is so linked to the narrative of the rape plot that he [Wright] cannot *not* represent it ... Therefore, Wright's task is to reveal the crucial nature of the myth of black female sexuality to this narrative without misrepresenting the black woman's historical fate. That is, he had to make Bessie's invisibility visible” (187). However, Wright does not merely illuminate Bessie’s invisibility; his formal treatment of Bessie mimics Bigger’s treatment of her in the text. Bessie is stripped of any interiority and agency, and she is ultimately used as a symbol of Bigger’s condition. Contrary to Guttman, I would argue that rather than making Bessie’s “invisibility visible,” Wright is just making Bessie invisible altogether.

Bigger’s rape of Bessie is one of the most problematic scenes of the novel, one difficult to reconcile with Bigger’s earlier theorizing of rape as a metaphor for rage against oppression. For all the insight Bigger seems to gain about “rape not being what one did to a woman,” his act of sexual violence against Bessie complicates this assertion. This scene compels us to ask how we define rape in *Native Son*. Having considered the metaphoric use of rape, let us consider Wright’s representation of rape as nonconsensual sexual act. After Bigger forces Bessie to flee with him, the two hide out in an abandoned building in the Black Belt of Chicago. As night falls, Bigger seeks out Bessie, who rejects his advances—but Bigger insists on having her by force:

Bessie’s hands were on his chest, her fingers spreading protestingly open, pushing him away. He heard her give a soft moan that seemed not to end even when she breathed in or out; a moan which he heard, too, from far away and without heeding, he had to now. Yes. Bessie. His desire was naked and hot in his hand and his fingers were touching her. Yes. Bessie. Now. He had to now. *Don’t* Bigger *don’t* he was sorry, but he had to, he. He
could not help it. Help it. Sorry. Help it. Sorry. Help it now. She should. Look! ... He was feeling bad about how she would feel but could not help it now. Feeling. Bessie. (234)

Like the murder of Mary, Bigger’s rape of Bessie is depicted as unavoidable in that Bigger seems to lack a conscious awareness of his actions and their implications; nor is he able to control his impulses. The repetition of “He had to now … he had to, he. He could not help it. Help it. Sorry” underscores this point. While he thinks “Sorry,” it is unclear whether he knows what he should be “sorry” for. Here again, Bigger seems to be the victim; even the words of rescue, “Help,” are in Bigger’s thoughts, not Bessie’s. Who then is responsible for Bessie’s rape, for the callous dismissal of “her fingers spreading protestingly [emphasis added] open, pushing him away” (234)?

In discussing the actual rape of Bessie, JanMohamed contends that Wright’s intentions to have Bigger rape Mary were transferred to Bessie, as “real forces of censorship” and “considerations of representability” may have “influenced his [Wright’s] decision to have Bigger actually rape a black woman, Bessie but not a white woman, Mary” (The Death Bound Subject, 79). This reading of Bessie’s rape repeats the violence to Bessie’s body described in the text, for here Bessie serves only as the body of evidence of Bigger’s actual or imagined rape of Mary. In particular, this argument recalls the Deputy Coroner’s insistence, “Owing to the peculiar nature of this crime, and owing to the fact that [Mary’s] body was all but destroyed, I deem it imperative that you examine an additional piece of evidence” (Native Son 329). This “additional piece of evidence,” which “will help shed light upon the actual manner of death of the deceased” (329) is none other than “the raped and mutilated body of one Bessie Mears” (330). In other words, Bessie’s body stands in for Mary’s absent body and proof of her sexual violation, offered
to the court “in the interest of justice” (330). The black woman’s body then is only representational.

Rather than standing in for the rape of Mary, I would argue that Bigger’s rape of Bessie represents Bigger’s transferal of his feelings of fear, shame, and powerlessness onto Bessie. In the passage describing Bessie’s rape, as in Bigger’s theory of rape, rape is associated with feeling, as Bigger reflects that he “feels bad about how [Bessie] would feel ... Feeling. Bessie” (emphasis added 234). Bigger’s desire to blot out his family, like his disposal of Bessie’s body, by dumping her down an airshaft after he rapes and murders her, is always related to his sense of failed masculinity and the shame that brings. Bessie, like other blacks who “make [Bigger] feel this way,” becomes the target of his murderous rape and rage (29). Here we may consider again Bigger’s figurative rape of Gus with the knife when Gus humiliates him by exposing his fear of robbing Bub. It is not coincidental then that Bigger kills Bessie with a brick to the head after raping her, as he sees her as part of that confining, oppressive wall that his back is against. Bigger’s reflection before violently killing her with a brick is telling: “Bessie did not figure in what was before him” (234). And it seems that Bessie does not figure much into Wright’s vision either. The danger of using rape as metaphor for rage is that it obscures the real violence of rape that black women have experienced. In Wright’s novel, black women are depicted as complicit in the oppression of black men, as they are represented as emasculating mother figures or passive subjects lacking interiority. Black women are markers of Bigger’s shame; their desperate conditions reveal his inability to provide for and protect them and thereby testify to his failed masculinity.

It is possible to argue that Richard Wright conceived of the project and political import of *Native Son* in a fashion that invites comparison to the insights of William H. Grier and Price M.
Cobb in *Black Rage*. Grier and Cobbs describe their clinical study in a fashion similar to Wright’s description of his purpose in writing *Native Son*. These texts offer a case study of black rage that offers a warning to the nation of the potential danger and devastation of racism, classism, and race relations based on hatred and antagonism. In other words, the continued abuse of African Americans would produce in the masses a type like Bigger Thomas who would resort to violence as the appropriate response to his condition. Such violence would not always be directed towards the black community, but would rather find its target in whites. As Arnold Rampersad notes, Bigger Thomas “epitomized for Wright the most radical effect of racism on the black psyche” (Rampersad, xvi).

In *Black Rage*, Grief and Cobb seek to interrogate, in particular, the effects of slavery and oppression on the black psyche. In title of the book’s opening page, “Who’s Angry?” takes the form of a question, which the authors attempt to answer: “Aggression leaps from wounds inflicted and ambitions spiked. It grows out of oppression and capricious cruelty” (3). Surely Bigger’s aggression testifies to this; but, as with Grier and Cobb, the novel ultimately ends up pathologizing the black subject. I agree with Desmond Harding that Bigger’s rage becomes a “sadistic agency” (102) rather than a site of healing or revolutionary transformation. As Harding continues, “it is this strain of pathological behavior which finds its root in sadistic pleasure that ultimately hallmarks Bigger’s distorted sense of ‘conscious history’ from very early on in the novel” (102). Bigger’s agency must be at the expense of the pain of another. Rather than challenging a system, Bigger misdirects his rage and violence at those, like Bessie, who are most vulnerable and accessible. In the final scene of the novel, Bigger’s fear of his imminent death by execution has dissipated. In this heightened sense of consciousness, he confides in Max, who is terrified not simply by Bigger’s words but his sense of agency. Bigger states, “What I killed for
must’ve been good! …. When a man kills, it’s for something … I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things [emphasis added] hard enough to kill for’ em” (429). But what exactly does Bigger kill for? What exactly does Bigger feel “hard enough”? In his scathing analysis of Native Son in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin offers this reading of the “tragedy” of Bigger Thomas:

For Bigger’s tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth. (22-3)

According to Baldwin, Bigger succumbs to a “theology” that “denies his life” or sees him as “always already dead,” and Baldwin imagines no space of agency in this “constrained” position, only a reactive potential limited to the “brutal criteria bequeathed him at birth.”

Bigger is not in control of his destiny; he merely acts from the space of pathological violence into which he is born. However, I would not dismiss Bigger so easily. There are important glimpses of a radical imagination or political resistance that emerge in Bigger Thomas’s theorizing of rage that reveals a sophisticated understanding of his emotional subjectivity in relation to the dehumanizing world. But this radical potential is compromised in his rape and murder of Bessie. Bigger is unable to imagine communal, restorative rage; rather he accepts his alienation and rejects any communal identification that could productively harness this rage.

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13 Sharon Patricia Holland’s Raising the Dead offers a compelling reading of blackness and death where she ascribes agency to this space of being “always already dead” in the American cultural imagination.
Down These Mean Streets: “The North’s Lynch Mob”

In *The Street*, Ann Petry provides a means of rewriting—certainly of rethinking—the erasure of black female subjectivity in Wright’s *Native Son*. The novel also provides the grist for a more productive theory of black rage than that which Wright offers through Bigger Thomas. Ann Petry’s novel illuminates the ways that gendered violence is ignored or appropriated in the masculinist representations of rage. Moreover, I will explore the way Petry reimagines the traditionally masculine domain of rage to resist the sexual exploitation and racial oppression that defines the black female experience. The rituals of violence inflicted upon Lutie Johnson’s body seem a part of her education as a black woman and are central to her understanding of her multiple oppressions and their connectedness. My reading of Petry’s theorizing of rage through Lutie Johnson is informed by Kali Gross’s study of black women’s violent crime in *Colored Amazons*. Gross recognizes the ways that rape (sexual violence) operated as a disciplinary tool of racial control and female subjugation. She observes, “Gang rape and other forms of sexual torture became common instruments used to *teach black women their place*” (emphasis added, 73-4). Gross examines the ways that violence and sexual violation impacted black women’s lives and their violent crimes. “Although most black women repressed their inner turmoil and anger, effectively invoking a veil of silence,” notes Gross, for those women who could not live their lives under a “veil of silence,” largely due to the weight of poverty, discrimination, and sexual abuse, violent crime was one means of expressing their rage” (73). Gross suggests that anger and rage were policed, and particularly for black women, like Petry’s heroine, who ascribed to norms of respectability and racial uplift that championed temperance and polite manners, outward expression of rage was openly discouraged. Gross adds, “The nature of these criminal acts speaks of the women’s desires, fears, and vulnerabilities as well as their triumphs,
disappointments, and rage” (emphasis added 73). As in Wright’s Native Son, Petry’s theorizing of rage in The Street cannot be divorced from an engagement with a host of other emotions, because rage is often rooted in a failed desire and the fear and shame produced from this space of disappointment, rejection, and humiliation. Lutie carries around the shame of her failed marriage and the guilt of feeling that she is also a failed mother. In fact, the first mention of rage in the novel appears as Lutie has returned home from working at the Chandler residence to find that her husband Jim is living with another woman. She erupts in violence. “If he hadn’t held her arms, she would have killed the other girl. Even now she could feel rage inside her at the very thought” (Petry 54). When Jim simply laughs at her, she feels a “red rage” at this humiliation (54). Gross’s work underscores the ways that the domestic space and particularly romantic relationships where infidelity is involved becomes a site of rage and black female violent crime. While Bigger Thomas is readily identified as the archetype of the black criminal, I read Lutie Johnson as the literary embodiment of these Colored Amazons, as Kali Gross describes black women who when trapped in a system of sexual violence, racial terror, and economic exploitation explode in a killing rage. Expounding on the insights of Gross’s study of black female criminals, I examine Lutie’s act of “killing rage” to question the limitations and potentiality of “rage” in responding to oppression.

Similar to Bigger Thomas, Lutie’s rage is represented through the language of confinement, a sense of constantly being walled in until her back is against the wall and, with no other avenue out, she explodes. My analysis of rage in The Street will focus on the metaphors of confinement in three ways: 1) spatially, through the reoccurring trope of the confining walls and the metaphor of the street as “dirty, dark, filthy traps” (73); 2) visually, through the masculine
gaze that continually intrudes on Lutie’s body; and 3) bodily, through the attempted rapes that are also depicted through a language of physical and emotional confinement.

The opening scene of *The Street*, like the opening scene of *Native Son*, marks the generative nature of violence in the text. While searching for an apartment in Harlem, Lutie is assaulted by a brutal wind. In fact, the wind is personified as a violent aggressor: “It rattled the tops of garbage cans, sucked window shades out through the top of opened windows ... it drove most of the people off the street in the block between Seventh and Eighth Avenues except for a few hurried pedestrians who bent double in an effort to offer the least possible exposed surface to its violent assault” (Petry 1). The “violent assault” of the wind is echoed in the centrality of violence against the body. As Foucault suggests, “Nothing is more material, physical, corporal, than the exercise of power” (57-8). Pedestrians are literally “bent double” in postures of pain or surrender against this merciless wind, and others are literally driven off the street. As in *Native Son*, this symbolic violence initiates the reader into the literal violence of the novel.

Indeed, the novel is littered with passages that illustrate the psychic and corporeal violence of the street, a metonym for the larger urban landscape. Carole Henderson argues that Petry’s novel “bear[s] witness to the dehumanizing conditions of African American life with the urban center as her institutional model” (114). Through this analysis of the urban center, Petry dismantles the romance of the North and ultimately questions the gains of the great migration. This is perhaps most evident in her explication that “Streets like the one [Lutie] lived on were no accident. They were the North’s lynch mobs” (323). Her deliberate employment of the metaphor of the lynch mob as analogous to Northern streets reveals the ways that the street represents a systematic effort of death, torture, and terrorism of the black community—and an effort that goes unpunished. These streets are not paved with gold; rather, they are streets of destruction. Lutie
reflects, “Streets like 116th Street or being colored, or a combination of both with all it implied, had turned Pop into a sly old man who drank too much; had killed Mom off when she was in her prime” (56). The economic conditions of poverty and exploitation combined with racism prove to be an especially destructive and dehumanizing combination. These streets commit soul murder.14

The reoccurring trope of the confining walls reveals both Lutie’s desperate economic condition and her desperate attempt to contain her anger and rage. The walls are often personified as physically intrusive and stifling. Lutie reflects, “The trouble is that these rooms are so small. After she had been in them just a few minutes, the walls seemed to come in toward her to push against her” (78-9). Like the “violent assault” of the wind that opens the novel, the confining walls of her dilapidated apartment are depicted as pushing into her person. And much like the men in the novel who fail to respect her personal boundaries, the walls are transgressive and invasive; they violate Lutie. The sense of intrusion reveals the physical violence of poverty and racial oppression—but also becomes a metaphor for Lutie’s experience of affective asphyxiation. Lutie observes,

As long as she stayed alone in these small rooms, she would worry and wonder and the knot of tension inside her would keep growing and her throat would keep constricting like it was doing now. She swallowed hard. Her throat felt as though the opening was growing smaller all the time. (411-2)

The sense of claustrophobia that Lutie describes in the space is psychically and psychologically a

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14 In "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," Nell Painter draws on psychology to engage the psychic cost of slavery and racial terror. She employs the term “soul murder” to address the ways that those (especially children) who are sexually, physically, and emotionally abused repress their emotions and submerge their identities into those of their abusers. She argues that soul murder was an integral part of the institution of slavery and had a damaging impact on whites as well as blacks.
“knot of tension” that grows in her throat and produces a constricting feeling as if her throat is as narrow as the walls themselves. This passage reveals Lutie’s struggle to choke down her anxiety and rage at her condition, a struggle that proves all too suffocating.

“A black woman’s body was never hers alone”

This sense of confinement and inability to cry out or protest is further evident in the scenes of Lutie’s attempted rape. Petry demonstrates that as a black woman Lutie is particularly vulnerable to sexual assault; it is assumed that her body is available to both black and white men, the object of their sexual desire and the source of its fulfillment. Her self-protective protests are often met with physical violence and force. Indeed, allusions to the violent and penetrating (white) masculine gaze crop up throughout the text. Lutie is confronted by the “the openly appraising looks of the white men whose eyes seemed to go through her clothing to her long brown legs” (57). Aboard the train, “their eyes came at her furtively from behind newspapers, or half concealed under hatbrims or partly shielded by their hands. And there was a warm, moist look about their eyes that made her want to run” (57). This is reminiscent of the slave auction block in the language of “appraisal” and the itemizing of her body parts (“long brown legs”). There is a sense of shame and exposure created by these violating eyes that follow her, searching under her clothes. Lutie reflects that while she was employed by the Chandlers, despite the fact that she was a respectable married woman and mother, the Chandlers and their friends “looked at her and didn’t see her, but saw instead a wench with no morals who would be easy to come by” (199). Ashamed and resentful of their (mis)identification of her, Lutie observes,

Here she was a highly respectable, married, mother of a small boy, and in spite of all that, knowing all that, these people took one look at her and immediately got that now-I-wonder look. Apparently it was an automatic reaction of white people—if a girl was
colored and fairly young, why, it stood to reason she had to be a prostitute. If not that—at least sleeping with her would be just a simple matter, white men wouldn’t even have to do the asking because the girl would ask them on sight. (45)

Lutie’s body is constantly being “looked” at, appraised, and mis(read) according to a host of inherited caricatures of black female lasciviousness. The politics of respectability are no protection for black women, who, despite ascribing to norms of feminine respectability through marriage, attire, temperance, and comportment, are constantly misidentified as “prostitutes.” This, Petry seems to suggest, is the greatest social ill: that black women are afforded no “honor,” no respectability. Petry draws on a history of devaluation and hyper-sexualization of black women’s bodies. She drives this point home again and again with numerous scenes in which Lutie is propositioned or assumed to be sexually permissive by white and black men alike.

While understanding that black women’s supposed sexual availability was a myth constructed largely to benefit white men, during slavery and beyond, Petry does not neglect to critique black men’s internalization of racist ideas about the accessibility of black women. In other words, she understands the ways in which black men participate in the sexual violation and intimidation of black women, which she captures in characters including Super Jones (the superintendent of Lutie’s building), and Lutie’s manager Boots Smith. Lutie quickly realizes that even “from [Boots’] viewpoint she was a pick up girl” (161). Lutie can’t even count on the “protection” of an older black woman. Claiming to “help” Lutie, her neighbor, Mrs. Hedges, actually tries to “pimp” her: “If you ever want to make a little extra money ... A nice white gentleman I met lately—” (83). Here, Petry suggests the ways that black men (and the black community more largely) are complicit in the dehumanization of black women and their sexual abuse. This critique is particularly evident in the scene in which Super Jones attempts to rape her
as she returns home late from a performance. Super Jones has been obsessing over Lutie for some time and is intent on having her that night, despite her protests. Her attempted rape is depicted through a language of confinement. Lutie in this scene is physically trapped as Jones blocks her passage to the stairs and begins to drag a petrified Lutie towards the cellar door. “She writhed and twisted in his arms, bracing her feet, clawing at his face with her nails. He ignored her frantic effort to get away from him” (235-6). Lutie is rescued from this attack by Mrs. Hedges, whose imposing figure un-mans Super Jones.

It would seem that Petry posits a kind of sisterly alliance through this act, but Mrs. Hedge’s warning to Super Jones disrupts this reading of the relationship. Mrs. Hedges cautions, “I just wanted to tell you for your own good, dearie, that it’s Mr. Junto who’s interested in Mis’ Johnson. And I aint goin’ to tell you agin to keep your hands off” (238). Mrs. Hedge’s threat to the Super Jones is rooted in the assumption that Lutie belongs to a more powerful man, Junto, a wealthy white club owner. Acting effectively as Junto’s “agent,” Mrs. Hedges advises the Super that he is messing with Junto’s property. In other words, for Mrs. Hedges, it is not the actual assault of Lutie that proves most egregious, but rather the Super’s encroachment on Junto’s “territory.” Super Jones appears exasperated and affronted by this revelation that Junto’s financial influence gives him more right to, or at least first dibs on, Lutie’s body. Lutie’s safety is predicated on another’s man’s (more legitimate) interest in her, not in her right to her own body. It seems at every turn Lutie is met by eager hands that assume access to her body. There appears to be no safety for the black woman from sexual assault, or, in the words of Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, “A black woman’s body was never hers alone.”

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15 This is cited in Danielle L. McGuire’s important study of rape and the Civil Rights Movement, *At the End of the Dark Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. 
In another scene of misrecognition of Lutie, Petry demonstrates the ways the black woman’s body continues to be surveilled, examined, and appraised for its value in exchange for favors, privileges, or money. It is assumed that black women are prostitutes. When Lutie seeks an audition at the Crosse School for Singers, she is met with another indecent proposal, this time from a white talent agent. After declining Mr. Crosse’s offer to represent her on the grounds that the mandatory lessons are too expensive, Mr. Crosse replies, “a good-looking girl like you shouldn’t have to worry about money” (321). He continues, “in fact, if you and me can get together a coupla nights a week in Harlem, those lessons won’t cost you a cent. No sir, not a cent” (321). Lutie is expected to exchange sexual favors for financial security. Mr. Crosse employs a false language of comfort in his suggestion that “you shouldn’t have to worry,” but what is presented as a space of agency and leisure is but a euphemism for a prison where she would be at his disposal to be raped and abused without detection. Lutie is insulted by this proposition, but most significantly by the assumption that she would entertain such an arrangement because of her color. Lutie situates herself and her gendered body in history, marking it as the site of vulnerability and perpetual threat of sexual violence as she observes, “It was a pity he hadn’t lived back in the days of slavery, so he could have raided the slave quarters for a likely wench any hour of the day or night” (322). In her reference to the rape of black female slaves, Petry seems to suggest that black women’s status as freedwomen did nothing to alter the prevailing idea that their bodies are readily available. But perhaps it allowed more agency for black women in their response to these advances. When Crosse so enrages Lutie, “She remembered the inkwell on the desk in the back of him. She picked it up in a motion so swift that he had no time to guess her intent. She hurled it full force in his face” (322). Lutie unabashedly communicates her rage and disdain at this proposition. She does not engage the
possible ramifications of the assault on a white man; instead she is only concerned with making her rejection of his offer loud and clear.

Lutie’s recourse to violence here demonstrates the ways that, even in her performance of black respectability and female coyness, she does not tolerate disrespect and is ultimately unable to “check the rage that welled up in her” (325). This violent reaction foreshadows her later act of murder. She quickly exits Crosse’s office and boards the Sixth Avenue Train, brimming with fantasies of rage:

She welcomed the roar of the train as it sped toward Fifty-Ninth Street, welcomed its lurching, swaying motion. She wished it would go faster, make more noise, rock more wildly, because the tumultuous anger in her could only be quelled by violence. She sought release from the urgency of her rage [emphasis added] by deliberately picturing the train plunging suddenly off the track in a fury of sound --- the metal coaches rushing headlong on top of each other in a whole series of thunderous explosions. (323)

This description of a “tumultuous anger” that “could only be quelled by violence” is reminiscent of Bigger’s response after being shamed by Gus’s accusations of his cowardice. Like Lutie, Bigger turns to fantasies of violence as his method of escape from his humiliation and shame. In the Native Son passage, Bigger meditates on “[m]ixed images of violence” and considers all the ways he could abuse Gus: “He could stab Gus with his knife; he could slap him; he could kick him; he could trip him up and send him sprawling on his face. He could do a lot of things to Gus for making him feel this way” (27). For Bigger, “[c]onfidence could only come through action so violent that it would make him forget [his humiliation and shame]” (29). Fantasies of violence offer cathartic outlets for these experiences of public humiliation, because it is only these images of violence that can provide “release from the urgency of [their] rage” (Petry 323). Interestingly
for Lutie, it is a self-destructive impulse at work here rather than a desire to blot out the other as in Bigger’s violent fantasy. In this moment of “tumultuous anger,” Lutie fantasizes about her own violent demise in a Freudian explication of the death drive. She welcomes the violence of the train (“its lurching”), desiring more (“faster and more noise”). Lutie seems to anticipate and even desire death as an escape from her condition. Importantly, this meditation on death takes place in the subway, a symbol of urbanity and isolation simultaneously. Buried underground, the subway is also symbolic of the ways her rage has been hidden, buried, choked down. It is only in this underground space that she can explore her repressed rage. The “urgency of her rage” requires a release. Here Petry suggests the psychic pain of choking down that rage.

“Dangerous Accumulations of Rage”

The street is the North’s disciplinary mechanism, its tool of racial control as blacks daily suffer abuse, humiliation, and the oppression of poverty and racism; it is a psychic and corporeal violence. As a single mother, Lutie struggles to keep her son Bub from the “dirty, dark, filthy traps” signified by the street (73), but her efforts prove futile. Lutie’s son is arrested in a mail fraud scheme devised by the superintendent to punish Lutie for rejecting his sexual advances, underscoring the ways that the family is punished and terrorized with reprisals when the black woman does not submit her body. As Lutie desperately seeks financial assistance from musician Boots Smith to pay for Bub’s legal counsel, Boots uses the opportunity to sexually proposition her, and threatens to beat her into submission when she rejects his advances. Lutie’s first recourse is to “take her mouth and make a gun” (Marshall 630). She unloads an arsenal of verbal attacks. “Words tumbled from her throat,” which was once occluded by her efforts to choke down her rage (Petry 428). Lutie’s act of “talking back” should not be understated. As Paule Marshall suggests in her critical essay “Poets in the Kitchen,” talking back is both an artistic
mode of an expression and form of verbal self-defense and retaliation, particularly for women of color, who occupy a vulnerable space in society. Marshall recounts how the women in her mother’s kitchen would encourage each other to “Souly-gal, talk yuh talk! ... In this man world you got to take yuh mouth and make a gun!” (630). Words become weapons for women in “this man world,” where physical retaliation may not prove suitable or effective recourse. Lutie’s “fighting words” provoke physical retaliation. After she curses him, Boots slaps her across the face, retorting, “I don’t take that kind of talk from dames … Not even good looking ones like you” (428). Violence is employed to remind Lutie of her place as a woman in the social order, which controls the freedom and power of speech.

The constant threat of physical and sexual violence finally overwhelms Lutie, and she erupts in a “killing rage:”

This quick surface anger helped to swell and became a part of the deepening stream of rage that had fed on the hate, the frustration, the resentment she had toward the pattern her life had followed. So she couldn’t stop shouting, and shouting wasn’t enough. She wanted to hit out at him, to reduce him to a speechless mass of flesh, to destroy him completely, because he was there in front of her and she could get at him and in getting at him she would find violent outlet for the full sweep of her wrath. (emphasis added, 428)

Rage as suggested in this passage emerges from other “ugly feelings” of “hate, frustration, and resentment [at] the pattern her life had followed,” a pattern of oppression, sexual violence, and exploitation. Having choked down her rage, living under a “under a veil of silence,” her first recourse is to “shout” to use her voice, but this becomes inadequate when the depth of her rage demands destruction. She seeks to silence the one who attempts to silence her, to “reduce [Boots] to a speechless mass of flesh, to destroy him completely” (425). Though Boots’ attack provokes
her rage, he is, to all intents and purposes, a non-specific target; rather he becomes symbolic of her experience of oppression, of the walls closing in on her. “He happened to be within easy range at the moment he set off the dangerous accumulation of rage that had been building in her for months” (emphasis added 429). Securing a “heavy iron candlestick” (429), she strikes him.

“As she gripped the iron candlestick and brought it forward in a swift motion at his head, she was striking, not at Boots Smith, but at a handy, anonymous figure --- a figure which her angry resentment transformed into everything she hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her” (429). In this space of claustrophobia, she reaches her threshold of tolerance; with her back against the wall, her only option is to deal Boots a “death blow.” The graphic nature of the descriptions of Lutie’s desire for a “violent outlet for the full sweep of her wrath,” to “reduce him to a speechless mass of flesh, to destroy him completely” suggests that this rage must inevitably be manifested in violence, a glimpse of which we have seen in the earlier episode of violent resistance to the talent agent’s advances.

It is a “lifetime of pent-up resentment” that Lutie unleashes on Boots (430). With each blow, Lutie recalls the various incidences of fear and shame: “First she was venting her rage against the dirty crowded street”; “Jim and the slender girl she’d found him with”; “the insult in the moist-eyed glances of white men on the subway”; “the unconcealed hostility in the eyes of the white women”; “the greasy, lecherous man at the Crosse School for Singers”; “the gaunt Super pulling her down”; and finally “the turn-of-events which had forced her to leave Bub alone while she working so that he now faced reform school” (430). As Lutie reflects on this resentment, these deferred dreams and denied opportunities, her rage moves from the focal realm of shouted protests to physical violence. “Finally, the blows were heavier, faster, now she was striking at the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there
was no escape” (emphasis added, 430). This spatial metaphor of confinement, of being “walled in,” is repeatedly employed in the text, most significantly as the way that Petry narrates Lutie’s life in the passage, “From the time she was born, she had been hemmed into an ever-narrowing space, until now she was nearly walled in and the wall had been built up brick by brick by eager white hands” (324). This reoccurring trope of the wall “built up brick by brick by eager white hands” suggests the limitations of Lutie’s condition as well as the sense of alienation that it produces and the rage that ensues as a result. Reminiscent of Bigger’s meditation on “rape” as “not what one did to women” but rather “what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out” (Native Son 227), Petry properly identifies this feeling of confinement as a “dangerous accumulation of rage” (Petry 429). For Lutie as well as Bigger, “[Rage] is what happens when one’s back is against the wall” (Native Son 227). But for black women, rape represents key mechanisms of racial control and gender oppression; Petry illustrates that rape cannot stand in for rage. In her articulation of a black feminine rage, Petry allows us to rethink the way that retaliatory violence becomes the domain of the masculine. Furthermore, her rewriting of this attempted rape scene suggests the ways that black men become complicit with white patriarchy’s abuse of the black woman’s body. Here, she seems to give voice to Bessie, who under the weight and force of Bigger “surrender[s] something more than her body” (Native Son 233). Lutie refuses to surrender to Boot’s attacks; she chooses instead to fight to the death.

Lutie’s act of rage is fraught. As Lindon Barrett correctly observes,

The climax of The Street is duplicitous, then: One cannot ignore the fact that the climatic violence occurs in the seemingly ‘unmasked’ form of intra-racial violence, nor the fact that the consequences of the violence are dire. The violence sustains the incarcerated space of Bud; exterminates the fluent black male musician; and silences the black woman
singer. ... still, at the same time, the violence proves a quizzical redaction and revelation of the dense, complex, and convoluted antecedents precipitating it. (125)

Though *The Street* represents an instance of black feminine rage as a deliberate and calculated resistance to a power structure that seeks to abuse and exploit her (the white talent agent and Boots), it also reveals that there is always something lost in the use of violence. While it is clear that living her life under a “veil of silence” by repressing her rage is unsustainable, Lutie’s act of murderous rage compromises the very freedom she acted to protect. At the end of the novel, Lutie is a fugitive; she flees to Chicago, leaving behind her son, who will be forced to go to reform school. Yet bell hooks suggests a more hopeful reading of the novel’s conclusion and theorizing of rage: “Despite the novel’s sad ending, it is the expression of that rage that awakens Lutie, destroying the fantasies and dreams that have rendered her unable to respond in a productive way to the reality of her life” (*Remembered Rapture* 208). It is through this episode of murderous rage that Lutie is awakened to the interconnectedness of her multiple oppressions as a black woman. The question remains, to what does the novel’s treatment of rage awaken the reader?

“What I killed for must’ve been good!”

Both *The Street* and *Native Son* dramatize the violence permeating the lives of their central characters. Both authors seem inclined to suggest that violence is generative. In other words, as victims of violence, Lutie and Bigger reproduce that violence against others in myriad forms, including violent fantasies of rage at one end, and murder at the other. In *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel* Jerry H. Bryant suggests, “In the most morally simplified cases, white violence against blacks produces a victim, black violence against whites a hero ... The figure of the hero who kills whites in retaliation assumes the validity of his
counter-violence” (2-3). However, there are implications and potential consequences for this enactment of violence, from retaliation from whites to fear from the black community that this violence may turn inward (3). It is this inward turn of violence directed at the black community that makes it hard to imagine these episodes of murderous rage as heroic. Both Bigger and Lutie kill other blacks, Bessie and Boots respectively, who become “but a handy anonymous figure—a figure which [their] angry resentment transformed into everything [they] hated, everything [they] had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate [them]” (Petry 429). The violence in these novels results in the destruction of family as Bigger awaits his execution and Lutie abandons her son to flee prosecution for the murder of Boots Smith. Part of the inadequacy of the rage depicted in these novels lies in its isolation and individualistic focus. Bigger’s and Lutie’s alienation from their families and communities limits the revolutionary potential of their rage. Considering Bigger Thomas a predecessor to Franz Fanon’s theorizing of the emancipatory potential of violence for the colonized subject, Matthews correctly observes,

Bigger experiences many of the same material conditions as Fanon’s native and, as a result, at times he gives voice, twenty years before Fanon, to the consciousness that, according to Fanon leads to revolution. Yet Bigger’s statements ultimately lead only back to himself, his own alienation and rage. He seems unable, until it is too late, to reach out to others in a way that could lead to collective revolutionary action. (288-89)

The psychic isolation and individualistic focus of these protagonists renders their rage destructive and politically disengaged. When Richard Wrights posits, “How do Negroes feel about the way they have to live?” in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” this question is also paired with “How do they discuss it when alone among themselves?” (32). The focus on community, on being “among themselves” discussing and expressing black feelings, is key to
survival and emotional health. But Bigger and Lutie, even when in the company of other blacks, are never “among themselves”; they are merely by themselves.

There are two aspects to Bigger and Lutie’s isolation: the limitations of the communities they are, and also their own choices not to engage with their communities. The traditionally healing sites of family and community are often represented as spaces of shame. Lutie is ashamed of her community and berates her son when she feels he is becoming like “the rest of these little niggers” (Petry 67). While Bigger’s gang seems like a potential space of alliance and there are moments of seemingly genuine intimacy, this is still a space of shame and ultimately violent rage, symbolized by Bigger’s violent attack and metaphoric rape of Gus. Similarly, for Lutie, the potential for community with other black women is compromised. While Mrs. Hedges saves Lutie from the eager hands of Super Jones, it is only as financial investment in assuring the freshness of Lutie’s goods for Junto.

Wright and Petry’s protagonists at times outright reject the restorative possibilities of family and community. In her reading of The Street, Farah Jasmine Griffin correctly observes that “Petry makes a few safe spaces available to her protagonist, Lutie; community, family, and the voice of her grandmother. Lutie dismisses all of them” (114). While I do not address the voice of her grandmother as a potential site of healing and safety in my reading of the text, the point still stands that Lutie rejects the safe spaces available to her and this, I argue, is what limits the transformative potential of her rage and resistance to dehumanization. Lutie’s failure to create community leaves her more vulnerable to exploitation by Junto and Boots. When Bub is arrested, Lutie cannot confide in or seek assistance from her co-workers because “she didn’t know any of them intimately ... she went right home after work ... and she always took a sandwich along for lunch, and when the weather was good she ate [alone] on a park bench”
Lutie’s choice to isolate herself from her potential communities has serious emotional and economic consequences. Similarly, Bigger rejects the possibility of a “safe space,” through relationship with his family or gang, or through heterosexual romance with Bessie. Bigger Thomas and Lutie Johnson embody the alienation and fragmentation of the city; without a community, their rage cannot be collectively marshaled to move from self-destructive to revolutionary action. But does black rage have a pedagogical function for the reader, though it proves inadequate for the protagonists?

*The Street* ends with a questioning of the purpose of writing. As Lutie draws circles in the fog on the window of the train, she remembers this is the series of circles that she learned in grammar school to achieve “the proper slant” in penmanship (Petry, 435). She recalls her (white) teacher’s admonishment of the uselessness of teaching her people to write. She reflects, “What possible good has it done to teach people like me to write?” (436). This question calls to mind the famous freedom/literacy trope, so central to antebellum slave narratives; if literacy is the site of agency in the slave narrative, where is the site of freedom and agency in the Jim Crow moment? William Scott suggests that in the ending of the novel “one can detect ... a gesture of hope intimating the radical possibilities of African American women’s writing” (112). At the same point that Lutie questions what good can come from her ability to write, Petry is penning this protest novel that hopes to awaken America’s conscience. Her novel’s conclusion captures the vexed position of African American writers, especially as regards the powers and limits of protest fiction and its relation to social justice. Both novels are deeply concerned with speaking, writing, and singing (Lutie is a singer), with artistic forms of expression. *Native Son* ends with Bigger’s existential soliloquy while *The Street* concludes with Lutie’s musings about the potential of writing. Together, it could be argued, their “expressions” implicitly invite the reader
to ask what is the purpose of black protest fiction, and what is the role of “affect,” specifically rage in this genre?

“Without the Consolation of Tears:”¹⁶

The Territory of Reader’s Affective Response in Protest Literature

Protest fiction has always been invested in producing an affective response in readers that would hopefully incite political action; be it sympathy or (out) rage, the reader’s affect is always a concern of writers who engage in political work through literature. Slave narrative writers were aware of their reading audience and engaging their affective responses to the autobiography. One notable example is Harriet Jacob’s appeal to her female readership in this famous passage:

“Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered” (161). Compassion of course necessitates identification with these women and their plight, and this Jacobs seems to suggest is a potentially radical act.

There is an established tradition of appealing to white sympathy in protest literature from the slave narrative on. Richard Wright, however, is more skeptical of the political efficacy of white sympathy in attaining black freedom.

Affect is so much a part of the landscape of Native Son because Wright’s vision for his novel is to stand against the impulse of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (something Baldwin argues he fails miserably at). In “How Bigger was Born,” Wright describes his motives for constructing such a narrative of the bleak reality of black urban life and the violence it produces. He insists on a distinction between the (white) reader’s affective experience in reading his short story collection Uncle Tom’s Children and in reading Native Son:

¹⁶ Wright describes his political project of writing in “How Bigger Was Born,” where he suggests that he no longer wants to write novels that a banker’s daughter can weep at and then feel good about. Instead, he pens a violent and disturbing novel in Native Son, one that must be read “without the consolation of tears.”
When the reviews of that book [Uncle Tom’s Children] began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naïve mistake. I found that I had written a book, which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest. (emphasis added 455)

It is clear that Wright, heavily influenced by naturalism, is also offering a critique of sentimentalism and its limitations for producing real change. But what affective response, if not “weeping,” does he hope to produce in his readers? Grief or sentimentalism is too comfortable for the (white) reader. Instead, Wright wants to implicate the (white) reader or outrage the reader. Committed to social realism and political naturalism, Wright resists the aesthetic concerns of beautiful language, poetic imagery, and delicate metaphors; rather, his aesthetic of rage, violence, and deprivation creates stark imagery of the dilapidated conditions of housing and the many harsh realities of black urban life. These depictions assault the reader’s senses and disrupt the leisurely reading experience with horrific scenes, including killing the rat, dismembering Mary’s body, and raping and murdering Bessie. Early reviews of the novel often described it in violent language: “grim and frightening,” “a super shocker,” “tremendous wallop,” “shock our sensibilities” (Kinnamon, 19). The sense of discomfort if not outright fear expressed in these reviews reveals the way that violence moves from the realm of the novel to the reader’s response and engagement with the text. In one particular review by Bennet Davis, in “Books of the Week in Review” for Buffalo Courier-Express, March 3, 1940, the novel is described as “a book which takes you by the ears and gives you a good shaking, whirls you on your toes and slaps you dizzy

17 James Baldwin famously accuses Wright of reproducing the sentimentalism of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin through its use of stereotyped characters that lack psychological complexity in his influential essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”
against the wall” (Kinnomon, 19). The reading experience is described through a language of violence, disorientation, and the feeling of being knocked unconscious. Moreover, the relationship of violence and pedagogy is evident in the disciplinary language used to describe the novel as “a book which takes you by the ears and gives you a good shaking,” an image that recalls a teacher’s disciplinary practice for unruly students who fail to listen and learn. By this account, the book both instructs and disciplines the reader. This is not a novel that is concerned with its readers’ leisurely, comfortable reading; it is a novel that may in fact give its readers nightmares.

I would argue that in “dead earnest,” Wright sets in his brutal descriptions of the violent murders of Mary and Bessie and the rape of Bessie to produce a certain kind of psychic violence in the reader that initiates the reader into the violence of black urban life. Petry similarly employs graphic scenes that insist that the reader not only be a spectator to this violence. Unlike Wright, Petry herself lived a relatively sheltered life in New England and never suffered the economic deprivation that she depicts. Rather, “It was as a witness to this genocide as young writer in Harlem observing the world around her that she was compelled to write a novel that would not only describe the conditions there but also be a statement of protest, one that would urge readers to change their attitudes” (Remembered Rapture, 203-4). Petry also imagines her work of fiction as a tool for social change, starting with the minds of the readers.

Ann Petry and Richard Wright clearly engage the purpose of black art and seem to suggest it has a specific function to awaken American conscience to the dehumanization of racism and economic exploitation. However, James Baldwin in his seminal essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” engages the limitations of this genre and its use of sentimentality. In this controversial essay, Baldwin engages affect and reader’s response. He states, “Sentimentality,
the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel [emphasis added]; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty” (14). According to Baldwin, sentimentality is dishonest in that it disguises cruelty; it is inhumane. It is this “spurious emotion” that Baldwin accuses Wright of producing in his readership. Whatever the effect, be it wet eyes or a sense of (out)rage, it is evident that the reader’s affect was a central concern for Wright and Petry, who saw their novels as politically engaged works of activism. The question remained, could the rage of their protagonists effectively create (out)rage in their readers?

These aesthetic and political concerns with representing the black experience and rage as means of negotiating one’s relationship to violence continued to inform future generations of writers, thinkers, and artists. But while in Protest Era fiction, rage is often repressed and hidden and only expressed in the most violent ways after a “dangerous accumulation,” writers like Alice Walker and radicals like Angela Davis and Malcolm X would conceive of rage as a political imperative, as an organized response to racism that challenges the focus on the individual experience of rage in these earlier texts. With the emergence of Hip Hop in the 1980s, rage appeared in the voices and swagger of gangsta rappers and Hip Hop artists. Rage would become both an attitude and identity of a whole generation of those who signified on Bigger Thomas, but with a more pronounced political agenda and radical ethics—modern day “prophets of rage,” to borrow from Public Enemy, who would define rage as a “useful and necessary tool for revolution.”

In their video for “Prophets of Rage,” Public Enemy employs a speaker who defines the terms “prophets” and “rage.” When defining prophet, the speaker reads from the dictionary: “One who delivers divine message or who foretells the future.” He then discards the dictionary when offering this definition of rage: “A useful and necessary
Chapter Two: Presenting Our Bodies, Laying Our Case: The Political Efficacy of Grief and Rage During the Civil Rights Movement in Alice Walker’s Meridian

I’ve got vengeance in my heart tonight and I ask you to be angry with me. Well, I’m sick and tired. I am sick and tired of going to memorials. I am tired of funerals. I don’t want to go to another memorial ... Don’t bow down anymore! We want our freedom NOW!

Dave Dennis, “Eulogy of James E. Chaney”

On August 7, 1964, forty-seven days after the disappearance of Freedom Summer volunteers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner and three days after their murdered bodies were discovered buried fifteen feet below the Mississippi earth, C.O.R. E organizer Dave Dennis delivered the eulogy for slain activist James Chaney at his Mississippi funeral. Refusing to offer the “traditional” eulogy, one of lamentation and celebration of the deceased’s life, Dennis instead offered one of the most impassioned and rhetorically masterful calls to engagement of the Civil Rights Movement, the cadence of his voice ranging from moments of lament to the anger of the jeremiad. He spoke of the “living dead,” those in the community who are apathetic and sit idly by in the midst of oppression and gross injustice (2). The words of the epigraph are particularly provocative in that Dennis questions the appropriate affective response to racism and injustice? Dennis suggests a need to move beyond mourning to a more militant and radical affect, anger or rage, one that could translate into social change and transformation. “We want freedom now!” he declares. His insistence on this need for immediate...
action is what I call a radical ethic of rage. This insistence on the value of black life, the need to not only mourn the dead but also protect the living can be considered an expression of black rage. Theorizing the relationship of mourning and rage is also the work of Alice Walker’s civil rights novel *Meridian*, a novel that meditates on the efficacy of various political strategies for eradicating racial injustice in the civil rights movement.

Alice Walker’s novel offers important insights on the activism and the vision of freedom, but also on the extreme violence and sacrifices faced by those in the movement, some of whom gave their very lives to its cause. Importantly, the protagonist, Meridian Hill’s political awakening is ignited by news of the bombing of a local home where an interracial coalition of black and white volunteers registering people to vote are being housed. Inspired by their bravery in facing such virulent threats and attacks, Meridian articulates her own stance as an activist in the words, “I’ve come to volunteer” (Walker 75). The significance of the novel’s title and name of the protagonist Meridian should not be understated. Meridian has important historical relevance to the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement in that it was in Meridian, Mississippi where Freedom Summer activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner disappeared and were later found dead and buried, victims of the violence of the KKK. The function of violence in the novel and its meditations on loss, mourning, and the many causalities of the freedom movement underscore the many lives lost in the movement.

In this novel that meditates on mourning and loss, the Civil Rights Movement is not simply imagined as a series of legislative triumphs culminating in the Civil Rights Act, but as a movement represented importantly through its causalities. This novel reflects that freedom is not free, it must be paid for with a cost and we must question that cost, both physically—in terms of lives lost—but also psychically in terms of the emotional scars and trauma of those who remain.
Meridian both mourns and memorializes those who laid down their lives in the struggle for justice. Most significantly, in the novel’s use of eulogy and representations of the rituals of black mourning, Walker explores the cost (in lives) of creating a beloved community. Like Dave Dennis’s invitation to anger in the epigraph, the novel underscores the emotional fatigue of grieving and considers the efficacy of anger and rage as a retort to racial violence and injustice. Rage and grief are interrelated in this novel, as rage often arises from grief. Furthermore, grief and rage are politically galvanizing affects. I consider Judith Butler’s insights on the politics of mourning and Douglas Crimp’s articulation of the power and efficacy of “mourning and militancy,” to examine the novel’s interrogation of the political potential of grief and rage. In her characterization of the psychic trauma of grief, Walker questions the non-violent philosophy of the Civil Rights Movement and the willingness, espoused by Martin Luther King, Jr., to submit the body to blows and even possible death.

Much of the critical discourse on Alice Walker’s Meridian has engaged such themes as “coming to voice” of the female protagonist, or “coming of age,” in a manner suggesting the traditional bildungsroman. Other critics have also considered the ways this text explores the efficacies of the Civil Rights Movement and the methods of protest by which it is best known. While an engagement with the strategies of the Civil Rights Movement is certainly central to the text, Meridian is fundamentally a novel about rage, specifically rage within the context of that movement.

19 Deborah McDowell’s “The Self in Bloom: Walker’s Meridian” and Karen Stein’s “Alice Walker’s Critique of Revolution” offer insightful readings of the ways Meridian resists the prescribed roles of gender and insists on a self-making. These critics illuminate the ways the novel is about transformation and a coming to consciousness that necessitates a challenging of the institution of marriage and motherhood that reinforce patriarchal oppression of the female spirit. Critics like Roberta Hendrickson and Lynn Pifer interrogate the ways that the political and philosophical ideologies of the Civil Rights Movement are represented and called into question in the novel.
Significantly, Walker begins to write *Meridian* in 1970 at a moment of disillusionment with the aspirations of the Civil Rights Movement and the growing fervor of The Black Power Movement. The Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movements are complex and the subject of extensive scholarly deliberation. While the nonviolent Civil Right Movement becomes the dominant image of black activism from the 1950s-1960s, there has always been great debate and different ideological positions on strategies for dismantling racism since slavery. There were certainly activists of the Civil Rights Movement who displayed rage, advocated the use of violence in the case of self-defense and preservation. There are numerous accounts of blacks arming themselves in response to attacks by the KKK. And while the “weary” figure of the respectable Rosa Parks became the symbol of the Montgomery bus boycott, Claudette Colvin and others were far less polite and expressed rage, even attacking police verbally and physically when arrested for refusing to give up their seats. Charles E. Cobb Jr.’s *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed* complicates this popular image of the movement in suggesting the ways that armed self-defense greatly aided the Civil Rights Movement and protected nonviolent protesters. He contends, “Thus the tradition of armed self-defense in Afro-American history cannot be disconnected from the successes of what today is called the nonviolent civil rights movement” (2). It is important to note there was great diversity in perspectives, strategies, ideologies, and imperatives in both movements (as well as fluidity between the movements) in their interrogation of a vision for freedom and democracy for blacks, the ethics and efficacy of nonviolence, the potential/limitations of interracial coalition, and economic inequality among other concerns.

For the purposes of my argument, I address the different rhetorical and political employments of “rage.” Specifically, I consider the ways that Walker examines the strategies of
the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement, most readily identified with Martin Luther King Jr. King called for a disciplining of the body and suppressing any outward expression of rage. On the other hand, the Black Power Movement sought to marshal that same rage and in fact to stroke it, towards nationalist and revolutionary ends. Black rage and, by extension cathartic violence, become central tenets in the turn against the assumed passivity of non-violence. This is a moment when rage had become the required black affect for black revolutionaries, a marker of black authenticity and a badge of commitment to the movement. The tension in the rhetoric and ideology of these movements is most evident in Walker’s depiction of the revolutionary group of militants that asks Meridian to declare not only her willingness to die but to kill for the revolution. To the disappointment and dismay of her militant friends, Meridian is unable to answer definitively that she is willing to kill for the revolution. Instead she pledges to do what she believes in, what she believes “to be best for black people.” She vows, “‘I’ll go back to the people, live among them, like Civil Rights Workers used to do” (18). As a character emerging at the crossroads of the nonviolent direct action Civil Rights Movement and Black Power, Meridian wrestles with rage and its usefulness as well as the efficacy of nonviolence and violence, the call to either die or kill for the revolution. In Meridian’s need to confront her rage, Walker reveals that rage needs to be spoken, used, marshaled – testified to.

Freedom Isn’t Free: The Cost of Heroic Suffering

*Meridian* treats both poles: the “cost” of the heroic suffering where rage is exchanged for public suffering as well as the “cost” of staging “violent” rage as the basis for revolutionary commitment. While Walker is critical of the rhetorical posturing of “killing for the revolution,” she importantly weighs in on the performance of non-violence and the insistence that rage be disciplined and even silenced in the face of injustice. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Walker
reflects on the ways activists in the Civil Rights Movement figure in the American cultural imaginary:

I think it started when I became aware that the very brave and amazing people whom I knew in the Civil Rights Movement were often incredibly flawed, and in a way, it was these flaws that both propelled them and ‘struck’ them ... The image you got on television showed their remarkable control. Their sense of wholeness and beauty. In short, they were heroic. It’s just that the other side of that control was the cost of their heroism, which I think as black people, as Americans, we don’t tend to want to look at because the cost is so painful. (179)

It is this pain, guilt, grief and rage that Walker brings to bear in Meridian, a deeply flawed heroine who negotiates the various moral and political strategies for achieving a beloved community, from her work as a civil rights activist registering people to vote to her involvement with a militant student group that requires her declaration of a willingness to kill for the revolution. The novel explores the psychological and physiological toll of participation in the movement on the minds and bodies of the freedom fighters, these brave men and women who demonstrated “remarkable control” (179). Meridian as a novel begs the question, what is “the cost of their heroism?” What is the cost to their bodies, mental health, relationships, and building of community?

Specifically, the novel calls attention to the physical and psychological costs of Martin Luther King Jr.’s call to “present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community” in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (82). 20

20 Dr. King described the psychological and physical preparation for participation in the various direct action non-violence protest efforts against segregation in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” written August 1963. He writes, “So we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. We were not unmindful of the
King calls for a sacrifice of the body, a willingness to accept blows and possible jail without retaliation. By no means does King ignore, deny, or pathologize rage; one cannot hear King’s suggestion of the “fierce urgency of now” in his “I Have a Dream Speech” and miss his anger and righteous indignation, but his is a tempered rage. The philosophy of non-violence seeks to discipline this rage, regarding violent or un-tutored rage as counterproductive to achieving a beloved community. In *Meridian*, Walker appears suspicious of this mode of disciplining one’s affective expression and subjecting one’s body to violence, especially as a testimony of suffering to awaken the nation’s conscience.

The Political Efficacy of Rage

In *Meridian*, Walker confronts the relationship of rage to social movement activism. She questions the political efficacy of rage, asking implicitly what is the role of rage in achieving social justice? Moreover, she investigates whether rage is a surrogate for grief? In several occasions in the text, rage is preceded by grief: the students rioting after being denied the right to properly mourn and bury the Wild Child; the father’s ritualized destruction of his home on the anniversary of the death of his son, a Civil Rights activist killed in the movement. There is a similar desire to channel grief through rage in Dave Dennis’ invitation to anger, captured in the epigraph. Even in its colloquial usage, rage is associated with loss — rage can signify that which is “in vogue,” or of contemporary relevance, “a fad,” as in “*X is all the rage now.*” It is important to note the focus on temporality in this usage; embedded in this cliché is an assumption of ephemerality: the “thing” that is “all the rage” is fleeting, lasting only a season. There is an anticipation of loss. This linguistic use of rage is theoretically expedient as I will
argue that one can not access rage without addressing loss, grief, and by extension, without addressing mourning. To anticipate loss is to reside in a liminal space that is at once future directed in its “anticipation” but retrospective in its expectation of loss. It is, in other words, “a retrospective future.”

I will focus my analysis on the ways in which *Meridian* can be placed in dialogue with what Judith Butler calls “the political use of grief” and, at the same time, enables us to think about the relationship of grief to rage (xv). In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler articulates the political dimension of grief:

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (xv)

Obituaries, eulogies, and public displays of mourning (a moment of silence for instance) support the work of the nation in eulogizing the dead who are prized, those who are esteemed to be of value and thus worthy of being honored and remembered. In other words, obituaries and eulogies, which may be seen as “public” documents, re-inscribe norms of who belongs to the category of the human. There is an imagined community created through mourning – a sense of a shared memory and affective experience. Consider the work of memory and nation-making when Americans continually recall where they were, or what they felt at the moment of J.F.K.’s assassination, or at the moment of the 9-11 attacks; there is a sense of a shared memory, solidarity, and mourning essential to the project of nation making.

While public mourning or re-membering can be a way of nation making and a way to re-inscribe normative ideas of the human, public mourning can also be a radical act that insists on
the recognition and memorializing of marginalized groups. In his work examining loss and episodes of public Queer mourning during 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic, Douglas Crimp observes that violence “reaps horrible rewards” of psychic pain (18). However, he insists on an engagement with the emotional reality of “our rage- our terror, our guilt, and our profound sadness” as they have important possibilities through “[m]ilitancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning and militancy” (18).

I am interested in mapping the relationship of mourning to militancy in Walker’s *Meridian*. This relationship is evident in the novel’s meditations on mourning the dead, which take two significant forms: the litany of those martyred in the Civil Rights Movement, whose names are listed in the novel. But apart from the names of public, recognizable figures, there is the recurrent image of the dead child, in whom both grief and rage converge. Significantly, Meridian arrives at a kind of political consciousness at a moment of mourning and remembering. As she listens to a grief-stricken father eulogize his son, a civil rights worker who is brutally killed, she begins to meditate on perhaps the central question of her political life: will she kill for the revolution? In this pivotal scene Walker articulates a theory of grief and rage through Meridian’s perspective:

> I have been allowed to see how the new capacity to do anything, including kill for our freedom—beyond sporadic acts of violence—is to emerge, and flower, but I am not yet at the point of being able to kill anyone myself, nor—except for the false urgings that come to me in periods of grief and rage—will I ever be. (emphasis added Walker 205)

Walker locates “a new capacity to do anything,” a deeper commitment to revolutionary transformation and even a willingness to kill in these “periods of grief and rage” and yet these affects are identified as “false urgings,” unreliable or untrustworthy impulses. I am interested in
the ways in which this space-time continuum—“in periods of grief and rage” (Walker 205) — affords an opportunity to think through what Butler suggests about the possibilities of grief: “what might be made of grief?” (Butler xv), but also for my purposes, what might be made of rage? In *Meridian*, grief and rage are set to operate in the same affective register. In other words, in the lived and meditative experience of Meridian, grief and rage are in close proximity to anger and loss. They are imagined to be politically useful affects in their employment in displays of public protests, whether in public mourning or expressions of rage/outrage. Most importantly, they are imagined as “shareable” affects. Whereas through empathy, we can bear each other’s grief, rage is thought of as somewhat contagious.

In the phrasing “Periods of Grief and Rage,” Walker articulates the limits of grief and mourning and the potential of rage for revolutionary transformation. This process seems most evident in Walker’s use of the eulogy as a form of mourning and protest, in the recurrent motif of the dead child as “a case before the nation’s conscience,” and finally in spectacles of public mourning which become sites of “shared” grief and rage. Walker’s use of the eulogy serves to offer for the reader’s consideration an expansive notion of what constitutes a grievable life. At the same time, the novel suggests the limitations of mourning and grief in its retrospective focus and romanticizing of suffering and martyrdom. Like Crimp, Walker considers the place of “militancy,” in this case expressed through rage in displays of public mourning.

While the phrasing—“periods of grief and rage”—conjoins these two affects, Walker actually announces this conjunction in the novel’s epigraph, an excerpt borrowed from Black Elk’s eulogy for the martyred women and children at the hands of the United States army at Wounded Knee:

I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there.

Walker borrows Black Elk’s lamentation here as a means of framing her novel’s running allusions to the many freedom fighters who bled and died during the Civil Rights Movement. Specifically, the images of children “lying heaped and scattered” recall the images of the scattered and dismembered bodies of the four martyred girls Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. King’s “Eulogy for the Young Victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing,” delivered at a joint funeral for the girls in Birmingham, is also implied. King laments, “These children—unoffending, innocent, and beautiful—were the victims of one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity” (95). Describing their deaths as noble, he also likens them to “the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity” (95). Suggesting that the “innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as a redemptive force,” he professes, “Indeed this tragic event may cause the White South to come to terms with its conscience” (99).

In King’s poetic delivery and imagery of heroism, beauty, and innocence the tragic deaths of these four girls serves a symbolic function. His prediction that their deaths might serve to awaken the conscience of the nation eerily harkens back to King’s distillation of his philosophy of non-violent resistance: “we present our very bodies as a case before the nation,” articulated in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (82). While Walker seems to be alluding to these martyred girls, she seems, at the same time, ambivalent about this kind of heroic suffering.
Whereas King called repeatedly for living bodies willing “to accept blows without retaliation” in the direct action non-violence efforts, Walker explores the extreme consequences of this call, not only in the echoes of the four martyred girls in the novel’s epigraph, but also in direct, explicit references to martyred leaders, as well as to the reoccurring image of the dead body on display in the novel. Walker critiques the call to martyrdom in the philosophy of non-violent resistance, questioning whether the cost of freedom should be death; and if so, how many innocent people have to pay this price? And conversely if killing is the cost of freedom (as the revolutionary cadre suggests) how might guilt be observed as the debt?

Black Mourning: The Work of the Eulogy

Walker’s use of the eulogy is especially interesting as it appears as a litany of names of freedom fighters martyred in the freedom movement, from President John F. Kennedy to Black Panther member George Jackson. Significantly, this is the only section of the text that is unnamed, buried between two chapters “The Last Return” and “The Wild Child.” I reproduce a significant portion of this chapter as it appears on the page because of its unique use of the physical page as well, its use of capitalization and italics as a grammatical, aesthetic, and affective intervention. It reads as follows:

MEDGAR EVERS/JOHN F. KENNEDY/MALCOLM X/
MARTIN LUTHER KING/ROBERT KENNEDY/CHE
GUEVARA/PATRICE LUMUMBA/GEORGE JACKSON/
CYNTHIA WESLEY/ADDIE MAECOLLINS/DENISE
MCNAIR/CAROLE ROBERTSON/Viola LIUZZO
It was a decade marked by death. Violent and inevitable. Funerals became engraved on the brain, intensifying the ephemeral nature of life. For many in the South it was a decade reminiscent of earlier times, when oak trees sighed over their burdens in the wind; Spanish moss draggled bloody to the ground; amen corners creaked with grief; and the thrill of being alone, once again, to endure unendurable loss produced so profound an ecstasy in mourners they strutted, without noticing their feet, along the thin back of benches; their piercing shouts of anguish and joy never interrupted by an inglorious fall. They shared rituals for the dead to be remembered.

But now television became the repository of memory, and each onlooker grieved alone.

Walker marks the centrality of death and by extension mourning to the movement in this litany of loss. Mourning is described as a kind of choreographed dance, a performance of “strutting, without noticing their feet” as this unendurable loss produces both grief and “ecstasy.” Mourners are at once alone to experience their grief in “amen corners” but still it is a shared ritual of remembering.

Margo Perkin’s work on political autobiographies identifies the common use of a roll call in such works as Assata Shakur’s autobiography as “foremost a gesture of giving names to the nameless (i.e, of insisting upon their humanity) and of resisting America’s propensity for historical erasure or forced forgetting” (11). This common trope is an important political and pedagogical intervention that presents alternative narratives of history and knowing to readers. The litany of names is also reminiscent of the ritual of reading the names of fallen heroes at memorial sites. While this reading is often done in a meditative and reverent tone, Walker’s use of capitalization seems to disrupt this reflective and reverent mode. In this way, this passage is
not only an expression of grief and loss, but rather I would suggest that an (anti) aesthetic of rage is at work in the use of capitalization for the names. The capitalization of all the letters is visually jarring against the page. It disrupts the reading experience, as the boldness of the capitalization serves to not just speak but scream the names of those fallen heroes. The recitation of the names of the four martyred girls supports the reading of the epigraph’s allusion to their tragic death, but it further implicates the reader, in forcing the reader to confront his/her positionality in relation to the named individuals. Furthermore in integrating the names of a President, various world leaders, activists, and then the name of the young girls, Walker suggests a democracy of grievability. There are no distinctive markers or special honoring reserved for any particular name, challenging the ways that the nation ascribes grief and sympathy to people considered worthy or of value. Here the life of Denise McNair and Kennedy are of equal significance; undoing the traditional work of the eulogy in nation making.

The Motif of the Dead Child: Presenting the Body as a Case

The motif of dead children, along with the practice of mourning them as a kind of public and political act, is repeated in several episodes in the novel, functioning as a site of healing, shared grief and rage, while simultaneously signifying the potential of political mobilization. For example, the rape and murder of Camara, Lynne’s daughter, becomes the only site of potential healing for Lynne and Meridian’s broken relationship. The shared rage and grief over the death of this “innocent” child is a moment of intimacy, compassion, and potential reconciliation. I am most interested in another moment of a dead child and the public spectacle of public mourning, (out)rage, and protest surrounding his death. The conditions surrounding the death of the unnamed boy in this small town in Alabama illuminate the unrealized aspirations of the Civil Rights Movement and integration. The town refuses to integrate the local swimming pools,
choosing instead to close them. Consequently, black children are forced to spend the hot summer days playing and swimming in the ditches behind their houses; but the city without warning flushes the excess reservoir water in these ditches leading to the death of a young boy who importantly remains unnamed in the text. I would suggest that the boy’s unnamed status signifies his representational function. The drowning of a child was a yearly occurrence resulting from these unsafe practices and thus the boy’s body stands in for the body of many children.

Led by Meridian, the community responds to the boy’s death with a processional to the mayor’s office. Bearing “in her arms the bloated figure of a five-year-old boy who had been stuck in the sewer for two days before he was raked out with a grappling hook” (195), Meridian interrupts a town meeting and places the child’s decomposing body beside the mayor’s gavel, a symbol of justice.

The silent procession behind Meridian represents both a protest and a funeral procession. Meridian honors the body in carrying it like a “bouquet of roses,” but this simile draws attention to the decaying body’s presumed stench. This display is also a militant moment of rage, one which, while committed to non-violence, is nonetheless deliberatively transgressive. This act of disruption—interrupting the mayor’s official meeting—is also an act of forced integration and intimacy of state power with the black body. In this scene, mourning and militancy meet. Meridian directs her rage into an act of protest, an act of remembrance, and an act of reckoning.

The display of the dead body is imperative for Meridian’s political project of rage. I locate this moment in the affective register of rage because of the insistence on the exposure of the body, rather than the gesture of covering or burying the body associated with mourning. There is no request for a proper burial or memorialization. Instead, the dead body remains
purposely unburied, exposed, above ground, out in the open. The figure of this un-named body recalls Emmett Till and the public performance of mourning his death as a political act.\textsuperscript{21} The bloated body of this unidentified boy in \textit{Meridian} also recalls the physical deterioration of Emmett Till’s lynched and mutilated body, discovered days after his murderers threw his corpse in the river. The insistence on a kind of public viewing of the body in the town hall chambers is an implied allusion to Till. As Fred Moten notes of Emmett Till’s mother Mamie Bradley’s insistence that her “son’s face be seen, be shown, that his death and her mourning be performed.” Leaving the casket open, he continues, constitutes a “performance. It is the disappearance of Emmett Till that emerges by way of exhibiting kinship wounds ” (199). This performance, this spectacle of public mourning is—a calling to witness—often read as “an awakening of the nation’s conscience” that many argued inaugurated the Civil Rights Movement, in revealing the perverse monstrosity of American racism and violence. While grief is a private affective experience, the insistence of the open casket moves the mother’s private grief into the public realm of mourning, where grief is performed. This provides an opportunity for communal healing, “exhibiting kinship wounds” through mourning together.

As Adam Green observes, the (black) national mourning of Till was facilitated by the open casket and thousands who attended the wake but most importantly by \textit{Jet} magazine’s publication of the images of the open casket that allowed for a national viewing of the body and an “imagined community” of mourners (182). Green astutely describes the affective experience of Till’s wake as “the modern occasion of black national feeling – illuminating an African American sense of self as comradeship that occupied a shared place and time” (182). \textsuperscript{22} Shelby

\textsuperscript{21} We may also consider the ways this public mourning recalls Jimmie Lee Jackson, the young voting rights activist, whose death was part of the impetus for the march from Selma to Montgomery.
Steele’s reflections on Emmett Till’s murder confirms Green’s observation of this moment of black feeling:

Oh, how we probed his story, finding in his youth and Northern upbringing the quintessential embodiment of black innocence, brought down by a white evil so portentous and apocalyptical, so gnarled and hideous, that it left us with a feeling not far from awe. By telling his story and others like it, we came to feel the immutability of our victimization, its utter indigenousness, a thing on this earth like dirt or sand or water. (43)

The repetition of “we” in the passage is illustrative of the ways that community is often forged through pain. Importantly, it is not only witnessing but sharing these stories of gruesome violence that produces a shared affective experience of “awe” and “victimization.” This “shared place and time,” as Adam Green identifies it, recalls Walker’s articulation of the revolutionary potential for communal healing and transformation “in periods of grief and rage.” This occasion is one of grief and of (out) rage; it is also a moment of accusation. The open casket is an indictment of those who perpetuate such violence. Like the public display of the drowned boy’s body, it is a refusal to bury rage; it is a public shaming of the nation.

Walker interrogates the ways that radicalism, protest, and revolutionary transformation are constructed following this act of placing the body before the mayor. Significantly, Meridian collapses after leaving the town meeting, entering her death-like stance, resembling the corpse she has just carried. The conversation between Meridian and her black townspeople underscores the contestations over what constitutes resistance and radicalism. When Meridian suggests that “their smallest resistance to the murder of their children, [is] to use the vote,” the people respond with nervous laughter: “‘But that’s nothing,’ these people said, who had done nothing before beyond complaining among themselves and continually weeping” (37). Meridian reveals the
townspeople’s passivity after the mass mobilization of the Civil Rights Movement. “People will laugh at us because that is not radical,’ they said, choosing to believe radicalism would grow over their souls, like a bright armor, overnight” (37). In conflating complaining and continually weeping, Walker suggests the limits of mourning for political change if it is not grounded in a political imperative and engagement; mourning must be marshaled for more radical action that moves beyond “weeping and wailing.” While the town seems to imagine radicalism as something more militant than voting, Meridian holds on to the political imperatives of the movement, such as the focus on voter registration.

Mourn with those who mourn

In another tableau of a dead child, Walker explores the radical potential of public displays of mourning. The administration of Saxon college has refused to recognize a funeral for The Wild Child, an uncivilized young woman who is tragically killed in an accident. Her death isn’t worth commemoration because of her purported lack of respectability amongst the school of genteel Saxon ladies. When the students attempt to have a burial for The Wild Child, they are met with great opposition from the administration who refuse to admit her casket into the chapel. The students lament this injustice as it “caused a cry to rise from the collective throats of the crowd in one long wail” (emphasis added 37). The students are one “collective throat” as their grief, later manifested as rage, is “one.” Mourning becomes a militant act in this moment as rage is marked by grief, the mourning of The Wild Child. It is also a site of rebellion against Saxon college as the students have gathered to protest the institution’s refusal of a funeral for this untutored, uncivilized young woman who turns up pregnant at the age of thirteen. For the students, this is a fight for human dignity; for the administration, this foul-mouthed Wild Child, undisciplined, and marked by the shame of her growing belly, is not a proper subject of
sympathy. One can consider the ways that The Wild Child alludes to Claudette Colvin, whose pregnancy out of wedlock, lower class status, and anger (cussing out the white bus drivers) make her unsuitable for becoming the test NAACP case against segregated busing. It is a similar politics of respectability at work in Saxon College’s clear disregard for Wild Child’s life as unworthy of commemoration, recognition or even a moment of silence.

Meridian recalls the fervor of student protest. “For five minutes the air rang with shouts and polite curses” (37). Described as “ashamed and angry,” and unable to articulate the “ferocity [they felt] that was close to hatred,” the girls “began to boo and stamp their feet and stick out their tongues through tears” (37) It is as if this deep pain and rage cannot be translated through language but must be rendered through sound or gesticulations. Symbolically, they remove the markers of their conformity to the ideals of femininity and purity. “In the heat of their emotion they began to take off their jewelry and fling it to the ground—the heavy three stand cultured pearl necklaces and the massive, circular gold-plated chastity pins, the globular, cluttered earrings and their glittering bracelets of many colored stones they throw off their jewelry: the pearl necklaces and circular gold plated chastity pins” (37). These acts of solidarity continue “as if by mutual agreement—though no words were spoken—the pallbearers picked up the casket and carried it to the middle of the campus and put it down gently beneath The Sojourner” (37). Importantly, these acts of solidarity are done in silence; as they are one, their pain is shared. The silence also signifies a sense of mourning, a moment of silence honoring the dead but also silence as a display of defiance.

These acts of solidarity and protest soon give way to chaos as the students, filled with bitter rage at the administration’s disregard for human life, destroy the sacred tree, a symbolic site of resistance. It was for the first time in Saxon’s “long, placid impeccable history” that
students rioted on campus (38). And while Meridian pleaded with the students to destroy the president’s house instead, in “a fury of confusion and frustration they worked all night, and chopped and sawed down, level to the ground, that mighty, ancient, sheltering music tree” (38). Walker signifies the potential of a shared rage that moves beyond the individual experience to a rage that is a communal property, a rage that unifies to the point of being represented as a “collective throat,” a unified voice. This movement of unity, however, arguably ends in an unproductive display of misdirected violence, signifying the self-destructive nature of an undisciplined rage. Despite Meridian’s pleas, instead of destroying the president’s house, the students blinded by rage, target The Sojourner and senselessly destroy the sacred tree, limb by limb. Walker seems to question whether violence, and particularly this misdirected violence, can be transformative? What is the emancipatory potential of this militant rage when expressed in a chaotic violence?

The potentiality of this moment of mourning turned to militant rage is potentially undermined by the misdirection of the violent expression. Here Walker seems to confirm Cobbs’ and Grier’s assessment of rage as undisciplined and prone to misdirection and destructive impulses. Yet this is a section of the novel where the reader only gets Meridian’s reading of the event; while Meridian is invested in the preservation of the Sacred Tree, its destruction can not be extrapolated as a loss for all. The destruction of the tree would seem to suggest an alienation from the ancestor in which Meridian is rooted but it may also suggest that these rioters insist on charting a new path and developing new strategies for navigating their oppression. While these mechanisms of resistance may appear counterproductive, it is possible that the students find a cathartic release in this violent rebellion.
Meridian’s perspective on the destruction of The Sacred recalls discourses centered on blacks “looting” and “destroying their own communities” as an indictment against their irrationality, self-destructiveness and unproductive rage. The discourse is often more concerned about the destruction of private and public property than the assault on black lives that often precipitates this violent, explosive rage as is seen in the mainstream media’s response to the 1992 L.A. Uprising, following the acquittal of the officers charged with beating Rodney King and most recently in Ferguson, MO and Baltimore, following the police related deaths of Michael Brown Jr. and Freddie Gray, respectively.

The destruction of the tree may be read as a necessary break with the past and a turn towards the future. The militant mourning, moments of silence, or even the dismantling of the markers of white femininity when the girls throw off their pearl necklaces appear as a site of revolutionary potential. The implicit question of what results from this rage is never answered. Whether it is this act of protest and destruction of the tree that later dissipates as the girls go back to business as usual or is there a seed of revolution planted in this destruction? Does this scene suggest that anger and rage need to be expressed and expelled from the body? That there is something healing about this moment for the girls who find community through communal mourning and rage? Such questions are not answered.

Call and Response

Meridian is ultimately ambivalent about the revolutionary potential of rage, reflected in the novel’s presentation of rageful expressions that are disparate in their effects. While such moments as the town hall meeting show the radical potential of rage when mobilized for political action, the scene of the Saxon rioting ending in the destruction of the Sacred Tree arguably suggests the destructive possibility of misdirected rage; the danger when rage finds inappropriate
targets. While I do not wish to reduce rage to violence, Meridian is preoccupied with the question of the efficacy of violent rage. It is in the space of the church, a more radical and politically engaged church than that of Meridian’s childhood where she confronts this question, and makes a final resolution. Meridian accepts the need for violence but rejects her own violent action, resolving instead:

... to walk behind the real revolutionaries -- those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and therefore go right ahead and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear.

(205)

Meridian identifies with the role of the “revolutionary” artist, one unable to do the work of the “real revolutionaries,” who she suggests must be willing to kill. She pledges instead to sing, to use art to restore those who do what she imagines as doing the real labor; this is her contribution. There are no easy resolutions to the question of the efficacy of violent rage; still questions the novel raises are incredibly generative. In particular, the narrative’s invocation of Margaret Walker’s brilliant poem “For My People” in this scene is instructive: “‘Let the martial songs be written,’ she found herself quoting Margaret Walker’s famous poem; ‘Let the dirges disappear!’” (199). I read this invocation as a turn away from mourning, away from “the dirge,” and a turn towards the “martial,” of which rage is one manifestation. Douglass Crimp’s call to reconcile “mourning and militancy” to see that acts of mourning and political engagement are not incommensurable is an important one. As I have suggested, the public mourning of the death of those who are marginalized is an important intervention but if mourning is the call to
engagement then rage must be the response. For the limit of grief and mourning is that they are retrospective in focus.

While grief elicits sympathy, rage implicates the interlocutor as participant in the inflicted attack or failing to protect the victim from said trauma and thus is also a call to accountability. Butler suggests, “passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transports us, undo us, implicate us in the lives that are not our own, irreversibly, if not fatally” (25). Grief and rage bind us together in an affective community, producing an irrevocable but also potentially fatal intimacy. But while grief focuses on the dead, what is lost; rage connects the living to the dead by insisting on the value of the dead but also demanding accountability for the living, a responsibility to those who remain. Walker problematizes the insistence on martyrdom attached to the call for “present[ing] our bodies,” a call which focuses on suffering as a means of arousing sympathy, and awakening the conscience of the nation.

The image of the dead child continues to function as a call to conscience in the American cultural imaginary, if we consider the ways in which the images of Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, and Jordan Davis, Michael Brown Jr., Tamir Rice are employed as a means of presenting the case of injustice before the conscience of the American public. Interestingly, Jet magazine whose images of Emmett Till became iconic, featured an image of Jordan Davis with the provocative heading “Is Your Child Next?” in a June 14, 2013 Special Investigative Issue. In the article entitled “Standing Our Ground,” journalist Denene Millner interviews the parents of Jordan Davis, Ron Davis and Lucia McBath, who discuss their deep grief and pain at their son’s life being cut short. The image of the grieving black mother has become ubiquitous; she is often shown with a school picture of her son (it is very rarely a daughter who gains national attention);
the school picture testifying to his innocence and possible future as narratives of his criminality circulates as a challenge to a mother’s and community’s grief. Even postmortem, black children (people) are not easily imagined as subjects of sympathy. The suggestion of one’s culpability and complicity circulate: he was wearing a hoodie; he smoked weed; he appeared menacing; and the list of indictments of the dead goes on. Likewise, there are accusations of criminality hailed against those who publicly grieve and express rage at the injustice of the deaths of blacks by police or vigilante law enforcement.

The public discourse surrounding the April 2012 “rage- filled” outburst of a Black female college student who threatened to kill her White professor and classmates as she was overwhelmed with grief and rage over the Trayvon Martin murder illuminates the way black rage continues to figure in the cultural imaginary. When Jonatha Carr, a premed student at Florida Atlantic University, raised her hand to ask a question during a study session for an Evolution class, no one predicted the violent outburst that would ensue after an unsatisfactory response from her professor. Jonatha asked, “Why does evolution kill black people?” and when her professor insisted that evolution did not kill black people or any other race, Jonatha responded with a verbal outburst complete with expletives and threats to kill her professor and white classmates (“Jonatha Carr, Florida University Student”). This “rage-filled rant,” as it is often characterized, would be viewed on YouTube by thousands of people and several news networks covered the story. An informal and often misguided discourse about rage, race, and gender began on various blogs and websites. It was later noted that Ms. Carr was involved in efforts to organize a protest in support of Trayvon Martin. I cite this example to demonstrate the ways that rage as an affective response to racial oppression is commonly dismissed as irrational, threatening, and inappropriate without any concerted efforts to understand it. It is important to
claim this outburst as intelligible and not dismiss it as crazed or as a racist rant, as some were inclined to do. Nor should Carr’s statements be judged embarrassing or shameful or evidence of a young woman with bipolar disorder whose meds had failed her, as her mother would later claim to news reporters. The responses to Jonatha Carr’s outburst underscore the fact that existing critical tools and cultural assumptions are often unavailable or are certainly inadequate for understanding black rage. As a result, it is silenced and driven underground, in its own way, employed as mere evidence of the pathology of black urban youth and culture.

Like Jonatha Carr, black urban youth confronted by state violence are impatient for justice. Martin Luther King Jr.’s argued fervently about the immediate need for justice in his 1963 “Why We Can’t Wait.” Moreover, his suggestions of “the fierce urgency of now,” and his charge against America if freedom is not realized still resonates. In his “I Have a Dream” speech delivered August 29, 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial, King clearly articulates the urgency of the moment and resists the rhetoric of gradualism instead suggesting that:

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent [emphasis added] will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality ... And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. And there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. (83)

I point to this passage to suggest the ways that King engages impatience and rage through the language of growing discontent and a thinly veiled warning should the nation “overlook the urgency of the moment” (83).
More recently, Robin Kelley signifies on King in his November 2014 article “Why We Won’t Wait: Resisting the War Against the Black and Brown Underclass.” Like *Meridian*, Kelley’s appeal is a roll call, featuring a litany of names of those killed at the hands of police who have sworn to protect and serve. He begins with the words, “Wait. Patience. Stay Calm.” In this way, he emphasizes the calls to discipline black affective responses to the 2014 shooting death of Michael Brown Jr. by officer Darren Wilson. Ultimately, Kelley questions the efficacy and cost of waiting, by naming those who died as we waited for the grand jury’s decision on whether to indict Darren Wilson. Identifying the victims, circumstances, and cause of death, his account is sobering:

Meanwhile, *as we waited* for the grand jury’s decision, a twelve-year-old Black boy named *Tamir Rice* was shot and killed by police in Cleveland because the officer mistook his toy gun for a real one. [...

*As we waited*, Cleveland cops took the life of *Tanisha Anderson*, a 37-year-old Black woman suffering from bipolar disorder. [...]  

*As we waited*, police in Ann Arbor, Michigan, killed a forty-year-old Black woman named *Aura Rain Rosser*. (emphasis added)  

He continues with this litany, giving an account of the deaths Rosahad McIntosh, Darrien Hunt, Akai Gurley, Ezell Ford, and Omar Abrego. The repetition of “as we waited” with the sobering statistics of black death caused by police brutality invites the questions: Can we afford to continue to wait? Can we afford to continue to be patient? Can we afford to stay calm, or does this moment require a different response? I consider the words of journalist Mychal Denzel Smith in an April 2014 article in the *Nation*, “The Function of Black Rage” eloquently captures the political efficacy and urgency of rage:
What some call *depression* or pessimism, I would call impatience and rage. *Our impatience and rage is what produced progress* [emphasis added]. That we are still impatient and angry reflects not black people’s failing but how far America still has to go. My question/challenge to white people who claim to be on the side of equality and justice: when will you get just as angry that these things have been done in your name? (Smith)

Smith locates impatience and rage as fundamental to the black revolutionary tradition and fight for justice;” impatience and rage is what produced progress.” We are at another crossroads of impatience and rage.

My work seeks to recuperate rage in what Robin D.G. Kelley calls “the transformative potential of radical imagination,” the dream, the future (*Freedom Dreams* 2). Rage resides in the domain of futurity. Rage is a kind of injunction to not only remember and honor the dead but also to be simultaneously accountable to the living, and the unborn, a responsibility to create a future, a “beloved community” for (to borrow form Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah) “the beautiful ones who are not yet born.”
Chapter 3: “A Proper and Properly Placed Rage:” Rage as a Radical Ethic in The Autobiography of Angela Davis

Of the many inhuman outrages of this present year, the only case where the proposed lynching did not occur, was where the men armed themselves in Jacksonville, Fla., and Paducah, Ky, and prevented it. The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense.

The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs a great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life. The more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged and lynched.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors*

Before Malcolm X coined the now famous phrase “by any means necessary”; before the Black Panthers donned their iconic leather jackets and climbed the capitol steps at the California statehouse brandishing .347 Magnums, 12-gauge shotguns, and .45 caliber pistols in protest and in demonstration of the right to bear arms; before Bobby Seal uttered the words of his prepared statement, “[t]he time has come for black people to arm themselves against this terror before it is too late,” activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett penned the words above in a formulation of the radical ethic of rage. In her famous work *Southern Horrors*, which served to dismantle the myth of the black rapist as justification for rampant lynchings in the South, Wells-Barnett made an appeal for the right to bear arms. Furthermore, she maintained the urgency of exercising this
right for the protection of black life. In asserting that “a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home” to protect blacks against the “inhuman outrages” that they daily suffer, Wells-Barnett upholds black dignity and justifies black rage. As Wells-Barnett contended, respect for black life can only be gained through a willingness to protect black life from white assault and aggression, by any means necessary. The only appropriate response was for blacks to exhibit a spirit of rage and militancy represented by armed self-defense.

Most importantly, in the passage above, Wells-Barnett theorizes the pedagogical function of violence in black life. She asserts, “[t]he lesson that this teaches that every Afro-American should ponder well” is that the respect for black life could only be gained through the defense of black life. The practice of violence against the black community should be instructive, because there are lessons to be learned from the instances where white attacks are thwarted. Respect for black life can only be attained through a commitment to armed self-defense. This is not an argument that appeals to white sympathy or compassion, to the white American conscience, as was commonly employed by her male contemporaries, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.

While arguably to radically different ends, both Du Bois and Booker T Washington advocated for sympathy, racial understanding, and cooperation.23 White sympathy is imagined as particularly advantageous to Washington, who frequently appealed to the "earnest sympathy" of Southern whites for the advancement of blacks. In an 1899 address to the Unitarian Club on New York, Washington would lament the “unfortunate” mindset of those blacks who “long retained the idea that any member of his own race who sought in a manly, independent, and unselfish

23 I do not attempt to conflate their political positions and philosophies in this comparison. Du Bois was a highly critical of Booker T. Washington's political vision for the advancement of blacks. Du Bois lays out this critique in "Of Booker T. Washington and Others" in *The Souls of Black Folk*. 
manner to thus encourage the Southerner to enter into *active sympathy* [emphasis] with the negro must necessarily be a trimmer or traitor to the highest interest of his race (497). Washington seems to engage the sentiments of Wells-Barnett who insisted that the era of lynching did not allow blacks to “cringe” or “beg,” as a posture of obsequiousness would only lead to yet more outrage, abuse, and lynchings against blacks. While a staunch and public critic of Booker T. Washington’s policy of racial accommodation and gradualism, Du Bois nonetheless saw sympathy between the races as imperative to the realization of American democracy. In his assessment of the racial strife of the South and its implications for national progress and racial uplift, Du Bois would suggest that “Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph” (133). Though Wells-Barnett writes *Southern Horrors* to elucidate the horror of lynching, her unrelenting indictment of white racism and disregard for black life emphasizes blacks’ responsibility to guard themselves against attacks.

I begin with Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s manifesto to demonstrate the ways that black women have theorized the radical potential of rage. The important theoretical interventions of black women are often relegated to obscurity, while male figures are credited as theoretical originators. Although Malcolm X has been hailed as “the prophet of black rage,” Wells-Barnett articulated the ethical imperative of rage eloquently and with theoretical sophistication almost a century earlier. Angela Davis follows in this black feminist tradition of militancy. Like Wells-Barnett’s campaign against lynching, Davis’s fight against systems of control (police brutality, the carceral state, racial violence) highlights the ways that spectacles of state violence, be it lynch law or police brutality, serve to physically and affectively discipline the black community. More
importantly, they advocate for black dignity through a radical insistence on the worth of black life.

The Sheer Absurdity of Racism

Through her storytelling techniques and rhetorical emphasis, Davis reveals what Cornel West describes as “the chronic refusal of most Americans to acknowledge the sheer absurdity that confronts human beings of African descent in this country—the incessant assaults on black intelligence, beauty, character, and possibility” (95). In constructing her life narrative as one of witnessing violence, hearing the sounds of bombs during her childhood in Birmingham, Alabama, and experiencing the psychic horror of racism and the ever-present threat of racial violence, Davis marks the pedagogical function of violence in black life in two ways: 1) violence as intended to teach black people of their “place” in society. 2) Situations of self-defense (as in Wells-Barnett’s advocacy of the Winchester rifle) teach black people to take up arms to protect themselves. She recognizes the psychic trauma of racism that can manifest in the cycle of violence and self-hatred when rage is inwardly directed or misdirected at other blacks as surrogates for white aggressors. She details the danger of this “inner directed violence” (Davis 100), and the impact it has even on children: “The children fought over nothing—over being bumped, over having toes stepped on, over being called a name, over being the target of real or imagined gossip” (94). She continues, “It hurt to see us folding in on ourselves, using ourselves as whipping posts” (95). Acknowledging the destructive potential of misdirected and unharnessed rage, Davis asserts the importance of what she deems “a proper and properly placed rage” (319), one that is rooted in shared social anger rather than a repressed rage that can have destructive outcomes when unacknowledged or misdirected. For Davis, rage must be effectively mobilized through political action.
In theorizing a “proper and properly placed rage” (319), Davis imagines the radical ethic of black rage as a response to racial terror. In using this terminology of “the radical ethic of rage,” I borrow from Michael De-Rell Hill’s construction of the ethics of swagger. He defines swagger as:

... a boldly innovative self-presentation in retort to racial prejudice. Swagger here involves more than just ego; it entails cultural recovery. Because slavery and segregation threatened parts of black life, especially aggression and flamboyance, swagger, in the post-civil rights era, became a way to both reclaim and viscerally celebrate aspects of the self that had been historically eroded. (2)

I am interested in the other repressed aspect of black life that Hill identifies: “aggression.” Affects exist on a continuum; rage may be understood as a heightened form of frustration: frustration-annoyance-anger-rage, all of which are identified as feelings of aggression.

Historically, blacks have been forced to tame down emotional expressions, like frustration, anger, or rage that may be read as aggressive. However, Davis asserts that “[f]rustrations, aggressions cannot be repressed indefinitely. Eventual explosion must be expected” (373). Recognizing the futility of choking down that rage, she further suggests, “the solution is not to become less aggressive, not to lay down the gun, but to learn how to set the sights correctly, aim accurately, squeeze rather than jerk and not be overcome by damage” (373-4). She employs “the gun” both literally as a metonym for self-defense and metaphorically to represent aggressive emotion as a weapon and tool of empowerment, if aimed correctly; recalling her articulation of “a proper and properly placed rage” (319). Like swagger, rage is also a site of “cultural recovery,” a reclaiming of one’s emotional subjectivity through a communally affirmed and shared rage, and a “retort to racial prejudice” (Hill 2).
Specifically, in my analysis of Davis’s exposition of a radical ethic of rage, I call
attention to the various dimensions of rage as a moral imperative and a political strategy. Davis
identifies the moral imperative of exercising Second Amendment rights for blacks. As in Wells-
Barnett’s appeal to the honor of the Winchester rifle, the right to bear arms is a central tenet of
Davis’s explication of black rage. Throughout scenes of her childhood, Davis recurrently
mentions her father’s gun as a means of protection of the family, whose Birmingham, Alabama,
home was targeted as retaliation for integrating a white neighborhood. The ethic and moral
imperative of rage is also demonstrated in the ways that it is seen as a site of cultural recovery; a
communally shared affective experience. Like Alice Walker’s Meridian, Davis’s interrogation of
the political efficacy of rage is engaged with grief, as rage often emerges from a site of grief and
mourning. There are frequent meditations of grief turned rage in the autobiography. In fact, it is
after the murder of George Jackson that Davis declares, “the deeply personal pain I felt would
have strangled me had I not turned it into a proper and properly placed rage” (emphasis added
319). The emphasis on place is instructive; Davis suggests that rage must be placed somewhere
specific, its proper place. In “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage,” anthropologist Renato Rosaldo
theorizes the ways that rage can serve as means of exorcising grief.24 The headhunting ritual is a
collective process, in which a group of men accompany the widower to find a random victim to
behead as a part of the mourning process. Relaying a conversation with an older Ilongot man
regarding the practice, Rosaldo observes: “He says that rage, born of grief, impels him to kill his
fellow human beings. He claims that he needs a place to ‘carry his anger.’ The act of severing
and tossing away the victim’s head enables him, he says to vent and, he hopes, throw away the
anger of his bereavement” (1). It is through a literal “killing rage” that the Ilongot find healing

24 In this ethnographic study, Rosaldo explores the cultural practice of headhunting amongst the Ilongots of
northern Luzon, Philippines. He suggests the ways that this ritual is connected to the emotions of grief and
rage.
from the pain of bereavement; grief turned anger must be vented and then disposed of. These theories of rage similarly express the relationship between grief and rage and foreground the importance of the community in the process of grieving and expressing rage. For Davis, it is a communally experienced and harnessed rage that proves politically transformative and emotionally healing. She suggests the galvanizing potential of grief turned rage, as many of the mass movements and protests are as moments of both “mourning and militancy.” Ultimately, Davis outlines the importance of political mobilization as a strategy not only for political advancement but a space to “carry one’s anger,” though there is never a hope to completely relinquish it as in the Ilongot ritual; instead Davis argues it must be channeled into positive and productive action.

In Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties, Margo Perkins offers an insightful reading of the autobiographies of 1960s Black Power women activists Assata Shakur, Elaine Brown, and Angela Davis. Perkins posits that these black women activists employed life-writing as an extension of their political activism by connecting their experiences to those of activists across historical periods, insisting that the personal is political, and constructing alternative histories that challenge hegemony’s control of knowledge. Rage often figures as an important affect in these works as it is experienced both as a personal, visceral response to racism and as a communally shared affect that must be formulated into a political ideology. Davis herself characterizes her writing as a “political autobiography,” a document of shared social anger at racial oppression. She renounces “a posture of difference,” characteristic of traditional autobiography, arguing instead that “the forces that have made my life what it is are the very same forces that have shaped and misshaped the lives of millions of my people” (ix). She continues to reiterate the representational function of her autobiography through her
objective to “convey my overwhelming sense of belonging to a community of humans – a community of struggle against poverty and racism” (x). Davis challenges the idea of the separation between the personal and political, between self and community. Throughout the texts there are several references to such sentiments as “my anger was shared” (263). More explicitly, she contends upon reading of incidences of virulent racism as she is studying abroad in Germany, “I am certain that what I was feeling was a variation and reflection of the same feelings that were overwhelming larger and larger numbers of Black people abroad” (145). For Davis, a collective consciousness is rooted in shared feelings.

In foregrounding an analysis of Davis’s autobiography as a theory of black rage, I seek to challenge the ways that rage has been identified as an affect of the masculine domain and property of the black underclass. Like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Angela Davis, a daughter of the black middle class, was often imagined as an inappropriate and unlikely vessel of black rage because of her gender and class. This characterization is perhaps most evident in the mainstream representation of Davis as what I call a “Girl Scout Gone Radical” in the national coverage of Davis’s arrest and subsequent trial for her alleged involvement in the Marin County Hall of Justice kidnapping-turned-shoot out orchestrated by Jonathan Jackson. In particular, an October 26, 1970 Newsweek cover story, entitled “The Angela Davis Case,” features images of her middle class upbringing, including a family portrait, an image of 10-year-old Davis as a Girl Scout, and references to her childhood piano lessons. The irreconcilability of Davis’s radical identity is evident in the discourse of the magazine article.

Angela Davis became a suspect in the Marin County Hall of Justice kidnapping turned shoot out case, after it was discovered that the two handguns, a rifle and a shotgun, used by 17 year old Jonathan Jackson in the failed kidnapping ploy was bought and registered to Davis. Jackson smuggled the armed weapons into the courthouse, interrupted the trial at gunpoint, freed three black convicts, and took five hostages, including the judge. Jackson planned to trade the hostages for the “Soledad Brothers,” three black men indicted for the murder of a prison guard, one of whom (George) was Jonathan Jackson’s brother. However, shooting ensued as they tried to flee in a van, leading to the death of Jackson, two of the convicts, and the judge.
She could have opted for the life of scholarship—a precocious childhood, attendance at the best schools, junior year at the Sorbonne and graduate study in Germany, European literature, Kantian philosophy, professorships, tenure and learned publications. Or she could have chosen the world of the streets—of swelling black consciousness in the nation’s ghettos, mass rallies, Afro hairdos, angry slogans, guns and violent death. But she chose both worlds at once—and the tension lent special power and poignance to her story. (“The Angela Davis Case” 20)

Davis is portrayed as a kind of tragic mulatto figure caught between two worlds, none of which she fully belongs too.

Whereas Malcolm X’s persona as representative of urban black masculinity marks him as an appropriate militant subject, Angela’s identity as an academic and child of the middle class make her rage and radicalism unintelligible to the American public. I question the ways that the construction of black rage as a masculine affect and property of the black underclass serves to evacuate rage of its validity and identify it with the “unruly black male body” and thereby invalidate its merits. Cornel West hails Malcolm X as “the prophet of black rage—then and now” because of “[h]is profound commitment to affirm black humanity at any cost and his tremendous courage to accent the hypocrisy of American society” (emphasis added 95). Similarly Davis offers a critique of American democracy through illustrating the psychic and corporeal violence of racial antagonism. She observes the ways that it may manifest as self-hatred and like Malcolm X, she encourages blacks to reclaim their beauty, intelligence, and purpose. She suggests as hooks notes that “it is humanizing to be able to resist [racial terror] with militant rage” (17). I question, what happens if we locate Davis as also a prophet of rage. How might her autobiography reveal a theorizing of rage that has implications of our current moment?
Moreover, locating Davis, a black female academic, as a “prophet of black rage” serves not only to complicate the ways that rage is often gendered and classed but also affirms its intellectual and ethical grounding.

The Pedagogical Function of Violence

Through her representation of the violence and “inhuman outrages” daily visited on black life, Davis demonstrates that violence originates from the state. Violence is shown to be foremost a tool of the state apparatus. This revelation positions self-defense by blacks as a source of dignity and honor rather than the result of pathology and criminality. Davis seeks to describe and represent in detail the physical and psychic violence of the state and of racist practices on the black community. The autobiography begins with a meditation on the psychic terror Davis experienced during the period she spent evading capture as a fugitive on the FBI’s Top Ten Most Wanted list. The affective economy of the opening scene is rich. She recounts,

Outside in the open, entangled in my grief and anger was also fear. A plain and simple fear so overwhelming, and so elemental that the only thing I could compare it to was the sense of engulfment I used to feel as a child when I was left alone in the dark. That indescribable, monstrous thing would be at my back, never quite touching me, but always there ready to attack. (5)

The sense of imminent threat, “always there ready to attack,” that pervades her mind creates a sense of claustrophobia through the spatial metaphors of “entangled,” “overwhelming,” and “engulfment.” Moreover, in describing the entangled nature of the emotions of grief, anger, and fear, Davis reveals the ways that emotions are porous and interconnected. Through recalling
childhood fears of the dark, she underscores the monstrosity and psychic horror of the fear of violence that pervades her as a fugitive of the law.

Yet to make it clear that this sense of terror is not due solely to her fugitive status, she employs similar language in the characterization of her childhood in Birmingham, Alabama. This emphasizes the mundane nature of state violence in black lives. Davis recalls,

It was evening in the spring of 1949. I was in the bathroom washing my white shoelaces for Sunday School the next morning when an explosion a hundred times louder than the loudest, most frightening thunderclap I had ever heard shook our house. Medicine bottles fell off the shelves, shattering all around me. The floor seemed to slip away from my feet as I raced into the kitchen and my frightened mother’s arms. (79)

Davis describes the disruption of a potentially innocent and idyllic American scene of preparing for Sunday School by washing her white shoe laces in the bathroom; however, this ordinary scene of routine activity is interrupted by a scene of war. These metaphors of war reveal the ways in which blacks live in a constant state of fear and terror of possible attack. In juxtaposing the unnatural sounds of the bombs being a “hundred times louder than the loudest, most frightening thunderclap,” Davis underscores the ways that technologies of violence employed by white terrorists become naturalized in black life, as they become as common as the natural elements, and even more frightening and destructive in their monstrosity. The emphasis on the sonic nature of the violence reminds us, as Alexander observes, “Hearing, too, is central to witnessing. Sounds here haunt the mind as much as visual images” (83).

In Davis’s recollection of her childhood, blacks are in a state of war. In the context of the sounds of bombs destroying homes and the fear that characterizes her life, even the “slightest sound” is read as a threat and creates the sense of desperation and fear. In another memory, she
recalls, “I remembered how terrified I had felt when I heard the bombs explode, ripping to pieces the houses across the street. I remembered how my father’s weapons had always been waiting in his top drawer in anticipation of an attack. I thought about the time when the slightest sound was enough to send my father or my brothers searching for a hidden explosive device outside” (emphasis added 221). The focus is on the sonic elements of terrorism, the sounds of bombs that create anxiety and state of fear and trauma. The repetition of the phrase “I remember[ed]” is illustrative of the ways that the memory of trauma and witnessing violence not only instructs the black subject but is also a means through which kinship is reinscribed; it is “collective cultural trauma” that forms black (racial) identity. As Elizabeth Alexander suggests, “… these corporal images of terror suggest that ‘experience’ can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in the memory as knowledge. This knowledge is necessary to one who believes ‘it would be my turn next’” (81). In Davis’s account, blacks live in an environment “steeped in violence” and racial antagonism, from which their homes are no havens (79). She recalls the “Crowds of angry black people” who would congregate to stare at the “bombed-out ruins” of the recently bombed home or the “weeping black woman who had come screaming to our door for help” (80). Importantly, Davis articulates the necessity of self-defense within this context. Davis’s father’s self-defense measures are imagined as an honorable enterprise to protect his life and the lives of his family. There are numerous mentions of “guns hidden in drawers” in anticipation of violence as a measure of protection. Through this characterization, Davis recalls Wells-Barnett’s suggestion of the place of honor that the gun should occupy in the black home.

Through these depictions of her childhood and the way that the constant threat of violence pervades black life, Davis offers a counterargument to the characterization of black radicals as violent threats to the peace of the nation; she locates violence foremost as a tool of the
state apparatus. Davis achieves this critique in her response to the question of whether the Black Panthers are a violent group in an interview documented in the *Black Power Mixtape*:

> You ask me, you know, whether I approve of violence that doesn’t make any sense at all.
> You ask me whether I approve of guns; I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. Some very, very close friends of mine were killed by guns, guns that were planted by racists. I remember from the time I was very small the *sound of bombs exploding across the street and our house shaking*. I remember my father having to have guns at his disposal at all times because of the fact that any moment we might expect to be attacked … That’s why when someone asks me about violence *I just find it incredible* because what it means is that the person who is asking that question has absolutely no idea what black people have gone through, what black people experienced in this country since the time the first black person was kidnapped off the shores of Africa. (emphasis added Olsson et al.)

Davis’s body language in the recording of this response is revealing. Her gesticulations and facial expressions disclose a sense of bewilderment; her eyes shift, she shakes her head in a sense of surprise, frustration, and dismay, retorting that she finds the question “incredible.” At one moment, she appears to laugh. The repetition of “you ask me ... you ask me” as an inverted rhetorical question coupled with the look of righteous indignation evident on her face reveals the absurdity of the question. Her response to whether she approves of violence is simply, “I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama,” a place that has become a symbol of pervasive violence and virulent racism. Moreover, her rhetorical emphasis in suggesting she finds it “incredible” when someone asks her about violence shows an awareness of the ways that blacks, as the assumed agents of violence, are forced to justify their own fears of violent attacks. She calls attention not only to

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26 Davis references the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and horrific murder of four girls attending Sunday School: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Roberston, and Denise McNaire.
the lack of historical knowledge inherent in the question but also to a fundamental lack of empathy for blacks.

Perhaps Davis’s most damning indictment of the operations of racism is her retelling of the murder of the four little girls -- Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Roberston, and Denise McNaire -- in the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963. The church bombing is frequently cited in works interrogating the racial violence of Jim Crow but for Davis this is a deeply personal account, as Davis knew the young women not as symbols of the barbarity of white supremacist terrorism but as members of her community. In particular, she recalls Carole being a close friend of her sister and Denise being a former student of her mother. The autobiography offers a detailed meditation on Davis’s response to learning of the bombing while studying in Europe. Moreover, Davis beautifully eulogizes the girls, recalling not only the horrific nature of their death but also the significance of their lives. Davis recalls, “When the lives of these four girls were so ruthlessly wiped out, my pain was deeply personal” (130). However it is only after “the initial hurt and rage had subsided” that she is able to assess “the objective significance of these murders” (130). Theorizing the “objective significance” of this act of terrorism, Davis offers this insightful reading of the events:

This act was not an aberration. It was not something sparked by a few extremists gone mad. One the contrary, it was logical, inevitable. The people who planted the bomb in the girls’ restroom in the basement of 16th Street Baptist Church were not pathological, but rather the normal products of their surroundings. And it was this spectacular, violent event, the savage dismembering of four little girls, which had burst out of the daily, sometimes even dull, routine of racist oppression. (131)
Davis illustrates the perversity of racism that its inevitable product is something so horrid as the “savage dismembering of four little girls.” In suggesting that “[t]hese acts are not pathological” or “aberrations,” but rather a natural extension of “the dull routine of racist oppression,” she indicates that savagery becomes the norm in oppressive states where humanity is denied to a class of citizens. Moreover, she goes on to suggest the way that these forms of violence served to terrorize the larger community and repress social activism, “to destroy the movement before it became too deeply rooted in [the people’s] mind and [the people’s] lives” (131).

Not only does this violence reveal the way that depravity becomes both mundane and inevitable in a racist society, but it serves a second pedagogical purpose by instilling a rage in Davis that compels her to radicalism and political engagement. It is after the accumulation of reports of incidences of violence and grave mistreatment that Davis decides that she must return home to America to participate in the freedom movement. She resolves, “I wanted to continue my academic work, but I knew I could not do it unless I was politically involved. The struggle was a life-nerve; our only hope for survival” (145). Davis locates a bold hope in rage.

Davis details the anger and rage produced by these experiences of violence and indignity; her autobiography is replete with references to these emotions. Her references to “Crowds of angry Black people” [79]; “Rage had transported these brothers” (175) are two illustrative examples. While she recuperates rage as source of psychic healing and political transformation, she also acknowledges the danger when rage turns inward or finds inappropriate targets. The “sheer absurdity of racism” (West 95) exemplified by brutality against blacks also manifests in cycles of black-on-black violence when the anger and rage at racism finds no productive outlet. Davis details the ways that blacks who “did not yet know how to struggle against the real cause of [their] misery” (95) fought and struggled against each other: “All through school there were
absurd battles—some brief, but many sustained and deadly” (94); “We seemed to be caught in a whirlpool of violence and blood from which none of us could swim away” (101). She further notes, “They fought over everything—split shoes, and cement yards, thin coats and mealless days. They fought the meanness of Birmingham while they sliced the air with knives and punched Black faces because they could not reach white ones” (94). It is a deep pain and shame at powerlessness and poverty that begets this rage and destructive violence. In theorizing this “inner-directed violence” (100), Davis reveals the dangers of rage when it is expressed, as Audre Lorde suggests, “not vertically against the corruption of power and true sources of control over our lives, but horizontally toward those closest to us who mirrored our own impotence (135).

Davis suggests that violence begets rage and violence and that if that rage is not politically and productively harnessed it has destructive outcomes both personally and communally. However, she imagines hope and empowerment in this rage if blacks can learn how to fight and “struggle against the real cause of [their] misery” (95).

Davis articulates the political efficacy of shared anger and rage in mass movements and organizing for political change, but even this shared rage must be properly channeled. She points out, “Nevertheless, the eagerness to fight back cold not be permitted to wither away---it had to be channeled into a political direction” (178). Recounting a protest in which “chaos reigned in the crowd” due to “pent-up frustrations ... seeking the easiest way out” (174), she observes the ways that rage could lead to violent fantasies realized as desperate action:

Rage had transported these brothers into a desperate fantasy world. I understood how they felt. When I saw Gregory Clark’s blood on the sidewalk, rage had pulled my instincts in the very same direction. But understanding the real value of
mass action, I therefore had something else to lean on, something which could absorb my anger and set it on the right path. (175)

While the easiest way out, according to Davis, is to succumb to the visceral aspect of rage, she emphasizes the need to understand rage intellectually to tap its full potential. Rage requires theoretical, ethical, and political grounding to be empowering and effective. Davis is able to lean on this political conviction as a means of channeling her anger productively. Highlighting another instance of mass movement, Davis describes protests for the release of the Panther prisoners at the County Courthouse in terms of shared rage:

... the collective anger was so great that the people could not be contained. Defiant throngs pressed forward through the doors of the building. So great was their rage that they began to destroy everything in sight. As they attacked the coin machines in the lobby, they were probably fantasizing about ripping down the iron bars of the jail upstairs. (239)

Similar to the previous passage, rage is described through a language of violent “fantasy,” recalling bell hooks’ theory of “killing rage” that may be manifested through violent fantasies of destroying agents of racial oppression; in this instance, the innocuous coin machines become surrogates for the iron bars that imprison freedom fighters. While she does not disavow the reality of visceral rage that finds cathartic release in physical destruction of property, she implies the ineffective nature of this approach. Instead she asserts that “Rather than waste our energies giving vent to our frustrations, we should be trying to organize ourselves into a permanent movement to defend our fighters and to defend ourselves” (240). In the end, the rally served its purposes, as it attracted many volunteers to assist in the work of the movement. However, Davis notes that it is not the spectacle of the “visible or dramatic” episodes like that of the rally that
sustains movements but rather that “in order to realize the potential of what we had witnessed, much day-to-day organizing was needed” (240).

Davis’s autobiography reads as eulogy of the Black Power Movement at various moments, as she reflects on the many lives lost in the freedom struggle. As previously noted, Davis’s description of the Sixteenth Street Baptist church bombing is not simply as a catalogue of violence to reveal the ways that black lives are under threat but also a eulogy for the girls that identifies them by name and offers details of their lives and relationships. She mourns their deaths as much as she theorizes the conditions of racial hatred that produce such savagery. Throughout the autobiography, Davis offers eulogies for those who died at the hand of “malevolent racism” (319), most notably activists George and Jonathan Jackson, and an unarmed teenager named Gregory Clark who was killed by police brutality. These roll calls, a common motif in life narratives of black activists, both represent and lament the violence blacks daily confront, and correct the historical record’s account of their lives and the circumstances of their deaths. As in Meridian, there is a meditation on the cost, in lives, of participation in the freedom movement. Davis reflects on the trauma and psychic pain of American racism and on having to constantly mourn those killed in the movement.

We had cried before, we had attended funerals before, and we had felt and expressed rage at seeing the life of a brother, a comrade, so cruelly blown out of him. We knew that for the moment our commitment meant that we were chained to a vicious circle of violence—in this way our enemies were trying to forces us to retreat in fear. (emphasis added 194-5)
The repetition “We had ... we had ... we had” in reference to crying, attending, funerals, and feeling rage underscores the ways these rituals of mourning and rage became routine, as funerals were as commonplace as the violence that precipitated them.

In fact, Davis’s grief propels her rage, and it is from a space of grief that Davis articulates the radical ethic of rage as a moral imperative, site of political consciousness, and political strategy for empowerment. Relaying the tragic murder of Gregory Clark at the hands of the LAPD, she considers, “But the hurt and the rage meant nothing by themselves. What was needed was an organized struggle” (171-2). For Davis, emotions must have a political life to be meaningful. This sentiment is reiterated in her reflection on the death of George Jackson, which as previously noted greatly informed Davis’s understanding of the potentiality and purpose of her rage. She reflects, “George was dead, and the deeply personal pain I felt would have strangled me had I not turned it into a proper and properly placed rage. I could not dwell on my own loss” (emphasis added 319). The allusion to affective asphyxiation through the reference to strangulation is revealing here, as she indicates that choking down her pain could prove deadly if it found no mode of expression. Refusing to dwell on the pain of the loss, she instead suggests that her grief and rage over George’s death “would be like lodestone, a disc of steel deep inside me, magnetically drawing toward it the elements I needed to stay strong and fight all the harder” (319). She harnesses these ugly feelings for the purpose of political empowerment rather than choking them down or turning them inward. She contends, “It would give me the courage and energy I needed for a sustained war against the malevolent racism that had killed him” (319). It is this manifestation of courage and energy for the fight against injustice that Davis identifies as the outcome of “a proper and properly placed rage.” Unlike the destructive forms of rage that are misdirected at other blacks as surrogates for the systems truly responsible for misery and
oppression, this “proper and properly placed rage” is aimed against the malevolent racism enacted through police brutality, the carceral system, and institutionalized racism in the judicial system. It is a moral commitment to engage in the fight of dismantling systems of control and violation.

Radical Ethic of Rage

Davis articulates the radical ethic of rage as integral to the fight for justice and to achieving a beloved and transformed community. While she recognizes the way misdirected rage can have serious and dire implications for the self and the community, her autobiography reclaims rage as an ethical, politically efficacious, emotionally restorative affect that is rooted in a history of black resistance. One of the greatest interventions both politically and pedagogically of her autobiography is a kind of counterargument to the characterization of black radicals as agents of violence and criminality. A central tenet of Davis’s work, as in many other life narratives of black activists, is to orient readers towards the ways that violence is a weapon of repression of black resistance used, practiced by, and legitimated by the state. As Margo Perkins suggests, “the state is exposed as the original architect of violence and repression, while the people’s resistance is reclaimed as healthy, reasonable, and just” (73). Davis’s autobiography both validates black rage at racial oppression and affirms the imperative of black self-defense.

In many ways, Davis’s autobiography represents what Manning Marable describes as the project of the black intellectual tradition in that her autobiography demonstrates “there is a practical connection between scholarship and struggle, between social analysis and social transformation” (17). Furthermore, her work proposes “practical steps for the empowerment of black people” (17-18). Specifically, Davis’s autobiography offers important lessons in our contemporary moment as the effort to harness black rage into a political direction continues.
Davis’s recounting of the murder of eighteen-year-old Gregory Clark by an LAPD officer is hauntingly familiar in the current context of the police-related violent deaths of unarmed blacks like Jonathan Ferrell, Tanisha Anderson, Michael Brown, Jr., and countless others. I cite the story in its entirety, as it appears in the autobiography, to observe the rhetorical strategies Davis employs as well as to elucidate ways this narrative is specifically reminiscent of the shooting death of unarmed teenager Michael Brown Jr. by officer Darren Wilson. Davis narrates:

On a warm afternoon in February, Gregory Clark and a friend were cruising down Washington Boulevard in a late-model Mustang. They were drinking soda pop, the cans covered by brown paper bags. When they reached Vineyard, they were motioned over to the curb by an LAPD cop, who according to the brother who survived, told them that they didn’t look like they “fit” the car they were driving. Then, seeing the brown bags and without a shred of proof, he accused them of drinking beer while driving.

The two brothers protested, the witnesses said. They had the registration to prove that they had not stolen the car and the cans themselves were proof of what they had been drinking. But the cop, Warren B. Carleson, refused to hear their explanation. All he heard was niggers talking back to a white man in uniform. Ordering them out of their car, he prepared to handcuff them. Perhaps Gregory began to raise his voice in protest. Perhaps he snatched his hands away to prevent the cop from slamming on the handcuffs. Perhaps he did nothing. In any case, there was a brief scuffle before Carleson locked the manacles around his wrists. The victim was caught. But Carleson did not stop there. According to those watching the encounter, he knocked Gregory Clark to the sidewalk, and while he lay face down, his hands cuffed behind him, Carleson shot Gregory in the back of the head with a .38 revolver.
As I stood there on the corner of Washington and Vineyard, staring at the two-week-old bloodstains on the sidewalk, this scene unfolded before me in all its original horror. (Davis 171-2)

As in the depiction of her Sunday morning ritual of washing her white shoelaces interrupted by sounds of explosions, Davis emphasizes the ways that an ordinary day of cruising down the highway and drinking soda can be disrupted by violence. The repetition of “Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps” serves to underscore the brutality of the officer’s response regardless of Gregory’s actions, whether he verbally protested, physically resisted, or did nothing. We may never know what transpired in the encounter between an eighteen-year-old black man and a police officer; we may never know whether a scuffle took place or whether there was fear on both ends. Still, the undisputed fact is that at the end of this encounter one black body lay dead on an asphalt road. Davis’s account underscores the constant (mis)identification of black men as criminal. The (mis)readings of the black body abound in this account: rather than drinking soda pops, the boys are assumed to be drinking alcoholic substances while driving. While they did not “fit” the make of the car, they did “fit” the image of the criminal, black menace. Davis’s focus on the soda pop recalls the emphasis on Trayvon Martin’s skittles and Ice Tea as evidence of his youth and innocence as well as a statement of the quotidian operations of violence in black life such that even a trip to the store for candy can prove deadly.

But this story is even more eerily evocative of the killing of Michael Brown Jr. The facts of what happened on the morning of August 9, 2014, when Darren Wilson encountered Michael Brown Jr. and his friend Dorian Johnson in Ferguson, MO, are heavily debated. After approaching the men, there was a confrontation between Brown and Wilson. While Dorian Johnson and another witness Tiffany Mitchell reported that Brown was fleeing and protesting
“Stop shooting, I don’t have a gun!” when Darren Wilson opened fire, Wilson’s account and allegedly the account of other witnesses challenge this account of the facts (“Back Story: What happened”). However, the outcome, as in the case of Gregory Clarke, is undisputable. After being shot several times, Michael Brown Jr.’s body lay dead in the street. For many, the indignity of his body, left face down blood streaming from his head for 4.5 hours under the merciless August sun, proved more inciting than even the manner of his death; the story of unarmed black male shot by a police officer has become all too mundane. In a similar fashion, Davis observes the affective experience that the scene of the “two-week-old bloodstains [of Gregory Clark] on the sidewalk” produces. She reflects, “But the hurt and the rage meant nothing by themselves. What was needed was an organized struggle.”(172). For Davis, grief and rage can only empower if they are marshaled to productive political action.

For many in Ferguson, MO and nationwide, “the hurt and rage” of this scene of violence reinvigorated efforts to critique police brutality and call for judicial accountability. While much of the media portrayals of Ferguson, summer to fall 2014, featured coverage of looting, rioting, social unrest and antagonism towards the police, for the vast majority of protestors, peaceful measures were employed. As the Missouri National Guard was called in to quell the “social unrest,” increasingly militarized measures (tear gas and combat style uniforms) were used against protestors, Ferguson, MO resembled a war zone and the protestors treated like enemies of the state.

As I write these words, I consider the organized struggle and action of thousands of students, parents, and others who are daily marching, gathering, obstructing traffic in an effort to protest the state’s refusal to indict the officers charged in the deaths of Michael Brown, Jr. and Eric Garner. I feel their grief and I feel their rage. In the words of George Jackson, “I’m a part of a
righteous people who anger slowly, but rage undammed. We’ll gather at his door in such number that the rumbling of our feet will make the earth tremble.”
Chapter Four: “When Fear and Weapons Meet”: Fear, Rage, and Black Bodies in Public Space

You know where I was when I first heard about the verdict? I was laying down in my bed asleep and when I heard the words not guilty on my TV I instantly woke up. It was a pain that went from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. It was an empty, hollow feeling. It was a rage inside me, burning. I wanted to kill. I wanted to kill.

Anonymous Response to the Rodney King verdict

Here on Earth, tell me what’s a black life worth
A bottle of juice is no excuse, the truth hurts

Tupac Shakur, “I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto”

The spectacle of the beaten, whipped, and mutilated black body has been a site of fear and fascination in the American cultural imaginary for centuries. From the historical practice of public whippings during enslavement, the ritual of lynching, the beatings of innocent demonstrators throughout the Civil Rights Movement, to currently escalating (and lethal) forms of police brutality, violating the black body has proved an American pastime. While these spectacles of violence, mechanisms of punishment, or “high crimes against the flesh,” in Hortense Spillers’ language, often serve a perverse fascination and pleasure for white audiences,

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27 This anonymous response is documented in Report from the L.A. Rebellion. Chicago: Revolutionary Worker, 1993.
28 James Allen’s Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America examines the ritual of lynching and white consumption of spectacles of violence and punishment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Specifically, the post card industry has emerged to circulate these images of mutilated and violated blackbodies underscores white fascination with the beaten black in American history as well as commercial industries that fed these perverse desires own artefacts and memorabilia depicting these horrors.
they also serve to instruct the black community about the operations of power; or more simply put, they serve as a lesson to blacks to stay in their place. 29

While both black men and women have been victims of these acts of terrorism, Elizabeth Alexander rightly observes, “The focus in American narratives of violence against blacks in the popular imagination is usually male. The whipped male slave, the lynched man, Emmett Till, Rodney King: all of these are familiar and explicit in the popular imagination” (90). We can add to this ever-lengthening list Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Michael Brown Jr. These familiar images of violation are commonplace in the American imagination and reveal the ways that black boys and men constitute a threat to the presumed law and order of the nation, whether the laws of Jim Crow or the recent—and very controversial—“Stand Your Ground.” The black male body is typically coded as “unruly,” “trespassing,” “threatening,” and therefore must be disciplined and restrained. While we cannot ignore the pervasiveness of violence against black men in our nation, we must acknowledge the reality that, as Kali Gross poignantly asserts, “black women suffer the same injustices. Silence motivated by sexism and patriarchy, in mainstream and black America is the only reason why it isn’t widely acknowledged” (“Silence on Black Female Victims”). Black male bodies are not the only black bodies coded as dangerous and thereby vulnerable to the violence that occurs when “fear and weapons meet” (Staples 19). While the stories of black women’s abuse by police and vigilante citizens is less familiar; it is no less widespread. Like Black men, black women must also constantly negotiate their presumed “unruliness,” as well as the constant threat of violence that attaches to this (mis)reading of their bodies as dangerous and menacing. Undoubtedly blacks feel a range of emotions when confronted with this distorted image of the self: fear, terror, anger, rage, disgust, and indignation.

29 Barry Morris notes, “These practices of punishment through violence, and intimidation through public spectacles staged and consumed by white communities, coded Black Americans as subject of a different economy of power” (158).
However, I am interested in the relationship between fear of the black body and black rage. This chapter will consider the ways that racialized narratives of danger work as justification for the assault of black bodies. While Brent Staples’ essay “Black Men and Public Spaces” offers an account of Staples’ personal experience as a black man navigating public spaces in Chicago, I believe this essay has important insights into the ways fear (of the black body) and rage operate in interracial encounters where black bodies (male and female) are (mis)read as threatening. The 1986 essay was first published in Ms. Magazine under the title “Just Walk on By: A Black Man Ponders His Ability to Alter Public Space.”

Living in Bigger Thomas’s native Chicago, Staples becomes fluent in “the language of fear,” as he illustrates the ways he is constantly (mis)identified as a predator, “ever the suspect” (19). The essay ominously begins with the line, “My first victim was a white woman, well dressed, probably in her early twenties. I came upon her late one evening on a deserted street in Hyde Park” (20). The essay goes on to describe the “worried glance” of the woman confronted with the “menacingly close” figure of a “youngish black man – a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket” (20). While the essay initially seems to confirm every stereotype of black male criminality and specifically the myth of the black rapist, it takes a quick and satirical departure when Staples identifies himself as a twenty two year old graduate student of the University of Chicago.

Staples begins to explicate his relationship to white fear by vividly depicting encounters with whites as moments of hailing, reminiscent of Fanon’s “Look a Negro!” He describes this

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31 In Black Skins, White Masks Franz Fanon Fanon articulates the ways that the black body is always already interjected into a narrative informed by “legends, stories, and above all historicity” (111-2). He asserts that the black body produces both a fascination and fear for the white subject, in his/her hailing, “Look a Negro!” Importantly, the black subject must also negotiate this interpellation affectively. He remarks that at this moment, he first makes “tight smile” and then “I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had becomes impossible.” It is in this
birthright of blackness as an “unwieldy inheritance I’d come into—the ability to alter public spaces in ugly ways.” Like Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas, Staples questions his inheritance of fear as a native son. Staples laments his ability to alter public spaces, to produce fear and discomfort in whites, the anticipation of harm in their worried glances. In her discussion of the temporal and proximal dimensions of fear, Sara Ahmed asserts that “Fear responds to what is approaching rather than already here. It is the futurity of fear which makes it possible that the object of fear, rather than arriving, might pass us by” (65). It is both the proximity to the black body and the anticipation of harm or injury that registers as fear.

These interactions in which whites experience fear at his mere presence and proximity are pedagogical for Staples, who quickly learns that being presumed to be a threat actually presented a threat to one’s own life, constituting a “hazard in itself” (19). He adds, “Where fear and weapons meet—and they often do in urban America—there is always the possibility of death” (20). Staples rightly observes the “possibility of death” for black men (and women) perceived as dangerous. Richard Wright similarly observes, “But the color of a Negro's skin makes him easily recognizable, makes him suspect, converts him into a defenseless target.” (“The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” 28). Moreover, there are countless stories and names of black men (Amadou Diallo, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Jonathan Ferrell) who appeared threatening to whites in public, civilians or police alike, and paid the price with their lives. But for stories like that of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teenager out for a snack, shot dead when “perceived” threatening by a self-appointed neighborhood watch, there is a similar story like that of Latasha Harlin, shot dead by a “frightened” store owner, after trying to purchase a box of orange juice.
For the story of Jonathan Ferrell killed by Charlotte, NC policeman while running to them for aid, there is a similar story of Renisha McBride, seeking help after surviving a car wreck, but unable to survive the “fear” her body registered in the white respondent, Theodore Wafer.

But what are the affective responses to this reality of fear and anxiety being projected onto one’s body and the potential violence that may be experienced as a consequence of these fears? In Staples’ account of walking the Chicago streets as a black man, fear of the black body cannot be divorced from black rage; inevitably, there is a violence enacted through the white gaze, through this (mis)reading of the black body. Staples acknowledges the rage he feels at the violence of the “worried glance,” the nervous look, the sudden realization of the need to cross the street. He imagines no power or agency in this ability to alter public space, in what Nick Cave calls “the power within the black male, that intimidation and scariness” (Lacayo 51). Instead, he reconciles that “Over the years, I learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal. Not to do so would surely have led to madness” (emphasis added 20). But is smothering the rage, or choking it down the healthy alternative? Is this the only means of navigating one’s relationship to the psychic and physical violence of racism that Staples suggests “would surely lead to madness?” or is the act of smothering rage, choking it down, the very thing that leads to madness, when the rage finds no meaningful means of expression, no exit from which to be expelled from the body? Perhaps this means of repressing rage represents an unhealthy alternative that merely prolongs its inevitable eruption; as the rage accumulates to a point it can no longer be tamped down, choked down, smothered down; at this point of “dangerous accumulation,” it cannot be productively harnessed.

Staples’ suggested prescription for rage, “smothering,” is reminiscent of the language of “choking down that rage.” Choking down or “smothering” rage describes a repression of rage, a
muffling or silencing of one’s expression of anger, frustration, and discontent whether it is a silencing that is imposed or self-induced. Smothering, like choking, results in an obstruction of the airway in the throat that prevents one from producing audible, articulate sound. The language of “smothering down” creates a violent image of intentional suffocation or stifling to prevent the ability to cry out or protest. In more colloquial usage, “smother” is related to the sense that one is being overwhelmed, that one’s personal space is being intruded upon, as in the phrase, “(s)he’s smothering me.” This usage of the word smother is particularly interesting considering that it is the fear of the black body in public spaces, the sense that the black body will intrude, cross boundaries and overwhelm the white body that leads Staples to feel rage at this moment of (mis)identification. However, his only recourse is to internalize that white fear by repressing his rage, constraining his affective experience. I’m suspicious of this prescription for rage, not simply because evidence by way of countless examples and anecdotes testify to its ineffectiveness, but because of the suggestion that blacks must willingly bear the weight of white fear and anxiety on their bodies without giving room to their full affective experience. Instead of doing violence to the white body as anticipated, Staples does violence to himself by way of affective suffocation. Smothering, ultimately like choking, causes death; Staples seems to suggest here that some affective possibilities simply cannot live but the question remains, where exactly do they go to die? And where are they buried?

Smothering rage is not the only precautionary measure that Staples develops in navigating public space. With great irony, he suggests giving “wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms during the wee hour,” but perhaps his most interesting metaphor is the one of whistling Vivaldi and Beethoven, which he suggests has
proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers ... Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn’t be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi’s Four Seasons. Whistling Vivaldi is the rough equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country (Staples 20).

While ironic in tone, Staples’s recourse to the sonic realm interests me and I will return to a consideration of this metaphor in my reading of Nick Cave’s Soundsuit as a kind of sonic armor. In employing this metaphor, Staples suggests the ways that blacks are expected to take responsibility for abating others’ fear of the black body. Moreover, the metaphor calls into question the logic that blacks can control the ways they are perceived in interracial interactions; the implication being that blacks are complicit in their own violation and death “when fear and weapons meet” (Staples 19). This is a familiar argument employed in cases where blacks are abused and killed by police officers or vigilante citizens: If he hadn’t run; If he wasn’t wearing a suspicious hoody; If she hadn’t resisted arrest or fought back. The expectation in this discourse is that blacks can whistle Vivaldi; they can repress their rage and alleviate the fears of others; they can and must save themselves. But as countless stories attest, attempting to whistle Vivaldi, whether by way of showing or attempting to show a college ID, screaming, or expressing one’s reason for being in a particular neighborhood, often proves futile.

To consider the workings of fear of the black body and rage, I turn to a consideration of the discourse of fear of the black body in the trials and verdicts of the Rodney King’s and Latasha Harlins’ cases as well as the ways that artistic representations and engagement of these cases, and the subsequent LA uprising engage fear of the black body and the ethics of rage. I begin at the site of the videotaped beating of Rodney King and the subsequent not-guilty verdict
as it represents another occasion of “black national feeling,” to borrow from Adam Green. The King beating crystalized a historical disregard for black humanity and specifically televised the vulnerability of black men’s bodies in public spaces. As the response recorded in this chapter’s epigraph makes clear, the tape of the beating, followed by the not-guilty verdict, had a visceral effect, a racial pain for many black folk. “It was a pain that went from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. It was an empty, hollow feeling. It was a rage inside me, burning. I wanted to kill. I wanted to kill” (Report from the L.A. Rebellion 6). This deeply felt racial pain at the verdict calls to mind what bell hooks describes as a “killing rage.” The King beating is a moment etched in the national memory and black consciousness through the technology of video recording. The moving picture of each violent blow and kick was replayed on mainstream media and news outlets. It brought to the forefront of the national conscience a debate about race relations, the vulnerability of black bodies, the brutal practices of police, and the wages of black rage. But while the Rodney King beating garnered national attention, the tragic shooting death of fifteen year old Latasha Harlin by Korean grocer Soon Ja Du which occurred a mere two weeks after the Rodney King beating never received the level of national attention of the Rodney King incident. As Elizabeth Alexander suggests, black males are the focus of these narratives of violence and so black women’s experiences of violence rarely receive similar mainstream coverage. The manner of Latasha Harlin’s death (a bullet to the back of the head after an altercation over a box of orange juice) as well the subsequent light punishment of Soon Ja Du, like the Rodney king verdict, underscores the vulnerability of black bodies and the disregard for black lives.

I consider these cases together for several reasons: first, the incidences occurred only

32 In many ways, the video recording of King’s beating represented a turning point in the documentation of police brutality through video recording by civilians, which has now become a key site of resistance in documenting police misconduct. In many ways it is reminiscent of the Black Panthers appropriation of “neighborhood watch” in patrolling black neighborhoods and policing the police.
two weeks apart yet King’s case received significantly more national coverage; this discrepancy in attention underscores the ways that black men become the symbols of violence against the black community and the dangers of evacuating black women’s experiences from these conversations. Second, despite the fact that both incidences were video recorded, the narrative of fear articulated by the defense attorneys for the officers and Soon Ja Du proved more convincing than the visual recording of the assault of King and murder of Harlins. Here, I am interested in the ways that narrative works to shape emotions and perceptions, specifically the narrative of “clear and present danger” that the black body represents in the American cultural imaginary. I will examine the power and persuasion of this narrative in my reading of the discourse of fear and empathy employed as a strategy by the defense to justify the use of force and identify the victims as complicit in their abuse and death. Third, I am interested in these cases because of the proliferation of artistic responses to the incidences and verdicts in the cases as they reveal a deep interest in the working of fear and rage.

Black artists, writers, and thinkers have engaged, critiqued, and represented the beating of Rodney King and murder of Latasha Harlins in various forms. Some notable examples include Spike Lee’s use of footage of the assault on Rodney King in the opening of his film Malcolm X. There he juxtaposes this footage to the image of the American flag burning until only the X remains. Popular culture references to the Rodney King beating, verdict, and subsequent riots are numerous. Several notable hip hop artists, in particular Ice Cube and Tupac Shakur, were invested in keeping Harlins’ memory alive and critiquing the manner of her death. A song depicting her death, entitled “Black Korea,” was featured on Ice Cube’s album Death Certificate. Tupac’s 1993 hit “Keep Your Head Up” was dedicated to Harlins, as well as numerous other mentions of and tributes to Latasha on tracks like “Something 2 Die 4,” the interlude to “Thugz
Mansion.” In the interlude to the song, Shakur is insistent that Latasha Harlins be remembered, imploring his listeners, “Latasha Harlins, remember that name ... ‘Cause a bottle of juice is not something to die for.” On another track, “I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto” (cited in the epigraph), Shakur astutely suggests the interrelatedness of the Harlins and Kings cases and the ways the cases underscore the vulnerability and triviality of black life. The speaker of the song laments, ”Tell me what's a black life worth / A bottle of juice is no excuse, the truth hurts /... / Ask Rodney, Latasha, and many more/ It’s been going on for years, there’s plenty more.” Shakur frames Latasha’s death and the beating of Rodney King in a larger history of the abuse of black bodies and the failure of the justice system to protect black lives or prosecute those who threaten it. Community activist Queen Malkah similarly observes connection of these cases. In her interview documented in Anna Deavere Smith’s documentary theatre piece Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992, she states, “Because no matter what people say, the injustice of what happened to Rodney King, it just coincides, as there’s a parallel between Rodney and Latasha” (Smith 48). I am interested in the ways that works engaging these cases reveal a critique of these racialized narratives of danger, demonstrate the vulnerability of the black body in public spaces, and offer rage as a radical ethic, as a creative and political response to racial terror.

I have selected works across mediums that engage the relationship of fear and rage in interracial encounters as well as the vulnerability of black bodies in public spaces. I begin with a consideration of playwright Anna Deavere Smith’s Twilight, Los Angeles, a form she calls documentary theatre. Twilight engages the racial tensions surrounding the verdicts for both cases and the L.A. Uprising. I am interested in the pedagogical impulse of this work which is based on over 200 interviews conducted by Anna Deavere Smith after the riots; the dialogue from the play is taken verbatim from these interviews with a diverse group of people from academics,
community organizers, witnesses, attorneys, and family members from the Rodney King, Latasha Harlins, and Reginald Denny cases. Most importantly, Smith situates these cases in relation to each other, and through the interviews she reveals the workings of fear of the black body and the presumed criminality of blacks. I will pay particular attention to the interview of Charles Lloyd, Soon Ja Du’s attorney, and Gina Rae aka Queen Malkah, a community activist, as these interviews reveal the discourse around fear and the value of black life. I then consider Hip Hop as a key site for the engagement of the vulnerability of black lives. Specifically, I engage the work of Ice Cube in his theorizing of fear, violence, and rage in the cases of Harlins and King and the subsequent uprising. Finally, I examine visual and performance artist Nick Cave’s *Soundsuit* entitled “Twigs,” inspired by his witnessing of the videotaped beating of Rodney King. I examine the ways that Nick Cave articulates rage through the discordant sound produced by his *Soundsuit*, a kind of sonic armor to both protect the black body and protest its mistreatment.

Considering the Rodney King and Latasha Harlins cases together provide a fuller picture of the ways that violence informs the black experience as well as the ways that racial narratives of danger affect black men and women alike. Most importantly, the discourses in these cases have important implications for the current moment; the vulnerability of black bodies in public spaces is ever more pressing. This concern is most readily evident in the escalating and lethal forms of police brutality as well as the discourse of “clear and present danger” that is often employed as justification for deadly force by police officers and citizens alike when “fear and weapons meet” in interracial encounters.
“A Screaming [Black] Man is not a Dancing Bear.” Reading the Rodney King Beating

Let us briefly return to the spectacle of the Rodney King beating and the racial theatre of the verdict in the case. On March 3, 1991, construction worker Rodney Glen King III and two passengers Bryant Allen and Freddie Helms were involved in a high-speed chase with the Los Angeles Police after spending a night watching basketball and drinking with friends. At the end of the high-speed pursuit, the police insisted that the men exit the car. Bryant Allen and Freddie Helms were treated roughly upon exiting the car. However, it is the treatment of Rodney King who would later emerge from the car that would become a national spectacle. In the 82-second home video footage recorded by bystander George Holliday, Rodney King is shown being repeatedly beaten, kicked, and assaulted by four Los Angeles police officers; King is struck 52 times. The videotape seemed to present indisputable evidence of police misconduct. In fact, the prosecutor declared the video recording to be the “most objective piece of evidence” (Rabinowitz, 210) and it became the basis for the prosecution’s case. Not surprisingly, the defense, which challenged this claim of objectivity in its interpretation of the tape, argued that the video did not show a man being assaulted but rather, one who presented a grave threat to the officers. Invoking a history of racist ideas about black criminality, the defense rendered King the “agent of violence” in its narrative of the event (Butler “Endangered/ Endangering,”16). Robert Gooding-Williams correctly observes that “Rather than assume that filmed facts speak for themselves, these lawyers turned to a received stock of already-interpreted images of black bodies, and used some of these to assault the black body appearing in the video” (165).

33 I borrow this title from Aime Cesaire’s epic poem, Notebook of a Return to the Native Land in which he writes, “And above all, my body as well as my soul, beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of miseries is not a proscenium, a man screaming is not a dancing bear...” (13-4).
The defense’s argument was grounded in a racist logic predicated on the stereotype of the criminality of black men or what Khalil Muhammad would call “the condemnation of blackness.”34 Butler’s observations on race and policing are also insightful here:

The police are thus structurally placed to protect whiteness against violence, where violence is the imminent action of that black male body. And because within this imaginary schema, the police protect whiteness, their own violence cannot be read as violence; because the black male body, prior to any video, is the site and source of danger, a threat, the police effort to subdue this body, even if in advance, is justified regardless of the circumstances (18).

The threat that the black body presents to the white gaze, whether real or imagined, is sufficient justification for any action taken to be understood as “self-defense.” The black body is always read as the “site and source of danger” that one must defend against (18). This explains in part why postures of surrender—hands up or postures of retreat, such as turning one’s back—may still be read as aggressive with potential deadly consequences. In fact, Sergeant Koon testified to assessing King’s size after King exited his car. Koon described King as “very buffed out, very muscular,” and therefore he concluded “that he was probably an ex-con” (“Sergeant Says King” New York Times). King’s stature is constantly referenced as evidence of his criminality.

Significantly, technological manipulation of the video served to verify this narrative of the white vulnerability and the threatening black body. The defense showed the video more than thirty times, at various speeds, forwards and backwards, as well as in freeze-frame and fast

34 In The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America, historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad demonstrates the way that the identification/ and construction of blackness (and specifically black masculinity) with criminality was essential in the making of modern America and the ways that the stereotype of the black menace to society worked to reinforce ideas of black pathology and failure to integrate into American society in comparison to working class whites and European immigrants. Moreover, the books traces the ways this discourse informed urban development and social policies.
motion. Through this framing, the horror of the repeated beating was interrupted, reframed and thereby altered. As Robin Bernstein notes, “Sound --- and its elimination—also played a crucial role in the defense’s strategy” (127). Rather than hearing Rodney King holler as he was beaten, the defense and the police force expert, Sergeant Charles Duke, provided narration for the reframing of the video, offering an alternative reading of the events than what the video visually (re)presented. This reframing of the video produced a narrative in which, as one juror would later remark, Rodney King appears “in total control” of the scene (Williams 55).

Sue Kim’s apt observation that narratives do important work in shaping our emotions is useful in this context. Further, it is quite evident that the technological manipulations and voice-over served to construct the jury’s empathy for the police officers while denying it to the King.35 That King was seen to be “in total control,” and not to “hurt excessively,” speaks to the ways that the black body is consistently misread and presumed to have a high tolerance for pain (Williams 55).36 At the same time that Black bodies are dehumanized (in the sense of their vulnerability and inability to feel pain), they are rendered hypervisible (in the sense of presenting danger). In other words, they are at once both subhuman (lacking in humanity and beastlike) and superhuman (possessing superhuman strength and ability). Psychological research has demonstrated the way that such subtle forms of dehumanization referred to as superhumanization have functioned to endorse police brutality. It is important to note that these studies do not suggest that these perceptions of the black body are instinctive or natural; rather they are learned from various stereotypes and associations of blacks with criminality. Nor does this research

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35 Borris notes a similar point in this observation, “Through a substantial reordering of the affective experience of the video and its affective specificities, a convincing counter narrative was produced” (160).
excuse police and citizens from accountability; instead these studies suggest that there are serious implications associated with this racist ideology. As Waytz et.al. observes, “This is important because failure to recognize someone else’s pain likely reduces empathy and justifies withholding aid when aid is needed” (15). This superhumanization is certainly at work in the characterization of Rodney King, which focuses on his stature and presumed strength, necessitating that four policemen violently subdue him, thus rationalizing excessive force as standard police practice. Even while lying on the ground, it is he who poses a threat to the safety of the officers; the gestures of his raised arm to shield himself from the officers’ blows are read as aggressive gestures of attack. Yet he is also subhuman and beastlike. This subhuman characterization is perhaps most evident in Sergeant Koon’s descriptions of Rodney King as being bear-like in his stature, movements and threatening stance; even his groans were described as sounding like that of “a wounded animal” (“Sergeant Says King Appeared,” New York Times). The officers operated in self-defense as they felt threatened by his body, his force, his bear-like presence. This videographic reordering that denied empathy to King is predicated on his presumed identity as a predator and the assumption that blacks can tolerate more pain. An understanding or appreciation of another’s pain is key to human empathy and community; denying a person access to the ability to feel pain, denies his/her humanity.37

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37 This characterization of blackness of lacking in emotional expression and experience of pain, grief, love etc. is by no means new but is littered through out literature of the Enlightenment period. Most notably, Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia asserts that black bodies are scientifically different and thereby inferior to that of whites in frame/stature, smell, beauty, and ability to express and experience higher order emotions. Edmund Burke similarly describes the encounter with blackness and specifically the black woman’s body as an experience of the sublime, one of both awe/fascination and terror. Fanon would later examine this phenomenon of white encounters with blackness in Black Skins, White Masks in his iteration “Look a Negro!”
“Tell me what’s a black life worth: A box of juice is no excuse”

It is a similar question of empathy, and who is seen as victim versus aggressor that operates in the Latasha Harlins case. The discourse on the subject of use of force and fear of the black body in the Latasha Harlins trial is strikingly similar to that of the Rodney King case though the verdicts were different; the officers were acquitted in the King case while Soon Ja Du was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter. It is also important to note that this case of a Korean woman shooting a black girl is markedly different than the familiar narratives of violence against the black body, which tend to focus on violence against black males by white male officers. Latasha Harlins was a teenaged girl killed by another woman of a marginalized community, Soon Ja Du who was not a member of law enforcement. As Brenda Stevenson notes, “[Latasha Harlin’s murder was not another challenge of black masculinity, that constant theme in the history of race in America. It underscored, instead the vulnerability of the most defenseless in the nation’s socially constructed hierarchy—women and children of the racially, culturally, economically, and politically marginalized (emphasis added xvi). While Latasha’s murder was not the familiar narrative of violence, it crystallized a history of conflict between Korean grocers and their customers (largely black and Latino) in the South-Central. It is a history that reveals mistrust, prejudice, stereotypes, and xenophobia between racial and ethnic groups. Another important factor was resentment on the part of blacks and Latinos for the perceived ability of Koreans to financially benefit from communities where they did not live and therefore were not invested in improving. I will not engage this long and complex history and racial dynamics.”

38 For a more comprehensive treatment of the complicated racial and economic workings of Los Angeles and Asian, Latino, and black relations please see Brenda Stevenson’s *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots* as well as Sumi K. Cho’s “Korean Americans vs. African Americans:
Most importantly, I do not wish to oversimplify the King and Harlins cases in my comparative analysis. While there are clear differences specifically in the racial and gender composition, my interest is in the ways that the racialized narrative of danger served to afford empathy to Soon Ja Du while fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins was stereotyped and criminalized in her death. In this way, she is imagined as complicit in her own death in Judge Joyce Karlin’s explanation of the sentencing of Soon Ja Du. This recalls the characterization of King as in control of his own assault. Moreover, Latasha Harlins’ efforts of self-defense are misread and her own (possible) fears in this interracial encounter are discounted.

On the morning of March 16, 1991, Latasha Harlins entered Empire Liquor Market, a local store in her South Los Angeles neighborhood. Walking to the back of the store, Harlins selected a carton of orange juice and placed it in her backpack. The storeowner Soon Ja Du witnessed this and assumed that Harlins was stealing the juice. When Harlins approached the counter, Du grabbed the young woman’s sleeve and attempted to take her book bag away. Harlins responded by punching Du in the face four times and knocked her down. What occurred after this initial confrontation depends on the version of the story one accepts as truth: in one account of the story, Harlins threatens to kill Du; in another, Harlins explains to Du that she wants to pay for the juice. Regardless of the version of the story, the result is the same: Du retrieved the gun that her husband kept behind the counter and aimed it at Harlins. Harlins placed the orange juice that had fallen to the ground during the altercation on the counter and turned to leave the store. Du shot her in the back of the head. The police arrived on the scene to find Latasha Harlins dead, two crumbled dollars in her left hand. The price of the orange juice was $1.89.

As in the Rodney King case, the incident was captured on videotape, in this case, by the security camera in the store. While the video led to a guilty verdict on the charge of voluntary manslaughter, the narrative of empathy was again afforded not to the victim of deadly force but to Soon Ja Du, whose fear of Latasha Harlins was deemed “understandable” by Judge Karlin. The videotape played in court showed that Harlins had turned to leave the store when she was shot in the back of the head. The video was played numerous times for the jurors with Du’s attorney, Charles Llyod, framing a narrative of Du’s fear and victimization for the jury. Llyod argued that Du used the handgun in self-defense. Du’s defense was predicated on a narrative of the constant fear of violence, intimidation, and death that Du faced working in South Los Angeles where gang violence was rampant. He suggests that after experiencing gang violence and robberies, Du was sensitive to aggressive behavior. Additionally, he asserted that the shooting was an accident as the handgun had been altered so that the trigger could be pulled with minimal pressure. The defense attempted to paint Latasha as threatening in the same manner as a gang member and if her age, stature, and gender did not work to confirm that idea, the defense relied on a long history of caricatures of black womanhood that denied black women traditional feminine vulnerability.

The defense worked to masculinize Latasha Harlins in the eyes of the jury. This was evident in the language employed in defense attorney Richard Leonard’s summation. He stated of Latasha, “She punched awful hard,” adding that her blows were “possibly as tough as any guy at the same age” (cited in Stevenson 268). This narrative of the force of Harlins’ blows would be repeated in Judge Karlin’s statements explaining the verdict. Karlin stated that “Although Latasha Harlins was not armed with a weapon at the time of her death, she had used her fists as weapons just seconds before the shooting” (Karlin “Great Provocation and Duress” LA Times).
In alluding to Harlins’ fists as weapons, Karlins renders Latasha Harlins armed and dangerous. Harlins represents the clear and present danger in this narrative and is allowed no vulnerability; the only experience of fear that is recognized in this telling of the story is that of Soon Ja Du, whose is depicted as a loving wife and mother. In her verdict, Judge Karlin contends that Soon Ja Du did not need to be incarcerated for justice to be served as she was not a “danger to society” or a “criminal,” but rather a law abiding business owner who only fired her gun under “circumstances of great provocation, coercion, and duress,” and whose gun had a faulty trigger (Karlin “Great Provocation and Duress” LA Times). Like black men, black women have been historically denied victimhood. Represented as aggressive, violent, and hypersexual in the larger culture, these characterizations of black women have also affected the way that they are regarded and treated in the judicial system.

Soon Ja Du was convicted of voluntary manslaughter, which carries a maximum sentence of 16 years in prison. However, with time served considered, Du received five years of probation, 300 hours of community service, and payment of the Harlins’ funeral expenses. This verdict represented one of the most lenient sentences in any gun-related crime in Los Angeles that year. In the transcript of Judge Karlin’s explanation of her reasons for imposing probation rather than any prison time, Karlin tellingly begins by suggesting that the district attorney’s claims that failing to impose less than the maximum sentence “will send a message that a black child's life is not worthy of protection, (are) dangerous rhetoric, which serves no purpose other than to pour gasoline on a fire” (Karlin “Great Provocation and Duress” LA Times). She further asserts that “[I]t is my opinion that justice is never served when public opinion, prejudice, revenge or unwarranted sympathy are considered by a sentencing court in resolving a case.” (emphasis added). Relegating calls for justice for Latasha Harlins by way of a maximum
sentence to revenge, Karlin undermines the legitimacy of this appeal to justice. Moreover, she suggests that sympathy for Harlins is “unwarranted.” But for whom is sympathy warranted in this case? And why is sympathy ultimately foreclosed to Latasha Harlins and her sympathizers. Karlin explains that she had to consider “the vulnerability of the victim” (“Great Provocation and Duress” LA Times) and in Karlin’s mind Latasha was simply not vulnerable. Ultimately Judge Joyce Karlin argued that while Du behaved irresponsibly, her fears of Latasha were understandable. She stated, “Did Mrs. Du react inappropriately? Absolutely. But was that reaction understandable? I think that it was” (“Grocer Given Probation in Shooting of Girl,” New York Times). This case highlights the questions: Whose fear is understandable? Whose fear does the law recognize?

Latasha’s age and gender afforded her no protection or sympathy, underscoring the ways that black females are denied feminine vulnerability and its protections; even as child, she is not afforded the innocence of childhood. While Du is pronounced guilty, Harlins is ultimately the one who is identified as the guilty party in Karlin’s verdict. For Judge Karlin, Latasha is not a fifteen year old girl running a morning errand, perhaps grabbing orange juice to drink with cereal or eggs for breakfast before going to school, placing it in her book bag simply because it is easier to carry that way. Latasha is not afforded the benefit of the doubt, innocent before proven guilty that day of her tragic death or the day of the verdict. Her body is already marked as criminal. Her black hoody is alluded to as gang attire. Like Rodney King, Latasha Harlins is depicted as having unnatural strength. While King is compared to an animal in Sergeant Koon’s descriptions of him, Harlins is masculinized, punching with the same force and strength as a boy with her “weapons of her fists.” On the other hand, the police officers and soon Ja Du are represented as scared,
vulnerable, and desperate to protect themselves against the impending threat of the menacing black body.

Importantly, the subject of agency and control is an important part of the narrative in both cases as the defense invites the jurors to view the wounded body as the one with agency and power. While the black bodies are ultimately the ones subdued on the ground, they are described as the agents of control in the scenes. Even traditional signs of retreat, surrender, or protection are scripted as aggressive, as in the case of Latasha Harlins’ attempt to leave the store or King’s attempts to shield himself from the blows are read as aggressive gesticulations. Not only is the possibility of fear on the part of Harlins and King discounted, but their own rage and self-defense responses are deemed violent and inappropriate. Their acts of self-defense in the case of Harlins who punches Du to resist her grabbing her, or the case of King’s protective gestures are not read as self-defense but provocation. On the other hand, the police blows and Du’s recourse to using a weapon is seen as appropriate force in the first case and while “inappropriate” it is deemed understandable in the other. Harlins’ anger at being accosted by Du and her violent response is further criminalized by Judge Karlin, who explicitly stated that she did not believe Latasha’s assault of Du to be justified. Karlin further criminalizes Harlins and dismisses the possibility that Harlins herself could have experienced great provocation and distress during her encounter with Du in her suggestion that “Had Latasha Harlins not been shot and had the incident which preceded the shooting been reported, it is my opinion that the district attorney would have relied on the videotape and Mrs. Du’s testimony to make a determination whether to file charges against Latasha” (“Great Provocation and Duress”). Latasha’s response is identified as potentially felonious.
Empathy is foreclosed to King and Harlins. This is most clearly achieved through narration of the video recording of the incidences which mediate the jury’s experience and encourages what Robin Bernstein describes as a “dehistoricized, compassionless gaze” (125). In this way, fear of the black body legitimizes rage against it; the police’s aggression and brutality like Du’s is represented as necessary and justified through a rhetoric of fear. Their bodies are (mis)read as dangerous and thereby they are seen as complicit in their own assault and death. If he had not resisted and remained still; if she hadn’t attacked Soon a Du.

The verdicts in the King and Harlins cases would elicit great rage and protest including community boycotting of Korean-owned stores and the successful effort to close the doors of Empire Liquor Market as well as failed attempts by the Latasha Harlins Justice Committee to remove Judge Karlin from the bench. Most significantly, as scholar Brenda Stevenson and many community members suggest, the Latasha Harlins murder and the lenient sentencing of Soon Ja Du would also be a catalyst for the L.A. Uprisings along with the Rodney King verdict. In The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots, Stevenson contends that the L.A. Uprising was not meaningless chaos but rather represented a kind of dissent that, though destructive, was purposeful, and specifically mounted as a response to the Latasha Harlins murder and verdict. She notes that Korean-owned businesses were specifically targeted in the uprising, representing almost 50 percent of the businesses destroyed. To further establish the connection to Latasha Harlins, she cites that The Empire Liquor Market, though already closed, was firebombed during the uprising. A telling sign on the door read “Closed for Murder and General Disrespect of Black People.” The indictment of murder and “general disrespect of black people” speaks to the ways that the L.A. Uprising represented for many a way to protest against the societal (mis) treatment of blacks.
On Wednesday, April 29, 1992, nearly six months after the Latasha Harlins verdict was pronounced, the verdict in the Rodney King case was announced. Many watched as “Not Guilty” was pronounced ten times in an anonymous vote by jurors to acquit Stacey C. Koon, Theodore J. Briseno, and Timothy E. Wind of all charges stemming from Rodney King’s videotaped arrest and beating on March 3, 1991. The officers were relieved and overjoyed, embracing each other and their lawyers. Powell’s sisters and mother wept tears of joy and relief. The prosecutors were silent, heads hung in what may have been disbelief or dismay, maybe both. Shock, grief, anger, and rage were the emotional responses to the verdict, which represented for many blacks a miscarriage of justice. The words of forty-three year old Rose Brown of LA would prove prophetic: “I am not given to riot, but just you watch. Something’s going to break” (6). Something did.

The uprising that swept Los Angeles from April 29 – May 4, 1992 left buildings and property destroyed and 34 dead. Governor Edmund G. Brown commissioned former CIA director John C. McCone to head a panel to study the riots. Publishing its findings 100 days later, McCone suggested that the riots were “not a product of wanton thuggery” but “a symptom of sickness in the center of our [city,]” due to idleness, despair and the marginalized conditions of the ghetto (Understanding the Riots 10). McCone’s conclusions offer a familiar narrative that blames a “culture of poverty” and “black pathology.” The narrative generated by the panel recalls William H. Grier and Price M. Cobb’s assessment of the 1968 racial riots in their study

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39 This account of the event and response is recorded in Understanding the Riots: Los Angeles Before and After The Rodney King Case by the staff of The Los Angeles Times (1992).
Black Rage. In their reading of the 1968 riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., clinical psychiatrists Grier and Cobbs identify black rage as a sickness, emerging from a site of racial oppression and marginalization. While racial oppression undoubtedly causes psychic trauma as Cobbs and Grier note, they identify no agency or power in rage, divorcing it from a conscious engagement with one’s political reality. In On Anger, Sue Kim observes the ways that black anger and rage have been dismissed and invalidated in American culture, particularly as they have been expressed and articulated through hip hop and other artistic practices that do not conform to white middle class norms of respectability. She asserts,

Just as with women’s anger, the fear and dismissal of black rage, particularly male rage, is ubiquitous and longstanding. Any critical discussion of gangs, inner-city poverty, “at-risk youth,” incarceration, the Black Muslims, the Black Panthers and black power, rap music, etc., must take anger into account in two ways: first, as expression of protest against continuing structural racism and injustice; and second, as an externally imposed blanket characterization of poor people of color that evacuates the anger of validity and insight. (49)

My work in this chapter engages Kim’s call for a deep engagement with cultural productions that employ anger and rage as a critique of systematic racism and injustice in order to assert the validity of black anger and rage. Towards this end, I examine several cultural productions that engage, theorize, and perform rage as a response to the Latasha Harlins and Rodney King verdicts and the subsequent L.A. Uprising. Anna Deavere Smith’s Twilight as well as the work of gangsta rapper Ice Cube, and visual artist Nick Cave’s Soundsuits reveal the workings of fear and rage in the discourse surrounding these cases and verdicts and most importantly, these works offer a counter narrative to the story of who is really in danger in public spaces.
No Justice No Peace: Reading *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*

Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, a work of documentary theatre, importantly engages the discourse surrounding the Latasha Harlins and Rodney King cases, situating them in a larger discussion of violence, rage, and racial intolerance. The General Production Notes explain, “This play is about race relations and the degree to which we make assumptions about others based on the visual impression they make” (5). Most importantly for my purposes, the play documents and examines the discourses about the value of black life, fear of the black body, and the politics of fear, rage, and empathy.

Smith conducted over 200 interviews with a diverse group of people following the LA Uprising. The dialogue from the play is taken verbatim from these interviews, a fact that Smith makes clear in the production notes as well as in the programs at performances and on slides used during the performances. The General Production Notes of this play are incredibly insightful in developing Smith’s vision of the documentary theater as a pedagogical instrument. She insists that the actors be informed and complete their own research about the 1992 riots. Importantly, she insists that the audience also be given background information. Specifically, she requires that not only the recording of the Rodney King beating be shown at the opening of the play but also the video of Latasha Harlins being shot, and the video depicting the beating of white truck driver, Reginald Deny, by four black men. While I will not engage the beating of truck driver Reginald Deny, it is important to note the ways that this act of violence by four black men paralleled the abuse of Rodney King; but while the violent rage of those who assaulted Deny was pathologized and represented as savage and unmerited in the media, the rage of the police officers who similarly abused King is protected by law. In pairing all of these incidences, Smith’s play calls us to question the operations of racism in the ways that some
bodies are identified as criminal and thereby sympathy for these subjects, to borrow from Judge Karlins, is “unwarranted.”

In a particularly compelling vignette entitled “No Justice No Peace: The Story of Latasha Harlins,” Smith’s interview with Charles Llyod, attorney for Soon Ja Du, is recorded. A note is given for the director with a brief description of the contested story of Latasha Harlin’s death with directions suggesting that the video recording of her shooting be played for the audience. What is interesting in Charles’ Lloyd’s meditation on Latasha’s stature and his characterization of her as uncontrollably rage-filled.

Latasha hits Mrs. Du in the face four times,
very viciously,
and knocks her down twice.
I mean, this fight was no contest.
I’ll take the girl.
I’ll take the girl.
This little girl,
And didn’t you think the girl was much smaller?
Misleading,
mis...
she’s five six, one-hundred-and-fifty-two pounds,
and she beat the hell out of this lady (40).

In narrating the encounter through a focus on Latasha’s psychical stature and the force of her punches, Lloyd calls on the stereotypes of black criminality and violence. He further disrupts the potential sympathy for Latasha as a young woman in suggesting that her stature is misleading
and that she is not as small as initially appears. His examination of her body, through references to her height and weight as well as his reiteration of the amount of blows she gives “this lady” (four punches, knocks her down twice) are a calculated effort to script Latasha as a vicious predator. As if reporting on a boxing match, he suggests, “this fight was no contest” (40). The vulnerable Du is no match for the rage and aggression of Harlins, who according to Lloyd “beat the hell out of this lady” (40). In playing the video along with Lloyd’s narration of the events, which was the strategy employed during the trial, Smith reveals the ways that narrative works to construct emotional responses and to legitimate expressions of rage and anger for those represented as vulnerable. In this way, she questions the ways that sympathy is allocated and rage justified.

Smith complicates this narrative of the events in juxtaposing Lloyd’s interview with that of community activist Gina Rae ,aka Queen Malkah. In Malkah’s retelling of the events, she appeals to the testimony of the two children who witnessed Latasha’s death and testified that Latasha begged Mrs. Du to release her, protesting that she was not attempting to steal the orange juice. But most compelling is Malkah’s meditation on the ways in which the case revealed the paltry worth of black life:

and Latasha lay dead with two dollars in her hand

Her last act was two dollars in her hand

...........................................

And the sentencing of Soon Ja Du,

Was a five-hundred dollar fine,

“restitution of the funeral expenses.”
You can’t-bury-a-dog-in-Los-Angeles-for five hundred dollars.

Latasha’s service cost seven thousand dollars.

So five hundred dollars’ fine?

We think it’s to the tune-of-one-billion

It-cost-the city

April twenty the ninth [sic]. (48)

Rhetorically, the emphasis on enumeration is illustrative here. She repeats “two dollars in her hand” to emphasize the triviality of the two dollars and therefore the tragedy of Harlins’ death over such a minuscule amount of money. She further critiques the juridical system through questioning the verdict and the fine of $500 as compared to the seven thousand dollars Harlins’ funeral reportedly cost. Like the repetition of two dollars, she repeats “five hundred dollars” the second time in the form of a question rather than a statement. Lastly, she implies the real cost of this injustice was the one billion dollars it cost the city on April 29, alluding to the cost of the L.A. Uprising in destruction of public property etc. Here she locates the Latasha Harlins murder and verdict as a catalyst for the uprising and communal rage. Like Lloyd’s documented interview, Malkah’s interview reveals a numerical account. While Lloyd used enumeration to suggest the disproportionate force of Harlins’ blows, Malkah’s meditation reveals her perception of Harlin’s vulnerability and the triviality of the conflict over orange juice that led to her murder. Interestingly, Lloyd’s vignette concludes with the question “Isn’t human life cheap?” though with no acknowledgement of the role of race in the perception of Harlins’ criminality and her death. Malkah’s monologue explicitly identifies the operations of racism and the implications of the fear of the black body, whether such fear is legitimate or performed. Her monologue, in its
mediation on the two dollars in Latasha’s hand, the $500 fine, the funeral expenses, and the economic cost of the uprising seems to pose the question, “what is a black life worth?”

“A Balance of Threat and Theory:” Ice Cube’s Rage

Hip Hop, often referred to as the Black CNN by Public Enemy’s Chuck D, has also been invested in engaging this question of the worth of black life through its sharp criticism of police brutality and the surveillance of black bodies in public spaces. The murder of Latasha Harlins and the beating of Rodney King were frequent subjects of criticism in the works of various Hip Hop artists in the 1990s and particularly gangsta rappers in California. Several songs by notable rapper Tupac Shakur eulogized Latasha Harlins, featuring such haunting lyrics:

Dear Lord if ya hear me, tell me why
Little girl like Latasha had to die
She never got to see the bullet, just heard the shot
Her little body couldn’t take it, it shook and dropped
And when I saw it on the news I see busta girl killin’ Tasha
Now I’m screaming fuck the world (“Hellrazer”)”

Shakur’s lyrics testify to the confusion, despair, grief, and rage felt by many who watched the video of Latasha’s murder broadcast on the evening news. In his plea to God for understanding, Shakur recuperates Latasha’s innocence and youth. Latasha is imagined as a “little girl” who didn’t see her death coming and whose body couldn’t withstand the bullet. Through this image, he mourns the loss of such a young life, while also articulating anger and rage at this social reality of the vulnerability of black life, declaring, “Now I’m screaming fuck the world.”

Similarly, Ice Cube would pen a sharp criticism of the manner of Latasha Harlins’ death in his
highly controversial song “Black Korea” on his *Death Certificate* album. Employing racist epithets of Korean American grocers and violent fantasies of reprisals against racist Korean grocers, the song recounts the speaker’s experience of being watched, followed, and profiled as a thief while shopping in a Korean grocery. The speaker proclaims:

So don't follow me, up and down your market
Or your little chop suey ass'll be a target
of the nationwide boycott
Juice with the people, that's what the boy got
So pay respect to the black fist
or we'll burn your store, right down to a crisp

While Cube’s use of racial stereotypes of Asians is rightly criticized, the song nonetheless offers a critique of the ways that blacks are racially profiled as criminal and the various strategies for responding to this policing of their bodies. Cube proposes two approaches for protesting against this form of racial profiling, nonviolent and violent, or in his words a nationwide boycott or burning down the store. Cube insists on a respect for black humanity and dignity in his declaration, “Pay respect to the black fist.” “Black fist” is a metonym for the larger black community as well as the Black Power Movement of which the black fist is an iconic stance. The black fist may also serve as threat of physical violence as well as a reference to Latasha Harlins’s own fists as she punched Soon Ja Du after she grabbed her. Through violent fantasies and rage filled lyrics, Ice Cube articulates the frustration of being (mis)identified as a menace to society, as well are the desire for respect in this song inspired by the murder of Latasha Harlins.

Ice Cube would remain invested in interrogating the vulnerability of black bodies in public space and perhaps his sharpest criticism of violence against blacks and theorizing of the
ethics of rage emerge from his album *The Predator*, released within months of the L.A. Uprising. In his provocative article, “Is the Rage Behind Ice Cube’s Rodney King Rap Still Burning?,” Jack Hamilton examines the “historical specificity” and “raging force of” Ice Cube’s album, *The Predator*. He observes, “*The Predator* was a work of righteous indignation and ferocious self-defense, one that set out to be a revolutionary wholesale inversion of a bankrupt system and the moral apotheosis of gangsta rap, if such a thing was even possible.” Such a thing appears very possible in Ice Cube’s commitment to critiquing the police power’s systematic terrorizing of black urban communities. For as Hamilton further notes, Ice Cube’s declaration that “Riots ain’t nothing but diets for the system” offers “a precarious but stunning balance of theory and threat.” It is this “balance of theory and threat” that is of interest to me.

Ice Cube’s album represents the voice of a counter public, a sphere that as Michael Warner suggests is identified by “[its] tension with the larger public’ while at the same time “maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status” (56). Ice Cube is acutely aware of the ways that he is (mis) read as a predator in society, one who is hypervisible in the sense of always being surveilled and policed and yet at once invisible as a member of a marginalized community, outside the domains of power. Throughout the album, Cube theorizes the limitations and potentials of this fraught positionality as a site of both powerlessness and agency. The songs on the album explore themes such as distrust of the police by the black community, the criminalization of black men and (mis)identification of them as predators, engagement of the riots and rationale and motivation/consciousness of participants. Employing a documentary style, Recordings from the news, reporting on the verdict to the Rodney King case as well as coverage of the L.A. Uprising are littered throughout the album and employed as interludes, introductions to various tracks, or featured directly on several tracks. Additionally,
several interludes feature interviews with Ice Cube and debates about social issues that appear to be between a congregation or members of a talk show audience, underscoring the ways the album serves to represent the counterpublic for marginalized peoples to express and translate their rage and frustrations. Tracks such as “We Had to Tear this Motherfucka Up,” which theorizes the rationale behind the violent uprising following the Rodney King verdict, emphasize this collective function of the album. Of particular significance and interest is Ice Cube’s track “When Will They Shoot?” which most directly speaks to black men’s vulnerability in public spaces. The sense of imminent violence is evident in the title of the song, which takes the form of a question. Violence and death are inevitable as the question is no longer “if” as in the Claude McKay poem, “If We Must Die” but “when:” “When Will They Shoot?” I will return to a consideration of this song.

Like Staples’ “Black Men in Public Space,” The Predator reveals the ways that the black body is constantly surveilled and (mis)read as menacing, heightening its vulnerability to violence in interracial encounters, during which “fear and weapons [often] meet.” Significantly, Ice Cube reclaims rather than laments what Staples describes as the “power to alter public spaces in ugly ways” (20). Calling to mind Sharon Holland’s discussion of the ghostly potential of blackness, Ice Cube uses the site of invisibility as a site of agency in order to haunt the American public. Ice Cube’s construction of The Predator employs and revises the trope of the black man as predator, a criminal. In fact, references to stalking the streets, being a mugger and other criminal activities are littered throughout the album. Ice Cube finds agency in this characterization, in this

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40 In Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity, Sharon Patricia Holland suggests that in the cultural imaginary, blacks occupy a space in which they are “already always dead” and that this special relationship to death is not a space of lack but rather possibility, as blacks have a more intimate relationship with the dead, they also operate with agency in their ghostly haunting of the American literary and cultural landscape. This framework is insight in my examination of black artists’ enactments of rage in response to violence as something more hopeful and agentive.
space as a shape-shifter, night stalker who can command fear and intimidation. Unlike Brent Staples, Cube relishes the power and ability to alter public space, to force others to cross the street. He reclaims this abjection and shame. In this site of what Aimee Ellis calls the “thug imaginary,” a space of death-defiance, that Ice Cube finds his greatest artistic freedom.  This freedom encourages me to read Ice Cube’s *The Predator* as a critique of historically familiar calls to blacks to smother their rage, to choke it down. In Ice Cube’s work we find a counterargument to this injunction, as well as to the suggestion that rage is unproductive and leads to madness. Importantly, he imagines rage as politically necessary and psychologically healing. Unabashedly angry and rage-filled, Ice Cube unleashes this politically engaged, raw album, often retorting over various tracks “make it rough!” Ice Cube gives voice to and performs a communal rage.

In “Rap’s Unruly Body The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage,” Annette J. Saddik observes the subversive potential of black performance through gangsta rap, “… rap artists too display their ‘unruly bodies’—the threatening, half-naked, screaming, and sweating muscular body of the gangsta rapper. The gangsta rapper threatens the mainstream white authority that seeks to keep the ‘savage’ in its place” (121). Gangsta rappers often examine and critique white fear of the black body while simultaneously manipulating and exploiting these same anxieties for profit as well as for political purposes. White consumption of Hip Hop music reveals what Nick Cave describes as the “conflict around fear [of] and attraction [to] the black body (Shea 5). The black (masculine) body in Hip Hop culture is simultaneously

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41 Aimee Ellis’s interrogation of black masculinity in 20th century literature and popular culture in *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls* (2011) is committed to examining this space of the “always already dead” black male subject. Ellis’s employs anthropologist Michael Taussig’s theory of the “space of death/culture of terror” to suggest the ways that death defiance or overcoming the fear of death is key to freedom for black men who are always already marked for death in the American cultural imaginary.
represented as threatening and yet also attractive in the highly sexualized figure of the “sweating muscular body” (Saddik 121). The interplay of fear and fascination associated with the black body is long standing in the American cultural imaginary, as the black body has functioned as a spectacle of derision and intrigue, from the site of the slave auction to the public spectacle of lynching. Hip Hop artists like Ice Cube appear keenly aware of this historical bind, choosing both to critique and exploit this fascination and fear. In embracing such characterizations as the “predator,” Ice Cube self-consciously alludes to the characterization of the black body as at once subhuman, savage, and unruly in its role as predator to innocent whites, but also superhuman and alien, signifying on the popular science fiction horror film franchise *Predator*.

Like Annette J. Saddik, I am interested in Ice Cube and gangsta rap’s “performance as a theatrical representation of violence, one that addressed the growing pain and rage of disenfranchised American black males through language and rhythm instead of through actual physical violence” (115). While Cube’s lyrics may be troubling to some in the use of violent imagery and rhetoric, the lyrics do not call for violent action.

I am not interested in this reading of the work as a direct call to arms; rather, I maintain and acknowledge the use of violence as an aesthetic in Ice Cube’s album and as a means of translating and representing a collective rage. Gangsta rap offers an artistic alternative, a means of channeling rage creatively and giving voice to a disempowered people. It is in this imaginative space and soundscape that rappers critique American racism, attack policies that reproduce poverty, and reimagine the parameters of the American judicial system.

Ice Cube’s “stunning balance of theory and threat” is perhaps best exemplified in the track, “When Will They Shoot? The sense of imminent death pervades the song, from the title, “When Will They Shoot?” to the ominously-worded conclusion, “Sitting by my window because it’s hot
and then I heard a shot.” Cube describes the ways the urban black male is confronted with systematic violence of the state as well as the threat of gang violence or black-on-black crime more broadly, as a form of inner-directed violence. But my interests in this track lie primarily in the way its chorus narrates black men’s negotiation of public space through the threatening image of “stalking” juxtaposed with the innocuous “walking.” Ice Cube’s “When Will They Shoot,” in anticipating violence, explores the interplay of the black man as, at once, violator (stalker) and potential victim. The soundtrack for Ice Cube’s “walk” is neither a bright sunny selection from Vivaldi or Beethoven; rather the hard-hitting sounds of the beat offer a more self-consciously aggressive tone. Ice Cube’s indictment of America’s historical and systematic terrorism and destruction of the black community is unabashedly rage filled: He reflects:

    Cause to us Uncle Sam, is Hitler without an oven
    Burnin our black skin
    Buy my neighborhood – then push the crack in
    Doin us wrong from the first day
    And don’t understand why a nigga got an AK
    Callin me African-American
    like everything is fair again, shit
    Devil, you got to get the shit right I’m black

In juxtaposing the Uncle Sam figure of American democracy with Adolf Hitler, Ice Cube suggests the ways that systematic assaults on black humanity “from the first day” amount to genocide from enslavement to what he suggests as the government’s involvement in the crack epidemic. He asserts the absurdity of the ways that black rage has been evacuated of its validity and political consciousness, and historical memory in the line “And don’t understand why a
nigga got an AK.” He disavows the identification of African-American, noting the superficial nature of the label when it does not reflect full democratic participation and citizenship. Instead, he asserts, “Devil, you got to get the shit right I’m black.” Black is the color of his “big boots” in which he navigates the streets, walking to some, stalking to others but with no intention of catering to their comforts or anxiety; instead, he celebrates his ability to appear threatening, relishing the power to “alter spaces.”

Robin Kelley’s observations about Malcolm X and black cultural politics in “The Riddle of the Zoot Suit” are similarly useful in addressing the complex and contradictory politics of gangsta rap in the late 1980s and early 90s:

The zoot suiters and hipsters who sought alternatives to wage work and found pleasure in new music, clothes, and dance styles of the period were “race rebels” of sorts, challenging middle-class ethics and expectations, carving out distinct generational and ethnic identity, and refusing to be good proletarians. But in their efforts to escape or minimize exploitation, Malcolm and his homies become exploiters themselves. (*Race Rebels* 163)

Like zoot suiters, gangsta rap artists appear threatening because they refuse to conform to the Huxtable image of black respectability through the attainment of education and middle class ethics and principles. Gangsta rappers are ostentatious in their celebration of conspicuous consumption, the gold chains; designer clothes self-consciously performed a black masculine identity. They celebrate a reclaiming of the black body from work through displays of the body enjoying leisure, play, and through dance. But like the zoot suiters, gangsta rappers often appear complicit in the celebration of commodity capitalism and conspicuous consumption that reproduces oppression and exploitation of poor blacks in the “ghetto.” While acknowledging
these strains in their work, can we also simultaneously imagine these rappers as race rebels who “represent(ed) a subversive refusal to be subservient,” who through their lyrics express what Kelley calls expressed “disdain for and defiance toward police practices” (167). Through this imaginative soundscape of gangsta rap and performance, artists create their own court of law and justice. The soundscape of Hip Hop is an important site of agency, a counter public for representing and translating social critique and black rage. Through his balance of theory and threat, Ice Cube suggests that if they cannot or refuse to see us, we can insist that they hear us. But this is likewise a dangerous negotiation.

Sounding Off: Nick Cave’s Soundsuit

Visual artist and Alvin Ailey trained dancer Nick Cave also employs sound as a tool of social critique, protest, and rage in his work. Cave has become famous for his highly embellished and extravagant Soundsuits that are a mix of sculpture, costume, and fashion. His work has appeared in numerous art galleries as installations and performance art pieces worldwide. Cave’s Soundsuits are constructed from scavenged and discarded objects collected from flea markets, thrift shops, and even the local park. Suits have been constructed from sticks; stuffed animals sequin buttons, human hair, welcome mats and other everyday materials. The use of the everyday materials in constructing these suits of armor speaks to the mundane nature of violence against the black subject; these ordinary objects are reimagined and repurposed as armor, protection. It also suggests the ways that things of “everyday use,” as Alice Walker describes it, can be marshaled for subversive efforts. In this respect, Cave’s work is very much in the tradition of black quilting, in which black women wove their stories using discarded materials. Significantly, Cave appropriates the protection of the feminine in signifying on this historical practice of quilting that also represents a model of survival and a claim to black humanity and
artistry. His work can also be said to be informed by the hip hop culture in a number of ways. For one, Cave’s recycling of materials recalls Russell Potter’s assessment of hip hop as a “cultural recycling center.” As a signifyin(g) art, hip hop is created from the recycling of cultural artifacts and expressions, whether sounds and music through sampling, or aesthetics and styles. The suits’ defensive posture as armor is reminiscent of the hip hop posing, featuring iconic defiant postures. But the similarities are most readily evident in Caves’ emphasis on the necessity of sound to articulate protest and rage. I am interested in the Cave’s theorizing of sound and protest of the vulnerability of black bodies in public space in the development of his original Soundsuit entitled “Twigs” and its relation to the beating of Rodney King.

Nick Cave acknowledges that, in the aftermath of the brutal beating of Rodney King, he searched for an artistic outlet to “translate those emotions” including “humiliation and response, silence and outrage” that left him traumatized by witnessing the tape and media coverage of the beating (Lacayo 51). In an interview with Andrea Shea for NPR, he reflects on the emotional struggle of confronting the vulnerability of his body as a black man in public spaces as a kind of death-bound subject. He recalls, “… I was really sort of going through this emotional struggle with that incident and my own sort of identity. You know, the moment I leave my house I could be a victim of circumstances, you just never know” (Shea 1). Cave notes the ways the constant threat of violence narrates his life; the moment he leaves his house to enter the public domain, he is met with the potential of violence. Here, he asserts his identity as a potential victim rather than violator. In employing the word “circumstances” rather than explicitly highlighting police brutality, for example, he suggests the mundane and quotidian ways in which violence pervades

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42 Russell Potter makes the argument that Hip Hop is a “highly sophisticated postmodernism” in Spectacular Vernacul. In this way, he objects to Paul Gilroy’s suggestion that hip-hop represents an oppositional modernity. Potter imagines more creativity and agency in hip hop as a political practice and theory by which everyday people use media and capital to create their own realities rather than reproduce hegemonic power.
black life. Most importantly, he identifies the psychic trauma of racial oppression and terrorism, as an “emotional struggle” to reconcile “what it’s like to feel discarded, dismissed, devalued” (Shea 4). It is at this moment of reflecting on value, and the ways in which blackness becomes discarded that he arrives at his project. He recalls that he saw a twig on the ground, “something that I walk on, something I dismiss … and it just sort of clicked.” Cave would create his first Soundsuit from the twigs he found discarded on the ground that day.

Cave’s first Soundsuit, figured below, is constructed of twigs affixed to fabric to create what appears to be a monstrous figure. Critical of the discourse around black men’s bodies that circulated in the media portrayal of King, Cave satirizes narratives of black masculinity—the soundsuit represents the black man’s bestiality, but yet, his vulnerability, as the soundsuit is both monstrous and a protective armor.

Figure 1: Nick Cave’s “Twigs”

43 This image was made available through a review of Nick Cave’s installation at Limpscomb. “Last Night’s Art Talk: Nick Cave at Lipscomb.” Nashville Scene. Web. 3 April 2013.
Specifically, he questioned the popular rhetoric of King being “larger than life,” being scary and menacing, along with the exaggerated idea that it “took 10 men to bring him down” (Shea 4). Significantly the brownish color of the twigs create a hair-like appearance and the suit, overall, resembles a bear, calling to mind Sergeant Koon’s description that Rodney King “kind of gave out a bear-like yell, and he continued to rise” (Serrano, “Koon Says King Attacked”). He further described his groans as that of “a wounded animal” (“Sergeant Says King Appeared,” New York Times). Cave deliberately invokes the human/animal divide to critique the dehumanization of blacks that allows for their abuse to be justified. While his later suits are often full body suits that completely conceal the body of the wearer, and thereby conceal race and gender, his first suit reveals the neck, feet, and parts of the face of the wearer, who is importantly a dark skinned black man as figured in this image.

The Soundsuits are visual representations of this meeting of sight and sound and their full potential isn’t realized without considering their sonic elements, which are reflected in their attention to the body, its vulnerabilities, its movements and the sounds that such movements produce. Nick Cave reflects on the way he became aware of the sonic property of the suit:

But I didn’t even think I could put it on the body... And then once I stepped into it I thought about building this sort of second skin, you know, a suit of armor, something for protection purposes. Then I started thinking about protest. In order to be heard you’ve got to be aggressive, you’ve got to speak louder …In other words, you’ve got to make sound — hence the name Soundsuit. (Shea, “Nick Cave Brings ‘Bigger-Than-Life’”)
The body is no longer a site of vulnerability here but a weapon of protest through this “building of a sort of second skin,” an armor that makes noise. Rather than disavowing aggression, Cave reclaims it as site of power and protest. Cave has spoken of his desire to represent “the power within the black male, that intimidation and scariness” that is stereotypically associated with black masculinity in the American cultural imaginary (Lacayo 51). For Cave, aggression functions as a second skin, a defense mechanism for black males whose bodies are constantly under attack and heavily surveilled. But the aggression and rage are also evident in the discordant sound, the noise produced by the movement of these discarded objects, symbolic of the protest movement of a discarded people. The sounds produced by these assembled discarded objects may not be regarded as music; as audiences and reviewers suggest the sounds trill, clang, and rustle depending on the materials used. They are not arranged to produce well-ordered notes and harmonious sound, rather, as in the work of Ice Cube, there is a politics of aural antagonism at work. While invested in protest, Cave’s discordant sounds are in opposition to the conventional protests that are invested in creating intelligible slogans to be collectively chanted during protest marches. These harmonious chants, songs, and slogans seduce the listener to elicit sympathy for the cause. This discordant sound demands your attention; while you can avert or close your eyes to refuse to see undesirable sights, the task of shutting out sound is more difficult. You cannot completely refuse to hear. The sounds rage on.

The disruptive impulse of the discordant sound is similarly evident in some of Cave’s performance art exhibitions; dancers dressed in his Soundsuits invade public spaces, taking over 44

44 In a review of Cave’s 2009 installation at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Jori Finkel describes the sounds of the suits in this way, “Some Soundsuits, like a bouquet of metal toys and tops perched on top of a bodysuit made of crocheted hot pads, make a clanking commotion. Others, like the Soundsuits made of human hair (bought already dyed from a wholesaler in New York), tend to fall in the quiet, whispy range. All come to life in performance.” (I Dream the Clothing Eletric, The New York Times. 31. Mar. 2009. Web.)
sidewalks, interrupting the movement of pedestrians. This practice seems to borrow from the protest efforts in the Civil Rights Movement as the bodies of protestors would block traffic and interrupt daily activities. In Cave’s iteration, protest, rage, and frustration are not only visually represented but are sonic; they must be loud, and must make noise. “In order to be heard, you’ve got to speak louder, I thought about the body as an alarm system that could go off any second” (Lacayo 51). The Soundsuit represents both an armor to protect the black body from assault as well as an act of protest through producing sound in movement; it insists on being heard, not just being seen.

The beating of Rodney King and the murder of Latasha Harlins, like the vicious murder of Emmett Till underscored the vulnerability of black bodies and the dangers of the (mis)identification of the black body as criminal and menacing. The verdict in the case of Rodney King and the sentencing in the case of the Latasha Harlins case forced many to confront Tupac Shakur’s question, “Tell me, what’s a black life worth?” The responses to these incidences of violence, documented through video-recording, ranged from grief, confusion, rage, frustration, impatience and it manifested in forms of protests like the boycotting efforts that led to the closing of Empire Liquor Market to the turbulent L.A. Uprising. The response to what many imagined as a miscarriage of justice in both cases also led to a proliferation of artistic meditations, critiques, and representations of the psychic violence of being (mis)identified as criminal as well as the corporeal violence that often accompanies this fear of the black body “when fear and weapons meet” (Staples 19).

While the artistic representations I have explored range in form and genre, they all reveal a pedagogical and documentary impulse. Moreover, these works are all conversant with the discourse of the cases that circulated through media and news coverage as well as direct
references and allusions to the strategies, arguments, and language employed by the defense attorneys. The documentary and pedagogical impulses are readily evident in Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, a documentary theatre piece. Smith’s extensive research in constructing the play reveals a commitment to record the experiences of those directly affected by the acts of violence as an alternative archive of the L.A. Uprising. In other words, her piece implicitly challenges the record and interpretation of the event as it was projected through the news outlets. She also directly confronts the operations of racist ideologies of fear of the black body and its implications in juxtaposing the different narratives of the events that challenge understandings of who is vulnerable and who is the victim in these interracial encounters.

Similarly, the construction of *The Predator* reveals a documentary style and counterpublic; Ice Cube also chronicles the news coverage of the events along with his social commentary, and groups conversations that explore current social issues, giving voice to those often marginalized by the mainstream media. Cave’s *Soundsuit* “Twigs” can also be read as a visual and sonic documenting of the societal disregard of the black body through his use of waste materials and visual allusions to the rhetoric of King’s beastliness employed in the case. There is a clear investment in offering the audience an alternative perspective on the events and calling into question the characterization of the black subject as aggressive violator as scripted in the defense’s representations. These works mediate on the value of black life in a society where it so easily ‘discarded,’” as Cave suggests, without punishment.

I Can’t Breathe

Fear (of the black body) and weapons continue to meet resulting in deadly consequences. Additionally racialized narratives of dangers continue to serve as justification for the use of deadly force against unarmed blacks. There are hauntingly similar circumstances in recent years
that recall the assault of Rodney King and Latasha Harlins. We cannot but see the resemblance to the Rodney King case in officer Daniel Pantaleo’s meditation on Eric Garner’s size and stature as justification for the fatal chokehold used to subdue him. On July 11, 2014, Eric Garner died in Staten Island, New York after being placed in a chokehold for 15 seconds, after being approached on suspicion that he was selling loose cigarettes. Like that of King, the incidence was captured on camera and played across news outlets nationally and again what appeared to be clear evidence of excessive force and disregard for Garner’s protests, “I can’t breathe,” resulted in a decision of no indictment. The decision was met with protests, anger, frustration, and rage and Garner’s protest “I Can’t Breathe” like Rodney King’s “Can We All Just Get Along” become symbolic of a larger feeling of unrest, frustration and in the former affective asphyxiation.

In a similar vein, the tragic death of nineteen-year-old Renisha McBride after seeking assistance at the residence of Theodore Wafer reminded many of the death of Latasha Harlins. While the circumstances differ, the rhetoric of the defense is familiar to that of Soon Ja Du. Wafer’s defense attorney, Cheryl Carpenter, argued that crime was rising in Wafer’s Detroit neighborhood and when he heard the pounding at his door, “He ha[d] never been so afraid in his life ... He was in an extreme emotional state,” (“Detroit-area man gets 17 to 32 years”). Like Judge Karlin, Judge Dana M. Hathaway also showed empathy for the defendant and dismissed the possibility that race factored in. She stated, “I do not believe that you are a coldblooded murderer or that this case had anything to do with race” (“Detroit-area man gets 17 to 32 years”). However, her sentencing reveals a stark difference from Judge Karlin’s suggestions of “unwarranted sympathy” (“Great Provocation and Duress”). Instead, Judge Hathaway concludes, “I do believe that you acted out of fear, but an unjustified fear has never been an excuse for
taking someone’s life.” Wafer received a minimum of 17 years in prison. While the outcome in the case was different, the language of the trial still pivoted on the question of whether or not fear was warranted.

As Brent Staples suggests, where there is fear, there is often rage. A comparative analysis of the cases of Harlins and King illuminates the ways that blacks are targets of violence regardless of gender, age, or stature. But most importantly, this comparison reveals the ways that rage against the black body is often legitimated through the language of justified fear and the appeal to law and order. And while black rage is often pathologized, (white) rage is given legitimacy through this rhetoric of the fear of the “unruly black body” and the need to protect one’s person and property (vigilante citizens) or protect the public (law enforcement).
CODA

Confronting the Black Rage of Our Day

Black Rage and the Black Lives Matter Movement

I found *myself unexpectedly overcome with tears*, feeling as if finally, after years of being *denied some kind of oxygen*, I could exhale. Finally, someone in a position to do something was going to hold police accountable for their biases and their transgressions. It is a shame it has taken this long for someone to do the right thing. It is a shame I, and so many others, have lived with this *feeling of suffocation* for so long. (emphasis added)

Marie (self-identified young black woman) of New York City, New York

In the summer of 2014, as social unrest filled the streets of Ferguson, MO following the shooting death of unarmed teenager Michael Brown, Lauryn Hill dedicated her song “Black Rage” to Ferguson. The song had in fact been recorded two years before but the words had never been more poignant and prophetic:

Black rage is founded on dreaming and draining,

Threatening your freedom

To stop your complaining

Poisoning your water

While they say it’s raining

Then call you mad

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45 These comments were posted on the *New York Times* website on May 2, 2015 in response to prosecutor Marilyn Mosby’s decision to prosecute police implicated in the death of Freddie Gray.
For complaining, complaining

Asserting the emotional fatigue or “draining” of racial violence, Hill’s “Black Rage” also confronts the ways that narratives of “complaining” and “madness” are often employed to dismiss the merits of the issues presented by women and racial minorities who are deemed overly-sensitive, hysterical, or always complaining.

Significantly and no doubt deliberately, Hill’s sketch of “Black Rage” is set to the melody of the iconic American classic “My Favorite Things” from Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical *The Sound of Music*. The words of “My Favorite Things” contains the refrain “When I’m feeling sad/I simply remember my favorite things and then I don’t feel so bad” (emphasis added) – it is a song about memory and affect and more specifically the power of pleasant memories to create feelings of joy where ugly feelings, like sadness or fear, reside. The original song offers a litany of the speaker’s favorite things, idyllic scenes of childhood and happiness: “brown paper packages tied up with string;” “girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes;” “silver white Winters that melt into Spring.” Hill’s revision of this American classic is not about “raindrops on roses or whiskers on kittens” (“My Favorite Things”) because for Hill, the memories and scenes she recalls are not aesthetically pleasing; they offer no reprieve to Hill or her listeners. Hill offers a catalogue of the violence that assaults the senses with images and sounds of violence and terror. For Hill, the sound of music is the sound of black rage; she offers us this interpretation in this gritty and soulful performance. Her voice is accompanied by an acoustic guitar and in another instance of signifying on the musical, there appear to be voices of children in the background. She sings, “Black rage is founded on two-thirds a person/Raping and beatings and suffering that worsens/Black human packages tied up in strings/Black rage can come from all these kinds of things” (“Black Rage”). Recalling the horror of the slave ship and
the practice of rape and lynching as a means of terrorizing black communities, Hill’s “Black Rage” underscores the vulnerability of black bodies in America. Hill theorizes rage as an existential condition of blackness in a virulently repressive society. Detailing the circumstances of psychic and corporeal violence, or in her words “Victims of violence/Both psyche and body,” that inspire or produce this affect, Hill suggests that the response to racial terror is black rage.

Through her ironic use of the familiar tune to “My Favorite Things,” Hill suggests that violence against the black body is an American pastime, one of America’s favorite things. Cate Matthews notes the poignancy of the song in her observations that, “‘Black Rage’ reminds listeners not just of the depth of Ferguson's injustice, but its context. Systemic prejudice doesn't roll to a stop outside the town's limits. And although the protesters are gathered in Michael Brown's name, the song provides a fitting anthem for the scope of their dissent” (“Lauryn Hill Releases ‘Black Rage’”). Hill’s “Black Rage” may be said to be an anthem for a movement of black defiance, reminiscent of Claude McKay’s 1919 “If We Must Die” in response to the Red Summer.46

Created following the 2012 acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, the Black Lives Matter Movement represents both a site of what Douglass Crimp calls “mourning and militancy;” a mourning of the countless lives of unarmed blacks lost to police or vigilante violence as well as a radical insistence on the value of black life through the mantra and verbal affirmation that “Black Lives Matter.” The national website describes their vision and mission in these words:

“Rooted in the experiences of Black people in this country who actively resist our de-

46 Red Summer refers to an eruption of racial riots throughout the Northern and Southern states during the summer and into the fall of 1919. While there was widespread violence perpetrated by racist whites against black communities, Chicago, Washington D.C. and Elaine, Arkansas represented some of the areas where the violence was most virulent. The violence was a result of various local racial incidences. Significantly, many blacks resisted the terrorism of their communities through armed self-defense.
humanization, #BlackLivesMatter is a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-
Black racism that permeates our society. Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that
goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes.

(Blacklivesmatter.com)

BLM comprises a national, interracial movement of students, youth, and more largely citizens
concerned about police brutality and the general disregard for black life and humanity reflected
in state laws and policies. With various local entities, BLM encourages concerned Americans to
“get active, get organized, and fight back” through various strategies of joining local groups,
organizing teach-ins and leading protests, and marches. BLM also represents an effort to reclaim
black rage as a meaningful and healing source of empowerment and political agency.

The Black Lives Matter Movement has often come under harsh criticism by pro police
groups, groups that suggest BLM promotes violence and chaos, and those who are antagonistic
to the declaration of the integrity of black lives. Efforts to discredit BLM gained momentum after
gunman Ismaaiyl Brinsley murdered NYPD officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu on
December 20, 2014. Patrick Lynch, president of Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association, castigated
all law enforcement protestors, claiming “There’s blood on many hands tonight,” and
particularly singling out the Black Lives Matter Movement and calling for it to be eradicated,
stating, “It must not go on, it cannot be tolerated” (Lynch, “Stop Slandering”). These efforts to
undermine and discredit the Black Lives Matter movement and protests also seek to criminalize
black expressions of discontent. Additionally, some police and pro-police groups have met
protestors with increasing antagonism. In some instances, police and their sympathizers have
mocked slogans like “I Can’t Breathe” by wearing t-shirts stating “I Can Breathe” in clear
disrespect of the final words spoken by Eric Garner. Most significantly, policing tactics in
response to protests and uprisings have become increasingly militarized in the strategies and weapons employed to quell protests and subdue even peaceful crowds. Most recently, police have employed military grade sonic weapons, LRADs, against Eric Garner protestors. Employed as crowd control measures, these powerful amplification systems emit a piercing noise that produces pain, discomfort, and disorientation, forcing protesters to disperse.\footnote{These LRADS were first developed for military application. These amplification systems would allow for instructions and announcements to be given across great distance through a direct and focused cone of sound. However, this sonic weapon has been used to attack protestors during the Occupy Wall Street Movement as well as various Black Lives Matter protests in New York City. See Nick Pinto’s article “NYC Cops are Blithely Firing A Potentially Deafening Sound Cannon At Peaceful Protestors.”}

In her examination of the police response to Ferguson, Carole Anderson suggests that reading the events in Ferguson, MO, following the murder of Michael Brown Jr. as yet another example of black rage ignores the operations of white rage and white supremacy that perpetuate violence against black communities. She asserts,

> What we’ve actually seen is the latest outbreak of white rage. Sure, it is cloaked in the niceties of law and order, but it is rage nonetheless ... It goes virtually unnoticed, however, because white rage doesn’t have to take to the streets and face rubber bullets to be heard. (“Ferguson isn’t about black rage against cops. It’s white rage against progress”)

While I would argue that black rage should not be discounted since black rage often emerges as a response to white rage and terrorism, Anderson’s points are insightful. What she reveals in these observations are the ways in which white rage is legitimated and protected by law often through narratives of fear that identify the black subject as criminal and therefore justify the use of (deadly) force and violence.

Like Lauryn Hill’s “Black Rage” anthem, a number of articles and blogs by BLM supporters, with explicit titles like “The Function of Black Rage,” by Mychal Denzel Smith and
“In defense of Black Rage” by Brittney Cooper, represent a concerted effort to reorient the mainstream discourse on black rage and its political function through challenging the ways rage has been devalued and discredited as useless, dangerous, and unproductive. Mychal Denzal Smith’s article underscores the political efficacy and necessity of black anger and rage and seeks to dissociate it from the ways it is relegated to black nihilism: He asserts, “Where they see pessimism and gloom, I see anger, an anger I wish we saw more of. Anger helps build movements. Of course, anger alone isn't sufficient, but it has a galvanizing effect. There's an anger unique to experiencing America through blackness that has pushed this country to react” (“The Function of Black Rage”). Smith suggests like Angela Davis that a “properly placed rage” can be revolutionary in his concluding statement that it is “our rage and impatience that has produced progress.” In the passionate rage of young people and concerned citizens angered by racial terror, discrimination, and racial profiling, Smith does not see fear but rather hope and a promise of change. Similarly, Brittney Cooper’s “In defense of Black Rage” poignantly articulated black frustration and rage and resisted the expectation of criminalizing or disavowing the uprising in Ferguson, MO following the murder of Michael Brown Jr. While stating that she did not support looting, Cooper declares,

I refuse. I refuse to condemn the folks engaged in these acts [looting], because I respect black rage. I respect black people’s right to cry out, shout and be mad as hell that another one of our kids is dead at the hands of the police. Moreover I refuse the lie that the opportunism of a few in any way justifies or excuses the murderous opportunism undertaken by this as yet anonymous officer.

Cooper reveals the ways that the focus on looting and isolated incidences of antagonism towards the police obscures the matter of police brutality. Moreover, this discourse reveals a greater
concern over destruction of public property than the loss of black lives. The work of BLM, as well as the work of those who write and speak in defense of black rage, represents an attempt, as bell hooks suggests, to “take that rage and move it beyond fruitless scapegoating of any group, linking it instead to a passion for freedom and justice that illuminates, heals, and makes redemptive struggle possible” (*Killing Rage*, 20).

But one clear obstacle to the political efficacy of rage and black resistance is the evacuation of black women and other marginalized communities, specifically black Queer communities, from the national discourse. Black men continue to be the visual representatives of violation against the black body by police or vigilante citizens. The title of a recent anthology, *Killing Trayvons: An Anthology of American Violence*, underscores the ways that black men’s names and images become representative of American violence against the black community while black women’s vulnerability to state violence is often ignored. This, as Kali Gross points out, is a gross injustice and only serves to undermine the effectiveness of the movement against police brutality. State violence is not only killing Trayvons, it is killing Renisha McBrides, Tanisha Andersons, and Aura Rain Rossers.

My own experience attending a Black Lives Matter Rally in Charlottesville highlights this issue of the evacuation of black women’s stories from the larger discourse of police violence against the black community. The fliers for the event featured images of Jordan Davis and Trayvon Martin, and, while the words printed on the flyer announcing the event stated Black Lives Matter, too often black lives are conflated with black men’s lives. The speakers for the rally were overwhelmingly male and spoke of their own experiences of the fear of immanent violence in public spaces. Interestingly even the lone black female who spoke expressed her anger and rage not at her only vulnerability to violence but at the presumed vulnerability of her
sons; and though she stated that she also had a daughter, it was her sons that she really feared for, it was their lives that she spoke out for. In that rally, like much of the larger national discourse on police brutality, there is no sustained reflection on the ways these same systems of violence, fear, and racial terror target and destroy black women.

While the #hashtag and slogan Black Lives Matter have become synonymous with the contemporary movement, the invocation of “I Can’t Breathe” is not only a protest of police brutality, it also reveals the sense of affective asphyxiation felt by many blacks struggling to choke down their rage at racial injustice. “I can’t breathe” were Eric Garner’s final words as NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo held him in a fatal chokehold. The video of Eric Garner’s chokehold death was captured on cell phone footage and played repeatedly through various news outlets, receiving the national attention perhaps only reminiscent of the beating of Rodney King. In many ways, Eric Garner’s death is not only evidence of police brutality but also of a general disregard for black life, evident in the lack empathy displayed when his pleas, “I can’t breathe,” were ignored. Though the use of this restraining measure has been banned by the New York Police Department for over twenty years, reports indicate that the department has a backlog of chokehold complaints that are currently under investigation (Thomas “Pregnant Woman”).

The chokehold has long functioned as a symbol of police brutality in urban communities and is frequently referenced in popular culture. Most iconic is Spike Lee’s depiction of the chokehold death of Radio Raheem in Do the Right Thing. While black men have been depicted as the targets of the chokehold practice of policing, the use of the chokehold (though nonlethal in this instance) on a pregnant Rosan Miller calls attention to the fact that black women are also subject to this practice of policing.  

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48 An unidentified NYPD officer placed Rosan Miller in a chokehold after Rosan was accused of illegally grilling on a public sidewalk outside her home in East New York, Brooklyn. While video of the incident was not publically
The practice of the chokehold is the genealogical extension of the lyncher’s rope. It is a public display that serves to discipline the “unruly black body” through the narrative of “disorderly conduct” or “resisting arrest.” Moreover, the image of the black body in a chokehold, like the lynched black body is an act of psychic terror, meant to serve as a public lesson—and warning—to the larger black community to stop resisting, stay in your place, choke down that rage or risk having it choked out. The invocation of “I Can’t Breathe” by BLM protestors is not only in memoriam of Garner but as the epigraph to this coda so eloquently captures, it is a witnessing and a testimony of the condition of affective asphyxia, for many blacks who “have lived with this feeling of suffocation for so long” (emphasis added). As black emotional expression has been so heavily policed, the expectation of choking down that rage, for many blacks, has felt like living in a psychic chokehold. Like Marie, many are beginning to exhale by reclaiming their rage.

The current debate on black rage is an ethical one. It is a contest over what is deemed appropriate and inappropriate behavior, acceptable and unacceptable modes of expression. The language and underlining ideology of this discourse often polices and pathologizes black expressions of rage, anger, and discontent. In his essay on Malcolm X entitled “Prophet of Rage,” Cornel West suggests that there is much we can learn from Malcolm X’s articulation of black rage if “we are as willing as Malcolm X to grow and confront the new challenges posed by the black rage of our day” (105). The first step in facing the new challenges of the black rage of
our day is to confront and then dismantle our fear of black rage and the ways that that fear paralyzes and divides us. I consider the words of Audre Lorde in her essay “The Uses of Anger,” which I believe are applicable to rage: “It is not the anger [rage] … that will destroy us but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger [or rage] as an important source of empowerment” (130). Rather than fear anger or rage, we must allow it to teach us and tutor us. And If, as Lorde suggests, “we listen to its rhythms, learn within it,” then we may be able to access the politically radical and psychically restorative potential of rage.

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