Introduction

Blackness, Abjection, and Sexuality

"Yeah. It didn’t work, did it? Did it work?" he asked.
"It worked," she said.
"How? Your boys gone you don’t know where. One girl dead, the other won’t leave the yard. How did it work?"
"They ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em."
"Maybe there’s worse."
"It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that."
—Toni Morrison, Beloved

LET US TAKE this dialogue, from a novel which is in many ways the ur-text and bible of my project, as an instructive fable, a fragment to expound upon for a sermon. Sethe’s decision to murder her toddler daughter—a decision we should be careful not to name as a choice, at least not without troubling assumptions about individual agency that are commonplace in a liberal democratic society—is of such a final and extreme nature that it begs readers to differ as Paul D does. But the logic by which she reaches the decision, and the declared limits of her survivalist epistemology, are difficult to gainsay. The murder itself to one side, Sethe’s seems a compelling strategy for responding to the demands of the moment, and to the tremendous pressures on her existence and on her very embodiment. As such, the structure of her logic is of a piece with the harsh structures of her social world, where sociality is governed by strict racial hierarchy and property law.

We are not Sethe and we do not live her exigencies, and thus we cannot judge her actions. Her creator, Toni Morrison, does not call us to do so. Sethe of course is not really a slave or ex-slave, even though she is inspired by a historical personage: she is a speculation on history (as well as on psychology and politics) of Morrison’s, and a shifting point of
identification for her readers. Sethe figures us in the guise of our ancestral past. "Us" here is all who are connected by dint of ancestry or culture to the practices of chattel slavery in the Americas, all who bear any relation at all to the concept of blackness—the connection obviously being stronger the more invested, consciously or unconsciously or both, one is in that concept, which, from my point of view, ought to mean that a conscious white supremacist of the Aryan Nation variety is roughly equally the "descendant" of this experience as a person who takes on a highly politicized conscious African American or black identity. We are not Sethe, but we are her inheritors.

The salient matter in this exchange Sethe has with Paul D and with us pretends to be about moral judgment, but this path quickly peters out in either impasse or fanaticism. The productive road Morrison opens for us has to do less with what should be judged than with what it is our "job" to "know." Certainly we are being called, from that pulpit Morrison shares with James Baldwin and many before him, where willful ignorance of the injustices of one's society earns thunderous condemnation for the carnage that such ignorance enables, to know more than Sethe dares: to know what is worse and what is better, and to what degree, and how, and why, and to track the ripples from the range of ancient Sethe-like decisions as they eddy to our own doorsteps, as they flow in the memory of our own cells. What Morrison of course is saying to us in Beloved is that the all-too-easy accord between the decision to murder a child and the epistememes of a racially organized economic and social system of the United States in the mid-19th century, though it may remain unexamined, unmapped, unknown, persists in our world as a latency sporadically but inexorably reactivated, and that if the particular logic of the deed and the world that made it possible has through the passage of time faded like an ancient painting to near invisibility, its frame, capacious and insidiously flexible, still sets the boundaries of our own world.

Of course to acquire this knowledge, and to be positioned to make use of it, is by comparison to Sethe's historical moment a luxury, earned precisely by the canniness and suffering of forebears of whom she is a literary avatar. It is only from a position of relative privilege that we can will ourselves to "know" what Sethe refuses to take cognizance of, but which haunts her in the hideous form of mystifying, counterintellectual traumatic memory. At the same time, because we are her inheritors, we need to know what she knows but refuses to know, in order not to be haunted just as she is. Thus the luxury bought by the (bloody) successes and
(bloodier) ancestral failures that Sethe figures is also, paradoxically, a necessity for us: our freedom is relative and measured by rods others than hers, but we, too, are imprisoned.

(I am going to try to establish in this book that these paradoxes—luxury that is necessity, freedom that is imprisonment, and, perhaps surprisingly, their correspondent vice-versa formulations—speak to the very core of what blackness is in our culture and how we embody it.)

In some ways the range of strategies perceived as available to those of us doing the work of African Americanist cultural criticism in particular, and of African American politics and Afro-Diasporic antiracist politics in general, often does not seem a great deal broader than Sethe's. It is easy enough to see how the emergency continues, to still hear the sirens of warning, to feel the body readying itself yet again to receive a lash or a blow—and thus the demand for strategies that remove us from harm's way or counterattack the source of harm, are, or seem, of paramount importance. This readiness to flinch—bodily, psychically, intellectually, a multidimensional response I will take up further in my discussion of Fanon's references to the flinching and "tensed muscles" that characterize blackness—seems especially evident to me at the moment of this writing, shortly after the inauguration of the first black president of the United States. In the view of many of us steeped in the lessons of our history, the antiracist triumphalism or eager anticipation of a transformation in "race relations" that Obama's electoral victory might inspire in some quarters (the house, perhaps, not the fields) seem to belong to the realm of glib immaturity and delusion. The "change" that was a watchword of Obama's campaign we judge to be only "symbolic" rather than being a credible foundation on which to build plans or policy. This is a dismissal-in-the-form-of-description that would seem ill suited to those of us in the academy whose daily bread consists of the claim that what occurs on the symbolic level and in discourse is highly relevant to, and often indistinguishable from, the material and the lived—except that what we are able or willing to "know" is, still, in close alignment with what Sethe knows. Sethe's inheritors, we are confronted with our own exigencies, which are simply the progeny of those she confronted. To think of these events this way is a habit, not unlike the physiological process that arranges and renders sensible the vast array of visual stimuli bombarding us which we experience simply as "seeing" when it is in fact also editing; it is a product of battle-tested strategies and hard-won epistemologies honed into tools for carving out a space and habitation of survival. Morrison—and of course
she is not alone in this call—would have us retrain our habituated perceptions. She implies that just as Sethe's healing ultimately depends on seeking to know consciously what strategies of survival habitually hold at bay, for us to explore the "worse" that every demand for safety and for righteous vengeance would compel us to flee may prove fecund for the formulation of tools and strategies that take us further, and give us more freedom, than ways of knowing and decisions that track Sethe's flight, flight, or both at once all too closely.

The genesis of this project for me lies in encountering a resistance that runs through the core of two intertwined political currents which, despite the sometimes sclerotic ways of seeing of which they are justly accused, continue to seem vital to me (I'll say why in chapter 1), and which are major contributions (if not foundations) for the field of African American studies: the Black Power/Black Arts Movement and Frantz Fanon's work. This resistance—the same, essentially, that Morrison figures in Sethe's response to Paul D—is to what Fanon and Black Power thinkers perceived to be a pervasive abjection in the historical experiences of people in the African diaspora. I am using the term abjection somewhat loosely here—it is not a term used by Fanon or Black Power thinkers, particularly—and I will discuss further later what I mean by it. In this context, the abjection describes a kind of lowering historical cloud, a judgment animating arguments and rhetoric in both currents in which the history of peoples in the African diaspora—having been conquered and enslaved and then, post-emancipation, being dominated by colonial powers or by homegrown white supremacists—is a history of humiliating defeat, a useless history which must be in some way overturned or overcome. To this way of seeing, the past is an obstacle to imagining and building an empowered political position capable of effective liberation politics.

We see an example of this attribution of abjection and its avoidance as we follow the trajectory from Fanon's essential point in Black Skin, White Masks that blackness functions in Western cultures as a repository for fears about sexuality and death—fears, in other words, about the difficulty of maintaining the boundaries of the (white male) ego, and fears about acknowledging the repressions and renunciations on which Western civilization depends. As such, blackness is an invention that accomplishes the domination of those who bear it as an identity; and for that reason, blackness (like the more dominant term in Fanon's corpus, "the native"), while it is something that, because it has been degraded under white supremacy, must be embraced and lionized as a first step, eventually needs to be
surpassed in favor of a conception of nation (which is also a conception of self) that does not depend on racial definition. Hence, Negritude—and Black Power—is insufficient and ultimately misleading for Fanon, and it partly is so because blackness is constituted by a history of abjection, and is itself a form of abjection.

This posture toward the black past has been widely identified in nearly half a century of criticism, from various quarters, of the political, ideological, sexist, and homophobic shortcomings of Black Power, black nationalism, and black cultural nationalism, and the now seemingly near-exhausted identity politics to which they gave rise. Certainly Fanon comes in for a lot of criticism as having an unsound relation to real history in his work (about which more later). As a literary scholar I have tended in my thinking about this issue to follow the line of critiques in the work of novelists such as Morrison, Gayl Jones, Ishmael Reed, Octavia Butler, and others who wrote the neo-slave-narrative novels of the late 20th century. Collectively, their fictive interventions sought to interpret the historical record in a more complicated way than it appears in Black Arts dismissals, emphasizing in their representations the wily political and personal resistance of slaves and freedmen, and demonstrating the complexities involved in coming to terms with the myriad traumas of physical and psychological violation.

Revisiting and reframing Morrison et al.'s conversation with the Black Power/Arts Movements and Fanon about how blackness is constituted and lived, I am interested in examining the abjection that makes the black past appear to be so useless (and terrifying), and which always has to be surpassed, or that, even from the overall perspective of the neo-slave-narrative writers (and this of course distorts their individual nuanced representations), has to be shown not to be solely abjection, but also to be heroism in disguise. In this reframing I am not averring that blackness is produced only as a result of traumatizing violent domination and historical defeats, but my interest is in trying to grapple further with that apparently inescapable aspect of blackness—lying coiled at its historical heart, repeated, echoed, in part through the collusion of historically produced circumstances and the practices of our collective habituated perceptions—which can be described by terms such as defeat, violation, and humiliation. Thus, insofar as Fanon's and the Black Power thinkers' misreading of history, their essential lack of historicist rigor, nevertheless touches on something that is true—that the history and experience of enslaved Africans being racialized as black and their descendants assuming a black
subjectivity does entail (and perhaps fails to contain) abjection—my questions are as follows:

If we are racialized (in part) through domination and abjection and humiliation, is there anything of value or to be learned from the experience of being defeated, humiliated, abjected? Or is this question ultimately best focused on identifying those elements of that experience, that history, which tend toward the overcoming and surpassing of domination and defeat? What can the historical, inherited experience of that enslavement and what it might have taught, conscious and unconscious, provide for us by way of useful lessons or templates?

And particularly, I want to search for the answers to these questions not from a historicist perspective—a project which would have to be governed by foundational questions such as, what was it really like for slaves or for those in the very worst grips of Jim Crow? and the like, which I do not endeavor to answer—but rather to ask, what is the potential for useful political, personal, psychological resource in racialization-through-abjection as historical legacy, as ancestral experience? How do we work with that legacy now, how do we use it to fit our own exigencies? For the inheritor of blackness who confronts it as a historical artifact marking the defeat of his ancestors and defining the obstacles to his present possibilities, can blackness-as-abjection be understood or experienced as an aspect of historical experience—a resource for the political present—that broadens and even enriches the expanse of what is human being rather than setting its limit or marking its terror-bound underside?

I seek one set of answers to these questions in what would seem to be an unpromising place: black sexuality. In a fundamental way this is a book about black sexuality as much as it is about abjection—but not, alas, in a fun way, because, as we well know, to confront the notion of a “black” “sexuality” is to run, at top speed, into the puckered but nonetheless sturdy walls of an often deforming articulation between blackness and the production of sexual expression and repression in Western societies. As Frantz Fanon elegantly dissects the matter, Negrophobia is essentially a sexual phobia, because blackness is primarily associated in Western (and Western-influenced) cultures with perverse, nonnormative sexuality. Amid such pressures, for which overdetermination seems too wan a description, those who are ushered into or assume black social positions
continually must enunciate those positions while contending with the articulation of blackness to sexuality—including, understandably, contending with it via denying its significance. To speak, then, of black sexuality is to do so unaccompanied by the pleasurable illusion of choice or self-mastery, but again to find ourselves instead with Sethe-like choices, dodging a hail of the most powerful bullets—our Kryptonite—in the arsenal that makes being black a “problem” rather than the easily assumed mantle of yet another ethnic heritage.

This often seems to be a kind of conceptual prison, which constrains liberatory and even reformatory imagination and strategizing, and certainly makes intellectually challenging, and highly fraught, any approach to the subject of black sexuality. There is of course no necessary connection between black people and sexual ex/repulsion, just as there is no definite centrality of sexuality to subjectivity or to personhood or to the “truth.” But these connections are rife, and thickly imbricated, in the stew of our cultures. As a consequence I am drawn to them rather than to the laudable attempt to surmount them. I am drawn to the lie, to find something there that might be beautiful and progressively productive for a political project of cultural reform, or a cultural project of political reform. It is entirely possible that my search for something useful in the ever-problematic construction of black sexuality risks reproducing that familiar set of false equivalencies that make, say, Isaiah Thomas’s sexual harassment case, Kobe Bryant’s rape trial, Michael Jackson’s trial for child molestation, Mike Tyson’s conviction for rape, R. Kelly’s child pornography trial, O. J. Simpson’s murder trial, and so on, the obscuring spectacles—and the consolidations of whiteness and its social and political privileges—that they are. But at the same time it seems to me that a contribution to the analysis of this articulation, and a determination to work with its obvious power to incite, as well as aiming to deconstruct and, perhaps, alter or even destroy it, is useful, and perhaps necessary.

The twinning of blackness and the sexual—the relentless, repetitive sexualization of black bodies, the blackening of sexualized bodies—also fails always fully to contain the forces that articulation works to control: eruptions occur or can be provoked. In this sense this is a book about black sexuality, but not in a direct way: as I consider black sexuality I feel, like Herbert Marcuse (to whom I look for guidance frequently in these pages), that I must consider how it is or can be a vehicle for, or the re-alization of, black freedom and power—however vexed, attenuated, and provisional those concepts must be—even though, and especially though,
deployments of notions of black sexuality are frequently the very means by which that freedom and that power are curtailed.

This is one way among several in which the concept of queerness comes to our aid—though at first only to complicate any movement toward a goal of black freedom and power. Its usefulness and its complications both stem from the way that the representation of queerness in an African American or Black Atlantic context, by drawing attention to nonnormative sexuality and sexual practices—again, an arena already obsessively linked in Western cultures with the figures of blackness and the image of the black body—might be said to create a vertiginous doubly queer register that matches, reflects, and helps constitute the well-known double-consciousness of blackness. Examining queer blackness provides opportunities to consider how the history that produces blackness is a sexual history, that is, a history of state-sanctioned, population-level manipulation of sex’s reproductive and pleasure-producing capacities. Whereas the initial political impulse animating rejections of the term queer emphasizes a liberatory dissolution of fixed boundaries between genders, sexualities, and races, the queerness of blackness entails a confrontation with the likelihood that a historical context that provided for the defiance of conventions of sexual propriety and for the relatively unpolicing expression of sexual variation—racialized slavery in the Americas—was a practice of physical and psychic domination, meant to enslave rather than liberate, to fix the human beings whose racialized bodies made the enjoyment of a certain kind of queer freedom possible in a particularly bound identity rather than release the fluid potentialities of that identity formation. As Sharon Holland remarks, the first sexual revolution occurred under the auspices of American slavery. In considering the relation between the queerness of blackness and the conception of queer freedom’s possible dependence on productions of blackness—which is in part to say, in considering the spectacularity which is blackness in American culture—we come back, then, to the scene of historical conquest and its effect, which is the defeat and subordination of the being who will be called by his conquerors and come to know himself as black.

One approach to this problematic is to identify its operation and its deleterious effects—tohistoricize the categories of blackness and black sexuality—and put forward that historicization as a means either of dissuading the powers-that-be that exploit it from continuing to do so or of prodding those who are its victims to organize politically (and psychologically) to combat it: this is a strategy aimed at diminishing, at overcoming,
the operation of this spectactularity. The pursuit of such a strategy in those realms where sexualizing black bodies and violence against black bodies go hand in hand has been in operation since at least the time of our forebear Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and the need to continue this pursuit is clear. This is, we might propose, a central strategy of the neo-slave-narrative line of critique that I noted earlier has been an initial guide to me in considering the questions of this study.

There is another strategy, too, that is less often pursued and very possibly less likely to be effective but that nonetheless may offer helpful information in carrying forward the project of resistance that informs African Americanist inquiry: to examine those deleterious effects not only for the purpose of demonstrating their injurious outcomes but to see how the effects, indeed the injuries themselves, may themselves be tools that can be used either to model or to serve as a means of political transformation (at least as we see “politics” becoming manifest in the domain of “culture”). This is another strategy we can find sometimes employed in those same neo-slave narratives, though it is subordinate, on the whole, to the former.

In this sense the frame that I am proposing here and attempting to work out avers that though sexuality is used against us, and sexualized domination is in part what makes us black, though sexuality is a mode of conquest and often cannot avoid being deployed in a field of representation without functioning as an introjection of historical defeat, it is in and through that very domination and defeat also a mapping of political potential, an access to freedom.

As I try to answer these questions, I argue that the abjection in/of blackness endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive power—indeed, what we can begin to think of as black power. This power (which is also a way of speaking of freedom) is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call identity, body, race, nation seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary. “Power” in this context thus assumes a form that seems repugnant or even nonsensical, for its conditions of appearance are defeat and violation, and thus it seems to be antithetical to the robust self-endorsement that the definition of Black Power in American political history emphasizes. Yet in the texts I read to answer this study’s set of questions, capabilities emerge through the unflinching investigation, depiction, and manipulation of an originary history of violation.
Again I want to emphasize that mine is not a historical or even a historicist project. In this book the tool of historicizing will be less important than the tools of theorizing and imagining—inventing by use of the stage set by history without attending too scrupulously to the particulars of historical incident. My aim here is not to seek the revelations of history but to emphasize that key component of the work of historical excavation that involves the construction of the past: that is, to work imaginatively with—and rework, and work over, and maybe, if we are lucky, work through—the material that history provides.

I approach the questions in my project from a couple different postures: one a literary reading of a recurring metaphor in Fanon’s work that, I argue, represents in his theory blackness in its relation to the abject; the other a derivation of theoretics about the relation between blackness, abjection, and sexuality from close reading of literary texts.

Thinking Black Abjection

*Extravagant Abjection* investigates the relation of blackness and abjection; and it examines one of the ways that blackness is rendered by the various cultural, social, and economic processes of white supremacist domination as the exemplar of nonnormative genders and sexualities. I therefore follow and expand on Fanon’s essential point in *Black Skin, White Masks* that blackness functions in Western cultures as a repository for fears about sexuality. As a particularly revelatory set of representations through which we can theorize the relation between blackness, abjection, sexuality, and power, I focus for most of the book on scenes of the sexual exploitation or humiliation of black men—some violent and explicit, some largely metaphorical—in novels and essays written by canonical African American authors in the 20th century. With such a focus, *Extravagant Abjection* proposes a queer reading of various literary assays of the existential condition of blackness, ways of thinking about how blackness is queer.

Metaphorical references to or depictions of sexual exploitation in texts by the writers James Weldon Johnson, Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka, and Samuel R. Delany seem generally to present themselves for shock value, hyperbolically representing the outrage of racist practices as an assault on what in Western culture stands as the paradigmatic trope of citizenship and of the achievement of willed autonomy: the inviolable masculine body. The shock of these depictions of course draws on the longstanding
conflation between the identity of the race and manhood that black feminist scholars have criticized, and it also draws from the well of homophobic disgust at sexual contact between men. I treat the figure of male rape in African American literature as a symptom of this conflation and homophobia, but also as a device that helps us understand the ways that gender informs blackness—especially where blackness becomes a mode of or figure for abjection. I also posit the figure as a representational strategy for productively working through or with the history of abjection that underpins and in part constitutes blackness.

If representing black male characters being sexually humiliated or violated is effective on a visceral level only because the measure of autonomous or free selfhood is really masculinity, and the Other of the masculine is feminine, such a set of basic assumptions generally tends toward either a defense of masculinity through the disavowal of the feminine (as exemplified by a writer such as Baraka, but even, more equivocally, by Morrison) or some kind of avowal of the feminine as the model of an abject consciousness, of powerlessness. In contrast to both those trajectories, my reading of these scenes contends that despite being hedged about or even permeated by such repressive and regressive political strategies, these fictional representations attempt to bring into history (albeit fictionalized history) rape of men by other men as a means of racial domination. They name rape as a sexual trauma that produces racial identity, but they also move beyond this recognition to suggest that this historical subjugation endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive black power.

Extravagant Abjection thus attempts to delineate some of the capabilities of blackness in its abjection by using the figure of male rape to disarticulate blackness from its quest for successful masculinity. I argue first that these capabilities center around the figure’s usefulness for dramatizing or actualizing alternatives to linear temporality: such alternative temporalities arise largely in the temporal paradox that characterizes trauma (in which the trauma patient may recall the traumatizing event in literal detail but, failing to have understood it or to have been conscious of it at the time of its occurrence, loses access to it in the mode of narrative memory). I argue that this paradox, typically understood as one of the indicia of psychic dis-ease and debility, in the context of black abjection provides a resource for representing—and to some extent, achieving, if only by expansions of a reader’s consciousness—a liberating escape from linear time. I base this part of my analysis on Marcuse’s argument that the perception of time as linear is an important element of internalized self-defeat, which authority
regularly exploits. The male rape figure as a way to represent an alternative relationship to linear time also arises in a simpler and perhaps more familiar way, through acts of literary imagination that actively attempt to rewrite the past. The twist here—and the bridge to what I am identifying as the second arena of capabilities inhering in black abjection—is that the text I take to do this work of imaginative revision of the past in the most useful fashion, Delany’s *The Mad Man*, is an explicitly pornographic literary novel that aims to arouse readers sexually (i.e., at once bodily and psychically) precisely through its evocation of the history of blackness constituted through abjection.

The second arena of capabilities of blackness in its abject aspect, then, centers on the male rape figure as a mode for African American writers to represent and/or produce pleasure from fantasized identification with violated ancestors. This is an idea of pleasure I will want us to understand in the manner of paradox: both in its commonsense meaning, in the meaning attached to it through its association with sensuality and sexuality, and at the same time in a way analogous to Sethe’s not-choice—that is, framed by the history of violation and humiliation that underpins blackness and crafted from the very material of that inherited trauma. Pleasure found in narrative manipulations of the male rape figure also owes a great deal to that aspect of abject experience that psychoanalytic critics such as Julia Kristeva have described, in which normative gender and sexuality are (however momentarily) not yet defined, and therefore in abjection gender and sexuality appear as a range of limited though significant possibility. In sum, representations of the sexual exploitation of men as part of the historical trauma that in part produces blackness operate in the texts as almost therapeutic enactment, allowing reconceptions of a racial identity paradoxically enriched, even empowered, by the suffering that constitutes it and that it psychically repeats.

In making this argument I will also be pushing it further, though I am not choosing to make these implications the central point or the teleological end of this inquiry: blackness in abjection, blackness as one of the go-to figures for referencing the abject, grants us a vantage point for viewing the movement, direction, and inchoate shapes that characterize or arise from the fluid potentialities of subjectivity formation itself—despite, and because of, the various cultural, economic, and political operations aimed at producing blackness as fixed and objective. The possibilities or capabilities I find in blackness-in-and-as-abjection emerge out of the subjugation (at once past and present, material and discursive) that makes a
black subjectivity possible. But these possibilities and capabilities are not only related to blackness and not only inherent to the subjects to whom the category of black is applied: they are powers of human consciousness which can operate on both the individual and the collective level: existential powers in a sense. What makes them black is partly the vantage point from which I choose to view these powers—but in larger part because the choice of perspective from which to view them is really a Sethe-like choice, determined by my—by our, retaining that definition of “us” with which I opened—inescapable relation to the history of racialized slavery and racial segregation in the Americas. That history and the relation to it of those of us who hold (or are forced to hold) it as a legacy, and those of us who live in and as black bodies, allows us to perceive somewhat more clearly the properties of embodied alienation than those who are unconscious of that legacy and/or living in racially unmarked or “white” bodies. But the alienation of an embodied consciousness is common to all humans. Blackness is nonetheless in the Americas one (but only one, among the brethren of racially marked bodies) of the primary means to access that alienation and its (perhaps surprising) powers.

That the unpromising—black abjection, black sexuality—should be the pathway along which to quest for the promise of power and freedom is, admittedly, something of a backward approach. The governing notion of this inquiry is to explore the counterintuitive, to sidestep the compelling sense of Sethe’s reasoning—and thus, perhaps, to step sideways around the limits of her impossible decision and around the habituated perception of narrow, dire options that what she represents bequeaths us.

Thus, my method of analysis is often to read vigorously against the grain. This is because the body-psyche nexus wherein I find the relation between blackness and abjection to be experientially lived, as well as the various qualities the relation of blackness and abjection might be said to possess, enter representation vexed by particular challenges: they do not so much defy or resist narrative as simply pose a problem for narrative machinery, because the marvelous fictions of I, self, linear temporality, or coherent perspective on which narrative usually depends are in the state of abjection awash in those fictions’ opposites, their negations and what is in excess of them. Extravagant Abjection proposes that we can see this nexus, and gain access both to it and its powers, as they are represented
textually in the metaphor of muscle tension (in Fanon), in a lynching scene (in Johnson), and in narrative scenes of the sexual violation of black men (in Morrison, Baraka, and Delany). Nevertheless, the toolbox of the literary and theoretical that I employ often will seem, both for characters within the given fictional domain and for readers, to represent blackness-in/as-abjection through frustratingly elusive strategies of indirection. These strategies—paradox rather than straightforwardness, suggestion rather than direction—call attention to and even seem to wallow flamboyantly in the essential indirection which is symbolic activity itself: what the characters either cannot or do not say in the case of Johnson’s and Morrison’s novels, what readers refuse to read in Morrison’s novel or what Black Arts/Black Power readers of Fanon skip over, what appears in Fanon’s text as only peripheral, metaphorical, or seemingly throwaway rhetorical figures, and what is condemned or disavowed but appears as parenthetical pleasures or inarticulate screams in Baraka. These indirections are, however, necessary aspects of an investigation conducted along counterintuitive lines, and I believe they are the best devices by which power and freedom that inhere in the abjection of blackness can be described.

Sex, Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, and Black Abjection

I would like to discuss further here what I mean when I use the term abjection. As I noted earlier, initially in this book the abject has a somewhat flexible definition, because I am deriving its content from its peripheral evocation, the echo of its denied, transcended, or overcome presence, in the texts, while at the same time I assert that its appearance is highly salient. At first as I work with the concept, abjection largely denotes what my first theorist, Fanon, attributes to the defeat suffered by African peoples in a distant past, a past from which we as their descendants are at once thoroughly cut off and yet bound to, in the persistence of the economic and political systems and their cultural concomitants that resulted from ancestral failure. As I move forward in my analysis the abject takes on a more distinct profile and begins to depend for illumination on Julia Kristeva, the theorist who has made the term applicable to what Fanon is peripherally describing. Kristeva’s psychoanalytic (and thus all-too-typically deracinated) account of abjection has many facets; one that I take up is that abjection is a universal experience in the developmental trajectory of the subject, which can be observed in phobic and borderline patients.
Abjection establishes itself in the development of subject-object relations: the subject is produced by relation with objects, as the two mutually bring one another into being. Abjection is experienced in the realm where the development of object relations is delayed or strays—thus preventing, even if only transiently, the subject from making its “normal” appearance. Abjection is part of the process of becoming a subject—which is to say it is part of the process of encountering language (the Name of the Father).

But almost precisely due to the usefulness of Kristeva’s definition, the object of my analysis remains necessarily shadowy. For to enunciate the properties of abjection from the standpoint of critical knowledge—even critical knowledge that maintains in the forefront its orientation toward discovery rather than argumentation, as I wish to do here—is to alter the object that is defined and constituted by the fact that it slips over the active ramparts of ego and “I” and, thus, of knowing and asserting. Often this abject is understood by the writers I work with as an affront to personhood, an experience of terrible suffering. But while this affront and this suffering cannot be avoided, what my reading suggests is that within the black abject—within human abjection as represented and lived in the experience of being-black, of blackness—we may find that the zone of self or personhood extends into realms where we would not ordinarily perceive its presence; and that suffering seems, at some level or at some far-flung contact point, to merge into something like ability, like power (and certainly, like pleasure) without losing or denying what it is to suffer. As I explore this latter account of abjection, the concept is particularly well described as an aspect of sexuality and sexual pleasure. Abjection as it finally takes shape in Extravagant Abjection is a term that speaks to various states of apparent and real disempowerment—which is in a sense to brush off and look again at a somewhat hoary concept, popular in the 1980s and sucked up into the vacuum bags of corporate workforce-management diversity seminars, but which, with its origins precisely in the power-seizing politics of 1960s movements, is what I am groping for here.

My use of the term abjection clearly owes a great deal to iterations of the concept in queer theory. As I have said, Extravagant Abjection performs queer readings of various literary assays of blackness and in this way is an example of ways of thinking about how blackness is queer. It thus broadly engages with works in the emerging field of black queer studies such as Siobhan Somerville’s Queering the Color Line (2000), Robert Reid-Pharr’s Black Gay Man (2001), Roderick Ferguson’s Aberrations in Black (2004), and E. Patrick Johnson’s collection Black Queer Studies (2005),
and more broadly still, with such classics in queer theorizations as Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and Leo Bersani’s *Hemos* (1995) and his essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987). The mutually defining relation between blackness and queerness is, however, an effect, or a secondary step, in the development of my argument, which is principally aimed at theorizing blackness-in/as-abjection and discovers queer sexuality as an element of that abject state and as a strategy and capability for working with that abjection. These studies provide important direction for my project, but they generally do not focus on the way blackness is founded and maintained in a historical and psychic defeat as a primary matter, nor do they explore in depth representations of black men’s sexual humiliation and humiliation as the source of racialization. My project actually links these studies of black queerness to defining texts in African American literary-informed theory, such as Hortense J. Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby/Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987) and Abdul JanMohamed’s *The Death-Bound-Subject* (2005), which examine disempowered modes associated with black history such as loss of gendering under slavery or the immanent threat of death in lynching and illuminate the political possibilities those devastations enable. Spillers’s essay in particular proposes a series of key formulations regarding the nonnormative operation of gender in African American contexts that informs this book. Still, whereas these latter texts do not fully elaborate on queerness as an element of and response to such disempowerment, *Extravagant Abjection* does so.

A recent work, Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* (2006), like my project bridges the investigations of black queerness and disempowered modalities; it posits the embrace of shame as central to the confluence of black and gay identities and their politically radical potential. Stockton’s investigation of shame considers the relation between blackness, abjection, and queer sexuality as *Extravagant Abjection* does, though she tends to take up the term *abjection* in a way consistent with its deployment in much other work in the field (in Butler, for example, and in Reid-Pharr). There the use of *abjection* follows another of Kristeva’s accounts of it, this one emphasizing the processes of exclusion and boundary setting that are components of subject formation: as in Kristeva’s mapping of the development of subjectivity, this use of the term *abjection* describes how the (always incomplete and at-risk) achievement of an identity depends on certain objects-to-be (such as phobogenic elements or the feminine body or excrement) becoming reviled and cast off in order to consolidate the subject, which thereby becomes not only itself
or a self according to its idealized definitions but "clean" and defended—while retaining an attraction and repulsion relationship to what is abjected. This process reflects and is reflected by social boundaries between races, genders, and sexualities. In queer usages of abjection, generally we begin with the inescapable slippage across necessarily porous but desperately defended boundaries: the boundary between the ego and what it excludes in order to constitute itself (the female excluded—abjected—to make the male, the homosexual to make the heterosexual). This formulation of abjection (boundaries and exclusion, the abject as what is abjected) underlies my own uses of it.

Stockton’s Beautiful Bottom considers some of these same questions I do, though using different terms and, as it happens, reaching a set of answers that, though hers and mine are, I think, complementary, differ in particular content and overall emphasis. The shame she emphasizes is related to what I am calling abjection in the way that Stockton says debasement relates to the ultimate aim of her book: for her, debasement is an “informant” concerning the links between black and queer signs (and black and queer communities). For me, affective states, and even processes of identification, are “informants” concerning black abjection and its powers. I am not seeking here the links between “black” and “queer”—I am largely assuming those links by piggybacking on the work (like Stockton’s) that has come before mine.

For my project abjection is a way of describing an experience, an inherited (psychically introjected) historical legacy, and a social condition defined and underlined by a defeat. Extravagant Abjection utilizes but does not focus on mapping the crucial process of the back and forth between the binary poles that make meaning, or on making visible the essential fluidity of, and connection between, politicized identities. The proposal here is that black people have had to be inside, as it were, abjection, have had to embody it and to be it in the lack of command of their embodiment that becoming black decrees; they have had to do this, be this, and survived, after a fashion, giving rise to the questions: What then is that fashion of survival? What are the elements of that survival in abjection, or as abjection? Though I therefore necessarily utilize terms and ideas from psychoanalytic theory and from the history of black politics—both of which concern themselves with formulations of identity—my argument does not so much aim to delineate aspects of black/queer identities or to trace the operation of negative affects or emotions in the production of political performance or personae. Rather, my hope here is to reform and revivify
an element of what has been called—and, with transformed meanings, I
would call again—black nationalist thought, in which my final object is to
suggest not a set of identity-positions or identity-performances but a set
of capabilities and potential strategies for experiencing or seizing—and
above all, for redefining—power that the social construction of blackness
makes possible.

As a related matter, I want to flag another conversation into which Extrava-
gant Abjection enters: though this is a general study of the powers in
abjection where it is the historical legacy and lived present of blackness, I
focus on readings of fictions involving male characters and on an abstract
human proposed by the likes of Fanon and Maurice Merleau-Ponty that,
like its counterparts in the vast majority of Western philosophy, is by and
large imagined as male. The maleness of these literary and theoretical fig-
ures for blackness is of course not incidental: Fanon’s black everyman en-
snared in epidermal schemas and James Weldon Johnson’s Ex-Coloured
Man both become representations of a certain persuasive power because
of the longstanding phallocentric confla- tion between the identity of the
race and manhood—a conflation that black feminist criticism has exposed
and worked hard to diestabilish.7 My purpose in this selection of figures
is not to repeat that conflation uncritically but rather to work with a cogni-
zance of the ways that gender always informs blackness in its relation to
abjection. I aim to employ the tools that arise from black feminist criti-
cism as the means to show how the powers in abjection become revealed
precisely as the disarticulation of masculine privileges and postures from
blackness.

The accomplishment of this purpose is especially tricky where this dis-
articulation is effected in the particular example of writers elucidating as
(black) power the pleasure produced by representations that invite identi-
fication with (sexually) humiliated or violated ancestors, or with sexual
violence as the legacy of racialization. Focusing on such scenes, one po-
tential complication is that my argument will buttress the assumption, of-
ten enough shared by black feminist work as well as by more traditionally
masculinist African Americanist criticism, that for black people in general,
but black men in particular, the abject is like the feminine, or is definitively
feminine—that is, to be abject is to be feminized. Again, to represent black
male characters being sexually humiliated or violated is arguably effective
on a visceral level only because the measure of autonomous or free selfhood is really masculinity, and the Other of the masculine is feminine.

Regarding these complications, then, *Extravagant Abjection* necessarily draws on work in African American feminist and gay criticism that exposes the contradictions and instability of the black masculine figure (and black male subjectivity). In this body of work, the de rigueur application of the concept of double-consciousness to objects of knowledge assigned to the category of “black,” “male,” and “African American” generally finds the “black male” to be a self-contradicting and self-reinforcing position at once hypermasculine and feminine, exemplifying an erection/castration paradox. In this black male figure gender appears both in its idealized form (if extremely so) and in gender’s undoing, and therefore in the revelation of gender’s basic plasticity; correspondingly in this figure gender cannot have meaning without a clarified racial marker, and in this figure sexuality exists almost purely—but never truly so—as the excess, the feared, indicator of and movement toward that state of undifferentiation in which linguistic categories of knowing and communication (and thus, of course, of identity) are momentarily without ballast, in crisis. My project engages especially with the latter dimension which scholarship has shown to be a constituent of the black male cultural figure, and thus it follows publications such as Philip Brian Harper’s *Are We Not Men?* (1996), Maurice O. Wallace’s *Constructing the Black Masculine* (2002), and especially Lee Edelman’s *Homographesis* (1994), which demonstrates how literary representations of blackness frequently attempt to manage the challenging fact that racialization is accomplished through subjugation by containing or marginalizing threats of penetration to black male figures in the texts.

In reading representations of violations and humiliations in various scenes, I refer to the abject as accessing gender in a state of relative undifferentiation, gender as (however momentarily) not-yet-defined. This positioning of gender possibility—possibilities which are impossible within the epistemes structured by the perceptual requisites and mechanisms that underpin the ego—needs to show itself as not-masculine. But this does not mean that it is necessarily feminine, or only feminine, merely that it cannot be narrated except as the negation of what it exceeds or overruns—all of which is to say that it participates in the prevailing paradoxical logic in operation throughout this book. The delineation of vexed masculinity, then, is, like queer uses of abjection and the various linkages between blackness and queerness, not my focus; rather, vexed masculinity is one of this study’s privileged modes for the expression of the power of abject blackness.
The abject as a mode of working with blackness need not necessarily privilege masculinity, vexed or otherwise, nor need it center male actors, subjects, or characters—though this study does both. It does both because it originates in a conversation with work in the fields of gay male and black queer studies, and with the study of black masculinity having its origins in black feminist critiques of masculinism, and also because of the usual essentially arbitrary limitations on project conceptualization (an arbitrariness that cannot but betray a masculinist tilt on my part, at least with regard to this project).

It bears noting, however, that we do not have to focus on vexed masculinity in addressing this subject because, again, the abject and the feminine as the penetrated or violable are cotravelers and overlap: From that vantage point the masculine as the site of black abjection thus might only be the “hard” case in terms of gender norms, and the “easy” case in terms of finding power in the context of black abjection. Women or female characters, in other words, may be too easily shown to have a relation to the abject—this risks simply underlining the structure resulting from the production of normative gender—and thus may be harder to affirm as evincing some form of power in abjection. Where the abject is always something to be resisted and overcome for nationalist politics, and where feminist politics labors to establish a human dignity for women that does not enforce the definition of the feminine as the abject—there it is possible that male privilege, the effect of male domination that permits men to invest in the fantasy that they have no essential relation to the abject, makes abjection something that can be consciously entered into, “played” with, manipulated: which is not to say that women cannot manipulate or play with abjection but that where women do so the political ramifications may more easily appear to be a confirmation of the defeat with which abjection works rather than a complication of it. Of course such a proposition risks distorting matters in the very ways that this study is meant to challenge, for both the “hard case” and “easy case” formulations presume the definitions of masculinility on which a masculinist ideology insists (i.e., precisely that to be or act masculine is to be or act with a kind of performative “strength” which does not permit or admit defeat and violation). Even if we can avoid this trap by insisting at every step that the abject is not definitively feminine, and that there is an abjection that men or male characters can experience or be represented in relation to that is only characterized as “feminized” from a male supremacist or misogynist point of view, it is nonetheless just possible that the working with abjection I describe in this
book is, in some way, more easily recognized in its political implications where men are concerned, precisely because such working does not confirm a prevailing cultural definition of masculinity or femininity. This is a question I can flag but only answer suggestively, not definitively, due to the limitations—self-imposed, admittedly—of this study.

I engage this matter throughout the main text.

Extravagant Abjection’s conceptual foundation follows Fanon’s essential point in Black Skin, White Masks (1952) that blackness is rendered by the various cultural, social, and economic processes of white supremacist domination as the exemplar of nonnormative genders and sexualities. My deep investment in utilizing aspects of Fanon’s theorizations of blackness puts this project into conversation with various contemporary interlocutors of Fanon, especially Ato Sekyi-Otu (Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience, 1996), as well as with essays by Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Ronald A. T. Judy, and Lou Turner (many, though not all of the essays with which I engage, are collected in Fanon: A Critical Reader, published in 1996 and edited by Gordon). This group of scholars has been identified with a development in the study of Fanon that aims to plumb the entirety of Fanon’s published work, in order to, as Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting, and Renee T. White put it, “work with and through Fanon,” taking him as a guide for the development of original theoretical projects “across the entire sphere of human studies.” These scholars’ work to some extent counters—or at least positions as inadequate—analyses associated with literary critics such as Homi Bhabha that were primarily focused on Black Skin, White Masks and were animated by the need to theorize the complexities of postcolonial subjection and subjectivities, and to find a signal theoretical text—deemed to be sorely lacking elsewhere—that rigorously assumes and proves the mutually constitutive relation between race, gender, and sexuality. My own project is positioned between these two groupings of Fanon study, in that I am beginning with Black Skin, White Masks’s conclusions regarding the relationships between race, gender, and sexuality as my assumptions and engaging with the broad palette of Fanon’s publications in order to find guidance concerning blackness and abjection. The bulk of my engagement with Fanon’s texts is with The Wretched of the Earth (1961) and essays collected in A Dying Colonialism (1959) and Toward the African Revolution (1964)—yet, further illustrating the
confluence of the two sometimes disparate schools of Fanon study in this project, I use the instrument provided by my training, literary analysis, in order to derive theoretics for the relation between blackness and abjection, because in these particular texts Fanon discusses both blackness and abjection largely by implication, or through the deployment of metaphorical figures. The attempt to derive these theoretics also puts me into conversation with those who have read Fanon as black feminist and black queer critics, such as Spillers, bell hooks, Francoise Verges, and Kobena Mercer. Their engagements with Fanon (some of which are collected in another 1996 anthology, The Fact of Blackness) inform my working with and through Fanon, as well.

Hortense Spillers's name in the foregoing list is an important pivot turning us toward the consideration of another of the fields with which this project engages: the field studying psychoanalysis or psychoanalytically informed concepts in African American and Afro-Diasporic contexts. Spillers's essay "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race" (1996), along with others collected in Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen's Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism (1997), are texts that have done the crucial work of clearing the ground for the use of psychoanalysis in African Americanist criticism—a critical application that has been for various, and variously persuasive, reasons assailed as inappropriate to its object. I do not wish here to rehearse this controversy or to engage directly with doubts about this usage, but rather firmly to locate myself in the clearing provided by these feminist elders, as I work my way primarily through Fanon and thus to some extent, by necessity, through Freud and Lacan, and then by choice through psychoanalytic critics such as Julia Kristeva and Herbert Marcuse. In this respect my project's engagement with the field of psychoanalysis in African American contexts also participates in the field of the study of psychoanalytics and racial formation. Works such as David Eng's Racial Castration (2001) and Anne Anlin Cheng's The Melancholy of Race (2001) argue that a kind of "racial melancholia" and its attendant processes are core elements in the identifications that produce Asian American subjects—and, by extension, of racialized American and hyphenated-American subjects generally (the latter is especially true of Cheng's work, since she balances portions of her arguments on accounts of racial formation drawn from African American texts). These descriptions of how racial formation occurs through or along with ostensibly debilitating psychological processes, and the authors'
determination to demonstrate the ways these apparent debilitations also open up politically useful ways of seeing and/or performing and living as racialized subjects—lines of argument that also can be said to take up psychoanalytically informed inquiries into the operation of identification processes along the axes of gender, race, and sexuality that are explored in Butler’s analysis of Nella Larsen in *Bodies That Matter* and in Diana Fuss’s *Identification Papers* (1995)—are, to my mind, important models and sister texts for my own inquiry, in which humiliation and those processes attendant on the psychoanalytic abject are central to my understanding of blackness.

As I have said, the ultimate trajectory of the individual experiences and cultural associations and meanings I hope to illuminate by use of the term abjection is toward something I can call power. Power is of course an even more complex—and more contested—term than abjection. Per Lewis Gordon,

Power is a term that is not often clarified these days in the academy... Most often... it is Foucault’s use of the term that is presumed, as if his formulations were the be-all and end-all of discourses on power. We should, however, remember that power emerges in the thought of such thinkers as Hegel as a function of dialectic opposition of consciousness and recognition; Marx, as ownership over the means of production; Gramsci as hegemony; Hannah Arendt, as uncoerced exchange in a public sphere the emergence of which are deeds of glory; Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt, as legitimate force, which is issued only by the sovereign or the state; and Elias Canetti, as the godlike range of actions that transcend those locked under its grips as mere mortals.¹⁰

I am not certain that *Extravagant Abjection’s* contribution will prove to be any clearer than the vagueness that Gordon indicts, but as a general matter I seek here to trouble the notion of power: I want to theorize that which is not-power according to the ego-dependent, ego-centric (and masculine and white) “I” definitions we have of power, but which is some kind of power if by power we mean only ability, the capacity for action and creation in one or several spheres, be they internal or external to the empowered.
Power in my usage will sometimes slip over into freedom, and both will be bound up a great deal with indeterminacy—at which the reader may raise reasonable objections. Mere indeterminacy is not freedom or power, it may justly be said; but the effort in these pages will be to show that in a context where overdetermination is the hallmark of the figure of blackness, the presentation of or the access to the indeterminate bears a potency worth reckoning. Drawing on Fanon's discussions (as well as on Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's and thus on existential philosophy and psychology), indeterminacy appears as an essential descriptive element of the operation of human consciousness and thus perhaps the foundation—if not, to push it further, the breadth and the limit—of what power and freedom for humans (as opposed to for systems or for imagined divines) can be—and, I argue, blackness can get us there.

From this point of view, greater attention ought to be accorded to the "mere" that describes indeterminacy; it is indeed a gossamer mere when measured against the near absolutes of historical events and extant institutions, but a mere that we ought to see as having recognizable strength when measured against our existential conditions. While the achievement of something we can see as a "real" material, wide-ranging freedom or power—because it looks enough like the operation of institutions in the present and the past—is certainly a good goal for progressive and radical politics, do we only recognize freedom or power when they approach the direction of infinity on the asymptotic curve? I say not. Thus, power here appears against the grain, provisional and to some degree slippery and suggestive—literary, a form of knowledge making contiguous and simultaneously apparently disparate, temporally separate constituent elements—exactly because our definitions of power (again, bound to gender position, bound to racial position) obscure even the possibility of its existence. I am wagering that it—it this set of abilities, powers—does exist, however.

Black Abjects

In chapter 1, "Fanon's Muscles: (Black) Power Revisited," I interpret the argument that Frantz Fanon makes throughout his corpus that blackness (as well as nativity) is an invented racial category created by the enslavers of Africans. The implication of Fanon's argument is that a clear-sighted examination of the "fact of blackness" yields larger truths about the human psyche and about how liberation from Western oppression can be
achieved. Fanon rejects the notion of ontogeny for sociogeny, arguing that all the elements of the human being are created in the social world, essentially without fundamental attributes. This is demonstrated by the fact that each black person can, through a traumatic encounter with the blackness that his societal indoctrination has taught him to hold in contempt, become conscious of the imposition of blackness upon him. The black person can identify the source of his self-division, his internalized self-defeat. That which is fully internal to the nonblack or nonnative, especially those persons securely identified with a given dominant culture, and which remains obscure without the revelation of analysis or art, becomes external in the conscious black person. Thus, one can see through the invented prism of blackness both the deprivation on which the person in Western civilization is created and the possibilities for the transformation of that person—and the first step in the process of coming to this consciousness involves working through an experience of trauma (a forced recognition of his blackness).

The chapter unfolds the ramifications of Fanon’s sociogenic understanding of blackness in order to uncover what, in the process of being made black, of being blackened, can be seen to evince the power, pleasures, and freedom that blackness was created to deny its bearers. Glimpses of that power begin from Fanon’s “mirage of muscle power,” which appears in several of his texts as a recurring metaphor, “tensed muscles.” Fanon repeatedly employs “tensed muscles” to represent an unconscious recognition of the colonizer’s manifold injustices, a way in which the colonized knows and resists his historical subjugation; and the state of muscle tension or contraction simultaneously is the transitional precursor state to revolutionary action. This tension is represented as physical, but its full dimensions are psychic; and its form of knowledge is not fully intellectual because it inheres in a nexus between bodily sensation and perception, and in the structure of consciousness itself. Thus, “tensed muscles” represent a form of bodily (un)knowing that recognizes its existence in a history of defeat while instancing its unconscious preparation to meet and resist that defeat. Chapter 1 then considers the possibilities latent in this stance by referencing the existentialist (Jean-Paul Sartre), phenomenological (Maurice Merleau-Ponty), and psychoanalytic (Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva) tenets that inform or parallel it: temporal dispersal, anonymous existence, double-bodiedness, vertigo, trauma, abjection. What each of these (anti) concepts share is a nonconscious, nonunified, and dispersed relation to selfhood, action, or change in which the ego is not defended. Thus, in
reading the metaphor of tensed muscles of the black/native, I make a set of conceptual moves, a number of which I enunciate in the terms of the existential philosophy and existential psychology with which Fanon is in conversation. I find gestural and postural possibilities, which loop (rather than align or stick on a pyramid) the past, present, and future, an approach to time that I call interarticulated temporality; a state of death-in-life and life-in-death characteristic of the paradox of a being that experiences utter defeat yet that is not fully defeated; a “lack” that is nonetheless not a void and that refers the native/black back to anonymous existence, to indeterminacy and a kind of freedom in the form of anguish and vertigo, as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty defines these terms: a vertigo appropriate to the (non) subject—that is, object in the world—both imprisoned in this highly attenuated freedom and yet free in imprisonment.

In chapter 2, “A Race That Could Be So Dealt With: Terror, Time, and (Black) Power,” I link the terms I derive from what is essentially a literary reading of Fanon's mid-20th-century theoretical and activist texts to an attempt to derive theory from a literary scene of lynching in a novel of the early 20th century. James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912) is the only text I examine that was not written in the latter part of the century, but its temporal position pre-Fanon demonstrates the usefulness of reading African American texts through psychoanalytically informed theories of liberatory processes. The biracial narrator of the novel confirms Fanon’s observations when he decides to reject the possibility of adopting a black identity. For most of the novel the narrator struggles, mostly unconsciously, with both a racial and (as other critics have pointed out) a sexual ambiguity that in some ways makes him a paradigmatic American subject, both tortured and invigorated by the opportunity of creating an identity of his own choosing. But when he witnesses a terrible lynching of a black man he decides to become “ex-colored”—in essence, white. This lynching bears the connotations of a kind of rape, not only because of the savage interest the lynchers display in dismembering the black man’s body but because of the narrator’s own subtly sexualized regard for the white male lynchers. The narrator’s experience identifies a specific aspect of racialized trauma. The trauma that he experiences is entirely bound up in his perception of the lynching as a collective injury—indeed, a collective annihilation. His trauma lies in his intense imagination of connection to “a race that could be so dealt with.” The lynching thus becomes a kind of primal scene for the narrator in which the violent, and sexually violent, elements of the relation between whiteness and blackness
are revealed; he looks directly at the construction of blackness but can only read it as humiliation and defeat, so he abandons it—and in so doing abandons an opportunity of self-making, of taking the reins of Fanon’s sociogenic power, that an acceptance of abject blackness would enable.

The chapter focuses on how the representation of the Ex-Coloured Man’s traumatic response to the lynching he witnesses enacts one of the chief symptoms, and puissant forms, of the black power explicated in chapter 1: temporal dispersal, hostility toward, as Fanon describes it, “conformity to the categories of time.”12 Though the novel is designed as a narrative of failure in many senses, peripheral suggestions of actions alternative to those the narrator chooses emerge in the miscegenation with which the novel concludes—this miscegenation is at once denied (the Ex-Coloured Man passes as white) and affirmed (not only because he is a once-colored man but also through his desire for his white wife’s desire for his black boyhood friend, Shiny)—possibilities that, if consciously embraced, would position the Ex-Coloured Man as a kind of race- and family-terrorist.

Chapter 3, “Slavery, Rape, and the Black Male Abject,” concludes the set of readings in which I am attempting to derive a theoretics of the relation between blackness and abjection and provides the bridge into considerations of male rape thesmatics as a specific representation of that relation. Toni Morrison’s Paul D, a secondary character in Beloved (1987), like all the members of the household in the novel, has to confront the active, living past in the person of the corporeal ghost Beloved. Paul D’s sexual relationship with the ghost and the consequences of this liaison for his relationship with Sethe hinge on his working through the mostly repressed memory of his sexual violation while laboring on a chain gang. Chapter 3 thus intensifies the sexual nature of the paradigmatic scene of conquest and defeat and portrays a less-failed, though similarly riven, male survivor than the Ex-Coloured Man. Foregrounding Paul D’s traumatized re-membering of the experience of “breakfast” (forced fellatio) on the chain gang, I explore alternate possibilities for the figure of black manhood that evin tuate from the scene and its highly elliptical rendering. The scene troubles the dominant trope of black masculinity, “emasculatíon” (the parallel to “rape of black women”) by attributing emasculation to the rape of men by other men. Its mode of rendering figures at once the sexual exploitation of men and silence about it—a silence enforced by the anger and disbelief that black audiences manifest toward this scene and that suggests that the horror the scene seems to provoke also signals a repressed memory.
of homoerotic domination. Paul D’s road to healing, then, in embracing abjection in his quest to define “manhood,” opens other, less-defended modes of being male in the world.

The homophobia implicit in Seth’s and Paul D’s refusal to explore the homosexual implications of his sexual humiliation on the chain gang is both addressed and redressed in this book’s final two chapters, where Extravagant Abjection transitions from a meditation on the abject in Fanon’s “tensed muscles” metaphor to use another, not unrelated metaphor: the bottom. I use bottom to signify the nadir of a hierarchy (a political position possibly abject) and as a sexual position: the one involving coercion and historical and present realities of conquest, enslavement, domination, cruelty, torture, and so on, the other involving sexualized or erotic consent/ploy which references the elements of the former. The connection between the two meanings of bottom (1) shows the correlation between scenes of blackening and of rape and homosexuality, (2) investigates the nature of the black power inherent in such (ostensible) forms of pain and abjection, and (3) ventures the question of the kinds of pleasure that might inhere even in such experiences. I mark the transition between these two metaphors—the first, broadly speaking, abstract and theoretical, the second, exemplary and unfolded in narrative—with a discussion of the various questions and troubled terms that emerge in the encounter between the concepts of blackness-in/as-abjection and queerness.

In particular I gloss the possibilities and problems of using the term pleasure in the context of racialized abjection. I discuss how pleasure here must be understood in a manner analogous to the way Spillers suggests the term could be productively applied to the experience of our enslaved ancestors, which is to say, in a way requiring us continually to turn our attention to a markedly different set of referents and meanings—different though, here and there, overlapping—from those to which our ordinary (and perhaps even our psychoanalytically informed) notions of pleasure direct us. This is a pleasure that at once depends on an at least amoral and perhaps immoral use of the history, and memory, of ancestral suffering, and that simultaneously attempts to maintain that use as an empathetic form of identification and as an ethics derived from such identification: pleasure that emerges through both a voyeuristic, even prurient appropriation of ancestral scenes of suffering and a potentially transformative refusal to obtain protective distance from such scenes.

In these introductory notes prior to the final chapters, I also show that though such familiar (if nevertheless endlessly fascinating and near
limitless) terms as *masochism* and *castration* overlay, overlap, and even partly describe the relation between blackness and abjection, and the powers that inhere in that relation, these do not fully encompass that relation and those powers, adequately name them, or exhaust them.

Chapter 4, "The Occupied Territory: Homosexuality and History in Amiri Baraka's Black Arts," focuses primarily on Black Arts Movement intellectual LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and his semi-autobiographical novel *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965) and essays that appear in the collection *Home* (1966). It also engages with Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968). Jones/Baraka and Cleaver enthusiastically endorse Norman Mailer's valorization of black men as the authentic avatars of the socially and politically radical "moral bottom" in his notorious essay "The White Negro" (1959). Extending Mailer's reversal of the traditional white-over-black hierarchy, Jones and Cleaver cathex the moral-bottom superiority of blackness in the despised figure of the black male rapist. Jones and Cleaver frequently use rape (and analogized acts of sexual or sexualized domination), especially interracial rape, as an arguably "queer" political trope—queer insofar as the black male rapist figure is relished precisely for its nonnormativity (in the form of its violence and perversity), its putative defiance of the ruling powers' designated boundaries. For them, rape gestures explicitly or implicitly toward the experience of slavery and viscerally represents the historical injustice of white supremacist practices. Rape is their metaphor of choice both for the historical crime committed against black people and for the fantasy of racial revenge. Thus, rape—and the perverse, violent, queer sexuality that rape is drafted to represent—is presented as historically constitutive of the political and existential condition of blackness. But Jones's and Cleaver's macho attempt to incite rage and to rally against the external enemy—to erect the protections of the masculine ego—forces them to discard the most radical and humanist elements of blackness that Fanon identifies: the characters (and/or the narrative authority) often accede to an ostensibly liberated black wholeness by dismissing the nonmasculine, queer implications of a history characterized by the complex psychic devastations and compromises that result from institutionalized sexual domination. Yet it is the very queerness of this past, the threatened dissolution of fixed boundaries between genders, races, sexualities, and even subjectivities experienced perforce in such a history of sexual domination, that endows blackness with the protean qualities that make it a powerful vehicle for imagining freedom in these texts. At times and usually against the authors' intentions, *bottoming* and/or a
vulnerability to penetration is portrayed in their texts as a willed enactment of powerlessness that encodes a power of its own—a kind of skill set that includes pleasure in introjecting and assimilating the alien (perhaps, alienation itself), a sense of intimacy acquired even in situations of coerced pain, a transformation, through harm, of the foreign into one's own.

In the final chapter, "Porn and the N-Word: Lust, Samuel R. Delany's *The Mad Man* and a Derangement of Body and Sense(s)," I attempt to traverse the difficulties that narrative machinery encounters in blackness-in/as-abjection by visiting a kind of text that generically aims to work with (and to work) psychic/body responses: pornographic writing. In *The Mad Man* (1994), a literary pornographic work, arousal and climax are achieved for John Marr, *The Mad Man's* protagonist, through his inheritance of specifically racialized (i.e., black) abjection. John Marr is a black gay male character who feverishly seeks out the pleasure of sexual acts that involve some form of apparent humiliation or degradation. These acts are frequently explicitly racialized—John's partners call him "nigger" repeatedly. John uses his activities and fantasies and their historical resonance of racial subjugation, and the intense pleasure these acts give him largely because of that resonance, to open the way to a sense that he operates within a greater sphere of freedom and power than he did before engaging in his sexual practices. His experiences represent the possibility of overcoming the internalized defeat demanded by the legacies of history.

The novel attempts to achieve for readers what it represents for John Marr through a sexual or erotic practice—in this case, primarily, an erotic and sexual reading practice—of Marcusian exuberance. In *The Mad Man* the combination between the evocation of the history of racialization through humiliation and the pornographic form itself doubly represent the apparent paradox of power in abject blackness. Delany's text addresses the messy imbrication of blackness with a queerness that is simultaneously subjugating and yet psychically freeing, and it does so by making central what from an antiracist point of view must appear to be a political paradox: the historically charged erotic fantasy of white male sexual domination of black men. In this chapter we find what Morrison and Baraka et al. suggest is most recalcitrant to the politics of black empowerment—black men sexually violated or degraded, homosexuality, masochism—in the realm of what common hierarchies of discourse assign as one of the sites most unlikely to demonstrate anything "redeeming"—porn.

The smudged and traversable line between representation and fantasy on the one side and practice on the other—the projection and reflection
(or refraction) of the mind and the body’s relation—permits me to argue that what is represented in *The Mad Man* is something in the nature of a rough model of working with the legacies of a history of conquest and enslavement (which is to say, with blackness, with having-been-blackened) through the transformation provided by erotic/sexual fantasies. Delany thus imagines a position that takes on board race without having at the same time to take up its fellow traveler, so often mistaken for the thing itself, ego. Is it possible to have race without ego, without defensive postures, without boundaries to police and ramparts on which to stand watch? The character of John Marr tries to model for us this position. Delany imagines him living his black body in its collective, sociogenic dimension, in which the demand to self-protection of that seductive individual *I* is refused in favor of one’s becoming immersed in, lost in what it is to *be* the race, precisely as to be black means to have-been-blackened, to have been rendered abject.