The Fantasy of Close Reading: Communicability, Intimacy, and Lingering with Black HIV/AIDS Narratives

by

Hannah Zeller

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Dissertation Committee:

Kate Kelp-Stebbins, Chair

José Cortez, Core Member

Mark Whalan, Core Member

Cera Smith, Institutional Representative

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: The Fantasy of Close Reading: Communicability, Intimacy, and Lingering with Black HIV/AIDS Narratives

This project close reads two texts: *Sorrowland,* a novel published in 2021 by Rivers Solomon, and *Gary in Your Pocket: The Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher,* a collection of Gary Fisher's fiction, poetry, and journals posthumously published in 1996. Although these works differ in form, genre, and historical context, this project places them together to highlight what becomes possible in their extended contact. *Sorrowland* follows Vern after their escape from Cainland, a Black religious compound that is secretly used by the United States government for human experimentation. Infected with a fungal spore, Vern undergoes a bodily and sensory transformation that connects them to a mycelial network that give them access to previously infected people who reappear as "the hauntings." By contrast, *Gary in Your Pocket* is a fragmented text composed of fiction, poetry, and journal entries written before Fisher's death from AIDS-related illnesses. Across the pieces that make up *Gary in Your Pocket,* Fisher explores racialized sexual fantasy in graphic descriptions of his sexual encounters alongside discussions revolving around him processing his mortality and illnesses before his death.

Reading these texts together allows me to reconsider close reading as both an institutional method of literary analysis and an intimate, sensorial, and community-building practice. *The Fantasy of Close Reading: Communicability, Intimacy, and Lingering with Black HIV/AIDS Narratives* follows Afropessimism, Afrofuturism, Black feminist theory, and queer theory to consider how Black life is mediated through histories of racialized gender and sexuality, and

objectification. I argue that *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* are linked through fantasy and speculation. Here, fantasy refers both to spectacular narrative forms and to the sexual fantasies that flow throughout each text. Across these narratives, speculation is imaginative and visual, moving among fantasy as value judgement, categorizing framework, and sexual longing. The texts of my archive anticipate reading as a form of institutional incorporation that can reproduce epistemic violence. Simultaneous to this anticipation, *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* create through alternative narrative forms that craft possibilities for intimate communication and collective life. Rather than resisting objectification outright, Solomon and Fisher repurpose it, transforming the textual object into a site of sensation, relation, and community.

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I: INTRODUCTION: SPECULATIVE OBJECTS AND THE COMMUNICABILITY OF CLOSE READING

Twenty-five years separate the two texts that this project works through: *Sorrowland,* a novel by Rivers Solomon published in 2021, and *Gary in Your Pocket: The Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher,* a collection of works from Gary Fisher's notebooks, posthumously published in 1996. This twenty-five-year gap may appear to widen more when considering the two texts in their further particularities. *Sorrowland* follows its protagonist Vern after they escape from a Black religious compound called Cainland. Throughout *Sorrowland,* we follow Vern as they look for safety and community. This search for safety is disrupted continuously because, as we learn across the pages of the novel, Cainland is actually under military observation and the people living there are unknowingly imprisoned so that the United States government can experiment on them. As a result of this experimentation, the people living at Cainland are infected with a fungal spore. After escaping, Vern is hunted by agents of the United States government because they are the rare experimental success: the fungal spore has taken hold, and their body is transforming into a powerful fungal weapon. The fungal infection does more than just reorganize Vern's body and affords them with heightened strength and stamina; it also reorganizes their sensory perception and taps them into a mycelial network that connects them to every other person who had been infected with the fungus before they died. These dead infected people pop up into the narrative, violently and uncontrollably, and are what Vern calls "the hauntings."

This narrative and formal structure that works its way through *Sorrowland* stands in stark contrast to what we encounter in *Gary in Your Pocket: The Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher.* In Fisher's work, we receive a fragmented text. Split down its center, the first half of

Gary in Your Pocket is filled with poems and short stories that Gary Fisher wrote before he died in 1993 or 1994 of AIDS-related complications.[1] The second half of the text is filled with Gary Fisher's personal journal entries, reading like a diary that follows him from the first entry that he wrote when he was sixteen, to the final entry that he wrote just before his death when he was thirty-two. The text is introduced by Don Belton and closed with an afterword by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Throughout the stories and journals that make up *Gary in Your Pocket,* Fisher writes of his sexual practices and sexual fantasies that follow him through his adolescence and into his adulthood. Fisher's works outline in explicit detail the sexual actions that repeatedly reproduce violent racializing and fetichizing fantasies that Fisher narrates alongside his desire to be sexually and racially dominated. Within each of the entries of Fisher's "stories" and "journals," are individual narratives navigating racial and sexual fantasies, and navigating Fisher's negotiation of his HIV diagnosis and the later illnesses that lead to his death. Alongside these fragmented narratives is a larger narrative operating at the level of *Gary in Your Pocket*'s publication, played out in the foreword and afterword to the text.

Despite the space between Fisher's project and Solomon's, *this* project explores what happens when these texts are placed together and read closely. In sitting with this reading, I perform an exploration of the dimensions of close reading as simultaneously a historically and institutionally imbricated tool of analysis, and a practice that holds intimate reflective, sensorial, and community-building possibilities. *The Fantasy of Close Reading: Communicability, Intimacy, and Lingering with Black HIV/AIDS Narratives* works with central questions guiding Afropessimistic attention to Black social life in the wake of chattel slavery, and Afrofuturistic

[1] I include both 1993 and 1994 as possible years for Fisher's death because across the works of this project that address Fisher's death, there is no clear consensus around the year he died. There's a nearly even split in the scholarly works addressing Fisher's text between claims of Fisher dying in 1993 and 1994.

formulations of imagination that practice life-affirming and world-constructing negotiations of Black life and being. In doing this work, I consider Black feminist and queer discussions surrounding the modern colonial productions of gender and sexuality that work through ontological constructions of the human that, in various capacities, articulate these ontological formulations as ones that objectify the Black person. In my attention to these various theoretical, philosophical, and aesthetic formulations, I read a fantastical tie between *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* that works through speculation surrounding mattered relationality and alternative temporal configurations. My discussion of fantasy considers fantasy as a name for sensational and spectacular narrative frameworks, but also as being linked to sexual fantasies that operate through both *Gary in Your Pocket* and *Sorrowland.*

This work with fantasy, in its varying valences, leads me to read *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* as texts that mediate sexual fantasy through fantastical productions of speculation. These reformulated networks of speculation and fantasy utilize the communicability of their narrative forms to craft imaginative networks of speculation that function through sensorial reading practices. Across these narratives, speculation is both imaginative and visual, traversing fantasy as value judgment, categorizing framework, and sexual longing. Working at the site of Black objectification, I read *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* as texts that consider the textual object in relation to analytical practices that define objects of study. In reading both texts, I outline how each anticipates reading as a form of incorporation that opens the object of analysis up to epistemic violence but may also provide possibly liberatory pathways of communication through intimate networks of reading. In this way, and despite these anticipations within structures of analytical objectification and incorporation, Solomon and Fisher craft texts that utilize their textual and discursive objectification and re-deploy these ontological frameworks

towards alternative projects of sensation that embrace the object through life-building community practices.

FANTASY

In this project, I position my engagement around a play with fantasy as a practice of speculation. This positioning gestures towards multiple sedimentations of meaning. In introducing "fantasy" as an attempt at naming the organizing logics behind my project's work with these two texts, I consider fantasy in its categorizing capacity—as a set of narrative tropes and a family of magical relations within storytelling. I also consider fantasy in its looser construction—of that "escapist," "idle," and at times "sexual" deployment of the term. Fantasy understood in these layers organizes the communication I locate between the covers of *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket*. It also organizes my attention to the narrative depictions of sexual contact in the archive of moments I work from within the two objects of my study. I consider fantasy as a loose archival stipulation that guides my considerations surrounding the two texts I close read. Between *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket*, there is not an immediately clean generic lineage (in either the formal construction of the texts, or the narrative events that make up their speculative components). Despite this lack of clear generic resonance between *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket,* in my readings I place them next to each other in order to consider what echoes appear in the moment of their extended contact.

This attention to fantasy that I build out through a discussion of other frameworks of imaginative and fantastical configuration is one that settles in quite easily to *Sorrowland.* My movement towards fantasy as a framework serves to straddle the space between *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket.* Solomon's work can be understood as an Afrofuturistic production fairly easily, while also having narrative or thematic ties to more commercialized genre distinctions

like horror, science fiction or fantasy. Fisher's work with the fantastical is less frequently discussed as a frame through which to consider Fisher's aesthetic and philosophical work. While the reliability of the truthfulness of Fisher's narratives has been questioned in some of the responses to Fisher's text, understandings of Fisher as an author who works through these lineages of Black imaginative production based in speculative play with temporality and materiality is less common. In reading *Sorrowland* with a specific focus on the narrative treatment of scenes depicting sexual contact, and in reading *Gary in Your Pocket* as a work centered around imaginative deployments of humanity working through alternative networks of temporality, I trace the overlap of the fantastical practices of Solomon and Fisher's texts. These negotiations of fantasy play with visuality, materiality, and imaginative performances of sensation and speculatively reorganize ontological networks to craft intimate communities across time.

Rather than performing a direct claim about genre, my use of fantasy is just one formulation that pulls from ongoing scholarly discussions in the expansive fields of Black feminisms and Black queer studies. Among these conversations are a multitude of frameworks discussing Black artistic and cultural practices organized through the frameworks of Afrofuturism, and other routes of speculation. Saidiya Hartman's deployment of "critical fabulation" that she continues into a discussion of "close narration," serves as one framework that builds up networks of other cultural and critical engagements with these Black speculative practices ("Venus…"; *Wayward Lives…*). Hartman's "critical fabulation" and "close narration" have been central in other Black queer and feminist scholarly attentions that consider the liberatory capacities of fabulation. Following Hartman's framing, Tavia Nyong'o's discussion of afro-fabulation considers both Afrofuturism as a name for Black future-making artistic practices

and articulates fabulation as a broader conceptualization for networks of storytelling that push into structures of temporal and epistemic truths.

Similarly, Kara Keeling moves through the interplay with queer and Black articulations of time and history to discuss these future-crafting practices as an ever-shifting temporal iteration that crafts Black futures *now* despite impossible and totalizing denials surrounding the possibility of Black life. These articulations are built on again through a direct engagement with Black literary imagination in Cassandra Jones's recent discussion of reparative fabulation as a name for the social justice work that she locates within Afrofuturistic texts written by Black women since the 1970s. Jones's discussion considers these literary Afrofuturist productions as forms of critical fabulation that operates through Black writing as, in part, a response to literary politics relating to genre that are themselves built through anti-Black, colonial, heteropatriarchal notions of value. Across these scholarly attentions to Afrofuturism and the fabulatory capacity that Black aesthetic practices offer in their critical liberatory productions, is a continual negotiation of categorizing logics that make these patterns of artistic and aesthetic sensibility communicable. Despite the varying frameworks applied to these patterns of Black expression, these shifting negotiations of fabulation and futurism, work together as frameworks that highlight alternative processes of knowledge formulation not built through calcified claims to truth and reality.

My use of fantasy takes in these fabulatory frameworks of communicability that work through and seep beyond what is commonly or most immediately understood as Afrofuturism. Despite this seepage, my project still considers Afrofuturism because, as Keeling explains, Black futures unfolding in queer time reorganize what a futuristic production may look like. In this way, fantasy is built through these Black practices of liberation. I move from these larger frameworks of fantasy (genre), fabulation, and futurism, to more idiosyncratic uses of the term.

In shifting my frame from fantasy as a categorizing framework to fantasy as the "idle," "escapist," and "sexual" varieties, I use fantasy as a way of moving towards sensation. Sensation in the fantasies of my project does not map immediately onto neat representational or political models of liberation as scholars like José Esteban Muñoz and Amber Jamilla Musser outline extensively in their works. This oscillation of fantasy guides my archive and reading practice towards *Gary in Your Pocket* and *Sorrowland*; and it continues to guide me through *Gary in Your Pocket* and *Sorrowland* as I read the two texts across my chapters.

BLACK FUTURISMS: IMAGINATION AND FABULATION

This space of speculative fictions and Afrofuturistic production, and of the theoretical practices that come through them and through a reading of them, is where I want to loosely place my engagement with *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket: The Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher. Sorrowland*'s work between and within various speculative genres is a frequent point of conversation in the scholarly works that address it. Solomon discusses this genre movement and the way *Sorrowland* may fit within it in an interview published in "Genre Marauders: A Conversation with Corey Brotherson, Chella Ramanan, and Rivers Solomon," and explains:

> when I wrote it, my main goals were to be as upsetting and disturbing as possible—which usually falls into the category of horror, so I think genre-wise, it falls into that, but there's a huge speculative component and transformation that takes place that definitely puts it into science fiction and fantasy as well. The way you sort of cut off between what is fantasy and science fiction is so very dependent on a particular person, but I would say it's both. I would say it's horror, it's sci-fi, it's fantasy, and it's also been called gothic. So yeah, it's very all over the place, genre-wise. (Muwanga-Magoye 1)

Instead of classifying *Sorrowland* within a specific genre, Solomon moves to talk about Vern and what Vern lives through in the pages of the novel as the thing that determines how *Sorrowland* should be defined. This unplace-ability, or diffuse(d)-place-ability, of *Sorrowland* within a matrix of genre distinctions, highlights a formulation of genre from Solomon's reception of *Sorrowland's* reception that is articulated from faer own understanding of what makes something "horror," as well as an understanding of genre as a personal project that falls into these collective categorizations.[2] *Sorrowland's* horror, sci-fi, fantasy, gothic, and speculative fictive categorizations places it within a history of artistic practice based in an engagement with the world through an ontological and epistemological restructuring of matter and knowledge that could be expansively categorized within a spectrum of imaginative genres.

In her recent work, *Black Speculative Feminisms: Memory and Liberated Futures in Black Women's Fiction,* Cassandra Jones looks towards this "genre-defying, slippery" literary-speculative movement to articulate what she frames as "Black speculative feminisms" that perform the "reparative fabulation" she discusses at length in her project (4; 2). Jones's discussion of genre that leads her to "Black speculative feminisms" mirrors some of Solomon's description of *Sorrowland* as a speculative project that is "very all over the place, genre-wise" (Muwanga-Magoye 1). This "all over the place" framing, what Jones calls "slippery" and "genre-defying" places Jones's examples of Black speculative feminisms as "existing between fact and interpretation, metaphor and object, in defiance of the respectability literary politics" (4). Naming Afrofuturism as a key term in her consideration of Black feminist speculation, Jones describes how "Afrofuturist scholars examined Black writing as speculative, expanding our notion of Black literature to include science fiction and fantasy" (2). This expansion of literary

[2] Solomon uses fae/faer and they/them pronouns.

labels compounds through Jones's orientation towards Black women's writing as a "fluid fiction," "that operates between genres such as horror, science fiction, fantasy, and historical realism and emerges as a speculative act that rejects the genre definitions that are used to dismiss our contributions" (3).[3] Jones's discussion highlights the racialized and gendered parameters that structure histories of genre categorization and literary studies. In outlining these histories of exclusion through definition, Jones's close readings of the texts that make up her archive frame speculative components and patterns in Black literature, like haunting, as collective cultural metaphors *and* practices which perform important political and social functions.

In addition to Jones's work with Black speculative feminisms and haunting, many scholarly projects have recently turned towards Black artistic projects to articulate the specific world-making and deconstructing capacities located in speculative practices of textuality and performance. Afrofuturism serves as one framework gesturing towards both a categorization of texts relating to genre, and a critical practice based in sonic, temporal, narrative, aesthetic, and spatial re-orientations towards Black futurity despite the death-making deployments of anti-Blackness in what Saidiya Hartman outlines as the "afterlife of slavery."[4] Afrofuturism as an aesthetic practice resonates with genres like science fiction and technofuturism, but utilizes the speculative capacity of these thematic and formal castings through time as a radical practice of

[3] Jones's use of "fluid fiction" comes from Kinitra Brooks's coining of the phrase in relation to Black women's literary practices in *Searching for Sycorax: Black Women's Haunting of Contemporary Literature.* Additionally, for more on "magical realism" and the racialized and gendered dynamics surrounding the term's history, see Christina Davis's "Interview with Toni Morrison."

[4] The differing forms of Afrofuturist speculation are addressed frequently in scholarly attentions to the practice. For a discussion on sonic Afrofuturistic production, see Kodwo Eshun's 1998 discussion in *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction.* Ekow Eshun attends to the many visual and sonic forms of Afrofuturism in the recent work *In the Black Fantastic.* See also Adilifu Nama's *Black Space: Imaging Race in Science Fiction Film* and "Brace Black Worlds: Black Superheroes as science Fiction Ciphers."

Black imagination and world-making.[5] In Kara Keeling's reading of Afrofuturist texts in *Queer Times, Black Futures,* she follows earlier claims surrounding the distinct liberatory dimensions of Afrofuturism as they exist in relation to the speculative futuristic productions of science fiction more broadly, but moves a discussion of queer temporality into her considerations of Afrofuturism. Keeling identifies the genre of Afrofuturism within these speculative works and traditions to discuss racial capitalism's shared engagement with speculative futuristic formulations. Keeling's discussion of the radical work of Afrofuturistic productions is informed by her attention to a wide range of theoretical frameworks, central among which are queer social, affective, and temporal arrangements that inform her readings of Afrofuturistic works. Alongside these Afrofuturistic examples of speculation, Keeling traces seemingly similar groupings of narrative speculation deployed by corporate and financial institutions that work to curtail the liberatory capacities of futuristic narratives that are "calibrated to reproduce existing relations" (9). Against these reproductions of "existing relations," Keeling turns toward Afrofuturism to consider speculative frameworks that work from "creative engagements with Black existence, technology, space, and time" to "call forth new relations for all" (4; 34) that do not rely on the continuation of systems of commodity exchange and capital.

[5] Kodwo Eshun, in his creative and critical work "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," maps these distinctions between science fiction and Afrofuturism and outlines the aesthetic and philosophical projects of Afrofuturism in its varying particularities. In Eshun's discussion, Afrofuturism diverges from science fiction and technofuturism through its characterization "as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro-diasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken" (301). Afrofuturism is situated by Eshun as distinct from science fiction in its historical and philosophical practices that stretch beyond anti-Black epistemological and ontological structures. In a similar vein outlining the specific political and imaginative capacities of Afrofuturism, in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* Ytasha L. Womack describes Afrofuturism as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (9). Womack's work with Afrofuturism, which locates a liberatory impulse within its narrative and aesthetic formulations, stands apart from the narrative uses attached to science fiction more broadly through its liberatory capacity.

In a construction against capitalistic continuations, Keeling situates Afrofuturistic imagination as a tool that "participates in the construction of the present through a combination of past and present elements that are not necessarily attached to presently perceptible reality" (33). These movements through the past and present to provide an alternative future vision works through a "queer temporality." Keeling turns to queer temporality to name "that dimension of the unpredictable and the unknowable in time that governs errant, eccentric, promiscuous, and unexpected organizations of social life" (19). Queer times are the reorganized temporal imaginations that animate what Keeling calls "Black futures." Explaining "queer times" is integral to her discussion of "Black futures" because the Black futures of Keeling's discussion "stall movements predicated on temporal deferral" by existing in "The ungovernable, anarchic here and now" (Keeling 32). Queerness's incommensurable capacities surround what Keeling understands as Black futures enacted not in an imaginary future time, but as already having been unfolding in the temporal present despite being framed as impossible.

The radical potential held in Afrofuturistic texts unfold across Keeling's monograph and serve as "A marker of a historical mode of existence that exerts pressure on, and indeed has been perceived as antagonistic to, the ontology of the human" (32). These ontological antagonisms reveal the ways that "Black existence is a condition of possibility for moving beyond what is. At the same time, it presently anchors a set of possibilities for "something else to be" (34). These Afrofuturistic productions that formulate Black futures through speculative works are a part of a larger web of aesthetic and philosophical production that works through time and across mediums. In "moving beyond what is" while anchoring "a set of possibilities for 'something else to be,'" Black radical imagination and the texts that Keeling reads as indicative of those performances are not a set of genre-practices (Keeling 34). Instead, Afrofuturism is formulated

by Keeling as a move gesturing towards radical practices of imagination that reorganize and recontextualize the world, providing and revealing alternative pathways of relationality against existing structures of anti-Blackness.

In another expansive engagement with Black queer aesthetic practices of speculation, Tavia Nyong'o picks up Afrofuturism in his considerations of fabulation as an elusive and polymorphic term deployed to highlight "the mythmaking function of fabulation as a sort of tenseless grounding for any black speculative practice whatsoever" (20). In his 2018 monograph *Afro-Fabulation: The Queer Drama of Black Life*, Nyong'o doesn't focus specifically on Afrofuturism and instead frames his discussion around what he describes as "a critical and fabulative archiving of a world that was 'never meant to survive' as Audre Lorde memorably put it—and a world that, I would add, was perhaps also *never meant to appear*" (3). The storytelling practices of interest to Nyong'o follow Keeling's description of impossible futures unfolding in a "here in every now" (Keeling 32). Speaking with Gayl Jones's novel *Mosquito*, Saidiya Hartman's descriptions of "critical fabulation," and Donna Haraway's "speculative fabulation," Nyong'o outlines how these "black feminist and posthumanist acts of speculation" work through his articulation of afro-fabulation. He explains them as "the tactical fictionalizing of a world that is, from the point of view of black social life, already false. It is an insurgent movement—in something else, something other, something more" (6). These "tactical" fictionalizations are both "ephemeral and fleeting" and "monumental and enduring" and while "neither may transform the conditions under which they appear, they live on through performative and narrative strategies and tactics that draw out of black feminist and queer repository of counter-conduct, finding in collective memory an ever-renewing series of stratagems for aesthetic oppositionality" (Nyong'o 6). Here, we see another engagement with Black liberatory narrative and performance practices

based in imaginative speculation that doesn't push against the expectations of genre, and instead pushes against the organizing fabric of everyday existence.

The queer relationality of the Black futures Keeling articulates in the "the ungovernable, anarchic here and now" (Keeling 32) layers into Nyong'o's "nonconcept" of afro-fabulations that has "almost as many senses as it has appearances" (202; 200). His description of the porosity of his key term sits in what he anticipates as "a promiscuity of meaning [that] will probably deny it as a concept" (200). The "promiscuity" of Nyong'o's fabulatory critical practices resonates with Keeling's suggestion of queer temporal understandings that are "unknowable," "unpredictable," "errant, eccentric, promiscuous, and unexpected organizations of social life" (Keeling 19). The dissonance between the impossible and the already-being-lived capacity of Black futures and afro-fabulation is further explained by Nyong'o within the context of fiction. He explains that:

> The phenomena of fabulation that I pursue here—across a range of aesthetic instances—is tethered to the classic paradox of fiction: the matter of why and how it is that a story we know to be untrue can nonetheless inspire belief, emotion, and attachment. Fictions, a theory of fabulation can tell us, do not simply attach themselves to moments of idle fantasy, play, instruction, or other socially acceptable occasions for storytelling. Fictions instead arise out of the indeterminacy and flux of living and dying, with life being perhaps the greatest fiction of all. (Nyong'o 7)

This attention to fabulation, fiction, and storytelling does not require a contextualizing frame that contains the fabulation within narratively sanitized and separated spaces. Instead, Nyong'o's discussion of afro-fabulation builds out the Afrofuturistic practices of impossible potentiality into unexpected quotidian events.

While these scholars utilize the frameworks of genre differently in their initial naming of the scope of the archives that make up their projects, what unifies these discussions of Black aesthetic and philosophical productions is the orienting frameworks around speculation and storytelling as central sites of analysis that discursively and aesthetically work to erode the categorizing logics of the human as an ontological classification made valuable and legible through antiblack formulations. Zakiyyah Jackson works with Black speculative traditions too in her discussion of antiblackness and "the ontology of the human" in her work *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (Keeling 32). Jackson follows a similar methodological thread or reading practice, discussing Black imaginatory practices as aesthetic and philosophical speculation through shared imaginative and aesthetic formulations of Black queer artists in the African diaspora. Reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring,* Audre Lorde's *Zami,* Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* and *Dawn,* and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* Jackson's engages with texts that many scholars would describe within the frameworks of Afrofuturism. Rather than directly engaging with Afrofuturism or a specific name for the texts she studies through the framework of genre or specific aesthetic movements, Jackson outlines her archive's structuring logics as being guided by a "philosophical thought that occurs in/as expressive culture" (Jackson 35).

I emphasize genre among these different conceptual frameworks relating to Black radical works of imagination in order to highlight approaches to narratively formulating Black speculative practices within academic publications that push against the knowledge projects of classification that have been practiced in white supremacist imaginaries. Afrofuturism, as a name for Black speculative practices that imagine future reorganizations of ontological and epistemological practices that are concerned with futurity, technology, temporality, and

imagination, does not conceptualize the future as a time not yet here, but rather as an ongoing practice and tradition within Black diasporic artistic expression.[6] This categorization of genre, or of archive, marks a field of academic study that gestures towards an extensive history of aesthetic theoretical production within African diasporic texts that reconstruct colonial epistemological and ontological formulations reliant on the dehumanizing logics of anti-Blackness.[7] While I've placed Jackson in this conversation, Jackson does not narrate the texts present in *Becoming Human* through this specific classification of Afrofuturism or speculative fiction. Instead, Jackson explains that an interest "in how African diasporic writers and artists not only critique animalization but also exceed critique by overturning received ontology and epistemic regimes of specifics that seek to define blackness through the prism of abject animality" is what guides the readings she performs throughout *Becoming Human.* By doing so, the texts that Jackson studies "present possibilities that point our attention to the potential of modes of worlding that are more advantageous to life writ large" (34).

FANTASY AS IDLE AND ESCAPIST

Nyong'o's discussion of fictions that are not "simply" attached to moments of "idle fantasy, play, instruction, or other socially acceptable occasions for storytelling" mirrors a quick use of "fantasy" that he again deploys in a review of Jackson's project from 2020 (7). He reads Jackson's work as a "deep dive into the radical alternative imaginary through which African

[6] Bennett Capers explains how this organization of futurity functions in his use of the term in "Afrofuturism and the Law: A Manifesto." He states that: "I am using it to signify a rejection of, or at least a distancing from, the dominant Western view that time is necessarily linear and represents 'an irreversible progress of moments,' yielding ordinal conceptions of past, present, and future as well as duration. …An Afrofuturist approach to time embraces the notion that past, present, and future co-exists and are always in flux" (1368). This temporal flux resonates with Keeling's articulation of queer time and of Nyong'o's "tenseless" performances.

[7] See also formal explorations with Black imaginative fabulation in critical or scholarly work in examples like E. Patrick Johnson's *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women,* Omis'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders,* or Alexis Pauline Gumb's poetic production *M Archive: After the End of the World.*

diasporic aesthetics challenge and displace white supremacist and Eurocentric hierarchical orderings of the human" ("Zakiyyah Iman Jackson…"). Furthering this articulation of Jackson's project, and the texts that Jackson reads, Nyong'o states that "The speculative turn that Jackson makes is therefore not one into escapist fantasy, as skeptics often assume. Black queer feminist speculation, to the contrary, is a crucial form of thought experiment, a necessary propaedeutic to any future collective project of unbecoming human" ("Zakiyyah Iman Jackson…"). I include this discussion of Jackson for multiple reasons. One of which is to highlight Jackson's refusal of categorizing distinctions towards her archive. While I don't mirror this approach in practice, like Nyong'o, I intend for my deployment of fantasy to be unsettled and discuss Jackson's archival descriptions as another disruptive line.

Additionally, Jackson's discussion of "black(ened) people" and animality furthers the discussions of Black genders and sexualities proposed in Keeling and Nyong'o's discussions (Jackson 1). Finally, Nyong'o's discussion of Jackson's work offers me another example that prods my use of fantasy. In this review, Nyong'o reproduces a similar structure to his earlier pushback against "idle fantasy" in *Afro-Fabulations.* Nyong'o speaks of Jackson's work and states that it is "not one into escapist fantasy, as skeptics often assume" ("Zakiyyah Iman Jackson…"). This refusal of (escapist) fantasy, is also about fantasy as a traceable categorization of genre. It highlights speculative texts in their imaginary capacity and the power (danger) that that imaginary capacity has to drift away from material and historical articulations of worldly engagement. It formulates *reality* specifically and posits *escapism* as a byproduct of imaginary formulations that do not adequately root themselves in the material, historical, or linguistic structures of a world worth critiquing. Without reinscribing them, Nyong'o's repeated reference

to fantasy notes the genre-value-judgements that Jones articulates within "respectability literary politics" (Jones 4).

Moving into a similar linguistic pronouncement, Audre Lorde writes in "Poetry is Not a Luxury" that "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought" (37). Lorde, furthering her description of the power of poetry to transcend and make meaning, writes of this process that as poetry, and individual "poems" "become known and accepted to ourselves, our feelings, and the honest exploration of them, become sanctuaries and fortresses and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas, the house of difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action" (37). Furthering this, Lorde writes that:

> Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have once found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but the true meaning of "it feels right to me." We can train ourselves to respect our feelings, and to discipline (transpose) them into a language that matches those feelings so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. (37)

In Lorde's articulation of "idle fantasy," she highlights a framework of thought through the initial presentation of an exclusionary framework that is based on a defense against a critical skeptic assumption. This assumption resonates with Nyong'o's assurances against "idle" and "escapist fantasy." There's a discourse around the unreal, around the uncritical, around the fanciful, around the fantastical, around a specific articulation of desire and imagination, that

contends with the *real work,* with reality's formulation that exists counter to escapist practices of dreaming what could be, with materially relevant liberatory practices.

However, Lorde's articulation of "dreams and poems… not idle fantasy" does not work as a repudiation of fantasy (37). "Idle" here, is an imperative engagement. But these articulations push me to think about: What does an active embracive fantasy look like and is it so removed from what might feel like idle escapism? This frames how I'm thinking about genre in this project. It's based in practices that have identified Afrofuturistic productions as spaces that reformulate relationality through time to propose or reveal alternative knowledge structures, in studies that don't rely on the categorizing logics of genre at all but often stem from sources that have historically (academically) been understood as nontheoretical in their imaginative productions, and it's based in experiences of a type of fantasy that "feels right," or, at least, is about feeling at its core. Lorde outlines a political and liberatory practice that embraces a poetic approach to knowledge (experience) and then works out towards language. Poetic dreaming, a type of fantastical practice, is an initial step that reformulates the affective entangledness of the subject away from revulsion or confusion or fear as endpoints, and towards an exploratory curiosity that doesn't forget that fear's there, but still, somehow, doesn't register fear through the same affective capacity.

These extended networks of fantastical production framed through futuristic speculation and fabulation that toggle between temporal and factual distinctions make the tie between *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* slightly clearer. Solomon's speculative work in *Sorrowland* is a central, or organizing, consideration in almost all of the scholarly works that are currently published on the novel. But Fisher's speculative productions have rarely been defined as such. I spend the time with these formulations of imagination that keep moving towards ontology and

humanity in their creative and critical deployments to thread the projects of Fisher and Solomon together. These threads, mycelial and fantastical, function as a type of temporal resonance that work through the reaching constructions of each text's speculative performances. And I move beyond the static prescription of genre because *Sorrowland*'s fantastical and speculative productions are not only produced in Solomon's otherworldly narrative productions. In Solomon's narrative treatment of Vern as a character, Solomon ties Vern's character development relating to their gender and sexuality to the transformation of their body as a result of their fungal infection. This resonates with Fisher's textual sexual speculations and performances as well.

IMAGINING GARY IN YOUR POCKET: CONFIGURING THE STORIES AND NOTEBOOKS OF GARY FISHER AS A SPECULATIVE PRACTICE

The construction of idle and escapist fantasy resonates with articulations of other forms of fantasy that overlap with these denied articulations of liberatory possibility: specifically, sexual fantasy. I want to transition to an example of the way that this structuring refusal of fantasy (in its idle, escapist capacity) works alongside alternative definitions of imagination in one response to *Gary in Your Pocket.* The publication of Fisher's work was surrounded by, as Robert Reid-Pharr described, a "rather maddening inarticulateness, a sort of collective shrug" (149) within academic communities.[8] Since its publication, *Gary in Your Pocket* has received a fraction of the published academic attention that *Sorrowland* has received in the years since its publication (despite Fisher's text being twenty-five years old and Solomon's being five at the time of my writing this). In this way, these two texts, again, seemingly diverge. The critical

[8] I follow Reid-Pharr's description of the initial academic reception of *Gary in Your Pocket* in detail in "Sitting with *Gary in Your Pocket.*"

paucity surrounding *Gary in Your Pocket* (in terms of the *number* of chapters and articles published) has been narrated and explained frequently in the scholarly works that did approach *Gary in Your Pocket* in the first twenty years after its release. To quickly illustrate the type of halting response towards Fisher's text described by scholars like Robert Reid-Pharr, Dwight McBride, and Jose Estaban Muñoz, I turn to a review (not academic or peer reviewed, but informative and claiming a peer-ship nonetheless). This comment, posted on the amazon storefront product page for a print copy of *Gary in Your Pocket: The Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher,* provides an example of a type of response that isn't uncommon in response to Fisher's work. The comment, written in 2007 by a user writing under the username "S. Farlow" and titled "I knew Gary" relies on these intonations of fantasy to make its three-star rating legible.

The commenter outlines the project of *Gary in Your Pocket* in relation to himself. He tells us in the opening of his review: "I knew Gary when we both attended UNC in the early 80's. If you read his journals, you will recognize me as 'John' or 'Johnny.' I am a white gay man" (S. Farlow). This comment describes *Gary in Your Pocket* as a book "which makes for spicy reading," and as one that is solely articulated through the research interests of the text's editor: Eve Sedgwick. The commenter claims that in his relationship with Fisher he gained personal knowledge that contextualizes the content of Fisher's stories and journals as products of imagination, claiming that "the reader must remember, the content of this book all comes from Gary's journals, and as pornographic as it seems, much of it may only be imaginary. Gary even admitted to me that he didn't mind 'enhancing' his stories sometimes" (S. Farlow). Here, the imaginary practices referenced in the Afrofuturistic and the speculative aesthetic reformulation

of matter takes on a different intonation and exists within a different structure of publication—"pornographic" and "imaginary" collide.

Likewise, the commenter frames a silver lining that came from his reading of *Gary in Your Pocket.* S. Farlow expresses that he "had mixed feelings reading this book… in some aspects there was some personal closure as to what had happened to him… I imagined he had passed but now know for sure" (S. Farlow). This comment articulates a form of imagination in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic without making this framework clear. I just provided contextualizing details that would make this commenter's negotiation of their memory of Gary Fisher resonate within larger historical patterns clear, but the commenter does not provide this for themself. The "I imagined he had passed" exists within, either a personal archive of loss that structures a specific generation of queer relationality around the anticipation of having-already-lost, or within an utterance of generic expectation rooted in something else. Whether this commenter actually knew Gary Fisher, what we can read here is a narrative of affective engagement in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that makes queer articulations of loss plausible and central, and that make this comment demonstrative without the need for verification. "I imagined he had passed but now know for sure" is the final sentence of the penultimate paragraph of this review: reading this, there's a personal engagement at the core of this reception of Gary Fisher's text.

Gary in Your Pocket: The Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher becomes the evidence of Gary Fisher's death for this (possibly imaginary) person from his past that confirms an imaginary story he had about Fisher's death. Moving into this matrix of the imaginary, the comment continues and ends with an articulation of the sorrow of Fisher's death. This commenter writes that "At first I was angry about reading this book" and asks:

> How could such a brilliant person just throw his life away so early, just for the pursuit of sexual fantasy. But then I remembered the Gary I knew… this Gary saw fantasy in everything and he wrote these images down daily for most of his life. I wish the readers of this book could read the full content of his journals because they would be left with a different impression of him." (S. Farlow)

I bring this review into my discussions of fantasy and Black world-building, to provide an additional example of the deployment of the term "fantasy" in its disreputable capacities and in its magical sensorial capacities.

"How could such a brilliant person just throw his life away so early, just for the pursuit of sexual fantasy?" asks the commenter. Here, the commenter gives us another imaginary narrative: a narrative based in an articulation of the risk surrounding sexual fantasy and its practices, and of informed choice. It produces a rationalizing logic that locates Fisher's death in relation to sexual fantasy prioritized over life. This question isn't answered or fully rejected, but it's softened in the following lines: "But then I remembered the Gary I knew… this Gary saw fantasy in everything and he wrote these images down daily for most of his life" (S. Farlow). There's an artistic practice of reformulation and imagination that recontextualizes this comment's treatment of fantasy. The claim doesn't go so far as to explicitly tie Fisher's sexual practices and sexual fantasies to his artistic practices of imagination, but there's a thread here. This thread holds together the manifestation of Gary Fisher's sexual practices and play with sexual fantasy within the journal entries included in *Gary in Your Pocket,* to Fisher's fictive works of speculations and imagery lead by a flowing imagination.

The pieces included in *Gary in Your Pocket* are not enough for this commenter: to him Gary remains fragmented in what we're given through the project of *Gary in Your Pocket.*

Repeating the sentiment that a central problem of the project of Gary Fisher in *Gary in Your Pocket* is the looming possibility of it not being Fisher at the core of this text at all, but Sedgwick, the commenter writes that "I wish the readers of this book could read the full content of his journals because they would be left with a different impression of him" (S. Farlow). This commenter's "wish" longs for a different textual possibility. The book's collected and fragmented reality refers to a different collection that, in the framing of this "wish" holds the hope or possibility for a truer representation of Fisher (or Gary) were the reader to just have *more.* If we were to just access the unedited collection of Fisher's journals, maybe the fragmentation marked as problematic in this comment would be ameliorated. Representation, and maybe recognition, becomes the narrative ideal surrounding *Gary in Your Pocket* in *this* moment of *this* review; and they become a possibility too, existing just outside the scope of the bound and published book.

The full collection of Fisher's notebooks that S. Farlow refers to are held in the San Franciso Public Library. Some of the scholars who've worked from Fisher's text have moved towards this expanded archive to discuss Fisher's project.[9] My project does not include a direct engagement with this larger archive to discuss the project of *Gary in Your Pocket,* and instead, looks to the first part of the published text which holds Fisher's "stories" rather than only his "journals" in an attempt to expand on how to read *Gary in Your Pocket.* Our commenter frames *Gary in Your Pocket* as a text that traces Fisher's sexual fantasies in relation to his death but tells us that the larger journal collections would show a daily practice of finding wonder and making fantasy out of the quotidian as a practice of *life*. Rather than looking further through the archive of Fisher's work, I locate this fantastical reappropriation of matter at the center of *Gary in Your*

[9] See Ellis Hanson's "The Future's Eve: Reparative Reading After Sedgwick."

Pocket through a close engagement with the book, and by tracing what is said, and unsaid, in the previously published close encounters with Fisher's artistic practices of life writing and poetic fictive formulations. I do this because my project is not concerned with the "truth" of Fisher's text, and instead considers the published text, including the varied entries collected within the text and the accompanying paratextual elements, to articulate the fantastical networks of speculation and community building within Fisher's work with writing, storytelling, and publication. Fisher's poetry and prose, as well as the design of *Gary in Your Pocket* as an object, exist as a theoretical practice of fragmentation and relationality, a theoretical utterance playing with history and materiality through the textual object.

MOVING TO THE MOTEL: *SORROWLAND*

The sexual-fantastical productions read in Fisher's stories and journal entries resonate through the embodied networks of infection, transformation, haunting, and sexuality in *Sorrowland* as well. In the final sex scene of the novel, these resonances surface through Vern's contact with one of the many hauntings that work their way into *Sorrowland*. In this scene, sixty pages from the end, the protagonist Vern finds themself alone in a motel room with two ghostly figures. In the motel room these ghostly figures are at first presented to Vern, not as post-mortem animations of people who have died, but as static, empty bodies—as corpses. Beginning this scene of haunting, Solomon writes that "Next to her, a body appeared in the bed, cool and stiff. On the other side of her, another" (292-3).[10] These quick descriptions produce a rhythm in the textual makeup of this moment. There are distinct beats to this sentence, distinct parts, and

[10] In this example, Solomon's use of pronouns throughout *Sorrowland* for the protagonist Vern can be seen. While "her" is used throughout *Sorrowland* as the pronoun for the novel's protagonist, Vern describes their gender identity in the novel as "in-between" (Solomon 237). I read Solomon's narrative choices surrounding pronouns in relation to Vern in "Chapter II: Reading in the Gaps: Illegibility and Narrative Refusal in Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland*" and explain my own choices surrounding the use of pronouns when referring to Vern in the section "Something Two."

they're delivered simply. There's also a temporal immediacy, a suddenness, in this short delivery. "A body appeared" and there're no modifiers informing on the space of this scene structuring what this experience means to Vern, or how it unfolds, beyond the fact of the body's appearance.

The following sentence is similarly delivered: "On the other side of her, another" (Solomon 293). "Another" sits fragmentally in the structure of the sentence, and the sentence itself is incomplete—needing the preceding sentence to imply the action (with a predicate), and to imply the meaning of "another" (with the subject). Suturing the second sentence's fragments together with the required information from the first sentence tells us what *this* sentence means. "Another" "body" "appeared" "Next to" Vern. "Body" and "appeared" are borrowed from the description surrounding the first ghostly being's arrival. This fragmented prepositional phrase[11] that moves into the meaning provided by the surrounding sentences builds an interdependency through these quick deliveries. Solomon gives more description in the next sentence, writing that "Cold sloughed off the corpses' ashen and blue-tinged skin" (292-3). "Cool and stiff" is expanded here in the context of what Vern sees and senses as the bodies (now corpses) rest on the bed next to them (Solomon 292). These corpses are just one of the many "hauntings" of *Sorrowland* which until this point in the story, had only terrorized Vern. Vern understands that these "corpses," and the sensorial stimuli that Vern senses them through, is inevitable and uncontrollable. The fragmentary and interdependent description of the bodies'—whom we later learn are named Samuel and Peter—appearance on the bed next to Vern gestures towards Vern's affective relationship with the hauntings.

[11] I provide a longer discussion on prepositions (in their phrased or singular manifestations) in the chapter "Sitting With *Gary in Your Pocket*."

Samuel and Peter are just one of many other hauntings that Vern experiences throughout *Sorrowland*, but they stand out in *Sorrowland* because of what happens after Vern finds them in the motel. The other hauntings of Solomon's text exist in a temporal loop—almost always reenacting the moment of their deaths or other violent moments from their lives, while some remain as corpsely visions who don't act at all. This haunting in the motel re-works the temporal logics of the hauntings by becoming sentient, responsive actors in this scene of the motel. Vern enters this haunting thinking that, like the other hauntings they had experienced, it was a memory, or a rehearsal of an event that was lived by a now-deceased infected person. This haunting appears like many others, as a static, cold, still, momentary depiction of someone's lived experience of pain or the moment of their death. However, this haunting transforms; and in doing so, transforms Solomon's use of the speculative technologies of the novel and pushes the temporal reflections of the text beyond an understanding of past events as iterative, and into an understanding of past events as continuously unfolding.

Vern's scared in the motel and calls their partner Gogo for comfort. As Vern talks about the haunting, Samuel and Peter begin to transform. Solomon writes that "Their skin, which moments ago appeared covered in sores, was smooth and glistened under the flickering overhead light beautifully" (Solomon 295-6). The "sores" on Peter's and Samuel's skin are visual markers of the infection that killed them. After the sores clear, Samuel and Peter awaken, see each other, and embrace. Narrating this to Gogo on the phone, Vern joins in their embrace and the four of them have sex. In this final sex scene of *Sorrowland,* Vern encounters a haunting that traces back to Samuel and Peter's deaths not as subjects infected by the fungus as a part of government experimentation like Vern, but instead as people who were opportunistically infected as a result of them being immunocompromised due to their AIDS infection. This transformative and

descriptive space in the narrative takes the hauntings and layers them with the material and discursive violences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The assumed temporal logics of the hauntings are fundamentally altered in the motel through its portrayal of the subjects of the haunting as being sentient continuations of the deceased infected person who doesn't only reenact violent moments from their past, but who can also perceive and touch the present pleasurably.

Much has been written about *Sorrowland* in the last few years following the novel's publication in 2021, with articles or chapters frequently articulating Solomon's use of the hauntings simultaneously as a textually deployed metaphor for the continuing effects of chattel slavery and as an extension of a Black speculative tradition performed through texts of an array of genres and mediums. However, while these articles frequently discuss Blackness or queer temporalities and structures of haunting in relation to Solomon's text, and claim this speculative-technological production in *Sorrowland* as a complex negotiation of spatiotemporal practices that work to deconstruct ontological and epistemological negotiations of matter and embodiment present in colonial impositions of humanity through antiblack formulations, rarely do these texts engage *both* the racialized and gendered dynamics of *Sorrowland.* And while many of *Sorrowland's* hauntings have been read, interpreted, and theorized, none of the currently available scholarship considers what happens with Samuel and Peter in the motel in their discussions of the metaphorical and spatiotemporal workings of the hauntings. Despite the array of published scholarly engagements with *Sorrowland,* this moment in the motel remains untouched, and untheorized within the racial and gendered logics of the text.

I start this reading of Samuel and Peter's appearance in *Sorrowland* here for a couple of reasons. In part, I include this reading because this scene is central to the epidemiological logics of *Sorrowland* that form the basis of how genre and (non)linearity are deployed by Solomon

throughout the novel, as well as being central to the frameworks of communicability that I hope to gesture towards, and perform, in this project. I also place them here to highlight at the top of this project how I'm understanding Solomon's speculative practice as being one that speculates within and against the anti-Blackness that continues to structure legal and popular discourse surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic. And I place them here because no one else has. I find it remarkable that in the articles that continue to be published about *Sorrowland* outlining the text as one that exists within a long lineage of Black diasporic artistic practices that deconstruct linear time and ontological categorizations, as one commenting on trans and queer embodied experiences that refuse singularity, as one that complicates genre distinctions through its temporal productions of the hauntings, or as one offering posthuman material formations that foreground embodied enmeshment and exposure to the more-than-human world, not a single one has said more than eight words about what's produced narratively, sensorially, and temporally between Vern, Gogo, Samuel, and Peter.

Solomon gives us the information of Samuel and Peter's infection status as a central element to Samuel and Peter's story. It's the second piece of information we learn about them and it's the piece of information present right before they transform (a moment of ghostly transformation that expands the temporal and agentic logics of the hauntings) that becomes the visual marker of their transformation as the sores on their skin fade away. Samuel and Peter exist in the mycelial network of the fungus because they were opportunistically infected by the fungal infection: not because of direct military experimentation, but because they were immunocompromised. Solomon stacks the narratively invented infection that is weaponized against Vern and their entire community, with the reality of AIDS as a disease that continues to disproportionally impact Black communities. This stacking is performed at a pivotal moment in

the text that furthers the diegetic production of temporality and consciousness that serves as the foundation for the fantastical elements of *Sorrowland.* And it continues, after Samuel and Peter awaken, into a scene of extended, and explicitly narrated sexual contact that moves the fantastical productions of *Sorrowland* towards sexual fantasies of contact and contagion re-worked affectively to craft a moment of pleasure and play between Vern, Samuel, Peter, and Gogo.

TEXT AND FLESH: ONTOLOGICAL SPECULATION AND READING PRACTICES

I position *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* as speculative works that do this stretching of fantasy—idle, escapist, material, historical—through their attention to reading and publication as speculative technologies. In understanding Solomon's and Fisher's texts in this way, I consider both the theoretical formulations produced through the narratives provided between the covers, and the narratives enacted across critical and academic receptions of the works as necessary sites of (re)reading. To close read these texts in this way is an engagement with the imaginative productions of the literary works of my study, as well as a poetic practice based in attempts to read and make sense of these different works as they exist in relation. *Sorrowland* could be said to be about uncontainability, or about excessive containability, in genre and its temporal productions that are mirrored through the embodied technological (fantastical) productions of the narrative (Vern, the hauntings, Gogo, Samuel, Peter, etc.), and through mycelial webs that move through time differently. This ecological disposition reveals the queer temporalities at play in the text, and in the logics of embodied risk and expression in the structure of the motel scene. Fisher provides similar spaces of imaginative creation and spatial-sexual engagement in *Gary in Your Pocket:* in his included journal entries, and in his

works of fantasy transposed "into a language that makes those feelings so they can be shared" (37).

Keeling produces a reading of Lorde's "Poetry is Not a Luxury" in the "Preface" of *Queer Times, Black Futures.* She reads Lorde's poetic pronouncement as one that shapes "poetry" as "a vessel for making queerness communicable" (xii). For Keeling, through Lorde, "Language is a vehicle through which sensory knowledge is parsed into common senses, and poetry has the capacity to deterritorialize language, making uncommon, queer senses available to thought. Poetry is a way of entering the unknown and carrying back the impossible" (Keeling xii). In the space and time of poetic performances, new forms of sensory knowledge become available through linguistic estrangement. "The impossible" comes back, maybe material, maybe sensorial, maybe metaphorical, but still shifting the frame of what is thought possible to think. These impossible thoughts, being thought anyways, is a structure of knowledge production that makes "queerness communicable" (Keeling xii). This communicability takes on additional dimensions when read with *Sorrowland,* with its speculative technologies being firmly rooted in histories of infection; and when read with *Gary in Your Pocket,* with Gary Fisher's illness being a central part of many of the pieces in the text, in its marketing and publication as a collected book, and as a central framework in its academic reception.

The type of knowledge project that I read between *Gary in Your Pocket* and *Sorrowland* is one that considers fantasy closely—as impossible dreams *and* sexual yearnings. This fantastical consideration refracts outwards to the ways that Fisher's and Solomon's works have been read. The knowledge processes of these fantastical formulations call forth alternative reading practices—ones that do not concern themselves with descriptions of "idle," "escapist," or destructive as limiting and totalizing values when dreaming forms of life and communion that

are considered "incomprehensible and impossible" (Keeling xii). Looking towards the way that these projects, *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket,* structure acts of reading and reading practices (both inside and outside of academic disciplining), I place my attention in the moments where their fantastical reformulations embrace sexual fantasy as a site of knowledge production. While *Gary in Your Pocket* and *Sorrowland* exist differently in many ways, I put them together because of the resonances between Fisher's project (the text and the practice) and what Solomon lets exist, loudly, in detail, impossible and ringing, in the motel scene and others. What joins these too, is how they show us what, despite being in clear view, isn't looked at more closely. The academic and critical reception of both texts highlight distinct reading practices and critical frameworks that govern the afterlife of their publication through critical modes of meaning making tied to distinct reading practices that at times reproduce gendered and racialized categorizations in order to ensure theoretical legibility.

My archive, constructed through a reading practice of its own, works between *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* as an extension of these "genre-defying" and "slippery" networks of knowledge production through sensorial textual constructions that utilize the textual object and literary form to anticipate and incorporate both the reader and the scholar into its projects (Jones 4). This reading practice follows Vern through the motel; and holds Fisher's journals, thinking in first person in the park, the theatre, or the library. And it asks: What genre is crafted at the intersection of these historical lines of aesthetic production, and these biological lines of contagion and contamination? Solomon and Fisher produce through modes that could be called Afrofuturistic; they produce through engagements with text and temporality that trace sensorial experience that opens up the space for some feelings to be felt again. They go further and embrace sexual fantasy through the speculative technological productions of the text as a

way of reworking the ontological constructions of embodiment and its pleasurable capacities. Before moving into these questions about reading practice and about communicability, it is important to frame my conversation around the artistic sexual formulations of these texts within a larger archive of works that have located spaces of queer temporality and Black sexuality within specific organizations of meaning through the productions of history. As I've begun to track already, my discussion of these texts is informed by a long history of Black queer feminist engagements with Black sexual practices and pleasure, as well as with disparate but frequently overlapping Queer of Color formulations of Black queer sexual practices that function as worldmaking performances.

The anti-Black colonial knowledge projects constructing the ontological structures articulated by scholars like Keeling, Nyong'o, and Jackson are tied to what Hartman frames as the violent reduction of enslaved people's bodies to exchangeable, abstracted units within the economic and legal formulations of chattel slavery that positioned the Black person as a "fungible commodity." Similarly, Hortense Spillers outlines the distinction between body and flesh through colonial gender constructions in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Spillers explains that "the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange" (75). These anti-Black historical productions that worked to position the enslaved person within the violent commodifying productions of chattel slavery are linked to the loss of "at least gender difference in the outcome" where "the female body and the male body becomes a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender specific" (Spillers 67). These anti-Black and gendered movements produce what Spillers terms as pornotroping where:

> 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness"; 4) as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodied sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning. (67)

Spillers's articulation of the distinction between *flesh* and *body,* together with her analysis of pornotroping as the process through which the enslaved subject is rendered a "thing" of sexual availability, provides a crucial foundation for Black feminist approaches that understands Black sexuality as a contentious site of representation where histories of racialized sexual violence continue to shape the terms through which Black women's bodies are imagined and regulated.

This fraught site of racialized sexuality and the violence of representation leads to the simultaneous hypersexualization of Black bodies which structure Black sexualities around hypervisibility, and to an attendant erasure of Black people's sexual practices. This is what Evelynn Hammonds describes in her foundational 1994 article "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality" as "an absent yet-ever-present pathologized black female sexuality" which is how "Black feminist theorists have almost universally described black women's sexuality, when viewed from the vantage of the dominant discourses, as an absence" (131). In the decades following Hammond's and Spillers's discussion of these discursive and representative networks surrounding racialized genders and sexualities, many Black feminists and Black queer studies scholars have mapped these continuously unfolding networks of

representation, sexuality, visibility, and epistemic violence.[12] Specifically, Spillers's discussion of flesh and sexual availability has been picked up in various ways. For example, C. Riley Snorton follows Spillers's discussion of *flesh* and the attending loss of "at least gender difference" in his discussion of trans shadow histories in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Spillers 67). Snorton outlines how Spillers's discussion of *flesh* and the structures of Black gender within chattel slavery produced gender itself as fungible for Black enslaved peoples that, while at once operating as a site of discursive and embodied violence, also provided opportunities for resistance and fugitive movements.

Snorton's discussion of trans shadow histoires that operate through the fungibility of Black genders serves as another site of resistance and speculation. These frameworks of flesh and fungibility are also taken up by Amber Jamilla Musser, who extends Spillers's articulation of pornotroping to argue that "the pornotrope allows us to see that violence toward black and brown people is inextricable from theorizations of sexuality" (7). Furthering her consideration of the objectification linked to the production of flesh, Musser shifts attention toward "the social relations at work in enfleshment," arguing that what she terms "brown jouissance" emerges "in the moments when Thing, Other, and object converge to form selfhood" (13). Building on these formulations, alongside other Black feminist and queer articulations surrounding these frameworks of objectification and posthumanism, my project considers Black queer and feminist speculative texts that imagine from the site of these porous, fungible gender positions, or from these contested sites of racialized sexuality. Rather than treating anti-Black formulations of gender and sexuality solely as technologies of domination, I examine how they become sites of

[12] See also Jennifer Nash's discussion of Black women in pornography in *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race Reading Pornography* and "Black Anality;" or Shoniqua Roach's discussion building from Quashie's articulation of "the quiet" in "Black Sex in the Quiet."

speculative imagination. In this way, I do not read sex scenes as transparent representations of sexuality. Instead, I focus on how Fisher and Solomon narratively frame and structure sexual encounters across their texts in order to approach both reading and publication as speculative technologies: which operate at once, through Solomon and Fisher's narrative formulations that anticipate the meaning-making projects of literary analysis, while simultaneously constructing narratives that formulate their literary and sensorial practices around a negotiation of the objectifying, racializing, and gendering discourses that have historically constituted Black genders and sexualities.

I look towards *Gary in Your Pocket* and *Sorrowland* as two entirely likely sources to map out the fraught, contentious, and overlapping dimensions of how these aesthetic sources offer the opportunity to recognize alternative structures of knowing and touching that reformulate communities of care and sexual practice that play with histories of subjectification through the communal sexual restructuring of spaces to produce alternative networks of knowing and knowledge production. Fantasy becomes a framework to highlight the textual formulations made distinguishable through the technological and ecological renderings of texts shaped through their magical engagement with energy, matter, pleasure, temporality, and embodiment that layer meaning poetically. Fantasy too becomes a layered space: it's a genre, it's the impossible formulated in an out of time moment, and it's rooted in subjective renegotiations of sexual fantasy that are formulated through vast discursive structures of legal, political, and historical organizations of racialized gender. These artistic formulations, these scenes of Black queer sex framed through the contact of time, work through ideological and embodied contacts that move across meanings articulated through loss and experienced alongside ecstatic embodied practices.

These sexual practices that further the ontologically speculative projects of *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* work through the haunting temporalities that unfold in the continuing aftermath of chattel slavery. Alongside these historical orientations that structure the speculative networks of *Sorrowland,* and that are specifically embodied in Fisher's descriptions of his sexual fantasies and published project, are additional layers of historical loss in the face of anti-Black and heteronormative violence exemplified in responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Fisher's illness, alongside the scenes of racialized abjection through his descriptions of his sexual play with racial violence and fetishization, serves as the reason behind a lot of the "inarticulateness" surrounding early scholarly responses to his work (Reid-Pharr 149). Fisher's posthumously published book marks the loss of his life through his past and impending death (depending on how you're viewing the text).

The sexual and fantastical play in Fisher's stories delivered through *Gary in Your Pocket* exist within a lineage of Black HIV/AIDS narratives that Dagmawi Woubshet reads in his project in *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* as a literary practice constructing "a poetics of compounding loss" (24). Woubshet frames these literary practices as responses to "scientific and popular discourses" that did not attend to the lived experiences of people infected with HIV and "instead worked together to represent AIDS only as spectacle and metaphor" (45). The Black speculative practices outlined by scholars like Nyong'o, Keeling, and Jones function differently to these scientific and popular narratives surrounding HIV/AIDS throughout the early decades of the epidemic. Woubshet turns to activist narratives in stories, poems, speeches, and obituaries in the 1990s that analyzed, critiqued, and performed against the formulation of the virus as a "spectacle and metaphor" (45). "A poetics of compounding loss" is Woubshet's articulation coming out of the intersection of Black mourning

practices and HIV/AIDS literatures which construct an "unusual timeline of grammar and loss" that doesn't only look backwards in their acts of mourning but also anticipates loss in a future tense (24). While *Gary in Your Pocket* isn't a text Woubshet reads directly in his project, the speculative and world-building formulations offered in Fisher's textual and sexual practices produce a similar attention to unfolding and predictive loss of life that layers Woubshet's discussion of temporality with imaginative and liberatory ones frequently located in fabulation and futuristic texts. Despite these deathly frames, Fisher's work still speculates towards a futurity where he lives on—made object and textual, but continuously, compoundingly, citationally crafting.

If *Gary in Your Pocket*'s speculative components seem less immediately clear than *Sorrowland*'s, in *this* framing of genre or lineage, that of Black HIV/AIDS literatures, *Sorrowland* becomes the text that requires a bit of reorienting to become legible within the communicatory bounds of this temporal and generic label. While Solomon's text is commonly read as an example of Afrofuturism, fantasy, speculative fiction, horror, eco-horror, neo-slave narratives, and more, *Sorrowland* has yet to be read in relation to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, or in relation to the artists, authors, and activists who wrote through the tragedy and terror of the epidemic. I read *Sorrowland* through this lens and against *Gary in Your Pocket,* not as a stretch, but as an organic movement that considers the epidemiological frameworks of *Sorrowland* and the attending examples of fantastic speculation placed within it by Solomon. Following Woubshet's temporal and death-defying anticipatory frameworks of "a poetics of compounding loss," and tracing the performative and liberatory dimensions of Afro-futuristic and fabulatory reading and writing practices, *Sorrowland* sits as a literary enactment that firmly situates the HIV/AIDS epidemic within a longer historical frame of anti-Blackness and colonial violence. As

Che Gossett describes in their addition to *Queer Necropolitics,* contemporary laws that criminalize HIV serve as "one site in which anti-Blackness, AIDS phobia, queer phobia and carceral violence converge" (64). *Sorrowland*'s epidemiological fabulations that transform throughout the novel work in tandem with the novel's hauntings, and in the scene in the motel, these discursive, cultural, and sexual practices stack together to recontextualize the work with contact and contagion being staged at the textual level within these overlapping dimensions of epidemiological violence and anti-Blackness.

Sorrowland and *Gary in Your Pocket* overlap again when read this way. In their mournful, *sorrow*ful narratives, the presence of historical and personal loss cannot be disentangled. They are narratives that consider death, and the possibility of decay, deep within them. However, these sites of death, decay, and violence are not stagnant, static configurations. *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* are situated around impossibilities: spectacular, speculative impossibilities breaking reality's hold; and fantastical, sexual fantasies finding pleasure despite violent refusal of Black life and joy. These are life affirming, world-building fabulations that, even in their impossibility are imagined and performed *now.* In pushing *Gary in Your Pocket* and *Sorrowland* together in this new categorizing framework, fantastical Black HIV/AIDS narratives, their echoes become clearer, and the political-sensorial work of these projects practices itself through continuous reading.

In his poetic formulation of Black poetry in *Black Aliveness,* Kevin Quashie reads alongside Black pessimism, Black poetry, and Black queer feminisms and explains that "the gambit of *Black Aliveness* is that the black one's ontological dilemma is not in regard to not-being or being-against; the ontological dilemma, as such exists, is being" (11). Not pushing against Afropessimistic understandings of anti-Blackness that continue to attack Black life-

worlds, Quashie moves towards Black poetry in a way that mirrors Amber Jamilla Musser's articulation of a "*yes, and* in relation to Afropessimism" (Musser 9), Quashie tells us:

> Since blackness cannot exist fully, humanly, in the world, we will imagine a world where the condition of being alive is of us. In a black world, the case of our lives is aliveness; not death, not even death's vitality, but aliveness. We are alive, we are alive, or, as a poet once put it, "This is the urgency: Live!" Such aliveness is relation and it moves one into other habitats of (one's) being. (12)

These ontological frames inform on my project's consideration of Fisher's and Solomon's speculative productions which work with matter—both inside and outside—of their narratives to play and fantasize at the site of ontological categorization and epidemiological exposure. In reading these texts together, I consider the distinct artistic practices within *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket,* but I also consider what spreads when they're read together, and what this pairing produces across their different fantastical and temporal projects.

GETTING CLOSER

There's a question at the center of my project: *Why read* Gary in Your Pocket *and* Sorrowland *together?* Followed up by: *Why read only those texts?* My archive is small, in comparison to many other beautiful and expansive projects that analyze through close reading. In the sections preceding this one, I've tried to answer the "together" part of that question for anyone who may find my pair troubling. Instead of answering the "only" of my fantasized question, I want to first distill my question even further, and shift it just a bit: *Why close read at all?* To finalize my introduction to the project that follows, and to better establish my archive as *also* beautiful *and* expansive, I want to first surround the disciplinarily and historically imbricated method of reading known today as "close reading." In my use of the term "close

reading," I hold it as another possible avenue of fantastical relation. The term, described by John Guillory in his 2025 examination *On Close Reading* as "a puzzling anachronism, a contradiction" is one that, while central to the discipline of literary analysis, is linked to the practices of the New Critical approaches to literary studies coming to popularity in the 1930s (15). While the specific methodological and disciplinary commitments of the New Critics are not the focus of this project, the historical association of close reading with New Criticism remains an important consideration for my use of the term.

In *Outside Literary Studies: Black Criticism and the University,* Andy Hines considers New Critical approaches to the study of literary texts within the social and political historical context that surrounded the formulation of formalism. He argues that "New Critical activity [served] as a reactionary and counterrevolutionary response to the political and cultural activities of Black writers" (Hines 7). Formalist approaches that established "ontologies" of language and form and called for the separation of the literary object from its historical and discursive situatedness, as well as from reader response and author intention, were driven by New Critical beliefs surrounding textual autonomy, form, and truth. The literary criticism prescribed to by New Critics, in performing these readings that isolated the literary object from external interplay worked to actively exclude certain forms of writing, and to specifically exclude Black radical writing traditions due to their philosophical investments in creating "literature [that] engages, reveals, and imaginatively portrays the material reality of the Black past, the present struggle, and the future to build" (Hines 2). The historical enmeshment of Black literary productions served as one site through which to justify the exclusion of Black artists and critics from the literary productions of New Critical approaches.

Hines's discussion of literary studies in the 1940s and 1950s traces this New Critical "objectification and isolation of the literary object from the circumstances of its creation" in order to situate these literary practices within anti-Black and classist histories that the contemporary university is still embroiled in (3). Furthermore, Hines locates distinct reading and writing practices produced by "Midcentury Black writers on the left [that] envisioned literary-critical methods and institutions that were opposed to the solidifying interpretive practices of the university and the state" (2). Through these Black "literary-critical methods," Hines narrates how Black leftist authors utilized scenes of interpretation within their literary works that reproduce literary interpretation that suggested through their narrative and formal productions:

> that interpreting Black literature of this period frequently stages scenes of interpretation where the stakes are higher than in formal squabbles. These scenes suggest that interpreting Black literature, Black culture, and Black life can both challenge white supremacist ideas and activate white supremacist violence. They make plain the threat that a socially and politically situated interpretive practice can pose to a political, economic, and social order designed to protect whiteness. (17)

Hines's intervention demonstrates that the interpretive practices of the New Critics, central among which are formalist approaches frequently glossed through the term "close reading," have always been embedded within racialized institutional formations. Hines also opens the question of whether close reading itself must remain tethered to the disciplinary assumptions of New Criticism through his alternative focus on the interpretive practices offered in Black literary productions that served to transcend the New Critic's limited attentions.

Taking up this question from a different disciplinary practice, Paula Moya distinguishes the methodological practice of close reading from these historical frameworks frequently tied to

the practice in her discussion of close reading in *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Rather than trace Black artistic incorporations and critiques to these literary categorizations of value, Moya discusses the histories of New Criticism briefly but ultimately shifts her attention to discuss the methodology of close reading in the context of interdisciplinary reading practices. Moya's "close reading" is defined as "the kind of intensive reading and re-reading that calls for a heightened attention to literary language and form, considering both as semantic structures that mediate authors' and readers' perceptions of the social world" (9). As is framed in Moya's initial definition of her attention to close reading, the text and its "literary language and form" are still of central concern in her articulation of the reading practice, but the ontological sterility and separation of the text from its readers, its authors, and its attending discursive and historical enmeshment are not. For Moya, the close reading of literary works is an important social practice of communication that moves literary analysis towards an attention "to the way works of literature can both figuratively and literally 'move' us" without which, "they miss something essential about the thing itself" (35).

Continuing her discussion of the function close reading performs for close readers, Moya follows the articulation of the literary object made subject of close reading "As aesthetic objects that engage readers deeply on the cognitive-affective level over a duration of time" and explains that:

> works of literature make us think—but they also make us feel. They give us language, while also prompting us to form in our minds images that evoke a whole variety of associations. Literary texts have the potential to alter our perceptions and teach us how to interpret unfamiliar phenomena. They shape our cultural imaginaries and build for us schemas through which we interpret the social world. (Moya 164)

In Moya's treatment of the interdisciplinary and social functions of close reading as a practice, she echoes Lorde's discussion of poetic dreaming. From the unfamiliar object, to the thought, to the feeling, to language, Moya's work with close reading formulates the practice as an embodied and philosophical one that engages with the poetic through the slow, close practice of reading performed outside of the temporal narrative flow of the words on the page.

Close reading, as a description for a range of reading practices in literary studies, is loosely guided by interpretive and analytical practices that attend to specific structural and formal details in a text. It's performed through re-reading, isolating, and extending thought that extrapolates from what the reader *thinks* they can know from the formal construction of the text. Alongside Moya's movement through the possibilities that close reading holds, in my project I do not consider the practice of close reading as a closed one. I consider in my reading of *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* the practice of close reading as a temporal poetic performance built around these polytemporal reading practices that make the reader circle the text. As an open, flowing practice, I consider close reading through a framework of communicability and intimacy that functions at the site of textual resonance and reiteration performed through the spinning referentiality frequently located in the methodological logics behind these approaches to the literary object.

The texts of my archive, anticipating the scholarly impulse to interpret and analyze in a similar way to the historical practices of the authors of the Black arts movements narrated by Hines, produce textually and discursively through an understanding of these reading practices. In *Sorrowland,* Solomon layers the fungal infection's metamorphosis, Vern's sexual awakening, and Vern's literacy narrative all together in the same part of the novel. Vern learns to read through a reading practice that resists disciplinary cohesion and as they do this, articulates a refusal of

gendered categorization that specifically denies the categorizing impulses of modern gender labels because of the discursive violence that operates through these interpreting frameworks. These critically conscious formulations structure *Sorrowland* and the onto-epistemological productions within it through an anticipatory network that resist analytical approaches that would place *Sorrowland* within static articulations of its discursive and literary projects. *Gary in Your Pocket* produces this critical consciousness as well. However, in the case of *Gary in Your Pocket*, this drama is staged at the site of publication and materiality, as well as at the site of truth claims relating to genre and formal categorizations that are directly and repeatedly referenced throughout Fisher's journal entries and stories.

In reading these texts together, I practice a close reading that understands the close of close reading as a proximity. This proximity, coming through the temporal and polytemporal practices of these puttering readings is performed in my project at the site of contact between the reader and the text. I read *Sorrowland* and *Gary in Your Pocket* as texts that presuppose the possible violence of these forms of contact, which through reading practice and a critical engagement, may produce a type of systemic incorporation into the totalizing frameworks of knowledge systems predicated on colonial violence and anti-Blackness. But while the refusals of my texts may gesture towards these violent incorporations, incorporations into ontological constructions of value predicated in whiteness as value, these same texts push outwards and away from these disciplinary incorporations. My project reads at these moments of anticipated incorporation, and at the mediated sexual productions of my texts as moments which gesture towards alternate affects of incorporation and consumption. And that, while not recapitulating, recuperating, or fully redressing the violences of incorporation, push towards understandings of pleasurable incorporation through textual communication. Here, I move between close reading

and reading practice. And hold at the center of my work with close reading the violence of its historical deployment while still understanding its practice otherwise. Building on these claims, I consider the contact of close reading, and what's inherited from these practices which must be understood in their violent historical framings, and may also be recontextualized through Black aesthetic practices of imagination that configure them as pleasurable sites of contact. In this pleasurable practice, a close, intimate reading of the texts of my archive guides my consideration of the textual production and performances unfolding across the layered narrative entanglements with speculation, narrative, sensation; and lingering with these narratives embrace a longing for a type of contact and communicability that considers the textual object as one that seeps and absorbs in its sensorial performances.

CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

In the chapters that make up *The Fantasy of Close Reading: Communicability, Intimacy, and Lingering with Black HIV/AIDS Narratives,* I work to read the textual objects of my archive through their speculative renegotiation of objecthood in extended close readings that I situate as a form of lingering and extended contact with the sensational performances of the texts. In the first chapter, "Reading in the Gaps: Illegibility and Narrative Refusal in Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland,"* I perform close readings surrounding the word "something" as a strategy of opacity that embraces illegibility as a discursive tactic that refuses anti-Black colonial productions of race, gender, and sexuality. Drawing on Black feminist and queer theories, I read these moments alongside the novel's narrative elisions surrounding Vern's sexual history to show how Solomon withholds scenes of sexual violence as a narrative refusal of epistemic and representational violence. Rather than reproducing trauma, *Sorrowland* cultivates alternative forms of speculation and pleasure and positions narrative vagueness as a practice of care.

In the chapter that follows, I stay with *Sorrowland* and build on this foundation. In "Reading Sex: Racialized Surveillance and Sexuality in Sorrowland's Sex Scenes," I continue to consider the narrative framing of Vern's sexual exploration through Solomon's imaginative deployment of surveillance and sensation as technologies of perception linked to Vern's fungal transformation and speculative sensory capacities. Drawing on theories of surveillance, flesh, and sensation, I read Vern's sexual encounters as sites where racialized surveillance is transformed into practices of pleasure and healing. Through speculative technologies of perception, the novel reconfigures exposure and vulnerability as opportunities for embodied exploration. Solomon's depiction of Vern's sexuality challenges violent systems of categorization, producing alternative forms of Black pleasure and community that embraces queer and HIV/AIDS histories.

In the final chapter of this project, "Sitting with *Gary in Your Pocket,"* I move from *Sorrowland*'s narrative formulations surrounding speculative sensational practices and read *Gary in Your Pocket* through the poetic and fictive pieces of Fisher's text, as well as the creative and imaginary engagements of the published scholarly articles and chapters that take on Fisher's oeuvre of manuscripts without the need to look elsewhere for a truth about Fisher. In doing these readings, I consider Fisher's fantastical play with matter, story, text, and sex as fabulatory life-defining practices in the face of death. These fabulatory practices produce forms of embodied relation through *Gary in Your Pocket's* textual, material, and aesthetic constructions. I end the project on a close reading of one of Gary Fisher's stories: "Red Cream Soda." In this reading, I argue that *Gary in Your Pocket* extends Fisher's engagement with racialized sexuality, objectification, and HIV/AIDS through the materiality of the text itself and through storytelling as a form of haunting. These material and narrative productions in *Gary in Your Pocket* push out

from the narrative form, and through the utilization of the textual object, challenge the readers to confront their own relationship to Fisher, through writing and acts of reading.

II: READING IN THE GAPS: ILLEGIBILITY AND NARRATIVE REFUSAL IN RIVERS SOLOMON'S *SORROWLAND*

Something haunts Rivers Solomon's 2021 novel *Sorrowland.* This *thing* shifts, grows, infects, and metamorphizes throughout the novel. It follows the novel's protagonist, Vern, and it shows up, in body and in concept, again and again. "Something" is repeated, is ubiquitous. Solomon begins the novel with Vern hiding in the woods outside of the Black religious compound where they grew up as they give birth to their two children, Howling and Feral. This compound, The Blessed Acres of Cain (or Cainland), is led by Reverend Sherman and is framed as a Black utopian society that was initially founded as a refuge from the violent structures of whiteness, antiblackness, and consumption present in modern America. While Cainland was created with these utopian concepts and longings, the insidious and controlling structures present in Cainland unravel throughout *Sorrowland* until Vern uncovers that the United States government has infiltrated Cainland and reshaped it as a tool for medical experimentation and military development.

In this chapter, I begin by grounding my reading of *Sorrowland* in multiple moments in the text that use the word "something." By reading moments in the text where "something" is discursively deployed, I start with thinking about *Sorrowland's* arrangements around unnaming and unknowing (unnameability and unknowability). I then move on to a discussion of the critical and academic reception of *Sorrowland* to posit an amended reading practice seated in my readings of something. To do this work with "something," I begin by placing my reading in the context of Denise da Silva's articulation of Black feminist poethics as a foundation for the reading practice that organizes this collage of moments from *Sorrowland.* Building on this initial foundation, I move to two other textual groupings surrounding Solomon's use of the word

"something" to trace a layered engagement with opacity and illegibility that structures *Sorrowland*'s discursive engagement with racialized gender and sexuality. Following Hortense Spillers's discussion of the historical production of *flesh* for enslaved people and C. Riley Snorton's work with trans shadow histories that reveal the gendered possibilities of fleshiness, I work around the term "something" to discuss Solomon's production of Vern as a character who resists modern gender categorizations as a practice of discursive and sexual liberation. I layer these gendered refusals with Jesse Cohn's recent reading of Vern's literacy narrative throughout *Sorrowland* to ground Solomon's work through an attention to discursive and critical interpretations that *Sorrowland* structures an awareness around.

I end my reading of "something" by considering Vern's embodied practices of desire—contextualized in the first part of *Sorrowland* around Vern's continually unfolding communal and sexual trauma, and Vern's search for care in the face of their pain. Vern's history of sexual trauma and exploration is implied throughout the first part of the novel, and in the second and third parts of the novel, Solomon moves from these initial representations of harm towards Vern's sexual exploration. While Solomon's narrative works with sexual contact and Vern's sexual exploration offers these alternative sensorial descriptions, I do not move directly into a discussion of Vern's sexual exploration in *Sorrowland.* Instead, I pause with the first part of the novel and consider Solomon's structural refusals surrounding scenes of anti-Blackness and sexual violation. I move from reading alongside the opacity of "something" towards Solomon's larger narrative structures surrounding Vern's sexual practices in the first part of *Sorrowland* to contextualize Vern's later sexual exploration. Solomon's work throughout the first part of the novel utilizes narrative elision to refuse structures of exposure surrounding anti-Black violence that, as Saidiya Hatman describes, "too often… immure us to pain by virtue of familiarity" (3).

In this reading, I hope to highlight a way that Solomon's work further unravels the discursive structuring of Black bodies and their pleasures within systems of racial capital and violent colonial extraction. I begin here with "something," to practice a reading of Solomon's novel that thinks about its productions of pleasure as and against the *body* turned *flesh* in a way that reveals the possibilities of fleshiness and whatever it can create. My movement through Solomon's utilization of strategic vagueness through the word "something" considers the poetic qualities of *Sorrowland's* narrative refusals through examples of direct and indirect discourse that shape Solomon's narrative engagement with racialized genders and sexualities as sites of resistance. This production of refusal as resistance to the epistemic violence built into categorizations relating to race, gender, and sexuality is infused into the narrative structure and plot of Solomon's novel as well. I extend these considerations of pleasure and desire that are uncovered through my readings of "something" and the frameworks of recognition and recognizability that they gesture towards and refuse in my examples by placing the readings in relation to a structural refusal crafted into Solomon's novel.

Beginning my attention to the refusals of *Sorrowland* establishes a theoretical and historical framework that works through Solomon's treatment of Vern's sexual history and exploration that unfolds across the novel. I move through my readings of "something" as evidence of Solomon's work with discursive illegibility and read moments of narrative elision that are structured around flashbacks and non-linear temporal productions. Despite the use of flashback in the first part of *Sorrowland* that informs on Vern's sexual history, Solomon does not include a narration of the scenes relating to Vern's sexual past and present in moment-to-moment descriptions. Instead, Solomon utilizes narrative elision through the narrating voice and implies the sexual actions that work to inform this part of Vern's trajectory through the novel. By

reading the treatment of scenes depicting sexual contact in the first part of this novel, I argue that Solomon produces a narrative structure that refuses to reproduce scenes of sexual trauma, manipulation, or coercion in a way that extends the utilization of narrative refusal and vagueness as a site of care and resistance.

READING "SOMETHING"

In *Sorrowland,* Vern experiences the world outside of Cainland for the first time. As Vern moves further and further away from the compound each new experience reveals the physical and discursive violence that Vern had been subjected to and had internalized throughout their childhood. As Vern's worldview unravels and Vern moves towards uncovering Cainland's infiltration by the United States military, Vern learns how that infiltration shaped the rituals and beliefs that the leaders of Cainland structured Vern's life around. I begin with reading the word "something" in moments of direct and indirect discourse in *Sorrowland* to read the ways that ambiguity and discursive vagueness work as a moralizing impulse to structure Vern's embodied practices of gender and sexuality. What Vern doesn't know in *Sorrowland* begins as a site of fear, terror, and trauma. In the beginning of the novel, there's something hunting Vern, Howling, and Feral in the woods. Vern names it "the Fiend" but doesn't know what or why it's there. Simultaneously, Vern is plagued by "the Hauntings" which are waking terrors, dreams, or visions that Vern suffers through as a result of the secret medical experiments performed on the members of Cainland by the United States government. And it's present in Vern's own processes of survival and existence within the layered systems of biological and epistemological control imposed upon them. Solomon constructs and deploys these *somethings* throughout the novel and in doing so, engages with the epistemological structures, of domination and otherwise, that work to shape, interpret, and utilize Vern's body.

In her piece, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," Denise Ferreira da Silva considers "The Thing" as a way to think against the onto-epistemological violence produced through universal reasoning's construction of the Subject and the "Category of Blackness."[13] Da Silva explains that she does this work with "The Thing" "to give you an idea of the kinds of description that just become available if 'The Thing' guides our imagination" (93). Speaking with Fanon's constructions of Black Ontology, da Silva explains that Fanon's "placing [of] the Black Man among Objects, as another Object" helps to shape "this Black Feminist Poethic's engagement with the Quest(ion) of Blackness, the question that unravels the racial dialectic, [and] has no qualms with thingness" (87). Beyond qualms with this construction of "thingness," da Silva further works with the onto-epistemological category of the thing in her attention to an understanding of a world built outside of "the iron hinges of universal reason" (86).

The "Reconstructing" of a world requires, in da Silva's poetic attention to philosophy and this Quest(ion) of Blackness, the End of the World as it is shaped by a universal understanding of space and time. Da Silva explains that "Without the laws and forms of universal reason, and its formulations of Space and Time—that is, the figuring of the World as a Plenum inspires a description of the existence as marked by virtuality: matter imaged as contingency and possibility rather than necessity and determinacy" (92).[14] This framing of matter as contingent

[13] Here, I preserve da Silva's use of capitalization to delineate the moments where I am relying on her poetic utilization of form to communicate the structural and historical resonances held within these terms.

[14] I'm attending to this term, as da Silva does, in a footnote. Da Silva explains this articulation of moving away from the conceptualization of a "Universe"—that is, space in which matter is present, or, the space that holds all matter—and moving towards a conceptualization of the "Plenum"—as space *as* matter. Da Silva explains this through Leibniz's assertion that "'everything is a plenum, which makes all matter interconnected'" (96). The Plenum alters an approach to existing with and within and as matter that highlights, as stated by Leibniz, how:

> Every motion has some effect on distant bodies, in proportion to their distance. For each body is affected, not only by those in contact with it, and in some way feels the effect of everything that happens to them, but also, through them it feels the effects of those in contact with the bodies with which it is itself

works with (works as) the thing beyond "categorization[s that] function in an ontological context governed by Time" that, da Silva hopes, "will emancipate the thing from Categories (strategies of particularization)" (da Silva 87). Da Silva's engagement with space, time, and the rearticulation of matter as a plenum, works through these concepts in a way that practices a Black Feminist Poethics that engages with the linguistic and affective structures of the poetic, the scientific, and the fantastic and is necessarily informed by an attention to the structuring force of racial capital with/as universal reasoning that upholds the (white) Subject.[15] In this attention, da Silva notes:

> that these descriptors are not meant to name or determine something, which would be nothing more than a rehearsal of the moves of the philosophers of universal reason, in its historical and scientific stages. They are guides for the imagination. When virtuality guides our imagining of political existence, then the only significant political demand is Reconstruction: the end of state capital is the demand for the restoration of total value expropriated through the violent appropriation of the productive capacity of native lands and slave labor. (94)

Da Silva's piece does not attempt to reinscribe a singular meaning of the (W)orld in her deconstruction of it. Through da Silva's articulation of The Thing, of the vibrant and contingent matter of the thing, she touches on the dangerous processes of naming as categorization that

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> immediately in contact. From this it follows that this communication extends to any distance whatsoever. As a result, every body is affected by everything that happens in the universe, to such an extent that he who sees all can read in each thing what happens everywhere, and even what has happened or will happen, by observing in the resent what is remote in time as well as in space. (da Silva 96)

Shifting from this conceptualization of the Universe to the Plenum works in da Silva's piece to further reject the singularity of the Subject and the World that is produced through the Subject's use of universal reason (or vice versa).

[15] Here, I shift da Silva's use of the term "virtuality" to the framework of fantasy as informed by my earlier to discussion of the categorizing logics of genre in this project.

cannot construct a world outside of colonial logics of race and capital. Da Silva's articulation of these onto-epistemological regimes and their parts engages with *something* ("these descriptors are not meant to name or determine *something*" (94; emphasis added)). This engagement shapes a sense of what something can do, and how it can function as a way of imagining, of playing with, matter. This something outlined by da Silva can also be traced within *Sorrowland* through Solomon's approach to play and pleasure alongside the categorization of matter.

SOMETHING, ONE

On the night that Vern ran away from Cainland, Brother Jerome came by on his usual rounds. Each night in Cainland, a member of the community (a Cainite) would go house to house. This person would then restrain each Cainite to their beds with straps and cuffs to contain the sleeping bodies of the Cainites as they experienced the terrors brought on by the Hauntings in their sleep. On Vern's last night they teased Brother Jerome about his presence and purpose. Vern pointed out that "If I was really so dangerous in my sleep, I'd break out of my straps, sleepwalk to your house, come in, and strangle you. Now, have I ever done anything of the kind?" (Solomon 64). Brother Jerome responds to Vern, telling them: "You are something else, Vern" (64). This construct of "something else" is familiar to Vern. It "was how Cainites politely expressed displeasure in Vern. Lately, it seemed someone said that to her at least once a day" (65). This common phrase, of claiming for another this something else-ness, touches the categorizations outlined by da Silva that link the production of the subject with the totalizing tools of universal reason. "Something else" names the ways that Vern exists outside of what the other Cainites understand as pleasurable. Vern is in this moment expressed through their production of "displeasure." Vern is "something else," a name for the displeasurable thing

refusing the categories of being and behavior supplied to them within accepted or dominant paradigms.

In this way, "something else" could be read as a linguistic marker for what da Silva explains as "Blackness's capacity to signify otherwise—beyond universality and its particular arrangement of Space and Time, but also away from transcendentality (self-determination)—[that] invites a consideration of the possibility of knowing without modern categories" (84). If we are to follow this trace of *something else* down this line of thought, it can further work with da Silva's claims that "beyond capital—and its colonial, national, and imperial architecture—Blackness signals the creative capacity, which is a quality only apparent when one contemplates the World as Plenum and not as Universe" (86). This move, this reading, this attention to five words that I've produced here requires a leap between *something else* and Blackness as da Silva shapes it in her critique. While I do not (cannot and would not) provide a reading that attempts to determine a singular approach to Blackness as a sign or signifier, as an embodied and constructed reality, I do want to think through the possibilities opened up by reading this moment in Solomon's narrative as an instance of epistemological excess that reveals the looping inability of the subject and universal reason when met with *something else*.[16] In letting this leap remain and holding these readings together, Solomon's "something else" can be understood as

[16] In making this tie, I want to attend to the systems of articulation, naming, and renaming that flow through academic texts as another form of determination. I want to make clear that this tie is but one reading, and one assertion, of Blackness that utilizes the framework as metaphor while insisting on an embodied referent. I am self-conscious of this construction as one that reproduces yet another "ritual of renomination" and determination marking the possibilities of Blackness as a hermeneutic, a way of matter, and also as a quasi-phenotypical structure thrust upon Black people within the biopolitical and necropolitical structures of neoliberal America (Moten i). Instead, I think here of producing one reading, which hopefully has the capacity to exist among many others. I think here with Moten's initial explanation of his project in *Black and Blur: consent not to be a single being:*

> The essays in Black and Blur attempt a particular kind of failure, trying hard not to succeed in some final and complete determination either of themselves or of their aim, blackness, which is, but so serially and variously, that it is given nowhere as emphatically as in rituals of renomination, when the given is all but immediately taken away. (Moten i)

a narrative moment marking Vern's inability to be contained within the categorizing logics of Cainland. Something else here engages with the processes of "emancipating Blackness from the World… [that] requires [that] knowing and doing be emancipated from Thought, unhinged from the many ways in which Thought—the said seat of the universal—is limited, constrained, and arrested by Truth" (da Silva 86). This first reading of "something else" in Solomon's *Sorrowland,* establishes an engagement within the text to universal reasoning's production of the thing and the possibilities that open up when this thing is read in its excess.

SOMETHING, TWO

This engagement with *Sorrowland*'s somethings touches too on my considerations of how to talk about Vern carefully. By this I mean how to hold a conversation about Vern, a fictional character living in Solomon's works, that allows for an imaginative construction of their personhood requiring an engagement with how they live in the text and how they could live otherwise. I locate this initial reading and performance of care within the use of pronouns in this project. Throughout Solomon's narrative, the narrating voice refers to Vern using pronouns understood institutionally to refer to feminine gender identities. Within the voice of the narrating prose Vern is referred to with "she/her." This is reproduced in my text here when I quote Solomon directly; however, the use of this referent is not reproduced within my own narration. This decision is one that I make in my attempts to highlight the discursive deconstruction of gendered language deployed by Solomon through my reading of the disjuncture between the gendered logics that shape the use of language in the narrating voice at the beginning of *Sorrowland* and the structures of refusal produced by Solomon throughout the text. To explain more fully why I've chosen to engage with my text and Solomon's text in this way, I will go back to *Sorrowland* and another moment of something.

Later in the novel Vern leaves the woods with Feral and Howling to escape the Fiend's increasingly violent attacks that attempt to force Vern to return to Cainland. Vern travels to a place they heard about from their childhood friend, Lucy. Lucy had been a young girl who grew up with Vern in Cainland, and whom Vern thought had escaped years before. Lucy's mother was supposed to bring Lucy to her aunt's as both escaped Cainland. Vern has a loose idea of where Lucy might be, and, in fleeing the Fiend's attacks, followed the traces they had in their memory of Lucy's supposed whereabouts. In their search for safety, Vern, Howling, and Feral find Lucy's aunt, Bridget; however, Lucy is not with her. Bridget takes Vern and their children into her care and brings Vern, Howling, and Feral to her remote cabin home. Here, Vern meets Gogo, Bridget's niece. Vern and Gogo slowly build a relationship and reveal themselves to each other in this moment of safety and reprieve in Vern's narrative.

During this time, Vern and Gogo have a conversation about their genders. Gogo, a member of the Lakota nation, explains to Vern that she is *winkte* and shares what that description means. Upon learning the gendered possibilities that exist outside of the structuring logics of Cainland and the heteropatriarchal constructions present in dominant political, cultural, and social configurations of identity, Vern reveals that "I'm kind of like you, too" (Solomon 237). Vern "admits" this, looking at Gogo "questioningly" and explains that "I'm in-between" (237). Vern says this "quietly, looking away shyly" and in response:

> Gogo reached for Vern's chin and turned her face to her. "It's okay," she assured.
>
> "There's a word for that, you know. In English."
>
> "I'd rather not know it, then," said Vern.
>
> Gogo nodded. "Why not?"

> "Because without a name for it, it's just something I am. A part of life. Once it's got a name, I know that means someone has studied it, dissected it, pulled it apart. When something has a name, they can say it's bad," said Vern, and she didn't want to hear anybody else's thoughts on what was bad anymore. (Solomon 237-8)

In this shared moment Gogo and Vern build a space of being and speaking and knowing that refers to and relies on the violent structures of determination and the ways that it wounds the subjects within it while simultaneously anticipating and rejecting the wounds that those structures could further impose.

In my consideration of how to talk about Vern and *Sorrowland* carefully, my own engagement with systems of categorization and determination must also be considered. In attempting a careful attention to Solomon's narrative, it feels necessary to also mark the reinscription of harm even as I strive for care. I have chosen to preserve Solomon's narrative structuring and use of "she" and "her" in relation to Vern. I have chosen, in my own prose, to refer to Vern using "they" and "them." I have done this not in a mode meant to correct the narrative choices of Solomon, but instead to highlight the limitations of care within the genre that I write, through the voice that I have available, and within the institution that I'm writing it for. I said earlier that Gogo and Vern discuss Vern's understanding of gender within a space of "safety" crafted between them; safety here refers to a system of trust and care that I do not feel comfortable claiming exists within the framework of this project. As such, I do not assume that the gendered referents "she" and "her" can signify the same things as what is constructed by Solomon throughout *Sorrowland.* In bringing Vern into this project, regardless of attempts towards carefulness, I am placing Vern within the systems of determination and naming, of "dissection," that they refused. Every insistence through the imperfect referents that are "they" or

"them" in this project should be understood as an inability of this project to do justice to the work of *Sorrowland.*

Despite this inability in my own discursive framing, what can be brought to *Sorrowland,* or, what *Sorrowland* brings into these discussions surrounding Black sex and being resonates deeply with the work of Black feminism and Black queer theory. I practice using pronouns in the way that I do as a process of care, even as I engage with and reproduce violence in the assertion of that process, because of the quest(ions) that Solomon's text opens and forces upon readers of *Sorrowland* and of these institutionalized disciplines of knowledge. In applying theories of Black feminism and Black queer theory, theories that encounter how the Black body is shaped through (and shapes) sex and flesh within white-colonial-extractive epistemologies, I mean to highlight the material histories and histories of thought that have worked to deconstruct an onto-epistemological construction of the category of Blackness.

Black queer feminist theories and readings of the historical racialization of gender and sexuality help to inform my use of pronouns when talking about Vern. In Vern and Gogo's conversation, "something" functions in the place of categorization or determination and performs a denial of institutionalized naming and the static approach to knowing that comes with it ("it's just something I am" (Solomon 238)). The pronouns "she" and "her" are what Solomon uses in *Sorrowland* to refer to Vern; however, Vern's articulation of their gender to Gogo, in the space of safety that is built between them, does not fit within an institutionalized understanding of what the terms "she" and "her" signify. In this way, Solomon further engages with acts of refusal shaped by the way that Vern touches structures that are already enacting violence through forced incorporation. "She" and "her" become uncertain referents when deployed by Solomon about Vern in *Sorrowland.* The pronouns in the narrative voice engage with an instability of

gender, or an inability of binary gender constructions, and the language used to codify them, to account for the ways that subject-formation and self-knowing occur despite seemingly totalizing epistemological regimes of determinism.

Vern's articulation of the violent processes of knowing—"dissecting," "studying," "pulling apart," "naming"—highlights a process of knowledge formation that remains with "*something.*" This violence of knowing speaks to the racializing logics of gender and the gendered logics of race that Hortense Spillers works through in her seminal 1987 text, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Spillers outlines how the gender and kinship structures available to the Black person in contemporary America continue to be informed by the *ungendering* and later *mis*naming of the Black woman that began in the hold of the slave ship. This formation of meaning-making that Spillers reads in the Middle Passage reverberates into contemporary America discursively, culturally, legally, and socially. Spillers demonstrates how the logics of the slave ship that worked to forcibly shape Black bodies as fungible commodities, revealed through her readings of the ledgers found on fifteenth to eighteenth century slave ships, were based in the production of "a distinction… between 'body' and 'flesh' and impose[d] that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions" (67). Furthering this explanation, Spillers explains that:

> before the "body" there is the "flesh," the zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. …If we think of the "flesh" as the primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or "escaped" overboard. (67)

Spillers reads the history and the practices of the Middle Passage and of chattel slavery in America in a way that outlines the discursive constructions forced upon the enslaved person's body.

This making of flesh and the histories and narratives surrounding it are read by Spillers as crafting conditions where "one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as *quantities*" (72). What Spillers produces through this attention to the grammars of American chattel slavery that constructs this "materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh 'ungendered'" is "a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations" (68). The praxis and theory articulated by Spillers is picked up and attended to in diverse ways by Black queer feminist theorists and artists who continue to work through "a past that is not past" that follows these processes of *ungendering, mis*naming, and transforming gender and Black beings and bodies that enable Black social and physical death (Sharpe 13).

C. Riley Snorton furthers these attentions to Black gender and the grammars surrounding it in his work *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity.* Snorton follows Spillers's readings of gender in historical productions and performances of Blackness and "trace[s] collateral genealogies of blackness and transness in which captive and divided flesh functions as malleable matter for mediating and remaking sex and gender as matters of human categorization and personal definition" (20). In tracing these genealogies, Snorton reads a trans "shadow history" within a historical archive that outlines a dimension of racialized sexuality produced through the grammars of chattel slavery within which "transness became capable, that is, differently conceivable as a kind of being in the world where gender—though biologized—was not fixed but fungible, which is to say, revisable within blackness, as a condition of possibility"

(59). This "condition of possibility" as described by Snorton led to "the ungendering of blackness [becoming] a site of fugitive maneuvers wherein the dichotomized and collapsed designations of male-man-masculine and female-woman-feminine remained open—that is fungible—and the black's figurative capacity to change form as a commoditized being engendered flow" (59). Snorton's archive reveals not only the ungendering of Black bodies in chattel slavery and plantation life, but also how this ungendering led to gender for the enslaved person to itself be a fungible quality.

Through this reading of gender as a racialized and racializing practice, Snorton outlines the ways that trans possibility can be traced through these imposed structures of embodied categorization. Elaborating on this concept, Snorton crafts a reading of a historical archive that reveals how:

> blackness functioned as a site for an elaboration of gender in which the fungible interchangeability of sex for chattel persons revealed gender within blackness to be a polymorphous proposition. The ungendering of blackness, then, opens onto a way of thinking about black gender as an infinite set of proliferative, constantly revisable reiterations figured "outside" of gender's established and establishing symbolic order. Its symbolic order, which is simply one articulation of the ordering of things, relies upon gendered others to maintain an epistemological coherence. (74)

Snorton furthers the reading of the ungendering of Black bodies within the quantitative framework of chattel slavery to provide an attention to the trans possibilities that have been lived within this violent ordering of flesh.

Snorton's articulation of the fungibility of gender when considered within these historical configurations of Blackness provides contextualization for the gendered language used in the

narration of *Sorrowland.* The narrative voice deployed by Solomon in *Sorrowland* performs a discursive inability to name Vern within the static construction of essentialized sex that would not be remediated by a shift in the use of pronouns. Snorton articulates how his attention to gender within archives coming out of chattel slavery consider "gender as an always racial and racializing construction" and states that the "polymorphic proposition" that was sex and gender for enslaved people functioned "as a strategy for living and dying" (66). When Vern refuses to learn the name for being "in-between," they redefine the terms of classification by refusing the signifying potential of contemporary gender identity categories to recognize them even when opened to non-binary possibilities (Solomon 237). Solomon's approach to Vern's stated gender identity in *Sorrowland* revolves around a refusal of incorporation that instead embraces the liberatory capacity of illegibility through a practice of misnaming. The "figurative capacity to change form" that is produced through gender's fungibility within the commoditization of Blackness is not located within the gendered language used to describe Vern in *Sorrowland* (Snorton 5). It is "just something" they are, it is just "a part of life" and living for Vern (Solomon 237). In reading *Sorrowland,* the "polymorphous proposition" that is "gender within blackness" is present in the narrative's approach to pronouns transforming the referential load that "she" and "her" carries (Snorton 66).

This approach to pronouns is part of what I've categorized as a type of careful reading of *Sorrowland*. It is an attempt to read the character of Vern through an understanding of the inevitable inability for Vern to be recognized fully within this piece. In thinking about what this careful reading entails, and about care and its limitations in literary criticism, I think, in part, with Hil Malatino's articulation of searching for trans art and artifacts in the historical archive. Malatino explores in his 2020 text, *Trans Care*, how the cis-centered construction of care labor

and care ethics don't fully conceptualize what caring for each other looks like for trans communities, and specifically, trans communities within university spaces. Speaking with Barthes's attention to "the 'fascism' of language," Malatino marks a difficulty for trans care work:

> when writing about (of, for, with) those subjects who appear, spectral, in the archives: the fact that the categories operative in language—masculine/feminine, or the informal, singular *you* and the formal, plural *you,* for instance—"are coercive laws" that "permit communication… but in exchange (or on the other hand) impose a way of being, a subjecthood, a subjectivity on one: under the weight of syntax, one must be *this* very subject and not another." ...In order to communicate *about* these lives, you engage in forms of speculation, projection, invention, and translation that inevitably fail to render subjecthood faithfully. The piecemeal, the partial, the imperfect is all you have. Each claim you make is overdetermined and only ever *possibly* resonant with the vicissitudes of their lived experience. The terms you use to describe folks are inevitably, as Barthes attests, coercive, too forceful, assertive, and declarative to do justice to the complexity and nuance of experience. This intensifies with trans subjects, because we experience ourselves so often, and so acutely, as trapped and constrained by language. (56-7)

Malatino touches an archive full of people whom he doesn't know but whom he imagines how to care for and about. To engage with these subjects of this archive, "who appear, spectral," requires "forms of speculation, projection, invention, and translation that inevitably fail to render subjecthood faithfully" (Malatino 57). To speak about a spectral archival figure is to expose them (again) to "the categories operative in language" and to make a decision about

how they're exposed (56). Malatino's attention to care in *Trans Care* holds these categorizations and avenues of overdetermination and harm close, recognizing them as central to a practice of communication that may lead to the cultivation of further collectivity and trans community.

This practice of communication, this cultivation of community, is central to Malatino's rumination on care. What care is, how to be caring, shifts. Part of what makes up the process of recognizing care, in Malatino's construction, is a "deep [feeling of] responsibility" to the material that makes up trans archives (58). Malatino explains that "This responsibility entails an ethical obligation to narrate justly… To care for these archives, to care for these lives, means, minimally, 'cultivating openness to irreducible alterity,' admitting that there are unknowable dimensions to our entanglements" (58-9). The work of caring, of touching these archives carefully, is an active, ongoing work. Malatino describes this work as a "practice" stating that "Practices of care are always part of an emergent ethos. Because care isn't abstract, but only ever manifested through practice—action, labor, work—it is integral to our ways of doing" (40-1). To practice caring is a form of doing and engaging that requires an openness, an entangledness. To be entangled is a critical practice of care that I attempt to extend to *Sorrowland* by highlighting my authorial choices that actively work against those deployed by Solomon.

Malatino and Snorton both work from different historical archives to reconstruct trans histories. Snorton, through his specific attention to Black trans histories and the inextricability of gender and race, offers a framework within which to understand Solomon's narrative utilization of gendered language through pronouns. Vern's refusal to learn a name for their gender identity anticipates the violence of what Malatino describes as being "trapped and constrained by language" (57). Solomon's use of pronouns within the narrative voice attends to the violence of gendered language without assurances of a solution that can be achieved through a performance

of an amendment to the structures that that violence is wielded through. Snorton's reading of trans "shadow history" in his archive provides a contextualization for colonial gender systems that are intimately and historically tied to systematic racialized gender violence which I read as working within Solomon's narrative choices surrounding gendered language and pronouns used for Vern.

These theories and formulations of attention and recognition help to inform an idea of what it means to read Vern carefully. "Writing about (of, for, with)" Vern requires an active practice of care too that I'm attempting to place in this extended discussion of the use of pronouns in *Sorrowland* (Malatino 56). To think about Solomon's deployment of gendered language in the narrative voice is to think about how Solomon engages with flesh through Vern's refusal of gendered categorization. Spillers explains that "If we think of the 'flesh' as the primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness" (67); and Vern explains their refusal because "that means someone has studied it, dissected it, pulled it apart" (Solomon 238). I begin with this theoretical framework and this attention to talking about Vern because, despite Vern's refusal in the narrative, the very fact that I'm writing about them and theorizing with them is a refusal of their refusal to be studied in this context. I think there's something wrong with touching Vern like this. I think there's something wrong with using they/them, but there's something worse if, given the framework this chapter tries to build (the *scope* this chapter looks through), I perform an unquestioned reproduction of the textual pronouns provided.

SOMETHING, THREE

My final engagement with the explicit *somethings* in *Sorrowland* points me in the direction of desire. Twice more in Solomon's text the term something appears in its unnamable

tendrils. In both utterances, "something" relates to a desire that remains unnamed. Early in the novel, Solomon writes that Vern "fled the compound in want of something, and though she'd been gone for only a short while, she already knew she'd never find it" (10). And later in the first part of the novel, Solomon writes that "Vern didn't know what she wanted. She was a girl made of aches and she flung her body at the world in the hopes that something, anything, might soothe the tendernesses" (75). Like the earlier "something" that Vern was labeled as that marked the "displeasure" of the Cainites, these two manifestations of the word could be understood as Vern's search for a type of pleasure, or as a desire for pleasure. This desire (this *want*) for pleasure or for care, for something to soothe, speaks to the frameworks of redress deployed and questioned by many Black feminist scholars; and in *Sorrowland,* the thing that heals and soothes the body and the flesh lives unnamed, unrealized in these early deployments of "something." This desire and the search for what could soothe Vern in a world of woundedness takes on an instability, an unnameability, that the other "somethings" shape. It places the possibilities for redress, justice, or just care outside of the framework of the onto-epistemological structures and ways of knowing and naming that shape the wounds through exclusion and denial and through inclusion and incorporation.

Jesse Cohn follows a similar path through *Sorrowland* as what I outline in my reading of the word "something." While he focuses his attention on a different cohering logic to the passages that he reads from Solomon's text, Cohn organizes his engagement around many of these same narrative moments. In his attention to Solomon's novel in "'Vile Matter': New Materialism and the Black Anarchism of Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland*," Cohn briefly maps the early critical reception of *Sorrowland* that read the "Southern gothic setting" of the novel as a tie to "Black trauma" (Cohn 308) before beginning with a reading of Vern's "want of something"

(Solomon 10). Responding to the earlier scholarly assertions that *Sorrowland* serves as a text utilizing genre and speculative tropes to represent Black trauma, Cohn states that while these readings are "well founded, this line of argument overlooks the emancipatory dimensions of *Sorrowland:* its engagements with queerness, with Black and Indigenous freedom movements, and with anarchism, all of which provide it with a different conception of materiality and an affirmative model of queer desire" (308). This "affirmative model of queer desire" becomes a central claim within Cohn's argument about *Sorrowland* as a text that situates itself within a historical and literary framework that engages with Black trauma and pain but ultimately structures its narrative around Vern's journey towards multiple forms of liberation. Cohn articulates his claims around the emancipatory framework at the core of *Sorrowland* through an initial discussion of desire. To read this trajectory of desire in the novel, Cohn begins by quoting one of these "somethings" directly: "'She'd fled the compound in want of something, and…she already knew she'd never find it'" (Cohn 309). Immediately following this quote, Cohn states that "Before Vern can escape the failed escape that is Cainland, she has to experience affirmative desire, a desire that produces new relationships and potentializes a 'more intense and freer life'" (309). Here, Cohn refers to Cainland itself as a "failed escape" while also pointing towards Vern's ongoing escape from Cainland. Vern, still living in the woodlands surrounding the compound, is outside the walls of Cainland but not yet free from its physical and psychological hold.

Vern's "want" that drove their flight that remains unrealized is read by Cohn as a driving desire that remains out of reach in the first part of the novel, "Kingdom Plantae." There are a series of shifts between this first part and the second, "Kingdom Fungi," that pushes Vern to actualize their escape from Cainland that Cohn reads as stemming from this "want of something"

(Solomon 10). In Cohn's reading, Vern escapes from their escape as they pursue "emancipation through social relations in the second section of the book" (309). In the space of the novel that takes place on Sugar Mountain, Vern and Gogo's relationship grows, and through it, Vern's engagement with their sexuality deepens narratively.[17] This narrative deepening is what Cohn terms as Vern "coming to grips with her own 'dirtiness,' her queer materiality" which Cohn states "forces Vern to confront her own internalized oppression. [Gogo's] Indigeneity gives her new language with which to conceptualize it, and something more" (309-10). Cohn uses this moment of "something" ("She'd fled the compound in want of something" (Solomon 10)) to read a desire marked "with unassuageable lack" (Cohn 308). Cohn follows up on this attention to queer desire later in his piece with the moment right before our "Something, Two."

In his piece Cohn recounts the scene where Vern and Gogo discuss their gender identities and describes how "Queer discourse begins to create a society that does not demand lying and the limitation of one another's freedom" in this moment of *Sorrowland* (316). Furthering this reading, Cohn states that "Indeed, it is through construction and connection, through assemblage, that Vern can find herself and redefine herself" (316). Cohn follows this claim with a block quote:

> "For wasicu," began Gogo, "it's simple. There's men, there's women, and that's it. From birth, you're forced into a role, and fuck you if you can't fit into it."
>
> Vern understood this perfectly well. She'd been victimized by this same system.

[17] This "deepening" is what I explore in the next chapter, "Reading Sex: Racialized Surveillance and Sexuality in *Sorrowland*'s Sex Scenes." It is not until the second part of the novel that any description of Vern's sexual exploration is included directly in the novel's narrating voice.

> "For Lakota, there's more flexibility, more than just man and woman. So, me? I'm one of the *more.* When I was born, they guessed from what they saw that I was a boy, but I wasn't a boy. I'm *winkte.* That's the best I can explain it." (Solomon 237)

Cohn reads this moment in the text as one that makes "at least two anarchist dimensions… visible" (316). Gogo's explanation of "*more"* in relation to their gender identity is built into Cohn's reading of this moment in *Sorrowland* as an "anarchist critique of representation" (Cohn 316). He states that "precisely because it can't be simply dismissed, the power of words to delimit reality by obscuring the '*more'*...must be contended with. …Solomon continues to make representations, to narrate, but at the same time continually gestures toward all the living, proliferating '*more'* that falls outside of representations 'false edges'" (Cohn 316-7). This "*more"* read here by Cohn contextualizes his earlier claim that "[Gogo's] Indigeneity gives her new language with which to conceptualize it, and something more" (310). Here Cohn takes the "something" shaped by a "lack" buried within Vern's early desires and articulates how this community with Gogo initiates a moment of healing for Vern.

Cohn's "something more" (310) serves as a marker of Black "anarchic possibility" "unbeholden to our current tenants of legibility" (316) that is an "unrepresentable vast[ness], the *'more'* to knowledge to which Gogo grants Vern access" (318). Cohn's "*more"* that he theorizes through Gogo's "*more*" is based in Gogo's self-expression as *winkte.* To read something *more* here marks again the discursive power of gendered constructions alongside categorizing logics: it is within Gogo's rearticulation of a gender outside of white colonial epistemes that Cohn locates a reading of productive anarchic illegibility. Structuring his articulation of illegibility, and of proliferation of experience around that illegibility, Cohn's "something more" follows Vern's earlier "something else." Both gesturing to the illegible, or at

least to the unread(able), the "more" and the "else" are played with through different affective registers in their deployment across *Sorrowland.* It is through gender, gendered language, discussions about gender, and the unsaid within gendered language in discussions about experiencing gender that Solomon constructs what Cohn reads as a Black anarchist attention to possibility through illegibility.

Like Cohn, other scholars have also located their readings of Solomon's texts through the framework of unrepresentability that pushes into the violent structures of categorization present in the ongoing construction of white colonial subjectivity.[18] These readings of *Sorrowland* consistently study the novel*,* and Solomon's other novels, short stories, and novellas, to speak to Solomon's artistic and literary engagement with histories of chattel slavery and structures of anti-Blackness. Cohn outlines *Sorrowland*'s liberatory dimensions by tracing Solomon's characterization of Vern through their experience of encountering new knowledge systems and community structures for the first time in their life after leaving Cainland. While Cohn includes the scene where Gogo and Vern discuss gender identity in his articulation of the liberatory knowledge-making productions held in his discussion of *Sorrowland*'s *more*, he places the bulk of his analysis in another example of Vern's transition and processes of discovery during their

[18] "It is not for nothing that reviews of the novel tend to read its gothic geography as an extended metaphor for Black suffering and trauma" (Cohn 308); "Each of Solomon's novels is certainly worth its own, more detailed analysis in terms of its engagement with other utopian frameworks and themes of activism, race, gender, kinship, and labour—and indeed many such analyses are recently published or forthcoming" (de Bruin-Molé 2); "In a similar fashion to neo-slave narratives, *Sorrowland* outlines Vern's trajectory as a journey from captivity towards liberation. …In spite of this neo-slave subtheme, the novel offers a counterfactual account of historicity. …Solomon's novel develops, through its counterfactual account of historicity, a mode of temporality whereby the afterlives of slavery still orient and legitimizes the actions of the US government in the present" (Vergara 100-101); "References to the slave trade are less apparent in *Sorrowland* than in *An Unkindness of Ghosts* or *The Deep;* however, this historical event still plays a crucial role in the trajectory of Vern as a character. While in Solomon's previous novels enslavement has an ostensible presence in the narrative, in *Sorrowland* slavery exerts an eerie influence over the text's narrative structure, intertextual allusions and historical references (Vergara 103); "it is clear that, like Octavia E. Butler and Hopkinson before them, Solomon's use of the animalistic 'serves to relativize and reimagine the nature of humanity, but not to surrender [her] own claim to the category of human'" (Cohn 315).

time on Sugar Mountain. Cohn begins with one of *Sorrowland*'s "somethings" in order to mark Vern's desire—their "want for something" (Solomon 10). Following this articulation of desire, Cohn reads the "more" from Gogo's explanation of gendered possibility to Vern to move towards an articulation of the way that the novel "challenges modes of thought that taxonomize the world into neat categories" (317). What began with a reading of the desire for "something," moves into a rumination on Vern's desire for something unknown—a world-building type of desire that Cohn locates in Vern's later community-based knowledge practices on Sugar Mountain.

While living on Sugar Mountain, Gogo teaches Vern how to read; a skill Vern had attempted to learn many times but due to the lack of community support and the lack of resources to mitigate the effects of their nystagmus Vern doesn't learn to read until their time with Gogo. Solomon names the books that Gogo uses to teach Vern how to read. These books range from children's picture books to modernist novels, to contemporary science fiction, to books on critical race and semiotic theory. The texts pop up across the conversations that punctuate Gogo and Vern's budding friendship and as Vern becomes more comfortable in the company of Gogo and Bridget, they also become more comfortable with reading. Cohn describes the texts that make up Solomon's attention to community and literacy in *Sorrowland* as a "constellation of references [that] doesn't spell out a unified, coherent ideology, nor even a Derridean critique of unity and coherence" (Cohn 318). Alongside this conglomeration's movement towards a refusal of a singular critique, it also marks a self-consciousness, or self-insertion, in Solomon's text that places the literary production of *Sorrowland,* and all of its historical or liberatory ruminations, *within* the reading practice that this conglomeration represents. Cohn reads the literacy narrative that Solomon builds into the second part of

Sorrowland as a literary and embodied practice that "attacks the modern drive to such classifications and the ontological 'purification' that enables it" (313). I extend this reading in my consideration of Solomon's literary productions that position *Sorrowland* itself as a text that defies genre categorization.

These "classifications and the ontological 'purification' that enable" them are present in how Vern was taught how to learn initially, and it's in the deconstruction of them that Vern learned to learn differently in this part of *Sorrowland.* This type of knowledge acquisition builds into something else, more, and informs Vern's own initial understanding of their body and what it means to feel with it, and to care with and to it. In this way, Vern approaches their literacy journey through a variety of texts that construct an unexpected archive resisting disciplinary boundaries. This disciplinary wandering that structures Vern's literary awakening positions reading outside of institutional bounds and instead within Vern's communal practices shaped through their time on Sugar Mountain. Vern learns to read alongside newfound sexual explorations reorganized through the fungal infection's sensorial networks, and in this way, Vern's literacy narrative is both an intellectual and embodied transformation. As Vern uncovers more of themself with Gogo, Solomon builds a reading practice that develops in the text alongside Vern's own articulation and practice of their gender and sexuality through expressions of desire and want. *Sorrowland* engages with the structures of reading that work to congeal meaning around flesh. In reading *Sorrowland's* somethings, in reading a way that meaning is shared and learned outside of descriptions and categorizations, "something else" can be read through the ways that it was always already gesturing towards its something-more-ness.

SOMETHING, ELSE

Snorton's consideration of "what forms of redress are possible in/as flesh" is based in his articulation of flesh as "above all else, a thing that produces relations—real and imagined, metaphysical and material" that, in the space of its imposed fungibility, holds possibilities for redress through queer and trans possibilities and performances (66; 40). Snorton asks "How does one access a language outside of and in contradistinction to the governing codes that currently determine human definition such that it gives rise to new meanings, forms of life, and genres of being?" (Snorton 183). Furthering his interrogation of these violent structures and his engagement with the trans "shadow history" that his project provides readings around, Snorton's interrogation of flesh and the grammars that surround it point towards the ways that "Blackness, as it has been given meaning by antiblackness, could acquire new spellings to engender itself (and queerness and transness) as symbolically and materially livable" (184). The "real and imagined, metaphysical and material" and the "symbolically and materially livable" emphasize the discursive and the physical as co-constructing formulations in a subject-object-relational-changeability (Snorton 40; 184).

Roderick A. Ferguson, in "Administering Sexuality; or, The Will to Institutionality," asks a similar question to the one posed by Snorton contextualized within the framework of the twenty-first century university. Ferguson states that "We must pause and interrogate the subtle and silent transformations that the tasks of knowledge and we—the subjects of knowledge—have undergone. We must also scrutinize this will to institutionality if we are to create alternative forms of agency and subjectivity not beholden to bureaucratization. … Put simply, by what countercalculus can we maneuver difference for the purpose of rupture? (167-8). Sorrowland's relations, the relations found between flesh, and the thing-ness inherent to fleshiness, could all be signaling possible countercalculuses. Solomon's attention to reading practices opens and sustains

a conversation about how knowledge is acquired and transformed and where those "transformations" take place. To read *Sorrowland* through the framework of *something,* to locate a reading in the deployment of *something* reveals countercalculated knowledge production in spite of its attention to its existing engagement with and future possibility to be incorporated within the "will to institutionality."

Although Sarah Ensor does not follow Ferguson's attention to this framework of institutionality and difference directly, she does engage with some of these same questions about knowledge formation in the contemporary university and posits a pedagogical practice based in "the relational possibilities that emerge in the American literature classroom [that] can help us respond to the current predicament of higher education from within, by reconceiving the very terms by which our teaching and learning are disciplined, codified, and normalized" (282). Ensor wonders through the "kind of care [that] can emerge in the absence of permanent commitment, [that] continually exposes us to each other's ideas, language, moods, and bodies, and is predicated on engaging the unexpected, on finding ourselves in circumstances far beyond our capacity to predict" (285). This "care" that Ensor locates within the classroom has whispers of Malatino's attention to care: "care isn't abstract, but only ever manifested through practice—action, labor, work—it is integral to our ways of doing" (40-1). One way of this doing is offered by Ensor within a type of "pedagogical kinship" that "offers us the forms of affiliation, care, and solidarity that enable us to respond to and persist amid the very real challenges that we face" (289). What Ensor reads through classroom and pedagogy, I want to take a step further and read with Vern. As Vern learned on Sugar Mountain, the spaces of knowledge production and acquisition happen in "constellations" and conglomerations, from contact.

Sorrowland touches on Black anarchism (Cohn), on salvage Marxism (de Bruin-Molé), on neo-slave narratives (Vergara) and literacy narratives (Cohn; de Bruin-Molé; Vergara), on posthumanisms (Cohn; de Bruin-Molé) and Black and Indigenous solidary and liberation movements (Cohn; de Bruin-Molé). In reading these texts that read *Sorrowland,* I am reading with them to think about how *Sorrowland* teaches us to read and what it might mean to read *Sorrowland* differently. This is not a praxis that I suggest other scholars producing critical work of *Sorrowland* do not have, but it is one that needs to be repeated, actively, caringly, in how we talk about, teach about, think about Vern and *Sorrowland.* To be entangled with Vern—to accept the violence of this claimed entanglement—to engage with the study of *Sorrowland* as an entangledness that considers Vern as something else, something other than a metaphor to be read that does not assume that the other side of a metaphor is literal, embodied, material flesh. This reading has to live in the spaces we inhabit, in the way we move in the institution and in the classroom too.

These engagements with *something* raise questions of pleasure and desire, of the mapping of those terms as concepts that live in the matter of flesh and that live through the violence that shaped matter as flesh to begin with. In my initial readings of the theoretical weight of the word "something" in these passages from *Sorrowland*, I have hoped to construct an attention to and a practice of reading with care without overstating an assurance of its full existence within the structures of knowledge and knowing that are prioritized in certain engagements with (and attempts of) thought. I have also hoped to mark this project as a practice of thought that may at times fail in its imagination of something about care and how to care about something. Thinking about something serves as a methodological assertion of value, care, and a prioritization of embodied being and practice that tries to rework or refuse the structures of whiteness and their

colonial and antiblack roots. This framework of knowledge and value, of naming, knowing, and thinking, establishes a reading practice that I utilize in my attention to Solomon's construction of scenes that engage with and show something that could be called sex.

DESCRIPTIVE ELISION: NARRATIVE OMISSION AS CARE

What begins unnamed, only marked as a "want for something" transitions into a later description of Vern's want for care that's still based in the unknown: "something, anything that might soothe the tendernesses" (Solomon 10; 75). I work through Cohn's reading of Black anarchism in relation to these different affective conglomerations around "something" to consider the ways that Solomon's text has already been read through its attention to reading practices. Cohn starts his discussion around Vern's undefinable desire and marks the events within Vern's literacy narrative as being in the space where Vern is able to define themself outside of the racist and transphobic beliefs they had internalized. Cohn's discussion of Black anarchism leads him towards a discussion of *Sorrowland*'s themes surrounding queer materialities. He does this by reading another layer of Vern's practices of discovery and exploration that develop during their time on Sugar Mountain. As Vern learns to read, and builds new community networks, they also develop a daily practice. Everyday they go into the woods surrounding Bridget's cabin and masturbate. The masturbation scene that Cohn places his reading in is the first detailed narrative description of Vern's exploration of sexual pleasure. Cohn's reading culminates with a depiction of Vern's morning ritual and it is through this reading that Cohn frames one of *Sorrowland*'s liberatory frameworks through a reading of the novel's new materialist approach to matter and embodiment.

Before following Cohn towards a reading of this scene, I want to pause longer on Solomon's consideration of desire and sex in the first part of *Sorrowland* to think about how

racialized gender and sexuality function as a central component to Solomon's work with liberatory narrative structures. The practice of refusal that circles Solomon's engagement with racialized gender in *Sorrowland* that Cohn reads as an embrace of Black anarchism, on one front, can be read in these moments of direct and indirect discourse through the strategic illegibility revealed in these deployments of the word "something." Solomon threads this production of illegibility through the structure of *Sorrowland* as well, utilizing narrative elision and euphemism to construct Vern's sexual history through narrative insertions of Vern's memories and past experiences.

While Vern's sexual history plays a substantial role in each of the novel's three parts ("Part One: Kingdom Plantae," "Part Two: Kingdom Fungi," and "Part Three: Kingdom Animalia"), *Sorrowland's* explicit erotic scenes come later in the novel. In "Kingdom Plantae," Vern lives in the wooded land surrounding Cainland after their escape and after giving birth to Howling and Feral. Throughout this first part of Solomon's novel, Vern learns how to take care of their children and survive despite Cainland's continued influence on them. Vern's visions of dead and dying people—"the hauntings"—and the mysterious entity—"the fiend"—who hunts Vern through the woods in an attempt to force them back to Cainland are the first signs in the novel that Vern's escape from Cainland is far from over. Many of the early moments marking Cainland's continued influence on Vern's life and body work their way into the novel through discreet moments where Vern's physical ability exceeds their expectations—and later, exceeds the physical expectations for any "human" body.

In these early scenes, Vern explores their sexuality in brief encounters which are often interrupted in their narration by narrative slips into, or representations of, the violence of Vern's past. In these interruptions Solomon layers Vern's early sexual exploration with histories of

trauma. Solomon does not include the details surrounding these moments of violence in Vern's past. Instead, Solomon crafts a description of Vern's experiences right up to the point of sexual contact before giving a summary about the sexual actions that took place in the narrating voice and moving on with a description of what happens after. Solomon's utilization of the narrative present and shifting temporalities when gesturing towards Vern's past sexual traumas informs through implication and context without direct moment-to-moment narration. By focusing on these elisions instead of following Cohn to Vern's morning ritual in the woods, I read what the gaps of the first part of *Sorrowland* perform in the context of racialized violence and surveillance to consider Solomon's larger narrative framing surrounding visibility and Black sexual practices.

My exploration of *Sorrowland*'s treatment of the erotic begins by focusing on these fissures, these gaps, that perform the novel's refusal to reveal Vern's experiences of past sexual trauma because Vern's understanding of their gender and their sexuality is colored by the material and embodied acts of violence perpetrated against them that are gestured towards in these early elisions. This sexual violence and violent categorizations surrounding sexuality seethe throughout the narrative despite their omission in a similar structure of communication through refusal that I locate in my readings of "something." The language of the text in these sexual encounters of the first part of the novel mirrors the epistemological and discursive violence wielded against Vern through the imposition of antiblack heteropatriarchal configurations of sexuality that informs their sexual encounters even as they leave the woods and metamorphose, accessing new sensory capabilities and power, and learning new frameworks for community healing and connection. This structure provides a historical framework that contextualizes the violent racial and engendered categorizations working through Vern's personal history that flow through their later practices of embodied sexual stimulation.

VERN AT CAINLAND

Unbeknownst to Vern, all the members of Cainland are infected with a fungus designed by the United States military in an experiment meant to weaponize a fungal spore with the purpose of creating superhuman soldiers that operate under complete military control. The fungal spores incubate in and transform the bodies of the people living at the Blessed Acres of Cain. As a result of this infection, the members of Cainland experience numerous side effects including night terrors and day-time hallucinations that they call "the Hauntings." Rarely does the fungus fully incubate and metamorphose completely and the people at the Blessed Acres of Cain remain for most of their lives living under military and scientific observation without the fungal infection ever fully transforming their body and senses. Vern is the second person in this experiment who metamorphoses with the fungus.[19] Throughout *Sorrowland,* Vern's strength and senses grow with a newfound physical power afforded to them by their embodied response to the fungal infection, a product of a generations-long medical military experiment meant to turn Vern into a tool of the United States government.

Before Vern or the narrative fully recognizes their newborn strength, Vern lives in the woods with Howling and Feral. For the first part of the novel, Vern lives in seclusion from the world, at first only ever encountering people other than their children through violent and surprising interactions with the fiend. Vern sees glimpses of the fiend in the woods and knows that the fiend is trying to capture them to force Vern and their children into captivity at Cainland. The fiend leaves calling cards and attacks and threatens Vern by destroying Vern's shelters and food sources, leaving bodies of other victims in areas nearby their encampment, and leaving

[19] The first person who fully metamorphosed is a woman named Queenie, who lives in constant isolation under military guard and who is only released from her captivity when she is tasked by the United States military later in the novel to track down Vern after Vern ran away to Sugar Mountain.

baby clothes ominously close to where Vern lives with Howling and Feral. In the latter half of the first part of *Sorrowland,* the fiend sets fire to a large pile of brush near Vern's camp, endangering Vern and their children with the threat of forest fire. Vern puts the fire out, and as they look around, Vern "caught the movement to her side. A rustle of clothing, of leaves. A dark figure in the distance, no doubt the fiend, darted away" (Solomon 40). This dark figure runs towards the edge of the woods, and despite their hesitation, Vern follows the figure towards the edge of the forest that Vern had built their home in.

In the moment they decide to take chase, Vern is overtaken by a "desire" and in this chase, Vern touches on something they'd been searching for (Solomon 40). Solomon writes that Vern:

> could still hear the patter of the fiend's feet against the ground, the sway of the leaves as he brushed against bushes and trees. Vern, her good sense overtaken by desire, gave chase. The air against her face was intoxicatingly bracing. This was the feeling she'd been longing for when gorging herself on berries, when cutting her palm. She was half animal now, only instinct and need. (Solomon 40)

In this moment of chase, of Vern's "good sense [being] overtaken by desire," they experience the feeling they'd "been longing for." Vern's desire in this moment speaks to their longing, their drive towards *something* that, even after leaving Cainland, stayed with them. This "desire" and this "longing" foregrounds a descriptive shift: Vern becomes, narratively, "half animal now, only instinct and need." Solomon works through dichotomies here: good sense and desire, human and animal, past and present. But in working through these dichotomies, Solomon slips between them in a way that reveals something about the racialized constructions at the core of Vern's early beliefs surrounding desire and animality.

The construction that Vern "was half animal now, only instinct and need" breaks apart the seemingly clear distinctions Solomon writes into this passage: between past and present, between sensibility and desire, and between the human and the animal (40). "She was" establishes a clear tense: simple past (Solomon 40). The "now" in "half animal now" complicates the simple past tense and marks a process of becoming that took place in the past that impacts Vern's current state. Working across the tense and the adverb in the sentence, the ordering temporal logic of this first clause is: "She was…now" (Solomon 40). This pairing, of past tense construction through "was," and a reflection on Vern's current state in the present, highlights a process of transition or change that took place in the past, but is not contextualized through narrative reflection until the present moment. The moment described through "now," the present moment in the narrative, in "She was half animal now" is not the timeframe the narrative voice works from; instead, the narrative voice reflects upon a past state of being, holding the charge of transformation, the charge of having changed states, without directly reflecting on the experience or sensation present in the moment of transition. That experience of transition is marked, but only in comparison to the past. This comparison points towards transition, towards the weight of having been different and of having gone through the process of becoming something else, with a knowledge of both the past state of being and of how it differs to the present without fully existing within either one.

Before Solomon writes that Vern "was half animal now, only instinct and need," Vern's engagement with desire is processed through a list of descriptions of Vern's sensational experience and the stimuli surrounding this encounter with desire (40). Beginning with auditory stimuli, Solomon writes that Vern "could still hear the patter of the fiend's feet against the ground, the sway of the leaves as he brushed against the bushes and trees" (40). To "still hear"

marks Vern's continuous auditory tie to the fiend's actions. "The patter of the fiend's feet" furthers this continuous framework. A patter—a repeated light tapping—holds a playfulness, a lightness, that frames the fiend's footsteps through an unexpected affective charge. Similarly, Vern "could still hear…the sway of the leaves." To sway—to oscillate or move back and forth gently. The leaves "sway" and again frame the movement in this moment as a gentle one, a repetitive one, not framed through force or panic, but instead framed through a gentle movement of the world. The fiend "brushed against bushes and trees" and the fiend's act of running from Vern in this moment is what creates this movement through the forest scape around the two characters.

This initial auditory description of Vern's sensory engagement with the fiend's flight in this scene is framed through a gentleness in an almost lulling way. The "patter," and the "sway" as the fiend "brushed" through this moment is not descriptively shaped through force. The description of the sensation of this moment is a gentle, repetitive, rhythmic one. In response to this moment, Solomon writes that "Vern, her good senses overtaken by desire, gave chase" (40). Vern chases after the fiend after a moment of violence—the fiend started a fire that could have led to intense ecological destruction that was a pointed attack on Vern and their family—but the description of what Vern perceives in this moment of the fiend running from them is not framed through this violence. This descriptive framing shapes Vern's following "chase" and the "desire" that led to it in a way that obscures the specific motivations behind Vern's actions in this sentence. The "patter," the "sway," the brushing of the fiend through the forest described by Solomon foregrounds Vern's "chase" and Vern's "desire" as one that is driven by this quiet, rhythmic, gentle, engagement with space and matter.

Solomon frames this moment through Vern's sensory experiences. The auditory stimuli surrounding the fiend's escape serves as sensory markers that foreground the narrative description of Vern's internal processes of desire. "Vern… gave chase" and held an active role in the construction of this passage, but only after Vern's "good sense [was] overtaken by desire" (Solomon 40). Following this moment, there's a direct description of Vern's physical sensations that shifts Vern into a passive position in the sentence: "The air against her face was intoxicatingly bracing" (Solomon 40). This moment of description focuses on the qualities of the air, of Vern's experiences of it. The air was "against her face" and "intoxicatingly bracing." This doubled description places Vern's body (their face) in an appositive phrase further clarifying the air and placing the sensation Vern felt within an adverbial construction modifying the action of the air (it being "intoxicatingly bracing"). This description of sensation, feeling, the use of adjectives and adverbs, highlights the processes of stimulation that make up the "feeling she'd been longing for" earlier in the narrative, while also obscuring Vern as the agent of sensation (Solomon 40). The descriptions in this moment flip back and forth between Vern's actions and relationship to their desire, and between Vern's sensory experiences.

When the descriptions and imagery of this scene are removed, what's left is a process of becoming that tracks Vern's engagement with desire through a movement between taxonomical classifications. Pulling out what Vern hears, what they feel on their body, and removing the narrative contextualization sitting between these descriptions of stimuli, reveals an approach to taxonomical categorization and transformation that occurs through this moment of sensation: "Vern, her good sense overtaken by desire, gave chase. …This was the feeling she'd been longing for… She was half animal now, only instinct and need" (Solomon 40). This initial engagement with sensation and the satisfaction of it, of being "overtaken by desire," of

"longing," and of successfully touching the feeling that that desire and longing was working towards, immediately shifts into a description of Vern as "half animal now, only instinct and need" (Solomon 40). Vern's bodily stimulation and satisfaction is immediately placed within an animalizing discourse in this initial construction of it in *Sorrowland*.

It is significant that when Vern finally feels something that satiates their desire, that fulfills part of what they were "longing for" earlier in the narrative, the narrative classifies this engagement with satisfying stimulation as a transformation into a different ontological frame: "half animal now, only instinct and need" (Solomon 40). This initial stimulation and momentary construction of satisfaction is an early marker of Solomon's attention to the ordering logics of embodiment and desire that reveals an instability to taxonomical divides and temporality in the narrative structuring of *Sorrowland*. This revisionary engagement with past sensation and categorizing logics works through many of *Sorrowland*'s erotic scenes in the second part of the novel; however, in the first part of the novel, Solomon frequently deploys statements of reflection and summation to mark Vern's engagement with sexual acts and encounters, without ever moving into the sensation surrounding Vern's sexual experiences or experiences with embodied sexual desire in the way that this moment of chasing desire is constructed.

Solomon's temporal shifting frequently glosses over and encapsulates Vern's experiences of sexual trauma, or of Vern's early sexual encounters with other characters in the first part of this text. Immediately following Vern's chase through the woods, two of these narrative gaps surrounding sexual violation and experience appear. As Vern chases the fiend through the forest, they eventually reach the edge of the woods they live in with their children. Vern leaves the forest and hears music in the distance. Finding the source of the music, Vern sees "a small cabin-like structure with a neon sign" (Solomon 42). Here, Vern encounters people other than their

children for the first time in months. "'You ride?' someone asked" and turning around, Vern sees "a woman leaning against the building, a cigarette in her mouth" (Solomon 43). The woman introduces herself as Ollie and shows Vern her motorcycle. Ollie offers Vern a ride on the bike and Vern responds:

> "I don't know how," said Vern. "And I don't know you." Though it wouldn't be the first time she'd taken a ride with someone she didn't know. …
>
> Back when she'd lived in the compound, Vern would amble to the part of the woods that butted up against the road whenever she could get away from her duties. She'd stick her thumb out to passing cars, but only once did someone stop. A patrolling police officer. He'd rolled down his window and asked her, *How much?*
>
> She'd understood the kind of transaction the man was after, and the price she named was escape. *Just take me as far away from here as you can.*
>
> That didn't happen. When they were finished, he drove her to the main gates of the Blessed Acres and called Reverend Sherman. (Solomon 43-4)

This scene that begins with Vern looking for the fiend, chasing a feeling of "longing," that drove them out of the woods slips into a memory from their earlier teen years. These scenes are wedged together as Ollie's bike resonates with the police cruiser in Vern's past. In this slippage, this wedging of moment and memory, more of Vern's history is revealed. However, this revelation is largely implied and lacks details. Vern asks to be taken "*as far away from here as you can,"* under the claim that they "understood the kind of transaction the man was after," and the description of moment-to-moment plot dissolves into narration. "That didn't happen" and "When they were finished" hold the weight of the unshared moments (44).

Solomon utilizes implication and elision as a textual tool that gestures towards the sexual violence Vern was subjected to and is reflecting on in this moment without building out Vern's affective, intellectual, or embodied experiences of the violence. This description of Vern's experiences of sexual violence in their childhood comes as a response to Ollie's offer of a ride on her motorcycle. In a memory, Solomon provides some context to Vern's history and the violent forces shaping Vern's understandings of sex and sexuality within a framework of coercion, containment, and control that Vern experiences on an individual and structural level through these various manifestations of heteropatriarchy and antiblackness in the narrative. Solomon writes that Vern had "understood the kind of transaction the man was after" marking an internal narrative that produces a stated framework of informed consent within this context of control and manipulation. This moment of narration grazes Vern's internal thoughts and exists somewhere between a moment of narrative focalization offering Vern's construction of this "transaction," and between an example of the ways that Solomon infuses the early narrative voice with the internalization of violent narratives tied to subject formation within sociological patterns of domination.

Moten touches on consent as a term in a way that frames Vern's understanding marked within this memory in relation to historical processes of racialization that construct antiblackness as an ontological tool of control used to rationalize and legitimize the construction of the human within white, western notions of subjectivity. In the "Acknowledgements" to *Black and Blur: Consent Not to Be a Single Being,* Moten clarifies that "The term *consent* doesn't merely defy but rather unravels a set of normative discourses on agency that are either denied to or unsuccessfully salvaged for those who remain in the middle passage which is, as Cedric Robinson and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have said, eternal" (xv). Furthering his acknowledgement,

Moten explains that "consent…is not so much an act but a nonperformative condition or ecological disposition" (xv). Consent when framed as a "nonperformative condition or ecological disposition" that "unravels a set of normative discourses on agency" that are incommensurate with the violent constructions of the middle passage and American chattel slavery, operates as a site of rupture marking a dynamic to subject formation. When Solomon writes that Vern "understood the kind of transaction the man was after, and the price she named was escape," Solomon establishes a transactional framework that colors Vern's entrance into this moment of violation through a type of choice (Solomon 43-4). This move, this contextualization, this justification or articulation of consent, operates within the narrative quietly (quickly) in this initial manifestation.

The sexual violation and early engagement with state-sanctioned racial-sexual violence revealed in Vern's memory after meeting Ollie is a short passage in *Sorrowland*. Despite this quick narrative treatment, the import of this moment is communicated through narrative structure and elision. This early engagement with police surveillance and sexual violence informs both Vern's understanding of the world outside of Cainland, and Vern's understanding of sexual desire and sexual acts as being tied to surveillance and coercion. Solomon gives this revelation very little textual space and relies on implication to communicate this part of Vern's history. Solomon outlines Vern's understanding of the transaction between them and the police officer and immediately follows it with a direct narrative inclusion of Vern's internal desires: "*Just take me as far away from here as you can"* (44). Vern was not sexually desirous in this moment but understood the transactional capacity that embodied sexual relations had for the police officer and performed a type of consent within the transaction as they understood it. Vern's desire was to leave, to be free of Cainland.

I want to be clear about my discussion of sexual desire in this moment: Vern was not engaging with sexual desire in the narrative articulation of this moment. Vern's desire was explicitly, directly narrated: Vern wanted to be free of Cainland and the coercive structures that forcibly shaped Vern through their relationship to gender, sexuality, race, and ability. The police officer's construction of desire and sex in this moment is not my intended intervention. What I am articulating as foundational in this moment to Vern's understanding of sexual desire and actions is the frameworks of coercion and violence that desire is rhetorically and linguistically linked to through embodied performances within racialized heteropatriarchal expressions of control. Solomon gestures towards Vern's histories of sexual trauma in *Sorrowland* in this initial interaction with Ollie. Vern's memory highlights consent as a concept that lapses and ruptures when applied to the racial-sexual relations between individuals living within contemporary manifestations of the violence of the middle passage that shaped race and gender as ontological tools in order to outline property and property rights through anti-Black logics of humanity and humanization.

Vern "understood the transaction" and entered into it in an act that performed consent within a system shaped through domination and (de)humanization. Solomon names what Vern desires—to get away—and then gives a paragraph break. There's an indent at the next paragraph before, "That didn't happen" (43). This marking of Vern's desire and the terms of their engagement with this transaction furthers the violation of this moment as one that violates the very contract it built. Vern "understood this transaction" and understood this moment as a transaction, but that knowledge did not protect them from the violation of this interaction. The terms of consent were already, in definition, structured around violation and the illogics of property and justice within systems predicated on their perpetuation of the afterlives of chattel

slavery (police surveillance, contractual negotiations, and freedom, consent, liberation as qualities bestowed, rather than inherent).

This is an example of Solomon's approach to narrative moments surrounding Vern's history with sexual trauma that are shaped around a refusal to include Vern's experience of early sexual acts and moments of sexual violation. This refusal is crafted through these moments of implication that gesture towards Vern's sexual history and the individual and structural moments of violence without reproducing the particulars of that history through a detailed narration of Vern's experiences of those events. In some ways, Solomon's refusal could work to mirror Vern's own refusal to engage with their traumatic past as a move of protection. Narratively, this moment might also be revealing Solomon's choices surrounding Vern's sexual desires and processes of learning their own sexuality within structures of coercion and containment. There are multiple ways to interpret or contextualize Solomon's use of elision and implication surrounding moments of Vern's history of trauma and sexual violence in this initial example. While it could point towards a moment of narrative focalization following Vern's own self-censorship in their thoughts to protect themself from reliving these moments of trauma, it can also be understood as a narrative tool Solomon utilizes to afford Vern some type privacy or care.

Saidiya Hartman, in the initial framing of her work *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, begins with a similar moment of exclusion in an articulation of why she does not reproduce a scene from Frederick Douglass's autobiography. Hartman situates the opening of her text around a discussion of a scene in Frederick Douglass's autobiography in which an enslaver is beating Douglass's Aunt Hester. Hartman explains the importance that this scene of violence has held in scholarly work engaging with Douglass's text.

Hartman follows this contextualization with an assertion and explanation of her own choice not to cite that scene directly. Hartman states that:

> I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body. Rather than citing indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? (3)

Hartman begins *Scenes of Subjection* around a discussion of the narrative and scholarly attention given to Black pain and the extreme torture that enslaved people were subjected to. This attention though, is immediately framed through speculation—the "theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances" of violence creates an affective charge, a process of spectatorship that is not removed from the violent structures of racial capital that frame the scenes of suffering it engages with.

Hartman's articulation of what it means to be a witness to these moments of Black pain and suffering through the consumption of slave narratives diverges from Solomon's account of Vern's experiences with sexual violence in its historical and generic specificity but resonates as a

possible way to contextualize Solomon's use of elision surrounding Vern's trauma. As has frequently been marked in scholarly engagements with *Sorrowland* and Solomon's other works of fiction, Solomon plays with generic conventions, and scholars working with *Sorrowland* have frequently classified it as a neo-slave narrative. Vern's flight from Cainland and the government agents that hunt them, and their persistent refusals against the discursive and material models of containment forced upon them throughout the narrative, places *Sorrowland* within a literary tradition that meditates on the contemporary manifestations of racialized surveillance and control that shaped Blackness as commodity through the violence of the middle passage and American chattel slavery. Vern's encounter with the policeman and the intense moment of sexual violence sitting within "When they were finished" exists in relation to the surveillance of Blackness as a colonial production that can be traced from the slave ship to contemporary systems of racialized surveillance and policing.

Solomon gestures towards Vern's experiences with these types of violence that are explained by Simone Browne in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness.* Browne states that "The historical formation of surveillance is not outside of the historical formation of slavery" and explains processes of "racializing surveillance" that situates surveillance "as both a discursive and material practice" that can be traced through history (50; 32). Browne's contextualization of "racializing surveillance" places surveillance within the context of the transatlantic slave trade that structured the "ontological conditions of blackness" (9). Browne defines racializing surveillance as "enactments of surveillance [that] reify boundaries along racial lines, thereby reifying race, and where the outcome of this is often discriminatory and violent treatment" (9). Continuing this definition, Browne later adds that "'racializing surveillance' signals those moments when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries, borders,

and bodies along racial lines, and where the outcome is often discriminatory treatment of those who are negatively racialized by such surveillance" (16). Browne's framing of surveillance "allows for a questioning of how certain surveillance technologies installed during slavery to monitor and track blackness as property…anticipate the contemporary surveillance of racialized subjects" (22). This historical orientation provides contextualization for Solomon's layered engagement with surveillance and policing in *Sorrowland*, particularly visible in this initial memory that reveals Vern's past engagements with American policing. While the details of Vern's encounter with the police officer are not revealed by Solomon, this framework of racializing surveillance and the violent treatment it enables within contemporary systems of policing work to contextualize the refusals produced by Solomon in these moments throughout *Sorrowland*.

VERN OUTSIDE OF CAINLAND

This structure of refusal continues throughout the first part of *Sorrowland*. In part one "Kingdom Plantae," all of Vern's new sexual encounters are treated in this same way even though they are not framed through the same immediate violence as Vern's encounter with the police officer. Later in this scene where Vern meets Ollie for the first time, Solomon produces a similar refusal to move into Vern's sexual encounters in the narration of the novel. After getting on Ollie's bike and riding away, they pull off and go into the woods:

> Vern licked her lips as she tripped over stones and sticks, dragged by this stranger. …
>
> "You want this?" asked Ollie, her forehead against Vern's.
>
> Vern nodded, teeth sunk into her bottom lip. "Sure," she whispered, afraid that if she said so any more loudly, Sherman would hear and track her down. …
>
> "I'll be gentle," said Ollie, leaning in for a kiss.

Vern shook her head. “Don’t.”

Ollie brushed her lips against Vern’s. They were with each other till morning. (Solomon 45)

“They were with each other till morning” again obscures the details of this scene. Solomon’s narrative gaps work to imply a type of fade-to-black that informs on histories of trauma and possible moments of engaging with desire alike. And this narrative approach to Vern and Ollie’s relationship continues throughout this entire part of the novel.

Slightly later in this same part of the novel, Vern is still living in the woods with Howling and Feral hiding outside of the Blessed Acres of Cane. However, Vern has begun to get more comfortable leaving the woods on their own to see Ollie. Ollie will pick Vern up and bring Vern back to her apartment. Solomon tells us about these meetings:

> Sometimes Ollie would say, “She only wants me for my body,” mock-mournfully, the back of her hand on her forehead. “You are insatiable, you know that? What is wrong with you?” Her tone would be teasing, but Vern’s face always hardened.
>
> “I’m not insatiable,” Vern would say.
>
> “Oh, but you are.”
>
> Ollie would climb on top of her, pressing Vern’s back into the sofa. “Even now, you’re angry, but you want it, don’t you? Want me. It’s okay,” Ollie assured, sliding up Vern’s shirt. “I won’t stop.” (74-5)

This moment is framed as a pattern in its narration. Solomon writes that “*Sometimes* Ollie *would say*,” that “Her tone *would be* teasing” and “Vern’s face *always* hardened,” “Vern *would say*” something in response, and “Ollie *would climb*” onto Vern (74-5; emphasis added). Solomon immediately shapes this description as a repeated engagement with “Sometimes.” Solomon

continues this pattern of repetition by consistently modifying the verbs in this paragraph with "would." "Would" frames this conversation and encounter around a habitual pattern of actions. The movement back and forth between the actions described, the specificity of the conversation they relay, and the framing of habituality compound this moment and the moves Solomon makes over the narrative timeline.

This moment begins through these habitual constructions surrounding the specific actions and statements of Vern and Ollie in this moment that Solomon then slips out of to move this description into a singular moment. After "Ollie would climb" on top of Vern, Solomon writes that Ollie would say '"Even now, you're angry, but you want it, don't you? Want me. It's okay.'" Solomon does not frame this statement through the auxiliary verb "would;" instead, to describe Ollie's act of speech surrounding this statement Solomon writes that "Ollie assured" Vern. The pattern of "would" modifying the verbs of the sentences in this description ends. Still in the past tense, "assured" shifts this narrative description out of the habitual and into the momentary. Moving further into this moment, Ollie's actions are described as "sliding up Vern's shirt" before she says "I won't stop." The auxiliary modifier of "would" alongside a past-tense verb transitions towards a non-habitual past tense "assured," before finally ending in the present tense articulation of Ollie "sliding up" Vern's shirt.

This movement from habitual patterns into a present moment description of Vern and Ollie's encounter then moves into another gap. The narrative description ends with Ollie saying, "I won't stop" and the next paragraph starts with a reflection on Vern's desires: "Vern didn't know what she wanted" (Solomon 75). What Vern wants frames this habitual practice crafted by Solomon. Beginning with Ollie's joking statement that Vern "only wants me for my body," moving into Ollie's claim that Vern is "insatiable," and ending with Ollie's conclusion that

"Even now, you're angry, but you want it, don't you? Want me" (Solomon 74). Vern's desire and practices of consumption and touch relayed in this repeated encounter are not shown in their sensational capacities. Instead, everything is documented through the description of habitual actions and direct quotations until the very end of this description. The temporal shift of Vern and Ollie's conversation and actions here frame their encounter as simultaneously repeated and singular. Unlike Vern's earlier chasing of the fiend though, this engagement with desire, or wanting, does not work around the physical sensation or stimulation Vern experiences.

This discussion of what Vern wants is framed as a type of foreplay that repeatedly shapes Vern and Ollie's sexual encounters that does not reveal Vern's sexual desire with a direct narration of the sexual stimulation Vern feels in these moments. Ollie makes claims about what Vern wants and after climbing on top of them the narration again fades out of the specific moment it had crafted. This narrative censorship highlights that Vern is sexually active in the first part of *Sorrowland,* Vern is engaging with sex directly and it is something that they search out actively, but there is no narrative fulfillment or escalation or movement into the explicit description of Vern having sex. In this part of *Sorrowland,* the narrative pattern of refusal continues and Vern's sexual stimulation is not a part of the narration. This moment moves from playful discussion to the initiation of undressing Vern and then fades out. What follows is a description of Vern's internal thought processes: "Vern didn't know what she wanted. She was a girl made of aches and she flung her body at the world in the hopes that something, anything, might soothe the tendernesses" (Solomon 75). Taking the place of a narrative description of Vern's experiences of their sexual encounter with Ollie is this rumination on Vern's processes of *wanting* at large. Ollie's assertions about what Vern wants and the "insatiable" categorization

of those wants is refuted in the place of narratively following Vern and Ollie into their sexual encounter.

CONCLUSION: ON TENDERNESSES

The reflection that happens in the place of Vern and Ollie having sex undermines desire and Vern's engagement with it in a way similar to the earlier moments of narrative refusal crafted by Solomon through "something" and the frameworks of gendered categorization that it glosses. The reflection included at the end of this scene frames Vern and Ollie's relationship around Vern's uncertainty, and hurt, and frustration. Ollie asserts a context for Vern's actions, that they are "insatiable," that they "want" Ollie and her body so much that Vern's anger and turmoil are overridden by Vern's desire (Solomon 74-5). However, what is revealed in the reflection following this moment is that "Vern didn't know what she wanted" (75). What Ollie frames as insatiable sexual desire is recontextualized as a search for care; it is recontextualized as an extension of Vern's "want of something" and Vern's search for "something, anything, that might soothe the tendernesses" (Solomon 10; 75). While the transition between Ollie and Vern's discussion and this reflection implies what they repeatedly do in this non-narrated moment, sex is not described in this reflection. What is described is that Vern "flung her body at the world" in hope that what they encounter, that the stimulation, the sensation, might "soothe the tendernesses" (75). This assertion of Vern looking for care for their many "tendernesses" frames this repeated encounter with Ollie through desire that vents towards sexual desire but holds something else. Tenderness becomes "tendernesses" pluralizing the noun to highlight the layers to Vern's internal turmoil: their body aches from the physical strain of living in the wilderness, their body aches from the transformation of the fungal infection inside

them, and the "tendernesses" gestures towards a deeper pain that Vern feels in their isolated life at Cainland and the woods surrounding it.

These initial textual markers of Vern's engagements with desire in *Sorrowland* begin a narrative trajectory that follows Vern's search for something more. Solomon begins *Sorrowland* by crafting these narrative refusals to show these moments of trauma, violence, and Vern's uncertain encounters with Ollie. These refused moments remain a part of Vern's character—with the insertion of the encounter with the police officer, with the repeated construction of Vern's meeting with Ollie—but that narration does not reveal Vern's actions, feelings, or internal processes. The reader must imply what happens and what Vern feels during the moments of sexual violation and the moments of sexual exploration based in Vern's search to remediate their pain through touch. Solomon gestures towards these moments without showing Vern's processes. This approach to sexual encounters might only mark a generic choice or narrative approach if the entire novel were shaped in this way. This use of elision that places Vern's sexual encounters outside of the immediately narrated actions is only present in "Part One: Kingdom Plantae." In the following two parts of the novel, Solomon shifts faer narrative treatment of scenes revolving around Vern's sexual practices but this consistent approach to scenes depicting sexual actions throughout the first part of *Sorrowland* makes the treatment of sex in the second part of the novel remarkable. In the second and third part of the novel, Solomon shifts to providing detailed accounts of Vern's sexual actions in moment-to-moment description. This contrast provides a backdrop against which to read the types of engagement and internal practices of sexuality and embodied pleasure that come later in the novel.

III. READING SEX: RACIALIZED SURVEILLANCE AND SEXUALITY IN *SORROWLAND*'S SEX SCENES

I've started with Solomon's utilization of narrative implication and elision in the moments revealing Vern's history with sex that shaped their understandings of sexuality through a framework of violence and coercion within the first part of the novel to mark a shift that occurs after Vern leaves the woodlands surrounding Cainland. Having thought about the gaps of *Sorrowland,* I want to now move to two moments in Solomon's novel that further an embodied and matter-centered approach to desire through sensation and alternative kinship formations. Vern leaves the woods and as they travel with their children, the fungal infection introduced to them during their childhood at Cainland begins to transform and grow. This growth reorganizes their body and their senses. As the fungus grows, and as Vern finds new people to build community with, Vern begins to explore their sexuality. In contrast to the events surrounding sexual contact or trauma in part one, the scenes depicting sexual contact, and pleasurable genital contact, in the second part of the novel begin to be described in moment-to-moment, detailed narration. The turn in Vern's understanding of sexual acts and desire sparks a shift in Solomon's narrative treatment of sex that begins to gesture towards the transformative possibilities of pleasurable embodied sensory contact that function as a form of healing, while also being a product of community healing in *Sorrowland.*

In this chapter, I interrogate two different sex scenes that come into the narrative present of *Sorrowland.* Vern perceives these moments through new structures of sensation based in speculative technologies of perception that come as an unexpected side effect of the metamorphosis of the fungal infection. These fantastical methods of veillance engage with and subvert structures of racialized surveillance and develop throughout the novel as Vern

relearns their embodied relation to pleasure.[20] I locate this discussion of the varying structures of observation and recording in *Sorrowland* alongside Simone Browne's discussion of surveillance as a racializing tool of the state, and as dark sousveillance as a resistant counter-maneuver that operates at the scale of the individual. The speculative and fantastical technologies that shape Solomon's novel within the traditions of horror, science fiction, or gothic genres also produce imaginative and embodied routes of observation and remembrance throughout *Sorrowland*. Browne discusses contemporary surveillance practices as they work to produce racialized subjects and articulates a practice of dark sousveillance as an imaginative approach to survival within structures of anti-Black coercion, domination, and destruction. Browne defines "dark sousveillance as an imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance, a critique that takes form in antisurveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices. Dark sousveillance, then, plots imaginaries that are oppositional and that are hopeful for another way of being" (21). I work with these frameworks of racializing surveillance and dark sousveillance to outline one structure of perception that Solomon works through in *Sorrowland* through the speculative technologies deployed across the novel.

In addition to these frameworks of veillance, I consider the sexual productions of the text as ones that produce alternative networks of speculation through sensation. In establishing this tie between the dark sousveilling renegotiations of the fungal infection through Vern's sexual awakening, I follow Solomon's narrative and discursive work with flesh into the sexual performances of *Sorrowland.* As Jennifer Nash explains, flesh "is a sexual state as well. Fleshiness is a state of sexual availability and use; it is having one's body located as the preeminent site of racial-sexual difference" (40). These racializing and sexualizing frameworks

[20] Here, I use Steve Mann's term "veillance" to work towards Simone Browne's articulation of "dark sousveillance."

of flesh and anti-Black surveillance contextualize Solomon's work with sexual exploration and scenes depicting sexual pleasure and contact in the second and third parts of *Sorrowland.* I follow these discussions of flesh and fleshiness towards these moments of sexual exploration and place them within Amber Jamilla Musser's discussion of "brown jouissance" which reroutes flesh as a site of sensual opacity that may also produce pleasurable relations. In the first of the two sex scenes I read in this chapter, Vern's fungal infection opens new avenues of sight and consumption through a mycelial network that transforms Vern's sensory capacity and provides erotic avenues of speculation through play and matter. In the second of the two sex scenes, Vern extends this play with matter and sexual exploration towards another of the fungal infection's side effects: the hauntings. I read these scenes as Vern's production of a dark sousveilling practice that Solomon locates at the site of sexual exploration and play.

The first of the two scenes I read in this chapter is the first narrative description of sexual actions in *Sorrowland* that changes the structures of refusal and omission that surround Solomon's narrative treatment of Vern's sexual encounters in part one of the novel. After the fungal infection's metamorphosis, but still during the time of Vern's stay on Sugar Mountain, Vern develops a ritual of daily masturbation in the woods outside of the cabin they stay at with their family. Vern's masturbatory ritual is a product of multiple networks of healing and transformation: one of which is the metamorphosis of the fungal infection that led to Vern's complete enmeshment with the mycelial network of the fungus connecting them to all the matter of the world and the experiences of past victims of the fungus who have died. An additional layer of Vern's healing and transformation comes through their time with Gogo. Throughout the second part of the novel, Gogo and Vern build a friendship and after some time start a sexual

relationship. These sexual encounters are short, a few paragraphs a piece, and they show Vern exploring their sexuality and sexual pleasure in the narrative present with Gogo.

This relationship and exploration exist differently than Vern's past experiences with sexual trauma and serve as a site to relearn their body and how they understand pleasure through it. The fungus opens Vern's senses and gives them access to a sensory realm that wasn't available to them before its metamorphosis. While originally intended to craft Vern as a weapon to be controlled and implemented by the American military, Vern's embodied experience of the fungus is not based in a coercive control. I read Vern's masturbatory ritual as one that shows that Vern's engagement with the fungal infection could not be anticipated by the violent logics of categorization or ontological control that conceptualized the infection as a weapon: Vern's pleasure exists, at least partially, outside of the existing blueprints of surveillance and control that formulated the fungus as a weapon. The fungal infection opens new sensory experiences that reconceptualize the imperial technologies of not only military-grade weapons, but also of sexual contact through proliferative constructions of Black genders and sexualities that resist the totalizing or universalizing constructions of the human.

In the final sex scene of *Sorrowland,* and my final consideration of Vern's development of their sexuality within and against engendered racializing and totalizing regimes, Vern has phone sex with their partner Gogo while simultaneously watching and touching two men that Vern accesses through the hauntings. This final engagement with the explicit, with the erotic, and with sexual contact in *Sorrowland* reconfigures violent, racializing surveilling practices into technologies of pleasure through the speculative components of the novel. These speculative veillances produce an expansive engagement with experiences of pleasure rooted in embodied practices of stimulation, racialization, and gendering that, in their excessive sensation, frame the

ontological categorization of Blackness through its relation to proliferative productions of Black sexuality that organize embodiment through stimulation rather than taxonomized categorization. In this final sex scene, Vern explores a haunting that appears to them in a motel. This haunting is made up of two men who had died from the impact of the fungal infection on their health due to their weakened immune system and preexisting AIDS. I read this final scene alongside frameworks of flesh and speculation and expand the historical and sexual networks being produced throughout *Sorrowland* through its negotiation of illness and exposure based in contagion, contact, and loss informed by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In tracking the trajectory of the erotic through Solomon's construction of Vern's past and present, alongside the metamorphosis of the fungal infection that expands Vern's awareness of the hauntings flowing through the temporal folds of the mycelial network of the fungus, *Sorrowland'*s sex scenes form a vision of Blackness and pleasure within structures of surveillance and exposure that shift the register of speculation from the social to the personal, from violent imposition to playful impossibilities, that offers an example of community healing through sexual practice. Solomon's production of sexual pleasure and embodied stimulation throughout Vern's narrative trajectory utilizes narrative rupture and excess and crafts a mediation on embodied processes of exposure and risk within systems of racial capital. These mediations work together throughout the novel and posit forms of community healing and pleasure that generate proliferative sexualities based in an embrace of nonteleological historical configurations that work with Blackness as it has been forced through violent systems of racializing surveillance and structures of humanization that rely on, as Zakiyah Jackson describes, the plasticization of Blackness.

FILLING IN THE GAPS: METAMORPHOSIS, MASTURBATION AND ONTOLOGICAL TURNS IN PART II OF *SORROWLAND*

At the end of the first part of the novel, Vern discovers that Ollie did not start a relationship with Vern by accident. Ollie was tracking Vern and Vern uncovers by accident that the fiend who was stalking and threatening them and their children after their initial escape from Cainland had been Ollie the entire time. This discovery leads Vern to decide to leave the woods and take Feral and Howling in search of somewhere safer. At this same time, Vern's fungal infection grows and begins to show its symptoms. Vern is in constant pain—their bones, skin, and joints all ache from the fungus reorganizing their body and rewiring their senses. As the pain grows, so too does their strength. Vern is able to carry Howling and Feral over miles and miles of forest and roadside. Vern is able to run faster, is more agile, and has more stamina due to this growing strength. Vern's plan is to search for their old friend Lucy who disappeared from Cainland years before Vern escaped. This search leads Vern to a community cafe that Vern knew was owned by Lucy's aunt, Bridget. Bridget immediately recognizes Vern from stories that Lucy had told when she was younger and takes Vern to her remote cabin home on Sugar Mountain. Once there, Bridget introduces Vern to Bridget's niece, Gogo.

This refuge came just in time and almost immediately after arriving at Bridget's home, Vern's fungal infection develops to a cataclysmic point. Vern falls ill with a high fever and goes in and out of consciousness. Gogo cares for Vern and nurses them through the life-threatening side effects of the fungal infection's metamorphosis. The metamorphosis almost kills Vern, but Vern survives it and comes out of the illness transformed. After they recover, Vern realizes the truth about Cainland and the illness and begins to understand the roots of the hauntings (the daytime visions showing past violent events from other people's lives that show up randomly throughout Vern's life), and their new strength and sensory capacity. Vern and Gogo build a

friendship, and Vern confides in Gogo about their history growing up in Cainland. After building the relationship between them, Vern and Gogo talk in the kitchen of Bridget's cabin. During this conversation Vern asks Gogo to help them gather information on Cainland, Ollie, and the government organization that controls them. Gogo agrees to help Vern and the section ends with Gogo telling Vern: "Eat up. Get some rest. I'll talk to you later" (Solomon 191).

Gogo's orders to Vern are the last words of chapter 15 of *Sorrowland* and Solomon immediately follows this prescription from Gogo with a description of the novel's first sexual act that is rooted in the narrative present. This is not a flashback, the narrative does not flinch or fade away from this moment; instead, the audience is thrust into this scene with Vern. Gogo telling Vern to "Eat up" ends chapter 15 of *Sorrowland* and then there's a blank space and a bold "16" marking the start of a new chapter. In the space of the "16," we're taken directly from Gogo's instructions to rest and to eat and brought to Vern lying "naked in the frost-glazed grasses, hungry" (Solomon 191). There is no clear narrative transition marking the action between Vern and Gogo's conversation in the kitchen and Vern lying in the grass naked. Gogo tells Vern to eat, and then Vern's outside, still hungry. Solomon moves from Gogo and Vern's conversation to Vern naked outside in a move different than the earlier treatment of Vern's encounters with Ollie: rather than fading away from Vern's sexual encounters, in this instance, Solomon abruptly moves into a description of Vern's embodied practice of sexual pleasure and satiation. This subversion of *Sorrowland's* earlier narrative constructions with Vern's sexual history marks a shift in Vern's engagement with their sexuality.

This sex scene is a product of Vern's developed senses and their time on Sugar Mountain with Bridget and Gogo. Vern's fungal infection transformed the senses available to them and altered their perception of the matter around them, opening new spaces for pleasurable contact.

In this part of the text, Vern stretches their developing senses and practices feeling them and feeling with them. They craft rituals around this practice of feeling, one of these rituals being the daily morning task of walking out into the woods surrounding Bridget's cabin, stripping off their clothes, and masturbating in a clearing. This abrupt movement from the kitchen to the forest where Vern lies at the start of Chapter 16 highlights frameworks of desire, consumption, and satiation that had only been grazed in the earlier part of the novel. Solomon writes that:

> Vern lay naked in the frost-glazed grasses, hungry for who she was becoming. Wet earth coated her bare feet, back, and bottom; it wedged into her creases, and she let it. In the mud, the border between land and body disappeared.
>
> Icy wind lapped Vern all over and she thrummed. Its caress teased her nipples taut and drew blood to the center of her. She gladly indulged the intimacies the mountains offered her. Not since Ollie had Vern given herself over to pleasures of the flesh, but now, out here in the presence of the fresh morn, among the firs, the warblers, and the tufts of herbage, she could put her fingers to herself and feel.
>
> Was it she who was the fiend? Practically rutting the dirt. (191-2)

The transition into this moment highlights a pull in Solomon's narrative towards consumption. Gogo's line is what foregrounds this scene in the woods. Vern lies in the woods, this moment of restful repose disrupted by the chilling description of the space around them: "naked in the frost-glazed grasses, hungry." This peaceful scene, of morning dew hardened over on the plant matter of the forest, of Vern taking a moment of rest among it, is fueled by a hunger and a warmth. The move, the slip between consumption and sexual stimulation, works within a larger framework of hunger.

My specific attention to Solomon's movement from Chapter 15 to Chapter 16 and the tension between these two moments works with Alexander Weheliye's questions pointing towards hunger as living in the space between desire and survival: "What does hunger outside the world of Man feel like? Is it a different hunger, or just the same as the famines created by racializing assemblages that render the human isomorphic with Man? How do we describe the sweetness that reclines in the hunger for survival?" (113). Following these questions, Amber Jamilla Musser considers the broader implications of sensation revealed in this discussion of hunger in *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance.* Musser considers sensation—of the culinary and sexual varieties (among others)—through consumption and craving. According to Musser, in this network of sensation and hunger "there are no objects, just cravings, and this act of craving is part of survival" (4). Hunger in this formulation is "constitutive of a type of selfhood that coalesces—even as it gnaws at the edges—in this state of openness and instability" (Musser 5). Musser argues that this hunger can be read as "a sensuality or mode of being and relating that prioritizes openness, vulnerability, and a willingness to ingest without necessarily choosing what one is taking in. This is not the desire born of subjectivity in which subject wishes to posses object but an embodied hunger that takes joy and pain in this gesture of radical openness toward otherness" (5). This discussion of hunger is what builds into Musser's theoretical articulation of "brown jouissance"—the "fleshy mixture of self-production, instability, joy, and pain" that lays in these moments of sensational excess and indiscriminate craving (5).

This framework of brown jouissance works with artistic and aesthetic production and performance working from Spiller's articulation of the pornotrope. Spillers explains the pornotrope as the process through which "the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible,

destructive sexuality" while also being reduced "to a thing, becoming *for* the captor" (67). Musser includes Spillers's discussion of the pornotrope to highlight it as part of "the production of flesh as one of white supremacy's tactics of domination" that "allows us to see that violence toward black and brown people is inextricable from theorizations of sexuality" (Musser 6-7). The idea of the pornotrope is central to Musser's articulation of brown jouissance as a framework that:

> gives us ways to think about the possibilities of resignifying that affective fleshiness, by showing us that which is not encumbered by discourses of sexuality, but that which traffics in sensuality, that amorphous quality of fleshiness that Spillers argues was assigned to 'the captive body.' …I ask what it might be to take the violence of the pornotrope and the accompanying impossibility of sovereign subjectivity seriously while dwelling in the selfhoods, intimacies, and knowledge systems that emerge from thinking with the flesh. For me, the pornotrope offers insight into the affective areas of racailizalization. In understanding race through the affective and sensational circuits of power and performance, we see that the pornotrope not only names the fleshiness of black and brown people, but also helps us to unpack these relationships to signification, enabling us to read otherwise. (9)

Sensation, specifically in its excessive capacity serves as a site to read pleasure and pain from alternative networks of knowing. Vern's movement from Gogo calling on them to eat, towards their supernatural sexual ritual of embodied consuming and consumption in the woods plays with narrative form and voice to gesture towards these sensational ruminations and material implications.

Vern's masturbatory ritual in *Sorrowland* is shaped by culinary imagery as Vern plays with their new senses and indulges their (not so new-found) hunger. The grass, "frost-glazed," serves as a culinary bed surrounding Vern's naked form where they lay and are "hungry" in the first line before they fall passive in the next few sentences of narration (Solomon 191). The "Wet earth," "Icy wind," and "the mountains" take on an active role as they coat, wedge, and lap their way across Vern (191-2). These elements become agential in this sex scene, and Vern's own thoughts and actions lose the narrative focus. Instead, it's Vern's bodily functions that take center stage: their thrumming, the tautening of their nipples, and the movement of their blood. We don't focus in on their hands or their fingers or the way they move their hands and *touch* through this moment; instead, we're focusing on how the wind flows, how the mountain offers, how the mud moves up and in and between as Vern "indulged" in what was "offered" to them. The description of Vern's embodied responses to this stimulation privileges sensation as the driving force of this scene, decentering Vern's agential processes of sexual decision making.

"Indulged" is simultaneously culinary and sexual here as Vern "yield[s] to an inclination or desire; [and] allow[s]" themself to follow their "will" ("Indulge Definition & Meaning"). To indulge has to do with taking in—of eating, indulging in a craving. Like "frost-glazed…[and] hungry," it's culinary. It's "Wet" and "lapping," straddling a culinarily sexual boundary as Vern's bounded body dissolves within this shifting sexual sentience. Vern's pleasure in taking in "the intimacies… offered" by the mountains through their cracks, their holes, the mixing of their blood as it moves towards the center of them even as they're undone by mud itself, is framed through the movements of the environmental elements around them. Not until the end of this ritual, until right before Vern's thoughts move themselves into the narrative voice of this chapter,

does Vern start to choose to shape themself, feel themself, to further their own pleasure. Solomon writes that "in the presence of the fresh morn, among the firs, the warblers, and the tufts of herbage, she could put her fingers to herself and feel" (192). First, it's the "fresh morn," "the firs," "the warblers," and the "herbage." Then it's their "fingers." Solomon structures this sentence around an unveiling and a slow movement towards Vern's bounded body in this sexual practice. It's the presence of these other entities and parts that leads into Vern's manual masturbation. This embodied fragmentation of Vern and the narrative focalization on the environment as sexual actor in these paragraphs disrupts the novel's earlier frameworks of animalized sexual desire.[21] The animalizing frameworks and patterns of racialized surveillance that work towards the ontological construction of Blackness solidified through Vern's internalization of (de)humanizing discourses about sexual desire falls away here in the initial narration of this scene.

Vern's pleasure is not immediately contextualized outside of its stimulatory capacity in this scene. Beginning with Vern's hunger and moving into how Vern "thrummed" in response to the wind, how their "nipples taut[ened]" and their blood "drew…to the center of" them (Solomon 191). Vern's embodied and biological responses to physical stimulation frame this scene in a way that contextualizes Vern's responses and the embodied, mattered functions of their body outside of an immediate framework of sexuality and pleasure as it is filtered through various discourses. Vern's embodied responses become particularized and isolated alongside the environmental actors described: the mud, the wind, the wet earth, exist alongside Vern's "bare feet, back, and bottom," and their "creases," their nipples, the center of them. This isolation of environmental actors alongside Vern's varying body parts craft a taxonomical play through

[21] I discuss these frameworks further in the section "Vern at Cainland" in "Reading in the Gaps: Illegibility and Narrative Refusal in Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland.*"

stimulation that refuses an immediate categorization or description in relation to ontology. Vern exists in this environmental frame and Solomon offers a counterexample to the earlier moments of sexual violation framed through violent transaction and coercive categorization.

The "ecological disposition" (Moten xv) of consent becomes literalized in this eco-erotic display of Vern's new senses and relationship to their embodied desires. "Wet earth coated" Vern, "it wedged into her creases, and she let it." The earth coats Vern without a question of consent but Solomon still frames Vern's actions in this moment—Vern "let it" coat them. Vern exists in a passive configuration in this scene and the active construction mid encounter is that Vern "let it" happen. Vern then "gladly indulged the intimacies the mountains offered her" (Solomon 191). What Solomon crafts in this ritual that is shared within the context of Vern's metamorphosis and Vern's relationship with Bridget and Gogo exists, for a moment, in a space with a different ecological construction. This ecology is one where the questions of consent, racialization, desire, and debt or transaction are not the immediate discursive structures or grammars available to Vern's budding practices of sexuality and embodied pleasure. This practice disperses the (human) body as the vector of pleasure and locates pleasure within these personified movements of the world and its matter, which narratively includes Vern.

RUTTING: FLESH AND ANIMALIZATION

Vern still places these acts within their learned frameworks though. Vern thinks of Ollie, of the fiend, and then Vern thinks of having "given herself over to the pleasures of the flesh." This mention of "flesh," of the distinction of matter as flesh, as flesh as being something that is given in to, something that is ungendered and racialized, rather than inherent in a lived experience, falls away momentarily to the particularization of the ecological items surrounding them: "the firs, the warblers, and the tufts of herbage" (Solomon 192). But this placement of

"flesh" next to "the firs, the warblers, and the tufts of herbage" does not remain a neutral observation. The paragraph breaks and like in earlier moments where Vern *feels* the earth and gets something they've been wanting, longing for, this moment too falls into third person indirect discourse focalized on Vern that reveals their internalization of the violent logics of ontological constructions of blackness alongside the animalization of pleasure.

Vern asks in this way, "Was it she who was the fiend? Practically rutting the dirt" (Solomon 192). This thought sits in the narration unmarked by quotation—instead, Vern is indirectly included at this moment with this thought sitting as a line of its own breaking from the paragraph where "she could put her fingers to herself and feel" (Solomon 192). The "Practically rutting the dirt" as in, "virtually," "almost," rutting the dirt is, I think, Vern. But beyond that, it could also be read as Reverend Sherman, who was the public voice of Cainland, working his way into Vern's private thoughts. This double focalization breaks from this moment of pleasure and shifts the uncategorized cacophony of mattered pleasures into a surveilled and structured engagement with sexuality, gender, humanity, and race. The forest scene of Vern's masturbatory ritual momentarily existed outside of clear lines of surveillance or acts of watching or of being watched: there was no visual component to the active elements in the description, the actors acted, and Vern's body responded but not within a framework of visual perception. Until the mention of Ollie, of flesh, the embodied and racialized surveillance surrounding Vern's earlier sexual encounters that shaped Vern's understanding of desire through violence and coercion were not present in the narration of this scene. Solomon shapes this scene as a momentary reprieve, a momentary entry into another way of understanding matter and another way of Vern understanding their relationship with matter through sex.

Vern's question—"Was it she who was the fiend? Practically rutting the dirt"—narratively marks the moment that Vern becomes aware of the structures of racialized surveillance and their implication on their embodied practices of pleasure (Solomon 192). Even though there's no one (that we know of right now) who can see Vern or knows what they're doing, these racializing logics and structures of surveillance utilized to control the subject of that surveillance are still present. Browne explains this process of racializing surveillance that is revealed in Vern's response that pulled them out of the pleasurable stimulation of this moment as a function of racializing surveillance that shows "how social control operates on certain bodies and in certain spaces" that exposes "disciplinary power and the ways that it comes to be internalized by some" (37). This internalization is familiar in the novel by now surrounding Vern's sexual practices or of moments engaging with embodied, pleasurable sensation, and these categorizing frameworks are a topic of frequent scholarly attention in response to Solomon's novel.[22]

In his article, "'Vile Matter,'" Jesse Cohn touches this scene too. Copying almost the same lines from Solomon's novel into his addition to *Extrapolation* in 2023, Cohn explains that "Vern's transformation is not only a matter of becoming-animal. Just as Vern disrupts the distinctions between human and animal… [Vern's] body keeps threatening to merge with that of the Earth itself" (315). Cohn touches on the instability and enmeshment of "the human." His assertion that "Vern's transformation is not only a matter of becoming-animal" highlights the

[22] Articles discussing *Sorrowland* through its attention to "more-than-human" relationalities and ontological reconfigurations continue to be published and place *Sorrowland* within different fields and disciplinary lenses. A few of these recent publications that do this work other than Cohn's include Michael Mayne's discussion of monstrosity and transness in *Sorrowland* in "Postnaturalist Monstrosity in Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland,"* Monica Calvo-Pascaul's reading in "Ethico-onto-epistem-ology and Traumatic Memories in Rivers Solomon's *The Deep* and *Sorrowland,*" Saswati Swayamprava and Nagendra Kumar's discussion of Solomon's novel in "'The Animality of Her Body': A Material-Discursive Reading of Disidentification in Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland,"* and Natalia Cecire's attention to the fungal political potentiality of *Sorrowland* in "Enchanting Austerity: Genre and Fungal Allegory."

taxonomical organization of Solomon's whole novel ("Part One: Kingdom Plantae," "Part Two: Kingdom Fungi," and "Part Three: Kingdom Animalia). But, strictly speaking, Vern is not in practice "becoming-animal" here—they're becoming-fungi, becoming-rock(ed), becoming-mudded, muddied. In their actions they're sedentary, sediment, as the wind, the wet*ness* erodes their borders. Thrums, flows, drawn to a center. Cohn claims that Vern is "not only" human becoming animal, and he amends his initial claim.

Cohn says that Vern's "body keeps threatening to merge with that of the Earth itself" (315). Cohn explains this amended assertion of bodily expansion after he pulls out of the block quote. He resumes his analysis by inserting Vern's thought as the first words after the block quote: "'Practically rutting the dirt.'" Cohn quotes Vern's reflection on their sexual proximity to the ground as a transition into his analysis of this moment. He reads this textual moment as one that reveals how:

> Vern's exploration of her sexuality dissolves the human/nonhuman boundary, literally muddying things up. Mud, as viscous matter in a threshold state between solid and liquid, seems the appropriate medium for this idiosyncratic ritual. Indiscreet, she risks losing her discrete embodiment, mixing herself with the world. In this sense, Vern plays out some very traditional understandings of monstrosity…. However, she does so with an affective charge quite the opposite of traditional horror fiction, a vulnerability and sensuality that is neither abjected in advance… nor to be entertained as transgressive and then abjected. …She is a genuinely erotic monster. (315-6)

I highlight Cohn's engagement with Solomon's work, his engagement with this particular scene, and his engagement with Vern as character to think about the pathways of meaning and meaning making modeled in this moment and imposed upon it in our critical approaches. Cohn and I

choose to isolate Vern's ritual from the rest of the text in our analyses of *Sorrowland.* There's something that draws us in to this moment, to picking it apart, to reading it and reading it closely and making claims based on those readings. Vern is touched, caressed, penetrated by the mud and the wind in this mountain-scape built by Solomon and there's something about this penetration that catches scholarly attention. I pull Cohn's text in here to think about how we touch, caress, dissect Vern's ritual in our scholarship and what is produced in that practice.

Cohn's assertion of Vern's "becoming-animal" plays with a tension between the category of human and animal, claiming to move beyond that human-animal ontological distinction entirely by widening the taxonomical framework used to contextualize Vern and their body. Cohn tells us Vern's act is "not only a matter of becoming-animal… Vern disrupts the distinctions between human and animal" and it's not animality in this ritual (315). Animality is not a present category while Vern thrums with the wind and the mud—not until the very end, until Solomon sprinkles in another voice, Vern's own voice and internalization of the values of Cainland, that there's a mention of animality. "Rutting" moves this moment into the animalizing framework that Cohn utilizes in his introduction to the way he attends to this scene. Cohn's reliance on a human to animal transition to move into his discussion of Vern's "erotic monstrosity" plays off of the animalizing discourses surrounding sexuality threaded through Vern's embodied engagement with their sexual practices as they relearn their body after the metamorphosis and as they unlearn the internalized racist, transphobic, and homophobic discourses that surround Vern's understanding of their sexuality.

"Rutting" highlights the racializing, animalizing framework surrounding desire that Vern's early moment of "longing" in the woods touched too. The violent taxonomical mindset

that surrounds this word choice is directly linked to the ontological structuring of Blackness that Browne articulates as a product of racializing surveillance. Rutting is:

> 2a. *intransitive.* Of a deer or other animal: to be under the influence of periodic sexual excitement; to take part in the annual rut (rut n. 1). Also: to copulate.
>
> 2b. *intransitive.* Of a person: to have sexual intercourse; to behave promiscuously or lecherously. *rare* before 20th cent.
>
> 3a. *transitive.* Of a deer or other animal: to mount or copulate with (a female). *Obsolete. rare.*
>
> 3b. *transitive.* Of a man: to have sexual intercourse with. *rare* before 20th cent. ("Rut, V. (1)")

The word itself jumps back and forth between these classifications. It's "of a deer or other animal:" it's "of a person:" it's "of a deer or other animal… with (a female):" it's "of a man." Human and animal trade this word, pass it back and forth, and gender has something to do with it too. Here, the animal seeps in, in Vern's internalized practice of shame, an externalized, narrativized moment of the voicing of this shame. The thought that shakes the narrative focus out of Vern's masturbatory ritual is one that categorizes this moment of practically rutting not as a practice of pleasure based in movement and sensation, but as a moment of indulging moralized through a framework that makes "rutting" bad precisely because it makes the human animal, and it frames Vern's expressions of pleasure transgressive of gendered norms.

"Practically rutting" exists as a linguistic marker affectively deployed here as a contemporary form of control surrounding sexuality that is legible only through its reliance on antiblack formulations of (white heteropatriarchal) subjectivity and humanity. The racialized and engendered interreliance of meaning that works to codify Vern's ecological masturbation within

this statement—*practically rutting*—as a shameful or transgressive one is reliant on the historical and intersectional sedimentation of humanity through antiblack formulations at the center of the racist and colonial practices that rationalized the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery through the oppositional production of the white, western subject. Zakiyyah Jackson unravels this racializing engendered ontological logic in her text, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World,* by contextualizing recent discussions surrounding embodied enmeshment and posthumanism within a varied archive of texts spanning from Frederick Douglass's essays and *Narrative* to contemporary Black women's science fiction novels. Jackson explores "what it is to problematize the category of Man from that space that has been foreclosed in order for the category to exist" by utilizing the "grounding reference of slavery" and furthering a "theory of ontologized plasticity" that "underscore the recursive trajectory of discourses on black animality" (36; 37). In Jackson's articulation of being (human), she highlights "key texts of the twentieth-century African diasporic literature and visual culture [that] generate unruly conception of being and materiality that creatively disrupt the human-animal distinction and its persistent raciality" (1). Central to Jackson's articulation around antiblack configurations of humanity is the racialization of animality or bestialization that, rather than only functioning as a non-human opposite to "the human," is actually central to the racial projects of western humanity that have systematically black(ened) people of the African diaspora as a counter image formed within the structures of humanity.

This black(ened) being is a western colonial Enlightenment construction that frames whiteness and humanity through the production of antiblackness that relies on the Black woman and Black female sexuality as a marker of the ontological limit of humanity—the turning point of bestialization or animalization. Jackson explains of this historical ontological production that

"Gender and sexuality feature prominently in animalizing discourse…Gendered and sexual discourses on 'the African' are inextricable from those pertaining to reason, historicity, and civilization, as purported observations of gender and sexuality were frequently used to provide 'evidence' of the inherent abject quality of black people's human animality from the earliest days of the invention of 'the human'" (5). Continuing this articulation of the centrality of gender and sexuality to this raciality western humanity built itself through and around, Jackson clarifies that:

> Antiblack formulations of gender and sexuality are actually essential rather than subsidiary to the metaphysical figuration of matter, objects, and animals that recent critical theory hopes to dislodge….the plasticization of black(ened) people at the register of sign and materiality is central to the prevailing logics and praxis of the human and sex/gender…. Our task would be to take seriously the particularization of gender and sexuality in black(ened) people in the context of a humanism that in its desire to universalize, ritualistically posits black(female)ness as opacity, inversion, and limit. In such a context, the black body is characterized by a plasticity, whereby raciality arbitrarily remaps black(ened) gender and sexuality, nonteleologically and nonbinaristically, while fleeting adherence to normativized heteropatriarchal codes. In such a context of paradoxical (un)gendering, and by gendering I mean humanization, power only takes direction from its own shifting exigencies—a predicament that might be described as chaos. This chaos by design is used to marginalize black(ened) genders and sexualities as the border of the sociological: a condition I refer to as ontologized plasticity. (9-10)

Jackson rearticulates blackness's ontological positioning within liberal humanistic categorizations as being reliant on Black female sexualities to cohere notions of white womanhood, and of sex and gender, within the raciality of "the human" that systematically exclude the black(ened) being and produce chaotic sexualities as a function of dehumanization.

This engendered and racialized construction of humanity that bestializes Black sexualities and genders flows through Solomon's articulations of "rutting" that cut into Vern's practice of embodied pleasures in *Sorrowland.* Solomon provides a moment of imaginative nonbinaristic pleasure that works outside the framework of a human-animal distinction. The ritual Solomon inserts into this scene is not immediately classified as one; instead, it is introduced only through Vern's sensory experience of the ecological pleasures around them. Solomon's ritual is not immediately classified as one, but even so, it plays with what Jackson explained as humanism's move to "ritualistically posit… black(female)ness as opacity, inversion, and limit" (9). Solomon's initial construction of this scene works through an expanded taxonomical framework where "opacity, inversion, and limit," the plasticity of Blackness and the chaotic genders and sexualities Jackson explains works through these concepts, is not immediately followed by a desire for inclusion in the category of the human. The statement of Vern's that broke from the sensory description of matter—"Was it she who was the fiend? Practically rutting the dirt"—places Vern within a violent self-categorization through the insertion of a self-reflective subjectivity tied to Western notions of humanity, race, and gender. Vern's sexual appetite is racialized and penalized through its placement within the context of a person who actively harmed and violated Vern—Ollie, the fiend, who, in Vern's memory is the last person Vern had "given herself over to the pleasures of the flesh" with (Solomon 192).

In Vern's mind, their sexuality is intrinsically linked to harm through the violent ways that the structures of antiblackness, and antiblack surveillance and its actors (Ollie, the police officer), have worked against them.[23] The insertion of Vern's memory of Ollie in their masturbatory ritual utilizes the framework of "flesh" and its "pleasures" and marks the violent utilization of Black sexuality and pleasure within racializing and bestializing ontological discourses of humanity. This racializing framework of "flesh" is historically situated by Jackson alongside the raciality of the human-animal distinction. Jackson explains that "the black body's fleshiness was aligned with that of animals and set in opposition to European spirit and mind" in Enlightenment constructions of the human that continue to shape "the human" and (human) being (6). "Was it she who was the fiend?" follows Vern's production of the antiblack categorization of matter in their reflection on their histories with "the pleasures of the flesh" as a product of them being subjected to state-sanctioned sexual violence. "Practically rutting the dirt" follows this marker of Vern's history with sexual violence.

"Rutting" again highlights the animalization of Vern through their sexual performances and engagements with pleasure that makes the antiblack ontological categorizations that rely on gendered performances of sexuality explicit in this formulation. Vern's "Rutting [of] the dirt" retroactively imposes a categorizing logic over their sensory experiences in the clearing on Sugar Mountain. Vern's sensory play with the matter of the clearing becomes "Rutting," codifying Vern's actions as not only stimulating, but sexual—not just an interplay of matter, but a transgression of the taxonomical divides between human and non-human matter. The imposition of rutting imposes a human-animal divide that inherently racializes Vern's sensory stimulation through the human-animal tension in its definition and makes it transgressively, chaotically,

[23] For a fuller reading of these examples, see the "Vern at Cainland" section of the preceding chapter.

gendered through its imposition as well. Vern's reflection on their stimulatory engagement with the world functions as a simultaneously sexualizing, racializing, engendered, and taxonomical interruption in this moment. These simultaneous productions of "Rutting" work through Vern's consciousness and self-reflection on their embodied sensory responses that touch and meld with their sedimented understanding of their sexuality that this ritual exists within in disruptive ways.

BEYOND RUTTING: SEXUAL PRACTICES OF SENSATION THAT KEEP GOING

This ritual is unlike the earlier moments in the first part of *Sorrowland* that stop before the narrative moves into Vern's sexual encounters. We start in the middle of Vern's sexual exploration in the woods and get interrupted by this discursive interjection. Despite the inclusion of this racially imbricated moralized focalization recontextualizing Vern's embodied sensorial ritual, Vern keeps going. The scene continues after Reverend Sherman's voice enters it, or after Vern's violent self-reflection enters it. Solomon immediately continues after this line about "rutting" by stating that Vern "thought of Lucy. Vern prayed for a glimpse of her old friend. She couldn't control when the hauntings came, but Gogo thought with practice that might change" (Solomon 193). From thinking of Ollie, Vern stops masturbating, understanding their actions as shameful, fiendish. But Vern doesn't stay with Ollie or Reverend Sherman; instead, Vern thinks of Lucy to try to access Lucy's memories through the hauntings and thinks of Gogo helping Vern understand the fungus and the powers Vern grew from it. This ritual does not move back into the sensorial play that it held in its initial narration; we do not follow Vern back into their play with matter through sensation.

Continuing with Vern in this clearing, despite trying, "Lucy didn't come… and Vern lay alone on the ground with only her base longings for company. She, with the vigor of a young

god, fingered herself into oblivion" (Solomon 193). Even with everything "Rutting" holds, Vern keeps going; even though the narrative voice, the narrative scope, doesn't flow back into sensorial descriptions. Vern keeps going as they become active in the narration of this scene. The transformative onto-epistemological practice that was revealed in the initial description of Vern's ritual is shortened: truncated to a description of Vern moving "into oblivion" (Solomon 193). And oblivion isn't bad, it isn't fiendish. Oblivion exists like what Jackson describes when she gestures towards the positioning of "black(female)ness as opacity, inversion, and limit" (9). Legibility and respectability are not intended outcomes to Vern continuing to finger themself "into oblivion"—something else is (Solomon 193). The opacity that Jackson reads is written into this aesthetic production of Solomon's description of Vern's play with sensation and flesh.

Musser explains "that opacity functions as a minoritarian strategy because it disrupts the assumption that visuality is equivalent to transparency by alluding to something else, a different set of norms or even an interiority inaccessible to others" (10). This inaccessibility filters out the narrative access to Vern's return to their morning ritual and stops even the narrative voice from accessing their sexual-towards-sensorial practice. The narrative scope fades away from Vern here but reframes the affective charge behind its fading. While Vern's internalization of Reverend Sherman in this first textual revelation of Vern's masturbatory ritual places it within a web of human and animal distinctions strung together through cultural constructions of morality and sex based in antiblack constructions of gender and sexuality, Vern keeps going and "fingered… [themself] into oblivion" (Solomon 193). While this indirect narration does break into Vern's morning ritual, in a reverse of the earlier structure around moments of sex or trauma from part one of *Sorrowland*, the passage doesn't fully fall away and end in a memory. Instead, we come back to Vern in the woods as the narrative fades into "oblivion" (193).

MORE AT THE MOTEL: EXCESS, TRANSFORMATION, QUEER PLEASURES, AND TOUCHING AFTERLIVES OF HIV/AIDS IN PART III OF *SORROWLAND*

Vern's ritual of ecological masturbation is a product of their healing time on Sugar Mountain. Vern uses the power given by the fungal infection as a sexual technology that begins to craft resistant sexual ecologies. At the same time as this sensorial-sexual exploration of Vern's heightened mattered enmeshment, the fungal infection also increases Vern's sensitivity to the hauntings, further exposing them to the embodied manifestations of the past traumas and violent encounters of other people connected to the fungus's mycelial network. The hauntings are perceived by Vern, and anyone else who is undergoing fungal metamorphosis, as embodied manifestations of deceased people who were infected with the fungus during their lifetime. These embodied manifestations come into Vern's life without warning or context. Sometimes the hauntings are corpses, unmoving somewhere near Vern; sometimes the hauntings are stuck in a moment of trauma from their life, reliving on a loop a moment of violence or violation; and sometimes the hauntings seem to come to life, touching and speaking to Vern.

The "hauntings" in Solomon's *Sorrowland* have been a frequent site of analysis in scholarly articles published about the novel in the years following its release. Many of the critical readings of Solomon's *Sorrowland* make claims about the epistemological and ontological configuration of the hauntings and how they impact Vern's life in the novel. The hauntings are articulated as, at best, a nuisance, and in their worst manifestations are described as physical assaults against Vern that cause them intense pain and distress. The scholarly attention paid to the hauntings in their traumatic and violent capacity attend to an important element of their textual manifestation; however, this framework is limiting when placed in the context of Vern's

sexual exploration throughout the third part of the novel. The hauntings' pleasurable capacities are frequently overlooked. Despite previous attentions being paid to Vern's practices of sexuality in the second part of the novel, and some attention being given to the violent structures of Cainland that shape Vern's understanding of their sexuality in the first part of the novel, a final manifestation of Vern's sexual trajectory throughout *Sorrowland* remains, largely, uncommented on.

In the third part of *Sorrowland,* Vern is found by the government agents behind the medical experimentation and control of Cainland. Vern runs, leading the agents away from Gogo, Bridget, Howling, and Feral as Vern tries to escape. Due to the strength and speed afforded to Vern by the fungal infection, Vern loses the government agents in the wilderness surrounding Bridget's cabin. Vern runs until they find a motel far enough away that they feel safe to stop. At the motel Vern gets a room and escapes into its solitude but finds that it is filled with hauntings. One of the hauntings is of two men who had died. They were opportunistically infected by the fungus before their death due to their weakened immune system and increased risk of exposure to the fungus from having AIDS. Speaking with Gogo on the phone, Vern explores the haunting and in doing so, brings the haunting to life. Vern learns the names of the two men: Samuel and Peter. After Samuel and Peter come to life, Vern, Gogo, Samuel, and Peter have sex: Gogo on the phone and Vern in the room with the haunting. The haunting is specific, embodied, and is a production of not only trauma and repression, but of desire, lust, and pleasure working across multiple technologies of speculation connecting the two couples. These layers of speculation and the structural tools used to practice them range from ones as mundanely mattered

as the cellular waves between Vern and Gogo's phones, to the spectacularly rooted threads of temporality that congeal in the mycelial network between Vern, Samuel, and Peter.[24]

In the motel the fungal infection is recontextualized through the opportunistic infection—the shared networks of exposure and risk between the mycelial and the viral. This final sexual encounter in *Sorrowland* continues to work with systems of racialized surveillance and the engendered raciality of "the human." The trajectory of the narrative production surrounding the erotic shifts again in part three and this final sex scene in the motel extends the metaphor of the fungal infection to the literal and embodied histories of exposure and increased bodily awareness of enmeshment through the framework of weakened immunity. This reorganization of exposure and risk plays with the fantastical frameworks of *Sorrowland* and produces an approach to the afterlives of individuals who've died of HIV/AIDS and establishes nonteleological, nonbinaristic, enmeshed, and embodied queer communities of pleasure that form networks of care and intimacy within these spaces framed through dangerous contact and risk.

This final scene reconfigures the gaps of history and historical representation through Vern's repurposing of the military medical experiment that was used as a weapon against their bodily autonomy and containment, even as it weaponized their body. Solomon takes this violent racial medical history of experimentation established in Vern's narrative and compounds and contextualizes it with the racist homophobic history surrounding the medical and governmental responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis.[25] This narrative approach to infection and spread transitions throughout the three parts of *Sorrowland* and transforms in this encounter in the

[24] Not to mention the onto-epistemological processes of knowing and being that are structured through the social, historical, and discursive positioning of the people in this scene.

[25] Scholarship surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic has a robust history itself. For more on the continuing impact that anti-Black and homophobic responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic has on Black residents of the American South, see Dan Royles's *To Make the Wounded Whole: The African American Struggle Against HIV/AIDS* and Alyson O'Daniel's *Holding On: African American Women Surviving HIV/AIDS.*

motel. The violent military medical experimentation and observation that started as an attack on Vern's embodied existence is reworked through the lens of pleasure and desire that reconfigures existing technologies of surveillance through new lines of sight, witness, and sexual observation. Moving from the gaps that mark Vern's lived experiences of sexual violence that reverberate throughout the novel, to the ritual in the woods that marks Vern's healing and unlearning of the violent production of Man that limited their engagement with their embodied sexual desires, *Sorrowland's* final narrative marker of Vern's developing sexuality and relationship to sexual pleasure reorganizes the technologies of domination—material and discursive—and reveals queer communal sexual engagement that marks contact and contagion, embodied enmeshment, through the lens of infection and HIV/AIDS that works together to frame the ontological categorization of Blackness in this new space of the motel in pleasurable, proliferative, productions of sexuality.

EXPLORING THE HAUNTINGS: BEFORE ENTERING THE MOTEL

Tomás Vergara explores the role of the hauntings in *Sorrowland* in his 2023 monograph, *Alterity and Capitalism in Speculative Fiction: Estranging Contemporary History*. Vergara explains the hauntings as a manifestation of "silences suppressed in hegemonic US history… [that] materialize how the very logic of exploitation engendering these events still exert an influence in the present" (104). Vergara's reading of the hauntings in *Sorrowland* is part of a chapter titled "The Afterlives of Slavery: Spectres of the Antebellum in Colson Whitehead's The *Underground Railroad* and Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland*." Vergara compares the speculative fiction tropes in the two novels analyzing the role of the hauntings in *Sorrowland* and arguing that they highlight an "undead temporality" that "stresses that mourning the past is an unsustainable position for Vern and the Black community as a whole, since it is not possible to

memorialize an event that is still unfolding" (Vergara 104). Engaging heavily with Christina Sharpe's articulation of "the wake as the conceptual frame of and for living blackness in the diaspora in the still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery," Vergara reads the temporal production of the hauntings as one highlighting the continuing impact of the transatlantic slave trade in social, legal, and cultural manifestations of anti-Blackness (Sharpe 2).

Mónica Calvo-Pascual cites this same moment from Vergara's chapter in their article "Ethico-onto-epistem-ology and Traumatic Memories in Rivers Solomon's *the Deep* and *Sorrowland.*" Following Vergara's articulation of the hauntings, Calvo-Pascual states that "Vern's hauntings… re-enact traumatic episodes in the lives of dead people oppressed by racial and sexual violence, voicing 'the silences suppressed in hegemonic US history'" (250). In their articulations of historical and archival "silence" and the "counterfactual" historical productions of the hauntings, both Vergara and Calvo-Pascual articulate the hauntings as a speculative manifestation of repression and trauma. Framing his discussion of the narrative tie between the hauntings and histories of chattel slavery in the United States, Vergara outlines the moments in US history that Vern accesses in the hauntings throughout *Sorrowland* in one sentence of his chapter: "These hauntings depict manifold events repressed from hegemonic US history: a spiteful slave woman [point of clarification: an enslaver] attempting to punish Vern for her literacy by cutting her tongue, medical experiments performed on non-white individuals, victims of the AIDS crisis during the 1980s" (104). Vergara's list of the hauntings in *Sorrowland* is incomplete, as it serves to demonstrate the way he is understanding the connection between historical violence and the present-tense iterations of the hauntings.

The final example of the hauntings referenced by Vergara in his list, "victims of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s," obscures Vern's embodied experience of the haunting (104). Unlike

with the explicit act of violence described in the first item of Vergara's list, there is no reference to the way the "victims of the AIDS crisis" engage with Vern's body in the narrative moment that this haunting arrives in *Sorrowland*. This framing glosses over the embodied nature of this haunting, of its specificity and singularity, while placing it in the context of two other mentions that shift between a specific reference to Vern's embodied experience of the violence of the hauntings, and an abstracted reference that remains locatable in Vern's body due to Vern's status as an individual who is currently living as a person who is being experimented on by the United States government. Additionally, there's a layer to Vergara's work with this haunting in the list that functions not only through the removal of context from the novel's larger frameworks, but through the addition of contextualizing information surrounding this haunting that the novel does not provide. Vergara supplies that the men of the haunting were killed during "the AIDS crisis in the 1980s." This temporal orientation and placement of the men of this haunting's deaths in the 1980s is not explicit in *Sorrowland.* Solomon does not provide a timeline or a specific decade for this haunting. This haunting does not factor into Vergara's larger discussion of *Sorrowland* and instead serves as a single detail meant to demonstrate the broader temporal pool that the hauntings pull from. While these details lay outside the scope of Vergara's argument, the insertion of "in the 1980s" in the framing of this haunting provides an example of a specifying and historizing impulse towards this scene that the extended metaphor of "the hauntings" in *Sorrowland* works to refuse.

In *The Calendar of Loss,* Dagmawi Woubshet reflects on practices of mourning in written, poetic, and activist works and performances in the early AIDS epidemic. Woubshet, writing in 2015 and reflecting on these practices from the early 1980s, discusses his reading practice as one which is informed by "looking for the dead *now"* (40; emphasis original). He

explains what this contemporary retrospective performs by explaining that "Looking for the dead sounds like an incongruous approach to a catastrophe like AIDS, which is defined in part by its sheer scale; it may seem that it does not require much searching to find the AIDS dead, given their countless numbers. But we live in an era that has effaced from our contemporary life the AIDS past and its many thousands gone" (Woubshet 41). He further articulates that "given gay liberalism's insistent erasure of the past, looking for the AIDS dead *now* becomes a timely intervention (Woubshet 44). Dan Royles marks a similar move in his discussion of Black activist responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in his 2020 text, *To Make the Wounded Whole: The African American Struggle Against HIV/AIDS*. Royles ends his historical attention to Black AIDS activism by explaining that "recognizing African American AIDS activism brings our timeline up to the present day. Many histories of AIDS activism in the United States end in the middle 1990s, around the time that most ACT UP chapters disappeared or went into decline. And yet, most of the groups in this book are still around today, continuing the fight against AIDS in Black communities" (224). These reflective frameworks on the contemporary discussions surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic explains a scholarly removal that constructs a temporal distance from the HIV/AIDS epidemic that incorrectly categorizes it as a thing of the past.

Vergara's reading of the hauntings as a textual manifestation that "stresses that mourning the past is an unsustainable position for Vern and the Black community as a whole, since it is not possible to memorialize an event that is still unfolding" also applies to Solomon's work with the haunting in the motel (Vergara 104), which uses the hauntings to extend what "looking for the dead *now"* might mean (Woubshet 41). I include this discussion of Vergara's demonstrative list of the hauntings to highlight the scholarly productions shaping Vern's embodied engagement with the hauntings, and with the symptoms of their fungal infection more broadly. I also include

it to gesture towards the symbolic and historical importance of this specific haunting in articulating the metaphorical and material work done through Solomon's deployment of the hauntings.

The hauntings are a symptom of Vern's fungal infection that draws in critical attention in a similar way as Vern's newfound senses present in their ritualistic masturbation on Sugar Mountain. Cohn's attention to the impact of the fungal infection on Vern's senses outlines how Vern adapts with the fungal infection and its symptoms. Vern's posthuman pleasures are closely theorized by Cohn and other scholars in their attentions to *Sorrowland* in their liberatory capacity and construction of Blackness. The type of pleasure Vern feels through their contact with the woods (the dirt, the mud) pulls critical attention—so too does the pain, trauma, and violence of the hauntings. Vergara's articulation of the third type of haunting, "victims of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s," marks an intersection between these posthuman pleasures and the past to present reverberation of trauma present in the hauntings (104). However, Vergara's construction of this scene in *Sorrowland* stops after those eight words and remains one of the only references to that specific haunting in any of the currently published critical responses to the novel. Despite this, Vern's interaction with this specific haunting is a foundational moment in *Sorrowland*'s production of Vern's super-human senses and engagement with the dispersed temporalities of the hauntings.

I highlight this critical framing present in the scholarly responses to the hauntings in *Sorrowland* and to the eco-erotic new-materialist pleasures Vern accesses in the second part of the novel after they metamorphose and begin to heal on Sugar Mountain because it serves as an example of the way both historical trauma and futuristic pleasures are read in the critical responses to *Sorrowland*. The "victims of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s" come from the same

haunting: they were lovers before they died and they arrive in the haunting together (Vergara 104). Their names are Samuel and Peter. This moment of haunting extends Solomon's attention to racialized sexuality through the sexual entanglement between Gogo, Vern, Samuel, and Peter. In the scene holding this haunting in *Sorrowland,* Samuel and Peter become embodied, they regain their mattered fleshiness, as Vern, speaking on the phone with Gogo, delves into the information they can access about Samuel and Peter's histories and lives through the mycelial network that Vern shares with Samuel and Peter.

Solomon's attention to haunting in *Sorrowland* follows a speculative literary tradition in Black feminist fiction that models a material understanding of nonteleological constructions of historical memory and events through metaphor. One scholarly articulation of haunting that could contextualize Solomon's deployment of the term in *Sorrowland* comes in Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination.* In her text, Gordon attends to the ways that haunting and the figure of the ghost reflect and shape social life. Gordon's interrogation into the structures of haunting in modern life is invested with an attention to knowledge production, imagined and sensed realities, and the interaction between the past and the present. In speaking to the gaps, points of erasure, and also the unmarked points of presence in the historical record, Gordon describes an experience of haunting "as that which appears to not be there [but] is often a seething presence" (8). Haunting, as suggested by Gordon, explains an unexpected, unnamed, unknown presence that "acting on and often meddling with our taken-for-granted realities" is experienced through the sign of the ghost (8). In Gordon's articulation, "The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life" (8).

At the intersection of history and subjectivity is haunting, experienced through and enacted by the ghost. Haunting as a way of making presence, of marking what is there but not there, and the ghost, functioning as the sign, the perceivable entity or action produced through haunting, becomes a way of knowing. This epistemology of haunting and the acting role of the ghost are again explained by Gordon: "The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (8). Haunting produces a type of "transformative recognition" through the sensing and feeling of a knowledge shaped both by the past and the present. This transformative recognition opens how reality is known and engages with affective processes of knowing that are rooted in processes of happening and of having happened. According to Gordon, ghosts and haunting are perceived through structures of feeling. Haunting is known through structures of feeling that are "not only the structure of an affective social experience and consciousness, but also the spellbinding material relations of exchange between the defined and the inarticulate, the seen and the invisible, the known and the unknown" (Gordon 200). Gordon continues her explanation on these structures of feeling and haunting by characterizing them as a tangle of "the subjective and the objective, experience and belief, feeling and thought, the immediate and the general, the personal and the social… A structure of feeling 'articulates *presence'* as the tangled exchange of noisy silences and seething absences" (200). The way of knowing produced and perceived by haunting exists in multiplicity, contradiction, and transformation.

In *Sorrowland's* hauntings, there is no narrative articulation of the ghost. The haunting becomes the name of the event and "ghost" is obscured, renamed through its overdetermined

relationship to the event itself. The trauma of the historical memory shapes the haunting and the hauntings of *Sorrowland* are named in their capacity as an event rather than as subjects who experienced the event. This shift away from *the ghost* as a sign, or singular subject or object within a haunting, and towards a *haunting,* is tracked in the scholarly articulations of *Sorrowland'*s hauntings that frame them through their relation to moments of trauma and pain without an articulation of Vern's varied interaction with the figures of the hauntings. The singularity of the ghost, the materiality of the metaphor of the hauntings is highlighted in the motel with Vern, Samuel, and Peter and works against the articulation of the hauntings as removed from an enlivened, embodied, sensorial experience of the hauntings, of the "ghosts" that exist within it. What Gordon describes as "the way of the ghost" expands in the motel in this third part of *Sorrowland.*

THE MOTEL: CORPSELY WATCHING

The scene in the motel follows after a brief period in *Sorrowland* where Vern, Howling, and Feral were able to stop running from the government agents hunting them. During that time, Vern began to feel at home on Sugar Mountain with Gogo, Briget, Howling, and Feral. This moment of reprieve offered Vern the space to explore their new body and sensorial capacity after the fungal infection metamorphized. Through this exploration Vern began to construct a different relationship with sexual desire and pleasure, relearning what embodied pleasurable sensation meant to them outside of the totalizing and violent frameworks imposed upon them at the Blessed Acres of Cain. As time passed, they formed a close relationship with Gogo, and for the first time in the novel, Vern has sexual intercourse with another person that is represented in the narrative present. This space of reprieve doesn't last though. Vern had to run away from Sugar Mountain to protect their family from the government agents that tracked them down and briefly

took shelter in Vital Springs Inn, a motel that they stumbled upon in their flight. Vern enters the motel room and is immediately met with multiple hauntings.[26] Vern takes a shower, comes out of the bathroom, and lies down on the bed.

In the initial moments of this scene in the motel, Solomon highlights notions of privacy and consent. Solomon writes that "Privacy was a gift the fungus was not going to grant" Vern that night (Solomon 293). The violent images (experiences) the hauntings bring into Vern's present moment are out of Vern's control and insert themselves into Vern's day-to-day life without regard for their desires. Vern cannot ask for privacy. They cannot claim it on their own. External, material (mycelial) networks limit their access to privacy. This is further exemplified by Vern's response upon seeing the hauntings in the motel room: "Vern begged" saying: "I thought I was done. Please, not tonight" (293). Solomon continues after Vern's plea: "but the dead were fixtures of Vern's horizon, wishing them away no less futile than bidding away her skin, her eyeballs, her own two feet" (293). This explanation of the hauntings establishes them as "fixtures," immovable objects, of Vern's "horizon," and, echoing the earlier particularization of Vern's body ("Vern's 'bare feet, back, and bottom,' and their 'creases,' their nipples, the center of them" (Solomon 192)) we get a new blazonic catalogue of Vern's physical attributes. However, this list places Vern's embodied relationship within a realm of non-consent—a controlling structure in a fearful, violent capacity. This articulation of Vern's embodied—enmeshed—relation to the hauntings mirrors the non-consensuality of hauntings articulated by Gordon: "Being haunted draws us, affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically" (8). Solomon crafts a comparison between these "fixtures" and Vern's own body: "her skin, her eyeballs, her own two feet" (293). This comparison establishes a tie between the

[26] None of them are Samuel and Peter yet.

material structuring of space (fixtures and the horizon) and the body (skin, eyeballs, feet) through the inescapable logic of embodied relation that the hauntings blur alongside the teleological temporal construction of past and present.

"Sometimes against our will and always a bit magically" (Gordon 8): the hauntings touch Vern, categorize matter, the ecologies of space, in a way that doesn't consider what Vern wants, what they accept, what they agree to. The hauntings in this way function like the original forms of violence they harken back to and move into the present moment. Despite this, Vern is still touched, and that touch is worth consideration. The hauntings disrupt Vern's access to privacy, and in doing so, touches them: "The telltale prickle of an invading presence brushed her skin" (Solomon 292). They are an "invading presence." This language of "invasion" highlights the violence and force that Vern considers the hauntings through. The "invading presence brushed" Vern's skin. The pairing of "invading" and "brushing" form a disjuncture between the description of the actor (the "invading presence") and the description of the action ("brushed her skin") (292). Solomon does not require an immediate description of violence to frame this entry of the hauntings as one that is perceived as violent.

After feeling the prickling, Vern calls Gogo. When Gogo answers the phone, "Cautiously, Vern tilted her head to either side to see if her grim companions remained. They did, and this time when she looked, they looked back, their corpses rotated onto their sides to face her whichever way she turned" (Solomon 293). The "corpses," also "grim companions," gradually come to life after Vern reaches out to Gogo, looking for support and comfort in the face of the haunting. The haunting in its initial insertion into Vern's life once they enter the motel works its way through the narrative in a series of descriptors: "a body…cool and stiff," two "corpses," "fixtures," "bodies," "cadavers," "bodies," "grim companions," "corpses," "'Two

dead bodies'" (Solomon 293-4). The haunting, despite its tracking motion, is embodied without descriptors of life—their death is central to Solomon's construction of the haunting's initial existence in *Sorrowland*, and they are not configured within ghostly constructions, but corpsely. The figures of the haunting are not described as a haunting—they are described as bodies, corpses—their existence is not filtered narratively in this moment through a technology of time or narrative that gives Vern metaphorical access to people or affective stamps in history, their embodied nature is a certainty in the logic of this scene. Despite the bodies' movement and visual tracing of Vern ("when she looked, they looked back"), during the beginning of Vern's phone call with Gogo, the death of the men of this haunting still foregrounds their narrative description.

Even with Gogo on the phone, Vern feels fear as the corpses of the men in this haunting track them. Here, the tracking motion of the haunting's eyes is placed within optic perception as a controlling and violent, or fear inducing, action. Solomon writes immediately after Vern contacts Gogo and Gogo asks if Vern is okay, that "Vern's breaths quivered out of her. What secret, dark memory would the dead enact on her body tonight? Unfastened from the mortal coil, the beings that walked the haunting realm were as infants in their concern only for self. Only impulse drove them" (Solomon 293). In this moment of narration, a possible example of indirect discourse focalized through Vern, or a moment that is possibly delivered as third person insight to the nature of the hauntings, the hauntings are likened to "infants" due to "their concern only for self. Only impulse drove them" (293). This framing directly mirrors earlier moments of Vern's engagement with their own desires and needs: "She was half animal now, only instinct and need" (Solomon 40).[27] Instinct turns to impulse, and animal turns to infant, together these

[27] I read this moment closely in the section "Vern at Cainland" in the preceding chapter.

examples highlight the narrative thread in *Sorrowland* that ties bodily drives (fear, pleasure, instinct, impulse) to the non-human (or non-adult, non-rational). Vern, repressing their own instinct until they're driven to running through the woods in search of the fiend, the hauntings, repressed from historical memory and mourning until they become "unfastened from the moral coil" and therefore unbeholden to human expectations of care, or consent, or gentleness.

These are the affective frameworks at play that lead into Vern, Gogo, Peter, and Samuel's sexual relations in the motel room (and the truck stop bathroom where Gogo is to have privacy while speaking to Vern) that mirror Gordon's articulations surrounding the hauntings. The hauntings are as Cohn, Vergara, Calvo-Pascual, and others have constructed: embodiments breaking out of time representing the continuation of historical violence into contemporary moments. They begin as reproductions of the systematic racialized and sexualized history of violence in the present-tense time. This haunting is produced with an initial imprint of fear, trauma, repression, pain, and death, but despite their scholarly interpretations, Solomon doesn't only work with hauntings in *Sorrowland* around these affective productions of trauma and death. What other scholarly engagements with the transformative desires of *Sorrowland*, or other engagements with the counter-historical temporal productions of the hauntings in *Sorrowland*, have not explored at length in currently published scholarship is the messy interplay that happens between the hauntings and Vern's sexual awakening after escaping Cainland.

AWAKENING IN THE MOTEL: HAUNTING AS A TRANSFORMATIVE STATE

As Vern digs deeper into the mycelial network, and answers Gogo's questions about the haunting in front of them, Samuel and Peter lose the markers of their death. When Gogo asks, "What happened to them?," Vern replies "Disease," and continues "'They had the same fungus I had.' She spoke the thought at the very same moment she'd realized it, no space between the

knowing and the saying. 'Except it killed them. They had AIDS.'" Gogo clarifies, "Opportunistic infection?" and Vern replies: "Yes" (Solomon 294). When Gogo asks "Were they with each other?... When they died? Say they were" (294). Vern turns to look at Peter and sees that he "was no longer corpse-gray. His dark skin was awash in tattoos so intricate Vern had to squint to make sense of them… Vern turned to face the other, Samuel, whose skin was lighter, body thinner" (295). Gogo, miles away on the phone in a truck stop bathroom, asks about Peter and Samuel, first "part curious, part trying to keep Vern distracted" (294) but that curiosity turns to something else when her questioning transitions into two moments of imperative speech: "Tell me their names" and "Say they were" together when they died says (demands, pleads) Gogo (294). "Vern had never thought about" the names of the people in the hauntings before (294). From Gogo's place in the truck stop bathroom while on the phone with Vern, Gogo considers the hauntings as bodies, as people, and opens this space of memory and time refusing to abstract the experiences the hauntings come from as moments of trauma divorced from life.

In this moment of exploration urged by Gogo, Vern reconceptualizes the hauntings of *Sorrowland* and considers their ghostliness, their embodied singularity. Gogo's "Say they were" exists as a different type of command (Solomon 294). No longer rooted in a surety of Peter and Samuel's experiences (that they have names, that they should be spoken), Gogo's imperative command moves beyond a certainty surrounding Gogo's understanding of their lived experiences (as something that did at one point exist), this command marks a wish, a desire that Peter and Samuel weren't alone when they died. This wish marks an initial form of affective enmeshment based in a desire for the wellbeing of another and reveals an entangledness through this small wish that opens up a space of mourning and hope. This moment of wishing, or sorrow, or tenderness from Gogo, only connected to this moment in the motel through the waves of

telephone transmission and sound, turns into a moment of looking. Solomon writes that "Vern exhaled and forced herself to turn to her left so she could look at Peter" (294). Not even a moment of looking yet, the verbs "exhaled," "forced," mark Vern's resistance to considering Peter and Samuel in their embodied forms. Vern accesses information about them, about how they died, through the mycelial network before looking at them but the optic, visual consideration of their bodies requires force.

We don't have the moment where Vern actually looked narrated in *Sorrowland*, we see them turning which opens up the possibility of looking at the "corpses;" Vern "could look" but doesn't yet. And then we are given in a final parenthetical clause at the end of this sentence, separated by a single comma after "could look at Peter": "who was no longer corpse-gray" (Solomon 295). Vern's moment of looking is not described as an action; instead, it is described as a possibility that is immediately realized through the description of the visual stimuli Vern receives by looking. There is a difference in this moment between being in proximity to a figure without being positioned to engage with it, being in proximity to a figure and being positioned in a way where you could engage with it, and of being in proximity to a figure and actually perceiving it (visually, viscerally). There is a space between perceiving and seeing that Solomon constructs into the embodied logics of this haunting. Until Vern turns and then looks, Samuel and Peter are "corpses." Before Gogo's "Say they were" breaks through her questions, Vern doesn't consider choosing to look at the men. "Were they with each other?" makes Vern look, and upon looking, the men were "no longer corpse-gray" (Solomon 294-5). "Corpse," no longer a noun describing Samuel and Peter, becomes an adverb, describing the qualities they no longer hold that led to their earlier classification.

After looking, Vern tells Gogo: '"Hours apart'" (Solomon 295). Gogo continues to ask questions about Samuel and Peter. Searching for an answer to this question opens Vern up to not only how Peter and Samuel died, but to the specifics of their life: their parents' names, "their siblings, their schools, their favorite books, their first times, their regrets, their favorite ways to fuck (desperately, darkly)" (295). Accessing these memories opens Vern to considering Samuel and Peter not only as ghosts, as people, but as people with histories of wants, desires, and sexualities of their own. "Their first times, their regrets, their favorite ways to fuck (desperately, darkly)" turns Vern and Gogo's exploration of the haunting into a sexual exploration. In the parenthetical aside, two adverbs sit, framing the scene that is to come: "(desperately, darkly)". Dark desperation frames Samuel and Peter's sexuality. This description comes without an immediate moralization—this dark desperation gestures towards a style of sexual activity based in a feeling of the earlier "base…longings" that Vern embraced in the clearing on Sugar Mountain.

This discovery, the parenthetical description that sits loaded with meaning but removed from the moralizing exposition that frequented earlier parts of the text urges Vern to explore the haunting further. Solomon writes:

> Experimentally, Vern reached out to touch Samuel's dead hand, but jerked it away at the coldness. Counting to three, she tried again. She weaved her fingers with his, then with Peter's.
>
> Their palms warmed in hers, then softened. Samuel's gripped back, then so did Peter's, hard so that Vern felt her bones start to slacken under the pressure.

> Vern didn't know what made them appear to her as corpses, awakening only now with her touch. Hauntings were myriad and strange, and their ways resisted complete understanding. (295)

Accessing Samuel's and Peter's memories expands Vern's emotional and intellectual engagement with the hauntings. Vern experiments and reaches "out to touch Samuel's dead hand, but jerked it away at the coldness" (295). Despite this coldness, Vern reached again and embraced the embodied form of the haunting. At this embrace, "Their palms warmed in" Vern's, "then softened" (295). The haunting shifts as Vern accepts the depth of the haunting and the way they touch it. As Gordon described, not "as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (8). This "transformative recognition" is mirrored in a literal embodied transformation of Samuel and Peter as Vern renegotiates their relationship to the haunting through a different affective framework. The fear, trauma, pain that shaped the earlier interactions with the hauntings turns to a warming sensuality.

This transition in *Sorrowland* is contextualized in another moment of third person indirect discourse focalized through Vern. No longer the animalizing, racializing narration of the earlier interruptions, this moment reveals Vern's production of knowledge surrounding their embodied practices that have been transitioning throughout the novel. Solomon writes that "Vern didn't know what made them appear to her as corpses, awakening only now with her touch. Hauntings were myriad and strange, and their ways resisted complete understanding" (295). The unknowable, excessive logics of the hauntings is structured around nonsingularity, an uncontainability within both time and affect. Vern touching this haunting, touching Samuel and Peter, is prompted by their acceptance of Samuel and Peter's dark, desperate sexual desire. What follows this acceptance and then this touch, is a reflection that breaks out of the earlier

racializing, bestial configurations of sexual desire that weaponize engendered (engendering) humanity to categorize and control Vern's sexual and embodied practices. The taxonomizing ontological productions of humanity through antiblack weaponizations of sexuality falls away to a statement that the hauntings "and their ways resisted complete understanding" (Solomon 295). This aside refuses a "complete understanding" and marks a point of refusal that doesn't result in Vern shutting down their sensual play; instead, what this refusal refuses are the processes of knowing and categorizing that fueled the earlier embodied denials of pleasure and catapults Vern into a sexual exploration through the logics of haunting constructed by Solomon.

After Samuel and Peter's hands warm (because of Vern touching them, as a result of Gogo urging Vern to get to know them), Samuel and Peter's transition into enlivened embodiment reaches a new level that allows for Samuel and Peter to see each other. Peter and Samuel "looked at each other" and see "each other for the first time since they'd passed" (Solomon 295). This shared looking, of optic engagement, is mirrored in the narrative voice. Solomon writes that Samuel and Peter's "skin, which moments ago appeared covered in sores, was smooth and glistened under the flickering overhead light beautifully" (296). Peter and Samuel's looking is mirrored in the narrative description. Switching to visual imagery, the narrative moves to describing the appearance of their skin with a string of descriptors and modifiers. Their skin heals the visual signs of the late stages of their AIDS infection: the sores fade away. "Covered in sores" magically transitions in this moment of looking to being "smooth," glistening in the light "beautifully." The "smooth" beautiful glistening constructs a visual imagery around reflection and shine. After this looking, Samuel and Peter start kissing. Vern tells Gogo and Gogo says to Vern on the phone "Wish I could be there with you. Wish I could see them" (Solomon 296). What begins as a historical reverberation of trauma, of loss, of the corpses of two men who died

violently, turns into something amorous to the point that Gogo wishes she could be there, wishes she could "see them."

The visual and nonvisual dynamics of this scene function through multiple technologies of speculation; a historical racializing surveillance surrounding the events of the haunting that established the material conditions of Samuel and Peters deaths; the fungal-fantastical technology of haunting that expands the visual/nonvisual binary through the mycelial network; and the verbal description and imagery shared to Gogo that craft the scene in a visual imaginary for Gogo in a similar way as the narrative voice does for readers. When Gogo wishes she could see them, Vern describes what Peter and Samuel look like: Peter, a Black man with tattoos and buzzed hair, and Sam, a man with "Light to medium brown skin," glasses, black hair, and facial hair. This description highlights the aesthetic choices of both men while also tying Peter and Samuel's death to the racial violence that operated through scientific, medical, and government responses to the AIDS crisis. This historical contextualization frames Samuel and Peter's relationship and sexuality in its proximity to risk and exposure to illness. Vern's access to Samuel and Peter is also framed through this construction of exposure and illness through the fungal infection. Rather than having this risk of exposure through contact and proximity limit the experience of the haunting through fear and revulsion, this haunting slips through exploration, desire, lust, and love. The hauntings, through the inclusion of Vern and Gogo's embrace of Samuel and Peter, become a site of care and pleasure even as it works from the continuing embodied and structural violences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Woubshet explains his work as an "examination of AIDS loss that neither marginalizes the sorrow of queers of color nor compartmentalizes loss into normal and pathological mourning, mourner and mourned, or even the living and the dead" (45). *Sorrowland* performs this work too,

residing in both the sorrow and violence of Samuel and Peter's death as it exists within the structural network of anti-Blackness and homophobia that precipitated the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and a kinship, pleasure, and call to care for each other through practices of sensation and joy. The affective reorganization of the haunting ties Vern, Samuel, Peter, and Gogo together despite the historical and hauntological logics that followed Vern into the motel. As Vern touches, watches, and describes Samuel and Peter's reunion, they get more invested in the affective structures spreading between the men. Solomon writes that Vern realized that "The description she'd given of the men failed to capture the gentle reverence they had for each other, which in seconds mutated into rapturing lust. Vern didn't have the vocabulary to articulate" to Gogo the specifics of Samuel and Peter's actions (296). Imagery and language fail for Vern as they consider Samuel and Peter's affective display, and the physical performances tied to it. "Gentle reverence" and "rapturing lust" exist together in a way that defies the structuring violence of Samuel and Peter's appearance in the motel that ties their death to their desires.

This violence is in Vern's mind as they speak to Gogo. Surveillance, looking, watching, and voyeurism play together in the shifting registers of this scene (historical event, optic event, and sexually contextualized event works between Vern, Gogo, Samuel, Peter, and the reader). As Vern describes the escalating sexual actions between Samuel and Peter to Gogo on the phone, they stop themself midsentence. Vern's thoughts are shared in the narrative voice: "These two were sharing a private intimacy, and here she was playing voyeur, her own body brought to wanting by their passion" (Solomon 296). Privacy shapes the space of the motel again: what was initially denied to Vern due to the violent and insistent structure of the hauntings in their life, Vern now considers giving to the haunting itself. But it is Vern's presence, their acceptance of the haunting and of making contact with it that makes Samuel and Peter's sexual embrace

possible. Vern "was playing voyeur" because their body was "brought to wanting by their passion" (296). There's an argument within Vern's thought that performs a sexual moralization and categorization based on their arousal like earlier moments: but this time, it's not built based on the racialization of Vern's physical sensations and responses. This time it is built on Vern's uncertainty of their ability to perceive Samuel and Peter's sexual embrace within a structure of consent or non-exploitative watching.

The nonconsensual manufacturing of the shaping of matter that exposed Vern, Samuel, and Peter to these varying forms of exposure through contact with each other and contact with dominating structures and organizations is a consideration in Vern's feeling of desire and the label of "voyeur" that categorizes their desire in a specific way. Gogo mirrors Vern's desire and tells Vern to "Tell me. Tell me about them" (Solomon 296). Gogo has the same desire and voices it without Vern's voyeuristic stipulation. This repetition to be told, to be in contact with this moment in the motel through the waves of the phone, to touch it through Gogo's affective link to Vern, leads to Vern describing what is happening sexually in this space. This description leads to a narrative description of the embodied sexual stimulation that both Gogo and Vern are feeling and begin to act on. Samuel and Peter touch each other, and Vern tells Gogo what to do over the phone. Peter then touches Vern as Vern masturbates and then Samuel, Peter, and Vern have group sex with Gogo over the phone. This grouped sex is described in specific detail, marking the actions of each member of this event, naming their body parts and the stimulation they have within specific descriptions of sexual want. Gender functions in this scene both in relation to the genital descriptions of pleasure and in excess to them. The racialized, engendered approach to sexuality that Jackson explains within the historical construction of "the human," the engendered animalization of "rutting," works through the categorization of engendered sexual desires. Vern

consents to Peter having penetrative sex with them. Solomon writes immediately after Vern consents, and before Peter acts, that "It didn't matter in this moment that usually her affections belonged to women alone. The need to connect and be a part of this rebirth of lust and love trumped all" (298). Gendered logics of sexuality lapse in this refractive web of perception. This reflection on queer desire exists within the death-defying, matter-defying desires of this haunting.

The sex scene ends, and the haunting faded out, "the bedspread smoothed out, and Vern was left by her lonesome" (Solomon 300). The nonteleological construction of the haunting spreads into excessive representations of desire within binary constructions of sexuality that exist specifically within the spaces constructed between Samuel, Peter, Gogo, and Vern. The haunting performs a different process of knowing based in embodied sensorial pleasures that reorganizes gendered categorizations and refuse the construction of the human through a reworking of the affective processes that exist within physical contact and exposures to embodied risk and infection. The enmeshed pleasures Vern felt in the clearing on Sugar Mountain highlight their unbounded practices of sensation that are historicized through the framework of Samuel and Peter's death and desires. Embodied enmeshment, the penetrability of the human body, is not a surprising frame for this scene. The fantastical penetration of the mycelial threads mesh with the viral threads of AIDS and that grounds the imaginative networks of the fungal infection and Vern's embodied pleasurable enmeshment in reality. This play with imagination that is revealed in this haunting extends Solomon's use of haunting as a framework.

AFTER THE END OF *SORROWLAND:* A CONCLUSION

Ruha Benjamin offers an approach to haunting in "Black Afterlives Matter: Cultivating Kinfulness as Reproductive Justice." Benjamin explains that "Black afterlives are

animated by a stubborn refusal to forget and to *be forgotten"* (65). This "stubborn refusal" echoes across *Sorrowland* in the hauntings, in the structure, and in Vern's exploration of their sexual desire through sensation and community. Continuing this articulation of Black afterlives and haunting, Benjamin explains that "black people have always had to construct their own afterlives through alternative family formations in the midst of crisis…. All kinship, in the end, is imaginary. Not faux, false, or inferior, but… a creative process of fashioning care and reciprocity. Is it any wonder that black people, whose meta-kinship threatens the biological myth of white supremacy, have had to innovate bonds that can withstand the many forms of bondage that attempt to suffocate black life" (65)? Benjamin's engagement with Black afterlives and the "imaginative" approaches to kin and family constructions that Black communities have crafted in response to consistent white supremacist attacks provide a framework for Vern's journey throughout *Sorrowland,* as well as a frame for understanding the flow of love, connection, and imagined (imaged) desire in the motel scene.

Haunting and surveillance work together in Solomon's construction of imaginative Black afterlives that live through these stimulatory and embodied practices of life and desire revealed in the woods of Sugar Mountain and revealed in the motel. The visual and sensational registers of the sex scene in the motel reimagine and utilize the fungal infection as a sexual technology that plays with the structures of surveillance and turns them into voyeuristic opportunities recrafted through ecological conditions of consent in the momentary constructions built through Vern and Gogo's care for Samuel and Peter in this haunting. This sexual stimulatory trajectory of the erotic in *Sorrowland* maps a renegotiation of what "fashioning care and reciprocity" can mean through these articulations of teleological exposure and rupture (Benjamin 65). Solomon positions the fungal infection as a creative engagement based in Black

sexualities and genders that work against the violent categorizing logics of humanity without an appeal for inclusion. The characters of *Sorrowland,* the characters of this scene in the motel, did not experience embodied enmeshment as an intellectual event—instead, embodied enmeshment is a historical reality operating through the logics of risk and exposure, and bestialization.

Reading sex like this in *Sorrowland* highlights the imaginative and resistant forms of sexuality practiced by Vern within a historical matrix of racializing surveillance that positions embodied sensorial productions of sexuality and desire as a form of dark sousveillance; of touching risk, exposure, and afterlife that offers pleasurable possibilities through embodied renegotiations of gender within Black kinship structures and reciprocal genital play. The sensorial play in Solomon's novel pushes into ecological and epidemiological networks of communicability that unfold across the story to negotiate against temporal limitations that separate Black queer communities from their histories. Moving from *Sorrowland,* I follow the temporal and mycelial threads through time that put Vern, Gogo, Samuel, Peter, and the readers in contact and I move back in time too to consider another narrative and put it against Vern's. In doing this, I hope to expand on these networks of narrative lasting staged through the haunting resonances of temporal and embodied exposure. In the chapter that follows, I read the stories in and around Gary Fisher's posthumously published text, *Gary in Your Pocket: The Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher* and consider how to follow these networks of speculation staged across *Sorrowland* even further.

IV. SITTING WITH GARY IN YOUR POCKET

Gary Fisher ends his short work "Love in Prepositions" simply. He writes: "I want to remember you as you were in relation to me" (Fisher 26). In the two paragraphs of this piece Fisher tracks the internal experience of mapping an understanding of this "want;" this desire that he frames and formulates before landing here, at being in relation to. At the beginning of the piece, Fisher writes: "I don't want you to love me. I don't even want you to like me. I don't need these abstractions of you" (26). Fisher speaks of wants and needs, of loving, liking, and being near, in terms of relationality and abstraction. And starting at this statement of desire, of want, Fisher frames this piece around the specific intonations of these connections that perform a process of thought through the piece's accumulation and amendment to the meanings held within these desires for connections. This "Love in Prepositions" modeled by Fisher in the poetic language of the piece refuses totalizing and summarizing productions of proximity. "To love me" and "to like me" are "abstractions"—not the type of meaning the narrator of Fisher's poem "wants" or "needs;" but even those distinctions dissolve throughout Fisher's piece. In the narration of this work, "want" becomes a knot that operates through a practice of prepositions. Published in *Gary in Your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher*, "Love in Prepositions" both models and speaks a theory of relationality, of prepositional personhood, that reflects and informs on Fisher's larger published project.

The cover of this collection tells us that it is "Edited and with an Afterword by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick" with an "Introduction by Don Belton." Between the bookends of Belton and Sedgwick's pieces, *Gary in Your Pocket* is filled with works written by Gary Fisher, a gay Black man who died of AIDS-related illnesses. These pieces in this project were selected and edited by Eve Sedgwick. Sedgwick chose the pieces to include in *Gary in Your Pocket* out of

Fisher's larger collection of journals that he filled from when he was a teenager to just before he died in his early thirties. Sedgwick, a teacher of Fisher during his graduate study at UC Berkley, whose whiteness is highlighted in the text's framing of her role as teacher, friend, and editor, became friends with Fisher in the years before his death. [28] The book, in its compilation, publication, and consumption, is one invested in a process of understanding and filtering proximity and relation. The display of Fisher's works in *Gary in Your Pocket* comes from a process of collaboration. Fisher, making one part of this collaboration, is tied through this work to Sedgwick who filtered and edited the much larger archive of Fisher's works to present a select few of his poems, short stories, and journal entries in the collected volume.

In this chapter, I begin by reading the scholarly works that have addressed Gary Fisher's text alongside my initial reading of "Love in Prepositions." I start from this vantage point to highlight a frequent refrain present in the early scholarship working out of *Gary in Your Pocket.* In the first decade and a half that Fisher's work was published and being printed, only a few scholars ranging from literary studies, queer theory, disability studies, Black studies, and queer of color critique published pieces addressing *Gary in Your Pocket*. These scholars, writing in the early 2000s, all address the reception of Fisher's work and contextualize the text as one that was met with tentative engagements and little scholarly publication. In these refrains addressing the paucity of critical work surrounding *Gary in Your Pocket,* these scholars frequently frame the academic reception of the text through embodied metaphors. Beginning my reading of *Gary in Your Pocket* here, with the scholars who followed him, does multiple things. First, it provides a backdrop for my own contribution to the conversation around Fisher's work. Second, it extends

[28] Sedgwick describes meeting Fisher in a graduate seminar on gender and sexuality that she taught in 1987. She explains that she "noticed him early because he was the only African-American student in a class where issues of race were going to be fairly salient" (276).

what I read in Fisher's "Love in Prepositions" through an attention to not only Fisher's scholarly and artistic production, but to how he continues to produce, prepositionally, next to, against, within, before, and through others in writing. Finally, this framing highlights trends in the practices surrounding *Gary in Your Pocket* over the last three decades that continue to discuss Fisher's text as one that performs a tension around not only his own body, through its aesthetic reformulation in the content and design of *Gary in Your Pocket,* but also of the reader's body.

The embodied metaphors from scholars like Robert Reid-Pharr, Robert McRuer, Dwight McBride, José Estaban Muñoz, and other more recent publications provides the backdrop for the type of prepositionality produced through readerly relation with *both* Fisher's narrative work, and the textual materiality of *Gary in Your Pocket* as a published object. Building from my readings of the embodied metaphors that pop up in the descriptions of the early reception of *Gary in Your Pocket,* I move into my close readings of Fisher's text. I begin with reading the cover of *Gary in Your Pocket* alongside the narrative surrounding its publication that's provided in Sedgwick's "Afterword" to the text. Through Uri McMillan's articulation of performing objects and avatar construction, I discuss the cover, title, and structure of Fisher's textual object as a production of a type of synthetic self that utilizes the narrative and material forms of *Gary in Your Pocket* to extend his sexual, aesthetic, and political work through an attention to Black objectification that formulates the book as a reproduction of himself as a published object.

These publication histories are part of my reading process in this chapter, because as I argue, the text itself performs an embodied enmeshment that utilizes the material text to further Fisher's messy play with racialized sexualities and subjectivities through objectification. After working through this network of perception and reception staged at the level of publication, I move into *Gary in Your Pocket* and read another of Fisher's fragments. In the final section of this

chapter, I go from my reading of the cover of *Gary in Your Pocket* and move inside the book to read Fisher's short story "Red Cream Soda." I read "Red Cream Soda" through its production of alternative temporalities and narratives surrounding lifespan, based in its sensorial productions in the face of embodied porosity and risk during the early decades of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. By ending on a reading of "Red Cream Soda," I consider the recursive properties of Fisher's text that incorporate its own framing and book design into his fictive sexual reproductions. In expanding the readings that have picked up *Gary in Your Pocket* through an attention to the theoretical productions in Fisher's fictive and autobiographical entries, as well as the text's own insistence on addressing, imposing, and rearticulating its materiality in relation to the reader, I understand Fisher's production of proximity in *Gary in Your Pocket* as a performance that forces the reader to consider themselves in relation to Fisher and the text, and that extends Fisher's project through the repetitive sensorial productions that happen at the site of reading and writing about it.

READING THE SHRUG: THE PUBLICATION AND ACADEMIC RECEPTION OF *GARY IN YOUR POCKET*

Gary in Your Pocket was published in 1996, just two years after Fisher's death. In the years following *Gary in Your Pocket*'s publication, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published multiple pieces that mentioned the text and how it fit within her larger body of work.[29] In addition to Sedgwick's continued attentions to the collection, multiple scholarly reviews were published that responded to the project of *Gary in Your Pocket.*[30] Despite this early discussion, it wasn't until

[29] For an example of this, see "All About Eve" with Christian Haye and Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick.

[30] See Arthur W. Frank's review "Bodies, Sex, and Death."

Robert Reid-Pharr published *Black Gay Man: Essays* in 2001 that *Gary in Your Pocket* was the subject of discussion or analysis in an article or chapter-length critical work. In the chapter "The Shock of Gary Fisher" Reid-Pharr contextualizes the book's reception between its publication and his writing on it. He explains that the reviews and "responses have ranged from righteous indignation toward the text and its editor, Eve Sedgwick, to a rather maddening inarticulateness, a sort of collective shrug at a document that demonstrates some of the ugly intricacies of what is often saddled with the euphemistic label 'queer'" (Reid-Pharr 149). The five-year period between these two publications is marked by a "maddening inarticulateness," by a "collective shrug," according to Reid-Pharr. In the grouping of articles and chapters that have discussed *Gary in Your Pocket* in the two and a half decades since *Black Gay Man* framed the conversation in this way, the explanations of the scholarly attention (or lack thereof) towards *Gary in Your Pocket: The Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher* frequently parallel Reid-Pharr's description of the "shrug."

Briefly discussing *Gary in Your Pocket* in his 2005 collection of essays, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality,* Dwight McBride addresses Fisher's text by first introducing Reid-Pharr's. In a larger discussion of Black sexuality, and specifically Black gay scholars' negotiations with a politics of respectability in their discussions about sexuality, McBride reflects on the experience of reading the "Introduction" to *Black Gay Man*. McBride describes the beginning of Reid-Pharr's project "where in demonstrating his insistence upon the inseparability of the realm of intellectual work and the realm of pleasure, he [Reid-Pharr] discusses in rather graphic detail (for an academic audience at least) an encounter with one of his 'favorite sex partners'" (McBride 93). In the paragraph following this discussion of Reid-Pharr's sexual academic productions, McBride writes that he "had a similar reaction when I

first read Gary Fisher's *Gary in Your Pocket"* (94). McBride outlines how the textual production of Black gay subjectivity available in the journal entries of *Gary in Your Pocket* cannot be:

> easily assimilated to approved versions of what black life, or even black gay life, should look like, how it should be publicly performed, or what it should represent in a white racist and heterosexist society such as ours. There are times reading Fisher that we cringe. At times it is the cringe of disbelief (the 'I can't believe he went there' cringe); at others it feels something more like the cringe of recognition. (96)

Like Reid-Pharr, McBride considers Fisher's work through an embodied response. The project of Gary Fisher's stories and notebooks is, at least partially, a project read through its configuration of recognition and representation evidenced through both the shrug and the cringe.

Half a decade after Reid-Pharr's publication, and just months after McBride's, Robert McRuer picks up the claims made in "The Shock of Gary Fisher" in his 2006 chapter, "Submissive and Non-Compliant: The Paradox of Gary Fisher." McRuer reads Fisher's work within a framework of queer of color crip refusals of rehabilitation with a specific focus on rhetorics surrounding HIV/AIDS treatments in the late 1990s. Contextualizing *Gary in Your Pocket,* McRuer marks the continued "shrugging off" that followed Reid-Pharr's scholarly attention in his published chapter. Explaining this continued performance of academic "inarticulateness," McRuer frames his entry into the discussion surrounding *Gary in Your Pocket* through the assertion that nothing other than Reid-Pharr's chapter had yet to be published on *Gary in Your Pocket.*[31] Considering Fisher's journal entries and grappling with one of the central

[31] McRuer does this in a note, stating that: "It is perhaps premature, less than a decade after its publication, to make pronouncements on the amount of critical attention to Fisher. Nonetheless, despite the fact that the publication context for *Gary in Your Pocket*—connected so directly to Sedgwick's work as both teacher and queer theorist, located in the prestigious Series Q from Duke University Press, introduced by Belton, and blurbed by Marilyn Hacker and Randall Kenan—could hardly be more conducive for critical attention, Reid-Pharr's essay remains the only significant consideration of it. On this theme, Reid-Pharr writes, 'I have been struck by how difficult the text

academic difficulties that Fisher's text seems to present to its readers, McRuer writes that "In what is potentially one of the most open-ended, uncontainable forms (the personal journal) illustrate well Fisher's work at and on the points where identity disintegrates" (97).

To demonstrate Fisher's approach to this disintegration, McRuer continues with a quotation from one of Fisher's journal entries and works out from it: "'I'm really going to have to burn this,' Fisher writes at one point. Resisting the apparent compulsion to incinerate his words, Fisher still manages, paradoxically, to generate a text that is almost too hot to touch" (McRuer 97). This quality, of it being "too hot to touch," is how McRuer frames the lack of published scholarly works surrounding *Gary in Your Pocket* at the time of his discussion, mirroring the physicality of Reid-Pharr's shrug. While this description of *Gary in Your Pocket,* of it being filtered through the shrug and through the cringe (or, more explicitly violent, through the threat of burning contact), may be understood as one marking a lack of response, this image of the "shrug" can also be read as a loaded one in the various narrations of the early reception of *Gary in Your Pocket* that trickles through this first decade of published academic responses to the text and its projects.[32]

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seems to have been for those people—white, black, and otherwise—who have encountered it. Indeed responses have ranged from righteous indignation toward the text and its editor, to a rather maddening inarticulateness.'"

[32] Following the narrative thread of Reid-Pharr and McRuer, José Estaban Muñoz addresses the scarcity of published scholarly work engaging with *Gary in Your Pocket* even later in 2013 stating that "One of the immediate goals of my essay is that Sedgwick's work on Fisher and race be taken up again, that the Gary Fisher volume be considered as a weighty and dense moment in Sedgwick's oeuvre" (108). Muñoz does this after mentioning a recent article addressing Fisher and Sedgwick's work published just two years before his: Ellis Hanon's 2011 piece, "The Future's Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick." This same framing around the lack of scholarly publications surrounding *Gary in Your Pocket* continues into even more contemporary readings of Fisher's text. In his 2022 addition to the conversation surrounding *Gary in Your Pocket,* "The Fateful Gamble: Autoimmunity and the Mattering of Black Life," Travis Alexander writes in a footnote that: "Holding aside the foreword and afterword to *Gary in Your Pocket*… and Reid-Pharr's treatment, only about three critics have dealt with Fisher in the almost quarter century since the book was released—a paucity almost certainly attributable to the idiosyncrasy of Fisher's historical and ethical vision" (25).

All three of these early works discussing *Gary in Your Pocket* are situated within an articulation of the reasons why the text hasn't been discussed more. From "the shrug," to "the cringe," to being "too hot to touch," Fisher's work is described not only through what has, and more accurately what hasn't, been said about it in the published scholarly works that build from it, but also through persistent metaphors that configure Fisher's work through the impact it has on his audience. I don't read these examples just as passing comments or only as colorful ways to describe a critical disengagement. Instead, I consider these examples as evidence of the levels of Fisher's textual, material, and discursive work in *Gary in Your Pocket.* Pulling from Reid-Pharr's initial framing of this critical-embodied response, I consider "the shrug" as an articulation of the material work at the core of Fisher's project of publication and performance made textual through *Gary in Your Pocket.* In considering the "shrug" that Reid-Pharr relays, the weight of *Gary in Your Pocket* can be better understood and conceptualized. A shrug, or, to shrug, is both a bodily and affective response: it's literally "a raising and contraction of the shoulders to express dislike, disdain, indifference, or the like" ("shrug, n."), or "to raise (and contract) the shoulders, esp. as an expression of disdain, indifference, disclaiming responsibility, etc.", but also figuratively "to shrug (something) off or aside: to dismiss or reject (something) in an offhand manner; to be unaffected by" something else ("shrug, v."). These definitions mark the paradox of the shrug: it is simultaneously elicited by dislike and indifference. It can impart judgement, wordless, soundless, while also imparting a desire to be removed from the judged object, so removed as to be indifferent—untouched by. However, despite its contained performance, the shrug is not performed as a sterile individual response. The shrug is performed in relation to outside stimuli; and in this way, to shrug is prepositionally paired. To shrug is shorthand for the action being performed: a shrugging off *of* or away *from*. The very act of

shrugging is to shrug off—to have been touched and touched in a way that produced a response which is more easily dismissed than addressed. It marks a tension that is easier to reject than resolve and an embodied performance of refusal.

To say that *Gary in Your Pocket* was met with a "shrug" is to mark the ways that *Gary in Your Pocket* births tension and ambiguity—a strife that makes the way it touches some of its readers an act that produces a feeling of "dislike" and of "indifference." The shrug is also tied to a burning paranoia as narrated by McRuer, what McBride describes as "the 'I can't believe he went there' cringe… [or the] it feels something more like… recognition" cringe (McBride 96), that requires a "disclaiming [of] responsibility" by those who read it in this way ("shrug, v."). It's a response that requires a consideration of the body, of how the body moves as a mode of expression, of how the body engages with and reflects an internal response while simultaneously denying an internal engagement at all. To theorize *Gary in Your Pocket* through Reid-Pharr's articulation of the shrug (and the various metaphorical enactments that followed it) is to understand *Gary in Your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher* as a text that extracts an engagement from those who interact with it, even as the nature of that engagement comes into question. While Reid-Pharr's approach to the shrug is in passing, his final comment on *Gary in Your Pocket* can be understood within this expanded matrix of the shrug. In his stories and journals, Reid-Pharr asserts that "Fisher allows none of us to remain innocent. That is his challenge and his promise" (149). Reid-Pharr addresses this inclusion of those who read it through the framework of innocence: he asserts that *Gary in Your Pocket* makes its readers culpable in the systems of violent racialization and sexual debasement that Fisher relays in his descriptions of his sexual practice. The shrug, the cringe, and the burning fear gloss *Gary in Your Pocket*'s production of readerly (scholarly) engagement through the subjectivities and

positionalities played with in Fisher's works. The shrug's attempted disclaiming of responsibility pushes against a responsibility that these early responses to *Gary in Your Pocket* hold onto which McRuer, McBride, and Reid-Pharr all mark in their discussions.

At the end of his chapter discussing *Gary in Your Pocket,* Reid-Pharr explains what drove his work with Fisher and his text. He writes: "I have tried neither to defend Fisher nor to suggest anything noble in Fisher's having died before ever publishing a word of his remarkable prose. What I have been concerned with, however, is the difficulty that Fisher creates for those of us he left behind" (Reid Pharr 149). Reid-Pharr's articulation reads as a quiet lamentation, refusing the type of summative mourning performed in posthumous labels of the under-recognized, now missing artist, and shifting to a collectivity framed through a still-being-here-ness, of a poetic and quiet articulation of being in community-with Fisher and of having been "left behind." The "difficulty" shared by Reid-Pharr here places a new affective production among his earlier narrated responses to *Gary in Your Pocket.* The "righteous indignation" and "maddening inarticulateness" that foregrounded the shrug turns towards a type of mourning. A mourning that claims community with Fisher by taking on the responsibility of the "difficulty" he left behind for "us." Fisher's "challenge and his promise," that none of "us" can "remain innocent" in the face of his text, is furthered through Reid-Pharr's revelation of remaining in the difficult aftermath of Fisher's project (Reid-Pharr 149).

For Reid-Pharr, the "Shock of Gary Fisher" comes through in an engulfing nature to the violence that Fisher writes with, and to an unresolvability, unremovability, that the text foists upon its audience. Reid-Pharr, discussing this pull towards culpability that he frames as part of the motivation for the shrug, states that:

> Fisher neither establishes the fairy tale black, white, red, yellow, brown beloved community so feebly articulated by innumerable rainbow flags; nor does he signal a separate, resistant black (gay) identity. What Fisher tells us is much more difficult, more shocking than any of this. Fisher goes beyond demonstrating that black/white intimacy is necessary and inevitable. Instead, he insists that if we are to maintain the clear distinction between the black and the white, this intimacy will never move beyond the ugly display of the master's dominance over the slave and the ugly scene of the slave's yielding to the same. There is no way to say "black" without hearing "n." as its echo. (Reid-Pharr 149; abbreviation added)

Reid-Pharr marks a system of racialized relation that Fisher's work relays that doesn't easily fit within Black or queer calls for liberation within liberal articulations of resistance and politics.

This description of Fisher's challenge posed by Reid-Pharr has been a sticky one in the decades following its articulation in *Black Gay Man.* Much like the framing of the shrug, Reid-Pharr's discussion of the trickiness that operates through Fisher's descriptions of his desire to be racially abjected through sexual violence have been a place of frequent scholarly attention. José Esteban Muñoz takes on this site of difficulty in his 2013 addition to his earlier monograph, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* In "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate: Gary Fisher with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick," Muñoz addresses *Gary in Your Pocket* and picks up Reid-Pharr's language of the "shrug," the "challenge," and the "shock" of Gary Fisher. Muñoz says, in a parenthetical statement built into the body of his argument:

> (As an aside, I should mention that it has taken me years to begin to "get" Gary Fisher and Eve's interest in his work. I found his highly stylized rendering of scenes of volitional and solicited racialized sexual debasement hard to attach myself to as a reader.

> While I identified interesting stylistic innovation, my own political mixed emotions made me shrug too. Sedgwick's relationship to Fisher was only slightly clearer to me. But I knew her investment in his work went beyond politics or even friendship. There was something else there that escaped me. In this chapter I hope to describe that incommensurable something else that eluded me.) (194)

Muñoz works from a description of his own process of consuming and reading *Gary in Your Pocket* that, at first, made him "shrug too." He can only write, years later, after he had time "to begin to 'get' Gary Fisher." Muñoz's attention to the text comes from a processing of this challenge where he contends that "A consideration of Fisher today, fifteen years after the publication of *Gary in Your Pocket,* might produce something more than a shrug" (197). There's a central uncertainness surrounding *Gary in Your Pocket* that Reid-Pharr articulates as a "shock" and a "challenge" and that Muñoz thinks, having had time, "might produce something more." I reproduce Muñoz's aside to follow the life of the shrug in my initial consideration of *Gary in Your Pocket* through an attention to the way that it sits in the minds of the audience who, even having shrugged, haven't alleviated the internal tension the text elucidates.

These shifting frames and material challenges of categorization and containment are also modeled in the organizing structure of *Gary in Your Pocket.* While *Gary in Your Pocket* is split in two halves, one holding a collection of short stories and poems, and the other holding a collection of Fisher's journal entries (with the first being written when Fisher was sixteen and the final entry being dated just months before Fisher's death when he was thirty-two), even the integrity of these distinctions organizing the two parts can be questioned. Fisher's journal entries are often early drafts or fragments of poems and short stories he has planned, and his short stories and poems frequently loosely fictionalize people and events in his own life or include

journal entries in their narrative framing. In this way, the very structure of *Gary in Your Pocket*, created and compiled through Sedgwick's editing, is destabilized through Fisher's works and the iterative process of thought and creation seeping through its organization. Sedgwick organized *Gary in Your Pocket* through this separation of narrative form that takes on a formal instability through the text's recursive practices.

Sedgwick's editorial positioning is of particular interest to Muñoz. Muñoz argues that due to Sedgwick's editing of the project, *Gary in Your Pocket* is a text that is framed through a central meditation on relation. Throughout his piece, Muñoz stresses the complexity of *Gary in Your Pocket* and asserts an interest in emphasizing the distinct frameworks established through the textual positioning of Fisher and Sedgwick's connection. On this approach to reading *Gary in Your Pocket* with a specific attention to the author *and* the editor, Muñoz states: "Certainly, Fisher's work is important on its own terms, within the context of black gay male writing practices in the AIDS epidemic. But I am clearly more interested in the ways in which Sedgwick and Fisher looked at the world through the strange optic allowed by their communion with each other" (Muñoz 109). Through this piece, Muñoz begins and calls for continued work on building an understanding of *Gary in Your Pocket* as a work that establishes a particular approach to queerness and queer being through the tensions and revelations of this communion and its academic or institutional positioning.

Muñoz begins this consideration of communion through a discussion of politics and queerness, building on his argument in his previously published book, *Cruising Utopia*, and furthering his assertion that "queerness does not yet exist" through a question: "If queerness does not exist, how can we have queer politics?" (Muñoz 103). Muñoz states that Fisher and Sedgwick's project provides a text in which this question can be understood. There is a "queer

politics of the incommensurable" that Muñoz locates in *Gary in Your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher*. Beginning his exploration of *Gary in Your Pocket*, Muñoz frames his reconsideration of this question through addressing "the role of politics and its relation to the lived experience of social inequality and economic asymmetry that people who understand their sexuality as marked by sexual alterity often share" (103). The connection between the lived experiences of oppression in the lives of queer peoples and politics is marked by Muñoz as one that requires careful consideration—one that requires a complex approach and attention to what is held within the framework of the political.

Furthering this attention, queer politics is framed by Muñoz as an "impossibility." He explains that "The inefficacy, or even impossibility, of these politics has everything to do with the way they are moored to a notion of value as equivalence. But… what I am calling queerness today… is about the incommensurable and is most graspable to us as a sense rather than as a politic" (Muñoz 104). Here Muñoz provides a framework of queerness outside of a dominant organizing strain: outside of "equivalence" as the thing that structures articulations of value. Rather than relying on this framework of equality or similarity, Muñoz moves through it and offers this "sense" of queerness through an understanding of incommensurability. The "incommensurable" being an inability to be measured against something else speaks beyond this framework of equality and instead focuses on the process of living and being that cannot be understood through a singular approach. Through this framework, Muñoz proposes:

> queerness as a sense of the incalculable and, simultaneously, the incalculable sense of queerness. I consider work produced by Fisher and shepherded by Sedgwick as a sharing (out) that helps us grasp a rich, complicated, and sometimes troubling collaborative scene. …this task presents me with an opportunity to also describe a dynamic that

> partially transpires under the sign of 'queer of color,' that is routinely misread by the lens of a politics of equivalence, but that becomes newly accessible as a sharing (out) of a nonequivalent, incommensurable, and incalculable sense of queerness. (104)

Muñoz's approach through incommensurability and the incalculable marks a vast web of experience and expression that can work to gesture towards what he frames as a "sense of queerness." This framing device, that of the "senses," is an important one in considering Muñoz's intervention into theorizing queerness and incommensurability.

To sense, relating to perception and the body, the filtering of material stimuli that ties the individual to their surroundings: to feel. This framework works to establish queerness not as a defined or even definable entity, but rather as an approach to perception, to understanding the body in relation to what it encounters. To tie this act of perception and the body to an incalculable incommensurability marks a system of perception and relationality that points to cacophonous feeling rather than a standing and understandable system. "To sense" and "to shrug" touch here, separated by their internal narratives of culpability. This fractured, uneasy subjectivity read by Reid-Pharr, and Munoz's articulation of the queer project of "sharing out" that structures queer politics through valuing through the incommensurable, rather than equivalence, is based in a movement through ambiguity that asserts a community despite contradiction.

Reid-Pharr and Muñoz follow Fisher through the traces he left behind. Ending his discussion of *Gary in Your Pocket,* Muñoz again approaches the "something more" that incommensurability could hold. He tells us:

> I think we can read Gary Fisher as a gay black man whose sense of self was incommensurable with an immediately available notion of black male identity. Instead,

> let us think of Gary Fisher and the writing he has left behind as a testament to the very limits of understanding his life as a black gay man solely through politics. The layering of acts of mastery and submission he narrates doesn't make sense within the logic of recognition, equivalence, and value. Instead I suggest that there is something else to be gleaned through incommensurability. At the heart of Fisher's writing, we encounter a quality that was meant to mirror the sex through which he so often came to know and describe himself. Fisher and Sedgwick's project, the book we know as *Gary in Your Pocket,* is the sharing of the unshareable, which is for some the shock of Gary Fisher and hopefully, for a growing number of others, the sense of Gary Fisher. (Muñoz 204)

The "shock" that Reid-Pharr contextualizes the "shrug" through is grounded in *Gary in Your Pocket's* inability to be neatly read and resolved. Muñoz picks these responses up and works towards a "sense" based in relationality and community that cannot be neatly resolved, but should be practiced nonetheless.

Fisher's work marks, performs, and shares out an instability of the subject reflected through his journal entries, his poems, his stories, and, as I will argue, the textual object. Reid-Pharr argues that Fisher's work constructs a representation of subjectivity in the pieces compiled in *Gary in Your Pocket* that, "As he attempts to establish a solidity under the sign of Gary Fisher, as he forces fingers up his ass, always with the assistance of an outsider, a nominally proficient master, he comes to create an image of subjectivity that is available to us precisely because it is fractured, uneasy, always in a process of reformulation, precisely because it mirrors the obscene nature of all subjectivity" (Reid-Pharr 145). Reid-Pharr's reading of Fisher's approach to subjectivity marks its fluidity and shifting boundaries that are intimately tied to the system of relation and proximity that Fisher's attention to prepositions marks. While utilizing a different

framework to engage with *Gary in Your Pocket*, Reid-Pharr's initial response to Fisher's work marks the incommensurability that Muñoz's discussion of queerness will later build. Reid-Pharr's acts of sense-making and organizing Fisher's pieces in *Gary in Your Pocket* comes to a conclusion of the impossibility for resolution, and instead does the work of marking, performing, and sharing an instability.

In this way, the theory built by Fisher in "Love in Prepositions" is one that is modeled not only in the prose or the text itself (through editor, author, publisher), but also in the text's relation to its reader: in the way that the reader must feign a shrug in order to maintain the ruse of their separation from the violence that the text builds, and that the text was built through. Through these frameworks, *Gary in Your Pocket* can be read as a text that, like the shrug, needs to be considered through its material and ideological complexity. It is at once embodied and figurative, performing and asserting a blurring of the boundaries between textual subject and reader, and between the body and the text that works to decenter and destabilize the concepts of individual realties that structure life and death.

ON "SECOND THOUGHTS" AND COVERING *GARY IN YOUR POCKET:* MATERIAL PLAY AND SEDGWICK'S "AFTERWORD"

In the "Afterword" to *Gary in Your Pocket*, Eve Sedgwick reveals some of the process that led up to its publication. She uses the space of the "Afterword" to contextualize, and in some moments defend, the actions and choices behind the book as it was published and as it exists as a text and textual object. Sedgwick contextualizes the title and cover art of the collection by framing it as a product of conversations her and Fisher had about the collection before he died. She reveals that "We both liked the idea of offering people who hadn't known him or his writing, as well as the few who had, a sort of 'portable Gary'—hence the title we agreed on. …Since

Gary's death, I along with other people have had a lot of second thoughts about calling the book *Gary in Your Pocket*. …As one of the manuscript's readers put it, *Gary in Your Pocket* risks sounding 'in some ways trivializing.' In metaphor, it seems to make Gary small, appropriable" (Sedgwick 285). Sedgwick offers the rationale behind the title through this reading of it offering a "portable Gary" while simultaneously gesturing towards her attention to, and progress through, possible critiques. This exposure to critique, or risk, becomes a central contextualizing framework, one where the "risk" of the project lies in a trivialization, appropriation, or commodification of "Gary Fisher" in the metaphor delivered through textual materiality.

Sedgwick moves this consideration of the possibly "trivializing" nature of the title to a larger consideration of the book within early American print culture's approach to the publication of Black authors in the United States, specifically in abolitionist contexts. While it's not directly explained by Sedgwick, this history is one that gestures towards print and publication histories of fugitive slave narratives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, alongside other historically situated print histories that privileged collection and anthology, collective authorship, and material ephemerality.[33] Sedgwick states that the title "may be all too resonant in the context of the posthumous publication of an African American writer, mediated by an older, Euro-American editor and friend, from the press of a mostly white, Southern university. Gary and I were both very conscious of a history of white patronage and patronization of African American writers, the tonalities of which neither of us had any wish to reproduce"

[33] For more work outlining these historical routes of publication for Black Americans within Black textuality studies, see Britt Rusert's review "From Black Lit to Black Print: The Return to the Archive in African American Literary Studies," the *MELUS* special issue on *African American Print Cultures* edited by Jocelyn Moody and Howard Rambsy II, and book-length projects like *African American Literature, and Periodical Culture* by Eric Cardner, *Early African American Print Culture* by Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, *Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions on Race Since 1850* by George Hutchinson and John K. Young, and *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* by Christopher Hager.

(285). Sedgwick offers a certain contextualization and analysis of not only the title, but also the framework of the book's publication here that alludes to multiple conversations she's held surrounding the racial and ideological implications of *Gary in Your Pocket* as a project distinctly located in histories of Black American print culture and publication.

Fisher's work speaks to much of what Sedgwick provides in her "Afterword." Her attention to the title, to its possible "trivialization" of Fisher can be understood through Fisher's own words as well. While Fisher's input on the title cannot be directly relayed through Sedgwick's explanation in the "Afterword," the logic of the title, of *Gary in Your Pocket*, speaks to Fisher's formulation of prepositional personhood in "Love in Prepositions." In the middle of the short piece, Fisher writes: "I want your prepositions. I want the little yous. I could list them here: in, on, around, under, over, between, near, next to, on top of—now it's getting too large; the little yous is all I want, probably all I need" (26). The "portable Gary" Sedgwick spoke of is based in his prepositionality: in his containment, in the diminutive nature that that containment gives him. In the fact that he is "in" (your pocket, this book, their memories, this project). Here, Fisher narrates the power of relationality—of knowing through preposition. Fisher continues: "I'll list them again for you, but in context, that is, with body (validity, actors and objects of prepositions and with vigor, at least implied): I want you in me; I want you on me; I want you all around me (forgive the little flourish there); I want you under me (on occasion anyway; but mainly) I want you over, over top of me, on top of me" (26). Fisher frames his approach to proximity, to relation, "in context, that is, with body" to clarify how this piece is constructing relationships through relationality and proximity.

Fisher's own text, "Love in Prepositions," provides a context for the title of *Gary in Your Pocket* that Sedgwick's reading does not directly address. "Love in Prepositions" shapes the text

around Fisher's attention to proximity, to relation, and to approximations that shape the construction and perception of people. Fisher's line, of wanting "you all around me" provides further insight into Sedgwick's attention to portability and to the way that *Gary in Your Pocket* is contextualized within a racial history of the United States. The act of creating a Gary that resides in your pocket, represented by the book as it's printed, produces an image of Fisher as not only "small" and "appropriable" but made to be consumed and contained.[34] A pocket-sized Gary, one that takes the form of the book as it's named, forms a version of Fisher that is consumable, that is literally objectified, possessed, held, owned.[35] While Sedgwick states that the racial history of publication she alludes to is not of interest in the titling and publication of *Gary in Your Pocket*, stating that while "Sexuality was a place where Gary was interested in dramatizing the historical violences and expropriations of racism; friendship, authorship, and publication, by contrast, were not" (285-6), the basis of the title of the text requires a consideration of this history of publication and the violent history of chattel slavery in the United States (285-6)[36]

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[34] While not directed quoted in this chapter, Fisher's work engages with other Black American literary traditions, and anti-Black historical productions, that Vincent Woodard discusses in *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture.* Woodward explains how "the desire for the African slave or American black had epicurean implications. This desire was less about literal consumption and more about the cultivated tastes the white person developed for the African" (18). Woodard's discussion provides historical and literary context for both Fisher's sexual play with racial abjection, and the reproductions of this play within his literary works.

[35] This play with objectification resonates with earlier discussions in this project surrounding Black objectification and colonial constructions of the Black body as a fungible commodity. See also Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America,* Spillers's article-length piece "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," and Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity.*

[36] There's a distinct contextual shift between the poetic work of "Love in Prepositions" and the editorial and textual work of *Gary in Your Pocket* that limits the total applicability of this reading without further theoretical and methodological framing. In "Love in Prepositions" Fisher's play with language melds into a narration of his desire for sensual overwhelm. This overwhelm pushes Fisher's initial reliance on prepositions to refuse external narratives of relationality based on judgement and perception into a formulation of prepositions as sites to consider the role of sensation as a process of relationality that decontextualizes stable narratives of subject formation. With this expanded consideration of Fisher's play with linguistic form, and this revisional, corrective, affective consideration of the self, some of the more recent publications addressing *Gary in Your Pocket* have considered Fisher's journal entries as sites to better understand the formulation of consent and subject formation through psychoanalytical

Sedgwick explains in the "Afterword" that the cover was decided on by both Sedgwick and Fisher while the two discussed ideas for the collection on a phone call before Fisher's death (285). The cover of *Gary in Your Pocket* is filled with an image of one of Fisher's drawings.[37] Circular blobs of colors—grey, green, yellow, pink, red, purple, black, orange—sit separate yet overlapping on the cover of the book. In each shape you can still see the dense, gummy lines of the waxy medium that made them; solid yet slightly blurring at their edges, stippled, mottled lines revealing the texture of the paper's fibers and how they held onto the thick colorful wax. The shapes are separate, yet touching, occasionally overlapping, blending, obscuring. In the top right corner of the cover is a dark shape loosely resembling a human form. Drawn in a deep, almost black, purple; the figure blurs at the tendrils from its sides and bottom—its limbs—to reveal the complexity of its hues as the seemingly black figure seeps purple towards the shapes around it. The color moves up, away from the arm, along the red outline of a nearby blob, the figure's arm sits over the red outline and moves into the olive-green interior of the shape. The red, shining in the shape's outline, rests under the green filling, showing only through the grain of the paper and popping up in pulpy or smudged reminders of the shade below.

approaches to his journal entries. For discussions relating to this work, see Musser's 2017 discussion in "Consent, Capacity, and the Non-Narrative," Avgi Saketopoulou's 2020 discussion of psychoanalysis and overwhelm in "Risking Sexuality Beyond Consent: Overwhelm and Traumatisms that Incite," and Isaac Jean-Francois's 2025 piece "'Self-Slaughter': Gary Fisher's Racialized Fantasies Bridge Black Studies and Psychoanalysis." This recent attention, as I will outline later in this chapter, provides some useful approaches to Fisher's text that help me to understand the aesthetic and narrative work of *Gary in Your Pocket* but approaches Fisher's work through a psychoanalytical frame, which, in its practice lies outside of the considerations of my project.

[37] This information, that Fisher is the artist who drew the cover art, isn't shared inside the text. Instead, it's placed on the outside of the book. On the back cover of *Gary in Your Pocket,* in the bottom left corner above the barcode and next to a close-up photo of Gary Fisher, it says in italic white text: "Front cover artwork by Gary Fisher. Photo of Gary Fisher by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick" (Fisher).

Typed in a clear, blocky white font over the top of this image is the title: *Gary in your pocket*.[38] The title sits large, running vertically along the spine of the book, mirroring the position of the smudged dark figure. In the same lettering, but smaller, rests the subtitle, the first of three lines running horizontally across the bottom of the cover: *Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher*. Under this comes the second line, in slightly smaller font still: "Edited and with an Afterword by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick." And finally, the third line, equally spaced and in the same font: "Introduction by Don Belton." Five people, or the idea of five people, the sense of five people, sit in this cover. The first, "Gary in your pocket," is mirrored in position by the second, the humanoid blob, who both fill the top of the cover. Smaller, in the writing, are the other three, each hovering above the next: Gary Fisher, Eve Sedgwick, and Don Belton. Further still the cover could be read through its intersections, through the relations it outlines in the amorphous shapes holding space next to and behind the five that I've named. The cover builds an image of prepositionality—of the process of being positioned through an attention to relation.

The profuse materiality of the image—the way it looks like its individual materials—is revealed in its attention to texture, to the scratchy pulp of the paper and the slick crayons whose individual lines track across the page within the shapes they build. The lines of the shapes, of the built-up color, simultaneously mark the materiality of the cover, the initial, differently textured and differently produced original, while also marking the system of relation of lines that build the shapes of the cover. This cover frames a text that is equally invested in Fisher's attention to working through preposition. My consideration of the cover—of the choices that went into its design—considers *Gary in Your Pocket* through its materiality, tying the textuality of *Gary in*

[38] In this inclusion of the title, I reproduce the capitalizing pattern form the book's cover. "Gary in Your Pocket" is not written in title case on its cover and only "Gary" is capitalized.

Your Pocket to its material production, the process of acquisition, and the consumption of this piece. The cover, marking the prepositions, engages the reader through these acts of relation: it's *Gary*, in your pocket. In holding this piece next to your own body, in considering the feasibility of it fitting within your pocket, the reader is drawn into the processes and systems of relationality produced within Fisher's works by holding the textual object, thus being brought into this embodied production of proximity. The title of the text and the material manifestation of the book position the person holding and reading it within the material and rhetorical processes of this system of relationality and proximity established by Fisher, Sedgwick, and Belton.

Gary in Your Pocket constructs an avatar of Fisher, a small, portable Gary, that models the consumption and possession of a Black man that is contextualized and understood within the history of enslavement in the United States through the explicit scenes of sexual play and racial fetishization that runs through so many of the text's pieces. This use of preposition structures the title of the text around these layers of relation and contextualization that Fisher marks in "Love in Prepositions." My consideration of the textual object of *Gary in Your Pocket* is, in part, informed by Uri McMillan's description of avatars in his work *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance.* McMillan reads an ephemeral archive of Black women's performance art and explains his use of avatars as a way to mark how:

> objecthood provides a means for black subjects to become art objects. Wielding their bodies as pliable matter, the black women performers discussed herein repeatedly become objects, often in the form of simulated beings, or what I term "avatars." I call this process *performing objecthood.* Becoming objects in what follows, proves to be a powerful tool for performing one's body, a "stylized repetition of acts" that rescripts how black female bodies move and are perceived by others. (7)

"*Performing objecthood"* names the process of artistic and aesthetic formulation that produce "avatars" as a "practice of self-objectification—one that provides the possibility for (though never the guarantee of) an emancipated subjectivity" (McMillan 8). McMillan articulates his claim around readings of historical and contemporary Black women's practices of performance that reconfigure anti-Black ontological categorizations that produce captivity and objectification through a claiming of objecthood as a state of resistance and fugitivity.

I follow McMillan's articulation of the power of performance art and bring it towards Fisher's play with textual materiality and readerly relation. Reid-Pharr's description of the "shrug" (Reid-Pharr 149), what Muñoz explains about the "something more" that lies "At the heart of Fisher's writing, [where] we encounter a quality that was meant to mirror the sex through which he so often came to know and describe himself" (Muñoz 204), and Fisher's own description of existing "in context, that is, with body (validity, actors and objects of presuppositions and with vigor, at least implied) all track a slippage between Fisher's lived experiences, the experiences relayed in the content of *Gary in Your Pocket,* and the published textual object as it touches its audience (Fisher 26). McMillan explains this slippage within his archive as the "slippages between subject and object… [that] reveal that the borders between subjectivity and objecthood are not nearly as distinct as we pretend they are… and never have been" (10). Later, he explains his term again, stating that he "rerender[s] 'avatar' in the service of black performance art to gesture toward some of the oldest (and newest) forms of impersonation staged by black women *and* the conversion of these self-effacing performances into literary, visual, and digital remains" (McMillan 12).

I attach my consideration of Fisher's work to McMillan's discussion of performance art because it helps to contextualize the "risk" Sedgwick was warned against about the title of *Gary*

in Your Pocket, and the assurances that Sedgwick made about the positioning of the project as being outside of Fisher's sexual practices. Fisher's play with objectification comes through in his discussion of sexual and racial debasement, where he replays the subject positions of an enslaved person through his sexual practices, and this continues on in his textual practices that configure *Gary in Your Pocket* as an object that takes on the risk of "appropriating" and "trivializing" him. The cover of *Gary in Your Pocket,* in its titling and design, position the textual object as an object that incorporates its audience into its material project through its framing as a fragment of Fisher, known here as "Gary."

The cover to Fisher's text pushes the narrative work unfolding across the journal entries and stories from Fisher's life into the posthumously published book. This timeline surrounding the book's publication places these paratextual elements of Fisher's text within the authorial-artistic play that unfolds between Sedgwick and Fisher. In his 2022 work, *Queer and Bookish: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as Book Artist,* Jason Edwards reads the cover of *Gary in Your Pocket* repeatedly as a piece fitting within a larger archive of Eve Sedgwick's work in collage, fiber arts, photography, and book design. In Edwards's reading, the paratextual elements of *Gary in Your Pocket* work into and as Sedgwick's process of mourning and memorializing queer community amidst the early decades of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Across this chapter Edwards reads the cover of *Gary in Your Pocket* at least six times. First describing the cover art as visually representing "Fisher's diagnosis [which] brings the cover of the book, whose forms resemble the orange, pink, and purple forms of CMV isolated under a microscope" (Edwards 113). Later Edwards re-reads the cover, claiming that "*Gary's* cover does not just represent the CMV blossoming in his bowels, but the HIV carried in his bloodstream" (128). And again, later analyzing a photograph of Fisher present in a collage made by Sedgwick, Edwards writes that,

"like the palette of the two top photographs of Fisher, with his grey checked shirt juxtaposed with the plum-colored couch, he described his lesions as an appetizing combination of the 'grayish, purplish,' 'mauve,' and 'a light eggplant': the colors of patches on the cover of Gary" (132). In this final example, Edwards quotes from Fisher's final journal entry included in *Gary in Your Pocket.* Fisher describes the lesions on his skin caused by the cancer Karposi Sarcoma (KS).

I group these three examples of Edwards's visual analyses of the cover of *Gary in Your Pocket* to trace Edwards's consideration of Fisher's embodied relationship with the cover of the text, specifically through Edwards's repeated claims that Fisher's art on the cover of *Gary in Your Pocket* traces Fisher's negotiations of diagnosis and illness.[39] As is briefly quoted by Edwards in his consideration of the cover, Fisher writes about this negotiation directly in the journal entries included in *Gary in Your Pocket.* The "'grayish, purplish,' 'mauve,' and 'a light eggplant'" highlighted by Edwards comes from Fisher's entry to his journal on September 19, 1993. Gary Fisher is writing while in the hospital. Fisher writes that:

> I have a new skin. I have a new identity. …The spots, the lesions, patches—they are so random (Even the name is slippery. What should I call these things, individually, I mean. One KS. Look, there's a KS. I have a KS on my hand, under my thumb). They refuse a common shape or texture or size and they sprout-spring-develop-appear unpredictably,

[39] There are other threads to Edwards's analyses that, while not entirely unrelated, I do not include in the body of this chapter. In addition to these three readings, Edwards also reads the cover in the following ways; "*Gary's* cover evokes a similarly liquid *suminagashi*-like form, with the yellow-and-orange leaf perhaps floating on algae-filled green water, and what looks to be the silhouette of a purple bubble-eye fish, seen from above, swimming out of the shot, top right. This liquid imagery is characteristic of the way Sedgwick repeatedly described being immersed in fisher's fishy idiom" (116; emphasis original); "on the cover of Gary, by the way the red, green, and orange phallic shapes, often partially outlined in different colors, as if wearing condoms, bore into the green liquid. They rub up against each other at their edges and tips" (119-20); and in relation to Whitman reads that Fisher's "leaves of grass might resemble the turf separating grieving mourners from their lost beloved. Indeed, with this in mind, viewers might interpret a less aqueous, more grassy reading of the leaf-strewn, green base layer of Fisher's waxy crayon artwork gracing the equally waxy paper cover, across which your fingers elusively slide" (126).

> time and location. (Backtrack: even the action of the disease is slippery). Some are clustered; some are island-like. Some are small—just dots. Some are large, sprawling, giraffe-like. I'm looking at my arm and I don't trust what I just said. There is a geometry to this, a poetry too. If I didn't know it was cancer and AIDS I'd say my arm—my right arm—is interesting, attractive. The spots are grayish, purplish, a light eggplant, mauve—a combination" (271-2)

This is where Edwards locates a piece of the textual evidence he uses to supply his final reading of *Gary in Your Pocket.*

Here, at the end of the text, the cover can be read through Fisher's explanation of the "poetic" spots on his arm. Edwards's argument expands this out to the principles of patterns and patches central to Sedgwick's collage art. Both Edwards's and Muñoz's arguments surrounding the queer potentiality that come from tracing the relationship between Fisher and Sedgwick through the text of *Gary in Your Pocket* add to my understanding of Fisher's project. In placing Edwards's reading in the context of Reid-Pharr's, Muñoz's, and McMillan's, rather than Sedgwick's other artistic projects, I extend these readings of *Gary in Your Pocket* to attend to the work of Fisher's material and literary designs that anticipate the scholarly (dis)location of his identity through textually analyzing this collection of his writing. In his explanation of his new identity, Fisher provides a framework to restructure the book itself. The cover art of *Gary in Your Pocket* asserts this new identity and it marks the "interesting, attractive" nature that Fisher speaks of in this journal entry. The cover art mirrors this explanation of Fisher's skin, furthering the significance of *Gary in Your Pocket* as a material object that represents Fisher himself, or at least, the part of Gary that Fisher left behind in his work.

While Edwards's process focuses on contextualizing *Gary in Your Pocket* within Sedgwick's larger repertoire of fiber arts and book design, his readings of the cover are about Gary Fisher's body. There's a metonymic relationship established between Fisher's embodied negotiation of illness and the text's representation of the scientific or epidermal visual evidence of infection that ties the cover of the book to Fisher's skin, and Fisher's skin to his negotiation of embodied subjectivities. Moving through the risk of "trivialization" or commodification of Gary Fisher's body referenced by Sedgwick in her "Afterword," these readings highlight the material, textual (textural) nature of *Gary in Your Pocket* that provides a structuring tension within the language used when discussing Fisher's project. Part of this tension operates through the necessary movement between discussing Gary Fisher as author, Gary Fisher as the subject of the text, and the Gary in *Gary in Your Pocket.* This difficulty is modeled in Edwards's approach to reading the cover of *Gary in Your Pocket:* in the continuous re-reading scattered throughout his other considerations of Eve Sedgwick's book design and collage work.

In the same year as Edwards's reading (2022), Travis Alexander reads Fisher's work in his piece, "The Fateful Gamble: Autoimmunity and the Mattering of Black Life." Alexander turns towards this same moment in the hospital with Fisher in 1993. It's the last entry in *Gary in Your Pocket,* apart from Sedgwick's "Afterword." Fisher tells us that he's "looking at my arm and I don't trust what I just said. There is a geometry to this, a poetry too. If I didn't know it was cancer and AIDS I'd say my arm—my right arm—is interesting, attractive" (271). Alexander reads this, telling us that "Fisher thus explicitly figures in AIDS his longed-for openness to the world, a redemptive salvation: embodied presence, immanent knowledge, and full imbrication with his social ecology. Fittingly, then, Fisher posits AIDS explicitly as an artistic condition" (12). Alexander continues by stating that "It is only in recognizing this linkage between viral

exposure and poetry that we can appreciate the full significance of Fisher's more evocative provocations" (13). In his contribution to reading Fisher's works, Alexander places *Gary in Your Pocket* alongside two other texts: Spillers's 1987 work "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," and Sapphire's 1996 novel *Push.* In placing these texts together, Alexander works through Spillers's articulation of flesh and Black gender formations in the wake of chattel slavery within a direct discussion of embodied exposure and risk informed by the specific violences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

About Spillers's project surrounding flesh, gender, and Blackness, and what Spillers's piece opens up when read in its temporal relation to the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Alexander contends that:

> to articulate black morbidity to black male feminization in 1987—whether that narrowly means a deterritorialization of gender, or vulnerability, exposure, and penetrability more expansively—is to invoke the anatomical and transmissive logic of HIV/AIDS, which for the preceding half decade had increasingly rendered that linkage tragically literal. …black men claim their "wild" inheritance at the scene of their autoimmunity, their inability or refusal to demarcate and defend a "self" against an entangled American carnage. Insofar as HIV/AIDS therefore unconsciously concretizes and overdetermines the essay's recuperative investment in sexual pulverization and death, "Mama's Baby" imagines an unlikely redemption of the epidemic itself. And if HIV/AIDS occupies the implied cathexis of her essay's necrological overture, even as a hauntological correlative, then what is the gamble of that "*yes*," of *that* viral solicitation. It would take no small measure of iconoclasm to suggest in 1987 that HIV/AIDS afforded resources of (re)capacitation—afforded a conceptual icon for a new mode of life, an autopoietic

> orthography—for blackness at a moment of crisis, when thousands of black women and especially men were becoming infected across the United States, to say nothing of the millions more in Africa, the essay's coordinate of historical and symbolic origin. Yet it does. (2)

Later in his piece, he concludes that this tryptic provided in his reading between Spillers's, Fisher's, and Sapphire's works "point[s] us to an unfamiliar future in which blackness as autoimmunity might actually embrace a strategy of fugitive recusancy and recession… this fugitive and depressive consciousness effectively sourced a strange necropower from virality" (22).[40] In reading *Gary in Your Pocket* alongside the grammars of racialized gender inherited in contemporary America from chattel slavery and following productions of anti-Blackness through social practices, legislative movements, and medical development, Alexander reads Black HIV/AIDS literatures through their negotiation of the anti-Blackness at the center of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its attendant political policies. These literatures work with colonial productions of gender that objectify and animalize Black subjects through the production of flesh, and the denials of stable gender categorizations, to reconfigure fungibility as a site of resistant porosity.

The textual slippage provided by Fisher's artistic choices as author and director of the initial book design plans is highlighted in Edwards's epidermic readings of *Gary in Your Pocket* and contextualized in Alexander's epidemiological reading. Fisher's included journal entries layer on top of these readings of the textual-representational nature of *Gary in Your Pocket.* On Sunday, July 6, 1980, Fisher writes: "Looking through this I'd be crazy to let anyone get hold of

[40] For more discussion of Black HIV/AIDS activism and literatures in relation to necropower, see Che Gossett's addition to *Queer Necropolitics,* "We Will Not Rest in Peace: AIDS Activism, Black Radicalism, Queer and/or Trans Resistance."

it—my journal that is. But more and more it seems I want someone to find it and read me like a book. For once I want someone to know me. A dangerous thought. At least I think so" (143). Fisher explains a desire to be known, to be read, to be made book. Here, his journal reflects what was written in "Love in Prepositions": a desire of being known in relation to another, of being witnessed and existing in approximations, in proximities, rather than summarizing networks of affective relationship. It also marks Fisher's interaction with the objectifying framework of *Gary in Your Pocket*—this object-making, trivializing, commodifying movement of the text as being simultaneously a violent and transformative process that is illegible within a neat categorization of agency, consent, choice, or humanity. Fisher says he wants to be "read like a book," and *Gary in Your Pocket* takes it a step further: to be made book, to be Gary as pocket-manual. This approach, a largely figurative one, takes on a literal meaning when considering these elements of book design and the way that they are evaluated and read within both Fisher and Sedgwick's larger bodies of work.

Fisher expresses this attention to object-making again on Tuesday, March 3, 1981. Fisher writes a letter, beginning it with "Dear Gary" (158). This self-addressed letter ends with a plea: "Come home, Gary. This isn't you. I am beauty, I am light. You are. WE are and we shall be again. Come be my fantasy. Be mine. Be yours. Hold me, Gary, set me free. I don't want to stay locked in this journal" (Fisher 159). Fisher fragments himself—or marks a fragmentation of himself—he both speaks as Gary and speaks to Gary. He desires a reunion; he desires that this other Gary "Come be my fantasy." This display of fragmented subjectivity that simultaneously works from and refuses the legibility of an individual subjectivity constructs and traps one shard of Gary in the journal: "I don't want to stay locked in this journal" (159). Fisher builds a fantasy, structures this journal entry around the tensions between reality and fantasy that shatters his self,

and theorizes the journal as a containing entity. This theorization compounds in the project of *Gary in Your Pocket,* taking this entry and reproducing it, again and again (and reproduced, here, too). Still contained, and embroiled in additional levels of mediation and removal, *Gary in Your Pocket* becomes a practice of mourning Fisher through Sedgwick's contact and the following scholars who work with the text, and of holding this remnant of him, even if that process risks a reduction of Fisher's agentic practices as author and community member.[41]

Alexander's reading of exposure and porosity that looks towards Fisher's text as a site to consider the "unfamiliar future in which blackness as autoimmunity might actually embrace a strategy of fugitive recusancy and recession" provides context for the space and time that Fisher may have been writing from (Alexander 22). McMillan's discussion of performance art and the production of "avatars" tracks "the conversion of these self-effacing performances into literary, visual, and digital remains" (10). Fisher's practice of aesthetic and literary production works from this negotiation of risk (in both Sedgwick's and Alexander's framings of it) and constructs a textual avatar that serves as a remnant of his embodied and sexual practices. The "remains" that McMillan traces surround the entire textual performance at the core of Fisher's mediated, relational work. As Alexander configures, Fisher worked from his lived experience of risk, exposure, and penetrability. In reading Fisher's *text* in this way, Fisher's artistic practice performs a type of "(re)capacitation" through his formulation of trivialization and appropriability. Because even this appropriability is cast into a realm of contention—in his "shock," "difficulty," "challenge," and core "incommensurability," Fisher's textual avatar (his practiced objectification) produces a site in which his reproduction and attendant objectification

[41] Travis Alexander marks this continued practice of mourning that unfolds within publications discussing Fisher's piece when he describe's Reid-Pharr's addition. In a passing comment Alexander refers to "The Shock of Gary Fisher" as "Reid-Pharr's eulogy" (Alexander 10), highlighting the ongoing practices of mourning that take place at the site of the critical response to *Gary in Your Pocket*.

works from the space of Black fungibility and applies what Muñoz articulates as a queer politics of the incommensurable to identify a central glitch in the logics constructed around racial objectification and abjection through the text's incorporating practices of textual performance.

RED CREAM SODA

In a recent (2020) addition to the ways that *Gary in Your Pocket* has been read, Avgi Saketopoulou uses Fisher's text (specifically his journal entries) as a source to expand psychoanalytical frameworks around sexuality, consent, overwhelm, and subjectivation. Saketopoulou reads Fisher's journal entries to inform on psychoanalytical approaches to understanding Blackness and subject formation and catches on the difficulty of *Gary in Your Pocket*'s composition. Asking about her practice of psychoanalytical care as it's informed by Fisher's text, Saketopoulou works to justify reading Fisher's text as evidence for her project. She writes:

> is it fair to read Gary Fisher… for "evidence of experience"…? Might Fisher's transgressive writing be, rather a textual strategy—"Fisher"—that thematizes its own textuality?... It seems to me that reading Fisher's text and engaging with… what Fisher… teach[es] us about some forms of queer, Black desire is not only fair but *necessary and politically urgent.* Fisher's desires for White sexual domination are not unique to him; they are desires that scholars writing on queer desire have been exploring for some time and about which BIPOC race-play activists have been quite vocal. To treat Gary Fisher's notebooks as literary works only runs the risk or, to put it more bluntly, does the work of obscuring erotic desires that are inscrutable to many people. (118-19)

Risking "obscuring erotic desires that are inscrutable to many people" is what Saketopoulou uses as a reason to read Fisher's works as testimonial evidence (119). I do not push against

Saketoupoulou's reading of Fisher's display of racialized subjectivation in *Gary in Your Pocket*; instead, I pick up her claim around the "risk" or "more bluntly" the "work of obscuring erotic desires that are inscrutable to many people" that happens through "only" reading "Fisher's notebooks as literary works" (119). I think with Saketopoulou's claims to extend what her questions don't center because of her methodological investments: in what ways can reading *Gary in Your Pocket* be a way to think of literary work as a practice of desire, erotic and otherwise, that is also "*necessary and politically urgent"*? Through this question, I embrace both the diaristic and fictional aspects of *Gary in Your Pocket* without the need to ground the textual or literary productions of the piece in an embodied truth, or in a solidified claim about the type of narrating voice we're getting.

Saketopoulou, in another moment of her reading of *Gary in Your Pocket* and how to map the space between her work and the literary productions of the text, articulates her attention to "the fact that they are not just literary devices or theoretical characters—and that they very much draw on the materiality of the crimes of slavery and anti-Black racism" (119-120). Saketopoulou's discussion of methodological approach interests me in the ways that it uses many of the same frameworks of earlier literary and queer scholars to support the clinical practice of psychoanalytical care that she develops in her larger monograph that this discussion of *Gary in Your Pocket* resides in. About Fisher's sexual practices relayed in his journal entries, Saketopoulou states that "To see Fisher as doing more than merely returning to, and being trapped in, the past, we, too, have to come into contact with something in ourselves that reaches beyond recognition, to make ourselves passible to his text" (117). There's a readerly receptibility that Saketopoulou states as being a methodological requirement to access the full thrust of Fisher's project in *Gary in Your Pocket.* Here, Fisher's own calls from his journal entries are

echoed. Not addressing "the past" as the thing that traps, but instead his own text: "I don't want to stay locked in this journal" (Fisher 159). Saketopoulou doesn't work through the literary and textual components of *Gary in Your Pocket* as a central source of evidence in her discussion, but still she locates a reciprocity to Fisher's journal that earlier scholars grappled with in their readings.

This work of passiblity with *Gary in Your Pocket* is framed as the accessing mechanism to understanding Fisher's work in its lived potentiality. There's an imperative of contact stated in her discussion of Fisher's textual configurations as they exist against material formulations of anti-Blackness. "To make ourselves passible to his text" formulates a readerly porosity that Saketopoulou further explains (Saketopoulou 117). She writes that "To do so, we have to bend our will, to look at it again and again, though not with a 'looking [that] comes before [and that] holds, replicates, reproduces what is looked at' but to look at it so that it may act on us, so that we may travel beyond the horror in Fisher and toward the horrific in ourselves" (117). There's a resonance between the type of active, relational approach that Saketopoulou calls for in readings of Fisher's work and the lingering impact of the "shrug" that seeped into the early readings of *Gary in Your Pocket.* This reading practice that Saketopoulou articulates in regard to Fisher's work also resonates with Amber Jamilla Musser's discussion of empathetic reading that she began in her 2014 work *Sensational Flesh: Race, Flesh, and Masochism.* Musser explains "empathetic reading" in her discussion of texts relaying acts of sexual masochism "as a reading practice… [that] highlights corporeality and the flesh… [and] calls attention to nonidentiarian circuits of embodied knowledge production" that "highlights how we can discern the structure of sensation in various texts/performances and it works to give those sensations meaning which in turn allows us to read differences in a more sensational mode" (38-40).

Musser argues that "By theorizing sensation we acquire a way to understand structures at the level beyond the discursive" (41). Furthering this articulation of her practice of empathetic reading and the role of sensation within it, Musser states that "deciphering the structure of sensation requires a particular mode of reading that emphasizes the connections between reader and text/object/assemblage" (42). Musser explains empathetic reading as a reading practice that is formulated *between* the text, the author, and the reader and becomes available as a practice by "allowing this multiplicity into the empathetic equation [that] shifts the focus away from understanding the other as unified and transparently available to us and invites us to experience affinities on a corporeal level *with* others through sensation" (45). Musser's discussion of empathetic reading highlights a process based in readerly sensation, touching on what Saketopoulou described as being "passible" to Fisher's text, and extends what Alexander articulated as embodied penetrability as a framework to understand porosity, through an attention to reading practice.

While Saketopoulou only reads the latter half of *Gary in Your Pocket* in her discussion, focusing on what Sedgwick framed as the "Journals and notebooks" section (Fisher 120), Saketopoulou still brushes against the literariness of these entries from *Gary in Your Pocket* in her readings. A clean cut between the "Stories and poems" and the "Journal and notebooks" is modeled in the book design of *Gary in Your Pocket* (Fisher 1; 120). The two halves of the collection are separated by an empty page followed by clean title pages that serve to describe the type of pieces included in each half. This paginated separation in Fisher's work is a product of Sedgwick's editing. While it is possible that Fisher and Sedgwick discussed the organization of his notebook's contents into these different sections, these conversations about the narrative structuring of *Gary in Your Pocket* as a collection are not recounted in any of Sedgwick or

Fisher's published or available works. I mark this uncertainty to clarify a layer of ambiguity surrounding Sedgwick's specific editorial approaches and tasks. Authorial intent is obscured by the framing of *Gary in Your Pocket* as a mediated text created out of the distinct forms of contact between Sedgwick and Fisher during their lives and after their deaths. This instability of authorial intent serves as the grounding for many of the text's early reviewers' hesitancy: what Reid-Pharr described as the "righteous indignation" and "maddening inarticulateness" (149). However, as Muñoz discusses in his contribution to the readings built with *Gary in Your Pocket,* the work of Fisher's text becomes a relational, incommensurable practice that produces senses through contact—a contact that is not only described in Fisher's pieces, but is also modeled between Sedgwick and Fisher in their imbricated artistic scholarly productions performed at the site of the text's collection and publication. The practice demonstrated by Fisher and Sedgwick in their authorial interplay becomes a part of the queer political and sensorial project of *Gary in Your Pocket.*

Throughout Fisher's included journal entries and scattered across the short stories that act as a preface to his journals, his consideration of this textual-authorial imbrication and play is provided directly and indirectly. As I've mentioned briefly already, the majority of existing scholarship focuses on the latter half of *Gary in Your Pocket* to form their claims about Fisher's project.[42] This work has focused on Fisher's journals to discuss his own relationships with Sedgwick and others to consider the difficulty Fisher's work opens up for his audience, or to configure Fisher's own subjectivation through an attention to his writing. Instead of doing this work, I turn from the cover of Fisher's work and what it might tell us about his artistic play with

[42] With the exception of a few readings that reference his short story "Arabesque" to contextualize Fisher's discussions of racialization and xenophobia.

materiality in the face of Black objectification and abjection and look inward. Like Fisher's work in "Love in Prepositions" and in the book design of *Gary in Your Pocket,* Fisher's discursive and narrative work provide lenses through which his aesthetic positioning and performances of the text can be contextualized and "look[ed] at again and again… so that it may act on us" (Sasketopoulou 117).

FRAMING STORIES AND "RED CREAM SODA": ON WONDER AND LITERARY PRODUCTIONS

I turn to Fisher's short story "Red Cream Soda" to plant my practice of reading and writing about Gary Fisher's work. Fisher's story begins with the narrator, who remains unnamed throughout the entire story, speaking to the audience after learning that he was "sick" (37). The narrator becomes the confidant of a man named Randy—whose relation to the narrator is unknown and unexplained throughout the story, despite the sprinkling of details that may inform on their existing relationship and interdependence. The story follows the narrator's experience of Randy telling him about his sexual encounters in detailed, near-daily descriptions. As Randy tells the narrator about his sexual encounters, the narrator begins to record Randy's tales in dated journal entries. This short story (packed with figurative language, symbols, and narrative ambiguity) acts, at least in part, as a meditation on the process of testifying, recording, and reading that replicates the structures of Fisher's own journal entries that come later in *Gary in Your Pocket*. Throughout these storytelling sessions Randy drinks from a can of soda that becomes a mysterious entity in the narrator's apartment: always somehow freshly carbonated and bubbling, and always, somehow, the same can of pop despite the span of weeks that these erotic retellings unfold over.

Fisher begins the story with the sentence: "Not a week after they found out how sick I was Randy started telling me his stories" (37). This is all the context Fisher gives into the lives of

these men. The story starts just after the narrator's diagnosis with an unnamed illness, implied throughout the story to be HIV or AIDS. This change in status for the narrator coincides with Randy starting to tell him his stories. Here, illness and storytelling are tied in this communal practice between Randy and the narrator even though the specifics of their relationship remains unexplained throughout the entirety of "Red Cream Soda." This first sentence also establishes a tie to the larger work of *Gary in Your Pocket*. Randy's "stories" told to the narrator are mirrored by the language of the collection's subtitle: "*Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher."* Immediately following this first sentence, the word choice is explained, with context to how the narrator and Randy understand it: "I call them stories but the scowl that met my doubt made me wonder. I didn't *not* believe my friend; it was simply easier to feign doubt than to show my true discomfort over what he was telling me" (37). "Stories" becomes a word that casts "doubt" through its categorization of what Randy's telling his friend. But the narrator doesn't stop at this judgement and when met with Randy's bristling response to this categorization of his experiences, "doubt" turns to a type of "wonder."

The narrator here feels "doubt," then "wonder," and before all that, "discomfort" (Fisher 37). This uncertainty turning towards "wonder" is cast as a type of protective measure. The "doubt" is recontextualized in the next sentence: "it was easier to *feign* doubt" (37; emphasis added). The "doubt" was always, in its practice, a sort of protective front meant to distance the narrator from the embodied actions of Randy's tales. In this moment, the *"Stories"* of the subtitle echo inward towards this initial framing of "Red Cream Soda" and the stability of *Gary in Your Pocket*'s separation and formal categorizations becomes even stickier. The "wonder" narrated here is in passing, operating in its relationship to "doubt" and disbelief. However, in this moment "wonder" serves as a crack in the façade of the narrator's doubt that traces out towards a

narrative disintegration that takes place later in "Red Cream Soda." "Stories" and "wonder" sit in the first few sentences of this short story positioning the genre-defining acts of the narrator within the larger editorial choices of *Gary in Your Pocket.* These moves of categorization establish a false binary between the "real" or "lived" accounts in the journal entries and the "fictive" productions in the stories.

The movement between the "Journals and notebooks" and the "Stories and poems" in Fisher's text constructs a version of realistically relayed experiences that the content of the text simultaneously works to disintegrate (1; 120). Brushing against these dynamics of genre categorizations, Muñoz reads the work between Sedgwick and Fisher in *Gary in Your Pocket* through the framework of truth. He says that reading with Fisher's work reveals that:

> Truth is not about transcendence or totality. It is not about possession or incorporation. It is more nearly about the proximity of different senses of the world. We know the world through our sense of it. While sense is always about singularity, this singularity is thinkable and knowable as plurality. …This knowing is akin to a sense of the world that isn't about the dyad of Same and Other… Nor is it about an anticipatable calculus of equivalence ending in some recognition of the self in the other. Instead, it is about the incommensurable. It is about trajectories and intersections between our senses of the world that make the world. (Muñoz 198-9)

Muñoz's discussion of "different senses of the world" pushes against a singularity based in "truth" as "totality." Muñoz's reading of *Gary in Your Pocket,* and his positioning of sense-making as a world-building practice adds another layer to how we can read the opening sentence in "Red Cream Soda" through reading "wonder" and worldmaking within the narrative trajectory offered by Fisher in the short story.

bell hooks describes wonder in relation to feminist pedagogy in her 2010 work, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom.* She describes "an ongoing experience of wonder" as an element to "practical wisdom" that forms:

> The ability to be awed, excited, and inspired by ideas …[as] a practice that radically opens the mind. Excited about learning, ecstatic about thoughts and ideas, as teachers and students we have the opportunity to use knowledge in ways that positively transform the world we live in… Hence, there is the capacity of ideas to illuminate and heighten our sense of wonder, our recognition of the power of mystery. (hooks 188) [43]

"Wonder" in hooks's discussion of critical thinking and feminist pedagogy exists within a different frame than the initial "wonder" of "Red Cream Soda's" narrator but marks a space of possibility for this "wonder" that the narrator works towards later in the story. Muñoz and hooks's contributions around meaning-making and uncertainty inform on Fisher's work with "Red Cream Soda's" narrative framing by articulating "wonder" as a type of porosity that, through the accumulation of senses, crafts a space for a different understanding of the world.

The "doubt" that gave way to the narrator's "wonder" doesn't immediately move into a "recognition of the power of mystery" in "Red Cream Soda;" instead the narrator resists Randy's attempt at sharing his experiences (hooks 188). The narrator's first attempt to distance himself from Randy's experiences was by labeling them as stories. His following attempts were more direct and establish an active conflict around their ritual of retelling. The narrator states that Randy "didn't seem to hear my protests; and would literally pull me from my work kicking, spitting, cursing him, into our common space… to make me listen to him. The man all but

[43] For a larger trajectory of feminist workings with "wonder," see Sara Ahmed's discussions in her blog post "Feminist Wonder" published on *feministkilljoys.com,* and Fabiane Ramos and Laura Roberts's article "Wonder as Feminist Pedagogy: Disrupting Feminist Complicity with Coloniality."

foamed at the mouth in his urgency to get them out" (Fisher 37). The urgency of this storytelling process is marked in Randy's agitation that borders a type of wildness—he "all but foamed at the mouth." "To get them out" blurs the objects of Randy's telling in the prepositional phrase that ends the description of this repeated conflict. The "them" being Randy's stories but also glossing the sexual partners that Randy recounts in his sadomasochistic practices. The storytelling process blurs with the messy frameworks of consent present in Randy's stories. The violence the narrator recounts at being brought into this practice of sharing resonates through Randy's "descriptions of the sex he had had, and was continuing to have, almost nightly—anonymous sex, reckless, vindictive sex, impassioned and yet loveless, somnambular sex, with bodies he could hardly see" (Fisher 37).

Even as these boundaries and the narrator's own contentious relationship with being told are established, the narrator explains and reproduces his own deep engagement with Randy's accounts. There is something built through the telling of these experiences. The narrator explains that "Somehow the acts he relived for me were beyond what the two of us could create, beyond what I could write, and beyond what he could tell me, though the combination was a dangerously close approximation" (Fisher 38). Even as Fisher writes this tension in the act of telling and wanting to be told, he establishes through the narrator's own comments that something is being built in these moments that go beyond just an act of conversation. Further complicating the narrator's own relationship to the act of being told, he marks his own engagement with Randy's stories: "He didn't ask me to, but in the weeks that followed I kept a diary of his stories, his 'encounters,' as he called them and insisted they be called. 'These men, these events,' he said slowly as though he were dictating to me there in the living room, 'everything I'm telling you has happened, and continues to happen as we speak, and will continue for as long as there are

men, I imagine'" (39). While he wasn't asked to be told, and repeatedly asked why he was being told, the narrator himself engaged with these texts by recording them, marking his own deep engagement through listening and taking on the role of the storyteller himself.

The narrator, between moments where he records and writes down Randy's testimony, explains that "I questioned then his need to tell these stories and the sanity of disclosure in general. Yet I would sit so passively through the next installments, neatly bound and gagged by what could only have been disbelief; forced to listen because I couldn't stop his talking" (Fisher 40). The narrator simultaneously marks his resistance to listening to Randy while also assuming a role within the act of telling and being told that mirrors the sexual practices that Randy talks about. The narrator says he sat "passively" and states that he was "neatly bound and gagged" while he was "forced to listen" to the accounts. Within this moment, the narrator is incorporated into the elements of kink and the sexual culture that Randy is speaking to him. He is "passive," tied and bound, he is framed as being "forced" even as he actively takes in what Randy tells him. Fisher builds an approach to witnessing the sexual testimony of another person here that, much like interacting with *Gary in Your Pocket* does, requires a consideration of the consumer within the roles present in the events being recounted and consumed.

This shifting framework for understanding the tension between doing and listening is mapped at the end of the opening paragraph to "Red Crema Soda." The narrator tells us that "He paced as he told his stories, and gestured, urging my attention, my understanding, my quiet conspiracy" (Fisher 37). Randy's pacing and gesturing serves as an urgent call for the narrator's interaction with him that slides from "attention" to "understanding" to "conspiracy." In this description, "attention" leads to a type of comprehension that culminates in the narrator joining in with Randy as they form "a combination of persons for an evil or unlawful purpose; an

agreement between two or more persons to do something criminal, illegal, or reprehensible (especially in relation to treason, sedition, or murder); a plot" ("Conspiracy, N."). The slip into "my conspiracy" extends the narrator's descriptions of his and Randy's play with non-consent as attention stacks into an "understanding" that incorporates the narrator into the sexual exchanges reproduced in these stories. The specific use of "conspiracy" marks the porous reading practices articulated alongside *Gary in Your Pocket,* modeling through Randy and the narrator's storytelling process the type of incorporating frameworks frequently read into Fisher's larger published project, while also marking the homophobic responses to cruising and casual sex that colored early social and political responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic through the moralization and following criminalization of HIV/AIDS.[44]

READING OBJECTS IN "RED CREAM SODA": THE POP AND THE GUN

Later again, Fisher establishes a dynamic of incorporation and criminality built through this progression towards "conspiracy." The narrator speaks to Randy during one of his stories and says: "Why are you telling me this? I don't think I want to hear this" (Fisher 41). To which Randy responds: "'Is it so much of your time?' he spit, and the soft glaze that had fallen over his face disintegrated. His eyes became hard balls, pieces of lead, aimed at my head" (Fisher 41). Through the figurative language of the story—the metaphor built around Randy's eyes—eyes positioned as a weapon pointed at the narrator, the theme of refusal and non-consensuality continues in this storytelling practice. The narrator begins by again asserting a refusal to willingly engage with Randy's stories: he doesn't think he wants to hear it. This refusal is not based in certainty. Instead, it's tentative—it's "I don't *think* I want" not *I* don't *want to hear this.*

[44] For more on these frameworks of moralization that structured early responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, see Evelynn Hammonds's addition to *Feminism in Twentieth-Century Science, Technology, and Medicine,* "Gendering the Epidemic: Feminism and the Epidemic of HIV/AIDS in the United States, 1981-1999" and Cathy Cohen's discussion in *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics.*

Still, Randy hardens in response to the narrator's tentative refusal. As he "hardens," Randy becomes a weapon with the likening of him to a gun, his eyes bullets aimed at the narrator's head. In the act of telling, Randy softened. There's a tenderizing process that happens as Randy tells his stories, violent in their content and their distribution, that, even through the force it took to get the narrator to the space of listening, still wants a buy-in from the listening narrator. The figuring of Randy as a weapon layers into the violence of his stories, and the fear surrounding gay sex and sexual practices of cruising in the early decades of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Randy's own infection status is unknown, with only the reference of how "sick" the narrator is in the first line and the narrator's discomfort surrounding the specifics of Randy's sexual practices informing on their proximity to the disease.

The narrator tells us about his and Randy's life later in the short story. He says that "Randy and I kept a relaxed house. I did what I could. He seemed to understand that, and on the weekends he did the bigger jobs. Picking up after our Saturday session I nearly bumped over an open and full can of pop" (Fisher 44). This is the fifth mention of Randy's can of pop in "Red Cream Soda" but it's the beginning of the object's mystery being revealed. Before this Randy only "sipped" "gingerly" or "cautiously" from *a* can of soda (38-43). As the narrator tidies their home, he brushes past the can of pop and instead lands on another mystery. Randy sees and comments on a recent newspaper in the common room, with the classified ads marked up with specific ads looking for men seeking other men circled. As the narrator cleans his home, Fisher constructs a paragraph that spans across over a full page of *Gary in Your Pocket.* In a stream of consciousness-style narration, the narrator's thoughts unfold around these different artifacts from Randy's life (the can and the paper). As he touches these items, the mystery of Randy's motivation layers into another mystery. The narrator tells us:

> I didn't immediately notice the pizza sauce on the can, a dried, crusted half-circle the shape of Randy's big thumb. …I still hadn't figured Randy, why so many? was it really a numbers game with him? Or couldn't he find the right-one? Suicide dawned on me, but why might he try to kill himself and in this awful, lingering way? I'd met sick men at a few of the support groups who said they were still at it, still meeting in the parks, in the restrooms, at theaters. They balked at my surprise and explained to me that they weren't the guns—they wouldn't goddamn themselves with murder—no, they played the victims. One man said he did it for control, because he liked to believe he was in control of his own dying, that he had made an adult decision and become victim. Another man said he did it to keep from asking who, why, how—that the faces, the bodies, the love of so many men had absolved any solitary one of them. …Then the pizza sauce registered on me—it had been more than a week ago, that nasty pizza. How had I missed the can in all that time? I decided quickly that Randy had hidden the thing in the refrigerator, that it was probably flat now, that it must have been flat last night when he sat drinking it, that I would throw it away, quickly, quickly before I thought any deeper into the matter. But I picked up the can and sloshed some of the red fluid onto my hand. It fizzed. I could see it and I could hear it, and this was plainly a new can of pop—not a week old, not a night, not even an hour. I stood in the floor perplexed dropping leaves from the tabloid. Had Randy been home? Had I—? (Fisher 42-3)

As the narrator works across the sensory information he receives from the can, he attempts to make sense of Randy's sexual practices and his own memories. These different observations layer together and provide context for Randy's earlier hardening.

Through the description of the "sick men" who the narrator met at support groups the metaphor of embodied weaponization is rearticulated. Randy's leaden eyes that he "aimed" at the narrator earlier stacks with the men's description of this embodied metaphor that is structured around the risk of transmission. The formulation of bodily weaponization is present in both of these metaphors, but the "gun" only becomes explicitly "aimed" at another person through the sexual recounting of Randy's experiences. There's an attention to literal contact and communicability in this metaphor that, through the phallic object of the gun, highlights the men's understanding of the capacity for harm in the sharing of bodily fluids. As the narrator moves through these different objects and memories in this paragraph and marks the bodily considerations and control of the men who are aware of their diagnosis, the pop can becomes a site of fluid contact instead. There's also a fluidity in the narration of this paragraph through the stream-of-consciousness back and forth between the sexual acts of the men from the support group and the sensory information perceived around the can of pop.

The narrator's attention to the can of pop begins with him marking what he didn't initially notice: "The pizza sauce on the can, a dried, crusted half-circle the shape of Randy's big thumb" (Fisher 42). The pizza sauce, a red mark on the red cream soda can becomes evidence of the temporal mystery surrounding the soda. Scaffolded through these other stories and memories, the can pops in again when "the pizza sauce registered on" the narrator; what had been framed, just sentences ago, as something that he "didn't immediately notice" becomes rearticulated as something that he reveals he *did* see but just didn't comprehend in its fantastical positioning. The pizza sauce, sticking in his mind as he wanders through his other thoughts, "registered" upon reflection and becomes a signature of not only Randy's "large thumb" and the identificatory capacity of his fingerprint, but also a marker of a temporal specificity evidenced through the

goopy remains of the "nasty pizza." Now dried and past, the pizza sauce serves as the first marker of Fisher's work with the fluid contact of his paragraph's symbolic work around the red cream soda can.

The narrator's realization baffles him and opens the space of the mystery surrounding the red cream soda can. The only explanation for the over week-old can of pop is that it "must have been flat last night when he sat drinking it" (Fisher 43). The decision to "throw it away, quickly, quickly before I thought any deeper into the matter" constructs what might be revulsion at Randy's consumption of a can of soda that had been opened over a week ago and wasn't fresh; or, it might reveal a flinch away from the earlier "wonder" of the first sentence (43). To dispose of the can "quickly, quickly" is an action that serves to stop thinking "any deeper into the matter." The type of deep thought around the old red cream soda can would open up an unresolved mystery around the seemingly ordinary can. In his haste to dispose of the can, the next example of fluid contact unfolds. The narrator "picked up the can and sloshed some of the red fluid onto my hand. It fizzed. I could see it and I could hear it, and this was plainly a new can of pop—not a week old, not a night, not even an hour" (43). "The red fluid" resonates with the red viscosity of the pizza sauce, but it also resonates with blood—built into the narration in this paragraph through the violent imagery of the gun, and the discussion of HIV/AIDS transmission. This repeated attention to red liquid surrounds the narrator's description of events that specifically work alongside an anxiety surrounding sexual contact and fluid exchange.

The red marks come from items meant to either be consumed by someone or contained by their originating entity. Outside of these frameworks of containment, they are a mess. The pizza sauce and the red liquid of the pop "fizz" outwards, sloshing and dripping across the narrator's musings about Randy's sexual practices. The pop "fizzed." This description works to

establish a sensory interplay between what is seen and what is felt. To fizz is both an auditory description, and a description marking the visual presence of bubbles. “It fizzed” is the whole sentence. This clipped account is a statement of fact—but a statement of fact that is based in its unbelievability. Because “this was plainly a new can of pop—not a week old, not a night, not even an hour.” Repetition serves as a process of emphasis through amendment, layering the temporal impossibility surrounding the liquid evidence of the can. All that the narrator is left with is questions: “Had Randy been home? Had I—?” (43). These questions build questions for us, too. “Had” he, *what?* And then there’s a paragraph break and the narrator tells us that “When Randy came in we both started talking, frantically” (Fisher 43). The repetition in the structure of these amending clauses of “not a week… not a night… not even an hour” push into the temporal mystery of the red cream soda. Fisher’s play with temporality in this repetition of “not” structures the narrator’s attempts at understanding what’s happening with the red cream soda through a recursive and amending negotiation. The narrator, anticipating that the can of soda was already flat, lifeless, airless, fizz-less, went to throw it away “quickly, quickly.” But the soda defies the temporal expectations surrounding its opening. The gasses flowing through the syrupy liquid of the red cream soda don’t disperse into the air of the apartment, leaving it past its peak; instead, it keeps moving, breathing, bubbling.

Fisher plays with temporal production, and symbolic continuation, in, what Dagmawi Woubshet terms, a practice of a “poetics of compounding loss.” In Woubshet’s readings of early HIV/AIDS literature, elegies, poetry, and activist speeches, he articulates how practices of mourning in 1990s AIDS narratives and literatures reveal a form of mourning that construct an “unusual timeline and grammar of loss” (24). Woubshet continues about the mourning practices surrounding HIV/AIDS in the 1990s by explaining that:

> Their double-tensed orientation toward loss is unconventional, if not counterintuitive, jarring against a normative grammar of loss, which, strictly speaking, should be expressed in the past tense. Loss's grammar is usually directed toward past events and passed-away people and the effect of these past losses on our present lives and psyches. This retrospective sense of loss is clear in early AIDS mourning, which emphasizes that which is already past, gone, absent. What is particularly striking, however, is that loss can refer not just to elapsed time, but also to the soon-to-be-lost future. Redirecting loss to signify that which is still outstanding, still living, still here demands a reorientation of loss's grammar, which is precisely what early AIDS mourning achieves: its grammar of loss is at once behind and ahead of time, giving formal structure to both past and impending deaths. (24-5)

The type of "double-tensed orientation" that Woubshet highlights within these early AIDS literatures that makes up what he terms a "poetics of compounding loss" produces a split temporality that mourns towards the future and holds onto the past.

This temporal reorientation constructed within these acts of mourning provides context for Fisher's work in "Red Cream Soda." Fisher's temporal play doesn't only disrupt the temporal productions of the story through being "behind and ahead of time," but works to disintegrate the temporal reliability that relates to the "formal structure… [of] both past and impending deaths" altogether (Woubshet 25). The red liquid of the red cream soda, and its ever-present carbonation, reject the narrative timeline provided by the narrator. Instead, the "not a week… not a night… not even an hour" old soda pushes the narrative timeline into a constant immediacy that disrupts the reliability of, and reliance on, linear temporality. Extending his reading of the "poetics of compounding loss," Woubshet explains that "These narratives of mourning do not recount,

respond to, and reflect upon singular events of mourning, but instead explicitly underscore—and are in some ways are almost deliriously obsessed with and full of rage over—the serial and repetitive nature of the losses they confront" (21). This state, of being "deliriously obsessed" is what Randy models to the narrator as he shares his sexual encounters. It's also modeled in the description of the red cream soda.

The mourning practices of *Gary in Your Pocket* marked by scholars like Edwards and performed by scholars like Reid-Pharr loom over "Red Cream Soda." The story starts "after they found out how sick I was," and we follow the narrator to "the support groups" where he tells us how the men he meets make sense of their impending deaths (Fisher 42). The production of denied futurity that Woubshet articulates his readings of mourning around serve as a framing mechanism for "Red Cream Soda." Randy's storytelling practices pull the narrator into communal productions that refuse the limitation of contact despite infection status, and entice the narrator, with only the red cream soda holding him down. With the soda can's mystery revealed, it too becomes an entity that subverts expectations about longevity and lasting. However, in the can of pop, the subversion doesn't come through a tragic shortening at the hands of exposure and release (of the can's pressure, of the gasses—open to the air). The can of pop subverts expectations of liveliness and survivability by pushing forward, constantly bubbling, always refilling, framing its existence not around a push forwards that fulfills narratives of deflation and decay, but instead that constantly remains in a temporal *now.* The first description of the soda comes earlier in the short story, and the narrator tells us that it is "deliriously wrong" when held against the context of Randy's encounters (Fisher 38). There's a frantic energy, a push towards telling *now,* that sits within Randy's agitated demeanors that's infused into the object of the pop can as well.

Randy's earlier fervor, when he "all but foamed at the mouth" to tell his stories, is also now embodied by the narrator (Fisher 37).[45] At the beginning of the next paragraph, the narrator tries again to communicate the mystery of the red cream soda can to Randy. He starts by saying, "Randy" but is cut off. He says, "I began but he shushed me and pulled me with him back to our room to begin his story" (Fisher 43). After this description, Fisher moves his short story into another moment that reproduces the formal productions of *Gary in Your Pocket.* The narration slips into a journal entry—seeming to recount Randy's sexual practices and seeming to be written by our narrator. Immediately after the description of Randy pulling him "back to our room to begin his story," the narrator forewarns that he's "not sure how much I heard or how well it translated that night into my feverish script, but I wrote until my hand cramped, then pushed the notebook and pen away violently and went for some air" (Fisher 43). That's the end of that paragraph, and the next paragraph begins: "Monday, April 13 It was cold and black—I'd never seen it so black" (43). Here, we either move forwards or backwards in time. We might continue on with our narrator, out "for some air" where the night ends up being "cold and black." Or we might circle back to the pushed-away journal, still open in the violence of the narrator's departure. And we might be hearing from Randy too, if the narrator's senses and memory can be trusted.

The narrator's "frantic" speech, cut off by Randy in priority of his own story, funnels into his "feverish" writing. The mystery of the red cream soda and its everlasting freshness gives way to the narrator's desire to record Randy's experiences. The violence he so frequently ascribed to Randy's sexual practices that sat behind his desire for Randy's stories to be "stories" moves into his body as his "hand cramped" and he "violently" pushes away the materials linked to his

[45] This is also a moment of liquid uncontainability—a type of fizzing.

fervor. As these boundaries between Randy's sexual practices and the narrator's practices of writing dissolve, this "feverish script" begins to overlap with the narrator's earlier descriptions and classifications surrounding Randy's storytelling practices in its unbelievability as well. This time though it's not the narrator's "doubt" (or feigning of doubt as an attempt to establish distance between himself and the stories Randy tells). Instead, the narrator begins to "doubt" his own ability to faithfully record what he's heard. The narrator states that he's "not sure how much I heard," casting doubt on not only "how well it translated" through his writing but on his ability to *hear* Randy. The narrator's own sensory capacity comes into question surrounding this final journal entry in "Red Cream Soda." In this way, the journaling practice of the narrator becomes unbelievable too as he fills in Randy's "stories" without the certainty of having "heard" it all. This destabilization of the narrator's ability to not only retell Randy's stories, but hear them fully, is provided as a caveat to the journal entry that follows.

The narrator's disbelief in the can of soda rolls into a disbelief surrounding the reliability of his transcriptions, and of him as a narrator. The first mention of the can of soda comes on the second page of "Red Cream Soda." In this first inclusion, it's described as an unremarkable, but incredibly important object in the narrator and Randy's rituals of retelling. The first description of the red cream soda comes from the narrator's explanation that:

> I found myself anchored by that little red can of pop, which I hadn't really noticed until he drank from it. It was a wrinkle in the dark, crazy fabric he was weaving, deliriously wrong, and fortunately so, because I might have gone back there with him… He wanted me to go, and I pretended to go, but some large part of me stayed, with the can in just the corner of my vision. I was safe in things I understood, or so I thought. (Fisher 38)

The can of pop is so ordinary that its existence doesn't even register for the narrator until its brought to Randy's lips. But this ordinary object becomes a site of fantastical production as it unfolds throughout the story. In this first mention too, Fisher hints at the paradoxically mundane pop can. "That little red can of pop" goes from something unnoticed in the space of the narrator and Randy's home, to being "a wrinkle in the dark, crazy fabric he was weaving, deliriously wrong, and fortunately so" because it was the only thing that "anchored" our narrator from following Randy back to his stories. The slippage between narrative spaces in this first description of the red cream soda models the narrator's later stream-of-consciousness-style paragraph.

As the soda can serves as an anchor, it simultaneously functions as a "wrinkle" in the "fabric he was weaving." These metaphors mix together creating an image of the can of soda as an entity that at once grounds the narrator in his reality (in the space of the common room) and exists within the same "fabric" weaved by Randy, "dark" like the later "cold and black" space of the "feverish[ly]" recorded encounter. The excessive nature of Randy's stories affects Randy and the narrator as they take on their different roles in their retellings—"feverish" and "foaming at the mouth." In the red cream soda's first appearance, there's a trace of these effects surrounding the can of soda as well. The pop can becomes "deliriously wrong" in a parenthetical aside that harkens back to the language of unbelievability and pathologization that was used to describe the "crazy fabric" created by Randy through his act of speaking, and the (near) "foaming" of his mouth. Even in this first description of the red cream soda, as an object that grounds him and keeps him from following Randy into his stories of "anonymous sex, reckless, vindictive sex, impassioned and yet loveless, somnambular sex, with bodies he could hardly see" (Fisher 37), its mystery sits in the web of its symbolic and metaphorical description, muddying the narrator's

transcriptions and destabilizing the narrative containment and control he attempts to practice through his writing.

With the mystery of the pop can looming over the story, Randy's "encounters" destabilize as the narrative voice shifts. No longer are Randy and the narrator clearly separated—the two threads of the narrative felt together. The narrative framing that established a break between the narrator's voice as he described listening to Randy's stories and Randy's voice from the transcriptions of his "encounters" dissolve after the mystery of the red cream soda is revealed (but not solved). The story ends with a dated entry: "Monday, April 13" (Fisher 43). In this entry, an encounter is relayed in which both the narrator and Randy could be present. The details of this encounter blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality, between nature and body, and between doubt and wonder. It begins:

> It was cold and black—I'd never seen it so black. I walked the block to the park suddenly relishing the darkness and the moisture and eucalyptus odor in the breeze; the tree branches, high up, rubbed each other sharply, whistling. I responded to a welcome I'd never known before, felt drawn, not blown, but gently sucked in by the whoosh and whistle of the branches, by the cool, black odor, the freshness of earth and night sky at the cusp. The woods accepted, then encouraged me and I soon found myself near the night figures, in their arms. (43)

Without explicitly naming any human actors in this entry, the narrator of this entry is engaged in a deeply connected and erotic scene. Framed by blackness, marked by senses—seeing the darkness, smelling the eucalyptus, feeling the breeze—the scene requires a consideration of the body that signals a bodily perception that exists beyond the framework of the human form.

The trees, moving and rustling near the narrator, are what rub, what whistle, what don't just blow, but gently suck, leading to "night figures."

The format of relationality and proximity, of subjectivity and reality, that is provided in the final entry of "Red Cream Soda" mark a transformative act that happens in this space: one in which blackness isn't just visual, but holds an odor, holds a coolness, that transcends the sensory boundaries established in other moments of the text. Bodily porosity takes on something else here, or takes on another flavor, as Fisher crafts an erotic scene that decenters embodied action as the sole driver of pleasurable stimulation. The movement of the trees becomes a part of the sexual practices that before now, had been based in Randy's sexual practices and the narrator's practices of record keeping. These trees, that "welcome" in our narrator in this final diary entry of "Red Cream Soda" meld with the "night figures," decentering clear distinctions of human sexuality and sexual acts that are instead replaced by direct reproductions of sensory information that exist outside of pre-supplied agentic roles. After the "anchor" of the red cream soda reveals itself as an artifact that was already based in fantastical, unbelievable routes of consumption, preservation, and temporality, the narrator becomes unmoored.

"Not a week old, not a night, not even an hour" disrupts the narratives of freshness that the "fizz" of the pop was supposed to communicate (Fisher 43). Time folds back on itself as the soda disrupts the notions of lifespan and lasting through carbonation. The narrator, upon uncovering this unexplainable continuation of freshness, "stood in the floor perplexed dropping leaves" from the newspaper he was holding (43). The porous, eco-erotic productions from April 13th move backwards into this moment of foreshadowing. "Dropping leaves," the narrator's open state stemming from his shock at the soda can leads to the pages of paper falling from his hands but also speaks forward to the trees at the end of the story. The narrator, as he drops the "leaves"

of paper, also tickles the boundaries between his human form and the trees that "whistle," "rub," and "suck" later in the story. In this extended reading between the trees on April 13th, and the narrator, rooted "in" the floor (rather than *on*) and "dropping leaves," the papers move towards his body, blurring the boundaries between body and paper through the trees and leaves analogy created between these different acting objects of the story. Between the "leaves," the trees, the narrator, Randy, and the narrative temporality of "Red Cream Soda," Fisher crafts a story that highlights objecthood and subjecthood as intimately connected positionalities.

The acts of speaking, hearing, writing, and reading become a practice that serves as an incorporating site as the narrator and Randy mush together in the final entry, and as the characters of the story dislocate themselves from human-actors and stream outwards, into the spaces around them.[46] It's not only the trees that perform as desirous objects that distort the frame of humanity and the structuring logics within it, but the can of pop as well. These differing frameworks distort "truth" and "stories" and leave the narrative with only a sense of "wonder" that's not pushing towards resolution, but instead wrinkling out through exponential layers that narratively embraces the unresolvable mysteries through writing (sharing) out. "Red Cream Soda" is a text that offers a meditation of *Gary in Your Pocket*'s larger considerations of proximity, approximation, testimony, witness, writing, and reading by modeling the specifically transformative and boundary blurring acts that receiving and witnessing testimony provides. That being known in relation to another—through another's story, next to another's story or body—builds a subjectivity that can at once objectify, can deny a humanity, while simultaneously engaging with larger transformative networks of being that don't rely on humanity to construct value.

[46] While I do not follow my reading all the way to the end of "Red Cream Soda," Fisher continues this play with sexual sensation and uncontainability all the way to the end of the story.

The can of pop, the trees, Randy, the narrator, the stories, and the notebooks layer together in Fisher's practices of incommensurability that turn to a sensational cacophony at the end of "Red Cream Soda." The avatar that Fisher produced through the performance of writing, reading, and publication that culminated in the textual object of *Gary in Your Pocket* traces an ontological play in Fisher's works that mark what McMillan articulated through his reading of Black women's performance art. McMillan explained about his project that "this book is not only about avatars that are embodied, but also those that become *dis*embodied, as these synthetic selves are distended across disparate representation forms" that "limns how experiments in ontological play create haunting resonances in word and image" (12-13). This book, *Gary in Your Pocket,* performs that too and shifts the mode of performance to the textual object that opens up to possible sites of reading and rereading (again and again) that keep his prepositional productions fresh. The dispersed temporality of "Red Cream Soda" that comes through the narrative process of retelling and transcription and the symbolic work of the red cream soda, also serves to model Fisher's production of avatars as "synthetic selves." Fisher produces layers of "synthetic selves" in *Gary in Your Pocket* and "Red Cream Soda" that work through the register of the textual object of *Gary in Your Pocket,* but also through the sensorial and narrative practices within his story-work through the trees and "night figures," and especially through the ever-available, always consumable, but undefinable red cream soda can.

CONCLUSION: CLOSING GARY IN YOUR POCKET

"Red Cream Soda" offers an approach to reading the journal entries of *Gary in Your Pocket*, and in turn, to reading what the project of *Gary in Your Pocket: The Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher* as a whole offers to its readers. Fisher's journal entries act as a sort of testimony—they mark what Randy explains in "Red Cream Soda:" "These men, these

events,'…'everything I'm telling you has happened, and continues to happen as we speak, and will continue for as long as there are men, I imagine" (Fisher 39). This is both fact—"everything" that is told "has happened"—while also being a fantasy—"I imagine." Fisher relays a moment of this connection, of this function of imagined reality in his journals when he tells of a dental procedure. He asks: "Where do I start?" and continues, "Well, after class I decided I'd have my tooth pulled. This was something symbolic of my new outlook on life, my new awareness of reality as a magic in itself" (Fisher 167). This moment, theorized through a dental procedure, through the gap left in Fisher's gums, builds on these ideas of "reality as a magic in itself" that flows through *Gary in Your Pocket*.

On Christmas Eve, 1986, Fisher again addresses the role of the journal. He explains, "I'm trying to find reasons… or trying to make reasons for this death. I haven't written much in this book because I haven't enjoyed, no, because I haven't deserved… no, because I haven't had time… because I've been afraid to admit" (Fisher 196). The act of writing, of testifying, of recording holds a weight. Like the function of recording and being witnessed in "Red Cream Soda," the act of writing, of communicating, attends to reality in a way that transforms it—that either inscribes or refuses a fantasy. These moments in Fisher's journal build a network of Fisher structuring himself in relation to his journal: he simultaneously is the book (he can be read in the reading of the journal), he is trapped in the journal (in telling the journal shards of himself are left in it), and he is made by the journal (to speak in it is to admit something of himself, to make himself more real in that way). And he positions himself, through *Gary in Your Pocket*'s materiality, as a fragmented, reproducible and containable version of himself—printed and dispersed across the stacks of the identically bound copies of his disarticulated self, left to "us" after his death.

Like the red cream soda, each copy of *Gary in Your Pocket* looks the same, might be the same one, even; but Fisher's symbolic work with the can of soda transcends what reproduction can mean. The mass-produced object, identical and interchangeable, that led to the narrator's confusion—that led to the narrator believing that the can might "anchor" him in a reality where temporality and decay can be trusted—pushes out to the red cover of *Gary in Your Pocket*. The fungible "reality" of the can of soda is destroyed through the fantastical productions of Fisher's story, the can of pop sits within the "crazy fabric" of Randy's stories, becoming a part of it, and ripples out to the textual-material work of Fisher's book design that, as it's read and re-read by the scholars who follow him, consider Fisher in his embodied performances of subjecthood and objecthood through each re-telling, transcription, or citation.

Woubshet explains the political actions within the mourning practices he traces in his project. He says that the "'disprized' mourners—the bereaved who are denied the rites, honor, and dignity of public mourning, and whose losses are instead shrouded in silence, shame, and disgrace" of the early decades of the HIV/AIDS epidemic "turned to their sorrow as a necessary vehicle of survival" (22). Silence, for these mourners, was akin to death and "the clarion call of early AIDS activism, put open, truthful mourning at the center of their protest, insisting that lives could be saved through the very speech acts precipitated by death" (22). These protests were performed through discursive practices, as well as practices of performance that coalesced around the corpses of victims of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.[47] Woubshet explains public demonstrations that revolved around the bodies of people who had died of AIDS related illnesses that, through "the AIDS funeral realized the 'corpse's presence to perform itself as [a] mode of political speech' enabling the dispossessed body to take on a remarkable 'political afterlife,'

[47] For more on the use of corpses in early HIV/AIDS demonstrations, see Debra Levine's "How to do Things with Dead Bodies."

indeed extending the life of the corpse beyond the life of the deceased" (33). The political utilization of the corpse in early HIV/AIDS demonstrations harnesses the political power of objecthood through an understanding of the corpse, "disprized" and removed from the public structures of mourning afforded to many due to the dehumanizing fears of contamination and communicability that was produced through the disinformation and anti-Blackness at the heart of early HIV/AIDS discourse, and brushes against McMillan's descriptions of avatars.

The attention that Woubshet gives to the "poetics of compounding loss" that, in part, can be seen in these public displays of mourning that serve as resistance to governmental and social attempts to erase the dead and dying victims of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, resonates with McMillan's discussion of the impact of performing objecthood and constructing avatars. McMillan explains that he utilizes "avatar production to reveal how these performers transmute their simulated identities into transhistorical figurations. Put differently, avatar production describes how these rogue corporeal stagings are 'reincarnated' into other mediums, transcending the original places of their conception" (12). The "corporeal stagings" of the performances of McMillan's archive resonate with the corpsely stagings within the political demonstrations that Woubshet speaks with. In Fisher's work in *Gary in Your Pocket,* he straddles the space between these two frameworks through the production of his textual self—both within the stories and notebooks of *Gary in Your Pocket,* and through the textual performance he enacts through the design of the book.

Early in McMillan's project, he tells us that he "is concerned with the personal and artistic risks incumbent in becoming and/or performing as an object" (8). And then he asks: "Put simply, what are the pleasures and perils of objecthood?" (8). The "risks incumbent in becoming and/or performing as an object" are not just perilous, but also pleasurable. The "risks," that lurk

within McMillan's discussion of objecthood and avatar production echo into Sedgwick's "risks [of] sounding 'in some ways trivializing.' [Because] In metaphor, it [the title of *Gary in Your Pocket*] seems to make Gary small, appropriable" (285), that layers with Alexander's discussion of the tentative positioning of the person living with HIV/AIDS in their heightened understanding of the risks of bodily exposure, and that push against Sasketopoulou's claim of the "risk… of obscuring erotic desires that are inscrutable to many people" were we to only read Fisher's work as a meditation on "textuality" (Sasketopoulou 119). Simultaneously, the "pleasures" of objecthood are a central consideration in Fisher's aesthetic and artistic practices. In Fisher's project he provides descriptions and performances of the experience of these layers of risk and pleasure that embraces their violent potentiality and their contradictions, without the assurances of the safety of clear affective, textual, or narrative boundaries.

To re-read the text and textuality of *Gary in Your Pocket* is to reconsider the frameworks of Black objectification surrounding the content and the textual object left to us in Fisher's project as a performance of aesthetic and political urgency. These performances flow through the text, and towards its readers. The "shrug" (Reid-Pharr, Muñoz), the "cringe" (McBride), and the heat of the text (McRuer) that were used to describe Fisher's work by the people who picked it up and wrote with it, are markers of how the readers themselves are brought into the material and discursive performances of Fisher's work. In this way, the text becomes a site of speculation, looking both forward and backward, and inwards and outwards, that produces a type of textual speculation through Fisher's material networks of incorporating narratives. Understanding *Gary in Your Pocket,* as a textual avatar, a "synthetic" self (McMillan 13), or a "Portable Gary" (Sedgwick 285), performs an objectification that plays with readerly porosity and positions the

reader as the one holding onto Gary's synthetic self, placing the reader within the "ontological play" that he haunts us with (McMillan 12).

In an earlier project of Muñoz's published just three years after Fisher's, Muñoz discusses mourning practices within queer frameworks of incommensurability. He pushes against the articulation of melancholia in psychoanalytical or clinical frames that position melancholy as a symptom to be cured or as an affect that inhibits action. He says that rather than these frames, melancholia for the racialized subject "is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names" (40). Fisher's work in *Gary in Your Pocket* functions through textual avatars that come through his journal entries and his stories, and through the textual object as another iteration of his objectified remains, and, through the metaphor of him being "in your pocket," the book becomes something that forces the reader to consider how we take him with us. In the book, in becoming a surrogate Fisher, in asking to be conceptualized as an extension (or maybe reproduction) of his body, Fisher pulls the reader and consumer into the framework of race and queerness that he reproduces in its incommensurability and complexity. To sit with Gary, in your pocket is to consider the ethics of consumption: of reading his journals, of holding this text, and of accessing and attempting to absorb Fisher's works, and to be struck by an unresolvable tension. *Gary in Your Pocket* locates a process of constructing the self through proximity that is at once internal and individual, while simultaneously forcing a consideration of the individual as it is intimately linked and built through its perception of, by, and through others. To sit with *Gary in Your Pocket* is to resist the urge to shrug—and to attempt to negotiate yourself in relation to the positionalities, subjectivities, and histories that *Gary in Your Pocket* embodies.

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