
A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
In English

By

Adonis Demetrius Williams, B.A

Washington, DC
August 21, 2018
I want to thank Dr. Pinto, Ph.D., the guiding intellectual light for this thesis and the research included herein. Without her support, this project would have not have come to fruition and for this, I am forever thankful. And, of course, I am thankful for my many friends and mentors who made this accomplishment possible.

“How do we decide what to study or what jobs to pursue or what topics to write about? The answer is simple: do the work your soul must have.”

— Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon

Many thanks,
Adonis D. Williams
## Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1 Black Feminisms and Black female Corporeality: Uncovering Epistemologies of Black Female Embodiment........................................................................................................4

Chapter 2 Bodies and Lives that Matter: Uncovering the Politics for Mattering.........................17

Chapter 3 Theorizing the Body through Literature ........................................................................33

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................41

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................................42
Introduction

In this thesis my intention is to theorize the black female body in and around a black feminist tradition. I am specifically interested in tracing how black feminism has theorized the black female body. While my discussion oscillates between both black lives and black bodies, the bodies of black women are the text — that is, the object under study. My thesis contributes to the field an examination into how the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) is being played out through black female bodies. This logic of this argument accepts that BLM follows a fundamentally black feminist tradition, and thus, has aims rooted in the same advocacy work that provided the foundation for the development of what we know contemporarily as Black feminism. This thesis considers, in great detail, the erasure of black existence through the lives of unarmed black women. The three bodies under review in this thesis are Renisha McBride, Shereese Francis, and Malissa Williams. While there are many women of color who have died at the hands of the state, the lives of these specific women cover a very critical territory that engages why black women’s bodies don’t matter.

The attention I give to the body is intentional. I am interested in black women’s bodies because they have enjoyed, throughout the years, a place in our country’s journey towards equality. African-American women— to include their bodies — have had a very important role in the resistance work that improved the conditions for marginalized communities — themselves included. This struggle for justice is animated by the role women of color have played in suffrage movements, housing initiatives, Jim Crow laws and anti-lynching rhetoric, to name only a few contributions. These many contexts, I argue, are mutually constitutive in constructing how we know what the black female body is. My thesis, therefore, extends this epistemology as I propose a new theorization of black female embodiment in the era of BLM. The theorization I propose
considers the post-mortem lives of McBride, Francis, and Williams and, in so doing, uncovers the genealogies of why black bodies have never mattered.

I tend to push against the mutually constitutive narrative that suggests gendered politics provides the foundation for black feminism. As Angela Davis makes us consider, feminist ideology has been intersectional since its inception and, as a consequence, has diffused into a practice which positions women’s bodies as the foundation for initiatives relating to advocacy and resistance. However, during our contemporary political moment, the work being done by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi has expanded our understanding into how cultural phenomena is played out through the body.\(^1\)

In my third and finally chapter I move the conversation into a literary space where I consider how black women writers such as Lucille Clifton, Toni Cade Bambara, and Barbara Chase-Riboud have theorized the black female body. I argue that their writing helps theorize the body through interpretations of visibility and subjectivity, which are tantamount to the work being done by BLM and its civic body. By framing their texts around the bodies of black female protagonists, they contribute to knowledges that provide the basis for how we know what the black female body is. These knowledges are mutually constitutive in the construction of black women’s lives and, as this thesis considers, their bodies. I conceptualize how said literature has constructed the lives of black women through their bodies. The conceptual framework I create in chapter three serves the purpose of allowing my readers to engage how the body is theorized in a literary context. It is my further intention, therefore, that readers of my thesis witness how literature and cultural phenomena materialize the bodies of black women.

\(^1\) Founders of Black Lives Matter Movement
My thesis borrows from Cheryl Clarke’s idea that the body is this *thing* that resists and, thus, is very political. There is, I argue, something very material about not only the bodies of McBride, Francis, and Williams, but also the cultural and historical genealogy that undergirds our understanding of *why* these women’s bodies should matter. And the literature discussed herein help exposes, albeit from a different angle, this genealogy. I ask myself: how did said women embody the violence to which they were constantly subjected? Reimagining and mapping how black feminism has considered non-white female bodies, I propose a *politics for mattering* that takes a critical look at the gendered dimension of black women’s resistance. As part of this logic, I recognize that for black lives to matter, black bodies must matter. The first commitment of this thesis is to trace, as part of my intervention, a genealogy of how black feminist thought has theorized the body.
Chapter 1

Black Feminisms and Black Female Corporeality: Uncovering Epistemologies of Black Female Embodiment

In the opening line of her 1980 novel *The Salt Eaters*, the African-American female author and social activist Toni Cade Bambara queries the question: “Are you sure, Sweetheart that you want to be well?” (1). The ends of this question speak deeply to the tone elicited by the text as Bambara begins her narrative with her title character Velma Henry, who just attempted suicide. Velma Henry, a community activist in a rural Georgia town, sits on a stool in an infirmary as the town’s healer, Minnie Ransom, hypnotizes her, pulling her deep into the abyss of her own consciousness. To many, Velma’s body is disjointed, as her bruised skin, matted hair, and bodily bandages call attention to the presence of a woman who, like the rest of her community, endured, and continues to endure. As we begin to imagine the picture Bambara paints within the first couple of pages to her text, readers interpret the ways in which the author aestheticizes the struggle of both her title character and, more importantly, the small community of black people in Claybourne, of which Velma is a part.

As readers flip throughout the novel’s first few pages, Velma’s psyche is probed. Before her attempted suicide, Velma was a civil servant, committing herself to fighting the interlocking and oppressive conditions that marginalize her community. Her commitment to fight for her town’s residents, coupled with her long-standing protest of Transchemical, a company that pollutes the town, chronicles a long lineage of warrior-women whose very bodies remained, and continue to remain, visible during campaigns for justice. And yet, if we accept Bambara’s belief that “revolution begins with the self, in the self,” then are we better able to engage with diverging epistemologies of what the body “means” and how, by way of it, resistance is aestheticized. *The Salt Eaters* is appropriate for any conversation about black female embodiment because the
question, “are you sure … that you want to be well” draws a critical eye to the epistemological and political understandings of the female body, writ large.

We, therefore, situate Bambara’s text amongst a long tradition of texts by African-American women that originated throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s, which explored the well-being of its female protagonists. During our contemporary political and social moment, we find that this logic has evolved, as our ways of knowing what the body is, and what it does, has shifted. According to the anthropologist Mary Douglas, “the body is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (36). To speak of the body along these lines disrupts normative epistemologies of the body and the ways in which it is often discussed during campaigns that combat white supremacy. The body is, I argue, a landscape from which both culture and language emanate. By language, I specially refer to cultural, societal and linguistic contexts that, together, inform how we define the body’s existence in the world.

In many ways, I argue that the physical body has become a site from which production, knowledge, and experience extend. The often intersecting and overlapping experiences that are embodied by black feminism’s civic body, I contend, resemble their way of being in the world. The query into how we connect black feminism thought and its engagement with the civic body of which black/female/queer/ bodies are a part has its roots in the purpose and mission of the Combahee women, whose collective statement, privileges, in a very direct sense, black feminism’s civic body. Although the Combahee River Collective was a group of majority lesbian women of color, their mission celebrates the foundation of what we know collectively as contemporary Black

---

2 When I refer to the Civic Body, I am referring to the black/female queer/ and hetero bodies that, together, are active in our country’s liberation struggle. The struggle is longstanding and has a genealogy that might well extend the pages of this paper.
Feminism and how, I observe, it has theorized the body. Spanning a genealogy that began in the late 1960’s, Black Feminism has its roots in our country’s Black liberation movement, to include campaigns for civil rights. To this point, Black Feminism gives us both a framework and language to talk about how bodies interact with interlocking oppressive structures. The human desire to be well provides the foundation for this interaction, and my reading of their statement uncovers how the logic of wellness has been absorbed by black feminist thought to describe the relationship that exists between the state and the female body.

In their statement, the writers note: “[they] realize that only people who care enough about them to work consistently for [their] liberation is [them and that their] politics evolve from a healthy love for themselves, their sisters and their community which allows them to continue our struggle and work” (3). This attention to, and appreciation for, “a healthy love for themselves” requires a level of wellness that is conditioned on the physical, social and spatial liberation of those who are victims of state violence. The logic of wellness, then, requires love for oneself which supposes, as well, that the body has been liberated. The liminal space that demarcates this liberation exists, I argue, outside the confines of white supremacy. The relationship that exists between the state and the body, I further suggest, unearths the interconnectedness between physical liberation and loving one’s self — this being a measure of wellness. The logic that undergirds their mission statement situates liberation of the body as an end of their work and, by extension, what the civic body aims for — that is, to be well. How we define wellness shifts, as it becomes more and more defined by the liminal spaces by which it is demarcated. This demarcation is validated along the lines of access, privilege, and visibility.3 The Combahee River statement outlines, for

---

3 When I refer to the white world, I am not implying the world is white in a literal sense. Instead, I am referring to the hegemony, property rights, and privilege that, combined, are validated by ideologies of white supremacy,
my purposes, the civic body that my analysis will more closely examine. In essence, discussions about the civic body that are made up by the Black Lives Matter Movement draw attention to the multiple, and often contrasting, definitions of wellness and how it is embodied. Our current political climate pushes us to consider epistemologies of embodiment differently as the body politic has, like Velma, become sickened and disjointed as a result of state violence to include the physical and psychological erasure of black bodies. To this point, we should denaturalize and demystify the dominant ideology that the body is a metaphor for understanding the outside world and, instead, understand it insofar as phenomena is played out through it.4

The political and social project that stands before us compels us to re-think how different cultural phenomena are being played out through the body. In turn, I argue, movements such as Black Lives Matter shift our understanding of; and engagement with, these bodies — them being back/ female/ and queer. The problem with the popular ideology that the body is a metaphor for understanding the “external” is that it doesn’t provide a complete conceptual framework to interpret the multiple, and often layered, contexts that are embodied by said bodies. During the era of Black Lives Matter, a transformation has taken place and, as I care to consider, black feminism’s theory of the body is being played out in different ways relating to advocacy, resistance, and temporality.

**The Body as Whole: Theorizing Embodiment and Bodily Wellness**

Situated at the center of growing debates in black feminist discourse is an interest in how black feminism engages with, and talks about, the black female body. The black female body has

---

4 In response to the Black Lives Matter movement claiming rights to a black feminist tradition, I believe the bodies who make up the movement can be read as mediums through which black feminist politics are played out.
been the site of resistance, political action, and as Audre Lorde notes, difference⁵. How women of color have participated in resistance movements is not an inquiry that solely originated in response to the Black Liberation Movement of the ‘50’s. Histories of resistance date back to as early as the 1500’s when enslaved women participated in revolts during the middle passage. The narratives of women pioneers such as Sojourner Truth, Linda Brent, and Ellen Craft, to name a few, point to the ideological significance of their lives and the lives of those women who they mirror. Patricia Hill Collins notes in “Rethinking Black Women’s Activism,” that survival is a form of resistance and what it means to survive is the quintessential question that undergirds Black Women’s activism and their well-being. Here, I observe the connection that unites Black Feminism and Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter, I recognize, is an activism that has ends directed in transforming institutions and improving wellness, while condemning anything that does the opposite. Black feminism’s civic body holds an interest in revolutionizing the very institutions, structures and spaces that oppress marginalized communities. The philosophical import, therefore, of re-imagining the black female body is three-fold. First, we must think more critically about what wellness is. Secondly, we must think about how the body becomes a site through which wellness is able to take place. Third, we must think more broadly about the extent to which the bodies of black women are able to be well.

In recent years, many of us have witnessed the war waged on said bodies. These bodies have been rendered disposable by the state. Black and brown bodies have been murdered by those who swore under earth to serve and protect. Extending Bambara’s question, I find that what it means to be “well” has shifted as we consider the ways in which state and gender violence mutilates and sickens these bodies. The poet and scholar Alexis Gumbs observes in her review of

⁵ See “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House”
Bambara’s text that “wellness is a crucial element, necessary for family, community and species, [and is] the practical way that the planet gets into balance and the universe gets to smile” (thefeministwire.com). In her review, Gumbs places great emphasis on wellness, as she positions wellness as a premeditated condition for society. I am most interested in the relationship that exists between wellness and the body. This relationship, I argue, helps conceptualize how black feminism and black lives matter shift our understanding of the body. This shift, Bambara suggests, lays out the critical groundwork for understanding the impact wellness has on the civic body’s ability to experience wellness and, by extension, become whole. And so, we ask, what do wholeness and wellness mean in these contexts?

Taken from a black feminist perspective, the body which is “well” and “whole” requires that we trace a genealogy of black feminist thought and, more specifically, how the body is situated amongst its context. Irma McClaurin provides, for my purposes, a definition of black feminist thought that, I observe, closely considers a black feminist treatment of the body:

An embodied, positioned, ideological standpoint perspective that holds Black Women’s experiences of simultaneous and multiple oppressions as the epistemological and theoretical basis of a ‘pragmatic activism’ directed at combating those social and personal, individual and structural, and local and global forces that pose harm to Black women’s well-being (63).

According to McClaurin’s logic, there is a historical genealogy that links black feminist thought to the female civic body. Located at the intersection where black feminism and the civic body meet are, to quote McClaurin, experiences, oppressions, activism(s) and forces that are mutually a part of well-being. The condition of thinking about black female and queer embodiment along the lines of wellness presents a rather unique task that requires us to think about how these bodies embody
wellness and the multiple negotiations that one must make to be well. Achieving a state of perpetual wellness is a journey earmarked by an interlocking web of forces that, when combined, impact well-being. Although McClaurin recognizes a cursory genealogy that unites black feminist theory and the black civic body, the Black Lives Matter movement injects itself into our contemporary moment and, in so doing, reimagines embodiment along the lines of what it means to be well. Bodily wellness provides a foundation on which the black lives matter movement depends. Communicated under the Herstory section of their website, Black Lives Matter politics position healing appears as an aim and/or end of the advocacy work the movement does:

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression. [...] The space that #blacklivesmatter held and continues to hold helped propel the conversation around the state-sanctioned violence they experienced. We particularly highlighted the egregious ways in which Black Women, specifically black trans women, are violated (blacklivesmatter.com/about/herstory/).

What this mission statement articulates is a definition of well-being that, I suggest, closely resembles a black feminist theorization of the body. When the founders of the movement think about how bodies of marginalized communities are violated, they are specifically referring to the physical death that often determines the fate of black life. While theories of black feminism provide, at best, a framework through which we can interpret how said bodies interact with interlocking oppressive structures, the Black Lives Matter movement refashions the conversation about embodiment around black demise and, more concretely, black death. The multiple black murders and black deaths aestheticize, in very uncomfortable ways, the very oppressions and

---

6 For my purposes I define wellness as a state of being where black/queer/and trans persons are fully and completely liberated from the social, economic, and political super-structures that are ordained by a white, hegemonic, state apparatus.
violations that the movement aims to combat. In “Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture,” Eric Stanley thinks about embodiment and death through the lives of Lauryn Paige and Rashawn Brazell. Lauryn Paige, a trans-male, and Rashawn Brazell, a queer male, were brutally murdered as a result of their sexual orientation. Death alone did not overcome these bodies, but the mutilation — overkill — of their bodies beyond physical death defines the narrative about how blackness has been pathologized by whiteness. This overkill, Stanley tells us, “is a term used to indicate such excessive violence that pushes beyond death.” While physical death, Stanley suggests, “is the biological time when the heart stops pushing and pulling blood,” overkill is often determined by the postmortem removal of body parts (9). And so, Stanley’s logic of overkill provides context for BLM’s belief that black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. Moreover, this logic assumes that the violence mandated by the state is fixed, unchanging. According to this argument, these bodies are perpetually a target of the state. Wellness, however, provides context in these regards, and Soyica Colbert pushes us to consider that “wellness is a temporarily bound state that requires examination of the relationship between trauma of the past and domination in the present” (1).

And yet I use the idea of wellness to critique, but yet expand, understandings of embodiment to include considerations of black and queer women. I am interested, then, in integrating a more nuanced theorization of queer/female embodiment that considers the interconnectedness of wellbeing and liberation. In my view, a cured civic body is one that experiences wellness and, as discussed earlier, liberation. And yet, I argue, we need to adapt a framework which helps us understand a definition of wellness that, Colbert argues, illuminates the

---

7 I use Stanley’s overkill politics to illuminate the physical and psychological demise to which said bodies are subjected as a result of the systemic and structural oppression that is affirmed by White Supremacy.
sins of our past in addition to the state violence that is tied to our present. To use interpretations of wellbeing and liberation to theorize embodiment helps explain the extent to which black feminist politics are played throughout BLM’s civic body. Wellness, I suggest, is an end of both black feminism and BLM:

We see healing justice as necessary in a society that criminalizes Blackness, and structurally ensures trauma for Black people while creating no space, time resources for healing. In this context we treat ourselves, how we treat each other, and how we treat each other, and how we move through conflict become deeply political explorations in liberation. Healing justice also informs our organizing and causes us to hold accountable those institutions [ …] that harm, traumatize and pathologize our people” (blacklivesmatter.com).

BLM’s commitment to the civic body’s wellness, as evidenced by their suggestion that healing is a condition for justice, destabilizes the territory surrounding embodiment. BLM’s advocacy politics presents, and rightfully so, that the queer/black/female body is sickened. The civic body, they argue, has been sickened by the forces of “persistent and historical trauma” that, for years, have been levied upon both black bodies and black lives. Under this logic, black and queer women’s bodies have appeared as a grammar to conceptualize existence. I, then, suggest that black feminist theory helps us interpret the multiple negotiations made by said bodies. Perhaps one of the best essays that theorize black queer/female embodiment, “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” by the queer writer Cheryl Clarke, positions black/female queer bodies as a site of danger and opposition against power: “For a woman to be lesbian in male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that North America, is an act of resistance. […] This rebellion is a dangerous business in patriarchy” (128). Though substantive, I believe Clark’s understanding of the queer civic body fits neatly within dominant discourses that affirm, historically, the extent to which female bodies are limited, suppressed, and maligned by society.
Mary Helen Washington captures this shortfall in her critique that black women are more aware of their condition as oppressed, despite their greater potential for shaping their lives (1982).

In my intervention, I argue that BLM is re-writing the narrative of black/queer/ female embodiment. We need to denaturalize our preoccupation with thinking about the body along the lines of pathology, and instead focus on the embodied phenomena that generates healing in the both the physical body and civic body. For my purposes, I use the term temporal body to theorize embodiment in these contexts. Black Lives Matter pushes us to consider how meaning is derived from the body, and how said bodies shift along the lines of advocacy, and resistance. And yet, the attention must remain focused on how the body is being proliferated by resistance against the state.

**Black Feminism’s Temporal Bodies**

In the final section of this chapter, I am interested in explicating my argument that black/queer/ female bodies are sites for temporal knowledge. I want to give more attention to what I refer to when I suggest that bodies are temporal sites for meaning. In addition, I want to consider how BLM’s language — to include rhetoric — shift meaning and, by extension, our ways of knowing the civic body’s relationship with black feminism. It is my intention, therefore, to critique, yet interpret, the transition that has occurred in BLM’s advocacy work. For this inquiry I use, as an archive of scholarly reflection, Miski Noor and Sandy Hudson’s piece *Organizing Beyond Borders*. The interiority of the civic body — that is, the multiple conditions that define its metaphysics — has been impacted by the ways in which blackness has been maligned and disposed of by whitness (Hill, 2016). The interior of this civic body, I argue, has been impacted by a shift in justice — that is, who experiences justice and who does not. This shift is temporal in nature and, might I suggest, has a feminist orientation. Using a black feminist lens to interpret what I term as temporal bodies in the BLM movement — and beyond — I would like to extend a
new feminist theorization that more closely considers temporal bodies. Miski Noor and Sandy Hudson, two activists with BLM, penned a piece that validates the presence of temporal bodies in the movement. I reason that temporal bodies exist within liminal spaces demarcated by both liberation on one end and condemnation on the other. The existence of black/queer/ female bodies in the movement and how they interact with indifference uncovers critical territory in regard to their temporality. In their piece Organizing Beyond Borders, Noor and Sandy observe:

And, we know that none of us are free until all of us are free. There is no liberation [within] these false borders. We are of this country and many others. […] Our cultures and peoples are deep and abiding, and our many manifestations of Blackness are met with as much love as we can hold. We are committed to growing, learning, and challenging ourselves; to showing up in different and freer ways, and to building a global movement for all black lives (blacklivesmatter.com).

Positioning the body as a vessel in which learning, love, and freedom are deposited, Noor and Sandy expand my designation for the body’s temporal context. Engaging the body in this context, Noor and Sandy uncover the body’s physical capacity for liberation and to experience wellness. The logic of wellness, though visited earlier, can be applied here. Physical violence, malign-ness, captivity, death, and erasure are all temporal states that imprison the physical body. These temporal states, to quote Colbert, prevent the civic body from being well. The “global movement” for justice is constitutive in defining the interlocking temporal context(s) that circumscribe the existence of black/queer/ female bodies.

On this view, the philosopher Drew Leder notes that “we cannot understand the meaning and form of objects without reference to the bodily powers through which we engage them ….

---

8 When I refer to temporal bodies, I am specifically referring to bodies that have been marginalized and maligned. By temporal I refer to a specific ontology that is susceptible to change, exhaustion and abject violence(s).

9 In the introduction to her Book “The Psychic Hold of Slavery,” Colbert considers the oppressive structures that have, and continue to, ail the civic body.
lived body is not just one thing in the world, but a way in which the world comes to be” (25). Leder’s philosophy offers a rather critical lens through which we are able to interpret the division between BLM’s temporal bodies and black feminism’s civic body. A condition of Leder’s argument accepts, as a premise, that there is a direct relationship between the world and the body. Black/queer/female knowledges are produced and, then, reproduced by the outside world and the multiple ontologies therein. On its website BLM calls attention to the relationship it has with black feminist politics. The relationship is alluded to in the affirmation of the organization’s embodiment of justice, liberation and peace. However, BLM departs from a purely black feminist tradition in regard to who they define as members of their civic body. Their civic body, as described on their website, is also queer: “We foster a queer-affirming network. When we gather, we do so with the intention of freeing ourselves from the tight grip of heteronormative thinking, or rather, the belief that all in the world are heterosexual” (blacklivesmatter.com). The inclusion of queer bodies into a movement that strengthens justice, and combats white supremacy, aestheticizes the degree to which these bodies remain a target. The queer body, like its heterosexual counterparts, is ravaged by abject erasure and physical violence. Under these oppressive conditions the queer body becomes sickened and its temporal identity is hijacked by a false sense of liberation. “Heteronormative thinking,” the movement suggests, operates as a hegemonic superpower whose properties form a “tight grip” on the civic body — to include queer bodies. Interpreting this phenomenon through Leder’s philosophy, I find that BLM aestheticizes the relationship between the body and the outside world. The world comes to be, Leder argues, through the body. The logic

---

10 This commitment could be found on the organization’s website under the “What We Believe” section.
of this symbiotic relationship assumes, as a condition, that we come to know the world through the body, and not the other way around.

And while, to a certain degree, we see a repeat of what black feminism attempted to achieve in the 1950’s, this present moment acknowledges the importance of considering the changes that are happening to black/queer/female bodies. Serving as archives for knowledge, consciousnesses, and temporalities, the body’s orientation has significantly changed. In thinking about the body and the knowledges produced therein, I recognize the ways in which the multiple contexts of black women’s existence interact with the larger civic body and how these experiences are embodied by a movement that validates and reaffirms the value of black/queer life.
Chapter 2

Bodies and Lives that Matter: Uncovering the Politics for Mattering

A cursory overview of America’s national headlines brings to our attention the uncomfortable reality of black life in America. As James Baldwin so rightfully suggested, “to be a Negro in America is to live in a constant state of rage” (205). The merits of this statement are not too far removed from our current social climate that is impacted by the over-policing and hyper surveillance of black bodies. In response to these defining moments, names such as Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Renisha McBride, Jordan Davis and Eric Garner, to name only a few, have become discourse.\footnote{These names have become a part of a larger national conversation about the contemporary meaning and value of black life in America. These names have been absorbed into a lexicon about black death.} These names signify a social order that has all together maligned black existence. Black lives don’t matter, because black bodies do not. Blackness, in our western context, has been imbued with the logic of criminality and black bodies have “weaponized sidewalks; shoot [themselves] while handcuffed in the back of police cars … [are] incarcerated, assaulted, and stopped and frisked for walking, driving, and breathing while black” (Sharpe, 61). To talk about the black body along these lines is to talk about the constitutive oppressions that debase blackness into nothingness — that is, non-ontology. Calvin Harris observes that the term non-ontology suggests a negative axis of being — being not predicated on mere appearance in the phenomenal real — ontology’s necessary exclusion (6). Here, we accept the following logic: for black lives to matter, black bodies must first matter. In this chapter I extend critical discussions about the body. I am interested, therefore, in theorizing a politics for mattering through the lives of African-American women whose biological and ontological lives were condemned. For my purposes the
lives of Renisha McBride, Shereese Francis, and Malissa Williams operate as archives through which my theorization will take place.

Before I begin, I want to conceptualize what I term as a politics for mattering. A politics for mattering contributes to the landscape a framework for talking about black ontology through what it means to matter. The questions my analysis address are the following: what does it mean to matter? who matters? What negotiations define who does and doesn’t matter? These questions provide a cursory overview of the type of conversation this chapter intends to generate. Furthermore, these questions outline the critical territory germane to studies about black ontology and pathology. And so, I propose the question, what does it mean to matter? To matter, I recognize, is to be imbued with a level of autonomy and agency that, together, necessitates the condition of one’s existence. To matter is to exist; to matter is to be recognized; to matter is to be visible. The erasure and overkill of black life is the result of white supremacy’s inability to fully accept the fact that black life does, in fact, matter. Extending this logic, I find that anti-blackness rhetoric has prevented people from recognizing the materiality of black existence. As Charles Taylor notes, “nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, [and] can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (25). Engaging Taylor’s critique through mattering politics, I observe the salient connection that links mattering to ontology and, by extension, recognition.

As part of the conceptual mapping that this chapter does, I would like to consider the postcolonial theorist Franz Fanon’s work on black ontology. Perhaps one of the most revered postcolonial scholars, Fanon’s Black Skin White Masks stands out as a premiere study into the psychology of white and black people in racist societies. As part of his study, he considers in his chapter The Fact of Blackness the genesis of black pathology and, in so doing, considers the
interconnectedness of phrenology, criminology and eugenics. To arrive at a conclusion about why black life doesn’t matter, we have to first consider the intellectual tradition from which blackness is formed.\textsuperscript{12} In his chapter, Fanon observes:

Dirty nigger!’ Or simply, ‘Look a negro!’ I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into the crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing […]. Ontology — once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside — does not permit us to understand the black man (88).

In this excerpt, Fanon recognizes the absence of ontology. This missing ontology, we assume, necessitates meaning for black life and without it black existence ceases to exists. The black man’s “will to find meaning” in the external supposes that meaning is missing from the body’s interior and, as a consequence, blackness is unable be fully recognized. The genesis of black life is, by default, condemned. Fanon aestheticizes this condemnation in how white people refer to the black man as “dirty nigger.” These words disjoin black life from black bodies and, in practice, denies black bodies the capacity to be autonomous. Black bodies, therefore, inhabit a space of non-ontology where meaning can only be validated by the the perpetrators of white supremacy. The liminal space in which non-ontology is situated is demarcated along the lines of white people’s imagination, objectification, and abject erasure. The black body, therefore, exists as nothing more than an object. To echo Calvin Warren’s observation, I find that the black body inhabits a negative existence in a white society — such that as America. The negative existence of black life is the materialization of a historical tradition that depends on the erasure, and subsequent death, of

\textsuperscript{12} When I refer to \textit{Blackness}, I refer to the ideological standpoint that grounds black existence and the interlocking web of experiences, consciousness, rules, and hierarchies that have been used to condemn black life. As Fred Moten often asked himself in his own work, he queried his audiences with the question, “what is wrong with black folk?”
blackness. The commitment to separate black life from ontology, Fanon observes, renders the black body meaningless and disposable.

Steeped in a paternalistic and post-colonial tradition, I find that Fanon’s engagement with black ontology — to include existence — destabilizes the territory surrounding the politics of mattering. Accepting my aforementioned premise that mattering requires that the subject has autonomy and agency, I find that Fanon’s logic necessitates ontology as a condition for being and, by extension, mattering. Robbed of their ontology, Fanon warns, black bodies are pushed further into the negative existence wherein white imagination exudes indifference. Situated in a negative existence and the white imagination therein, Black bodies become a vacuous medium through which pain, anti-blackness, and condemnation delineate reality. For the black body to matter, I reason, it must reconcile its subjectivity as an “object amongst other objects” and disavow the condition of non-being.

Indeed, black bodies exude the capacity to matter. However, the materialization of this capacity considers the phenomenological existence and sustentation of black life. This logic requires, then, that black life depends on the mattering politics of black bodies. In a western context, such that as America, where race matters, the black body’s metaphysics are constructed by the trauma and violence ordained by white ideology. Here, the politics for mattering requires a more nuanced engagement with black life and the multiple ontologies by which it is constituted. Fred Moten’s work expresses an interest with this engagement: “The lived experience of blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence, a para-ontology whose compartment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events” (185). At best, Moten’s critique illuminates the multiple, and often interlocking, ontologies that circumscribe black existence. Though I accept this premise, I want to move, for a
moment, beyond an ontological engagement with blackness and on to a more subjective one. To matter requires that human form is removed from its designation as an object. Object hood, to quote Fanon’s language, denies the black body the right to exist. This ideological claim, of course, assumes the logic that objects lack feeling, emotion and any other biological signifier.

Moving beyond this territory, my politics for mattering considers the subjective reality — to include metaphysics — of black bodies. For my purposes, I interpret the separation of subjectivity from ontology as that which considers the impact violence has on the subject. This assumption unhinges the belief that ontology is the only praxis around which meaning, and knowledge are materialized. The body’s subjective nature — it’s self-awareness — is always in tension with violence. Patrice Douglas defines this violence as the “constitution of a singular, refracted, and namable predominating force, the state and its extension, and is blind to considerations of violence located at the constitution of being itself and the present prior to the arrival of the state” (119). The logic of violence undermines the body’s metaphysics and as a casual result of this practice, black bodies remain situated at the margins of existence and material life. This reasoning is of a piece with what Fanon further observes as the “nausea” of black life. This nausea, I affirm, can be interpreted as a type of violence to which the body is subjected:

Nausea …. I was responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I Subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin” (112).

Fanon draws a critical eye to the relationship between the body and shifting modes of power. The ways in which the black body is battered down is materialized by the violence perpetuated by tom-toms, slave ships and racial defects. This violence, I understand, inhibits the body’s ability to matter. Meaning is thereby inculcated onto the body through the violence that constitutes its form. If, according to this logic, the body and violence are always intertwined, can the black body ever
be free and, thus matter? Although the answer to this question might well extend the confines of this paper, we do know that as long as blackness (and all that is embodied therein) remains as the antithesis of the human subject will black bodies cease to matter.\footnote{See Frank Wilderson’s “Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S Antagonisms.”}

I believe, now, that I have provided a succinct, yet critical, framework for thinking about both the black body and its existence. The remaining question that is germane to my politics for mattering asks: what can be done so that black bodies matter and, by default, black lives? An empirical question indeed, the fact that black life doesn’t matter has its roots in our country’s sin of slavery and, more specifically, the economic system that proliferated and commodified black bodies. But black life — and the bodies therein — can matter and as part of my politics for mattering, I intend to explain why.

Indeed, it is because of the white gaze and imagination that there exists a pathology around black existence. As D.L Hughley suggested during a recent appearance on “The View,” “white people’s imagination is the most dangerous place for blacks to live.” \footnote{On a recorded live appearance on The View, which aired July 11th, 2018, D.L Hughley commented on the race relations that undergirls America’s social discourse.} Turning back to my earlier analysis, for black bodies to matter, they must be visible. When the body under study is a part of a community that has been marginalized, the practice of becoming visible occurs at extreme measures. It’s not until the body is made visible and others recognize it that black life is able to exist. And because whiteness refuses to recognize blackness beyond objecthood, black bodies will always be terrorized by the white imagination. Hughley’s remarks are germane to my analysis because they observe the uncomfortable terrors to which black bodies are constantly subjected. Because of said terrors, the black body experiences a very distorted and abject reality.
In a black lives matter protest for Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, Ieshia Evans, a nurse from Pennsylvania, is photographed being arrested by Baton Rouge officers:

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 1. Arrest of Ieshia Evans at a Black Lives Matter rally in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on 9 July 2016. 2016. Photograph by Jonathan Bachman (Reuters).**

While many have dubbed this picture as “iconic” I believe that this photograph elicits more critical discussion that considers the following questions: How is Evans using her body to make clear that she, and all black lives, matter? How are the politics of mattering, as previously examined, being played out through this photo? And lastly, how can this photograph help theorize what it means to matter? I read Evans’ encounter with the Baton Rouge police department along the lines of hypervisibility. While definitions of hypervisibility are enjoyed by many in the academy, in the context of this photo Evans makes herself visible by limiting the liminal space between herself and modes of state power — that is, the police officers. Moreover, by entering into the space demarcated by state authority, Evans’ body shifts meaning. During this shift, Evans’ body becomes just as visible as the officers whose bodies are covered by the tools of the state. During the moment this photo was taken, Evans’ body matters. Her existence, too, matters. Her existence and body matters during this moment because she is no longer an “object amongst other objects.” Through using her body to limit the space that exists between her and the state, her blackness finally gets the chance to be be recognized. Her ontology, for just a brief moment, is removed from the negative existence of non-being. The fact that the officers respond to Evan’s
presence by way of an arrest is a victory, although a contentious one. Fanon notes that liberation occurs when other stop and give attention to black bodies. As a result, the body is “restored” and existence is materialized. Whether or not Evans is liberated or restored during this encounter is unclear, but what is important is that she is an active participant in what I have termed as a politics for mattering.

Although in the above-mentioned photo, there is only one body protesting, the Black Lives Matter movement is constituted by an entire civic body. Since there are multiple bodies that are part of the civic body, I find that politics for mattering are played out in different ways. One of these ways that politics for mattering are played out through the black lives matter movement is through “die-in” protests. In a photo that has circulated widely across the internet, Emory University Students participated in a die-in in support of the Black Lives Matter movement:

![Figure 2. Candler School of Theology and Emory University students, faculty, and staff host 'die in' protest joining 1000's of others across the country in the proclamation that "Black Lives Matter." Photo by Beautiful in Every Shade Creator Mackey.](image)

I use this image of a die-in protest because of the logic that provides the foundation for both its meaning and interpretation. Further, it provides a conceptual frame of reference for my politics. In die-in protests, groups of bodies lay still on the ground, oftentimes blocking the
entrance to an important meeting area or location. Die-ins are effective because they don’t require much of the person — just lay down and be still. The logic is this: Die-ins represent a *symbolic* death and death is the ending of biological life. When bodies participate in forms of symbolic death, existence is reduced to the corporeal and thus, all that remains of the body is the flesh and bones. Die-ins call attention to biological death and, as a consequence, force witnesses to engage with the corporeal — that is, the body itself. This practice shows the ravaging effects of state violence and how it reduces black life to mere flesh. The momentary crossover from life to death becomes the signifier for the many ontologies that have been expelled from existence. In a very materialized and tangible way, die-ins depend on the politics of recognition. Because of social media, black after lives *matter* more than black lives.\(^15\) Die-ins, however, destabilize this territory, as they encourage us to consider the symbiotic relationship between biological death and state violence.

**Black Bodies to Black death: A Theorization for the Many Lives that Don’t Matter**

In this section, I want to theorize a *mattering politic* through the lives of those who died at the hands of the state. I treat each life under examination as an archive. Nestled within these post-mortem archives are knowledges and ontologies that inform my theorization. In November of 2013, the then 19-year-old Renisha McBride had crashed her car on a street in a suburb of Detroit. Stunned from the incident, McBride walked away from the scene to the home of Theodore Wafer, and asked for help. Believing that his home was being broken into, Wafer pulled out a gun and shot McBride. As the news headlines had it, Wafer’s decision to shoot McBride was fueled by racial bias. During oral testimony at trial, Wafer acknowledges that upon opening the door he saw

---

\(^15\) By black after lives, I am referring to post-mortem black existence.
a “figure,” and shot straight through the screen door, killing McBride. During the time of her murder and admitted to at trial, Wafer sums up the totality of McBride’s existence by stating that she appeared as a “figure” at his door. Wafer’s denotation that McBride appeared only a figure robs her of having an existence beyond the flesh. Further, the logic that subsumes Wafer’s interpretation of McBride denies her membership to the rest of humanity. The claim that McBride appeared as a “figure” is noteworthy. A figure has no autonomy. A figure is unable to reason. A figure is non-intelligible. And more importantly, a figure is not a human. We read the moment when Wafer came to the door through what I term as the “expulsion of black life.” This expulsion is the antithesis of ontology. When black life is expelled from existence, the flesh becomes the signifier of only being. Indeed, Wafer saw a human body at this door, but because blackness exists as the antithesis of human ontology, — as Wilderson tell us — Wafer was unable to see McBride as a human subject. For Rinaldo Walcott, the inability of others to see blackness unearths critical territory, and is the result of colonialism’s disparagement of the blackness:

The profound consequences of having Humanness defined against Black being means that the project of colonialism and the ongoing workings of coloniality have produced for Black people a perverse relationship to the category of the Human in which our existence as human beings remain constantly in question and mostly outside the category of a life, remains an existence marked as social death” (93).

Existence constitutes politics of mattering. Timothy Baughman, the Wayne Country prosecutor who was responsible for charging the case, humanized McBride in the courtroom, despite the legal system’s attempt to see her as non-human. In his humanization of McBride, Baughman explains McBride “could have been a neighbor,” and that Wafer “didn’t know her gender,” or “her

---

16 *The New York Times* covered this case very well and while much of my knowledge of it comes from what I remember, NYT has a lot of articles on the trial’s specific details, to include a piece entitled “Theodore Wafer Sentenced to 17 years in Michigan Shooting of Renisha McBride.”
The practice of giving meaning to McBride provides a context through which subjectivity can be defined. Fanon might suggest that Wafer “sealed McBride into a crushing objecthood” and in the process affirmed her non-being outside life’s boundaries. This phenomenon is profound and has abject implications that subsumes all black life. The problem that persists is that blackness has long been detached from biological life. Though scholars Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland argue social death has all but reduced black existence, I suggest that social death, and the colonial history that constitutes it, provides a paradigm through which to produce new meaning for black life.

The fact that Wafer eulogized McBride by stating she was a “figure” reduces her ontology to that of an object. The proclivity for this reduction fits neatly within our nation’s grammar logic that remains indebted to the ontological murder and erasure of black existence. Moreover, the logic of his words achieves no other end but to kill McBride beyond the biological death to which she has already been subjected. The state’s preoccupation to reduce black life, and thus ignore it, is a negating logic that is responsible for McBride’s death and other black women like her. The conundrum to recognize that black life and black existence are one in the same materializes as a violence that negates the necessity for a politics for mattering. Indeed, when the white imagination sees black bodies as more than just a figure will black life begin to matter.

And yet the unspoken names of black women such as India Kager, Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, and Shereese Francis, are pushed more and more towards post-mortem death — a death beyond biological death. When we don’t say the names of these women, we participate in this practice of perpetual death. This “doubling” of death necessitates the politic that black lives don’t

---

17 See the article “McBride Killer stands ground at Michigan Supreme Court” on The Detroit News Website.
matter. And to this point, I ask the question: if social death has already killed black existence, then why must the state participate in the killing of black bodies? The theoretical line of questioning that this query elicits requires that we accept that the body is separated from existence. While much of the aforementioned analysis points us in this regard, the logic that the body provides the necessary conditions for existence hold true. However, as part of my theorization, I intend to conceptualize the relationship between the biological and ontological death.

In March of 2012, Shereese Francis, a New York City resident, was suffocated and killed by members of the New York City Police Department in her Queens home. Although she was diagnosed with schizophrenia, it was under control. For reasons that are unknown, Francis had discontinued her medication and on the night of March 15th Francis had a mental episode which prompted her family to call 911 for medical assistance. Upon arriving, four officers, in an attempt to subdue Francis, tackled her onto a bed. Restrained, and visibly helpless, the four officers shifted their weight onto her body, while holding her face down into the mattress. Death soon overcame Francis, as she suffocated.\(^{18}\)

Francis’s death provides a logic through which I can critique the body and, in a separate context, ontology. In the officer’s white imagination, Francis’s medical condition invalidated her being. Schizophrenia, the officers concluded, inhibited her ability to reason. The capacity to reason, Aristotle observes, is the thing that differentiates human life from plant and animal life. And so, a human is only a human to the extent that it possesses the capacity to reason. If we use this logic as lens through which to interpret the encounter, then we are able to see how the effects of schizophrenia slip Francis into non-being. Existing in a negative existence where she is no longer seen as human, Francis is left with only her physical body — her flesh. The state apparatus

for whom these officer work now requires that they ensure Francis’s biological death. Biological death is the end of human life. As the four officers all use their bodies as weights to restrain Francis, the combined weight bears a consequence that Francis’s body cannot handle. She has now slipped into biological death. She has been killed twice: once ontologically and secondly, biologically.

The state’s separation of black ontology and biology is not unique to the lives of these black women alone. In the 2012 shooting death of Malissa Williams, Cleveland officers were found responsible for every one of the twenty-four gunshots found on Williams’s body, spanning an area from her head to torso. According to published reports, thirteen officers fired a total of one hundred shots at the car Williams was in; and as if this wasn’t enough, Officer Michael Brelo, stood on top of William’s car and fired an additional fifteen shots at close range.19 Eric Stanley, known for his theorization of overkill, might ask: If Williams was dead after the first one-hundred gun shot rounds, than what does Officer Brelo’s remaining fifteen shots signify?20 A necessary question indeed, Stanley’s query contributes to the landscape surrounding my topic as a nuanced perspective about the meaning of ontology and biology. If we read Williams’s death along these lines, we arrive at the understanding that biological death is not the end of black existence in the eyes of white imagination; these two two deaths are, I observe, very different. The logic requires that for Brelo to shoot an additional fifteen shots after his colleagues’ one-hundred shots, provides that he aimed for a death beyond biological death. What is the thing, then, that Brelo wanted to expel from the face of the earth? What was it about Williams’s body — and her presence — that affirms the need to shoot an additional fifteen rounds? On the day the event occurred, why is Williams’s biological death, itself, not enough? The aforementioned questions animate the visceral

20 Stanley asked a similar question along these lines in his essay “Near life, Queer Death,” where he attempts to theorize queer death through overkill politics.
reality apart of, and tied to, black bodies and their existence. It is my argument that the aim of the first one-hundred shots was to ensure biological death. The additional fifteen shots aimed to ensure ontological death. Here, we see the materialization of the multiple deaths to which black bodies are constantly subjected. Williams’s death makes us privy to how black mattering exists through both the biological and ontological.

In America, black bodies experience two deaths at the hands of the state. These two deaths, I observe, are called the doubling of death. This phenomenon complicates the negotiations black people must make to matter in the world around them. While doing the research for this project, I found that my research elicited more questions than answers. Amongst all the questions that constituted this project, the query that remains is this: how black life can ever matter if both its ontology and biology are perpetual targets of the state? While the answer to this question conjoins multiple discourses, my contribution to answering this question challenges us to think about the conduits through which black consciousness and existence is able to be materialized. This task demystifies a linear process of thinking about what life is. Life, as we see in the aforementioned murders, is materialized in different ways. The relationship between human life and the state, provides the foundation on which movements such as BLM depend.

The praxis around which ontological and biological death occurs covers necessary territory in my theorization. Through the lives of these women I am able to expand the inquiry into the forces that prevent black bodies and black lives from mattering. Mattering politics assumes that black bodies, ontologies, and lives are all one in the same and thus, deserves full recognition. To separate one from the other is to negate the totality of black life. The state’s indebtedness to separate black ontology and biology, through death, chronicles the long history of black erasure in America. In the aforementioned analysis, I focused specifically on the deaths of black women.
This was an intentional act as I wanted to connect a mattering politic around black female bodies — to include the physical and ontological. This line of thinking continues the work done in my first chapter which talks about how black feminism has theorized the body. The need to theorize the body through feminism and, as I observe, a politics for mattering, pushes us to consider how the black female body changes — and responds to — in response to a heightened level of abject violence, death, and corporal punishment. As my analysis observes, the agents of violence have made the black female body hypervisible while helping shift our knowledge of it — that is, the body. Life, death, post-mortem death and the liminal space in-between animate our knowledge of the female body.

In response to the multiple black women who died at the hands of the state, I find that these bodies are remembered for having lost their battle for recognition. It is difficult, I suggest, to engage the female body without considering the multiple contexts and phenomena which constitute its consciousness. Long before the bodies of McBride, Williams, and Francis entered into the space of their murderers, their existence was criminalized, and fates condemned. This view is animated by what Saidiya Hartman calls the after-life of slavery. The material reality of slavery, she observes, is perpetual:

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a radical calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery — skewed life changes, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment (6).

Black women’s bodies are the site of this afterlife. The Black Lives matter movement and the injustices to which it calls attention aestheticizes what Hartman observes to be consequences of slavery. The after-life of slavery, of which Hartman speaks, is germane to my analysis for two
reasons. First, it provides a conceptualization that considers the multiple oppressions to which black life is subjected. Second, it provides a theory that connects the bodies of McBride, Williams and Francis to black feminist traditions. These women’s bodies live in the wake of slavery and as Christina Sharpe observes, “living in the wake means living in and with terror in that in much of what passes for public discourse about terror we, Black people, become the carriers of terror, terror’s embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror’s multiple enactments” (15). This ideology is unique to a black feminist tradition which holds that “U.S Black women encounter societal practices that restrict us to inferior housing, neighborhoods, schools, jobs, and public treatment” (Collins 28). Put another way, the bodies of these women operate as sites where the state is able to inflict terror. The state, I argue, is an extension of slavery’s legacy because the same bodily violence that invalidated the lives of African-Americans is the same violence that results in the erasure of black life today.

Through the post-mortem lives of McBride, Francis, and Williams I theorize my politics for mattering. I chose women of color as part of my theorization, and not men, because I want to continue my woman-centered approach for dealing with issues relating to the body. It is my argument, however, that my theorization can be used as a conceptual framework to talk about black lives, writ large. The multiple deaths to which these women were subjected animate the narrative around why black life and the abject conditions that circumscribe their existence.
Chapter 3

Theorizing the Body through Literature

In this chapter, I continue my discussion of the body, but in more abstract terms. I engage a framework that assists in the reading of literature by black women authors. The aim of this chapter is two-fold. The first commitment of this chapter is to provide a pedagogy for reading literature by women of color. The second commitment of this chapter is to uncover how the body is theorized and constructed by experiences unique to black women. The theologian and ethicist Katie Cannon comments on the visceral reality of black women’s experiences and the necessity to put these experiences under review. She observes:

Throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman’s reality as a situation of struggle—a struggle to survive in two contradictory world’s simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed (30).

To engage with said literature is to engage with how authors construct the lives of their black female protagonists. Once the reader is able to interpret the protagonist’s struggle, then we can identify how said struggle is being played out through the body. This practice, I observe, is played out through the protagonist’s subjective-self (social identity) and visibility. These two paradigms are used to theorize the body and are interconnected with my politics for mattering. It is through these paradigms and knowledges that we come to know what the body is.

Linda Berry and Judith McDaniels’s article, “Teaching Contemporary Black Women Writers,” affords interested scholars, students, and academics an interesting, yet critical, framework to engage literature by African-American women – both past and contemporary. Berry and McDaniels’ article takes a serious look at their experience as instructors in the classroom teaching literatures by black women writers. Literature by Toni Cade Bambara, Nikki Giovanni,
Toni Morrison and June Jordan, to name a few, interact together to uncover the narratives, experiences, realities, and traumas that are unique to the black women and their bodies.

Their article provides an entry point into conversations that undergird studies of literature authored by black women. Berry and McDaniels share their concerns and insights about how to approach literatures by said women, and the type of conversations that should be had. Understanding that authors such as Morrison and Bambara address women’s experiences in very nuanced ways, Berry and McDaniels had different expectations of how their students would respond: “we expected that racial tension among the students would be generated by the reading, which we found volatile and suggestive, and by the racism – both overt and inherent – of the white students who might enroll.” Their concern draws a critical eye to the challenge associated with talking about the female body through the oppressions that constrain it. As part of their pedagogy, Berry and McDaniels organize their course around areas of study, opposed to genre. In so doing, they are able to examine ideas such as strength, erasure, and ontology.

Having read literature by Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Lucille Clifton, Angela Davis and Gayl Jones, I have become interested in how these authors use the female body as a vessel through which resistance is theorized. The ways in which these authors construct, complicate, and examine the body uncovers critical territory into the value ascribed to the black civic body — and the female bodies therein.

My conceptual framework and guiding questions ask students to consider how said authors construct social identity and visibility within their texts. For the purposes of this chapter, select works by Lucille Clifton, Toni Cade Bambara and Barbara Chase-Riboud will be used to substantiate my framing questions. My study contributes to the field a sustained framework that
examines how elements of black womanhood interact with the body. Below, are my framing questions to help guide my study:

**Social Identity:** What is it? How is it talked about within literature? What does it mean for the writer to locate themselves within the larger world? What is the social context(s) writers find themselves in? How does it interact with the body?

**Visibility:** What does it mean to be visible? Why are black female bodies not visible? What does it mean for one’s visibility to be constructed within white imagination? What are the challenges of visibility? How do people negotiate their visibility within a larger narrative that sees everyone as invisible? How do you make that which is invisible, visible?

**Social Identity**

Questions that I ask myself are: “What is it? How is it talked about within literature? What does it mean for the writer to locate themselves within the larger world? What is the social context writers find themselves in?” How writers construct identity in their prose is of perennial interest. This is because experience and reality are often played out through the body. The knowledge gained from this sort of intellectual work affords readers a view into the lived experiences, and felt memories of the author. In many regards, I find that Lucille Clifton’s poetry provides a key entry point into conversations about identity. As Rachel Harding argues in “Authority, History, and Everyday Mysticism in the Poetry of Lucille Clifton,” “Clifton employs titles, phrasing, and meanings steeped in African American religious and historical sources. For the fullest engagement of her work, readers must be familiar with elements of culture deeply ensconced in the experience of black people in the country” (46). Harding’s examination of Clifton’s poetry dives deep into the nature and art of her poetry, forcing readers to dismantle the spiritual and cultural affinities that inspire her writing and how these affinities interact with the body. When readers engage
Clifton’s poetry, her identity as an African-American writer is exposed through the relationship she sets up between herself, her body, God, and family.

In her poem “the light that came to Lucille Clifton,” in *Good Woman*, Clifton opens up to readers an honest, yet essential, part of her life that provides a context for her burgeoning identity and sense of self. Lucille Clifton is most appropriate to use as an example because she often makes the persona in her poems hyper-visible — this is a necessary component for *mattering politics*. Clifton’s poetry, for example, engages with womanhood and the body insofar as she uncovers the many layers that constitute black women’s experiences. The question, What does it mean for the writer to locate themselves within the larger world, provides an interesting entry point into discussing the different spaces and bodies in Clifton’s work. And spirituality is, for the poet, the most basic requirement for ensuring the civic body is *well*. And yet, a hasty reading of Clifton’s poems not only force readers to interact with her spiritual and mystical affinities, but also how we come to know the body through religion. In her poem “Testament,” Clifton penetrates the spiritual realm as she retells an encounter where she sees the “light.” While the context of this poem is quite ethereal, Clifton combines the earthly and the heavenly during a moment that causes Clifton to see herself anew: “someone calling itself Light / has opened my inside. / I am flooded with brilliance mother” (Clifton, *Good Woman* 215). As we consider how spirituality assists in Clifton’s identity, it is worth noticing that her mention of “light” calls attention to the body’s presence. Lucille Clifton is heavily invested in exploring the relationship between the spiritual, the historical, and the body. Her own spirituality was one way she made sense of the world and of oppressive historical circumstances (Brassaw 1).

In addition to the spiritual and religious affinities that ground her work, Clifton serves an essential figure due to her theorization of the female body. As previously outlined, identity is
constructed through experiences and conditions that extend beyond the body. And yet, her poems “Homage to my hair,” and “Homage to my hips,” serve as important reminders to how black women writers define identity through bodily manifestations. A genuine reading of black women’s writing must consider how the female body is treated, constructed, and characterized. To these ends, the poems within “two-headed woman” allows readers to interpret Clifton’s capacity to love and appreciate others. For Clifton, the body operates as a site for awareness about female sexuality, age and, more ostensibly, blackness. Because her body is at once black, female, and aging, she maintains the duty to explore these issues simultaneously. Clifton’s proclivity to celebrate her aging body should be understood in relation to her racial heritage, and I will suggest, her identity (Cunningham 31).

Visibility

“What does it mean to be visible? What does it mean to be invisible? What does it mean for your visibility – or lack thereof – to make you apart of the ‘problem’? What are the challenges of visibility? How do people negotiate their visibility within a larger narrative that sees everyone as invisible? How do you make that which is invisible, visible?” In a social structure where patriarchy is the default, I’ve become interested in how female authors establish their characters’ visibility. Having read the works of Bambara, Chase-Riboud, Clifton, and Davis, it is interesting to see how said authors (notwithstanding Angela Davis) inject themselves into conversations about the body becoming visible. Focusing on Bambara and Chase-Riboud, I hope to contribute an understanding of how the politics surrounding visibility can help our interpretation of the body.

For my query into this topic, Barbara Chase-Riboud novel Sally Hemings provides an important context that highlights how authors bring that which is private to the public. Tailoring her narrative around Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with his slave, Sally Hemings, Chase-Riboud
uncovers a historical record that silences the thoughts and experiences of enslaved women. By focusing on the intimacy of Jefferson and Hemings’s relationship, Chase-Riboud shines a necessary light unto the complications of love and the problems tied to their master/slave relationship. Chase-Riboud contributes a researched account that examines how enslaved bodies interacted with non-enslaved bodies. A surface level reading of history reminds us Thomas Jefferson had visibility, whereas Hemings did not. We, then, pose the question, “What does it mean to be invisible?” Throughout many circulating historical records, Hemings was reduced to nothing more than a slave. Both her ontological and biological identities were held captive. For Hemings to be visible, it is important that the truth of her existence is told. Located within her text’s afterword, Chase-Riboud communicates to her readers that writing about Sally Hemings forces people to consider the visibility of black women: “I had therefore to find a way to elevate a member of the most despised caste in America to the level of the most exalted, in order to make believable Sally Hemings’ liaison with one of America’s most famous historical personages” (351). Even more noteworthy is my question, “HOW do you make that which is invisible, visible?” An interesting question to the say the least, Chase-Riboud does, in fact provides a response to my query, suggesting that Hemings’s story was made visible by referring to Hemings by her full name, opposed to just her first: “Linguistically, I solved the problem by always referring to Sally Hemings by her full name. [In so doing] it simply lifts Sally Hemings well out of her role as a slave and helps make a minor historical figure the equal, as a genuine archetype, to Thomas Jefferson” (351).

Chase-Riboud’s attempt to resurrect Hemings’s legacy in the course of history speaks to the plight of communities who are located on the margins of society and how, too often, their stories are swept under the rug. For many, this is of course problematic, and as Laura Dawkins examines in “A seeping Invisibility,” “through Chase-Riboud’s ‘countermemory,’ the historically
‘invisible’ Hemings family comes to embody the suppressed histories of all dispossessed African American kinship groups” (793). This being true, we ought to ask ourselves, what does it mean for women’s invisibility to make them apart of the problem? In other words, how does Hemings’s position as a slave warrant her own marginalization? When we don’t afford women such as Hemings a voice – or even an identity – we unintentionally make them complicit in their own non-being. In the absence of women’s voices, slave concubines such as Sally Hemings are too often assumed to be complicit in their own oppression, just as “passers” such as Harriet Hemings are presumed to sacrifice collective struggle for narrow individual achievement (Dawkings 794). If we continue to maintain this sort of logic, will we continue to prevent women like Hemings from telling their stories to a larger audience?

As Chase-Riboud makes Hemings visible through exposing her relationship with Thomas Jefferson via the novel, Toni Cade Bambara, too, creates a narrative around her protagonist Hazel to examine reliving one’s youth fosters visibility. In her narrative, Bambara draws reader’s attention to her protagonist, and her lover Bovanne who, quite interestingly enough, is described as being blind. During a closer read of the text, it is interesting how Bambara signifies Hazel’s visibility as something which is earned through combating her feelings of nostalgia as an old person by returning to do the things she and Bovanne enjoyed during their youth: “Cause you gots to take care of the older folks. And let them know they still needed to run the mimeo machine and keep the spark plugs clean and fix mailboxes for folks who might help us get the breakfast program goin [ …]” (9). Now as a much older woman, Hazel seeks visibility through not only her relationship with Bovanne, but through dancing and reliving the innocence of her youth. Focusing, too, on the shifts within the story that focuses on how Hazel negotiates between her older and younger identities, Roberta Maierhofer argues in “Bambara’s ‘My Man Bovanne,’” that “[the
[300x39]40

[72x709]author] repudiates negatives, trivializing, cultural stereotypes associated with with age by presenting a female character who is independent and self-confident and thus counters the invisibility of older women in our society” (1). She, too, contributes to the landscape a critical suggestion that as Bovanne is made invisible by his disability, Hazel is made invisible by her age. As an older woman who lives within a society that values youth, Hazel is pushed to society’s margins; people tend to forget about the old and seasoned. Maierhofer’s reflection provides the needed context through which to analyze how Bambara critiques the politics of difference. In Hazel’s world, to be old, is to be invisible and to reconcile this fact, Bambara charges Hazel the task of doing her part and attempting to relive her youth.

Important to my conceptual framework are the framing questions I use to facilitate my engagement with different ideas relating to the body. As I continue to engage in critical conversations about writers, topics, and criticisms, I am always interested in how a particular practice or thought is being played out through the body.
Conclusion

A cultural project more than it is literary, this thesis uncovers the ways in which the Black Lives Matter Movement is played out through the body. As a result of this examination, I contribute to the landscape a new theorization about the body. When we think about the bodies of black women, we must consider the interlocking experiences and negotiations that they embody. I consider these negotiations, and what we learn through the bodies of McBride, Francis, and Williams is that the multiple deaths to which said women are subjected are a result of a state apparatus that has rendered their bodies as disposable. The intervention, then, of my project re-articulates the discussion around the body, its metaphysics and wellbeing.
Bibliography


Brassaw, Mandolin. "The Light that Came to Lucille Clifton: Beyond Lucille and Lucifer."

*MELUS*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2012, pp. 43-70


Hill, Marc Lamont. Nobody: Casualties of America's war on the vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and beyond. Simon and Schuster, 2017

Leder, Drew, ed. The body in medical thought and practice. Vol. 43. Springer Science &
Business Media, 2013


Sharpe, Christina. "Black studies: In the wake." The Black Scholar 44.2 (2014): 59-69

---. In the wake: On blackness and being. Duke University Press, 2016


