

Introduction

Black Futures and the Queer Times of Life: Finance, Flesh, and the Imagination

The mothership can't save you so your ass is gonna get left.

—Erykah Badu, “On and On”

The future is “terra incognita”: although we may be able to guess the outcome of events that lie close to us, as we project beyond this we enter an unmapped zone full of uncertainty. Paradoxically, the range of options this reveals can seem paralysing.

No one can definitively map the future, but we can explore the possibilities in ways that are specifically intended to support decision-making. At Shell we use scenario building to help us wrestle with the developments and behaviours that shape what the future may hold and prepare ourselves more effectively. We also believe it can inspire individuals and organisations to play a more active role in shaping a better future—for themselves, or even on a global scale.

In this book, we use a metaphor of exploration and map-making to describe how we think about building scenarios. Like a set of maps describing different aspects of a landscape, scenarios provide us with a range of perspectives on what might happen, helping us to navigate more successfully. Exploration—of a territory or the future—involves both analytical thinking rooted in whatever facts are clear, and also informed intuition.

—Shell International BV, “Shell Scenarios:
An Explorer’s Guide”

Imagine that a man hails a taxi and instructs the driver to take him to a sustainable energy future. The taxi driver punches “sustainable energy” into the car’s GPS and steps on the gas pedal. Glancing at his passenger in the rearview mirror, the driver asks, “Do you believe in aliens?” For the rest of the ride, the taxi driver tells a tale of outer-space creatures who have been watching human development on earth. They notice that human actions have rendered the earth’s ecosystem increasingly tenuous and unsustainable and have depleted its energy supply. Speculating about the earth’s future and the potential of earthlings to participate in an intergalactic community, the space aliens in the driver’s tale determine that humans are “a bit too haphazard” to be “invited up to the intergalactic party.” The driver asserts, “We need to get better at seeing the bigger picture. We need to face the energy challenge.”

He continues by explaining that, from his present vantage point, one of two likely futures will become manifest. The first is characterized by a disorganized and unsustainable “scramble” for resources, with governments prioritizing the day-to-day and delaying the big decisions necessary for long-term energy sustainability in an unceasing game of catch-up focused on producing more and more energy. The other entails the innovation of a cooperative “blueprint,” created by people all over the world taking action, agitating for their governments to change laws, imagining new paths for sustainable living, and working in harmony with the planet while “we all continue to profit and grow.” Clearly, the cooperative “blueprint” is the better plan for the future that the “we” invoked here desire; and, according to the taxi driver, it would earn humans an invitation to the aforementioned intergalactic party.

This narrative is offered in an animated YouTube video produced by the future scenarios team at Royal Dutch Shell plc (aka Shell).¹ “Join the Taxi Ride to a Sustainable Future” illustrates the multinational gas and oil company’s recent efforts to “look into the future” with their “Shell Energy Scenarios to 2050” project. A pioneer in the development of corporate “future scenarios,” Shell’s investment in “the future” involves forecasting into and speculating about that future in order to maximize their profits. It is an investment in maintaining its present status as a profitable multinational corporation. Attending to *how and why* they produce knowledge about that future offers insights into the temporality that sustains present relations.

Royal Dutch Shell's website not only showcases a set of future scenarios reports; it also includes documents that explain the process of producing scenarios and the benefits to corporations of doing so. According to the introduction to "People and Connections: Global Scenarios to 2020," scenarios are "a tool for helping managers plan for . . . different possible futures." They are "alternative stories of how the world may develop," which "help us understand the limitations of our 'mental maps' of the world—and to think the unthinkable, anticipate the unknowable, and utilise both to make better strategic decisions."² The future scenarios offered in the 2050 project—"Scramble" and "Blueprints"—draw from the available quantitative and qualitative data that Royal Dutch Shell deems relevant to its present decision-making. Based on the literature accompanying the scenarios, including the ninety-eight-page publication "Scenarios: An Explorer's Guide," these speculative fictions inform decision-making aimed to maximize the corporation's profits and ensure its survival.

Contestations over "the future" and "futurity" have been central to formulations of time throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first: from the scientific inquiries into the relations of space and time carried out by physicists such as Neils Bohr, Albert Einstein, and others; to the theorizations of time offered by philosophers and artists such as Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, and Aimé Césaire (which often contradict those advanced by physicists); to the theories of modernity offered by political theorists; to the rise of financial derivatives as part of a shift away from the gold standard; and to the ways that film and other technologies have transformed lived experiences of temporality. Thus, the strategies and assumptions that inform Royal Dutch Shell's futures scenarios are antagonistic to those that animate *Queer Times*, *Black Futures*, which centers some of the cultural logics of Afrofuturism.

In 1994, Mark Dery tentatively defined Afrofuturism as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future."³ Over the past ten years, an explosion of interest in Afrofuturism has transformed the category itself, pushing its cultural logics and political investments

into the twenty-first century. Currently, Afrofuturism is a rich and growing area of critical inquiry and cultural production, which includes film and other visual cultural forms, literature, critical scholarship, and audio culture. Its early definition, which influential scholar Alondra Nelson, among others, credited to Dery, has been revised and debated. Recently, Ytasha L. Womack offered the following definition in her book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*: “Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation.”⁴ One of the aims of *Queer Times, Black Futures* is to interrogate these four constitutive elements of Afrofuturism—imagination, technology, the future, and liberation—within the context of finance capital’s stances toward (and investments in) the future.

Queer Times, Black Futures considers the implications of scholarly, artistic, and popular investments in the promises and pitfalls of imagination, technology, futurity, and liberation that have persisted in Euro-American culture since the beginning of the twentieth century. The Afrofuturisms of interest to *Queer Times, Black Futures* consist of cultural forms and logics through which creative engagements with Black existence, technology, space, and time might be accessed and analyzed. Their conceptualizations of futures differ from those through which Royal Dutch Shell and other transnational corporations like it aim to ensure their existence.

The corporate use of scenarios to support profitable decision-making affirms Kodwo Eshun’s claim in his essay “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism” that “science fiction is now a research and development department within a futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow.”⁵ Eshun continues:

Corporate business seeks to manage the unknown through decisions based on scenarios, while civil society responds to future shock through habits formatted by science fiction. Science fiction operates through the power of falsification, the drive to rewrite reality, and the will to deny plausibility, while the scenario operates through the control and prediction of plausible alternative tomorrows.⁶

For Eshun, the difference between the future scenarios produced through science fiction and speculative fiction genres and those

produced by the interdisciplinary teams assembled by multinational corporations resides in the stance each takes toward the present. Science and speculative fiction writers often produce future scenarios that the range of data available today would deem impossible, or that fly in the face of reality and plausibility. Multinational corporations, conversely, produce “credible, relevant, and challenging alternative stories” that help managers make long-term decisions rooted in present realities.⁷ By combining “different fields of knowledge and ways of knowing,” corporate scenarios seek to ward off what John Maynard Keynes referred to as “uncertainty,” and thereby mitigate the vulnerability and risks of unanticipated events caused by blind spots, at least some of which, as I discuss below, the Shell scenarios team attribute to the epistemological limitations of disciplinary knowledge.⁸

Royal Dutch Shell’s existence is predicated on a system of racial capitalism that thrives on the dispossession and exploitation of Black people, Indigenous peoples (some of whom describe themselves as “Black”), and people of color. A future in which Royal Dutch Shell would continue to exist as such forecloses upon a future in which those groups of living beings we currently can identify as “Black people” and/or Indigenous peoples, have the resources to enjoy a sustainable and joyful existence on this planet. In order to grasp the significance of Shell’s speculative fictions about the future, it is helpful to have a sense of its history, including the environmental and human costs of its “strategic decisions.”

Royal Dutch Shell was formed in 1907 after a merger between the British Shell and the Royal Dutch companies. Shell began as a venture between Marcus Samuel and his brother Samuel Samuel to control the oil trade in East Asia; it was formally launched in 1897 as the Shell Transport and Trading Company Limited.⁹ Royal Dutch was founded in 1890 by a Dutchman named Aeilko Jans Zijlker, who, as a manager of the East Sumatra Tobacco Company in the Dutch East Indies, found oil in north-east Sumatra in 1880 and convinced the Dutch authorities to support his efforts to extract it and bring it to market.¹⁰ While Zijlker founded Royal Dutch, it was Henri Deterding, another Dutchman, who later made it a profitable enterprise.

Shell began operating in the United States in 1912 and claimed worldwide operation one year later with its expansion to Venezuela. Venezuelan oil became an especially significant aspect of Shell’s holdings, and

it “was with mostly Venezuelan oils that the Allies fought the Second World War” on the European continent.¹¹ The arrangement depended upon the oil company’s good relationship with Venezuela’s president at the time, a fascist dictator named Juan Vicente Gómez.¹² Although the Royal Dutch/Shell Group (as it was then known) helped the Allies during World War II, even offering their dual headquarters in England and the Netherlands (which remained neutral during the war) to bolster the Allies’ war efforts, Deterding made no secret of his admiration for fascist dictators. He idolized Italy’s Mussolini and backed Spain’s Franco and Germany’s Hitler. Deterding reportedly offered to cooperate with Hitler, a decision that ultimately led to his ousting from his long-time leadership position.¹³ The history of Royal Dutch/Shell underscores the distance between the company’s stated purpose with its futures scenarios and the reality of how their profit-driven activities have impacted the peoples and ecologies they use in the name of ensuring the future of Shell Oil. The history of Shell’s flirtation and collaboration with fascist dictators is sediment within the present relations that sustain the oil giant’s profitability. These dealings contributed to Shell becoming one of the most profitable oil companies in the world after World War II. By the 1950s and 1960s, when post–World War II “economic growth throughout the industrial world was powered by cheap oil,” Europe was “the most competitive market in the world,” and “Shell was the leading European marketer.”¹⁴

During that time, Shell’s explorers found oil in Nigeria after a roughly fifteen-year search and set up an operation to extract it. The infamous events that followed reveal the extent to which Shell’s existence is predicated upon its ability to exploit land, lives, and labor. The future scenarios initiative at Shell began in 1970, when Shell was causing overwhelming ecological destruction in the Niger Delta and perpetuating violence against the Ogoni people who live there. Key staff on Shell’s scenarios team explain in a short video available on Shell’s website that in the 1970s, they predicted “volatility in the world would rise” as a possible result of the decision by Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela to form OPEC (the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) in 1960.¹⁵ Their speculation about a possible future that came to pass enabled them to prepare for the volatility ahead of time and thereby minimize its negative effects on their operations. But the future scenarios

did not prevent them from extracting resources from the Niger Delta. Royal Dutch Shell's operations in Nigeria demonstrate one example of how the company's industrial practices have harmed the planet's ecosystem across the world, especially on Black and other Indigenous peoples' lands. Some of Shell's "strategic decisions" over time have threatened the survival of both the land from which Shell extracts its oil and those who live on it.

By 1995, the Ogoni people had organized themselves to use nonviolent means to achieve justice. One of the most visible and outspoken Ogoni leaders was writer, journalist, and leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Ken Saro-Wiwa. About MOSOP's beliefs and motivations, Saro-Wiwa explained:

MOSOP was intent on breaking new ground in the struggle for democracy and political, economic, social and environmental rights in Africa. We believe that mass-based, disciplined organizations can successfully revitalize moribund societies, and that relying upon their ancient values, mores, and cultures, such societies can successfully reestablish themselves as self-reliant communities and at the same time successfully and peacefully challenge tyrannical governments.¹⁶

MOSOP's effective nonviolent campaign drew international attention in the early 1990s. In 1990, Saro-Wiwa wrote the first draft of the Ogoni bill of rights. As Bronwen Manby describes: "In October 1990, MOSOP sent the Ogoni Bill of Rights to then-military head of state General Ibrahim Babangida, but received no response. In December 1992, MOSOP sent its demands to Shell, Chevron, and NNPC [Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation], together with an ultimatum that they pay back royalties and compensation within 30 days or quit Ogoniland."¹⁷ By 1993, citing intimidation and attacks on its staff, Shell's operations in Ogoniland were suspended, and state-sponsored and extra-legal violence had been unleashed to stop MOSOP's nonviolent protests of Shell Oil's activities in the Ogoni area, which resulted in the deaths of "hundreds of unarmed Ogoni men, women, and children."¹⁸

After several previous detentions, Saro-Wiwa and other members of MOSOP were forced into a detention center in Port Harcourt in 1993. Writing from there, Saro-Wiwa claimed that Shell was sponsoring the

violent attacks against MOSOP. To this day, Shell denies any involvement. On November 10, 1995, after a trial that has been widely criticized as unfair, Saro-Wiwa and his eight co-defendants were hanged in Port Harcourt Prison. Shell Oil condemned the executions. In 2009, “before the start of a trial in New York that was expected to reveal extensive details of Shell’s activities in the Niger Delta,” Shell settled with Saro-Wiwa’s son, Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr., for \$15.5 million dollars, claiming that it was a humanitarian gesture.¹⁹

As of August 2018, Shell Oil is worth US\$306.5 billion,²⁰ and the company has been widely regarded as a leader in “corporate responsibility.”²¹ Yet, in 2004, Shell rocked the global financial market when it admitted that it had been overestimating its oil reserves by “2.1 billion barrels in Nigeria and Oman, 1.2 billion in Australia and Kazakhstan and 0.6 billion in other fields around the world.”²² Some commentators and observers placed partial blame for the deception on the company’s massive bureaucratic structure.²³ The decision to overstate the reserves by 41 percent was attributed to the leadership at the time, and led to the replacement of three senior executives.²⁴

Under international pressure from activists and humanitarians after the execution of “the Ogoni nine,” Shell conducted an internal review and updated its business principals to include “specific references to human rights.”²⁵ In their first social responsibility report, published in 1998, the company stated: “We engage in discussion on human rights issues when making business decisions. We have established a regular dialogue with groups which defend human rights.”²⁶ Yet, Royal Dutch Shell’s present existence has clearly depended upon their ability to wreak havoc on, if not destroy, the living conditions of those who inhabit the lands from which Shell extracts its profitable oil.

“Corporate responsibility” is another calculation to increase profit since Shell by no means plans to redistribute its wealth to account for the history that made it the one of the richest companies in the world. Under these circumstances, any likely future for Shell justifies the violences it has inflicted. The scenarios it predicts for the future, therefore, embed these violences and obfuscate present possibilities for redressing and preventing them. Moreover, Shell’s futures assume that Shell will continue to extract whatever resources it needs. Presently, Shell’s interest in futures and future scenarios evidences its investment in its survival as

a corporate entity. While the taxi driver's tale blames government policies, Shell Oil's own survival also jeopardizes the survival of the planet and all living things insofar as its profits continue to depend upon the exploitation and appropriation of land and living labor.

Since Shell Oil's future scenarios are of course designed to speculate on futures wherein the company will continue to generate profits, they do not include situations in which Shell Oil itself no longer exists, is rendered obsolete, or has redistributed its wealth. As such, Royal Dutch Shell's continued existence (since its inception in the late 1800s) can be understood as part of the *longue durée* of a modernity that, as I will discuss later in this introduction, was inaugurated by the colonization of the so-called New World, the attendant enclosure of land, and the transatlantic slave trade. Their future scenarios are part of a knowledge project that has been calibrated to reproduce existing relations.

The Interdisciplines and Societies of Control

The mode of knowledge production that animates Shell's future scenarios hinges upon its understanding of the value of interdisciplinarity. Shell presents interdisciplinarity as a significant method for fulfilling the role played by speculative scenarios in its decision-making process, as explained in its publication, "Scenarios: An Explorer's Guide":

Scenarios address blind spots by challenging assumptions, expanding vision and combining information from many different disciplines. Our experience, training, current fashions and familiar ideas can strongly influence what we notice and how we interpret the world. The positive view of these influences is that they help us focus, but they can also create blind spots—whole areas we know nothing about—leaving us exposed to unanticipated developments. Expertise itself can, paradoxically, help to create these blind spots. Information acquired from discipline-based research can create fragmented learning.²⁷

The value for Royal Dutch Shell of assembling "interdisciplinary" scenarios teams consisting of experts from a variety of fields, combined with their interest in using the story form to include relevant qualitative, nonquantifiable information in their scenarios, calls attention to the

convergence of the knowledge-production apparatus of a controversial transnational corporation with current academic discourses and practices. Those include interdisciplinarity and collaboration, the tropes and creative operations of speculative and science fictions, and the range of interests currently animated by imaginative speculations on the future. Here, “interdisciplinarity” marks a mode of knowledge production that can meet the challenges and demands of contemporary capitalism. Heralded in some academic quarters as a way to resist the governance of traditional disciplines, “interdisciplinarity,” according to Shell Oil’s future scenarios team, is also an emergent logic that serves the current needs of Capital by calling attention to existing “blind spots” created by disciplinary assumptions and their attendant methods of knowledge production. As a way to engage with the world that might direct attention to what Capital has not (yet) taken into account, interdisciplinary and collaborative scholarship emerges in accordance with the needs of finance capital.

Yet the difference between assembling a team of cross-disciplinary experts and producing interdisciplinary fields and areas of study is worth considering here. Talking specifically about the discipline of economics, Lawrence Grossberg has argued that Cultural Studies ought to take seriously the ways that interdisciplinary scholarship works to transform disciplines.²⁸ Grossberg asserts that scholars in Cultural Studies have become “lazy” as a result of “the increasing tendency to tame interdisciplinarity by incorporating it into and delimiting it within the disciplines. Rather than taking on other disciplines,” Grossberg writes, “we grab onto a body of literatures and paradigms that have become transdisciplinary, so that they appear to liberate people from disciplinary canons to some extent.”²⁹ It is debatable whether or not this tendency can be diagnosed as a symptom of laziness, rather than, say, the myopic modes through which scholarship is rewarded, at least in the United States, if not elsewhere, through publishing protocols and merit reviews that privilege the reproduction of existing scholarly methods, paradigms, and assumptions. Such a debate would not detract, however, from what is to be gained by pointing out, following Grossberg, that the interdisciplinarity of Cultural Studies historically has been predicated on a different model than the interdisciplinarity that informs the assembly of Shell Oil’s scenarios team.³⁰

The interdisciplinary drive of Cultural Studies, at its most impactful, has been consistent with how Stuart Hall retrospectively described the interdisciplinary activities of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), founded at the University of Birmingham, England in 1964 by Richard Hoggart. The CCCS, which closed in 2002, was the institutional home of “the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies,” which notably included Stuart Hall. In an essay entitled “The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities,” also quoted in Grossberg, Hall writes:

Serious interdisciplinary work involves the intellectual risk of saying to professional sociologists that what they say sociology is, is not what it is. We had to teach what we thought a kind of sociology that would be of service to people studying culture would be, something we could not get from self-designated sociologists. It was never a question of which disciplines would contribute to the development of this field, but of how one could decenter or destabilize a series of interdisciplinary fields. We had to respect and engage with the paradigms and traditions of knowledge and of empirical and concrete work in each of these disciplinary areas in order to construct what we called cultural studies.³¹

The interdisciplinary work described by Hall involves a sustained engagement with existing literatures in order to construct another field. It could be characterized as a mode of scholarly production that imaginatively, yet seriously, engages with disciplinary and interdisciplinary areas’ “existing paradigms and traditions of knowledge” and “empirical and concrete work” to construct a new scholarly terrain. Such an endeavor is calibrated to “be of service to people studying” a particular object or set of objects, or to those interested in specific questions; it creates ways to do that work. It is animated by a scholarly imagination. As Hall explains, after the critical, negative work that those who formed the CCCS did to distance themselves and their work from some of the ongoing traditions in the humanities, “the positive work one then went on to do in the Centre had still to be invented.”³²

The pulls toward interdisciplinarity can be situated within a broader transformation, described by Gilles Deleuze, away from disciplinary societies and toward “societies of control.” In a short essay published in

1992 and entitled “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” Deleuze argues, “We are at the beginning of something.” He describes it as a widespread “substitution” of “mechanisms of control” for the “disciplinary sites of enclosure” that characterized the prior formations of power described by Michel Foucault as those of “disciplinary societies.” The struggle over the transformation or destruction of the traditional academic disciplines in order to develop interdisciplinary sites of knowledge production can be understood as part of the broader struggle against disciplinary societies, which are animated by the same logics of enclosure.³³

The logics of interdisciplinary knowledge production, however, also are consistent with aspects of the mechanisms of control discussed by Deleuze in 1992. According to him, in place of the enclosed spaces of disciplinary societies, which “reached their height at the outset of the twentieth” century, mechanisms of control have been accelerating since the end of World War II to become the dominant logic of power. Deleuze writes, “Enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continually change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point.”³⁴ As the logics of disciplinary societies are increasingly eclipsed by those of control societies, institutions are being transformed, and the protocols and methods through which a variety of disciplines, including disciplinary knowledge production, have been maintained over time are subjected to modulation and fluidity.

Under present conditions, interdisciplinary modes of knowledge production can work as a mechanism of control.³⁵ As such, they encapsulate a confrontation between liberating and enslaving forces. Based on our examples of Shell Oil’s scenarios team and considering the importance of interdisciplinarity to neoliberal university management logics, it could be argued that control societies are substituting interdisciplinarity (practiced as what Grossberg characterizes as transdisciplinarity, or assembling experts in different disciplines in order to produce knowledge across those disciplines) for disciplinarity.³⁶ The logics and methods of interdisciplinarity do not guarantee, nor do they inherently express, liberatory or radically transformative knowledges. Yet, as Deleuze asserts, “There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons.”³⁷ Because “the different control mechanisms are inseparable variations,” it must not be assumed, however, that the weapons avail-

able to be found may not also be used to build the societies of control themselves.³⁸ In other words, interdisciplinary knowledge—that is, knowledge that transforms the disciplines while creating other forms of knowledge—might still be fashioned into a weapon directed against the investment in interdisciplinarity as a strategy of control.

The Imagination

The imagination is among the weapons on offer in societies of control. “Invention,” “innovation,” and “creativity” are buzzwords in many of today’s corporate cultures, in large part because they are thought to be living, human engines of capitalist growth and expansion. Entrepreneur, best-selling author, and marketing expert Seth Godin, for example, argues in his book *Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?* that, unlike the Fordist mass production–mass market economy for which Americans have been trained, today’s economy requires people who are willing to “draw their own maps” and make “each day into a kind of art.”³⁹ The art-ification of labor not only points to the significance of affective labor to contemporary capitalism, something about which Godin comments in his book, but also highlights one of the ways that, as Franco Berardi (aka Bifo) puts it, the imagination currently is being “blackmailed” by the economy and epistemologically dominated by economics.⁴⁰

Berardi explains that he can see no way out of “the present catastrophe,” in which “capitalist rule is liquidating modern civilization,” except by going through it. He writes:

My knowledge and my understanding do not show the possibility of any acceptable development out of the present catastrophe. But catastrophe, a word whose etymology stems from the Greek Kata (for “moving”) and Strophein, (for “beyond”), is exactly the point where we “move beyond” the present and a new landscape is revealed. I do not see that landscape because my knowledge and my understanding are limited, and the limits of my language are the limits of my world.

My knowledge and understanding are missing the event, the singularity that might open onto that new landscape.

So I must act “as if.”

As if the forces of labor and knowledge may overcome the forces of greed. As if the cognitive workers may overcome the fractalization of their life and intelligence. I must resist simply because I cannot know what is happening after the future, and I must preserve the consciousness and sensibility of social solidarity, of human empathy, of gratuitous activity, of freedom, equality and fraternity. Just in case, right?⁴¹

For Berardi, acting “as if” is a way of holding in reserve a radical imagination that approaches the limits of knowledge, not as a problem to be overcome, but as the condition of possibility for a “new relationship between the environment and the human organism” to be called forth by “the radical imagination.”⁴²

Today, as universities slash the budgets of those humanities programs and disciplines that have been (incompletely) transformed by Cultural Studies (as a result of the current accounting logics of university administrators in the United States and elsewhere), many of the methods and knowledges generated in those programs and disciplines remain a crucial part of a collaborative and interdisciplinary scholarly engagement with the world. As Shell Oil’s explanation of how scenarios can address the blind spots created by disciplinary expertise describes, the scenarios’ story form is valuable precisely because it might introduce qualitative elements that cannot be neatly quantified and measured; the use of the story form also might serve as one of the elements in what Berardi identifies as “the new space of activism,” namely, “in the meeting point of poetry and theory and creation of new paradigms.”⁴³

Arts and humanities concepts and practices in and of themselves are not a defense against the survival strategies of a corporation like Shell Oil and the attendant logics of exploitation on which they rely, which also include listening for—and to—a certain “poetry from the future.”⁴⁴ Such concepts and practices have been conscripted into Shell’s survival strategies in order to shed light on the presently unknowable so that existing blind spots might more effectively be navigated by those who seek to “explore” and “map” the future by tethering it to the present.

Nonetheless, humanities-based practices and ways of knowing also introduce additional uncertainty into calculations because they work with and through the unpredictable and imaginative activities that are part of what Karl Marx refers to as “the absolute working-out” of the

“creative potentialities” of those living beings currently recognizable as “human.”⁴⁵ To the extent that they do so while holding uncertainty open, critical theory, poetry, dance, literature, philosophy, music, and other creative sonic phenomena can each continue to feed thought (and the capacity for thinking) in ways that touch and inform not only the rational decisions of corporate leaders and managers but also, as Édouard Glissant put it, “the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics.”⁴⁶

For Glissant and Berardi, efforts to think thought carry the capacity to transform “the imaginary of peoples” and “their varied poetics”; in them, the risks of efforts to think thought become realized. Berardi’s and Glissant’s insights about the capacity of thought and “the thinking of thought” to affect the imaginary and poetics of peoples are a call for those of us for whom the production of knowledge matters, those whose intellectual labor seeks to be an operation of, through, and on the material realm, to assess the stakes involved in struggles over meanings, over the significance of things, and to participate in the collective production of shared senses of possibilities, of bodies and pleasures, of eccentric and errant affiliations, of matter, of times, and of worlds.

Attending to the ways that thinking matters calls for a reinvigorated concept of knowledge production—as an imaginative, scholarly enterprise characterized by an engagement with existing thought that eschews any version of “thinking thought” that simply withdraws into a “dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists.”⁴⁷ It calls for scholarly practices that engage with existing academic work and other knowledges and that involve the body as well as the mind. Such practices space themselves out into the world, recruiting matter(s) that perhaps have not participated in previous knowledge projects, or that have not been recognizable as ways of knowing, and finding out what those can do in thought now.

As the antithetical interests of Shell Oil’s energy scenarios, on the one hand, and projects invested in Black liberation and Indigenous sovereignty, on the other, make clear, the politics of imaginative knowledge production are by no means guaranteed. Yet, imaginative modes of scholarly production that both embrace the demands of “rigorous scholarship” and challenge the interests served by existing measures of academic rigor might work to transform existing knowledges (much as Hall claims the early intellectuals in the CCCS worked to do) and com-

municate their findings in ways that could inform “the imaginaries of people, their varied poetics.”⁴⁸ In addition to the traditional intellectual stances and methods of committed research in the pursuit of “truth,” they also might work affectively, telling relevant stories and seeking to affect matter—to spark and authorize additional creative engagements within matter.⁴⁹ The imaginative scholarly production sketched here tarries with Utopia as a horizon but does not fix its sights on it. Instead, it sinks deeply into matter and existing material relations in a world in which horizons shift depending upon whether one has power to delimit them. “The imagination of people, their varied poetics,” also become enmeshed in such a scholarly imagination even as it is affected by them.

The understanding that undergirds this description of imaginative scholarship is not new. Indeed, it is inherited from Romantic and Enlightenment thought and has served as one motor of prevalent understandings of both modernity and postmodernity. Other commentators have pointed out that renewed attention to the imagination in the twenty-first century is not surprising; from claims that finance is capital’s imagination to corporate slogans to “think differently,” to conceptualizations of a variety of “radical imaginations,” to the rallying cry “another world is possible,” the imagination today is called to do dramatic, urgent work toward divergent ends.⁵⁰

In the present project, the imagination also plays a central role: it animates the mode of knowledge production for which this project invested in Black futures calls, and it anchors a spatiotemporal organization in which “queer remains” are generative, deterritorializing forces. Thinking with and through a vibrant concept of the imagination opens onto this project’s perceptions of queer times and Black futures, and of the spatial politics that might be associated with them. Throughout this book, I call attention to the quotidian violence that secures the existing organization of things. The quotidian violence that holds existing reality in place does so in part by making the concepts “queer” and “Black” appear as aberrations while at the same time generating those concepts as sutures through which existing reality disavows its founding genocidal wars against Black and many other native peoples.

What I call “quotidian violence” is the violence that the reproduction, reinscription, and survival of what exists relies upon and enacts in order to manage what Octavia Butler’s character Lauren Olamina from

her novel *Parable of the Sower* calls “the only lasting truth”: change.⁵¹ In other words, quotidian violence names the violence that maintains a temporality and a spatial logic hostile to the change and chance immanent in each now; a quotidian violence presently holds in place a spatiotemporal logic that is hostile to the queerness in time.⁵²

Yet, it could be argued that the queerness in time is part of what facilitated such violence to accumulate in, and as, our present. To the extent that queer is perceptible at this point in our analysis, it appears as a structuring antagonism of the social, and therefore of all those institutions, practices, traditions, and so on that seek to govern sociality and regulate the terms of sociability, including the management of time and space. As a structuring antagonism of the social, “queer” anchors social orderings as their negative. The use of “queer” throughout this book builds on the definition offered by Eve Sedgwick in “Queer and Now,” her introduction to the 1993 collection *Tendencies*. She writes, “One of the things that ‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”⁵³

In my usage of the term, “queer” is not an ontological category—it is not what one is; rather, it is an epistemological category—one that involves life and death questions of apprehension and value production. “Queer” involves how one signifies or how groups of living beings are made to signify within a given set of significations. It may include what one does, how one does it, and where those actions place one in relationship to the maintenance of the present organization of things, including the groupings and affiliations of living beings constitutive of social, political, and economic relations. Recent scholarship in Transgender Studies has enabled a productive engagement with and critique of the ways “queer” has been conceptually allied with the politics of sexuality and the activism that seeks to address inequalities among people of different sexual orientations. Salient critiques of the extent to which “queer” has been domesticated and fixed along lines of sexuality, gender, class, ethnicity, and race in various national contexts remain important because they address how the politics that grow out of the disturbances through which “queer” has become perceptible might be responsible to those who presently might claim and/or be claimed by that category. Here and

now, “queer” indexes shifting sets of references, produced in dynamic ways through material sociopolitical processes. Challenges to attempts to fix its significations into an identity are salutary because “queer” remains a constitutive logic of the present reality commonly perceptible in many geographic locations.

The production of “queer” is violent, material, and excessive to the management and control of sociability. “Queer” is palpable, felt as affect. It is also not only an imposition but simultaneously a becoming.⁵⁴ Queer fluidly anchors and defines the normative. It flows through Capital itself. Queer might be felt as utopian or dystopian, quotidian, banal, spectacular, public, private; yet, in each of its material operations on and through bodies, it carves out our relations temporally and spatially and proliferates connections within difference. Take, for example, the beginning of the collection of stories of queer Kenyans compiled by the Nest Collective, “a multidisciplinary arts collective living and working in Nairobi.” Formed in 2012, the Nest Collective explains about its work: “Together we explore our troubling modern identities, re-imagine our pasts and remix our futures.”⁵⁵ The subtitle of the Nest Collective’s book, *Stories of Our Lives: Queer Narratives from Kenya*, illuminates that “queer” remains available as a relational axis of affiliation through sexuality in Kenya, where homosexual acts are outlawed. Toward the beginning of *Stories of Our Lives*, the Nest Collective writes:

Dear Kenyan Queer:

You are not alone. Whether you’re a man or a woman, whether you’re somewhere in between or somewhere beyond; you exist. You might feel small and fragile in the face of Statutes, Laws, Caucuses, Stones, Insults, a Church-State and Family that tries to deny your existence, but you exist. You must never let them take that away.

Exist. Breathe. Love and Be Loved. Fuck. Thrive. Apologize to no one for your existence.

Even though we do not know you, and even though we didn’t get to meet you and hear your story, understand what we mean when we say: you are not alone, and this is your story, too.

With all our hearts,

The Nest Collective

May 2015⁵⁶

“Queer” is a long-haul proposition available in any-instant-whatever. Queer’s proliferation of connections among disparate, qualitatively different things piles up, indifferent to its ability to measure or completely capture them. Capable of being modulated according to the demands of Capital, queer nonetheless stubbornly works on and through bodies, establishing relations between them and thereby connecting them across space and time. It might be said that queer is endogenous to time. Along the axis of the social, Capital must manage queer’s proliferation of errant, irrational, and unpredictable connections in the interests of objectifying and delivering reliable futures. That a particular historical trajectory of “queer” has been domesticated in the United States—contained through the affirmation of “gay marriage” and the increased visibility and recognition through which it was achieved—is simultaneously a sign of victory for a vivacious, bold, and heterogeneous movement for “LGBT rights,” and evidence of a recent modulation of control vis-à-vis sexuality and the organization of social life. To the extent that the dreams and visions of the world for which queer and trans* Americans have struggled over time have not been exhausted in the acquisition of the right to marry, in the United States “queer” remains an active and energetic reservoir for connection, affiliation, and experimentation.⁵⁷

As Deleuze said about control societies in general, “There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons.”⁵⁸

“Queer temporality,” in my formulation, names a dimension of time that produces risk. In terms of financial management, it is well known that “time” itself produces risk. Here, “queer temporality” names that dimension of the unpredictable and the unknowable in time that governs errant, eccentric, promiscuous, and unexpected organizations of social life. The complex equations for managing risk in stock investment profiles attempt to contain risk, accounting for it through calculations and algorithms devised to predict and control for randomness. In relationship to queer temporality, these calculations’ efforts to anchor the future to the knowable present miss the ways “queer” remains here and now in both recognizable and imperceptible forms. Insofar as some of those present forms are imperceptible to existing modes of knowledge production, they remain unaccountable to or within, for example, Shell Oil’s scenarios team’s plan to alleviate the risks posed by “blind spots”

by telling stories crafted through interdisciplinary knowledges. Yet, even imperceptibly, queer stubbornly persists in present relations. Now.

In this regard, the queerness that is endogenous to time animates what Nassim Nicholas Taleb refers to as “Black Swan” events in his book *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. The name “Black Swan” derives from the tale that holds that before Europeans discovered Australia, they were convinced that all swans were white. This story, for Taleb, “illustrates a severe limitation to our learning from observations or experience and the fragility of our knowledge.”⁵⁹ Taleb explains that what he refers to as a “Black Swan” has three attributes:

First, it is an outlier, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme impact (unlike the bird). Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence after the fact, making it explainable and predictable.⁶⁰

“Black Swan” events are characterized by “a combination of low predictability and large impact.”⁶¹ The most important aspect of this concept for Taleb, and for our purposes here, is “the fact that we tend to act as if it does not exist!” To clarify his “we,” Taleb continues, “I don’t mean just you, your cousin Joey, and me, but almost all ‘social scientists’ who, for over a century, have operated under the false belief that their tools could measure uncertainty.”⁶² Taleb’s primary target in his analysis is the science of economics and finance, in which measurements of “risk” purportedly account for future possibilities. Yet, according to Taleb, their measurements exclude the possibility of the Black Swan, evincing a “blindness with respect to randomness” because they focus on the minutiae instead of accounting for the big unforeseeable Black Swan events.⁶³ According to Taleb, “Black Swan logic makes what you don’t know far more relevant than what you do know. Consider that many Black Swans can be caused and exacerbated by their being unexpected.”⁶⁴

In *The Physics of Wall Street: A Brief History of Predicting the Unpredictable*, James Owen Weatherall contends that Taleb himself overlooks that a recognition of the flawed nature of building and revising mathematical models is built into the methodologies behind the models currently used in financial markets. For this reason, Weatherall argues,

rather than condemn mathematical modeling in financial markets (after all, the methods behind those mathematical models were also used to achieve engineering feats on which we regularly rely, such as air travel or the George Washington Bridge), one ought to recognize the value of trying to “domesticate as many unknown unknowns as possible,” regardless of the fact that one can argue that any particular model is flawed.⁶⁵ For Weatherall, in other words, financial modeling’s methods are convincing enough to warrant their use even though catastrophically unforeseen Black Swan events can and will happen in any arena. Weatherall further argues, “It is important to distinguish between the impossible and the merely very difficult. There is little doubt that mastering financial risk is extremely difficult, much more difficult . . . than solving problems in physics.” Yet Weatherall insists that the scientific method through which the mathematical models governing financial markets have been developed “is the best way we have ever come up with for addressing our biggest challenges,” and he asserts, “We shouldn’t abandon it here.”⁶⁶

To further clarify his own position, Taleb offered the concept of “antifragility” in his next book, *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder*. There, Taleb asserts:

By grasping the mechanisms of antifragility we can build a systematic and broad guide to nonpredictive decision making under uncertainty in business, politics, medicine, and life in general—anywhere the unknown preponderates, any situation in which there is randomness, unpredictability, opacity, or incomplete understanding of things. It is far easier to figure out if something is fragile than to predict the occurrence of an event that may harm it. Fragility can be measured; risk is not measurable (outside of casinos or the minds of people who call themselves “risk experts”). This provides a solution to what I’ve called the Black Swan problem—the impossibility of calculating the risks of consequential rare events and predicting their occurrence. Sensitivity to harm from volatility is tractable, more so than forecasting the event that would cause the harm. So we propose to stand our current approaches to prediction, prognostication, and risk management on their heads. In every domain or area of application, we propose rules for moving from the fragile toward the antifragile, through reduction of fragility or harnessing antifragility. And we can almost always detect antifragility (and fragility) using a simple test of

asymmetry: anything that has more upside than downside from random events (or certain shocks) is antifragile; the reverse is fragile.⁶⁷

Over the course of an argument that spans three books, *Fooled by Randomness*, *The Black Swan*, and *Antifragile*, Taleb's concept of "antifragility" emerges as a central attribute of entrepreneurs and risk-takers who have "flesh in the game." While Taleb mentions popular, ground-up movements and innovations as wellsprings of antifragility, his project valorizes entrepreneurial capitalists and not radically visionary freedom dreamers. Nonetheless, the concept of "antifragility" offers the following to the present project and its investments in freedom dreams: (1) a critique of finance capital's construction of "futures" that complements the analysis I advance herein; and (2) another way of thinking about the queerness in time as an ally in building the antifragility of freedom dreams, the obsessive love that sustains them, and those who advance such dreams within, without, and through love.

Within the calculations of the colonization of the Americas, the Atlantic slave trade, and the logics of white supremacy, the Haitian Revolution was a Black Swan event. It proved that Black belonging, anchored in love of freedom and of Black people, could be an antifragile revolutionary force at the same time that it demonstrated the robustness of European settler colonialism and white supremacy tethered to capitalist exploitation throughout the Western world. Explaining that Napoleon's army's inability to defend its territories in Louisiana lead to the defeat of the French in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), historian Edward E. Baptist states in *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*:

Even today, most US history textbooks tell the story of the Louisiana Purchase without admitting that slave revolution in Saint-Domingue made it possible. And here is another irony. Haitians had opened 1804 by announcing their grand experiment of a society whose basis for citizenship was literally the renunciation of white privilege, but their revolution's success had at the same time delivered the Mississippi Valley to a new empire of slavery. The great continent would incubate a second slavery exponentially greater in economic power than the first.⁶⁸

The events and significance of the Haitian Revolution have been studied, narrated, assessed, and debated by many others.⁶⁹ What is important here is that it happened, and, in happening, it affirmed that what appears to be a random, unpredictable, outlier “Black Swan” event from within one conception of the world might emerge as the result of planning, visioning, risk-taking, and radical love rooted in another conception of the world, one that is simultaneously antagonistic to, incommensurable with, and indifferent to the first. Susan Buck-Morss, citing Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, writes that the Haitian Revolution “entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened.”⁷⁰ The Haitian Revolution can be understood as the production of an expansive conceptualization of Black belonging as an expression of obsessive love, which was unforeseeable from within Euro-American conceptions of the world.⁷¹ After the Haitian Revolution, the possibility that slaves could end slavery through violent revolt was no longer unthinkable; for Britain and France, the Haitian Revolution marked the beginning of the end of the slave trade. In the Americas, potential slave uprisings were managed and assumed as an inherent risk of the slave trade. The Haitian Revolution played a role in transforming chattel slavery as it had existed until that time. In this regard, it is a manifestation of one of the “risks” assumed by the entrepreneurs who innovated within chattel slavery.

Ian Baucom explains in *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* that a modern system of speculative finance capital developed with and through the Atlantic slave trade and has come to characterize global capital accumulation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Since at least the sixteenth century, when options were used to buy and sell commodities in Antwerp and Amsterdam, economies have relied upon some mechanism to hedge against the uncertainty carried in time.⁷² According to Baucom, the struggle between the slave traders and the abolitionists in the late eighteenth century

both extends and replays what scholars in recent years have taken to be the central epistemological drama of the long eighteenth century, the drama—emerging from the social rivalry of the old landed and new moneyed

classes—in which, as mobile property displaced “real” property, and the imaginary value of stocks, bonds, bills-of-exchange, and insured property of all kinds trumped the “real” value of land, bullion, and other tangibles, the concepts of what was knowable, credible, valuable, and real were themselves transformed. Such transformations, J. G. A. Pocock was one of the first to argue, generated a wide array of epistemological shifts in British public life, shifts in the ways that eighteenth-century Britons struggled to make sense of and devise new forms for these novel structures of knowledge.⁷³

Michael McKeon and other scholars have identified the literary novel as among the most important new forms that emerged to meet the epistemological challenges of the eighteenth century for Britons. Baucom suggests that speculation arises as a new form that intensified and generalized throughout the world during the present phase of financialization. Baucom’s argument enables us to encounter in our present conjuncture the genocidal calculations, both financial and moral, that animated the transatlantic slave trade. Chattel slavery and the ontological, epistemological, and social-material regimes of settler colonialism that supported and perpetuated it underwrite our present.⁷⁴ The wealth generated through chattel slavery, settler colonialism, and European colonialism in Asia, Africa, and the Americas provided the foundation for present relations of exploitation and domination to accrue their force and authority—in other words, for today’s quotidian violence.

Due to the time and distances involved in the transatlantic slave trade, “the financial life of the trade and the theory of value that it made possible” produced a system of credit involving “a mutual and system-wide determination to credit the existence of imaginary values.”⁷⁵ The spread of chattel slavery across what Western Europeans claimed as their “New World” occurred in the context of and, according to Baptist was a driving force behind, the innovation of new technologies (such as the cotton gin), a new division of labor, and the entrepreneurial development of new financial instruments. Fueled by the risk-seeking behavior of entrepreneurs who harnessed capitalism’s capacity for “creative destruction,” the markets for slaves in the Americas capitalized upon the queerness that is endogenous to time. At the same time, systems of credit and speculation emerged to manage the risks unleashed and assumed by those entrepreneurs who grew the slave trade.

Financial Derivatives and the Afterlife of Slavery

Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. 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 racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.

—Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

In today's global economy, the financial derivative has risen in prominence, and its contemporary logics have taken shape as part of the organization of Capital into the forms of "globalization" and "financialization" that digital technologies have facilitated. Taken together, derivatives today mark one of the largest swaths of finance capital. Yet, as Dick Bryan and Michael Rafferty point out, derivatives also remain one of the least understood elements of capitalism. Bryan and Rafferty explain that the primary function of derivatives is computation. They write, "Derivatives are, within themselves, computational—they embody systems of calculation that commensurate different forms of capital according to notional competitive norms. They are, in this sense, a universalizing force."⁷⁶ Commensurating different forms of capital, derivatives are "themselves computations of relative values, embodying social relations of competition, not just trust, power, promises and obligations."⁷⁷

Drawing on Bryan and Rafferty's work, Lawrence Grossberg argues, "The contemporary explosion and use of derivatives is at least in part a response to, first, the move from gold to money as the universal equivalent on a global scale and second, the denial of the universal equivalent." Continuing with reference to the global economic collapse of 2007 to 2009, Grossberg observes that "the current credit crisis can be seen, perhaps, as the failure of the derivative, which itself must be located within a larger configuration of the contemporary impossibility of a universal

commensuration.” For Grossberg, then, “the collapse/failure of the derivatives market” in the late 2000s “has itself to be related to crises of value in specific capital formations, such as commodity markets, which have had to confront the new hyper-differentiation of markets. One could argue, for example, that what is frequently dismissed as branding and niche-marketing signals a radical restructuring of value beyond our capacity to measure it. The result is, apparently, a situation of the increasing sense of the unpredictability of value itself.”⁷⁸

A “process of continual recalculation” is built into derivatives, endowing them with a capacity for self-transformation that also universalizes capitalist logics. Following Bryan and Rafferty, Grossberg reminds his readers that, while derivatives often have been grasped in their function as financial instruments that manage risk, their primary function is to commensurate value. Moreover, as Grossberg argues, one can read Marx’s critiques of capitalism as “a critique of a particular form of mediation, of the social character of labor as a historically determinate social relationship.”⁷⁹

Bryan and Rafferty’s and Grossberg’s analyses are relevant to the present discussion about interdisciplinarity, futures, speculation, the concepts and affects that animate Black existence, queer temporality, and the imagination insofar as they renew our ability to bring analyses of class, labor relations, and political economy into ongoing engagements with cultural politics. Finance capital exists within a longer history of racial capitalism, itself undergirded by and maintained through the socioeconomic and cultural relations set in motion by the technological innovations and exploitation of risks that spread chattel slavery in the Americas. My attempt to bring the present political economy of finance into conversation with cultural politics is consistent with Randy Martin’s call, writing in collaboration with Bryan and Rafferty, for an interdisciplinary scholarship calibrated to assess and address the changes wrought by financialization. Bryan, Martin, and Rafferty explain:

Financialization, as a moment in the genealogy of capital, extends and refines accumulation, but it also elaborates mutual indebtedness as a more general feature of human sociality from labour to lived experience. More than a shift from one axis to another, it is one way that capital speaks its

social relations. Risk becomes not simply a form of calculation, a way of knowing, but also invites a kind of being. The boundaries between being and value, sheer quality and ceaseless quantity, have become blurred.⁸⁰

Situating financialization in capital's genealogy, and, importantly, as subtended by "real relations" rather than the fictitious ones often attributed to finance capital because of its intimacy with speculation, Martin, Bryan and Rafferty conclude,

Financialization . . . is not simply a stable object of inquiry that awaits bright lights, but an occasion of self-reformulation around an expanded political arena. In their profound interdisciplinarity, such politics might otherwise fall between the attentions of the domains of political and cultural economy—each bearing a potent conceptual lens that too frequently is tempted to look past what the other has in view.⁸¹

In much the same way as Shell Oil's desire to address the blind spots caused by looking into the future with only one disciplinary lens leads to their formation of interdisciplinary futures scenarios teams, the changes wrought by financialization call for attention by progressive and radical thinkers capable of interdisciplinary analyses. For instance, interdisciplinarity might be fostered by locating financialization in a longer history of credit and finance that acknowledges the central role that racial formation, the enclosure of land, and, importantly, anti-Black racism have played in credit and finance's rise to historical prominence.

In *Specters of the Atlantic*, Baucom argues that in the current conjuncture, the historically determinate social relationships between masters and slaves and colonizers and colonized rise to prominence as forms of mediation characteristic of finance capitalism: "As commodity capital is to the nineteenth century's intensification of the seventeenth, so finance capital is to the long twentieth century's intensification of the eighteenth."⁸² Baucom focuses on the slave ship *Zong*'s 1781 voyage, when enslaved Africans were dumped overboard so that, instead of selling them into slavery, the slavers and the Liverpool merchants involved in the transatlantic slave trade could collect insurance on them as lost property. (Dear Reader, you might want to read the previous sentence a

second time to allow the violences and pathologies it indexes to register with you affectively as well as intellectually. Or, take a break from this study, bookmark this page, and go read M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*.)⁸³

Presenting the *Zong* voyage as emblematic of the logics of the social character of finance capital, Baucom argues that, in Britain during the eighteenth century, the evidence of a slave trade shows up belatedly. He explains:

The evidence came later: after a voyage was complete; after the slaves had been sold; after the record keeping, the account adjusting, and the other work of documentation upon which historians rely for their own imaginary reconstruction of events. But the value already existed, prior to and independent of the evidence that what was valued in fact existed. Time and distance are part of the explanation. The time it took to complete the vast triangular circuit of the trade dictated that merchants must conduct much of their business on credit. But for such a system of credit to operate both a theory of knowledge and a form of value which would secure the credibility of the system itself had to be in place. Central to that theory was a mutual and system-wide determination to credit the existence of imaginary values. Central to that form of value was a reversal of the protocols of value creation proper to commodity capital. For here, value does not follow but precedes exchange (not, to be sure, as the classical Marxist account has it, in the form of that use value that is held to preexist the moment of exchange, but as what Marx understood to be the end product rather than the originary moment of capital: as money value, value in the guise of the "general equivalent"). Such value exists not because a purchase has been made and goods exchanged but because two or more parties have agreed to believe in it. Exchange, here, does not create value, it retrospectively confirms it, offers belated evidence to what already exists.⁸⁴

The *Zong* massacre reveals that the economy of the transatlantic slave trade was a speculative one, predicated on the belief that the future would confirm the present value of slaves and the other commodities of the trade. Baucom's analysis helps us to understand that certain of today's forms of finance capitalism intensify a speculative economy entrenched during the slave trade; while the spatiotemporal logics and the sociopolitical relationships are mapped differently today, the general

geopolitical logics and material relations remain present. The African slave of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, and the colonized subjects and nations of the sixteenth through twenty-first centuries, are sedimented within present relations of precarity, haunting them in different ways in different settings. The crisis of value that the financial derivative today resolves (however clumsily) extends back through centuries of temporal accumulation, piling up on the bodies of Africans and Indigenous peoples (some of whom are Black and/or Africans), present in “modernity’s most violent scenes of exchange.”

This is the context in which discussions of modernity and political economy can unfold in ways that might remain attentive to the central issues of this book: queer temporality, the fact of Black existence and its potentialities, the imagination, and technological mediation. In this context, our discussion of financial derivatives is in conversation with Saidiya Hartman’s statement (offered above) that slavery

had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. 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 racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.⁸⁵

Computation meets flesh and culture in the ongoing production and reproduction of Black existence.⁸⁶

In Grossberg’s analysis of finance capital, the financial derivative “proposes a mechanism of commensuration, of establishing equivalences and relations, among disparate and different elements, without appealing to the existence of a third standard term.” Grossberg asserts that the “derivative is not simply another expression of the commodity form, a binary structure holding together abstract and concrete risk, but the re-invention or at least the re-imagination of another form of economic exchange, one that refuses the need for such a binary structure grounded in a stable abstract term, in favor of an infinitely changing process of calculation.”⁸⁷

Within the capitalist system, derivatives remain tied to a conception of “wealth” that grows out of and perpetuates exploitative capitalist rela-

tions. Although it remains debatable to what extent the rise of derivatives marks the incorporation of everything into the logics of capital, it seems clear that derivatives exert a centripetal force, striving to pull everything into the orbit of capitalist commensuration. Bryan and Rafferty explain,

Each derivative product is a package of conversion of one form of capital to another—whether this is a simple commodity futures contract or a complex conversion of a particular currency index to a particular stock market index. When all these products are taken together, they form a complex web of conversions, a *system of derivatives*, in which any “bit” of capital, anywhere and with any time or spatial profile, can be measured against any other “bit” of capital, and on an on-going basis.⁸⁸

Though Bryan and Rafferty do not pursue it, their use of the phrase “bit’ of capital” recalls the significance of digital technologies, and of computation in particular, to derivatives. The connection between them is historical: that is, the rise to prominence of derivatives in contemporary finance has been facilitated by digital technologies, and computation enables both derivatives and digital technology, but neither derivatives nor digital technologies determine the other or are necessary to each other. Both financial derivatives and digital technologies could exist without calling for the other. However, as Bryan and Rafferty and Grossberg suggest, derivatives are part of “a complex web of conversions . . . in which any ‘bit’ of capital, anywhere and with any time or spatial profile, can be measured against any other ‘bit’ of capital, and on an on-going basis.”⁸⁹ Significantly, derivatives also “bind the future to the present or one place to another.”⁹⁰ This perspective illuminates the shared logics between derivatives and digital technologies, and underscores the ways that finance capital itself sometimes exists simply as digital units, bits, in an economic system that is no less material because of it.

In Cinema and Media Studies, the rise of digital mediation technologies is assessed and analyzed in a variety of ways, including, among other approaches, formulations of “the death of cinema” and an attendant eclipse of “Film Studies” or “Cinema Studies” by “Media Studies” (marking a relative indifference to, or, alternatively, a heightened interest in, the difference the specific medium of mediation makes), an incorpo-

ration of “Science and Technology Studies” into Media Studies, and the development of “New Media Studies” as a subfield within Media Studies. Analyses and theories of the specific role played by computation in digital media are of particular interest here because they help explain how digital cultural productions interface with the processes of computation and calculation that enable digital technologies. Any interface between digital cultural productions such as films, music, and digital art and those computations and calculations through which finance capital functions is an opportunity for contemporary demands for commensuration amidst various crises of value to be challenged by what Glissant has referred to as “a right to opacity.”

As it has been formulated in Glissant’s oeuvre, “opacity” names a politicized cultural strategy. Opacity is part of Glissant’s philosophy of “Relation.” It might be calibrated to secure an investment in what I will call “Black futures” (which may not look like an “investment” at all) through a reliance on a queer temporality. For Glissant, opacity is a mode through which one person or a group of living beings might resist Western thought’s “requirement for transparency.” Glissant explains that, from the perspective of Western thought, “in order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidarity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.”⁹¹ He suggests that perhaps “we need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction.”⁹²

To insist upon a group’s “right to opacity” in sociocultural terms, therefore, is to challenge the processes of commensuration built into the demand for that group to become perceptible according to existing conceptions of the world. It is a way of asserting the existence in this world of another conception of the world, incomprehensible from within the common senses that secure existing hegemonic relations and their “computations of relative value.”⁹³ Elsewhere, I have described cinematic images as images of value in process.⁹⁴ If, as I have argued, cinematic images index existing relations in ways that most often make perceptible “common sense” as the content of those images, then the eclipse of celluloid by digital video (and the attendant collapse of any claim to what film theorists have referred to as “profilmic reality”) reveals that the so-called crisis of the index in the digital regime of the image is merely an intensification of a crisis that has been constitutive of cinematic reality since

the invention of cinema: namely, the unmooring of an appearance from its material referent.⁹⁵ What was perceptible as a particular crisis of the image, the failure of images of Black people to empirically and positively represent Black people, has become a general crisis of representation that is emerging today, in part because digital media is explicitly indifferent to the truth claims undergirding appeals to a profilmic reality.⁹⁶

As I discuss in greater detail in chapter 3, as the digital regime of the cinematic image rises to prominence within the cinematic, digital cinematic images become perceptible as images that abstract existing relations through modes of commensuration (such as “common sense”) rather than through a claim, however false and contested, to some profilmic reality (and its attendant politics of correspondence and recognition). They do so according to calculations, mutability, fluctuations built into them. Retaining the opacity of certain cinematic images therefore offers one way to enhance the queer temporalities within the cinematic; it stalls (however momentarily) recognition of those images according to existing systems of evaluation and commensuration.⁹⁷ An insistence on opacity gives queer time for the conceptions of the world sedimented or, to employ a term offered by Baucom with a stronger economic sense, *accumulated* within existing relations to appear now.⁹⁸

“Black futures” emerges here as a way of indicating an investment in the risk that already inheres in social life—an antifragile investment in the errant, the irrational, and the unpredictable, made by a political imagination that posits radical socioeconomic and geopolitical transformations. Where financial derivatives and their calculations seek to quantify risk, account for randomness in advance, and perform the endless computations necessary for commensuration between various things, “Black futures,” animated in queer times and inseparable from queer relations, names what remains unaccountable to existing instruments of measurement and the interests those instruments presently serve. “Black futures” do so even when they are purportedly accounted for in advance through structures of anticipation that often miss that “Black futures” are here in every now. The ungovernable, anarchic here and now harbors Black futures. Black futures stall movements predicated on temporal deferral, problematically proclaiming “we are the ones we have been waiting for,” while singing (also problematically) “we shall overcome one day,” here, queer, in each now.⁹⁹

Black Radical Imagination

Imagination makes temporality possible. A version of the oft-cited definition of the imagination (most often attributed to Immanuel Kant) is found in the first two entries for the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: (a) “the power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses, including remembered objects and situations, and those constructed by mentally combining or projecting images of previously experienced qualities, objects, and situations”; and (b) “an inner image or idea of an object or objects not actually present to the senses; often with the implication that the idea does not correspond to the reality of things.” These definitions are important to my project here because they underscore the extent to which the imagination participates in the construction of the present through a combination of past and present elements that are not necessarily attached to presently perceptible reality.

Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish offer a helpful gloss on “imagination” in their co-written introduction to a 2010 special issue of *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*. They write:

We approach imagination as a process by which we collectively map “what is,” narrate it as the result of “what was,” and speculate on what “might be.” It is cognitive and corporeal, intensely creative and utterly mundane all at once. And while imagination is a terrain of political struggle it is not merely reducible to “ideology” in any simplistic sense of “false consciousness” or “fetishism.” Imagination represents a more rich, complex, agent-driven and ongoing working-out of affinity. It is a crucial aspect of the fundamentally political and always collective (though rarely autonomous) labour of reweaving the social world. Despite its problematic history as the fetish of the European “Enlightenment,” we cannot let go of a radicalizing idea of the imagination because it speaks to our ability to create something else, and to create it together.¹⁰⁰

The friction between the image of a thing, including an event, in its absence and a present image of that thing is what Robin D. G. Kelley is after when he writes in the preface to his book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* that, by the measure of whether or not the

visions that animated radical movements of the past were realized, “virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain pretty much intact. And yet it is precisely these alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change.”¹⁰¹

For Kelley, the theoretical underpinnings of radical movements continue to exert a force that exceeds those movements’ practices and tangible outcomes. The imagination is central to the freedom dreams about which Kelley writes: surrealism, Black feminism, Black internationalism, Communism. It is what allowed those movements to reach through and beyond what exists, including the distracting demands of daily life, and make perceptible another organization of things. Insofar as imagination also entails, as Haiven and Khasnabish assert in the quotation above, “a more rich, complex, agent-driven and ongoing working-out of affinity,” it might also be a motor of errant connections and affiliations enabled by the queerness in time.

The radical imagination works with and through what exists in order to call forth something presently absent: a new relationship between and within matter. It is radical because it goes against the root, taking aim at the very foundations of a shared reality. As Kelley’s work underscores, the Black radical imagination recombines the contents of the long arc of Black existence in ways that call forth new relations for all. 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, 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.”¹⁰²

To use Berardi’s formulation, it might be said that the modes of Black belonging generated by the Black radical imagination lie “after the future.” In the long quotation cited earlier, Berardi claims that he must resist what is because he cannot know what will happen “after the future.” His formulation of “after the future” acknowledges that the political mode of investing in and acting to affect the future that has characterized the twentieth-century’s dominant approach to the temporality of movements and change now only reproduces present logics. In his *After the Future*, he writes:

When the punks cried “No Future,” at the turning point of 1977, it seemed like a paradox that couldn’t be taken too seriously. Actually, it was the announcement of something quite important: the perception of the future was changing. The future is not a natural dimension of the mind. It is a modality of projection and imagination, a feature of expectation and attention, and its modalities and features change with the changing of cultures. . . . We don’t believe in the future in the same way [as the Futurists whose artistic movement encapsulated the twentieth-century’s belief in the future]. Of course we know that a time after the present is going to come, but we don’t expect that it will fulfill the promises of the present.¹⁰³

Beradi’s formulation “after the future” is thus anchored in an epistemological mode that embraces opacity. Recently, David Scott, Gary Wilder, and other scholars have advanced theories of temporality characterized by a notion of “futures past.” About his 2015 book *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World*, an intellectual history of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor between 1945 and 1960, Wilder explains, “I am not primarily concerned with futures whose promise faded after imperfect implementation nor with those that corresponded to a world, or to hopes, that no longer exist but instead with futures that were once imagined but never came to be, alternatives that might have been and whose unrealized emancipatory potential may now be recognized and reawakened as durable and vital legacies.”¹⁰⁴ Wilder’s study reminds us that the long arc of Black existence contains within it imaginative formulations of “futures past” that might be accessed now, in these queer times.

Persistent anti-Black racism continues to delimit otherwise visionary movements and possibilities, shaping existing geopolitics and other present realities. In this context, the long arc of Black existence contains vital elements that might be recombined to call forth new relations for all. Black existence has called modernity-as-progress narratives into question since the dawn of modernity during the transatlantic slave trade and the European colonization of African, Asian, Aboriginal, and other Indigenous peoples’ lands. It carries within it alternative organizations of time in which the future, if there is such a thing, has not been

promised; it has had to be created by reaching through and beyond what exists. It still does.

(Black) Existence beyond Measure

Two historical trajectories are imbricated in my use of “Black existence,” though there are more available. One can be described as the residue of white Being, as that temporal and ontological “impurity” expunged from the (European) human for it to cohere as such, and violently ordered into racial difference by a variety of disciplines. The other trajectory is creative invention, wherein “Black belonging” organizes the sociocultural life that escapes the above trajectory’s orderings and exclusions.¹⁰⁵ Both trajectories coexist within “Black existence” and contaminate each other.

Nonetheless, each does a different type of work in relationship to futures. Whereas Black existence indexes a residue of the consolidation of white Being, the present preordains or preempts the future—part of what Fanon called “a hellish cycle.”¹⁰⁶ Whereas Black existence is generative of Black belonging, futures are animated by an invention that renders “the future” opaque—Black futures exist “after the future,” blossoming in spite of what presently seems destined to be the future. Both of the trajectories named above harbor valences of risk to efforts to bind the future to the present, and both rely upon the difference between Black existence and individual Black people (or groups of people recognizable as Black in a given context). As a historical production open to both Fanonian invention as well as capture (some of which Fanon also elucidates brilliantly), “Black existence” anchors an opacity that invites and frustrates knowledge, transparency, and measure.

What I am after here is the provocative formulation with which Fred Moten ends his 2008 essay, “The Case of Blackness”: the “fugitive being of ‘infinite humanity,’ or as that which Marx calls wealth.” Moten refers to the following quotation from Marx:

In fact, however, when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity’s own nature? The absolute working-

out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e., the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a predetermined yardstick? Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?¹⁰⁷

The “real leap” about which Fanon reminds himself and his readers, the “wealth” that is characteristic of the “fugitive being of ‘infinite humanity,’” calls for knowledges that might animate calculations that do not perpetuate existing relations but instead point beyond the bourgeois form to a concept of wealth that encompasses all matter.¹⁰⁸ It calls, perhaps, for a concept of “universal exchange” facilitated by opacity and incommensurability. Marx’s notes in *The Grundrisse*, provided in the long quotation above, point toward one possible conception of wealth along these lines.

Marx’s conception of “wealth” stripped of its “limited bourgeois form” is wrenched from temporal demands imposed upon labor by the workday, the extraction of surplus labor power, the attendant alienation of labor into a commodity form, and the use of labor power to create surplus value for the capitalist. Stripped of this limited form, “wealth” accrues because it no longer is generated by alienated labor; rather, it is produced by the widespread exchange of material and immaterial products of affective and necessary labor. In these admittedly brief, incomplete, and therefore problematically authoritative, yet suggestive, notes, Marx points to a concept of “wealth” in which the development of human capacities is the engine through which humanity creatively reproduces itself as other than it was. Such wealth is presented as “the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., created through universal exchange . . . the development of all human powers as such” and as the “end in itself, not as measured by a predetermined yardstick.”¹⁰⁹ This “wealth,” which, in ways I elucidate in chapter 1, might be understood in Gilbert Simondon’s terms as “preindividual,” eludes calculation and measure.

For Moten, Marx’s concept of wealth helps to illuminate the difference between “Blackness” and “Black people” by underscoring the

ways “Blackness” itself is a historical becoming, tied to the human and therefore available to all. It both exceeds and supplements those who are called “Black people,” but cannot be divorced from Black people without epistemological and ontological violence to both the concept and the material realities it currently participates in organizing.¹¹⁰

Moten’s formulation of “Blackness” and “Black people” in relationship to Marx’s concept of “wealth” stripped of its “limited bourgeois form” not only highlights the racial dimensions of “the human” to which Marx refers (reminding us that “the Black” in Western philosophical thought is, as James Snead argues, “always there already” before, within, after, and beyond “the human”); it might also animate a notion of Black belonging in which, among other things, a Black radical imagination is central to “the absolute working out” of humanity’s “creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development.”¹¹¹ “Wealth” is, in part, a feat of the imagination.¹¹² The imagination is entangled with finance capital in pursuit of the bourgeois form of wealth that is still operating according to the temporalities of capitalist exploitation, however accelerated. This entanglement can be understood, following Berardi’s invocation of catastrophe in the quotation above, as not only a limit but also a condition of possibility for “a new relationship between the environment and the human organism” to be called forth by a “radical imagination” and its cosmic poetry.

Queer Times, Black Futures

In each of the chapters that follow, I consider a different constellation of the entanglements between racial capitalism, temporality, technology, mediation, and the imagination. Chapter 1, “‘It’s after the End of the World (Don’t You Know that Yet?):’ Afrofuturism and Transindividuation” takes the refrain from Sun Ra’s film *Space Is the Place* (directed by John Cone, 1974) as an opening for a discussion about how the temporalities of particular Afrofuturist cultural productions participate in reorienting speculative imaginations toward the presently impossible, thereby emphasizing the salience of Gilbert Simondon’s theory of “transindividuation” as an intervention into Western conceptualizations of Being.

In chapter 2, “Yet Still: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibilities, and Poetry from the Future (of Speculative Pasts),” I discuss how four

films, *Looking for Langston* (directed by Isaac Julien, 1989), *The Watermelon Woman* (directed by Cheryl Dunye, 1996), *Brother to Brother* (directed by Rodney Evans, 2005), and *The Aggressives* (directed by Daniel Peddle, 2005) involve related but different organizations of time. All of the films offer insights into the temporality of a present sense of political possibility, but whereas the first three evince a desire for a usable past that might work in the service of the present, *The Aggressives* organizes time idiosyncratically in a strategy that provides an opportunity to consider how queer temporality carries spatial implications that might anchor another orientation toward the past, present, and the future, one in which listening for “poetry from the future,” without insisting that it be recognizable as such, is an ethical demand of and for our times.

Chapter 3, “Black Cinema and Questions Concerning Film/Media/Technology,” focuses on the role technological considerations have played in the history of Black cinema, with a particular emphasis on the rise of technologies of digital mediation. In this chapter, I follow the interest in *technē* posited in the first wave of Afrofuturist cultural production during the 1990s and suggest that Beth Coleman’s 2009 essay on “race as technology” can offer a conceptualization of Black existence that is attuned to the contested ontological status of Black being, if there is such a thing.

The following chapter, “Corporate Cannibal’: Risk, Errantry, and Imagination in the Age of Catastrophe,” continues to develop a reading of Coleman’s essay through an engagement with pop star Grace Jones’s body of work. I discuss Édouard Glissant’s conceptualization of “errantry” as a mode through which Jones navigates the historical imbrication of Black skin with questions of ownership, gender, sexuality, (im)propriety, and *technē* before turning to a consideration of Glissant’s broader concept of “Relation” in the final chapter of the book, “World Galaxy.” In that chapter, Alice Coltrane’s errant sonic experiments with Asian musical forms offer a way to think about a different constellation of Afrofuturism, one that turns not toward outer space, as in the case of Sun Ra’s *Space Is the Place*, but toward an exploration of inner worlds as harbingers of another organization of things within the present. From Alice Coltrane’s Afro-Asian imagination, I turn to Nnedi Okorafor’s and Wanuri Kahui’s recent speculations on Africa, in particular Okorafor’s 2010 novel, *Who Fears Death*, and Kahui’s short film *Pumzi* from 2009.

These fictional texts offer errantry, myths, and stories as generative strategies through which the dystopian speculations about Africa on which corporate scenarios rely might be resisted, and the worlds those dystopian imaginations work to suppress can be felt.

Bartleby

The chapters that comprise *Queer Times, Black Futures* are punctuated throughout by shorter meditations on Herman Melville's 1853 novella, "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street." Though "Bartleby" was published in the decade leading up to the American Civil War, when the relationship between the United States and various Indigenous nations was being codified, I have not yet found evidence to suggest the story is explicitly about settler colonialism, slavery, or enslaved Africans or Black existence; however, the story is compelling to consider in the context of *Queer Times, Black Futures* for the following reasons: first, its setting (Wall Street, New York City) and title explicitly reference that center of finance; second, Bartleby's occupation as a legal copyist directly implicates his character and the story itself in questions of law and governance; third, Bartleby has inspired philosophical concepts relevant to the spatiotemporal entanglements of concern throughout this project; fourth, as I explain in the "Interlude," Bartleby calls attention to the interplay of sound and vision in ways that might be of interest to those who are thinking with and through the digital regime of the image in societies of control; fifth, like the rest of Melville's oeuvre, including *Moby Dick* (which I discuss in the "Intercession"), "Bartleby the Scrivener" raises questions about the American enterprise that might generate imaginative formulations of the errant possibilities it harbors; and finally, as we shall see in the following section, what Gilles Deleuze refers to as Bartleby's "queer formula"—"I would prefer not to"—rather than indicating a privileged disengagement with the ontological, epistemological, and hence material violences of the quotidian organization of things, can be understood as a mode of radical refusal, a de-creative, unaccountable, ungovernable, and errant insistence that confronts such violences head on in search of an expressive realization of existence beyond measure.