

BLACK LIFE-AND-DEATH THROUGH POETRY, THEORY, AND THE ARCHIVE
OF BLACKNESS

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of this work is to acknowledge black death as a condition of black existence while also pushing back at this statement to claim the possibility of black life within and against black death. In other words, black life is produced in abundance of anti-blackness. This argument is grounded in the premise that anti-blackness is a structure of violence that repeats across time. Therefore, rather than thinking of history as simply historical, this work argues that the history of blackness is resurgent. Anti-blackness repeats across time and space. This repetition, which is both material and ontological, conditions our understanding of blackness such that thinking blackness because overwhelmingly to think death. My intervention into this context (i.e. history) occurs at two levels—the theoretical/ontological and the poetic. I name this intervention an onto-poetic historical intervention. At the first level, the ontological helps us recognize that blackness is not a singularity. It is an entanglement of time and positionalities. Blackness is product of history that moves in excess of history; and, it is an ontology that is consumed by and in death while also producing black life-in-death as a paradimensional blackness. Through contemporary African American poet, Elizabeth Alexander and her work *American Sublime*, blackness is witnessed as moving through precarity (i.e. death) and care (i.e. life), as well as time (i.e. history). While history echoes forward, Alexander's poetry echoes backwards producing a shift in the ontological understanding of blackness. The Black is not solely a death form. Rather, the Black exists (as Ashon T. Crawley would say) as an *otherwise* positionality. Recognizing the Black as a paradimensional being

optimistically moves conceptualizations of blackness away from the historical narrative of blackness as nothing other than death to blackness as a life-in-death.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Dr. Shona Jackson, who may never receive the institutional credit she deserves for helping me with this project and for being a caring mentor to me throughout my three years at Texas A&M University.

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Contributors

This work was supervised by a thesis committee originally consisting of Dr. Shona Jackson (Chair) and Dr. Mikko Tuhkanen (Co-Chair) from the Department of English and Dr. Amir Jaima (Committee Member) from the Department of Philosophy.

However, as a result of my chair being on medical leave my graduating semester, this work was also supervised by a revised thesis committee consisting of Dr. Mikko Tuhkanen (Chair) and Dr. Sara DiCaglio (Committee Member) from the Department of English, and Dr. Amir Jaima (Committee Member) from the Department of Philosophy.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The Archive of Blackness: A Reproduction in Miniature of the Archive of Black Life¹

Slavery²

Master, however, was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of an overseer to affect him. He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin.

¹ According to *The Movement for Black Lives*, anti-blackness is constituted by the devaluation of black lives and the systematic disenfranchisement of black people throughout history. The devaluation of black life can take the form of overt racism or more covert systemic racism. The disenfranchisement of black people includes an “unethical disregard for anti-Black institutions and policies” that maintains blackness liminality in American society (<https://policy.m4bl.org/glossary/>).

² Douglass, Frederick. “Chapter 1.” In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, edited by Philip Smith, 1–4. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1995.



**Figure 1: Bennie Simmons, Alive, Soaked in Coal Oil before Being Set on Fire.
Reprinted from James Allen and John Littlefield's *Without Sanctuary* (footnote 3).**

³ Allen, James, and John Littlefield. *Bennie Simmons, Alive, Soaked in Coal Oil before Being Set on Fire. June 13, 1913. Anadarko, Oklahoma. Gelatin Silver Print. Real Photo Postcard. 3 1/4 x 5 in. Etched into Negative, "Edies Photo Anadarko Oklo". Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America.* James Allen and John Littlefield, 2000-2018. <https://withoutsanctuary.org/>.



Figure 2: Medical Workers Attend to Eric Garner. Reprinted from “Black Lives Upended by Policing; *The New York Times* (footnote 4).

Echoes of Anti-blackness from Chattel Slavery to 21st Century America

In the above examples, the repetition of anti-black violence and death are on display. Though the displays of anti-blackness are not the same, the examples, as a whole, trace the continuity of anti-black violence and death across different mediums and historical moments. The first example is an excerpt from the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Through the reproduction of Aunt Hester’s whipping, this example

⁴ Almukhtar, Sarah, Mercy Benzaquen, Damien Cave, et al. “Black Lives Upended by Policing: The Raw Videos Sparking Outrage.” *The New York Times*. April 19, 2018. [nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/19/us/police-videos-race.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/19/us/police-videos-race.html).

foregrounds the contours of anti-black violence within the context of institutional slavery. The second example is a postcard sampled from James Allen's and John Littlefield's photo collection *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. The image of Bennie Simmons' gruesome lynching captures the brutality of anti-black violence during the Jim Crow era. The third example is a screenshot image of Eric Garner's murder, selected from *The New York Times* collection of raw footage on police brutality. The image of Garner's death locates police brutality as the predominant formation of legalized anti-black violence in America today.

These examples are unified through the gratuitousness of the violences, the grandiosity of the spectacles, and recurrence of black pain. The diffusion of these elements across and within each example mark each instance of brutality as *overkill* – or as acts of violence committed in excess of the necessary (Warren 2017, 402). Aunt Hester's whipping, Bennie Simmons' lynching, and Eric Garner's asphyxiation are all acts of violence that exceed the bounds of necessary violence and, at times, even physical death. In the case of Aunt Hester's whipping, excessive violence is disguised as discipline. Though Captain Anthony had the legal right to discipline his slaves, Hester's offense would have been trivial if she were not a black slave. With Bennie Simmons' lynching, the mob's violence is shown to be constituted, not by justice, but by and in their negative desire to kill with no measurable end. Simmons' had already been arrested for the supposed murder of a sixteen-year old girl. Still, he was abducted and not only hung from the branch of a cottonwood tree but also set on fire while alive (Allen and Littlefield 2000, 4). Lastly, given the context of Garner's crime – the alleged selling of individual cigarettes, the NYPD officer, who confronted Garner, exercised a disproportionate amount of

violence. He held Garner in a chokehold for 15 second even though chokeholds were not permitted. The officer's abuse of power resulted in Garner's untimely death (Almukhtar, et. al 2018).

Under the weight of these violence, and the deaths they occasion, an environment of terror is produced. This environment permeates and reverberates across the annals of American history, defining, in its wake, the parameters of black life to be anti-black violence and death. Though American society has progressed from slavery to segregation to integration, the undergirding logics of anti-blackness have remained steadily in place. The whipping (Aunt Hester), the lynching (Bennie Simmons), and now the killing of Blacks by the police (Eric Garner) are all interrelated acts of anti-black violence and death. Each instance of violence is reiteration of the prior, undergirded by the historic right of the slaver holder to harm and/or kill his or her slaves at will. Through this death right, anti-blackness cuts across the materialist progression of history. For, even if history moves forward, it moves forward cyclically with anti-blackness continuously resurging in formations that accommodate historical change. As such, all movements forward have also only been movement in place for the existence of black life. Anti-blackness is a rhizomatic matrix of terror that has conditioned black existence from slavery into today.

Historical Interventions, Theoretical Entanglements, and Poetic Exhaustion

In spite of the repetition of anti-blackness across time and space, black existence is not solely defined by and in violence and death. Blackness always exceeds the impulse of anti-black elimination. In response to the ceaseless imperilment and devaluation of black life, black communities and advocacy groups have developed to provide support and

protection for black lives. Black art forms and cultural practices have continued to prosper inside and outside of mainstream global culture regardless of it being said that Black culture has little or no value. Black individuals have experienced great success as political leaders, insurgents, artists, and business people despite the structural challenges of being black in a White-dominated world. Within this context, portrayals of blackness as nothing other than violence and death are misrepresentations that perpetuates a singular narrative of blackness. While it is necessary to recognize and address historic and current anti-black conditions, it must also be noted that a concentrated focus on the damnation of blackness perpetuates a singular model of blackness as denigration. Attention to black alterity, as a unification of black life-and-death, in the archives of blackness is thus necessary if we seek to exhaust the overrepresentation of black death in the narratives surrounding black existence.

While this thesis sees itself as a historical intervention into the archive of blackness, it is an intervention grounded, not in historical re(dis)covery, but in black poetry and black critical theory. Since the expulsion of blackness from the realm of the human is a result of the double-pronged material and ontological degradation of black existence, an onto-historical intervention is needed to address the uneven representation of black death in the archives. While historical re(dis)covery of African and Black traditions illuminates the veiled contributions and advancements of black life and culture, it seldom undoes past or present violences. For example, Afrocentrism gave blackness a glorious past but the future of black life has remained consistent. The Black is still the *damned*, or liminal

character, permanently cut off from the value and spoils of humanity.⁵ The conjoined theoretical apparatuses of Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism intervene in the archive of blackness by paradimensionally moving black existence beyond the production of history. As both a historical product and an ontological positionality, blackness echoes in excess of History. It internally moves through key historical developments while externally being locked outside of civil society. Both Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism recognize the invaginated positionality of blackness in American society. For, in a world constructed by humans, these theories are guided by the premise that blackness is out of time.

Alongside the rupture of blackness within and to history, black poetry works to exhaust the overdetermination of black life as nothing other than black death. By fostering alternative possibility within and against the historical and cultural knowledge at our disposal, black poetry invokes what has been lost in and to the passage of time. Black Studies Scholar, Fred Moten affirms the poetic as a radical site of historical intervention (2007). Through the insertion of the poetic into historical narration, the equilibrium created between thesis and antithesis is unraveled. The breakdown of these antipodes (represented here as the schisms (/) between history/poetics, fact/creativity, and historical action/ontological action) explodes dialectical history, generating a historical lyrical surplus. Moten names this surplus the “not-in-between” (2007, 1-27). Distinct from the synthesis of the dialectic, the not-in-between is an instantaneous and superpositional entanglement of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The product of this entanglement is the augmentation of the world as we know it. The archive of black ~~life~~, which is also black

⁵ The concept of black damnation is derived from Frantz Fanon. The term is a descriptive encapsulation of the positionality of blackness as the non-human, or representational antithesis of the human, who is signified by the White European Man.

death, is unmade through the creative possibilities of the onto-poetic, historical intervention, which blurs history into the theoretical, the theoretical into the poetic, and the poetic back into history.

As mentioned previously, the core theories of analysis are the twin apparatuses of Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism. Primary studies on the positionality of black life in American history have traditionally focused on the negation of black humanity and the systems and acts of violence there were produced in its aftermath. Examples of these studies include Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987), Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Frank B. Wilderson III's *Red, White & Black* (2010), and Calvin Warren's "Onticide" (2017).⁶ Collectively, these works have come to be housed under the critical framework of Afro-pessimism because of their focus on the creation and repetition of anti-blackness across time and space. As a consequence of blackness's irreconcilable absolute difference to and with the Human, the Black cannot be recuperated into humanity and will thus always be subject harm. As such, the only way forward for black life, under this framework, is through the identification and critique of anti-black structures and ideologies. However, with the publication of Fred Moten's

⁶ Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987) scrutinizes the thingification of black bodies that occurred during the transportation of black slaves across the Middle Passage. Through the un/naming of slaves as undifferentiated quantities in ship log books, Spillers' argues that black slaves were reduced to non-human commodities and so lost their reproductive rights and kinships ties. Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) focuses on quotidian acts of violence experienced by the slave. Hartman inverts liberal discourses, legalese, and scenes of amusement to argue that even seemingly innocent institutions were imbued with terror and violence. Frank B. Wilderson III's *Red, White & Black* (2010) posits that racial conflicts are a product of an irreconcilable and ontological difference between blackness and whiteness. While the white represents the settler, master, and human, the black is the slave and non-human. For Wilderson, these immutable subject positions are reproduced in film through staging, lighting, and narrative. Calvin Warren's "Onticide" (2017) explores the consequences of blackness's non-ontological positionality. Since the Black is the absolute other of humanity, Warren argues that ontological terminologies and distinctions (such as gender) are non-applicable to the Black. As a consequence of this indistinguishability, (all blackness is the same blackness), excessive violence committed against the black body cannot be registered.

“Black Op” (2008) in a special issue of the *PMLA*, a new avenue of analysis was created within Afro-pessimism. The ground of black negation has shifted to include black im/possibility under the umbrella of Black Optimism.⁷ Similar to Afro-pessimism, Black Optimism maintains the premise that blackness is structurally irrecoverable in a world dominated by the human. Yet, Black Optimism shifts this pain and exclusion into a site of possibility through the “own[ing] of one’s dispossession [i.e. blackness’s]” and the embracing of “the underprivilege of being sentenced to the gift of constant escape” (Moten 2008, 1745). More crudely put, within the framework of Black Optimism, black damnation is forced to inhabit itself to the point of invagination and exhaustion, wherein it is transformed into a space of positive, paradimensional black alterity. Through the fleeing of black life to this alterior, underground space, blackness becomes a product and site of black life-in-death.

As an invaginated term, Black life-in-death marks blackness’s blurred existence. The term pessimistically recognizes anti-blackness as a motivator of black existence; however, it optimistically invokes the multitudinal ways black life persists in spite of and because of logics of elimination ingrained during slavery and passed on through the ages. This thesis uses the terminology of black life-in-death to invoke Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism as conjoined critical apparatuses. While some scholars position Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism as distinct positionalities on black ontological negation, other

⁷ The term im/possibility is a combination of impossible and possible. It is meant to reference the endurance or possibility of black life amidst the relentless endangerment or impossibility of black existence. The form of the term invokes the inlayed/embedded/blurred/entangled nature of black life-an-death. In addition to im/possibility, other terms will be formulated similarly. The point of this formulation is to reference the inlayed/embedded/blurred/entangled nature of the term/concept.

scholars formulate these frameworks as one-in-the-same.⁸ In his work “The Social Life of Social Death,” Black Critical Theorist, Jared Sexton asks, “[can] the most radical negation of the anti-black world [be] the most radical affirmation of a blackened world” (2011, 37)? Both Sexton and Moten answer in the affirmative. For Sexton, Afro-pessimism can be nothing other than Black Optimism because blackness calls into being the world that negates it, which it must then address and call attention to in order to protect black life (2011, 36-7). Similarly, Moten states that a critique of anti-blackness is a celebration of blackness because black pain necessitates celebration while celebration remains a reminder of black pain— or, as Moten more strikingly writes: “It hurts so much that we have to celebrate. That we have to celebrate is what hurts so much” (2017, xiii). Through Sexton’s and Moten’s formulations, the distinctions between Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism blur. For this reason, I refuse any clear-cut distinctions between Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism. Though they are differently oriented to their object of critique (i.e. anti-blackness/Western Civilization) and subject of analysis (i.e. blackness), they are not distinct areas of analysis. Afro-pessimism undergirds Black Optimism and Black Optimism pushes Afro-pessimism into new fertile ground. However, if this work leans Black Optimist, it is because I aim to affirm black life, possibility, and celebration in and through black negation. Precarity and care are both part of the fabric of black existence. Moreover, in the context of blackness, precarity quickly morphs into care and vice versa.

⁸ Critical Race, Media Scholar, Charles Linscott (2017) argues that Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism are differently oriented to their object of critique. As such, they are similar but not interchangeable areas of study. While Afro-pessimism focuses on structural anti-blackness and Black death, Black Optimism emphasizes fugitivity and possibility in the face of anti-blackness (2007). For Linscott, these different orientations situate Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism as two sides of the same coin. They share the same object of critique; however, they are not one-in-the-same as is suggested by scholars like Jared Sexton and Fred Moten.

Accordingly, a strict distinction between Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism is unnecessary— And, anyways, this thesis is not invested in strict distinctions. Rather, it is positioned in and by theory that *blurs* or *swarms*.⁹

There is no grammar: No language that can capture blackness. History does not hold and precision gives ways to undone thought— to Black life, Black ~~life~~, Black death, Black life-and-death, and Black life-in-death. Chimerical to the point of exhaustion; blackness is exhaustive. It exhausts language and being and thought. However, exhaustion is productive. From exhaustion springs forth *other* languages, *other* thoughts, and *other* modes of beings. This work inhabits exhaustion while asking for care. —What is care in the wake of slavery and in the context of black study (Sharpe 2016, 5)? For Black Studies Scholar, Christina Sharpe, care in the wake is “Wake Work” – or as I prefer woke work. (Sharpe 2016, 1-22). In *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Sharpe characterizes wake work as the simultaneous inhabitation and rupture of the known and un/imaginable, of black death-in-life and life-in-death (1-22). As such, wake work is a Black Optimist analytic. It focuses on the exhaustion of antiblackness through black vigilance and consciousness, which are themselves two of the definitions Sharpe’s provides for the term “wake” definitions of wake (2016, 21). To ask for care thus means, we must be vigilant; we must protect; and, we must do what is necessary to exhaust the logics of anti-blackness. As such, this thesis proceeds with an ethos of care: Care for black life and the desire to

⁹ The concept of theory (Black theory) or study (Black Study) that blurs or swarms is derived from Moten’s trilogy *Consent not to be a single being*, which includes the works *Black and Blur* (2017), *Stolen Life* (2018), and *The Universal Machine* (2018). Behind this conception is the idea that blackness moves in excess of Western thought, which is conceptualized as pure thought that moves linearly and logically.

think black survival and growth in and against anti-blackness: Care as a critical method:
and, Care as the heart of the onto-poetic, historical intervention.

In the next chapter, I read Elizabeth Alexander's fourth collection of poems *American Sublime* (2005a) as an onto-poetic, historical intervention into the archive of blackness.¹⁰ Through the apparatuses of black death, black alterity, and black vigilance and care, Alexander's *American Sublime* functions as an instantaneous and superpositional poetic intervention that entangles history and exhausts theory to provide care as a rupture to and of this world. To prove this point, this chapter will move through the works "Absence," "The *Amistad* Trail," "American Blue," "Smile," and "Tina Green." "Absence" and "The *Amistad* Trail" are derived from Alexander's "*Amistad*" sequence. In "Absence," Alexander writes of moans that transform into notes to become a "new blue await[ing] on the other shore" ([-ed] changed to [-ing]) (2005a, 63). I interpret the "new blue" of the rebels' moans as a reference to the sorrows and tribulations black slaves

¹⁰ Elizabeth Alexander is a highly celebrated African American poet, educator, and cultural advocate. She has been the president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation since 2018 and is currently a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Alexander's poetry collections include, but are not limited to, *The Venus Hottentot* (1992), *Antebellum Dream Book* (2001), and *American Sublime* (2005). Most notably, Alexander was chosen in 2009 as President Obama's inaugural poet. She composed and performed "Praise Song for the Day" for President Obama's inauguration (<http://www.elizabethalexander.net/new-page-1>).

Her work *American Sublime* is comprised of four poetic sequences. Comprised of four poetic sequences, in sum, Alexander's *American Sublime* lays bare the black bodies covered over by expansionist dreams of American grandeur and splendor. The first section of Alexander's collection, titled "American Blue," sets up this argument by detailing the expansive political and personal landscape of black experiences from post-emancipation America to today. Themes of this section include freedom, motherhood, police brutality, racism, and childhood. The second section, known as "Ars Poetica," makes the argument that poetry can be used as catalysis for political and cultural advocacy. According to Alexander, poetry is capable of producing social and civil change because it intimates real, human life (2005a, 56). The third section, "Amistad," covers the *Amistad* rebellion and trails from the perspective of the captives. Moreover, it foregrounds the rebels' affective, psychic, and physical states of being from the inception of their rebellion to their memorialization in history. The last section titled "American Sublime" takes its namesake from the title of the collection. Only two poems long, this sequence is the most overt critique of the American fantasy of the frontier, which willingly produced the erasure of Black life and pain in the narratives of American history.

endured in the Americas. Simultaneously, the rebels' "new blue" references the sequence title "American Blue." In my study of the title "American Blue," I discuss how blue textually and conceptually modifies America into an alternative space of black life-in-death. Finally, the poems "Smile" and "Tina Green" highlight the balance between precarity and care (i.e. black life-and-death) in the context of "American Blue." "Smile" tackles this topic through the theme of police brutality while "Tina Green" provides a reflection on the challenges of black girlhood through hair. Both "Smile" and "Tina Green" highlight black precarity giving way to black care and love.

CHAPTER II

CONCLUSION: PARADIMENSIONAL BLACKNESS IN BLUES HUES AND LYRIC FORMS

History

On the morning of July 2, 1839, Cinqué, Faquorna, Moru, and Kimbo each quietly escaped from the chains that kept them locked in the slave quarters of the Spanish schooner *La Amistad*. Making their way to the main deck, these men collected belaying pins and barrel staves to use in their fight for liberation. They began their revolt by bludgeoning the mulatto cook, who had threatened to eat them, to death. Inspired by the four men's courage, the remaining captives soon joined their revolt. Together, they gathered the cane knives on board the ship to use in defense of their freedom. As the rebels approached the *Amistad* crew, two of the guardsmen jumped into the ocean out of fear. The remaining guardsmen stayed and were killed. The rebels' owners, José Ruiz and Pedro Montes, were captured and locked below deck. The rebels' rebellion ended in success.

Determined now to return to their homelands in the Mende Country of southern Sierra Leone, the *Amistad* rebels enlisted Montes to steer the schooner back home. However, fearing for his life, Montes secretly keep the *Amistad* floating in the waters near the Caribbean and North American coast. Montes would steer eastward towards Africa during the day, and west and northward towards the Caribbean Islands and North America at night. August 24, 1839, the *Amistad* was captured off Culloden Point, Long Island by Lt. Gedney and Lt. Meade of the *U.S. Brig Washington* (Barber 1969, 3-4; Rediker 2012, 2).

Following the *Amistad's* capture, the rebels were imprisoned and transported to New London, Connecticut.

Over the course of nineteen months, the *Amistad* rebels underwent three trials to determine their status as either free born Africans or legal slaves. Their first trial, held before the circuit court of Hartford, concluded that the case was outside of their jurisdiction. The second trial, presided over by Judge Judson of the Connecticut District Court, ruled that “the *Amistad* rebels were “born free”” and should therefore be returned to their homelands (qtd. in Walters 2010, 1041). Their final trial, administered before the U.S. Supreme Court, upheld the decision of the Connecticut District Court. The *Amistad* rebels had at last won their legal freedom. They boarded the sailing ship *Gentleman* to return to their homelands in November of 1841 (Rediker 2012, 3, 215).

The *Amistad* rebels' left the United States lauded as heroes in both abolitionist and slave communities. These communities had hoped the rebels' victory would lead to the end of chattel slavery in the United States. Unfortunately, it did not. Instead, interest in the *Amistad* rebellion waned. By the Civil War, the *Amistad* case was all but a forgotten memory in many of America's white communities (Rediker 2012, 4). However, the memory of the *Amistad* was kept alive in the margins by communities of black slaves and freed-peoples. Through the 60s and 70s, the *Amistad* story continued to be preserved in the margins by black activists seeking to recast history from below. Then, in 1997, Steven Spielberg released his film adaptation of the *Amistad* case. Spielberg's film reignited interest in the rebels' narratives. Yet, mainstream narratives of the *Amistad* case, including Spielberg's, remained largely focused on the magnanimity of the American legal

system over the heroism of the rebels. Consequently, the rebels' stories have been overshadowed by the focus on White integrity, nationalism, and exceptionalism.

In contradistinction to these popular representations, Contemporary African American poet Elizabeth Alexander shifts the focus of the *Amistad* case away from the American legal system and onto the rebels themselves. Alexander offers a dynamic representation of the rebels' narratives by writing through and beyond the archive of the *Amistad*. In her work, Alexander frames the rebels' as complex historical actors versus overdetermined historical figures. For example, she complicates Cinque's depiction in the archive by featuring juxtaposing representation of him in the poems "Waiting for Cinque to Speak" and "Cinque Redux." In the poem "Waiting for Cinque to Speak," Alexander describes his life before he became a slave. She writes: Cinque grew rice; he amassed debt; and, to settle those debts, he was taken into slavery. Nevertheless, he was grateful that it was he who was enslaved and not his daughter or son (2005a, 83).¹¹ In contrast to this

¹¹ "Waiting For Cinque to Speak" is the 21st poem in Alexander's "*Amistad*" sequence (2005a, 83). The poem is partially reproduced below.

Waiting For Cinque to Speak

Having tried,

Having tried, having failed,

having raised rice
that shimmered green, green,
having planted and threshed.

Having been a man, having sired children,
having raised my rice, having amassed a bit of debt,
having done nothing remarkable.

//

Having amassed debt, I was taken to settle that debt.
(Not enough rice in the shimmering green.)
Better me than my daughter or son. (I was strong.)

fatherly and gentle representation of Cinque, Alexander describes him as a “bad motherfucker” in the poem “Cinque Redux” (2005a, 85).¹² This description of Cinque is the Cinque of the historical record— the insurgent, “upstart, rebel, rabble-rouser, leader” who “flaunted [his] gleam and spring,” who did not smile,” and who “never forgot (2005a, 85). For better or worse, this second representation overdetermines who Cinque is thought to be in the annals of Black/American history. However, the two poems together portray a more complex and multidimensional character. In Alexander’s poems, Cinque simultaneously is hero, slave, rebel, farmer, father, and warrior. The poetic allows Alexander to reinvigorate history by complicating its’ stagnant historical representations. As such, her poems awaken black narratives that affectively, psychically, and physically transcend the limits of the archive.

¹² “Cinque Redux” is the 23rd poem in Alexander’s “*Amistad*” sequence (2005a, 85). The poem is partially reproduced below.

Cinque Redux

I will be called motherfucker.
I will be venerated.
I will be misremembered.
I will be Seng-Pieh, Cinqueze, Joseph,
and end up CINQUE.

I will be remembered
as an upstart, rebel, rabble-rouser, leader.
My name will be taken by black men...

//

Yes I drew my hand across my throat
in the courtroom, at that cur Ruiz
to hex his thieving, killing self.
Yes I flaunted my gleam and spring.
No I did not smile.
No I never forgot...

Theory

This chapter draws upon Alexander's writerly complexity to make the argument that her poetry disrupts a singular representation of blackness. The primary claim supporting this argument is that black bodily sound is a medium of historical exhaustion. By creating a sonic continuity between the past and present, "American Blue" and "*Amistad*," Alexander's collection highlights the repetition of black death across time while also making room for the endurance of black life. This argument is achieved through a conjoining of Afro-pessimism/Black Optimism with the sonic resonances of Alexander's poetry. While, on the one hand, Alexander's poetry pessimistically recognizes bodily sound as linked to anti-black violence and death; on the other, it optimistically locates bodily sound as a generative force of *otherwise* black existence. Ashon T. Crawley, author of *Blackpentecostal Breath* (2016), activates the term *otherwise* to reference alternative options, existences, and possibilities for the ontology of the Black non/being. As discussed previously, the excision of blackness from the realm of the human puts into question the humanity of the Black. Resultantly, the Black is defined through negation—by what blackness lacks or is not versus by what blackness is or could be. In Alexander's collection, black bodily sound is a generative force of existence, even as it is a signifier of negation. Through the upending of (Western) ontology, black bodily sound reformulates otherness-as-death into otherness-as-im/possibility.

Black bodily sound is defined in this chapter as inarticulate sound produced out of or from the black body like non/musical notes, including moans, cries, shrieks, and screams. Scholarly stances on black bodily sound range from locating it as a site of anti-black terror to positioning it as a site of anti-ontological resistance. Through a study of

Aunt Hester's whipping, literary scholar, David Messmer asserts a negative positionality on black bodily sound (2007) Messmer maintains that Aunt Hester's cries reinforce her chattel status. He observes that by whipping Hester both to make her scream and to make her hush the Captain controls when and how Hester produces sound. For this reason, Messmer insists that Hester's cries lack discursive agency and authority (2007). What Messmer misses in his reading of Aunt Hester's cries though is the affirmative possibilities of bodily sound. Fred Moten challenges Messmer's reading of Aunt Hester's screams by inverting Karl Marx's theory of the speaking commodity (2003, 1-24). Though Marx presumes the commodity cannot speak, Moten disputes Marx's claim by asking: *how then does Aunt Hester scream* (2003, 1-24)? As a commodity, she should have no inherent value (i.e. being) before exchange. Nonetheless, Moten contends that Aunt Hester's cries resist objectification because they access a pre-ontological and non-material value before exchange (2003, 1-24). In other words, Aunt Hester's cries resist Marx's skepticism through the im/possibility of their articulation. Though they communicate non-meaningfully or rather non-discursively, Hester's cries manifest the pain of her material existence. In communicating this pain, her cries assert her inherent being against the structural erasure of her humanity.

The poems in Alexander's collection site of the juncture of these two sonic stances. To support this positionality, this chapter asserts that blackness exists paradimensionally through connections and continuities created between Alexander's "*Amistad*" and "American Blue" poetic sequences. The temporal relationship between these two sequences is one of passage through time and cultural history. In doing so, Alexander refutes the idea that the poetic historical narrative can simply be thought of as historical

documentation or reiteration. Rather, the poetic, as it is presented in *American Sublime*, is a living archive that ramifies through time as an embodied representation of what it means to be black and live blackness. The backwards movement of these sequences from now to then to before thus disrupts the historical. The clear-cut distinctions between the past and present are confounded as the present opens up into the past while the past moves with the present. Alexander's collection capitalizes on this temporal formation to argue that black alterity is shaped by historical formations of anti-blackness that originate in slavery and continue today. However, in recognizing History as never just historical, Alexander's *American Sublime* makes room for the subversion of black death in the archives and in present time. By asserting black care within, against, and beside the recurrence of black death, Alexander's *American Sublime*, and in particular, her "American Blue" sequence, exceed and defy the overrepresentation of anti-blackness as the predominant representation of black life.

Poetry

Blackness

On the deck of the *Amistad*, the rebels lay emaciated.¹³ It is after the success of their rebellion. It is after the success of their rebellion. There is no landmass in sight and

¹³ "Absence" is the third poem in Alexander's "*Amistad*" sequence (2005a, 63). It details the physical, spiritual, and psychological deterioration of the rebels' after their rebellion. Death and despair characterize the tone and mood of the poem. "Absence" is reproduced below into its full and original form.

Absence

In the absence of women on board,
when the ship reached the point where no landmass
was visible in any direction and the funk had begun to accrue—
human funk, spirit funk, soul funk—who

they have been at sea for approximately three months (2005a, 63).¹⁴ Death appears imminent: the likelihood of their return home decreases every day; and, in equal measure, their melancholia and sea sickness grow. Their bowels growl; their stomachs roll; and, their hearts thump frantically (2005a, 63). They are surrounded by funk – “human funk, spirit funk, soul funk” (2005a, 63). In reaction to the funk that surrounds them, they instinctually and physically begin to moan. Their moans are a “deep” blue sung in “gnarled harmony” (2005a, 63). They transverse the ocean and reach the shores of the Americas in anticipation of the rebels’ arrival. They foretell of suffering “await[ing] on the other shore” [-ed changed to -ing] (2005a, 63). Reverberating between the sea and land, the rebels’ moans are a collective expression of injury across time and space. While they anticipate the rebels’ future sorrow and express their present grief, their moans also summon the cumulative catastrophe of slavery in their harkening to the Blues. Through the active emptying of the rebels’ physical life and spiritual anima, their moans are transformed into blue notes, which hold in their sound a genealogy of black pain and disenfranchisement. The collective pain of this sound invokes the rebels’ status as otherworldly beings excised

commenced the moaning? Who first hummed that deep
sound from empty bowel, roiling stomachs,
from back of the frantically thumping heart?
In the absence of women, of mothers,
who found the note that would soon be called “blue,”
the first blue note from one bowel, one throat,
join by dark others in gnarled harmony.
Before the head-rag, the cast-iron skillet,
new blue awaited on the other shore,
invisible, as yet unhummed. Who knew
what note to hit or how? In the middle
of the ocean, in the absence of women,
there is no deeper deep, no bluer blue.

¹⁴ This estimate includes the rebels’ initial transportation to Havana, Cuba, which took about 2 months, plus the time they spent at sea before being captured off Culloden Point, Long Island.

from the field of the human. On the border of life and death, being and non/being, the rebels are ghostly: they are as much bodily beings as they are sonic specters. Their moans mark the ship as a haunted, liminal space. A floating coffin, the *Amistad* is a zone of nonbeing, which Fanon has described as an arid, hostile, and sterile region.¹⁵ Enveloped in death and absent of women, the *Amistad* is devoid of (pro)generative possibility. Biological life and physical futurity are at a loss on the ship. The *Amistad* rebels cannot extend their lives through biological reproduction nor can they be recuperated into the zone of the human. Lost at sea, only blue spirits remain as reminders of the rebels' past, present, and future experiences of violence and pain.

Outside of space and outside of time, the rebels' moans continue to haunt American life. They reappear displaced from their point of origin in the physical memorialization of the *Amistad* case. In the poem "The *Amistad* Trail," Alexander details the historical tour of the *Amistad* branch of The Connecticut Freedom Trail.¹⁶ The tour includes visits to the

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon describes two zones of being in both *Wretched of the Earth* (2004) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008). The first is the realm of the human, wherein the humanity of man [sic.] is fully recognized. The second is a zone of nonbeing. In a zone of nonbeing, the inherent dignity and value of the inhabitant is denied. Devoid of these life-affirming attributes, zones of nonbeing are characterized by rampant crime, death and disease. Classically, Fanon applied the term zone of nonbeing to British post-colonies, where exploitation of native inhabitants and the land produced overwhelming gaps between colonized and colonizer. Fanon's concept of zones of nonbeing has since been used to describe to other sites of extreme disenfranchisement like ghettos and slums. When part of a zone of nonbeing, the inhabitants are made into walking representations of its negative qualities. Blackness becomes equivocal to degradation and danger. As such, the Black recursively drops out of the field of the human without the possibility of recuperation. The *Amistad* becomes a zone of nonbeing because it locates the rebels within a non-biologically reproductive and so subhuman space.

¹⁶ "The *Amistad* Trail" is the 22nd poem in Alexander's "*Amistad*" sequence (2005a, 84). The poem is reproduced below into its full and original form.

The *Amistad* Trail

The *Amistad* Trail bus
leaves from the commuter parking lot,
Exit 37 off Highway 84.
There is interest in this tale.

houses where the *Amistad* girls stayed as well as excursions into “Cinque’s room, /the Farmington church where they learned /to pray...[and] Foote’s grave” (2005a, 84). By physically memorializing the *Amistad* case in the *Amistad* Trail, the State Historic Preservation Office of Connecticut honors (and monetizes) the tribulations and successes of Black slaves. The good, as Alexander notes, is in the interest and care invested in preserving sites that represent “black fighting back, [and] white helping black” (2005a, 84). Conversely, the bad is “the fact of it, [the] price of the ticket, /the footnote, the twist, and the rest” (2005a, 84). Though there is dignity in honoring marginalized pasts, memorialization is a preservation that functions ambiguously in the archive of Black/American History. Memorialization of historic anti-slavery events honors but does not end the cumulative sorrow of Black history. By preserving the rebels’ trials and success in the present, the rebels’ moans are repeated in the necessary celebration of a painful history put on constant display. The final lines of Alexander’s poem, which read, “The verse will not resolve. /The blues that do not end,” communicate the futility of

See where the girls lived while waiting
for the boat to sail home, see Cinque’s room,
the Farmington church where they learned
to pray to Jesus, Foone’s grave.

Good things: eventual justice, John Quincy Adams,
black fighting back, white helping black.
Bad things: the fact of it, price of the ticket,
the footnote, the twist, and the rest—

Done took my blues
Done took my blues and

—the good and the bad of it.
Preach it: learn. Teach it: weep.

Done took my blues.
Done took my blues and gone.
The verse will not resolve.
The blues that do not end.

putting the past to rest (2005a, 84). In their content, these closing lines announce the unending nature of the rebels' sorrow; and, in their form, they manifest their content by returning to blue – to the blue moans on board the ship and the blue ocean with “no landmass in sight” (2005a, 63). In the poem's final return to blue, Alexander cautions against acceptance of a false closure and reparation of the past. Her poem highlights the cyclical refrain of anti-blackness despite the social and cultural progression of American life. Through the *Amistad* Trail, the rebels' moans return to haunt the present by transforming everything to blue.

Blue

Blue is the sound of the moans that haunt— a signifier of black sorrow and black negation. Blue is the netherworld location of the *Amistad* in the ocean— the Middle Passage, where black bodies thrown overboard turned into sea. Blue is the memorialization of anti-blackness in the archives, black poetry, black history, and the fabric of American society. Black invokes blue as the negative manifestation of black existence— black death, black pain, and black precarity. However, blue is also a site of black alterity. Despite and in spite of blackness's damnation, black life exceeds the impulse of anti-black elimination. For, “in the absence of women,” on board the ship, blue moans act as a site of sonic regeneration (2005a, 63). They extend and modify the world of America, transforming it into a generative, if also precarious, “American Blue.” Made into blue, America becomes a product of the rebels' blue moans. Their pain is transfixed into life-in-death and their blackness gives way to alternative creation. In contradiction to the White Christian narrative of the world's creation, America is birthed not in the image of a singular white

deity but on the backs of black bodies. The reformulation of America's birth from whiteness to blackness disrupts the predominant archetypes of black existence. Though, historically, blackness has become synonymous with violence and death, the rebels' blue moans shift blackness from a site of death to blackness as a site of potent (re)production. As the rebels' moans were transformed into blue notes, blue sea, and blue sorrow so too are they are unmade and remade into the blue landscape of American life. Through the rebels' moans, blackness is shifted to the center of creation and blue becomes the ground of possibility for all human life and alterior existence.¹⁷ Alternative ways of living and being black within and against forms of black precarity are thus precipitated in the rebels' exhaustive interplay of blue and black, life and death, American and Blue.

Blue-Black

A black man stands across the street.¹⁸ He has been stopped by a police officer. "With both hands visible," he nods and smiles (2005a, 7). He responds politely: "Yes,

¹⁷ Alterior here is not a misspelling of ulterior. I use alterior as the adjective form of alterity.

¹⁸ "Smile" is the fourth poem in Alexander's "American Blue" sequence (2005a, 7). The poem is reproduced below into its full and original form.

Smile

When I see a black man smiling
like that, nodding and smiling
with both hands visible, mouthing

"Yes, Officer," across the street,
I think of my father, who taught us
the words "cooperate," "officer,"

to memorize badge numbers,
who has seen black men shot at
from behind in the warm months north.

Officer” (2005a, 7). He acts cooperatively while quietly memorizing the officer’s badge number (2005a, 7). At the same time, another black man leaves a bar. A woman with cotton candy hair clutches his arm (2005a, 7). She holds onto him “...as if /for her life” (2005a, 7). He smiles “...and his eye are flint /as he watches all sides of the street” (2005a, 7). The speaker looks on. She sees the black man stopped by the police officer.¹⁹ She recalls tough lessons taught to her by her father: cooperate or be shot (2005a, 7). She continues to reminisce on the difference between “*obsequious* and *safe*” (2005a, 7). She sees the couple leave the bar. She is vigilant in her observations. She watches the street carefully as the others watch her. All are alert to the precarity that surrounds them. Their watchfulness, hidden behind smiles, is protection.

American/Blue is a precarious space. Black life is not guaranteed. Instead, it is under threat by men in blue uniforms. While the blue of their police suits signals trust, truth, and confidence in the context of White American life, the significance of their presence is inverted in proximity to black bodies. The police have been conditioned to see

And I think of the fine line—
hairline, eyelash, fingernail pairing—
the whisper that separates

obsequious from *safe*. Armstrong,
Johnson, Robinson, Mays.
A woman with a yellow head

of cotton candy hair stumbles out
of a bar at after-lunchtime
clutching a black man’s arm as if

for her life. And the brother
smiles, and his eye are flint
as he watches all sides of the street.

¹⁹ The gender of the speaker is not stated in “Smile.” I chose the pronoun she because I think of Alexander as the speaker. The speaker could also be male or identify as LGBTQ+.

blackness as a threat. Two-hundred and five black lives were taken by the police in 2019: two-hundred and twenty-nine black lives were taken by the police in 2018: two-hundred and twenty-three black lives were taken by the police in 2017 (*The Washington Post*).²⁰ Across these three years, the endangerment of black lives has remained consistent at 23% of the total number of people shot and/or killed by the police (*The Washington Post*). As stewards of American civil society, the police are responsible for containing the danger, imagined or otherwise, that black bodies present to American life. The product of their responsibility, which is itself a repackaging of the slave catcher and overseer's right, is an excess of violence used when needed and an abuse of power when black men and black boy are unarmed and compliant. The smiles of the black men in Alexander's poem thus aim to disarm the officer(s) present. Fearing for their lives, the black men must act compliant. Their smiles present them as unthreatening and cooperative. They assuage the officers' unease and suggest to them that their lives are not under threat. The irony is of course that the officers were never under threat. The black men however live in constant danger. The line that divides "obsequious from safe" is bodily and racial—the "hairline, eyelash, fingernail pairing" separate black bodies from civil society (2005a, 7). It is this line that police walk when determining friend from foe and criminal from civilian. Black lives are not safe within American/Blue because their blackness marks them as deviant. Their skin locates them outside of the protection of the police and on the other side of the ethical line that divides safety from death.

²⁰ These statistics are derived from *The Washington Post's* yearly database on police shootings in America. The databases for 2017-2019 can be accessed through the following links.

2017: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2017/>

2018: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/police-shootings-2018/>

2019: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/national/police-shootings-2019/>

If cooperation cannot guarantee protection, how then do black men survive? The inversion of the black men's "cooperation" is the community that develops to protect them (2005a, 7). The precarity of the black men calls into action the vigilance of all surrounding black bodies. The speaker, the woman with cotton candy hair, and the two black men create a makeshift community. The goal of this temporary community is to provide each other with support and protection against anti-black violence and racism. Though the speaker acts as the narrator of the poem, she is also a witness. She records the scene: she gives voice the black men's actions and fears. She reveals the subtext of the interactions between whiteness and blackness that take place on the streets. She protects the black men by divulging the precarity of the scene, which would otherwise appear as a trivial and commonplace scene. The woman with cotton candy hair protects the black man she clings to even as he seeks to protect her. His eyes are fire "as he watches all sides of the street (2005a, 7). He is alert and prepared to defend her life. No doubt, though, she is also prepared to give her life. Walking in close proximity to him, the woman is a shield. She can warn him of danger while maintaining an appearance of innocence and simplicity. If need be, she can even pull him away from danger or act as a barrier against attacks. Her vigilance is understated; but, in its own way, it plays a crucial role in the black men's survival. While their actions are scrutinized, the women are free to act stealthily to protect black lives. The comradeship that is created between the speaker, the woman, and the black men is a product of blackness's precarious positionality: black life is not protected in American/Blue. Yet, it survives through the development of communities of care. These communities transform American/Blue into an undercommons— or, site where black life flees for survival, resistance, growth, and care (Harney and Moten 2013). The smiles and

acts of cooperation by the speaker, woman, and black men are quotidian resistances.

Quietly, their actions betray their cooperation; and, in doing so, they open up

American/Blue to the possibility of black life(-in-death).

Though black men and boys have been the primary targets of the most overt cases of anti-black violence, the precarity of black life spans heteronormative gender distinctions.²¹ Black women and black girls are also subject to acts of anti-blackness. In the poem “Tina Green,” a pre-adolescent black girl is teased about her hair (2005a, 9)²² She is

²¹ Black life is endangered whether a person identifies as Male, Female, or LGBTQ+. I only mention heteronormative because this paragraph reflects on black female precarity while the prior paragraph discusses black male precarity. Alexander’s *American Sublime* does not seem to contain any poems with LGBTQ+ speakers or poetic actor. For this reason, this work focuses on the construction of precarity and care in regards to black males and females.

²² “Tina Green” is the 6th poem in Alexander’s “American Blue” sequence (2005a, 9). The poem is reproduced below into its full and original form.

Tina Green

Small story, hair story, Afro-American story,
only-black-girl-in-my-class story,
pre-adolescence story, black-teacher story.

“Take your hair out,” they beg on the playground,
the cool girls, the straight-and-shiny-hair girls,
the girls who can run.

“Take your hair out,” they say.

It is Washington hot, we are running, I do,
and it swells, snatches up at the nape, levitates,

woolly universe, knotting fleece zeppelin, run.
So, I do, into school, to the only black teacher
I’ll have until college, the only black teacher

I’ve had to that point, the only black teacher
to teach at that school full of white people
who (tell the truth) I love, the teacher that I love,

whose name I love, whose hair I love,
takes me into the teacher’s bathroom and wordlessly
fixes my hair, perfectly, wordlessly

fixes my hair into three tight plaits.

asked by a group of young white girls with “straight-and-shiny-hair” to take her hair out (2005a, 9). She complies— but, it is “Washington hot” and they are running so her hair “...swells, snatches up at the nape, [and] levitates” (2005a, 9). Embarrassed, Tina Green runs to the only black teacher at her all white school. The teacher takes her to the teacher’s bathroom and wordlessly fixes her hair (2005a, 9). Even as it should not be, Tina Green’s hair is a site of pain. Historically, black hair has been policed in American society and used as a point of discrimination and judgement. Cultural black hairstyles mark black bodies as other by recalling the condemned status of the Black. Tina Green’s hair thus designates her as different than the white girls. It positions her as uncool and unable. While the “cool” white girls can run, Tina Green is imprisoned by and in her blackness (2005a, 9). Her physical freedom is limited by the frizzing of her hair, which singles her out as different amongst the white girls and perhaps even causes her to be reprimanded by her white teachers. Her future is conditioned by the frizzing of her hair; Tina Green will not be given the same developmental opportunities as the white girls because of her blackness. Her sense of self and self-esteem are stunted by the frizzing of her hair; through the white gaze, Tina Green is reminded that she is other and unbeautiful. At her predominantly white school, few understand her plight. This lack of community amplifies the psychological harm that is produced from being classified as other. Tina Green is not offered the protection of childhood. She is left unprotected by the white teachers at her school, who interpret the white girls’ teasing as harmless. The joviality of her childhood is inflected by the precarity of her blackness.

Yet, black care arises even in precarity. Tina Green’s vulnerability necessitates and anticipates the black teacher’s care. Her teacher instinctively recognizes Tina Green’s

precarity. So, wordlessly, she fixes Tina Green's hair (2005a, 9). No words need to be spoken in the silence between them. The silence of their interaction heightens the emotional exchange. The exchange of care between Tina, who loves and admires her teacher, and her teacher, who protects and mothers her student, quells the torment and tears that echo in the first half of the poem. The intimacy that is created between the two temporarily defers their environment of precarity. The teacher's restroom becomes a site of refuge. As a space of authority, it shelters Tina from the jeers of her peers and judgements of her white teachers. As a space of intimacy, it allows Tina's teacher to privately do what needs to be done. Through the blossoming of black care, the teacher's restroom is transformed into an undercommons. Tina and her teacher are paradimensionally pulled out of normative society and put into this otherwise space, where linear time is suspended. Tina's story is not new. As Alexander writes, Tina Green's story is the "Afro-American story, / [the] only-black-girl-in-my-class story, / [the] pre-adolescence story, [the] black-teacher story" (citation). As such, the beginning of Alexander's poem— "the black-teacher story— foretells the ending while the closure returns us to the beginning. Alongside acts of anti-blackness, Tina's story repeats. But, just as anti-blackness resurges across time so does black care. Tina and the teacher's exchange of love is immortalized. It repeats across history along with anti-blackness to remind readers of the capacity of black love and life.

Instantaneous and Superpositional Poetry

"But a poem is a living thing

made by living creatures
(live voice in a small box)

and as life

it is all that can stand

up to violence.”

— “Ars Poetica #1,002: Rally” in *American Sublime* (Alexander 2005a, 36)

In sonic blues and lyric forms, Alexander’s poetry intervenes in the archive of blackness. Her work exhausts the archive through the sonic transformation of America into American Blue. The rebels’ moans, which move inside/outside of time and space, make this transfiguration possible— They and their moans are blue in all of blue’s transformations. In this way, the rebels’ and their moans are carried across *American Sublime*. They echo in the poems of “*Amistad*” and “American Blue,” which are un/made through the rebels’ moans. Similarly, Alexander’s poems un/make American life (in real time). Her work is unlimited and unbounded. As a collection, Alexander’s poems complicate popular representations and meanings of black existence; and as living things, they extend beyond the page to alter history and its attendant current realities. For, if in the scenes of “Smile” or “Tina Green” we once only saw black pain or black precarity, we are made aware of alternative possibilities in and through Alexander’s visionary care. Though anti-blackness has a tangibility to it that registers as overwhelming and “factual,” black care persists alongside precarity. As such, ontological damnation cannot extinguish black life; it only makes it otherwise.

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