

# LOOKING FOR M —

## Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future

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In his conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon uses the well-known quotation by Karl Marx from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Fanon's version reads,

The social revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped itself of all its superstitions concerning the past. Earlier revolutions relied on memories out of world history in order to drug themselves against their own content. In order to find their own content the revolutions of the nineteenth century have had to let the dead bury their dead. Before, the expression exceeded the content; now, the content exceeds the expression.<sup>1</sup>

Fanon's choice of this oft-cited quotation substantiates the claim he makes in the conclusion of *Black Skin, White Masks* that the problem he considers there, created by the psychopathologies of colonialism, is one of time. As an epigraph to that conclusion, Marx's well-known formulation of the organization of time within the proletarian movement of the nineteenth century calls attention to Fanon's own interest in exploding the temporality of the colonial mode of representation of otherness and in revealing a temporality that raises the possibility of the impossible within colonial reality, black liberation. Elsewhere I have explored what Fanon's emphasis on the temporality of the black and blackness means for studies of the black image in cinema.<sup>2</sup> Here, I return to the temporality Fanon invokes in order to follow another relevant line of flight from it—one that opens through his citation of Marx's notion of "poetry from the future"—and to consider what thinking that formulation at the conjunction of contemporary con-

structions of “race” and “sexuality” might offer black cultural studies and queer theory now.

For if “poetry from the future” remains a viable formulation of what is required to effect a radical break with the past—a rupture from within history that also breaks from history—then three very different films, *Looking for Langston* (dir. Isaac Julien; 1989), *Brother to Brother* (dir. Rodney Evans; 2004), and *The Aggressives* (dir. Daniel Peddle; 2005), offer us ways to think such a presently impossible possibility from within our historical conjuncture. In this essay, I refer to *Brother to Brother* and *Looking for Langston* briefly and focus my comments primarily on *The Aggressives*. In what follows, I think through *The Aggressives* in order to articulate something that exceeds its expression in that film. Engaging with the film in this way inevitably produces a surplus, one that cannot be seen or understood but is nevertheless present as “affect.”

I use the term *affect* in the sense of what is felt as a present sensation in or on one’s body, a usage I adapt from the work of Gilles Deleuze. In his books on cinema, Deleuze relies on Henri Bergson’s definition of *affect* as “a motor tendency on a sensitive nerve.”<sup>3</sup> In Deleuze’s Bergsonian formulation, affect marks the body’s seemingly unproductive effort to respond to stimulation. Most commonly, we talk about affect as a feeling or an emotion, but it is important to think about affect also as involving the mental activity required to make sense of the world. To highlight the active dimensions of affect, those that require an expenditure of time and effort, I follow Marcia Landy’s use of *affectivity* to mark “a form of labor expended in the consumption of cinematic images, in the enterprise of voluntarily offering up our lives as ‘free contributions to capitalist power;’” and I expand that term to define a form of labor that sentient bodies use to constitute themselves as such through interactions with other phenomena.<sup>4</sup> Insofar as affectivity accesses our individual past experiences and the forms of common sense we have forged over time (even when it breaks the sensory-motor link that chains us to the past), it has both subjective and collective elements to it.

This formulation of affect and affectivity is important to my project here because it underscores the extent to which our efforts to assimilate that which moves us are bound to the ethico-political context of our times and available to capital and its normative structures of command, as well as to the related yet distinct operations we know as racism, homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia, among others. At the same time, it points toward the ways that whatever escapes recognition, whatever escapes meaning and valuation, exists as an impossible possibility within our shared reality, however that reality is described theoretically, and therefore threatens to unsettle, if not destroy, the common senses on which

that reality relies for its coherence as such. I understand Marx's phrase "poetry from the future" as a way to mark just such an impossible possibility. It is a formal ("poetry," with its associated lyricism and fragmentation) and temporal ("from the future") disruption, which functions primarily at the level of affect in ways that resist narration and qualitative description. It is a felt presence of the unknowable, the content of which exceeds its expression and therefore points toward a different epistemological, if not ontological and empirical, regime.

In this essay, I seek to remain aware of what in *The Aggressives* escapes attempts to contain it yet nonetheless can be felt and perceived even though—or especially if—it remains unrecognizable or unintelligible to our current common senses. Attempts to contain it include the processes of recognition, narrative, and other formal devices in the film, and the current logics and categories of cultural criticism, among others. We can think of what escapes these operations as the content that exceeds its expression, that through which poetry from the future might be perceived yet not recognized. The danger in tarrying with the surplus is that we will fall into a habitual reception of sensory experiences and information, reifying the collective narratives of the past and celebrating their expressions, drugging ourselves to the present content of what moves us. Poetry from the future interrupts the habitual formation of bodies, and it is an index of a time to come in which what today exists potently—even if not (yet) effectively—but escapes us will find its time.

By way of two other black queer films, *Looking for Langston* and *Brother to Brother*, the remainder of this essay considers what Peddle's documentary *The Aggressives* offers to a project that thinks the temporal structures of blackness and queerness in conjunction with one another and, hence, understands that the politics thought proper to each are inseparable from those of the other. Interested in thinking black politics as queer politics and vice versa, I want to authorize a set of connections between them through exploring the temporalities thought to inform each. "The future" is at stake here, and it hinges, as I show, on looking and on the labor "poetry" and its affects might perform.

Of course, any invocation of the future among academics familiar with recent contributions to queer theory inevitably enters the debate about queer temporality that swirls around Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.<sup>5</sup> I understand Edelman's claims regarding the "sinthomosexual" within the reproductive processes organized by a society's libidinal economy to be structurally analogous to Fanon's assertion in *The Wretched of the Earth* that, according to the logics of the colonial order, the native is "the corrosive element."<sup>6</sup> That is, for Edelman, the queer (or, more accurately, the sinthomosexual) is the figure currently

capable of unraveling the libidinal economy of signification through which a particular dominant socius reproduces itself. In Fanon's analysis, which takes the colony as its purview, the figure with the capacity to explode the logics of colonialism is the native in the colony, "the Black" within the colony's Manichaean racial logics.

In my gloss on them so far, these claims seem relatively uncontroversial. The devil is in the details, however, and, in this case, in how those details open onto or foreclose a future that might anchor or redeem the politics of each scholar's project. Though a sustained engagement with each man's thought is beyond the scope of this essay, I point to them here because they stand as markers of the distance between the avenues currently available for thinking a radical rupture from within the extant theoretical structures informing the temporalities of blackness and those informing homosexuality and queerness. In the face of the identification of a figure of radical alterity, and therefore potent danger, to the existing structures of signification and the inequities and violence they rationalize, Edelman advocates for an ironic embrace of that figure and a rejection of politics *tout court* on the grounds that any commitment to politics would drag that figure back into the structures of signification he threatens to destroy. Fanon, on the other hand, advocates for a revolutionary, cleansing violence, a radical violence through which the existing structures would be destroyed and a new man would be born.<sup>7</sup>

Much of the valuable debate about *No Future* has involved a critique of the figure on which Edelman's analysis hinges for having the characteristics and privileges that accrue to middle- and upper-class white gay men. Calling for no future, it has been argued, might inform a (non)politics only for those for whom the future is given, even if undesirably so.<sup>8</sup> The rest, those for whom the future remains to be won in each moment and who labor within the hellish temporal cycle Fanon describes, continue to dream "freedom dreams" of a better day ahead, remaining open to the disruptions poetry from the future might make in the symbolic order of the past and the present.<sup>9</sup>

Fanon has been similarly criticized for his construction of a putatively male, decidedly masculine, agent of revolutionary struggle and for valorizing a mode of struggle for which heterosexuality is a primary motor.<sup>10</sup> While Edelman and Fanon each construct problematic figures to embody the (im)possibility of rupture that is the very condition of possibility for a current spatiotemporal order and the socioeconomic relations it maintains, they differ in their assessment of the political implications of their analyses. This essay seeks to address the tension between the hermeneutics of recognizing a figure of radical alterity within the structures that guarantee futurity and the determination of a politics in the face of such a recognition.

### Looking, Desire, and History

The title of this essay, “Looking for M —: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future,” references *Looking for Langston*, which presents itself as a meditation on Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. Julien’s film features the poetry of Essex Hemphill and Richard Bruce Nugent and is dedicated to the memory of James Baldwin. Invoking these figures at its opening, the film rehearses a subterranean history of a gay identity perceptible from within the dominant history of black cultural production and presents that history as the frame in which Hughes might appear as a historical persona who both frustrates and fulfills a black diasporic desire for a historical ground of a contemporary black gay identity.

Like *Looking for Langston*, *Brother to Brother* searches for and locates a black gay male past as a component of a present production of black gay desire and identity. *Brother to Brother* also employs the Harlem Renaissance in the service of a contemporary production of black gay male identity and survival. There, Bruce Nugent is foregrounded in a long-overdue creative assessment of his contributions to the artistic sensibilities of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, especially Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman. Different in style from *Looking for Langston*, *Brother to Brother* looks to the past to provide a cultural context for its efforts to valorize present black gay desire and cultural production. By insisting on the presence of a queer Harlem Renaissance in a world still recognizable to us today, *Brother to Brother* makes visible the queer desire that haunts black creativity and cultural politics.

Like *Looking for Langston* and *Brother to Brother*, *The Aggressives* asks us to consider, albeit indirectly, the temporality of a present sense of political possibility. The temporal frameworks of these three very different films hinge on each film’s production and deployment of a politics of visibility aimed at making its queer subjects intelligible from within different systems of valuation. Some of the differences in the ways the three films work in relationship to time can be attributed to the formal choices of the filmmakers, including the differences in genre—*Looking for Langston* is an experimental film and presents a temporality organized affectively via “desire”; *Brother to Brother* is a work of dramatic fiction that seeks to provide a queer history of the present; *The Aggressives* strives to be a conventional documentary yet organizes time idiosyncratically. The differences between them are instructive because they point to two impulses in contemporary popular thought about temporality. The first is pragmatic and constructive. It is an impulse to order and reveal the past in the service of present interests and desires.

The second is pedagogical and critical. It is an impulse to reveal the operations of history itself and the ways that any invocation of the past is an exclusionary construction of that past.

*Brother to Brother* represents the first impulse. It uses the past to produce a queer visibility that might support a present and future lived expression of same-sex desire. *Brother to Brother* searches confidently for gay identity across time and from within a familiar historical narrative of black cultural production. *The Aggressives*, on the other hand, represents the second. It reveals (probably inadvertently) and must contend with the cutting edge of visibility, as sharp as a razor and as difficult to rest on. In this regard, *The Aggressives* illuminates a view of history as, in words from *Looking for Langston*, “the smiler with the knife.” This metaphor, like poetry, functions affectively, calling forth an image of history as, say, a responsible editor, leaving on the cutting-room floor everything that does not “further the action,” or a kindly killer, jovially dispatching those who cannot serve its needs and interests and leaving the silent corpses in unmarked graves.<sup>11</sup> The metaphor underscores history’s brutality and holds it in tension with history’s natural, inevitable, alluring appearance. In this way, it can be read as a critique of the first impulse.

The two impulses are related in that they evoke an interest in the temporality of present movements, but they deploy divergent methods vis-à-vis visibility. The first impulse, evident in *Brother to Brother*, puts the past in the service of the present in order to valorize a present, recognizable, and accessible gay identity. To do so, it reifies that present identity and deploys it backward, looking for past images and situations and making those fit present logics of sexuality, race, and gender. The second impulse, perceptible through a creative reading of *The Aggressives*, calls attention to the ways the past itself is surgically created and re-created in every present, making what does not fit present logics perceptible, even if not recognizable.

Both of these impulses can be seen in *Looking for Langston*, though history as the “smiler with the knife” is the stronger. With the emergency siren sounding at the beginning and the end, *Looking for Langston* indicates that its meditation on the past is a response to present pressing concerns. We can understand this film’s turn to the past as a version of what Walter Benjamin referred to in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” as seizing “hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.”<sup>12</sup> Rather than assume an accessible gay identity that is coherent and recognizable over time, Julien’s emphasis on “looking” produces a queer Harlem Renaissance as a present desire in a moment of danger. It might be said that the queer Harlem Renaissance finds its fulfillment in and draws its

poetry from the historical conjuncture in which *Looking for Langston* frames its images.

According to Julien, his choice to focus on Hughes, a figure central to the Harlem Renaissance whose sexuality has been a troubling question for historians, was animated by “a very genuine search for desire” that ultimately renders *Looking for Langston* “more about looking [than it is about Hughes]. . . . [it] is about Black gay desire; it’s an imaginary search for a Black gay identity.”<sup>13</sup> In an essay that focuses on *Looking for Langston* and *BD Women* (dir. Inge Blackman; 1994), Grace Kyungwon Hong characterizes “queer reproduction” as a process based not on “the real” but on a creative seeking that is generative of the past of which one seeks some sign. Hong muses that “perhaps that is all that we are now and will ever be: the fragments and figments of someone’s imagination, of someone’s desire for us to exist, much like *Looking for Langston* . . . dreams something in the ‘past’ into existence.”<sup>14</sup>

Situated in an imaginary space of shifting and interlocking temporalities, *Looking for Langston* works to retrieve an image of the past and make it recognizable to the present as one of its own concerns. Like Benjamin’s historical materialist, the film seeks to retrieve the image of Hughes from the weight of traditional depictions and narratives of him that rely on keeping Hughes’s probable homosexuality invisible. Searching for black gay desire, *Looking for Langston* produces it in the Harlem Renaissance by calling attention to those moments in that movement in which something queer might appear, such as the publication of the short-lived journal *Fire!* which included Bruce Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” quoted in the film, and the queer songs by the blueswoman Bessie Smith.<sup>15</sup> The act of looking for Langston produces a Hughes and a queer Harlem Renaissance available for further transductions of value and future commodification, such as *Brother to Brother*. Working to seize from “the true picture of the past” (in which we habitually recognize only what interests us) an “image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again,” the temporality that animates the search makes these elements of the Harlem Renaissance available for future use by dragging them out of the shadows, innuendos, behind-the-back winks, and reluctant nods, and into the footnotes and speculations of the official history of black cultural production.<sup>16</sup>

*Looking for Langston* looks after Hughes in two senses. The first is sequential and aligns with a temporality in which the past is put in the service of the present. It is a sort of “making visible” in the present what had been hidden through the struggle for hegemony in the past. Consistent with this first sense of “looking after” Hughes, *Looking for Langston* attempts to provide a poetic account

of Hughes's own time, relying on found footage and audio recordings of Hughes himself, to look at his time after Hughes himself could be said to have looked at and made his mark on it. The second way that *Looking for Langston* "looks after" Hughes is colloquially and affectively; it generates Hughes's purported homosexuality and makes it recognizable in a time when it might be useful, thereby protecting or sheltering a homosexual desire it attributes to Hughes by making it meaningful for and within a collectivity that presently needs it and therefore affectionately "looks after" or cares for it.

Making a queer Harlem Renaissance available in these two different but related ways, *Looking for Langston*, in the time of its initial release, was part of a broader deployment within queer cultural production of a queer historiography that relied on various techniques and technologies for making visible what had been "hidden from history," to invoke the title of an anthology of lesbian and gay history published in the same year as *Looking for Langston* appeared. Importantly, however, the queer historiography of *Looking for Langston* is not invested in producing or asserting a historical truth that might become a ground for redeeming Hughes's homosexuality.<sup>17</sup> Rather, it is important to understand the creative work that *Looking for Langston* does vis-à-vis Hughes's homosexuality as a type of affective labor that produces Hughes's homosexuality, puts it to use, and valorizes it rather than somehow redeeming it. The sirens that begin and end the film underscore the ways that the temporality of "looking after" Langston, as it is organized affectively, is unfaithful to any dream of ultimate redemption because they call attention to the violence underpinning the very terrain of looking.

Similarly, my interest in M— and *The Aggressives* is more about looking and the temporality of "making visible" than it is about the character "M—." Yet, unlike Julien's film, my project is less a search than circumvention. For I may not be the only one looking for M—, and, in large part because of this, my interests here have more to do with keeping hir present but absent than with locating hir in time or space.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Aggressives**

Peddle's documentary follows several "aggressives," who identify as female and/or as women and present themselves as masculine or male. The complexity of this mode of self-identification is highlighted by M—'s claim at the beginning of the film that s/he lives life as a man, but that doesn't change the fact that s/he is a woman. *The Aggressives* is, in my view, an important intervention in contemporary discourse about the politics and lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people pre-

cisely because it refuses to be located easily within the terms that currently animate that discourse and its manifold movements. Instead of *lesbian* or *gay woman*, *ftm* or *genderqueer*, the film offers us *aggressives*, a term used to negotiate complex senses of belonging, self-creation, and self-expression that are related to lesbian, dyke, butch, and transgender but excessive to each of those categories. In their adoption of a language of sex and gender expression forged, at least in part, within the sociocultural spaces carved out by people of color, the aggressives participate in making queer gender discourse more responsive to the particularities of their present experiences of gender and sexuality, experiences marked by their race and class.

To the extent that, as Octavia explains in the film, “aggressive” is a formation with currency both inside and outside prison, the designation of oneself as “aggressive” or “AG” is part of a broader convergence of black popular culture with prison culture and therefore cannot be divorced from other discourses of contemporary black existence in the United States and of class and black masculinity as it is informed and deformed by the prison industry. Because of this, *The Aggressives* also paves avenues of common interest between maturing queer movements and dynamic, urgent prison abolitionist movements. Peddle’s film is part of a larger fascination with and fear of black sexual deviance, black poverty, and black gender expressions at the same time as it contributes to and complicates an energetic emergent U.S.-based genderqueer movement whose current interests antagonistically enmesh it with regulatory state regimes of identification, recognition, and valorization.

As a conventional documentary framing unconventional subjects, *The Aggressives* mediates its subjects’ expressions of what it means to be an aggressive female and its viewers’ access to the social and cultural milieu the aggressives themselves create. The aggressives’ organizations of social life are enabled by creative engagements with common sense. These engagements are part of what circumscribes *The Aggressives* as belonging indelibly to our time. What the aggressives articulate in the film (sometimes despite the film’s formal constraints) as the common sense that conditions their belonging to the category aggressives is a set of possibilities for articulating a range of existing expressions and politics currently perceptible as genderqueer. Via their articulation of aggressive common sense, the aggressives challenge existing genderqueer discourses to become more responsible to aggressive common senses and their attendant forms of social life, which describe and navigate racialized and nonbourgeois experiences of gender expression.

### Aggressive Time

*The Aggressives* challenges us to make sense of the world of the aggressives, a world to which it seems to provide unlimited access while nevertheless giving few of the usual markers documentaries employ to assist their viewers in doing so. For instance, *The Aggressives* requires its viewers to work to locate the subjects in time and space, often giving only what the subjects themselves say about their time, location, and the passage of time captured in the film. Apparently, the film was shot between 1999 and 2004, but Peddle does not give us specific dates, times, or locations. He gives the first names of the people he is interviewing and occasionally their surnames, and his presence during the interviews is indicated by his subjects' reactions to his prompts. But the viewer's anchoring in space and time remains tenuous and dependent on the information gleaned from Peddle's subjects. There are some establishing shots (of the jail in which Octavia is incarcerated, for instance, or of street signs), but in general *The Aggressives* does little to enforce a "natural" spatiotemporal structure that anchors the action in space, in specific neighborhoods, for example, or in exact years, months, or days. While it is worth noting that this aspect of the film elicits an anthropological gaze at the film's subjects by generalizing them as exotic others whose natural habitat is any urban jungle, the unintended consequence of this aesthetic choice is of interest here: it provides a highly subjective and culturally dependent sense of the subjects' time by relying on their own references as markers of their location in space and the passage of time.

From Tiffany, for example, we learn that one of the days we see is her birthday, and she wants someone to come uptown to be with her in bed and then leave. Octavia tells us at one point that she was eighteen when Peddle first interviewed her and that five years have passed. Several of the aggressives reference the rap song "Still Not a Player" by Big Pun (in which he repeats the phrase "I'm not a player, I just crush alot"). "Still Not a Player" was popular during 1999–2000; as with many popular cultural references, especially musical ones, the references to this song in *The Aggressives* situate the documentary's subjects in time as time can be said to be marked by hip-hop cultural trends and products. That song situates the aggressives in a time measured by the life span of a popular cultural commodity, a sort of market time that also corresponds to and seeks to organize the demographic the aggressives themselves might be said to inhabit— young, urban, and black.

Aggressive subcultural time is organized in part by patterns of consumption and other social and communicative practices that require that participants

in that subculture spend time on them. By the end of the documentary, a couple of the aggressives have become distant from the subcultural activities in which they participated so enthusiastically when they were younger. Octavia, for instance, the aggressive who also does time in jail, does not have the time at the end of the film to participate in the aggressive subcultural life, a fact that reveals that the construction of aggressives as a category, like any identity category, indexes a dynamic investment of time and labor rather than a stable identity. Foregrounding aggressive as an index of an organization of time, rather than of a discrete and identifiable group, helps explain the difficulties its subjects pose for the film's conventional, linear narrative form. Prison time, the market time of popular cultural commodities, subcultural time and queer life cycles, and the temporalities of radical alterity as described, albeit differently, by Fanon and Edelman cannot be made to conform to the linear time the film seeks to impose on them.<sup>19</sup> Under irreconcilable pressure from the forced imposition of conventional documentary time, many things escape, becoming invisible and/or unrecognizable within the film's stylistic and narrative framework. One of them is M—.

### The Unequal Calculus of Visibility Distribution

The storyline for M— involves hir joining the military to earn money for college. The film provides images and interviews of hir while s/he is in the military. In the film's postscript, designed to provide narrative closure on the stories of the aggressives it features, the viewer learns that "during the US Invasion of Iraq," M— "abruptly left the Army. Her current whereabouts are unknown."

Given that M—'s disappearance from the film's *mise-en-scène* is a form of resistance and survival, what are the ethical implications of looking for hir and to what extent are they imbricated in a thinking through of black queer temporality and political possibility? M—'s disappearance from the film's *mise-en-scène* is hir refusal to remain bound to its visual economy. It is a political act that both undoes the film's pretense toward omniscient linear narration, narrative closure, and spatiotemporal continuity and opens a space of black queer desire that arises simultaneously from M—'s resistance to hir working-class immobility (a resistance that rationalized hir enlistment in the army) and from hir efforts toward self-valorization via mechanisms outside the nation-state and its military, which, as s/he puts it, does not "care" about hir anyway. While the military and its police might look for hir, attempting to recognize hir in a specific space, they will not look after hir in either senses of that phrase discussed above. Though each deploys different logics of visibility vis-à-vis sexuality, the primary axis that animates their

looking for M— subsequent to hir disappearance is spatial; they might seek to recognize hir according to their hegemonic common senses to locate where s/he physically is now.

The collective histories that have enabled hir appearance to date and the future beings desiring hir into existence today are what must be excised from the social body with hir captivity and conscription (in whatever form of service to the state) in order for the current hegemony to be maintained.<sup>20</sup> This is accomplished through a variety of wars, in the United States and beyond its borders. In M—’s case, by “abruptly disappearing” and thereby refusing to become a conscript of war, M— might live. Yet doing so also makes hir legible within the juridical logics of the state. To resist the terms of hir reinscription within the state’s logics, s/he disappears, becoming invisible and, therefore, utterly unprotected and vulnerable.

If disappearing enables M— to live, dragging M— into sight here implicates my own work in the very processes and situations I seek to illuminate and challenge. To disappear, M— also becomes invisible within the regime of the image that renders “the aggressives” visible throughout the film. The fact that s/he must disappear from the film’s narrative highlights the ways that a critical apparatus predicated on making visible hidden images, sociocultural formations, ideas, concepts, and other things always drags what interests it onto the terrain of power and the struggle for hegemony. On this terrain, the benefits of visibility are unevenly distributed.

In the colonial world of which Fanon writes, for example, the hypervisibility of blacks and the organizations of space that rationalize their hypervisibility are crucial techniques through which colonial power and white supremacy were maintained.<sup>21</sup> Insofar as colonial logics can be said to undergird present socioeconomic relations, black people can become visible only through those logics, so danger, if not death, attends every black’s appearance.<sup>22</sup> Yet precisely because what is visible is caught in the struggle for hegemony and its processes of valorization, one cannot not want the relative security promised by visibility.

In relation to this discussion, an earlier documentary film to which *The Aggressives* is often compared, Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning* (1990), should provide an important caution. As Judith Halberstam observes, five of the queens who were the subjects of that documentary were dead within five years of the film’s release, whereas Livingston became a filmmaker and the pop star Madonna made a fortune by appropriating voguing, the dance style the queens innovated and displayed in Livingston’s film.<sup>23</sup>

My point in bringing *Paris Is Burning* into this conversation is not to place blame on Livingston for the disappearance, death, or continuing poverty of her

documentary subjects. Instead, I issue this caution because it underscores the complicity of our critical endeavors with this unequal calculus of visibility distribution. At the same time, it calls forth the insistent need to attend to the ghosts, specters, and absences within what appears and to interrogate what is achieved through those appearances. If my own critical work in this article might contribute to fashioning a politics capable of redressing the very inequalities and injustices it illuminates rather than simply furthering my career by feeding the academy's contradictory need for knowledge about and sometimes by queers of color, the first question that must be asked of M— is not where is s/he but when might s/he be.

### Fear of a Black Future

At the end of the film, it might be said that M— is out of time (and unlocatable). After the transition that the official narrative of the U.S. nation, adopted here by the film, marks with “September 11, 2001 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq,” M— abruptly disappears. Hir disappearance must prompt us to ask not the policing question attuned to the temporal and spatial logics of surveillance and control (where is M— today), but, rather, in this case, the political question of when M—'s visibility will enable hir survival by providing the protection the realm of the visible affords those whose existence is valued, those we want to look for so we can look out for and look after them.

A “looking” for M— that begins by asking *where* s/he is now inevitably operates by harnessing the capacity of those temporal structures and epistemological enterprises of policing and surveillance inherent in any framing of questions of representation and visibility. Because of this, asking where s/he is now is complicit with the needs of the prison- and military-industrial complexes, the industries that proliferate in the very spaces (prisons and barracks) that already violently and antagonistically structure the time of *The Aggressives* and, indeed, are central to constituting the category and some of the logics of aggressives itself. Rather, a “looking” for M— that asks when s/he might be, even as s/he haunts us now, invests in an interpretive project that, while circumscribed by the exigencies of the present, is nonetheless creative. It seeks to think in a moment of crisis while remaining open and vulnerable to the (im)possibility of a rupture now. It is predicated on recognizing the ways the film seeks to enforce a straight time but fails to do so because its own subjects disturb that time by repeatedly pointing to the violences that guarantee it.

In the temporality the film seeks to impose on the aggressives, there is no known future for M—, yet she persists in it, haunting the film's attempt at nar-

rative closure and pointing toward another organization of time implicit and yet antagonistic to it. As Hong reminds us through her suggestion that “perhaps that is all that we are now and will ever be: the fragments and figments of someone’s imagination, of someone’s desire for us to exist,” a queer futurity is animated by a future desire only perceptible (“perhaps”)—not recognizable—now. The temporal structures M— haunts are those characterized not only by a reproductive futurity wherein what is reproduced is what already exists but also by the related but distinct orders of colonial temporality. That the straight time of reproductive futurity and (post)colonial reality is achieved at the expense of M—, several years of Octavia’s life, and the drag queens of *Paris Is Burning*, among others, should alert us to the ways that present institutions and logics dissemble a fear of a black future. From within the logics of reproductive futurity and colonial reality, a black future looks like no future at all.

Understood in this way, then, looking for M— entails reading the historical index of *The Aggressives* while acknowledging that something always exceeds such a reading and that it is precisely this excess, which we cannot name or know, that divorces our looking from all efforts to redeem it, whether in the name of a morality or law that would send M— to prison or to war or in the form of a political project that asserts its authority as an urgent imperative in which we must participate. Here, without redemption and indifferent to its call, undisciplined and vulnerable, firmly rooted in our time, looking for M— might touch the erotic as power within us and, in touch with that power, insist that we not look away.<sup>24</sup>

Sakia Gunn, the person to whom *The Aggressives* is dedicated, was murdered on a street corner in Newark, New Jersey, in May 2003. She was a black lesbian; some accounts of her describe her as transgender, signaling that she was masculine in appearance. The night of her murder, as she was returning home from a night out in Greenwich Village, Gunn and three of her friends were approached by two men who began flirting with those in the group with more feminine appearances. When Gunn intervened, asserting that they were lesbians, one of the men stabbed her in the chest. At age fifteen, she was out of time. But we still look for her in order to look after her. Out of time, she has become a figure of our time, one we invoke as a way to make palpably present the objectionable distance between, for instance, the contemporary focus on gay marriage by national lesbian and gay political organizations and an innovative, radical politics that looks after and therefore looks out for the lives of queer youth of color. As a figure, Gunn has been used by José Esteban Muñoz, for instance, to point to the present complexity of “the sensuous intersectionalities that mark our experience.” For Muñoz, Gunn

serves as an example of the modes of existence that misogynist, transgenderphobic, and homophobic violences today cut off at the root. By inciting academics and activists to “call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a ‘not-yet’ where queer youths of color actually get to grow up,” Muñoz also prompts us to ask the spatiotemporal question I am formulating here—when might Sakia Gunn be?<sup>25</sup>

That *The Aggressives* is offered “in memory of Sakia Gunn” reminds us that its subjects live, strive, labor, and love within the terms of a world whose regulatory regimes are guaranteed through a generalized, dispersed violence and reinforced via the persistent threat of physical violence directed at those such regulatory regimes do not work to valorize. A quotidian violence is the ground on which the spatiotemporal structures of the film rest—the violence that maintains the disjointed urban spaces in which the aggressives live, that secures the fact and characterizes the culture of Octavia’s jail and M—’s barracks. Violence also underpins the labor required of aggressive female masculinity and the political economy that secures such phenomena as black masculine unemployment, rising rates of incarceration, and femicide. An intolerable yet quotidian violence to which many of us have learned to numb ourselves out of habit is the historical index *The Aggressives* carries of its belonging to our time. This violence is an index of the imposition of straight times and of the constraints they place on black possibility and on queer existence coterminously. Such violence is all we can find today when we look for M—.

Undisciplined and vulnerable, firmly rooted in our time, might we nevertheless feel, even without recognition, the rhythms of the poetry from a future in which M— might be? Might we allow those rhythms to move us to repel the quotidian violence through which we currently are defined without demanding of the future from which they come that it redeem our movements now or then? Might we look after M— now without waiting for the future in which M— might be to issue our present cries?

### Notes

I offer this essay in memory of Nailah O. Franklin and as a call to look after the missing people listed at [blackandmissing.blogspot.com/](http://blackandmissing.blogspot.com/). This essay had an earlier life as a public lecture and work in progress. Many people have offered comments and engaged in dialogue with me about it as a result of its circulation through different academic spaces, including the peer review process during which an anonymous reader at *GLQ* and an anonymous reader at New York University Press, and Annamarie Jagose offered valuable suggestions that have impacted this essay's present arguments. Class discussions with the graduate students in my spring 2008 Archives and Subcultures course at the University of Southern California informed my thinking about these issues. Grace Kyungwon Hong also provided helpful comments and suggestions about an earlier version of this essay. I presented different pieces and drafts to audiences at the University of Southern California, the University of California at Santa Cruz, Pitzer College, Northwestern University, and Princeton University. I thank the participants in the discussions at each of those institutions, especially Jack Halberstam, Karen Tongson, Fred Moten, and Laura Harris; Carla Freccero, Eric A. Stanley, and other participants in the cultural studies seminar at the University of California, Santa Cruz; Hollis Griffin, Margo Miller, Hamid Naficy, and other participants in the Center for Screen Cultures Queer Media Symposium at Northwestern University; Daphne Brooks, Hiram Perez, Judith Casselberry, Mendi Obadike, Erin Forbes, Jessica Maxwell, and other participants in the faculty-graduate seminar in the Center for African American Studies at Princeton University. I am also grateful to Daniel Peddle for generously answering my questions about his provocative film. As ever, I thank Chandra Ford for carefully reading this piece at various stages of its existence and offering insightful and helpful suggestions for revision. All faults are attributable to me.

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967).
2. See Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Kara Keeling, "'In the Interval': Frantz Fanon and the 'Problems' of Visual Representation," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 91–117.
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 87.
4. Marcia Landy, *The Folklore of Consensus: Theatricality in the Italian Cinema, 1930–1943* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998).
5. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
6. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes that the native is "a corrosive element,

- destroying everything within its reach, a corrupting element, distorting everything which involves aesthetics or morals, an agent of malevolent powers, an unconscious and incurable instrument of blind forces" (*The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox [New York: Grove, 2005], 6).
7. Fanon writes, "Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder. But it cannot be accomplished by the wave of a magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or a gentleman's agreement. Decolonization, as we know, is an historical process: In other words, it can only be understood, it can only find its significance and become self-coherent insofar as we can discern the history-making movement which gives it form and substance" (*Wretched of the Earth* [2005], 2). My reading of Fanon regarding the issue of the violence of decolonization has been influenced by Samira Kawash, "Terrorists and Vampires: Fanon's Spectral Violence of Decolonization," in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Anthony C. Alessandrini (New York: Routledge, 1999), 235–57.
  8. See, for example, José Esteban Muñoz, "Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity," *GLQ* 13 (2007): 353–67; and Robert L. Ceserio et al., "Forum: Conference Debates," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 819–36.
  9. The phrase "freedom dreams" comes from Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2003).
  10. As examples of these critiques, see T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997); Michelle Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and three essays from *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. Alan Read (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996): bell hooks, "Feminism as a Persistent Critique of History: What's Love Got to Do with It?" (76–85); Lola Young, "Missing Persons: Fantasizing Black Women in *Black Skins, White Masks*" (86–101); and Kobena Mercer, "Decolonization and Disappointment: Reading Fanon's Sexual Politics" (114–31).
  11. Here, Benjamin's caution in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" that "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" provides an additional sense of the way that history as "the smiler with the knife" might be understood (Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken, 1969], 255).
  12. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255.
  13. Jim Marks, "Looking for Isaac," *Outweek* 1 (October 1989): 30–33, quoted in Scott Bravmann, "Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*: Hughes, Biography, and Queer(ed) History," *Cultural Studies* 7 (May 1993): 311–23.
  14. Grace Kyungwon Hong, "Blues Imaginaries and Queer Futurity," in *Capital Q: Marxism after Queer Theory*, ed. Amy Villarejo and Jordana Rosenberg (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

15. José Esteban Muñoz describes Julien's film as "a mode of history reading that listens with equal attention to silences and echoes that reverberate through the artist's production" (Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999], 59).
16. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255.
17. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Penguin, 1990).
18. I use the pronouns *hir* and *s/he* in reference to M— because, whatever their problems and whatever M—'s own gender identification today, these terms are consistent with M—'s self-presentation in *The Aggressives*, and they frustrate the dominant regimes of visibility and recognition currently operative around gender expression and identity.
19. For a formulation of subcultural time and its relationship to queer life cycles, see Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 1–21. For an analysis of "prison time," see Michael Hardt, "Prison Time," *Yale French Studies* 91 (1997): 64–79.
20. Dylan Rodriguez explains that "the prison is a place—a facility, in the clinical and experimental sense—in which experiences prior to and outside of the prison's proper domain disappear from both the official record and the institutional landscape" (Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006], 212).
21. See Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (2005), 3–4.
22. Ruthie Gilmore's influential statement that racism "is the state-sanctioned or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" is relevant here. See Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.
23. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 158.
24. In *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming), I develop my reading of Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in the context of recent scholarship about biopower. See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1984), 53–59.
25. See Muñoz, "Cruising the Toilet," 365. However, where Muñoz delineates some of the contours of that future, I do not. Within the terms of my argument here, it is important to resist asserting "queer youth of color" as a category that might cohere in a future that remains structurally impossible within present terms.