

**THE
EROTIC LIFE
OF RACISM**

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Acknowledgments

The Erotic Life of Racism has had several permutations over the last decade. It first started as a book about “generations”—a book that, thankfully, Ken Wissoker at Duke University Press suggested I didn’t want to write. It then became a more conventional project by taking on the shape of an introduction, a few chapters demonstrating my theoretical rubric, and a tidy conclusion. That manuscript made it through the first round of reviews, but it wasn’t yet a book—it hadn’t yet become the project I wanted to write. I thank the readers on that second attempt for suffering through a fledgling project. In the two years after that second attempt, I began to write a rather long introduction to the existing project—one that comprised some fifty pages or more of analysis. I took this portion of the project to a writing group with Cathy Davidson—it was there that she suggested I siphon off the expository chapters of the book and concentrate on the theoretical

side. In that moment, *The Erotic Life of Racism* began to blossom and take its present shape.

The title came before the book itself, calling me to write a book that could measure up in some way to the weight of that phrase. I do not know if I have succeeded in this task. Over the last decade that this project took shape, there have been many people and institutions to which I am indebted. I hope in my brief recounting that I do not forget anyone along the way.

I would first like to thank the University of Illinois, Chicago; Northwestern University; and Duke University for providing generous research funds to support this project, and for providing, perhaps unwittingly, the institutional experiences that continued to demonstrate to me that there was a need for it. During a crucial phase in the development of the book, I received a Senior Lectureship in American Studies from the Fulbright Foundation. While teaching two courses at Universidad Complutense (“La Complu”), I was able to present work that would eventually become part of this book. In particular I would like to thank Isabel Duran Gimenez-Rico, Carmen Mendez García, and Ana Antón-Pacheco Bravo, my wonderful colleagues at the university. I also extend a heartfelt thank you to the graduate students in my feminist theory course—their responses to the articles and books we read were often unpredictable and thoroughly stimulating. Thank you for a wonderful five months in Madrid.

This book would not have been possible without my colleagues in feminist studies, queer studies, and critical race theory. Their work has inspired me to write this little treatise as homage to the brilliance and the fine critique found in the interstices. May they see vestiges of their words throughout these pages, as this one is, I hope, for all of us. I would like to thank Jennifer Brody for pulling the beginnings of this project out of the trash, putting the pieces back together, and setting them on my desk late one night along with some simple words to greet me with my morning coffee: “Keep writing this.”

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Toward the end of the project I made my first return trip to Chicago, where I had spent the better part of the last decade. I thank Greg Laski, Wannalee Romero, and Melissa Daniels for welcoming me back with open arms—I will always remember that homecoming evening. To my Chicago family, words cannot express how much I miss you and hold you in my heart always. Lisa Freeman and Heather Schmucker, thanks for being my homegirls and for holding me when I need it most. Jennifer Brier and Kat Hindmand, I miss your warmth and love. I give thanks to Judith Sensibar for her help with the Faulkner section and for her encouragement, and I thank David Sensibar for his love of wine and support of all of my endeavors. Thanks also to Judy Raphael and Tony Philips whose creative vision has touched me in more ways than I can count. To E. Patrick Johnson and Stephen Lewis, I remember you both every time I sit down to a beautiful meal. To Mark Canuel, for his friendship and Capricorn love. To Johari Jobir, your intellectual companionship is sorely missed—Ralph Lauren is holding a table for us.

Toward the end of writing this book, I purchased eight acres and moved into the woods at the back of a watershed. I did not know it at the time, but

the land I now call “home” was once part of one of the largest black farmsteads in North Carolina. A friend suggested that I call it “Sweet Negritude”—the land here signals all the permutations of the life, love, and mystery of blackness. I give thanks to all of my friends in North Carolina who have kept me going through three very difficult years—Kim Turk, Cate Smith, and Bruce, Doreen, Josie, and Katie Sanfelici. To Christine Callan at Copa Vida and Tracy Gill at Joe Van Gogh, thanks for keeping the coffee going while I wrote, revised, and wrote again. To Laurabelle and the gang at Watts for keeping me fed and letting me laugh out loud. To Kathy Rudy whose love of animals matches my own, and to Kristine Stiles whose friendship is steady and enduring. To Shelba and Starr, bright lights in the Carolina sky. To all the horses, hounds, and humans at Terrell’s Creek—thanks for welcoming me and helping me enjoy the ride. With the animals on my mind: to Samar and Ebenezer, who I long for every day, and to Winnie and Webster, who run away but always come back home. I also would like to thank Ken Wissoker and Jade Brooks at Duke University Press for their faith in this project, and of course, thanks to my meticulous readers whose generosity of engagement was more than any author could expect or ask for.

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Dismayingly, institutionalized racism and prejudice endure too, long after the abolition of slavery, or the desegregation of public institutions, or the protest marches or the shattering acts of violence. Racism, it turns out, can take the heat.

—Joy Gregory, on her adaptation of Studs Terkel's "Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel about the American Obsession"

Most horrific acts committed by one person against another occur as small thoughtless gestures under mundane, if not trite, circumstances.

—Jennifer Culbert, "Beyond Intention"

The erotic is the mode of subjective communication.

—Deborah Bergoffen, "Out from Under"

It is time to recognize the political dimensions of erotic life.

—Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex"

Introduction

The Last Word on Racism

A few days after Tupac Shakur's death in 1996, I pulled into a Safeway parking lot in Palo Alto, California, with my friend's fifteen-year-old daughter, Danielle. We were listening to one of Shakur's songs on the radio; because he was a hometown boy, the stations were playing his music around the clock—a kind of electromagnetic vigil, if you will. An older (but not elderly) woman with a grocery cart came to the driver's side of my car and asked me to move my vehicle so that she could unload her groceries. The tone of her voice assumed fruition—it was not only a request but a demand that would surely be met. The Southerner in me would have been happy to help; the critic in me didn't understand why she simply couldn't put her groceries in on the other side where there were no other cars or potential impediments. I told the woman that I would gladly wait in my car until she unloaded her groceries—that way, there would be plenty of room for her to maneuver.

While she did this, I continued to listen to Shakur's music and talk with Danielle. We were "bonding," and I was glad that she was talking to me about how Shakur's death was affecting her and her classmates. When I noticed that the woman had completed her unloading, I got out and we walked behind her car toward the Safeway. What happened next has stayed with me as one of the defining moments of my life in Northern California. As we passed the right rear bumper of her car, she said with mustered indignation, "And to think I marched for you!" I was stunned at first—when something like this happens to you, you see the whole event in slow motion. I recovered and decided that I had two options: to walk away without a word or to confront the accusation—to model for Danielle how to handle with a modicum of grace what would surely be part of the fabric of her life as a black woman in the United States. I turned to the woman and said, "You didn't march for me, you marched for yourself—and if you don't know that, I can't help you."

When average people participate in racist acts, they demonstrate a profound misreading of the subjects they encounter. The scene related above dramatizes a host of racialized relations: the expectation that black women will cease a connection with their own families in order to respond to the needs of white persons; the comprehension of a refusal to do so as a criminal act; the need to subject black bodies to the rule of race; and the absolute denial of the connection between seemingly disparate peoples that the phrase "civil rights march" connotes. For that woman in the parking lot, the civil rights struggle was not about freedom for us all, it was about acquiring a kind of purchase on black life. I would be given the right to participate in "democratic process," but the ability to exercise the autonomy inherent in such a right would be looked upon with disdain and, at times, outrage.

The scene from the parking lot stays with me as if the woman and I were locked in a past that has tremendous purchase on my present. In my mind, we hover there touching one another with the lie of difference and non-relation balancing precariously between us—like the characters Rosa and Clytie at war on the dilapidated staircase in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, a scene I explicate at some length in the conclusion of this book. The psychic violation of that moment in the parking lot haunts me still;

but it is the intimacy of that moment that arrests me. *That woman expected something from me*—one usually does not expect anything from strangers. Moreover, our connection as women, tenuous though it might have been, was completely obscured, if not obliterated, by this racist act. It was then that I began to think about “race” under the auspices of racism, the thing that according to the epigraph for this chapter “endures.”

Racism defends us against the project of universal belonging, against the findings, if you will, of the human genome project. Racism, after all, “can take the heat.” Perhaps racism can take the heat because of its “universal” appeal. One of the first tenets of critical race theory is that “racism is ordinary.”¹ For scholars of critical race theory, “racism” is almost always articulated as an everyday occurrence, as pedestrian rather than spectacular, although we have seen evidence of its *gendered* spectacularity through historical watersheds such as Emmett Till (both then and now) and James Byrd.²

In this project my first grounding is in the work of critical race theory, with the understanding that *everyday* racism defines race, interprets it, and decrees what the personal and institutional work of race will be. My second grounding is in the work of sexuality studies and queer theory; both are critical projects dedicated to various articulations of the erotic lives of individuals. In this book I will demonstrate that although contemporary sexuality studies and queer theory have committed themselves to a thoroughgoing analysis of racist practice, rarely do they actually succeed in this endeavor. Can work on “desire” be antiracist work? Can antiracist work *think* “desire”? What would happen if we opened up the erotic to a scene of racist hailing? In this work I attempt to enrich conversations about our erotic life and our racist practice. I contend that it is possible to have both conversations at the same time, and in the same space of such intimate subjugation.

Racism requires one to participate in what I would call a *project of belonging* if the work of producing racial difference(s) is to reach fruition. I have used the phrase “project of belonging” to signify two sets of relations. One is a “real,” biological connection, a belonging that occurs at the level of family (blood relation). A crude understanding of race is that it is always already the thing that happens in the blood: think “one-drop rule,” “blood quantum,” “blueblood,” or “sangre pura.” The second set of relations is the

result of the work of identifying with others, a belonging usually imposed by a community *or* by one's own choice. Given the slipperiness of identity, identifying with others can be a fictitious and fantastic undertaking. Fantasy, of course, can oscillate between delusion and creative hope. As Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown observe, "In the everyday world, the facts of biological difference are secondary to the meanings that are attributed to them."³ Here it is meaning that matters. In the purely existential accounting, human beings make meaning everyday and we have come to understand, like Miles and Brown, that such matter(s) *creates* the materiality of race. My work in *The Erotic Life of Racism* interrogates the meaning of such creative ambitions and argues that we don't create meaning as much as we reproduce it.

Joy Gregory's words given in the first epigraph ground racism in what appears to be the long history of black suffering in the United States. In short, desegregation, abolition, and protest marches conjure black bodies so very readily; it is almost as if we think of those events as belonging to "the black experience"—and in many ways they do. What I want to open up here is the possibility that these events might not only signal black physical and political forms, but also mark a profound revision of the place we have come to know and call home. What if these histories no longer belonged to a people but instead comprised what we mean when we say the word "American"? I want to argue that when we see and say "race," regardless of how much we intend to understand race as being had by everyone, our examples of racial being and racist targets are often grounded in *black matter(s)*. In this instance, the black body is the quintessential sign for subjection, for a particular experience that it must inhabit and own *all by itself*.

What better way to think about how this conjuring of the black body works than through the anecdote with which I begin this book. I use this incident not to make a point about its universality and thus elevate it to privileged status (although I know that at some point this might be unavoidable), but rather to elicit both the intimacy and the quotidian nature of racism. A scene of everyday racist practice opens in two directions: one in which the scene focuses relentlessly upon the individual, seemingly to the exclusion of such leitmotifs of antiracist struggle as structure and caste; and the other in which the event unravels a series of dependencies and

intimacies both unexplored and unexplained. It is this latter direction that I hope the reader will both follow and find intriguing. In the final analysis quotidian racism can seem rather *unremarkable*; my point is to bring what cannot be remarked upon without some embarrassment to fuller recognition and accounting. To this end, that woman in the parking lot wanted a connection with me—one solidified through time and place by a history, a genealogy that she could readily attach to me. In short, she hailed me, and rather than respond in kind, *I spoke*. To make matters worse, my tiny little speech act in a Safeway parking lot became a contentless utterance—which was confirmed by her look of surprise, if not horror, when I opened my mouth. Her pronouncement was not designed to elicit a response, it was fashioned to keep me in my place. My retort offered her an alternative model—a refraction rather than a reflection of her own situatedness. As Toni Morrison once reminded us, “Definitions belong to the definers not the defined.”⁴ Clearly.

Where racism imposes racial purity, however, *law and practice* will code identification across differences as impossible—even if it happens, even if it is real.⁵ Even though every human visage and quotidian encounter bears witness to miscegenation’s imprint, miscegenation remains an impossibility; we are still made to choose a category, to state who our people are, and to relate to one cultural mode of being over and against another as if categories, communities, and belonging are positioned in finite relationship. As Adrian Piper notes in her essay “Passing for White, Passing for Black”: “In this country, . . . the fact of African ancestry among whites ranks up there with family incest, murder, and suicide as one of the bitterest and most difficult pills for white Americans to swallow.”⁶ It is interesting that Piper counts incest as one of the holy trinity of family travesties; as scholars of Southern history and literature in particular have indicated, incest is frequently miscegenation in the Southern imaginary. In other words, because of chattel slavery we cannot readily separate the practice of incest and the occurrence of miscegenation. We can’t have one without the other, yet we are so confused about the matter of race—who has it, how did we get it, is it just “culture” after all—that we have managed to spin exciting yarns about its place in our “family” histories.⁷ For example, more than twenty years ago I discovered that my father’s father was in fact a “white”

man, and it took me another decade to call him “grandfather” with any real conviction.

I use the phrase “blood strangers” to articulate this cognitive dissonance in order to mine the contradiction between human practice and collective (mis)understanding.⁸ While race creates the possibility for blood strangers, it also employs its primary ally and enforcer, “racism,” to police the imaginary boundary between blood (us) and strangers (them). Racism transforms an already porous periphery into an absolute, thereby making it necessary to deny all kinds of crossings. Moreover, even when those crossings appear less obvious—when women appear together in a quotidian scene of racist violence, for example—racism succeeds in breaking the tacit connection between them. In other words, racism irrevocably changes gendered relationships. Racism can also be described as the emotional lifeblood of race; it is the “feeling” that articulates and keeps the flawed logic of race in its place. When assessment is on the line, the “races” take their seats at the American feast of difference. This is the catch-22 of race: it renders theorizing about “it” impossible because it stabilizes identity for those who *impose* it and for those who work to *expose* it.

In this book I seek to mine the interstice between the insistence of critical race theory upon the “ordinary” in racist practice and the call by queer theory for us to take care of the *feeling* that escapes or releases when bodies collide in pleasure and in pain. This interstice is the moment—the blip in time—that is of great importance to my work here.⁹ We focus on race, but rarely on the *everyday* system of terror and pleasure that in varying proportions makes race so useful a category of difference. But siting and citing everyday racism is almost like stating a belief in the paranormal. Racism dismembers the “real”—so robs and eviscerates it that nothing and no one can appear as “whole” in its strange and brutal refraction.

One of the chief arguments of my project is that race coheres in the everyday practice of familial belonging. Since “the family” has not only been the cornerstone of liberal ideology but also black community belonging, it is important to ask—nearly 150 years after the abolition of slavery—whether or not the preservation of the idea of the “black” family is working for us.¹⁰ This is not a query that can be politely asked or answered but it is a necessary one, and this project seeks to begin not by rehashing the race/culture debate but simply by asking if the same scaffolding that applies to

quotidian racist practice might not also be the same structure that engenders the survival of the core concept of blackness, especially as such a concept relates to notions of familial and community belonging. The turn toward the quotidian is not one that focuses on prejudice but rather on the discretionary acts and, yes, racist practices that each of us make in everyday decisions such as choosing someone to sit beside on the subway, selecting a mate or a sperm donor, or developing a list of subjects for an academic study. The autonomy usually attached to erotic choices should be reevaluated to think through these attachments.

In order to worry that every day, to think about how much racism demands of us, from us, this book returns to that somewhat banal pairing otherwise known as the black/white binary. Such a return, to echo Hortense Spillers, might be “embarrassing” or “backward.”¹¹ When race becomes the basis for social organization—determining and fixing not only what we are to others, but also defining who we are—it gains an immutability that neither pro nor con can shake—it gains ontological might and becomes “too high to get over, too low to get under.”¹²

This book moves in the direction of prevailing work in critical race theory—toward racism and away from race—with one, if not two, caveats. It is my contention that we cannot get away from the black/white binary while thinking through the work of racism. In calls to abandon the black/white dichotomy for more expansive readings of racism’s spectacular effects, critics often ignore the psychic life of racism. What appears as an opening up or an expansion of the territory from “race and racism” to “racisms” might simply be a misrecognition of the primary work of racism.¹³ In the beginning moments of *Against Race*, Paul Gilroy offers the reflection that “black and white are bonded together by the mechanism of ‘race’ that estrange them from each other and amputate their common humanity.”¹⁴ Gilroy’s visceral insight is a testament to the fact that we cannot get away from our interpretation of the primary work of race at the junction of black and white; the estrangement that Gilroy alludes to is odd, given that relations between the two are and have been so intimately articulated.¹⁵

While I do not want to contest that globalization indeed has resulted in a proliferation of “racisms,” I do want to insist stubbornly that the psychic life of racism can best be read in the context of the United States in the space where black and white intersect, where the outer limit of doing and

being are exercised and felt by those who seek to negotiate their place at the “American” table. I say this even as someone who has great investments in the fields of Afro-Native and Native American studies. What I am driving at here is simple: even though critics want to move away from a black/white binary toward a more “open” field of inquiry, the way in which we understand how racism manifests itself is through a black/white example that belies a very static, but necessary, repetitious reading of racist practice. What work, critical or otherwise, have we performed to move beyond an interaction that to begin with we barely have been able to be truthful about (to ourselves, to others)? If anything, the chatter on the left and on the right during the presidential campaign of Barack Obama in 2008 assures us that we are by no means ready to give up the binary.¹⁶ It performs a fantastic service for us.

In this book I seek to correct a consistent *misreading of racist practice*. Too often the insidiousness of slavery casts a long shadow over the interpretive work that we perform; in our effort to uncover a terrible wrong, “a woeful shame,” “a national embarrassment,” we sometimes want to read the present as if it actually lived in this same dreadful past. We exist in a kind of Nietzschean ethics—where the present is consistently the past’s particular factotum.¹⁷ In this drama the parts are cast and we play them to their fullest, and because these relations have been cemented it is difficult for us to see beyond them to something else that might motivate us. This familiar reiteration in black and white has an equal and opposite upshot: it prevents “slavery” (writ large) from being seen in all of its formative machinations. Instead, slavery is relegated to its black and white players in a past, which desperately needs to be forgotten. I am not sure if that something else alluded to above exists or is even worth our contemplation, because to move forward in this moment, given all that has happened, would surely be like committing suicide—of a generational sort. But, at the risk of being contrary, this project goes to that territory.

The theoretical exploration I make here encourages us to reimagine the connection between black and white and to open up the interstitial and charged space between critical race theory and queer theory. This text and its readings therefore serve as an arrest in a seemingly perpetual critical backward motion. In queering the inquiry, for example—in returning to the black/white binary and asking what really happens or happened there

—we might be able to consider, at least for a moment, what our “pleasure” might look like; what being together, figuratively and literally, might yield—aside from, at times, the miscegenated being.¹⁸ As I mentioned earlier, I am also aware that such a focus on the black/white binary in terms of queer studies might seem backward in and of itself. As Tavia Nyong’o points out, “theory . . . can present itself as being explicitly ‘about’ race, class, and sexuality while continuing to serve the function of regulation and discipline. A major aspect of this regulation . . . is the frozen dialectic between black and white, and . . . between straight and queer, that is produced and reproduced within cultural forms both sophisticated and otherwise.”¹⁹ In this book I want to *defrost* that signal dialectic—to revise the black/white encounter’s oppositional narrative to speak to us across place and (in)appropriate time.

So often our “racist” culture is held as separate and apart from our desiring selves. To think about desire is to arrive at a queer place. But I do not mean for that queer place to become overdetermined by its association with desire, with the erotic. In essence, I am opening the door to a notion of the “erotic” that oversteps the category of the autonomous so valued in queer theory so as to place the erotic—the personal and political dimension of desire—at the threshold of ideas about quotidian racist practice. As Simone de Beauvoir reminds us in *The Second Sex*: “The erotic experience is one that most poignantly reveals to human beings their ambiguous condition.”²⁰ It is this striking ambiguity that not only brings us back to the quotidian but also to the strange and often violent modes of racist practice.²¹ I use the erotic also to capture some sense of its historical connection to feminist phenomenological thought, a process that I outline in chapter 2 of this book.

When I invoke the phrase “queer place,” I am thinking of queers here in much the same way as Randall Halle understands this constituency: “Not the acts in which they engage but rather the coercive norms that place their desires into a position of conflict with the present order.”²² My project comes from the other end of that question; rather than see desire as the force that “conflict[s] with the present order,” I enlist the erotic as a possible harbinger of *the established order*. In doing so, I want to imagine what happens to the “white” side of the equation—what happens to whiteness in close proximity to blackness—and what happens to our conceptualization

of the “us”? At the outset, it is important to note that I do not attempt, in the words of Michael Hames-García, to “recast questions of race into the language of desire.”²³ Rather, by thinking about racism as quotidian practice, much like the critical race theorists whom I deeply admire, I understand racism as wielding incredible power in its ordering of *family*, *generation*, and *desire*—in both black and white.

The focus on moving “beyond” race and its black/white binary—a condition I myself have wished for and often depended upon—actually speaks to a persistent problem inherent in the black/white encounter: namely, that this crossing seems impossible; that this crossing almost never happens. In other words, what happens when someone who exists in time meets someone who only occupies space?²⁴ Those who order the world, who are world-making master time—those animals *and* humans who are perceived as having no world-making effects—merely occupy space. When James Baldwin asked, “How much *time* do you want for your progress?” he was marking this dichotomy.²⁵ If the black appears as the antithesis of history (occupies space), the white represents the industry of progressiveness (being in time). It is possible to surmise that resistance to this binary might actually be telling a truth about our sense of time and space instead of a truth about the meeting itself. We often talk of inequalities that emerge in black/white meeting, but we rarely understand those structural impediments and inequalities in terms of the phenomenological readings of time and space. For example, to return to my opening narrative, in that moment in the parking lot I was occupying space; the woman was not only occupying time but also performing her ability to represent its material nature. My temporal immateriality yoked my presence to the needs and desires of my white female counterpart; my inability to serve therefore represented an intrusion upon the woman’s daily activities. I became an affront to *the order of things*, and her comment “to think I marched for you” was an invitation to take my place among the officially sanctioned table of contents for black/white herstory and relation.

At points in this project I return to the problem of “history” with varying degrees of critical success. In theoretical discourse, generally speaking, we have been bound by a fervent desire to make sure that we are historically grounded. In queer theory especially, this historical arc has been fleshed out through the work of Michel Foucault.²⁶ While Foucault’s historical trajec-

tory for the invention of the homosexual in the mid-nineteenth century is pathbreaking, it glides over signal events in the Americas such as transatlantic slavery or Indian removal as if these events bear no mark upon our sexual proclivities. In this mode of inquiry, a whole array of fruitful belongings, imaginings, and gestures can go unremarked upon and ultimately undervalued in critical discourse about sexuality. When the problem of history is laid at our feet, the imagined place for the black body is (re)produced out of the thin air at the critical heights of queer theory. This thin air mires the “black” in absolute relationship to the “white” as if their belonging were carved in glacial ice. The air up there is frosty indeed, and to speak about the black body at that atmospheric level is to produce a narrative of degradation to which that body is perpetually mired.

My argument with history, therefore, is not about its necessary efficacy or its archival rigor; my contention here is with how it is used to either fix a critical trajectory for a discipline (in the case of queer theory especially) or to ground a discussion of race in appropriate histories of black and white peoples in particular. In attempting to wade through the materials in the fruitful critical and fictive exchanges that I highlight, I find that history has a very limited reach where black/white bodies are concerned. As I have stated earlier, even though integration is our gold standard, we seem wholly unable to practice it *critically*.

I begin this book with a scene in a Safeway parking lot, and I end it with a reading of one of the central chapters of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* The material in between is mostly taken from critical theory, and given the stakes of my project—in queerness, blackness, and gender—Faulkner’s signature and very canonical work might seem like an odd capstone. Faulkner’s novel is a searing and relentless catalogue of racism’s battle for the American soul. As he observes at one point in Miss Rosa Coldfield’s narrative: “There is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering, which enemies as well as lovers know because it makes them both.”²⁷ Abrogate. Enemies. Lovers. These words help to mark the complicated trajectory of racist practice, and to me it felt perfect to end this book with one of the most articulate manifestos about how to begin the process of repudiating such abrogation.

At the same time, my choice of *Absalom, Absalom!* resists the urge to find

what I term the “black.female.queer” representation as the obvious repository if not endpoint for a project that as it evolves seeks to find how we lost this representation in the first place. The goal here is to get comfortable with that loss so that we can account for our forgetting in the first instant while simultaneously marking such a moment by *not* replacing the representation, by not making the obvious critical move to recover black.female.queer with an appropriate sign of her belonging. The periods in my configuration are meant to place the terms in figurative contestation, reflecting both the ease with which such terms are grouped and the relative incommensurability of the terms in critical conversation.

It is my hope that as scholars move through this book they might begin to uncouple their own critical trajectories, if not desires, from their usual embeddedness. My hope, further, is that there might be new spaces opened up for finding what we have lost or forgotten without the customary urge to reestablish the object of our desire, so to speak. In that space of the erotic—the political and the personal—we might be able (if not ready) to revise or even resist the object(s) of our critical desire as we come to understand just what it takes to make the erotic such a generative space. I am interested in outlining one aspect of the critical condition rather than displaying a repertoire of somewhat prescriptive endings to a story that is still unfolding.

I open chapter 1 with a sampling of pertinent critical race theory arguments about race and racism as a way to explore how such arguments have helped to diversify the critical field of antiracist study. In this chapter I perform what I hope is an important intervention by reading across a spectrum of critical race theory work, thus demonstrating that there is much to be gleaned from concerted attention to the field’s many critical corridors and interdisciplinary claims. In chapter 2, I stage the interface between “the erotic” and “racist practice” by delving into the relationship between feminist theories of the erotic from the mid to late twentieth century and how these theories have paved the way for the erotic’s *disarticulation* from racist practice. I argue that the erotic gains its autonomy during the feminist sexuality debates in the early 1980s and that such erotic autonomy becomes central to the articulation of a queer studies project, much to the detriment of a critical antiracist practice. In chapter 3, I return to the kind of inquiry evidenced in the first chapter, as I read across a range of

queer studies work that positions itself in response to an overwhelmingly (white) queer theory. Given what the black/white binary tells us (or does not) about racist practice, I argue that the continual staging of one (racial) project over and against the other serves to harness black.female.queer (a constellation that I use throughout that chapter) in static relation to queer studies as a whole, such that this body (of work) is literally lost as an active critical voice. Finally, in the conclusion I perform a reading of Jacques Derrida's "The Last Word on Racism" / "Racism's Last Word" and his theory about "touch" in the context of one of the most important black/white interactions in American literature—the meeting of Rosa Coldfield and Clytie Sutpen on the staircase during the only chapter narrated by Miss Rosa in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

In speaking to my classes on critical race and sexuality theory over the years, it has become clear to me that our methodology for thinking through the queer body can be cited along three registers: the psychoanalytic, the critique of global capital, and the biopolitical.²⁸ This project will move through a range of work dedicated to these epistemological registers but will resist the temptation to be seduced by one method of inquiry over another. My attempt here is to redirect our theoretical underpinnings, and my implicit question is whether or not these discourses are aiding us in our attention to the specter of racist practice that intermittently haunts queer studies conferences.²⁹ In many ways the responsibility for "fixing" the problem of race in academic discourse seems to have landed in our queer laps. But why? What is the underexplored connection between sexuality and race that makes us believe we can solve for x when other disciplinary endeavors have seemed unable to do so or have abandoned the project altogether? What can queer theory's desire do for understanding racist practice? Perhaps there is an answer to this question in the early work of Hortense Spillers, when she observes that during relations under chattel slavery, "whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived 'pleasure' from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask. Whether or not 'pleasure' is possible at all under conditions that I would aver as non-freedom *for both or either of the parties* has not been settled."³⁰ Spillers's query loosens the neat connection between the nineteenth-century homosexual and the queer community of the early twenty-first, thereby making their reliance upon pleasure/desire

as a defining matrix less edifying, more problematized, and somehow less clearly autonomous as it once seemed.

In this book I intervene at two levels, one academic and one beyond the academy in a historical moment in the United States that wants desperately and unconvincingly to call itself “postracial.” On the academic level, I reunite theoretical arguments that, increasingly, have lost touch with one another—as if once upon a time they didn’t have a history to share and a future at stake together. As we have seen, these two theoretical stances are critical race theory and queer theory. I am insisting that critical race theory and queer theory must come back together in this moment to resolve key issues and understandings in much the same way that my undergraduate and graduate students insisted that I do in terms of being clear about the connection between the two—a demand that was not always adequately met on my part. When I realized that I had no working roadmap for confluence and/or dissent is the point at which I began the work that became the heart of this project.

While both critical race theory and queer theory have taken a rich and fruitful transnational turn—one that also carries with it a legacy of nonidentitarian, multiple issue layering—in this historical moment, both within academic theory and beyond, I insist that in the erotics of the old black/white binary we understand not only racism but potentially our erotic selves. I am not in any way saying that global understandings don’t matter. They do. There are also local, historically situated features of the black/white binary that, in their definitional and oppositional clarity, illuminate our moment and our academic theories in (un)(re)productive ways. This book returns us, ever again, to the black/white binary that many theorists were happy to leave behind. That glee alone should tell us there is unfinished business—but by no means have we forgotten it, solved it, or even, in the end, addressed it. This all-too-brief glimpse takes a look at the structure in which desire and subjugation, belonging and obligation, are linked in theory and practice.

Ultimately, I have not forgotten the details of the scene in that Safeway parking lot, and I never will. In that one hailing denied is embedded an outrageous erotics of racism that in its quotidian expression represents for me an act of profound ontological rupture. A bit of character assassination, for sure, but also an occasion to reflect upon resisting the hailing

through its potential for further theorization. What that moment in the parking lot was designed to engender is the spectacular lie of our separation from one another as communities and individuals on this planet. *The Erotic Life of Racism* is an experimental exploration in the denial of that hailing, in the stubborn insistence that we do belong to one another despite our every effort, at home and in the institution, to lose track of, if not forget altogether, such belonging. This book reorders the terrain of critical contact. Because, now as ever, there is no *safe way* but just an ordinary road that we all must travel, I move to the first iteration of the erotic life of racism.