Enslaved Women and the Necropolitics of Quotidian Life: Against the Hegemonic Grain

by

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Letter To The Reader

Since the founding of the United States, Black women have been oppressed and subjugated.¹ Black women have been viewed as objects used for sexual exploitation, labor, and reproduction. During the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, a Black woman was “a thing rather than a person, a property rather than a subject...except when [she] was to be controlled or punished.”² These notions of objectification of Black women and their dehumanization are still very prevalent today. It is ingrained in the Atlantic World’s very existence. This dehumanization preserves the institutions that protect White, wealthy, heterosexual males and preserves the patriarchy that dominates the American government and American civil society itself. A Black woman’s survival is characterized by balancing the precarious situation of life and death. Her life remains in the balance of a government that has legalized brute and utter violence against her and citizens who have perpetrated violence against her for the last four hundred centuries. As a result, the Black female body has become a site for legalized necropolitical violence. Achille Mbembe argues that necropolitics is “the subjugation of life to the power of death.”³ Necropolitics creates death-worlds and living deaths for those considered to be disposable as it demonstrates the way the government or the state allocates distinctive measurements to human life.

¹ Throughout the body of this honors thesis, I have chosen to capitalize Black and White but direct quotations are faithful to the original text that are cited throughout.
This project takes Mbembe’s unique and thoughtful theorization of necropolitics as its point of departure. During my junior year, I first learned about necropolitics in a social theory colloquium. I wanted to know more about the forces that aid the sovereign in determining which lives were worth protecting. I understood how the sovereign in Mbembe’s necropolitics was the state. Still, I was interested in looking at necropolitics at the quotidian level to see how this discursive power was enacted in the everyday lives of those deemed “less valuable.” Additionally, I wanted to showcase the sovereign as something other than the state or the government but an actor from below who is ordained by civil society and the state to take away and grant life.

This thesis seeks to tell the story of Black women’s experiences in the quotidian necropolitical realm. We live in a world that only focuses on the actions and voices of men, often White men, and thus the voices of Black women are often erased from the Africana and Eurocentric archive. This erasure is best seen through the modern Black Lives Matter movement where there is a lack of awareness that Black women are too victims of police violence and brutality. #SayHerName was created to acknowledge this issue. This hashtag allowed women to be included in the conversation regarding police violence. My interest in understanding how Black women have navigated the quotidian necropolitical realm is personal. I am using this thesis to understand how I am subjected to the quotidian necropolitical realm and how I can move forward and achieve freedom if it is even possible.
This thesis will center on the voices and stories of Black women who have been left out of the narrative for far too long. This thesis means a lot to me, so I wrote it with sensitivity and care. The stories of the anti-Black violence the women I discuss in my case studies experience are rather disturbing and very upsetting. Still, anti-Black violence is a common theme in the affairs of the everyday lives of Black people and is essential to understanding quotidian necropolitics. Telling these women’s stories and how they relate to quotidian necropolitics has been both an honor and a privilege. I am in awe of how these women rejected the dominant hegemonic power of the Atlantic World and demonstrated personhood in a world that did not grant Black women any.

Yours truly,
Darielle Matthews
Acknowledgments

This thesis has been written and researched over the course of my senior year at Wesleyan University, and the people who have guided me along the way have been copious. This thesis would not have been possible without the support of my family, specifically my Mom, Dad, and sister, Dana. They have always shown me unconditional love and encouragement, and I am so thankful to be blessed with such a wonderful family. I love you three with all of my heart!

I would also like to acknowledge my thesis advisor Garry Bertholf who has become my mentor throughout the year. I appreciate all the ideas he has let me run by him, which has constantly reinvigorated my excitement for my project, and how he graciously met with me once a week to discuss my progress and plans for this thesis. Last but not least, he always shared my enthusiasm and energy for the topic by cheering me on, which made my thesis an overall positive experience. I would be neglectful in not mentioning that he has also strengthened my passion for African American studies. I thank him for all the drafts he has read, all the edits he has made, and for always being honest. I cannot express enough how grateful I am to have him as my thesis advisor.

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I would like to acknowledge that I visited the Writing Workshop for help in writing this thesis. Special thanks to my Writing Workshop thesis mentor Malaika Fernandes! Thank you for all of your edits and feedback throughout the spring semester. Additionally, I want to thank my editors, Dr. Sharifa Jackson, and Desiree Gascott, for their comments and suggestions.

Lastly, I am intellectually grateful for Achille Mbembe’s 2003 essay “Necropolitics,” which has been my point of departure in inventing quotidian necropolitics. Mbembe’s work inspired me as it gave me a new framework to understand the world around me and look at how people of color are subjugated through death. His theory was revolutionary because it piqued my interest and curiosity as I was fascinated by the unlimited power of sovereign subjects, how specific individuals are deemed unworthy of protection and how freedom can be achieved through death.
I. Prolegomenon: The Necropolitics of Black Life: Toward a Critique of the Quotidian

“The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.”

–Malcolm X, “Who Taught You to Hate Yourself” (1962)

“We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”

–“The Combahee River Collective Statement” (1977)

In Achille Mbembe’s, “Necropolitics” (2003), Mbembe is building upon the previous work of French philosopher Michel Foucault’s view of sovereignty and biopower in Society Must Be Defended 1975-1976 and Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s book, Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. He uses their work to devise the term necropolitics, the “subjugation of life to the power of death.”¹ I define necropolitics as the racial calculus and political arithmetic of who may live and who must die.² Necropolitics describes the relationship between a sovereign power determining who is worthy of life and who must be condemned to death. He is concerned with “those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations

² The above definition is a combination of two ideas. The first part “the racial calculus and political arithmetic” – is a line from Saidiya Hartman’s Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route (2008) which she uses to define the afterlife of slavery. The second part – “who may live and who must die” – is from Achille Mbembe’s “Necropolitics” (2003). This combined definition better captures my own sense of necropolitics.
Necropolitics, simply put, is a theory that allows us to analyze the relationship between power, death, and sovereignty. By showing his audience, contemporary forms of necropolitics through case studies such as Palestine, Africa, Kosovo and topographies such as “the colony,” “the frontier,” “the colony and under the apartheid regime,” and “the plantation,” Mbembe demonstrates the way sovereign powers enact death as a form of domination and subjugation.

Additionally, Mbembe discusses necropower. Necropower is the violence and power used to subjugate life. Necropower cannot only take life but diminish a people to “death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead [emphasis his].”4 Examples of necropower in Mbembe’s essay include enclave economies, colonial occupation, war machines, and management of the multitudes. Through Mbembe’s writing, it is pretty clear necropolitics and necropower are utilized by the state as a form to subjugate and control others.

i. Critical Intervention

I am interested in inventing quotidian necropolitics for my senior thesis. I am defining quotidian necropolitics as the racial calculus and political arithmetic of who may live and who must die with an emphasis on violence enacted by everyday White sovereign subjects onto Black individuals. Instead of the state and state actors, I am curious about how necropolitics is enacted on the microlevel in everyday life and circumstances. Quotidian necropolitics resides in relationships such as the master and the slave or the colonizer and the colonized in

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4 Ibid., 40.
environments that give the illusion of “nurturance,” such as the home, school, family, etc. I would like to point out that necropolitics from above and below do overlap and intersect as they both reinforce the legitimacy of the other. The institution of slavery is a project implemented by the state, which can be classified as necropolitics from above as legislation such as the Constitution protected the institution of slavery. Acts such as The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 allowed the government to not only police Black bodies as federal and state authorities aided in the capture of runaway slaves but condemned enslaved people to a continued social death. Colonialism was also a state project as other countries exploited countries for economic purposes and acquired power and domination of bodies designated as “other.” The master and slave dichotomy and the colonizer and colonized dichotomy are forms of quotidian necropolitics. These relationships on the individual level demonstrate the ways everyday actors subjugate Black life.

When I refer to the word “above,” I am discussing state-sanctioned violence. So, this begs the question of, what is the difference between Mbembe’s necropolitics/necropower and necropolitics/necropower from below? In Max Weber’s “Politics as a Vocation” (1919), Weber states, “the state is the form of human community that (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a particular territory–and this idea of ‘territory’ is an essential defining feature.” Since Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics is inextricably bound up with the state and state violence–what Weber would call legitimate uses of violence–what I’m calling necropower from below would

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necessarily be rendered as legitimate uses of physical force. These actors from below are sanctioned by societal and cultural norms that preserve the hegemonic, dominant power and cultural and social institutions that preserve the state. Quotidian necropolitics is a way to analyze relationships on an individual, everyday level by examining how Black people are allocated death as individuals closer to the dominant, hegemonic power are allocated life.

I acknowledge that Mbembe does discuss the everyday of necropolitics; however, he calls it “nanoracism.” Nanoracism “consists in placing the greatest number of those that we regard as undesirable in intolerable conditions, to surround them daily, to inflict upon them repeatedly, an incalculable number of racist jabs and injuries to strip them of all their acquired rights…”⁶ I argue that everyday racism is not the same as the necropolitics that happens in the quotidian. I am departing from Mbembe’s theory and creating my own because he is mainly interested in state violence and his theory of nanoracism which resembles what we might call microaggressions.

In “Necropolitics,” Mbembe states “to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.”⁷ I believe that academics’ biggest misconception is that they conceptualize a sovereign as a government entity or the state, but this is not necessarily always the case. I argue that the lexicon of a sovereign is a person who wields unrestrained power. In the Atlantic World, the dominant power is a White, cisgender, heterosexual, and oftentimes wealthy man. This mold of a

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human being is deemed valuable and worthy of protection. White, cisgender, heterosexual, and wealthy men often enact a “state of exception” in which, a sovereign subject can go beyond the limits of the law because it is regarded as beneficial for everyone. In this case, what is beneficial for everyone is coterminous with what is beneficial for the dominant powers at large.

There are two ways these individuals are granted the power to be sovereign subjects. The first way is through vigilantism, in which White, everyday actors feel like they have been indoctrinated by the state and view themselves as an extension of the state’s power. An example of White vigilantism is the death of Ahmaud Arbery. Three White men, Travis McMichael, Gregory McMichael, and William Bryan, gunned down an unarmed Black man named Ahmaud Arbery because they believed he had been enacting robberies in the neighborhood. Vigilantism allows White actors to commit anti-Black violence and death onto Black bodies.

Another way individuals are granted sovereignty is through Whiteness, which is a “public and psychological wage.” In Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America (1935) by W.E.B. Du Bois, he discusses how White laborers “were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white.” Even though Du Bois is referring to White laborers, I think these notions can be applied to the case of everyday White sovereign subjects.

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9 Ibid.
Whiteness allows White subjects to obtain advantages due to White supremacy and enables these sovereign subjects to wield violence against Black people. The “public and psychological wage”\textsuperscript{10} of Whiteness legitimizes these sovereign subjects through cultural and societal norms and practices that allow White individuals to view themselves as “superior” and capable of enacting violence without backlash or consequences.

Quotidian necropower is the force or actions used to dominate those considered disposable by White sovereign subjects who are considered to possess unrestrained power. The first form of necropower is cultural racism. Black bodies are dehumanized through cultivating cultural and societal norms that point them as other and a threat to civil society and the government, and thus violence is sanctioned. Cultural racism is the act of “creating a cultural standard and imposing a cultural hierarchy among racial groups.”\textsuperscript{11} It creates the idea that Whiteness is “superior.” Micro-practices of the dehumanization of Black bodies include erasing Black people in the media by deeming their stories to be less valuable or not as important, glorifying European beauty standards, colorism, and invoking anti-Black rhetoric that takes away Black people’s humanity. These micro-practices have been ingrained since the enslavement of Black bodies as a means for control and domination. This dehumanization expulses Black individuals from humanity by creating a death-world in which their humanity is unrecognized and non-existent. This dehumanization also takes a physical toll on the psyche as racial, generational trauma can be passed down from generation to

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibram X. Kendi, \textit{How To Be An Antiracist} (New York: One World, 2019), 72.
generation, stemming from the enslavement of Black bodies. On the individual level, this trauma can occur due to racial biases, racism, and hate crime encounters.\textsuperscript{12} This trauma can lead to mental health disorders that continuously affect communities of color.

I argue that the declaration of European forms of knowledge as the superior form of knowledge is a form of quotidian necropower. The consistent implementation of the European canon invokes violence. It establishes White and Eurocentric as the normative or dominant narrative by showcasing that only White men have human agency and the capacity to explore, create, discover, etc. This positions people of color as passive beings who accept the hegemony enacted upon them, which shields the truth of rebellion and refusal. Eurocentric narratives, histories, and cultures erase people of color from the record. Due to the White-washing of history, mistruths and fallacies about people of color are constantly being spread. Eurocentric history not only ignores the history of the majority of the world but preserves anti-Black violence and inferiority.

Quotidian necropower is also seen through the exclusion and erasure of Black people and voices from social spaces. These micro-practices include hair discrimination in workplaces and schools and Black voter suppression. Hair discrimination is a widespread social issue. Hair discrimination is used to protect Whiteness by banning natural hairstyles such as braids and afros because they are considered “unprofessional” or “against the dress code.”\textsuperscript{13} Black people are often

\textsuperscript{12} “Racial Trauma,” Mental Health America, accessed March 2, 2022, https://www.mhanational.org/racial-trauma.

criminalized because of their hair in places such as the workplace or the classroom resulting in punishment such as suspension from school or not being hired for certain jobs. Hair discrimination is a systematic way to make White phenotypes the norm of society, and all others that do not fit this mold are seen as deviant.

Another form of quotidian necropower is the hypersexualization of Black bodies. The hypersexualization of Black bodies involves employing stereotypes such as the mammy, jezebel, sapphire, and more to invoke caricatures that paint Black people as one-dimensional objects.¹⁴ In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism* (2004), Patricia Hill Collins discusses how past racialized objectification of Black women and men still creates oppression for Black people in the present day. According to Collins, chattel slavery relied heavily on the oppression of gender. The creation of the jezebel legitimized the rape and objectification of Black women as they were seen as sexual beings. Their masters saw them as “a fragmented commodity whose feelings and choices were rarely considered.”¹⁵ This hypersexualization has contributed to the anti-Black sexual violence Black women experience today as these stereotypes not only take away Black women’s humanity but make them targets of sexual violence.

These are just a couple of examples of quotidian necropower enacted in the everyday and mundane. However, analyzing the violence that occurs every

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day is not a new phenomenon. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), Hartman analyzes scenes in which terror is not as visible such as “slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual” to shed light on “the terror of the mundane and quotidian.”\footnote{Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.} Using primary sources such as slave narratives, plantation diaries and documents, newspapers, government reports, and more, Hartman demonstrates the everyday rituals of horror Black people in the United States face. Like Saidiya Hartman, I agree wholeheartedly that African Americans are condemned to daily acts of terror by the dominant White, hegemonic powers in which the calculations of violence dehumanize Black individuals. This terror shapes the Black identity by clarifying who is considered to be human. Hartman and I both believe that terror is infused in circumstances that are “under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property,”\footnote{Ibid.} which, in my opinion, is what makes terror so insidious is that the terror and violence against Black bodies are so normalized. This is best represented when Frank Wilderson said, “The violence perpetrated against us is not a form of discrimination; it is a necessary violence; a health tonic for everyone who is not Black; an ensemble of sadistic rituals and captivity that could only happen to people who are not Black if they broke this or that ‘law.’”\footnote{Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 40.} Violence against Black bodies is needed in order to define freedom, liberty, the citizen, and the human.
However, quotidian necropolitics differs from Hartman’s “the terror of the mundane and quotidian.” Quotidian necropolitics is a branch of necropolitics in which everyday sovereign subjects that are White, heterosexual, rich men are granted power and dominance through societal norms that sanction them to be granted White privileges as both a cause and consequence of racism and the enslavement of Black bodies. Through quotidian necropolitics, White actors from below can enact death, whether physical or social, onto Black bodies by dictating who is valuable in society and who is not. The critical component that differentiates Hartman and my “quotidian necropolitics” is the association of the sovereign’s capacity to enact death by assigning specific measures to human life to determine who is “worthy” of protection.

In *The Fear of French Negros: Transcolonial Collaboration in the Revolutionary Americas* (2012), Sara E. Johnson focuses on violence in the quotidian. In the first chapter of Johnson’s book “Canine Warfare in the Circum-Caribbean,” Johnson states, “slavery in the plantation Americas was a ‘veritable state of war’ between opposing factions: masters, whose rights were upheld by a legal, social, and cultural fabric of institutions that guaranteed their dominion over human beings designated as property, and the women and men compelled to work as slaves.”[^19] The notion of slavery as a state of war signifies the stakes for White masters and enslaved Black people as one group was fighting to preserve their way of life and power, and another was fighting for freedom. In this chapter, Johnson discusses how bloodhounds were utilized by European

countries as a method of terror weaponized against Black bodies. What I appreciate about Johnson’s terminology is the use of the word war. According to the Oxford Languages Dictionary, war is defined as “a state of competition, conflict, or hostility between different people or groups.” Enslaved bodies are given agency through the word “war” because it demonstrates how Black people fought back and resisted White supremacy and power. Agency is important because it acknowledges Black people’s self-determination and acknowledges Black individuals’ ability to fight back. This deconstructs notions implanted by the dominant power that only certain groups of people have human agency. Hartman’s “terror of the mundane and quotidian” and Johnson’s “veritable state of war” demonstrate how terror, violence, and resistance shaped the Black identity and contributed to Blackness. Both of these works give us the language and terminology to discuss the experiences of Black people in the everyday and what is at stake for Black lives as threats of violence and terror are looming over Black bodies in the Americas and the rest of the Atlantic world.

However, I argue that although quotidian necropolitics does not divulge the aspects of Black resistance and refusal as Hartman’s and Johnson’s terminology does, it differs significantly from a “state of war” in the sense that, as I have stated before, necropolitics is defined as the sovereign allocating death by determining who gets to live and who gets to die. It is very prevalent based on the centuries of anti-Black violence who is afforded the privilege of life and who, unfortunately, is seen as expendable. I am interested in solely White actors from

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20 “War,” Oxford Languages, accessed February 28, 2022, https://www.google.com/search?q=war+defined&oq=war+defined&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i10i131i433j0i512j0i10l7.1675j1j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8.
below being at the center of this narrative instead of the state or state actors because I want to showcase the mechanisms of terror and death that White individuals wield due to White supremacy and cultural notions of Whiteness. These powers were sanctioned by theories of the Enlightenment that demonstrated who was human and who was not and thus who was the killable enemy. In my opinion, Johnson’s “veritable state of war” can be applied to both Mbembe’s necropolitics and quotidian necropolitics. “Veritable state of war” can be applied to Mbembe’s necropolitics since European armies and colonial militia used canine warfare. Thus the state-sanctioned this violence as a way to control Black bodies. In fact, Johnson demonstrates that canine warfare was used to dominate “enemies of the state,” aka bodies that were not considered to be the hegemonic norm or were oppositional to the Eurocentric narrative. Actors from below also utilized canine warfare in another given context. Johnson demonstrates that slave catchers used them by invoking Juan Francisco Manzano’s Autobiografía. Additionally, some planters in Saint-Domingue believed that the weaponization of canines was warranted because dogs were used to protect White people who lived on the island.

Overall, by using the theoretical framework of quotidian necropolitics, I want to shed light on the precarious nature of Black women’s lives and the easy accessibility in the way death is often present in their everyday experiences. This framework will raise awareness of the anti-Black violence Black women face and recenter Black women’s experiences at the center of this framework to prevent the
continuous erasure of Black women in the discussions of anti-Black violence and its consequences.

This thesis aims to answer the following questions: What does resistance look like when you are not given full human agency in society? How does the necropolitics enacted during slavery help us understand how necropolitics is used against Black women in the present day? What does freedom from necropolitics look like? My project seeks to intervene in Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics by inventing the notion of quotidian necropolitics and exploring whether or not a person can escape necropolitics through acts of resistance. I want to know whether quotidian necropolitics is a condemned arena in which a person is forced to reside. My thesis also aims to deconstruct the rhetoric of the “sovereign” as a government entity but look at how White men have transcended the laws and regulations of the state to oppress and subjugate.

ii. A Note on Methodology

The Africana archive is a rather fragmented ephemeral archive due to the violence it has endured from the White, Eurocentric canon and also from slavery, colonialism, and imperialism itself. In Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive (2016), Marisa J. Fuentes explains how the hegemonic, European structures of power have permeated the archive. Thus, using scholars from the Africana archive as my sources, I hope these counter-narratives and revisionist histories will dissipate what Daniel Lord Smail calls “ghost theories.”

The European canon is a rather violent one utilized to preserve the dominant

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narrative of White men. Thus, I do not want the Eurocentric canon to be a part of my thesis when discussing subjugation and oppression. I genuinely believe the canon does just that by silencing voices, experiences, and stories that do not ascribe to the dominant narrative.

For my case studies, I will be analyzing the stories and lives of four Black women who resisted and navigated the necropolitical realm. By invoking these women as case studies, I will also like to make a bid that even though these women are not considered to be conventional theorists and do not adhere to the “Western canon,” they are, in fact, theorists in their own right. They are intellectual, political, and historical actors who have agency and are not passive figures in which atrocities are enacted upon them. The notion of these women being intellectual theorists is vital because my methodology is ephemeral and fragmented due to historical injustices and the destruction of Black civilizations, artifacts, and history due to atrocities such as colonization and slavery. Using the African archive, I wish to showcase that reading against the grain of the European tradition makes room for all figures and allows us to theorize in new and exciting ways. Using the Africana archive, I hope to theorize and change how we view methodology and learn about political, historical, and economic theory.

What does examining Black women’s experiences in necropolitical realms in the nineteenth century afford us? The nineteenth century was a period of immense change. Societies were transforming from agricultural to industrial as the Industrial Revolution began beyond Britain into the United States and Western
Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution consequently commenced imperialism as “industrialized” countries began to go into countries in Africa and Asia to gather raw materials for their countries’ economies back home. The nineteenth century was also a time period that marked the end of the Haitian Revolution as enslaved people led the first successful revolution against White masters, which consequently challenged the hegemonic, White world as assumptions cultivated by enlightenment thinkers were dismantled, creating a world in which Black people were political subjects and beings. Scientific racism started in the nineteenth century as empirical evidence was used to prove the “inferiority” of Black Americans. Scientists such as Samuel George Morton and Charles Darwin led the way in discovering racial differences by using the human body. The American Civil War transpired during the nineteenth century eradicating slavery in the United States. Overall, the nineteenth century was a time of significant progress and tremendous pushback as Black individuals gained freedom from their White captors but were chained and unfree through other methods.

Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the difficulties with the Africana archive when finding case studies and information regarding Black women’s refusal. The archive falls silent on the role of Black women in the resistance against slavery, and thus “their decisions, strategies, terrors, or friendships are primarily left to the imagination.”

Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic (2021), Jennifer L. Morgan attributes the silence of Black women in the archive for two reasons. The first is that when Black women were to enact refusal to the slave owners, they were at very high risk for abuse as “the punishment of enslaved women was often an opportunity for slave owners to take prurient sexualized pleasure…”25 The second reason is that enslavers cultivated the notion that Black women were a way to quell the anger of the enslaved population. This racist rhetoric took away any agency Black women had by making them passive and docile to the regime of slavery. Regardless of the reason, Black women have been branded in such a way that has made them forever invisible in the archive.

I have seen what Morgan talks about in her book come to fruition as it was very hard for me to find authentic and legitimate work that discusses in great detail the lives of Black women. For example, I was very taken by the story and life of Lieutenant Sainté Bélair, who was a free woman in Haiti who became a Lieutenant in Toussaint L’Ouverture’s army. It was compelling that a Black woman in this time period had such a huge leadership role, in addition to the fact that she was a woman fighting for the liberation of Haiti from the colonial clutches of France. However, the story of Bélair was fragmented as she was often mentioned in the footnotes or identified as Charles Bélair’s wife, which was the only place in which she was given some form of agency. When I could find information on Sainté Bélair that went into her life in great detail, I soon discovered that it was not a legitimate source, which was rather disheartening. I had a lot of doubts regarding the source I was using and thus decided to move on.

25 Ibid., 211.
from it because I could not conceptualize using a text that I was unsure about. For example, in the book I was using, the author states that Sainté Bélair’s last words before being gunned down by a firing squad were “Long Live Liberty! Down with Slavery!” However, there were no footnotes or documentation that showed specifically where these words came from other than a bibliography at the back of the book. I did not have the time to look through every source to see where she supposedly said, “Long Live Liberty! Down with Slavery!”

For the sake of time and space, I then began to search and focus on well-documented case studies. However, this also was proven to be quite difficult. By looking further into the archive, I noticed that the Africana archive returned to court case studies. In these court cases, the law was utilized to gain freedom by suing for it. I am interested in thinking and acting outside of the hegemonic realm for my thesis. Court case studies, I argue, comply with the hegemonic domain as the law became a way to legitimize racism, sexism, and violence against Black bodies. In order to look at fugitivity and counter-hegemony, I needed case studies outside of court cases; however, I would like to acknowledge that Celia’s story does involve the court as a consequence of her resistance, not a mechanism of resistance. I am interested in developing theory from below, and my case studies do just that.

I will focus my hermeneutics on what I consider to be the three key themes: “social death”; the “other”; and last but not least, “resistance.” To discuss these key themes, I will be utilizing the scholarship of Orlando Patterson, Sylvia
Wynter, Alexander Wheilye, Hortense Spillers, Colette Guillaumin, Frantz Fanon, and James Scott.

**iii. Social Death**

In Mbembe’s essay, he invokes slavery and the plantation to discuss an example of terror and necropolitics. The plantation was a place in which death was allocated to people on a regular basis. He believes that “the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a ‘home,’ loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status.”26 This triple loss is very similar to the term social death. By invoking Orlando Patterson’s social death, Mbembe is demonstrating that the death a sovereign invokes on an individual does not have to be necessarily physical but can be social. When discussing the relationship between quotidian necropolitics and Black women’s experiences, I will discuss social death because the plantation system is inextricably linked to the Black experience as we are still witnessing the consequences of the centuries of enslavement of Black bodies.

Orlando Patterson must be consulted when talking about social death because he coined the term. In *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1985), Patterson created the term “social death.” In Patterson’s comparative study of slavery, he claims that slavery is a social death in which “the slave’s powerlessness was that it always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death, usually violent death.”27 Patterson believes

that the three constituent elements of slavery are: gratuitous violence, natal alienation, and generalized dishonor.

The first element is “naked force,” which is the “use or threat of violence in the control of one person by another.” Masters and overseers used violence to ingrain into the slave’s consciousness that they were considered sub-human and had no autonomy. Violence and terror were a way to preserve the social death of slaves by ingraining in slaves that if they did not follow the rules of slavery, there was always a possibility of being physically murdered by their masters and overseers, placing the enslaved people in a constant state of fear and hopelessness.

The second element of slavery was natal alienation which is defined as the detachment a slave feels to civil society as the slave has no relation to their heritage, kinship, and traditions. Natal alienation was utilized to exclude slaves from civil society to showcase that they did not belong.

The final element is generalized dishonor. Patterson writes, “the slave could have no honor because of the origin of his status, the indignity and all-pervasiveness of his indebtedness, his absence of any independent social existence, but most of all because he was without power except through another.” Simply put, to have honor a person must have power. Additionally, the honor of the master and the dishonor of the slave was a manifestation of their relationship.

Using Patterson’s concept of social death, Mbembe believes the slave’s “existence appears as a perfect figure of a shadow” in the necropolitical realm.

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28 Ibid., 1.
29 Ibid., 10.
Unlike Patterson, he attributes the conditions of slavery as loss of home, loss over the rights of their body, and loss of political status which he believes is equivalent to natal alienation, social death, and domination. He then discusses the dehumanization of the slave as the slave is regarded as property and a means for labor and concludes his thoughts on dehumanization by stating, “a person’s humanity is dissolved to the point where it becomes possible to say that the slave’s life is possessed by the master.” By looking at the nature of Mbembe and Patterson’s discussion and views of a slave’s life and social death, it is quite apparent that the conditions of slavery make the enslaved person dismissed from humanity because the enslaved person is not recognized to be fully human. Thus the slave’s dehumanization and objectification dismisses the slave from “civilized” society but legitimizes the notion that the slave is incapable of humanity.

Black women, men, and children, for four hundred years, have been forced to reside in a world where they are in a permanent state of harm and peril. They lose ties to their homeland, their families, and last but not least, control and autonomy over their bodies. The institution of slavery reduced Black people to commodified objects in which their bodies could be used and abused however their masters and owners saw fit. “Social death” showcases the ways Black bodies were socially non-existent in a society based on the “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” [emphasis hers]. They were not given any autonomy or agency over themselves. The loss of social identity led further to the

31 Ibid.
dehumanization of Black people as the only identity they were given was through their relationship with their master, in which the slave’s existence was reliant on the master. In my opinion, social death showcases the lack of agency enslaved people were ascribed in the dominant, White society and how their resistance and autonomy came in the form of fugitivity and the counter-hegemonic.

iv. The Other

This brings us to the concept of “the other,” a key component of necropolitics. In “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project” (2006), Sylvia Wynter discusses the “Human Other.” Wynter claims that Black studies are a way to erect new forms of knowledge and reinvent the human. She talks about how man becomes representative of the human, and thus the creation of this identity produced human otherness. She writes, “The invention of the global category of Human Others on the basis of the institutionalized inferiorization and subjugation of those human beings classified as Indians, Natives, Negros, N***** [sic] was indispensable not only to the enactment of the new sociogenic code and its dialectic of evolved/selected ‘symbolic life’ and non-evolved dysselected ‘symbolic death’ but also to the over-representation of this ethno-class or Western bourgeois genre or mode of being human, as if [emphasis hers] it were that of the human itself.”

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33 Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project,” in Not Only the Master’s Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice, eds. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 128–29. I did not want to write the n-word out because I consider the n-word to be a violent word used to violate Black bodies. I trust that my audience will get the message of the quote without me having to spell out the n-word in its entirety.
In this quote, Syliva Wynter tells her audience that classifying human beings due to their race and cultivating connotations of inferiority and conquest puts into place the notion that the Western bourgeois genre of being human is coterminous with human in and of itself. Thus this legitimizes Whiteness and the dominant/primary form of being human. Additionally, I find this quote to be important. After all, Wynter touches upon necropolitics by talking about the global category of “Human Otherness,” a socially produced term that has cultivated the reasoning and logic that some lives are synonymous with “symbolic death” because they are not considered to be human.

In *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014), Alexander G. Weheliye writes, “as an object of knowledge whiteness designates not actually existing groupings but a series of hierarchical power structures that apportion and delimit which members of the Homo sapiens species can lay claim to full human status.”

The notion of human, thus, becomes a means to justify the subjugation and dehumanization of Black people because they are “things” used to fuel the economy. Notions of knowledge such as “The Enlightenment” were weaponized to control and manage bodies through means of putting the human in different categories that are racialized, gendered, and sexualized.

In *Habeas Viscus*, Weheliye makes a bid that categories of the human become coterminous with man. Weheliye’s conception of man as being coterminous with human allows for necropolitics to not only exist but thrive by

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cultivating this “golden rule” that phenotypically White men who are heteronormative, perform masculinity, biologically male and bourgeois, are the normative standard and those who fall out of these categories are deviant and are forced to like in a precarious state. These categories legitimize institutions and social constructs that produce power and privileges to apply to only certain kinds of people as if there is a standard that symbolizes all the possibilities of the “human” and humanity.

Through Wynter and Weheliye’s writings, it becomes clear that Black studies are a way to deconstruct the Western construction of genres of human. Weheliye writes, “the functioning of blackness as both inside and outside modernity sets the stage for a general theory of the human, and not its particular exception.”35 Whiteness and the “human” have become coterminous due to western modernity, and thus it positions anyone who is not White as sub-human. By looking at Black studies as a counter-hegemonic form of resistance to the Enlightenment’s way of controlling bodies through notions of “reason” and “freedom,” I cannot help but wonder if Black studies can be a method to theorize freedom from the necropolitical realm. Black Studies allows academic scholars to break down Western modes of thought that enable systematic untruths to persist from the Eurocentric perspective that cultivated historical narratives used to subjugate others. In “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, Of Désêtre: Black Studies Towards the Human Project,” Sylvia Wynter claims that we must reinvent the notion of the human to create a new order that is not based on

35 Ibid.
Whiteness and upholding White supremacy, but instead focuses on “the recognition, for the first time in human history, of our collective agency and authorship of our genres of being human…”36 By cultivating the argument that we must reinvent our conceptions and connotations of human, Sylvia Wynter argues that our current order dictates who gets to be human and who does not.

Western forms of knowledge and thought rule this order. The sovereign subject’s legitimization of the power to deal out death and death worlds to certain bodies is based on notions of the Enlightenment period in which Blackness is not deemed human. By destroying these concepts and forms of supremacy, new genres of human will be created that will disrupt the notion of those that are natural and those who are not thus, I believe the necropolitical realm can be penetrated and disrupted by Black studies as it will deconstruct these taxonomies that make death natural for bodies marked with “inferiority.”

Whereas Wynter and Wehileye attribute the cultivation of the “other” to things like colonization and modernity, Hortense Spillers believes that the othering of Black bodies transpired during the middle passage and chattel slavery. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (1987), Hortense Spillers discusses how specific historical contextualization of the Middle Passage played a significant role in the “ungendering” of Black bodies. This is best exemplified when Spillers states regarding the Brookes Plan, “Let it now be supposed . .. further, that every man slave is to be allowed six feet by one foot four inches for room, every woman

five feet ten by one foot four, every boy five feet by one foot two, and every girl four feet six by one foot .. “37 By using this quote, Spillers is showcasing how the flesh of the Black body has been exploited in the name of capitalism to barter, buy and sell and thus, this raises the question, “Do objects have gender?” My answer is no, based on my analysis of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” and the historical contexts of how Black bodies have been objectified since the beginning of slavery. The objectification and ungendering of bodies is a crucial feature of the subjection and oppression of Black bodies because they were not considered to be human.

The “ungendering” of Black bodies has been seen in other prominent forms of Africana scholarship, such as Saidiya Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America. Hartman does not refer to the notions of “ungendering” and “genre of the human”38 by name, but she does allude to it and discusses its implications in the nineteenth century. In Chapter Three, “Seduction and the Ruses of Power,” Saidiya Hartman’s book examines the rape of Black women not being recognized by the law. She writes, “The disavowal of rape most obviously involves issues of consent, agency, and will that are ensnared in a larger dilemma concerning the construction of person and the calculation of black humanity in slave law since this repression of

violence constitutes female gender as the locus of both unredressed and negligible injury."

Simply put, the rape of Black women was not considered a crime because Black women were considered objects and property of their masters. Thus, their humanity was non-existent and unimaginable. Whereas Wynter, Wehileye, and Spillers discuss the othering of Black bodies, in this chapter, Hartman discusses the ways ungendering was legalized through law and how this led to the paradox of agency and domination in the law. By using these sources, it is apparent that the “ungendering” of Black women was not only the norm for four hundred years in America but legalized through law. The “ungendering” of Black women throughout the centuries has contributed to the necropolitical violence these women face because the genres of the human are symbolized through Whiteness.

Hartman and Spillers both agree on the “ungendering” of Black bodies and look at how the White, hegemonic society has legitimized this notion to subjugate and oppress Black people. Admittedly, Sylvia Wynter and Alexander Wehileye’s pieces were written after Mbembe’s “Necropolitics” however, Mbembe does not invoke Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” I find this to be rather interesting since Hortense Spillers does an excellent job at distinguishing what constitutes “other,” specifically how the “othering” of Black people has been historically constructed. I understand that necropolitics is a theory applied to various amounts of people, such as those who live in colonies; however, Mbembe does invoke the plantation as a necropolitical site that is very

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specific to the Black experience. In order to truly understand the necropolitical realm Black people have been forced into, the objectification and oppression of Black people must be understood by the concept of “ungendering,” which legitimizes the commodification and subjugation of Black people.

To discuss “the other,” we must examine the natural group. In *Racism, Sexism, Power, and Ideology* (1995), Colette Guillaumin argues that our ideas regarding race and sex are not natural but rather manufactured socially constructed categories. In this book, Guillaumin analyzes and examines the concept of the “natural” group and how it operates and oppresses people. She argues that the idea of naturalness is cultivated in relationships of dependence and exploitation, which leads “to the postulation of the existence of ‘natural heterogeneous entities.’”\(^{40}\) She then states that colonization by using bodies of women, people, and territories for one’s own use has led to the creation of the nature of certain groups that have persisted to exist.

Guillaumin discusses how the notion of classification regarding somatic/morphological benchmarks cultivated the color of one’s skin as a mark for determining who was a part of the natural group and who was not, which attributed to slavery becoming about the color of one’s skin marking them as an enslaved person. She states, “A *social relationship*, here a relationship of domination, of power, of exploitation, which secretes the idea of nature, is regarded as the product of traits internal to the object which endures the relationship, traits which are expressed and revealed in specific practices. To

speak of a specificity of races or of sexes, to speak of a natural specificity of social groups is to say in a sophisticated way that a particular ‘nature’ is *directly productive* [emphasis hers] of a social practice and to bypass the *social relationship* [emphasis hers] that this practice brings into being.”⁴¹ In this quote, it is apparent that Guillaumin wants the reader to understand that the logic of nature is intrinsically linked to domination and the possession of human beings and is naturalized in these social relationships. Guillaumin’s scholarship demonstrates that the power of cultivating a naturalized group not only preserves heterogeneous intellectual notions of knowledge and humanity but subjugates and oppresses the “other” into a necropolitical framework because they are not deemed to be a part of the “good, civilized, normalized” group in the Atlantic World which suggests deviance.

While Hortense Spillers, Alexander Wehileye, and Sylvia Wynter discuss the “othering” of Black bodies through the middle passage, colonization, and the enlightenment, Colette Guillaumin dissects and historicizes the power dynamics at play that cultivate the “natural” group that constructs race and the basis in which this is done. The dominant “natural” group is the group that produces and legitimizes hierarchical taxonomies that oppress Black people by making these groups appear to be natural as opposed to what they really are, which is man-made. The naturalization of “race” has concealed the historical and cultural contexts that created these racial hierarchies meant to oppress people. “Othering” is a crucial component of Mbembe’s work because, in order to ascribe specific measures of value and power to human life to determine who gets to live and who

⁴¹ Ibid., 143.
gets to die, there must be a “natural” or dominant group that is deemed valuable and worth protecting. As Mbembe discusses in his essay, “the politics of race is ultimately linked to the politics of death.”

Race is essential in necropolitics because it is employed to legitimize dehumanization and rule over people of color and thus justifies the sovereign’s power to kill.

v. Resistance

In “Necropolitics,” Mbembe theorizes how necropolitics can be a form of resistance by analyzing the logic of martyrdom and the logic of survival in which he states, “death and freedom are irrevocably interwoven.” The logic of survival focuses on the “other” outlasting the enemy. In contrast, the logic of martyrdom weaponizes the body of the “other.” It requires their death to experience freedom and exert resistance, for the other is killing their enemies through their death. Mbembe writes, “For death is precisely that from and over which I have power.”

By speaking about martyrdom and survival, Mbembe suggests that when residing in the necropolitical realm, “the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred.”

Another person who theorizes what resistance looks like under the necropolitical realm is Frantz Fanon in his work The Wretched of the Earth. Even though the term necropolitics was not invented during the time of his writing, the conditions of necropower and topography of “the colony” still apply to his conceptualizations of decolonization. In The Wretched of the Earth (1961), Frantz

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43 Ibid., 38.
44 Ibid., 39.
Fanon theorizes violence as the absolute praxis for the colonized to overthrow the colonists and free themselves from the inferior, subordinate mindset the colonists imposed on them. Under the authority of Fanon, the rule of colonists was maintained by the use of violence.

In order for the colonized to reassert their humanity and restructure society as a whole, the colonized must employ violence. Fanon writes, “Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: The ‘thing’ colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation. Decolonization, therefore, implies the urgent need to thoroughly challenge the colonial situation.”46 Through violence, the colonized achieved freedom. Violence becomes a means to fight back against the necropolitical realm that continuously subjugates and oppresses people of color. There are various definitions of violence in the Oxford Dictionary. Still, when discussing violence, I will refer to violence as “The exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom.”47

It is clear that both Achille Mbembe and Frantz Fanon agree that violence can be weaponized to achieve freedom from necropower. By theorizing violence to liberate oneself, Mbembe and Fanon offer concrete ways for actors from “below” who do not have full human agency to cultivate agency and capacity for

freedom. Interestingly enough, Mbembe and Fanon’s uses of violence differ as Mbembe’s violence is enacted onto the body of the “other” in order to take out the person they deem the enemy. Thus the “other’s” freedom is achieved by their own death, or the freedom to choose a physical death instead of residing in a social one, whereas Fanon sees that violence can be more than a way to control people, but a means to scrub clean and undo colonization.

In *Weapons of the Weak Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), James C. Scott studies the Green Revolution in rural Malaysia. Through this study, he illuminates for his readers the everyday forms of resistance peasants used to fight back against their oppressors. These subtle acts of resistance included “foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth.”48 He states that these forms of resistance “require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms.”49 This book showcases how actors from below can resist in non-violent, covert ways.

*Weapons of the Weak Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* differ from Mbembe and Fanon’s writings because the resistance Mbembe and Fanon discuss is not only violent but grand insurrections. In *Weapons of the Weak Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), Scott discusses resistance to slavery in the antebellum south. He states, “These practices, which rarely if ever called into question the system of slavery as such [emphasis his], nevertheless achieved far

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49 Ibid.
more in their unannounced, limited, and truculent way than the few heroic and brief armed uprisings about which so much has been written." With this in mind, I believe that James Scott’s resistance is Mbembe’s “logic of survival” in the sense that the “other” wins by lasting longer than their enemies which requires them to be stealthy and acting as if they were compliant to the hegemonic society at large. Resistance, thus, is a primary feature of necropolitics. Mbembe, Fanon, and Scott have theorized how those subjected to the necropolitical realm can enact refusal to their oppression; however, I want to explore resistance specific to Black women’s agency in a world that does not recognize them as fully human. Is violence enough to reject the institutions and forms of knowledge that keep Black women oppressed, or do we need something more imaginative to destroy the hegemonic society at large?

\textit{vi. Conclusion}

The violence enacted against Black women’s bodies has become an epidemic since this violence has been legalized for over centuries. Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics has allowed us to theorize how death is ascribed to certain bodies through colonization and slavery. However, Mbembe neglects to showcase how the necropolitical realm has dominated Black women’s bodies through the despicable ways Black women have been brutally used, abused, and raped for the libidinal economy and the prosperity of Great World Powers.

\footnote{Ibid., 34.}
II: “Grab that fat white man and hit him with your machete”:
Violence as Black Feminist Praxis

“The first condition of freedom is the open act of resistance—physical resistance, violent resistance. In that act of resistance, the rudiments of freedom are already present. And the violent retaliation signifies much more than the physical act: it is refusal not only to submit to the flogging but refusal to accept the definitions of the slave master; it is implicitly a rejection of the institution of slavery, its standards, its morality, a micro-cosmic effort toward liberation.”


“The road toward freedom, the path of liberation, is marked by resistance at every crossroad: mental resistance, physical resistance, resistance directed to the concerted attempt to obstruct that path. I think we can learn from the experience of the slave. We have to debunk the myth that Black people were docile and accepting and the extreme myth, which by the way I read in my high school history texts in Birmingham, Alabama, that Black people actually preferred slavery to freedom.”


In order to examine my case studies, it is crucial first to understand the master-slave dialectic discussed in Angela Davis’s “Lectures on Liberation” (1969), in which she uses G. W. F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel believes that the foundation of social life is based on a struggle to the death between the master and the slave in which both of these individuals “must raise their certainty of being for themselves [emphasis his] to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won.”

1 In this relationship built on dependence, the slave is aware of their inferior status because the slave is always conscious of the fact that they are objectified and considered to be less than in the eyes of the master. At the same time, the master obtains consciousness by realizing that their

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ability to negate the consciousness of the slave is based on the fact that the subordinate status of the slave determines the master’s identity.

In her “Lectures,” Angela Davis explores this relationship by challenging the notion that the freedom a master has is a complete fallacy for “if the slave were not there to till the land, to build his estates, to serve him his meals, the master would not be free from the necessities of life. If he had to do all the things that the slave does for him, he would be just as much in a state of bondage as the slave.”

Simply put, Davis argues that, in the master-slave relationship, it is the slave who holds power because the slave can disrupt not only the master’s identity but their life. She backs up her argument by using Frederick Douglass’s relationship with Covey as an example by demonstrating how Covey is dependent on Frederick Douglass’s subordination to declare his identity as master. Once this dynamic is disrupted when Frederick Douglass physically fights back against Covey by grabbing him by the throat, Covey’s identity as master is openly challenged. Thus Covey realizes he needs Frederick Douglass oppressed and feeling “inferior” in order to preserve his identity as master.

Davis’s argument regarding the master-slave relationship can be applied to the four women in my case studies. Without these women being oppressed, objectified, and considered less than the master can no longer claim the status of “master” because the slave does not affirm their identity. Fermina, Carlota, Nelly, and Celia disrupted the plantation and the hegemony of Whiteness at large through their resistance by deconstructing the mythical fallacy that Black people

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were content with their enslavement and were passive individuals showcasing how resistance is the voice of the oppressed. Additionally, I believe that through their resistance, they demonstrated their humanity. As Angela Davis states, “the slave’s perception of the world is inverted. Because his life is relegated to that of an object, he must forge his own humanity within those boundaries.”

Since the beginning of enslavement, Black people have been forging their humanity based on White epistemic jurisdiction and the contradictory nature of their identity as both human and object. Thus I wonder if our capacious imagination is limited by the hegemonic powers at large, which I believe is hurting our ability to forge not only our own identities outside of these dominant, White structures but also curbing our ability to distinguish freedom outside of the hegemonic invisible hand as our global economy, politics and social dynamics are built on White supremacy. Thus freedom is often defined by Enlightenment forms of logic or terms meant to control and subjugate people deemed other. As I reflect on history and look at what liberation and freedom meant, particularly in the United States, since that is my strongest frame of reference, freedom often meant the desire to become a subject of the United States empire. By looking at the struggle and experiences of these women, I hope to define freedom outside of the hegemonic terms of the Enlightenment and, better yet, look at how Black women can escape necropolitics on their own terms, through fugitivity and dismantling societal norms and standards that legitimize their oppression.

Additionally, I would like to note that by looking at these case studies, I am interested in the notion that enacting violence becomes a means to be regarded

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3 Ibid.,115.
as fully human. Violence demonstrates the autonomy and self-determination of a person who has in the past been viewed as an object or commodity utilized to benefit capitalism. This is best seen in Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880. W. E. B. Du Bois writes, “He was called a coward and a fool when he protected the women and children of his master. But when he rose and fought and killed, the whole nation with one voice proclaimed him a man and brother. Nothing else made emancipation possible in the United States. Nothing else made Negro citizenship conceivable, but the record of the Negro soldier as a fighter.”

Although I am well aware that Du Bois was talking about the Civil War, which was a different situation than some of my case studies, in addition to the fact that his analysis of violence and personhood is very androcentric, this quote applies to Fermina, Carlota, Nelly and Celia’s experiences. When they rose and fought for their freedom and the destruction of slavery itself, they were finally regarded as more than objects but a person who could wield violence. Wielding violence allowed them to have their own identity outside of the category of an enslaved person, a negro, and an “ungendered” individual.

Lastly, I would like to establish that violence does not necessarily have to be physical but could be spiritual and psychological. In this thesis, I will define violence as actions that go against the hegemonic, dominant power used to cause injury and destruction to something or someone. Anything that could disrupt the

hegemonic grain is threatening to the current social order. Whether physical, psychological, or spiritual, violence becomes a means to shatter the master-slave dialectic, which causes damage to the master and the master’s self-identity and autonomy. It displaces the master, a person who is used to controlling the way society functions and makes them question all of their preconceived notions about themselves and the “other.”

In this chapter, I will first discuss Fermina and Carlota, two enslaved women who led an unsuccessful rebellion. I will then analyze Nelly, an enslaved woman who fought back against an overseer who was trying to punish her for being imprudent. Lastly, I will examine Celia, an enslaved woman who killed her master after he raped her for five years. These women’s stories not only demonstrate to us that Black women were in fact active participants in the fight for freedom, but that a method used to fight quotidian necropower in the nineteenth century was violence.

i. Fermina and Carlota: After Finch

To examine Fermina and Carlota’s lives, I will be relying heavily on Aisha Finch’s scholarship which includes “‘What Looks Like a Revolution’: Enslaved Women and the Gendered Terrain of Slave Insurgencies in Cuba, 1843-1844,” Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841-1844 and Breaking the Chains Forging the Nation: The Afro-Cuban fight for freedom and equality 1812-1912. “‘What Looks Like a Revolution’: Enslaved Women and the Gendered Terrain of Slave Insurgencies in Cuba, 1843-1844”
(2014) is an article that discusses Fermina and Carlota, two leading figures of enslaved insurrections of Cuba.

_Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841-1844_ (2015) explores Cuban resistance movements and the important role Black women played in insurrections against enslavement. In her book, it is clear that slaves were active participants in history. They fought back against the White, Eurocentric, hegemonic norms that cultivated the social hierarchies that diminished their humanity and regarded them as property. Finch writes, “The significant number of Atlantic crossings that recorded some kind of slave rebellion suggests that a range of resistant strategies were conceived and enacted in the slave holds. That new and recently arrived Africans figured so prominently in rebellions of the period indicates that the political consciousness that manifested itself on the plantations of Cuba was forged in part here, in this watery passage.”

This passage is important because it destroys the untruths cultivated in Eurocentric historical narratives that reduce people of color to one-dimensional, passive characters. Despite the hegemonic narratives, Black people were not complacent in their enslavement and subjectivity but willing to lay their lives on the line and enact refusal in any conceivable way to obtain freedom. Black people were not born into slavery but were coerced and forced. Therefore their humanity was always there, just hidden by the White, Eurocentric narratives that legitimized notions of inferiority.

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In *Breaking the Chains Forging the Nation: The Afro-Cuban Fight for Freedom and Equality 1812-1912* (2019), Finch and others study how Black resistance created courses of action to reclaim the humanity of Black people. To theorize the conditions of quotidian necropolitics and quotidian necropower in Fermina and Carlota’s lives, I will be doing a close reading of Aisha Finch’s work.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Cuba had become one of the greatest producers of sugarcane in the world as it was “hailed as the ‘bright jewel in the Spanish diadem.’”\(^6\) It is important to note that the prosperity in Cuba depended on the bodies of Black slaves. The violence enslaved people experienced, physically, psychologically, and emotionally demonstrates Black slaves’ exile from humanity altogether as they occupied a position of subordination that regarded them as disposable objects. The realm of the Cuban plantation was a necropolitical topography that ensured a permanent state of terror and violence in slaves’ everyday lives and experiences. Finch states, “As a space, a form of logic and a mode of production, the plantation was inherently a carceral regime, one designed to contain and discipline black workers through various forms of violence. This prisonlike system was so pervasive as to seem ordinary, yet it was absolutely central to the plantation’s geography and functioning.”\(^7\) These everyday forms of domination were a way to legitimize the violation of Black bodies and ingrain into society that the violence and terror slaves endured were normal, which allowed the hegemonic social hierarchies to flourish. On the plantation, men,

\(^6\) Ibid., 22.
\(^7\) Ibid., 34.
women, and children spent their days tilling and plowing the fields. The blood, sweat, and tears of the Black body were inextricably linked to life on the plantation as the whip was continuously enforced if the slave was not abiding by the whims of masters and overseers. Masters and overseers had complete and utter control over the slave’s life. The threat and use of violence were crucial to the preservation of the plantation since it was needed to continue the cycle of subjugation and oppression as well as legitimize the use of chattel slavery.

Quotidian necropolitics in the case of the plantation was inextricably linked to the libidinal economy as Black bodies remained in the realm of social death as they went from human beings to economic objects to further prosperity for the sovereign subjects of the plantation. This logic legitimized the necropolitical realm Black people were reduced to. These practices were not dictated by the state but enacted by everyday actors such as masters and overseers. The brutality of the necropolitical topography of Cuba’s plantation through micro-practices such as rape, sexual violence, the whip, and bloodhounds kept enslaved people “alive but in a state of injury [emphasis his], in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity.”\(^8\) The slave belonged to the master and thus belonged to domination, sub-humanism, and oppression. Fermina and Carlota deconstructed the hegemonic notions of leadership being linked to masculinity and demonstrated ways to rebel against quotidian necropolitics and the hegemonic.

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**ii. Fermina**

Fermina was an enslaved woman in Cuba who was a dominant figure in the November 1843 slave resistance. It is speculated that “it is very likely that as a Lucumí, Fermina, like Carlota, came from the region of Yorubaland, and was taken on board a slave ship somewhere along the Yoruba coast.”

Before the November slave rebellion of 1843, Fermina had acquired a rebellious reputation due to her participation in slave revolts. In June of 1843, Fermina aided in leading a slave revolt of approximately fifty enslaved people. Unfortunately, this revolt consequently led to Fermina and her fellow comrades’ capture, in which they were forced to endure brutal beatings as punishment. She spent time captured for five months until she was released in November of 1843 when another rebellion was transpiring.

In 1843, a field worker named Camila Criolla stated that she witnessed Fermina’s leadership in the rebellion by stating that Fermina “was shouting to the Triunvirato slaves[,] telling them that the whites were escaping that way; that right away [the witness] observed that Fermina was approaching the plantation grove directing several slaves and telling them ‘Grab that fat white man and hit him with your machete [*dale de machetazos*], for he is the one who puts [us in] shackles.'”

Fermina’s agency and personhood were legitimized by the actions of pure and overt violence. This violence is didactic for two reasons. Firstly, Fermina’s use of violence showcases the transcendence of Western forms of

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liberation and freedom. Amid all the violations and terror of life on the plantation, Fermina was able to acquire pure control over her own body by not only enacting violence onto others but directing others to enact violence. In this context and many others, violence was the only mechanism and language that expressed discontent and freedom from the hegemonic. When Fermina says, “‘for he is the one who puts [us in] shackles,’”¹¹ I believe she is demonstrating that she does not believe in the naturalization of slavery and social hierarchies that she was conditioned to believe in, but that she, like many other slaves, were able to negate the consciousness of their masters and the subordinate status the master gave them.

Secondly, Fermina’s leadership as a Black woman dictating to her subordinates modes of brutality demonstrates violence because it disrupts hegemony. Our educational systems erase and banalize Black women’s contributions in the fight for liberation. This equates violence and fighting as a very androcentric practice that minimizes and hides Black women who have employed violence. By cultivating the connotation that only men are the ones who can wield violence in our patriarchal society, Black women are reduced to passive figures that allow caricatures like the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire to persist because they contribute to repressive modes of knowledge the pigeonhole Black women as being complacent to slavery. Fermina’s story opens up for the Africana archive the possibility of the way we view leadership and insurgents by looking at how violence is a universal form of praxis when it comes to achieving “liberty” or “freedom.” Rebellion is not a masculine endeavor.

¹¹ Ibid.
By using Fermina’s story, I highlight how Black women, whether visible or not, were crucial to the refusal of slavery and the cultivation of a world without it. Interestingly enough, Fermina was “described by the Spanish authorities as having a ‘male character’ and to ‘have distinguished herself among the meanest of men during the chasing and killing of white people.’”\(^{12}\) Equating Fermina with characteristics such as the “meanest of men”\(^{13}\) was a way to vilify Fermina and delegitimise her as a political actor.

I invite my readers to look at quotidian necropolitics through Georgina Herrera’s poem titled “Fermina Lucumi,” which articulates the trials and tribulations of Fermina and her identity as an enslaved woman. This raises the question, “Does Mbembe’s theory allow for other genres to express the necropolitical realm?” Herrera writes,

On November 5, 1843, Fermina, when all the floggings were not enough to wreck her will…
What love puts shrewdness in her brain, fury in her hands?
What memory brought from the land where she was free like the light and the thunderstorm gave her arm strength?
It is valid the nostalgia that makes a woman’s hand mighty until she severs her enemy’s head.
Tell me, Fermina: What did you miss at that time?
Which happiness did you recover, when you were flying


\(^{13}\) Ibid.
more than running
through the green abysses of cane, where
your misfortune took place?
It is a pity
there is no photography of your eyes;
They must have shone so much.14

By looking at Herrera’s poem about Fermina, we can understand quotidian necropolitics through a different lens by looking at the way this poem explores what it means to be human. At the beginning of the poem, Herrera says that despite the beatings Fermina received as a result of her participation in the rebellion, her resolve and spirit were not affected by it. Through the first few lines, it seems, in my opinion, that Herrera is making a comment on human will and how Fermina’s determination to obtain freedom came at any cost. In the next lines, “What love puts shrewdness in her brain, fury in her hands? What memory brought from the land where she was free like the light and the thunderstorm gave her arm strength? It is valid the nostalgia that makes a woman’s hand mighty until she severs her enemy’s head.”15 Whether she knows it or not, Herrera is making a comment on the social death Fermina experienced through the natal alienation of her home, her family, and her own body and how this social death contributed to her desire to enact violence.

The invocation of nostalgia showcases the ties of the homeland and how her journey to slavery led to her finding the strength to use violence as a praxis to achieve freedom and punish the people responsible for putting her and her fellow slaves in chains. In this poem, Herrera showcases the penetrable nature of the

15 Ibid.
necropolitical realm in Black woman’s lives and how Fermina’s very existence was shrouded by the terror and violence of the plantation life, but this did not deter her from fighting back. Herrera then says, “Which happiness did you recover, when you were flying more than running through the green abysses of cane, where your misfortune took place? It is a pity there is no photography of your eyes; They must have shone so much.”16 When discussing the happiness of Fermina, is it quite clear that this happiness is equated with freedom. While Fermina was running or flying through the field, she was experiencing freedom and liberty because she could finally make the choices she wanted to make without the coercion of external factors, despite the fact that this freedom came at the cost of her life.

It is important to note a contradiction in Fermina’s story in the Africana archive. It is said that Fermina denied her involvement in the rebellion and stated that during the rebellion, “she was sleeping in her cabin,’ and maintained that when she heard the commotion she fled from her cabin and hid in a cane patch. She insisted that those who testified against her must have done so ‘to place themselves in a good position [buen lugar] and leave her [in a bad one],’ and that her accusers undoubtedly received some kind of compensation.”17 It is quite plausible that Fermina was a part of the rebellion due to her past participation in early June and was denying it as a mode of preservation. However, I do not have

16 Ibid.
https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2014.0007.
any answers to these questions, but I find it quite interesting that Fermina’s experience is not a neatly tied story in the archive but one of paradox.

In conclusion, Fermina’s story is a powerful one. For starters, she disarmed the sovereign powers that kept her oppressed. By directing her fellow slaves to hit the master with their machetes, she is the one dictating who gets to live and who gets to die, and in this circumstance is becoming the ultimate sovereign because she has the power to do just that. In Mbembe’s “Necropolitics,” Mbembe says that the loss of political rights was one of the factors in social death. By using violence to disrupt the current regime of terror she was living under, I argue that Fermina became a political agent. Even though according to Weber, this violence is considered an illegitimate form of violence because legitimate violence is considered to be from the state, Fermina’s resistance from below showcases that she executed this violence to obtain a political goal… the goal of freedom and to be recognized as an autonomous being.

**iii. Carlota**

Like Fermina, Carlota originated from Yorubaland. She was enslaved on the Triunvirato estate when the November 1843 revolt broke out. According to Matea Gangà, a fieldworker who had witnessed the revolt, “‘a black woman from Triunvirato, who she…heard is named Carlota, was boasting that she had attacked with a machete [había dado con el machete] a white daughter of the overseer who is named Doña María de Regla.’ Magdalena Lucumí similarly testified that Carlota ‘was talking about having attacked the child María de Regla, daughter of
the mayoral[,] with a machete.”"\(^{18}\) What’s fascinating about this statement is that the violence Carlota enacted on the overseer’s daughter allows us to make a very important conclusion.

I make the conclusion that sovereign subjects in the case of the plantation can also be White women who were included in the hegemonic, dominant power. White women played a very active role in slavery. There is often a misconception that White women were not sovereign powers on the plantation and the role of acquiring and disciplining slaves was purely in the hands of White men. However, this is not the case. Enslaved people were owned by White women and had to endure their cruelty and discipline.

Additionally, White women were very well aware of the economic benefits of slavery. This demonstrates that female enslavers were just as cruel and harsh as male enslavers. In *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (2019), Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers states that slaveholders “allowed their daughters to assume the roles of instructor and disciplinarian early on. White parents also taught their daughters the basic principles of slave ownership through naming practices and by requiring enslaved people to use salutations that conferred respect when addressing them and their children.”"\(^{19}\) Although Jones-Rogers wrote this regarding the American south, I still think this can apply to White women slave owners no matter the location because slavery is built on domination and oppression by placing Black people at

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the bottom of the social hierarchy which meant propping up White people no matter their gender to put them at the top. There is not much information regarding the way Doña María de Regla treated the enslaved on the plantation. However, it can be inferred that it was not well, for she was targeted amongst the slaves during the rebellion. The cruelty of White slaveholding women showcases that violence is universal when it comes to slavery. Gender and/or positionality did not matter.

When Doña María de Regla gave her testimony about the attack she experienced, she stated,

That when the rebellion broke out she fled in the direction of the plantation grove, ‘where she realized she was being pursued by two black men and a black woman; unfortunately she fell on the ground as a result of having been attacked; in which position the black woman, who was carrying a pruning machete [machete de calabozo] in her hand, inflicted three wounds.’ María de Regla ended by adding that ‘when she was wounded, the black woman shouted to the two other black men that they should strike her harder [que le dieran mas duro] because she was still living, and …the black men responded that this was not necessary because she was already dead.’

The sheer violence Carlota issued onto María de Regla deconstructs the notion that violence is a purely masculine endeavor and that enslaved women were just passive beings. By depicting Carlota as this brutal attacker, the archive demonstrates that Black women not only wanted freedom but were willing to do whatever it took to achieve it, whether it be, dictating to fellow slaves violent instructions or being the ones to attack and beat the owners themselves. Fermina and Carlota powerfully demonstrate that resistance is possible on the plantation. Despite the plantation’s inability to be a place of consent and agency, Fermina and

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Carlota were able to transcend not only the powers of the plantation but the hegemonic powers at large.

Unfortunately, Fermina and Carlota’s participation in the revolution led them to their demise as their social death quickly became physical. A firing squad executed Fermina. Whereas when Carlota was found dead by authorities, it was theorized that military forces subdued her. In the case of resistance, it often seems that it results in the demise of Black men and women, which raises the question of, is the only form of freedom Black people can obtain through death? If so, that is disappointing and disheartening. I refuse to believe that Black people have no agency or power to fight the overwhelming lure of White, hegemonic powers determining who gets to live and who dies. Over the course of centuries, Black people have committed suicide or chosen death as a form of resistance to White, dominant powers, such as the Igbo landing, the mass suicide of Igbo slaves resisting their condemnation to lives as slaves. Although the choice of death was favored over many of the slaves’ present conditions, resistance came at the cost of their lives. Death becomes the part of their life that they have freedom over, and therefore they can achieve liberation by taking control of their fate. Fermina and Carlota’s stories demonstrate that their navigation of the quotidian necropolitical realm was through countering the hegemonic grain by denouncing the social constructs they were put in. To achieve personhood and liberation, Fermina and Carlota had to transcend the current social order through utter violence, which allowed them to be regarded as more than just an instrument in the political
economy of Cuba but people who had their own thoughts, capacities, and abilities.

Although Cuba and the United States are different geographical locations, anti-Black violence is universal. The mechanisms used to control and dominate Black bodies, such as the whip, rape, and bloodhounds, were used in Cuba and America. The Middle Passage and the trade of African bodies happened on a global scale, and thus, dehumanization happened as well. There is great value in analyzing quotidian necropower in the Atlantic World because it allows us to see the ways quotidian necropower is utilized across space and time. I will maneuver to the location of the United States next in this portion of my thesis.

iv. Nelly: After Douglass

In the 1790s, slaves consisted of one-third of the population of Maryland.21 As the nineteenth century progressed, the proportion of free Blacks to enslaved Blacks increased. Slavery was reduced in the north, and the west of Maryland as farmers became more reliant on different cultivation.22 Regardless of the diminishing of slavery in the north and the west, the southern counties of Maryland still heavily relied on slavery. Thus, the political and economic power of masters and overseers had still reigned supreme as they were the sovereign subjects of the plantation. As demonstrated by Frederick Douglass’ autobiographies, the plantations of Maryland were a cruel necropolitical site in which Black people were objectified and treated as tools to run the American

economy. It was a place of pure and utter terror for Black bodies as White people, specifically masters, and overseers deputized themselves to act as all-powerful rulers. The everyday life on the plantation is not a state of exception but a part of the quotidian in which slavery and the plantation were ingrained into American life for approximately four hundred years. The brutality, violence, oppression, and subjugation that transpired on the master’s land were preserved and concealed into the United States’ law. Thus the plantation is a physical manifestation of quotidian necropolitics. The master-slave relationship enabled slave owners to enact complete and utter domination. In “The Constituent Elements of Slavery,” Patterson quotes Henri Wallon: “the slave was a dominated thing, an animated instrument, a body with natural movements, but without its own reason, an existence entirely absorbed in another.”

Frederick Douglass demonstrates the brutality of the plantation through the first-hand experiences of Aunt Esther, Nelly, and his own experiences on the plantation dealing with Covey. This necropolitical site was home to Nelly, an enslaved woman who fought against her overseer.

The story of Nelly’s resistance is told in all three of Frederick Douglass’ autobiographies *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). In *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass does not mention Nelly by name but I think he is telling her story in brief detail. Frederick Douglass writes, “Mr. Severe was rightly named: he was

a cruel man. I have seen him whip a woman, causing the blood to run half an hour at the time; and this, too, in the midst of her crying children, pleading for their mother’s release. He seemed to take pleasure in manifesting his fiendish barbarity.  

In his first autobiography, Fredrick Douglass mentions what I think to be Nelly’s story to attest to Overseer Severe’s cruelty and dehumanization.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass frames Nelly’s resistance as a moment of consciousness, in addition to his introduction to the horrors of slavery. In his second autobiography, he revises what was previously written in 1845 and extends his experiences. When discussing Nelly, he describes her as a “bright mulatto, the recognized wife of a favorite ‘hand’ on board Col. Lloyd’s sloop, and the mother of five sprightly children.”

Through the eyes of a young Frederick Douglass, it is clear that Nelly’s special positionality of being the wife of the master’s favorite hand gave her special privileges and powers, including not being whipped. Douglass describes witnessing Nelly’s whipping and resistance. Douglass describes Mr. Sevier trying to drag Nelly toward a tree as Nelly simultaneously tries to resist him. He writes, “she nobly resisted, and, unlike most of the slaves, seemed determined to make her whipping cost Mr. Sevier as much as possible. The blood on his (and her) face, attested her skill, as well as her

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25 In his different autobiographies, Frederick Douglass spells the name Nelly differently. In his second autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* her name is spelled Nelly. In his third autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* her name is spelled Nellie. Additionally, Frederick Douglass uses two different spellings for the cruel overseer. In his first autobiography, *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* he spells the overseer’s name as Mr. Severe. In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and his third autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* he spells the overseer’s name as Mr. Sevier.

courage and dexterity in using her nails.”

27 He later writes, “When Nelly was untied, her back was covered with blood. The red stripes were all over her shoulders. She was whipped – severly whipped; but she was not subdued, for she continued to denounce the overseer, and to call him every vile name. He had bruised her flesh, but left her invincible spirit undaunted.”

28 Throughout this excerpt, Frederick Douglass ascribes Nelly historical agency. She is not a passive figure but fights against Sevier’s violence and cruelty despite the tragic consequences that awaited her. He deems her to be noble, which is saying that she has admirable characteristics and is doing what is considered to be what is morally good. While speaking about Nelly’s resistance, he speaks with respect and approval of Nelly’s actions and uses active words such as “courage,” “determined,” and more.

In Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Nelly is described as “nearly white” and having “a predominating share of the blood of the master running in her veins.”

30 This is rather interesting because, in the past autobiographies, she was described as a mulatto, but now she is seen as being closer to Whiteness, and thus her being perceived as “nearly white” could have also contributed to Overseer Sevier marking her as impudent. When talking about her resistance, Douglass states, “When I came near the parties engaged in the struggle, the overseer had hold of Nellie, endeavouring with his whole strength to drag her to a

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27 Ibid., 288.
28 Ibid., 289.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
tree against her resistance. Both his and her faces were bleeding, for the woman was doing her best."32 He then goes on to say, “The cries of the now helpless woman, while undergoing the terrible infliction, were mingled with the hoarse curses of the overseer and the wild cries of her distracted children. When the poor woman was untied, her back was covered with blood. She was whipped, terribly whipped, but she was not subdued, and continued to denounce the overseer, and pour upon him every vile epithet she could think of.”33

Despite the continuities and discontinuities of the different versions of Nelly’s story, I argue that Nelly did achieve freedom through this act. She may have physically been in chains, but she transcended the Eurocentric, White societal order and the written and unwritten rules of her subjugation. She demolished the notion that Black people were objects and things. She showcased Black people as having consciousness which contradicted the notion of Black people not having minds of their own or intelligence. In My Bondage and My Freedom, after discussing how Nelly’s whippings did not subdue her in spirit, he writes, “He is whipped oftenest, who is whipped easiest; and that slave who has the courage to stand up for himself against the overseer, although he may have many hard stripes at the first, becomes, in the end, a freeman, even though he sustain the formal relation of a slave.”34 Additionally, I would like to attest that Nelly’s mere existence as a light-skinned woman with special class privileges was a form of resistance because, in the world of the plantation, she challenged

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 674.
slavery and enslavement as an institution. For example, how can a dominated being be allocated special class privileges when poor White men were not allocated class privileges other than the illusion of Whiteness making them “superior” to Black people.

By using Orlando Patterson’s three constituent elements of slavery, I will demonstrate how Nelly broke all of these elements and thus, in her moment of resistance, obtained freedom. I argue that even though Nelly lived in the realm of social death, she went against the White, hegemonic grain by refusing to submit unconditionally. Her resistance was a form of perseverance as she had to endure the lash. However, her humanity and spirit were still intact even though her autonomy came at the expense of bloodshed and complete and utter brutality. The first element is naked force which is the “use or threat of violence in the control of one person by another.” The overseer used this violence to ingrain in the slave’s consciousness that they were considered sub-human and had no autonomy of themselves. Violence and terror is a way to preserve the social death of slaves by ingraining in slaves that if they do not follow the rules of slavery, there is always a possibility of being physically murdered by their masters placing the slaves in a constant state of fear and hopelessness. Although Overseer Sevier could enlist brutal violence on her body, she still did not give up her capacity and ability to fight for her autonomy over her body. He tried to control and tame her body and spirit through brutal whippings, yet her spirit was not crushed even though her body was beaten and bloody.

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The second element of slavery was natal alienation, defined as the detachment a slave experiences as the slave has no relation to their heritage, kinship, and traditions. Even though Nelly is excluded from the dominant social order, Nelly has a social connection because she has her family on the plantation with her. She was a wife and a mother. As previously stated, Nelly was in a unique situation compared to other slaves on plantations because she created a somewhat nuclear family in an environment where families were destroyed on a regular basis. She even had some special privileges on the plantation due to her husband’s stature. I argue that this family unit helped Nelly navigate through her fugitive status as she was not alone or isolated because she had other people around her who not only put their lives on the line for her by protecting her from the overseer but also understood the situation she was in due to the trust they have as a family. This is best seen in Frederick Douglass’s second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, when the children “gallantly came to their mother’s defense, and gave the overseer an excellent pelting with stones. One of the little fellows ran up, seized the overseer by the leg and bit him…”36 Unlike other slaves, Nelly’s alienation did not stem from “alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of ‘blood,’ and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master”37 because she had her immediate blood family with her. Due to her relationship with her children and her husband, it is clear that she had a genuine, real identity outside of being a

slave. Her relationship did not depend on her master. Angela Davis writes, “Consciousness of alienation entails the absolute refusal to accept that alienation.”38 One of the first forms of freedom is consciousness. Davis writes, “True consciousness is the rejection of the institution itself and everything that accompanies it.”39 In the moment of resisting her master, Nelly did the unthinkable in a hegemonic world that has conditioned and brainwashed her to believe that she is an object used at the disposal of White people. She rejected the institution of slavery by denouncing the power dynamics that kept her oppressed. Through this consciousness, Nelly decolonized her mind by dismissing Western notions of racial hierarchy and power by demonstrating that she is not less than or unequal to a White man but just as powerful in her own right.

The last essential element of slavery is dishonor. Patterson writes, “The slave could have no honor because of the origin of his status, the indignity and all-pervasiveness of his indebtedness, his absence of any independent social existence, but most of all because he was without power except through another.”40 The third element of slavery was absolutely shattered by Nelly’s resistance. Patterson believes that “The slave...could have no honor because he had no power and no independent social existence, hence no public worth.”41 Dishonor conveys to the slave that they are powerless; however, through Nelly’s resistance, it is quite clear she does not see herself as powerless. I argue that through Nelly’s agency, she broke out of the shackles of slavery and became a

39 Ibid.
40 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 10.
41 Ibid.
free person, even if it was for a short duration of time. Nelly proved that she had power by using her voice to showcase her defiance and her hands and body to fight against the overseer. She did have an independent social existence because she had identities outside of her mere existence as a slave. She was a mother of five and a wife to her husband. She mattered for she had people who cared about her and saw her as more than a slave as well. With all of these factors in mind, she did have public worth. She held herself to a high moral standard and did not let the way White people in America viewed her stop her from maintaining self-hood in the master-slave relationship. Nelly claimed ownership of herself despite the irrefutable consequences that could have transpired because of her defiance.

Additionally, I argue that a dishonored person does not have pride. I believe that a key part of Nelly’s resistance is that she had pride and did not recognize herself through the master-slave dialectic. The class rank she acquired through her husband allowed her to believe she has the illusion of privilege and thus disrupted what Orlando Patterson believes to be the key elements of slavery.

Lastly, I would like to argue that Nelly’s resistance was a way to take back her body. Her body becomes a form of resistance. In a world in which Black bodies are bought and sold, bartered for, raped, assaulted, abused, whipped, and murdered, she was able to take control over her body and weaponize it by hitting and scratching the overseer. This diminished the institution of slavery because slavery is built on the notion that Black people are property which means they are at the beck and call and whims of White people. They are not considered to be human because they are objects. For the institution of slavery to persist, the slave
must not have any determination of the factors of their life. Nelly had determination over her external factors by denouncing them no matter the cost.

v. Celia: After McLaurin

There are no historical records about Celia regarding her birth or where she lived prior to Robert Newsom obtaining her. In 1850, she was around fourteen years old when Robert Newsom purchased her, and after her purchase, Robert Newsom raped her.42 This rape, unfortunately, became the first of many. In fact, it seems as though Robert Newsom purchased her to exploit her sexually. In Celia, A Slave (1991), Melton A. McLaurin writes, “A healthy sixty years of age, Newsom needed more than a hostess and manager of household affairs; he required a sexual partner. Newsom seems to have deliberately chosen to purchase a young slave girl to fulfill this role, a choice made the more convenient by the ability to present the girl as a domestic servant purchased for the benefit of his daughters.”43 As a result of Robert Newsom raping her, she had two children, and it is assumed that one or both of them was by him.

In 1855, Celia began to have relations with another slave named George. In the archive, it is said that George did not want Celia to have any more sexual encounters with Robert Newsom, in which he gave her an ultimatum to cut off sexual ties with Robert, or he would no longer be with her. The sexual domination Robert Newsom had on Celia represents a situation of quotidian necropolitics. As previously stated, quotidian necropolitics is beyond the state because actors from below dictate it. Newsom is considered to be the sovereign of his plantation. As

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43 Ibid., 24.
sovereign, he is able to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants, to whomever he pleases. This meant allocating death as well as social death. This is best exhibited when McLaurin states, “Robert Newsom was lord of the manor and could use Celia as he pleased.”44 Since their relationship was based on domination, Robert Newsom believed that he was entitled to her body because he bought and owned her; thus, quotidian necropolitics is built on these deep, personal relationships built on inequality, power, and domination.

Celia lived a social death as she had lost the right to her body through constant sexual exploitation by Newsom. She faced alienation on the plantation even though she had two children and George, her lover. Even with these human connections, she did not have anyone to protect her. I would like to point out that she could not rely on George to protect her because when George was given the option to either protect Celia or protect himself, he chose to protect himself. George’s decision to protect himself instead of Celia demonstrates that on the plantation, male and female slaves were not only utterly powerless but very much alone as people were focused on their own survival. She did not have the help of a slave community, and “there is no evidence to suggest that Celia had any contacts with the world beyond the Newsom farm, any relationships with persons, slave or free, who might aid her in an escape attempt.”45 Newsom alienated her from George, her lover because George wanted Celia to break off her sexual relations with Newsom and gave Celia an ultimatum. She was further alienated on the plantation because when she tried to advocate for herself by making a plea to

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44 Ibid., 28.
Robert Newsom’s children about the sexual exploitation their father enacted on her, no one helped her.

On June 23rd, 1855, Robert gained access to Celia’s cabin, which she warned Robert not to enter. When he came into her cabin, despite her refusal, she “raised the stick, ‘about as large as the upper part of a Windsor chair, but not so long’”46 and hit Robert Newsom on the head with it. She hit him again with the stick out of fear that Newsom would hurt her. It was the second strike that consequently led to his death. After killing her master, she put his body in the fireplace.

By killing her master, she used her body to enact resistance against the institution itself. Newsom’s repeated rape of Celia showcases the disregard for Black women’s humanity. By cultivating stereotypes such as the Jezebel, Black women were reduced to unidimensional beings. These stereotypes are used to preserve the White male patriarchy and the dominant narrative by silencing and erasing Black women’s voices and justifying the rape of Black women and girls. The creation of the Jezebel was a means to control Black women by casting them as hypersexual, and thus hypersexuality and criminality were the only agency they were allocated. The rape of Black women was deemed unimaginable due to the hypersexuality attributed to the Black body. Celia’s act of killing Robert Newsom gave her sovereignty, even if it was for a brief moment. Achille Mbembe argues that the “ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.”47 Celia was

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46 Ibid., 34.
able to allocate death at this moment through her act of resistance by determining whether or not Newsom would live or die. The first time she hit him was an act of defiance, but it was not the thing that killed him. Celia’s decision to hit him a second time, even though it was out of fear of his retaliation, caused his death, and thus she had the power and capacity to allocate death.

For starters, there are a lot of interesting components to Celia’s story. One of them is that McLaurin, author of *Celia, a Slave*, believes that it was George’s ultimatum that was a huge factor in Newsom’s death. This is best demonstrated when McLaurin states, “It was George’s male ego that placed Celia in the quandary that led to Newsom’s death and her arrest, conviction, and execution.”

I find this to be quite compelling because whether it is McLaurin’s intention or not, McLaurin does not grant Celia human agency by attributing her resistance to George. Even in the archive, her efforts are diminished and tied to a man. The implication that Celia cannot resist without male efforts makes the idea of a woman participating in violence as a means to rebel inconceivable. The humanity of Celia the slave and all the rape and abuse she endured ever since her purchase is not considered as probably one of the number one reasons for deciding to defend herself against Robert Newsom. Due to her positionality as a Black woman and the criminality ingrained onto her bare flesh, she was always considered to be the source of trouble or wrong-doing. This notion is a common belief among White and Black people alike, which is the most disturbing part of quotidian necropolitics because it showcases how negative and derogatory societal constructs are implemented into an everyday civil society that

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dehumanizes people of color. The micro-practices and self-disciplines of domination and enacting social death include having control over someone you deem inferior by establishing myths and fallacies that are practiced daily and then legitimized by law.

Celia’s story is a culmination of quotidian necropolitics and Mbembe’s necropolitics. I previously mentioned why her story represents the quotidian aspect, but I would like to shed some light on Mbembe’s necropolitics. In the context of the United States, the government is considered to be the sovereign power. During her trial, Celia was unable to give any testimony since there were laws implemented that prevented slaves from testifying. The prevention of enslaved people from testifying by law was a legalized form of social death, showcasing that Black people were not recognized as human by the law.

Additionally, this became a way to erase Black people not only in the archive but in the historical memory of the Americas and the Atlantic World as they were not allowed to speak up and defend themselves from the clutches of White supremacy. By not allowing slaves to give testimony to the crimes inflicted upon them, the United States government legalized the hegemonic norm by making the voices that matter White. Celia’s verdict is the perfect example of necropolitics in the United States. Celia was found guilty and sentenced to death for the murder of Newsom. By sentencing Celia to death, the jury, who was, in this case, the sovereign power, showcased that they had the power and capacity to subject Celia to death because she was a threat to the societal order and the
necropolitical realm at large because of whether she meant to or not she was challenging the hegemonic powers by using violence and refusing enslavement.

vi. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, it is quite clear that violence was a mechanism used for Black women to break out of the chains of enslavement and enact refusal to the necropolitical realm that oppressed them. It is by using violence that these women gain personhood. However, this personhood still did not grant them full humanity because ever since the Enlightenment, humans have been coterminous with Whiteness. However, I cannot help but notice that three out of four of the women’s fates ultimately led to death which is rather discouraging news that despite the fact that these women refused the necropolitical realm they were subjected to, they were killed as if their lives were insignificant and disturbances to the hegemonic power. What kind of politics do the scenes of these women’s stories demonstrate to us? What do they tell us about the social worlds we inhabit? The powers of White men and women showcase the ways White people dictate the rules and norms that allow them to uphold power through legitimizing violence, inequality, oppression, and degradation. By cultivating cultural norms of heteronormativity, White sovereign subjects are able to obtain a status quo that not only treats Black men and women as enemies of the dominant norm but as deviants. Black women rebelled against those who oppressed and subjugated them through means of violence; the consequences of these actions almost always led to death. When White men and women saw their slaves rising up against
them, they became a danger to their way of life and thus needed to be beaten into submission or killed.

These women’s stories tell us that a method used for the politics of the oppressed is violence. That is the only way that they can be heard and seen. As slaves, they were constantly forced to undergo violence. Their masters had the freedom to wield violence whenever they wanted, regardless of the circumstances. Slaves, especially enslaved Black women, did not have control over their bodies and were often subjected to sexual violence. Black women turned this objectification on its head by using their bodies to destroy the norm. These stories also demonstrate that Black women were political theorists in their own rights as they used political violence to obtain freedom and remove themselves from the plantation. It gave Black women, who are considered to be non-state actors, the legitimacy and power they needed to fight back. As one can see, there were many threats that Black women faced in the nineteenth century as they were vulnerable to sexual abuse, anti-Black violence, degradation, oppression, and the looming danger of death as White masters lured over Black people. In the eyes of their White enslavers and the eyes of the rest of the Atlantic World, they were nothing more than disposable objects. Although there were many ways that Black women responded to these threats, I find the use of violence as a Black feminist radical praxis intriguing as Black women are often viewed as submissive beings who had no agency. Thus they turned the master-slave dialectic onto its head as Black women were no longer slaves when they enacted refusal. They disrupted the
master’s identity, life, and livelihood by dispelling the hegemonic norms placed to cultivate Black people’s subservience and exclusion.

Through these case studies, it is clear that necropolitics is a trans-national theory. It is happening anytime, anywhere. By extrapolating necropolitics toward different geographies, it is clear that people who are labeled as “other” are under constant threat of death by sovereign powers.
III. Escaping Quotidian Necropolitics: 
Against the Hegemonic Grain

“In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body--it is heritage [emphasis his].”


“Afropessimism gives us the freedom to say out loud what we would otherwise whisper or deny: that no Blacks are in the world, but, by the same token, there is no world without Blacks. The violence perpetrated against us is not a form of discrimination; it is a necessary violence; a health tonic for everyone who is not Black; an ensemble of sadistic rituals and captivity that could only happen to people who are not Black if they broke this or that ‘law.’”


The stories of Fermina, Carlota, Nelly, and Celia demonstrate to us the mundane acts of necropolitics used to subjugate Black women’s bodies and the resistance used to define the identity of Black women in the nineteenth century. However, I am still left with the following questions: Is freedom from necropolitics possible?; and if so, then what does freedom from necropolitics look like? In order to answer these questions, I will first define freedom. In *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues*, Angela Davis focuses on collective freedom; “the freedom to earn a livelihood and live a healthy, fully realized life; freedom from violence; sexual freedom; social justice; abolition of all forms of bondage and incarceration; freedom from exploitation; freedom of movement; freedom as movement, as a collective striving for real democracy.”

According to Davis, freedom is struggled for. It is “a process of becoming, of

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being able to see and understand difference within unity, and resisting the
tendency to reproduce the hierarchies embedded in the world we want to
change.”

Freedom is an Enlightenment ideology that was used to control and
dominate Black bodies, and thus I believe freedom has become inextricably
linked to Whiteness. To be White is to have freedom, which allows for notions of
rights and private property. In Race and America’s Long War, Nikhil Pal Singh
states, “the ideal of freedom as self-rule was directly linked to a moral and legal
right to murder or sequester racial outsiders–designated as savages and slaves–in
the name of infrastructure development, collective security, and private
accumulation.”

I invoke Singh to showcase how freedom is utilized to advance
White fantasies and cultivate what it means to be human by attributing freedom as
the right to deal out death to those deemed as “other” to advance oneself. The
exclusion of groups of people is essential to the construction of freedom as
freedom defines itself by defining what it is not. By demonstrating the social
history of the formation of the liberal subject, it is very apparent who was
excluded. Thus, it is not beneficial to look at the Enlightenment’s theories of
freedom because the Enlightenment made freedom for Back bodies unimaginable.

The relationship between freedom and Blackness is a rather complicated
one as Black people’s freedom has been stripped away for centuries since the
beginning of slavery; however, Black people have proven time and time again
through acts of refusal and resistance that they will fight against the hegemonic

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2 Ibid., 18.
grain and die for their freedom. Even though Black people have made so much amazing progress, and as George Lipsitz writes, “the very survival of Black people in the face of murderous brutality and genocidal intent qualifies as a miracle”\(^4\) the inability to obtain true freedom as in the ability to be recognized as human, the ability to not worry about being gunned down in the street due to the color of your skin, the ability to not be stereotyped with criminality or negative connotations, the ability to have socioeconomic mobility, etc., is a fight that Black people are still fighting for. Freedom does not exist for Black bodies in the same way it exists for White bodies, and thus I believe freedom should be redefined. To be quite frank, I am still grappling with this new definition of freedom for Black bodies.

Although I hate to admit it, I wonder if my mind is too ingrained in the Eurocentric, hegemonic tradition. That is why I am having such a hard time establishing a definition that has nothing to do with the hegemonic grain. I am not done theorizing the notion of freedom for Black bodies. Still, for the sake of my thesis and establishing a coherent understanding, I will define freedom for Black bodies through Angela Davis’ definition because her definition of freedom provides a holistic view of what freedom means for oppressed people. The inability of the hegemonic, White dominant powers to recognize Black people’s humanity demonstrates the lack of freedom allocated to Black bodies.

Additionally, throughout slavery and colonization, White people have used institutions such as the law and cultural and social norms to control Black people

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and dominate their bodies. This domination has persisted since modern times as Black bodies are still criminalized. The inability to wear a hoodie without being seen as a thug and the inability to jog near one’s home without being seen as a threat by White vigilantes are all examples that demonstrate that Black people cannot just exist without being controlled or perceived as a threat.

To answer these questions—Is freedom from necropolitics possible?; and if so, then what does freedom from necropolitics look like?—I invoke *Afropessimism* by Frank Wilderson III. *Afropessimism* (2020), by Frank Wilderson III, is a memoir mixed with an Africana political theory that articulates Black oppression interwoven with personal experiences and narratives. By using personal experiences from youth into adulthood, Wilderson makes the argument that Black people are crucial to civil society because “Humanity would cease to exist; because it would lose its conceptual coherence, having lost its baseline other. Humanity would find itself standing in the abyss of an epistemological void. The Black is needed to mark the border of Human subjectivity.” He demonstrates to the reader that Black people are bounded by slavery as they are not political or sentient beings but rather objects used to advance not only other groups’ political agendas but bolster White fantasies of anti-Black violence. Black people are living in what Orlando Patterson calls a “social death” since they are excluded from civil society as they are powerless to hegemonic forces. Even though when Orlando Patterson discusses “social death” it is in the context of slavery, the term

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social death is applicable to the twenty-first century as Black people are still experiencing social death as they are not granted full human agency or humanity.

Wilderson best exemplifies this in his memoir when discussing his past relationship with Stella, a lover he had, and Josephine, Stella’s White neighbor. Josephine has invaded the couple’s space by entering their home without consent in this scene. Wilderson connects the master’s prerogative to Josephine and Stella’s relationship in which he sees Josephine as the master and Stella as the slave. He states that he realizes Josephine did not do anything wrong when she intrudes into their space by reflecting on a scene from 12 Years a Slave in which Edwin Epps (the master) violates the slave’s space as they are in their sleeping quarters. He states, “The cabin where they slept belonged to him as much as their flesh belonged to him. The regime of violence that made them his property and prosthetics of his desire made it impossible to see what he did as a violation.”

This scene was compelling. Stella’s inability to set boundaries in her own home due to Josephine’s hegemonic power as a sovereign in the quotidian necropolitical soil of America demonstrates Stella’s lack of human agency as she was viewed as an object rather than a human being. This scene is one of the many powerful vignettes Wilderson uses to bolster and theorize Afropessimism.

Quotidian necropolitics and Afro-pessimism intersect as necropolitics was the precursor to Afropessimism. As Wilderson wrote, “‘You better understand White people’s fantasies because tomorrow they’ll be legislation.’ That’s what the law is: White fantasies as objective value.” Quotidian necropolitics is dictated by

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6 Ibid., 72.
7 Ibid., 196.
actors from below who are sovereign powers that lay down authoritatively who gets to live and who gets to die. From the implementation of slavery until now, White fantasies have dictated what should or should not be considered to be written into legislation. An example of this is the lack of laws regarding punishment for the rape of Black women. Black women were considered the property of their owners, and since they were not viewed as human, the White men who raped Black women were not held accountable or punished for their wrongdoings. Another example of White fantasies turning into laws is Jim Crow laws. The legalization of racial segregation upheld White southern racial hierarchies and allowed the state to sponsor racism.

I believe the theory of Afropessimism answers my questions regarding if it is possible to have freedom from necropolitics. When talking about Black people, Wilderson writes, “We are [emphasis his] being genocided, but genocided and [emphasis his] regenerated, because the spectacle [emphasis his] of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world—we can’t be wiped out completely, because our deaths must be repeated, visually [emphasis his].”8 Black people transnationally are not viewed as humans in the eyes of White, hegemonic powers. This stems back to slavery as Black bodies were inscribed with criminality to justify enslavement and the harsh punishments used to preserve domination and control over Black people. This dehumanization is viewed through stereotypes such as the jezebel, the sapphire, and the mammy, which were weaponized to make Black women one-dimensional figures instead of three-dimensional beings that can exhibit humanity. As stated in the works of

8 Ibid., 225.
Wynter and Weheliye, Whiteness is coterminous with the human. Thus the very existence of Black bodies is used as a standard measuring tool to demonstrate who constitutes as “human” and who does not.

Black women have been condemned to quotidian necropolitics throughout the Atlantic World. In fact, quotidian necropolitics still transpires in nefarious ways today. No matter a woman’s age, socioeconomic status, or the shade of their skin, a Black woman is under a constant threat of physical death as the hegemonic world continues to ignore their humanity. To demonstrate the nature of Black women’s precarious state, I will be using the stories of three Black women: Lauren Smith-Fields, Asia Simo, and myself.

i. Matthew

A twenty-three-year-old Black woman, Lauren Smith-Fields, was found dead in her home in December of 2021 after going on a Bumble date with a thirty-seven-year-old White man named Matthew LaFountain. Matthew LaFountain called police to Smith-Fields’ apartment at around 6:30 in the morning as he claimed he woke up to Smith-Fields not breathing and her nose bleeding. According to the “New York Times,”

She invited him over to her apartment after three days of chatting. On the evening of Dec. 11, they ate food, drank tequila with mixers, played games and began to watch a movie. At one point, he told investigators, she went outside to meet with her brother, and when she returned, she went to the bathroom for 10 to 15 minutes. Her date told investigators that they continued to watch the movie and Ms. Smith-Fields then fell asleep on the couch, and he carried her to her bedroom. He fell asleep beside her, he said, adding that when he woke up at 3 a.m. to use the bathroom, she was asleep and snoring. But when he woke up again at 6:30 a.m., ‘she was
lying on her right side, blood was coming out of her right nostril onto the bed, and she was not breathing,’ he told investigators. He called 911.9

The police did not notify Lauren Smith-Fields’s family about her death. In fact, they found out by going to her apartment in which a note was left on the door stating, “If you’re looking for Lauren, call this number.”10 Lauren’s landlord put her in touch with a detective who not only told the family about Lauren’s tragic demise but that the man that Lauren had met on Bumble is “‘a really nice guy.’”11

When Lauren’s family went into her apartment to clear out her things, they found a pill, a used condom, and bloody sheets.

Lauren’s tragic death is a mixture of quotidian necropolitics and Mbembe’s necropolitics. The police are agents of the state as the state is a sovereign being and Matthew LaFountain is a quotidian sovereign being as he is a White, heterosexual man and fits into the characteristics of the hegemonic, dominant power. Through their investigation, it is evident that the police did not do their jobs properly. Lauren’s family had to implore the detectives to gather evidence regarding this crime and allowed Matthew LaFountain to walk away instead of treating him like a suspect because the detectives were under the perception that Matthew LaFountain was a “‘nice guy.’”12 The fact that the authorities did not notify Lauren’s family demonstrates the disregard for Black life as the sovereign determined that she was not worthy of protection and

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
therefore was allocated death even in the afterlife in which she went from physical death to a social one. What I mean by that is that Lauren was killed physically and was also committed to a social death as she experienced natal alienation in the afterlife as she lost attachment to her family, which is best seen by police officers not telling her family about her death. She also experienced “dishonor” in the afterlife because she did not have power or an independent social existence. Because of her skin color, she is considered without humanity and capacity. Matthew LaFountain was a sovereign of the quotidian in which he had ultimate authority. The very fact that he was able to call the police and not be questioned showcases how LaFountain is able to transcend the state. Additionally, I personally do not think Lauren’s death is a coincidence. Despite the fact that they found pills, a used condom, and bloody sheets, it was still ruled an accidental overdose, showcasing how Black women are in constant danger.

ii. The Cheerleading Team

Another example of quotidian necropolitics is hair discrimination which penalizes and punishes Black individuals for wearing their natural hair. In 2020, Asia Simo, a high school senior, was kicked off of her cheerleading team for wearing her natural hair at Captain Shreve High School in Louisiana after being on the cheerleading team for three years. Asia was kicked off the team because her hair was “too thick for the ‘half up, half down’ standard the team required for a number of games. Asia accumulated demerits for having her hair out of
uniform, which led to her eventual dismissal.” The sovereign, which is the school’s administration, is allocating death to Black students. Necropower, in this case, is reducing Black students to a state of helplessness as they are forced into a social death. The only way out is to conform to White beauty standards because those standards are considered “professional” or in accordance with the school’s dress code. Otherwise, Black individuals are not allowed to receive an education, participate in school activities, or have the ability to increase their socioeconomic mobility, etc.

Hair discrimination is a form of anti-Black violence. It clarifies that White individuals are resistant and violent against Black values and cultures because they go against the hegemonic grain. The individual relationship between the school and the student under the illusion of nurturance is a violence that is indiscernible to the average eye but is a way to instill White supremacy and anti-Black violence in subtle ways that demonstrate to Black students that they do not matter and are not human.

**iii. The Professor**

I would like to share a personal experience that happened to me that demonstrates quotidian necropolitics. I was in a class. It was Halloween weekend, and so a couple of my peers showed up to class in Halloween costumes ranging from onesie pajamas to cowboy hats. One of my classmates jokingly said to the professor, “What are you dressed up as for Halloween?” It was very apparent that

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my professor was not wearing a costume. The professor responded by saying, “A confederate soldier.” This response was jarring and demonstrated how anti-Black violence is normalized in everyday vernacular. It is a way for the professor, who is the sovereign of the class, to demonstrate that they can enact social death on those of us in the class who are in precarious positions as we go to predominantly White institutions that already showcase to us daily that people of color do not matter. Schools are institutions that are supposed to be places of nurturance—, as educators are supposed to help students develop their ideas, thoughts, and intellectual curiosity; however, like most quotidian necropolitical relationships, there is a power imbalance between the two individuals. At that moment, the professor condemned me to a social death through psychological violence. A violence in which they could exclude me from a collective space, alienate me from my classmates by highlighting my positionality as a Black individual, and showcase they were able to inflict violence in such a cruel manner on me because, in their eyes, I was deemed “other” and not worthy of protection in the classroom. I share this profoundly traumatic experience to demonstrate the discursive way power is embedded in our everyday relationships and how a racial hierarchy is always at play.

iv. Black Optimism

Although through my research, it seems like physically escaping quotidian necropower is impossible, I would like to point out that some of my fellow scholars use Black optimism to demonstrate that Black individuals can transcend quotidian necropolitics spiritually and consciously instead of materially. In
regards to Black optimism, Fred Moten makes the argument that Blackness is a condition of possibility and generativity. To discuss escaping quotidian necropower through the spiritual and the consciousness, I will be looking at the Harlem Renaissance, the Black radical tradition, and Afrofuturism.

The Harlem Renaissance

I would be remiss not to mention the Harlem Renaissance in my analysis of Black optimism and the fight against quotidian necropolitics. The Harlem Renaissance, beginning in the early twentieth century, was a cultural and intellectual movement for African Americans. The Harlem Renaissance is a prime example of an awakening of collective consciousness and a collective effort in creating the Black identity outside of hegemonic norms. This newfound Black identity is best exemplified by the “New Negro.” The term “New Negro” was a dismissal of “the racist stereotypes that depicted blacks as servile and submissive, traits that were captured under the sign ‘Old Negro.’”14 This very distinction between the “Old Negro” and the “New Negro” is a form of consciousness because it demonstrates the self-determination and autonomy of Black people to forge their own identities and modes of being. It showcases a rejection of the legacies of slavery that continue to haunt the Black identity and psyche by demonstrating the creation of a human being, one that can be Black. In a world where Black people had been defined by their White captors through rhetoric, cultural, and societal norms that routinely disregarded their humanity as a right of

passage, the New Negro demonstrates hope and agency, which destroys Enlightenment ontology that “justified” the enslavement of Black people.

Besides the “New Negro” notion, the Harlem Renaissance demonstrates deviance from the norm through blues music. To discuss the importance of blues music in the Harlem Renaissance, I will be relying on Angela Davis’ *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1999). In this book, Davis explains how the blues gave a form of expression to the social and sexual experiences of Black individuals. As free individuals, Black people were able to act as autonomous beings on matters regarding their sexuality, and thus, “Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation.”

Although there were many aspects to blues being a revolutionary art form, I am intrigued by how the blues became a way to reject the control and domination White people had over Black people’s sexuality, reproduction, and overall relationships. By writing songs about their sexuality, blues musicians took back their narrative and enacted autonomy by articulating experiences that were not afforded to them because of slavery.

**The Black Radical Tradition**

The next movement I will discuss is the Black radical tradition. The Black radical tradition can be defined as “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality.”

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power’s cultural, social, and intellectual norms. Cedric Robinson created *Black Marxism* because Engels and Marx did not acknowledge the notable revolutions by Black bodies. After all, Marx and Engels did not consider the colonies or the plantations part of the “modern capitalist processes.”  

The creation of Black Marxism is a revisionist tradition that revises the master narrative that moves against the hegemonic grain. This intellectual movement demonstrates the importance of Black bodies in the hegemonic world, not to mention that Black people have historical agency because they had control over their actions, whether that be outright refusal or indiscernible refusal.

Through the Black radical tradition, I argue that Black people are able to escape necropolitics consciously by forming their own awareness and responsiveness to their existence within the necopolitical sphere. The Black radical tradition allowed Black people to see that they have a space to escape from the anti-Black violence and a world that makes a conscious effort to erase them from history and the world.

From my perspective, the Black radical tradition disrupts Orlando Patterson’s social death. According to Orlando Patterson, the three constituent elements of slavery are naked force, natal alienation, and dishonor. In his book, naked force discusses the powerlessness of an enslaved person as the enslaved person is always under threat of violence by another person. Black Marxism disrupts naked force as the violence Black people endure in the Eurocentric forms of knowledge erase them from various narratives and refuses to recognize them as

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active beings and humans. The violence endured in the Eurocentric modes of thought can colonize and enslave the minds of Black bodies as it is a way to instill the belief that certain perspectives and methods of knowledge are more important than others. Violence does not necessarily have to be physical but can be mental as erasure is embedded in colonization, White supremacy, etc., because it upholds the current social order.

The second element is “natal alienation.” Natal alienation is defined as “Alienated from all ‘rights’ or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order.” Although the phrase “legitimate social order,” in my opinion, is problematic because I believe it contributes to the notion of White supremacy and hegemonic world order, I still think this definition is useful in discussing the ways Black Marxism disrupts necropolitics and hegemony. Black Marxism showcases that Black people not only belong in the world order but are integral to it. In “Why Black Marxism, Why Now?” (2021), Robin D.G. Kelley writes, “Black Marxism is neither Marxist nor anti-Marxist. It is a dialectical critique of Marxism that turns to a long history of Black revolt to construct a wholly original theory of revolution.” In order to carve out a space to recognize Black bodies in the many different class struggles that took place in the colonies or on the plantation, Black Marxism did away with Marx’s and Engels’ historical materialism. Black Marxism removes the cultural and social isolation

\[\text{18} \text{ Orlando Patterson, } \text{Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study} \text{ (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5.} \]
\[\text{19} \text{ Ibid.} \]
Black people have experienced from the trauma of the plantation and has allowed for a collective outlook on historical agency.

The third constituent element is “generalized dishonor.” Due to the Black radical tradition, Black people did have honor as they were able to create a name for themselves by escaping the Eurocentric narrative that gave them no honor because the slave was “without power except through another.”21 The Black radical tradition gives Black people power and a voice in an archive that is meant to silence them. Through this intellectual movement, Cedric Robinson “repeatedly reminded us that the forces we face are not as strong as we think. They are held together by guns, tanks, and fictions. They can be disassembled.”22 This intellectual movement sparked revolutionary action through the Black Lives Matter movement, demonstrating the Black Marxist Tradition in action but also the fact that Black individuals, time and time again, have agency.

Afrofuturism

Lastly, I will be discussing Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is a cultural movement that dares to imagine a world in which people of the African diaspora can see the world around them through a Black cultural lens by allowing Black people to reflect on the past, present, and future to create better lives and circumstances for Black people. In “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose” (1994), Mark Dery invents the term Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is defined as “Speculative fiction that treats

African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.” A famous contemporary example of Afrofuturism is the movie, *Black Panther*. *Black Panther* was released on February 16th, 2018, starring Chadwick Boseman, Michael B. Jordan, and Lupita Nyong’o tells the story of T’Challa, a young Black future leader of Wakanda who must battle his powerful enemy Killmonger in order to take his rightful place as king. Wakanda, an African nation, allows us to imagine Africa if it was untouched by Whiteness and if Africa’s resources, people, wealth, and culture were not extracted to create wealth for White countries and nations through slavery, colonization, and imperialism. Although this is just one example of Afrofuturism, this cultural movement demonstrates the possibility of Blackness outside of Whiteness and anti-Black violence and hatred. Overall, Afrofuturism allows people of the African diaspora to have a Black radical consciousness. Through Afrofuturism, we can survive the anti-Black present and imagine a future without the domination of the White, hegemonic norm by giving Black people the power to be the main characters in their own stories.

Afrofuturism will help redefine freedom outside of hegemony. We as intellectuals and academics are indoctrinated with European modes of knowledge and thought, which restrict the way we conceptualize and view the world. Invoking the tools of this cultural movement allows a reimagining of subjectivity.

and the Black experience. Quotidian necropolitics is all about everyday actors from below allocating death to express their sovereignty as they are given the power to determine who gets to live and who gets to die. Afrofuturism becomes a means to fight back against quotidian necropolitics consciously and spiritually because it demonstrates the humanity of Black bodies. By decentering White male figures, Afrofuturism recenters marginal figures and their voices to tell other stories showing that Black lives are deemed worthy.

\textit{v. Conclusion}

By using Afropessimism, it has become clear to me that physically escaping quotidian necropolitics is an extremely difficult task. Our civil society is contingent on anti-Black violence, which reduces Black people to objects instead of beings that can enact political autonomy. To be Black in this country is to be in a state of social death. Although the physical escape of necropower is a complicated and trying task, we can still escape necropolitics through Black optimism both spiritually and consciously, as these different forms of Black radical praxis allow us to uplift ourselves and the community. Cultural and intellectual movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, the Black radical tradition, and Afrofuturism allow Black individuals to reclaim their identity and agency by cultivating a culture that gives pride and the possibility of life after social death.

Even though I was primarily interested in the material escape of necropolitics as I have witnessed the anti-Black violence used in the mundane, there is value in understanding that spiritually and consciously, Black individuals
are equally enslaved as they are physically. Every day, we are bombarded with anti-Black rhetoric, anti-Black violence, Enlightenment modes of thought, and knowledge that privilege Whiteness over other modes of thought by people of color. The cultural racism used to dehumanize Black individuals preserves institutional and systemic oppression of Black people as they are considered deviant to the hegemonic grain. The fight against quotidian necropolitics is never over. Still, I believe these cultural and intellectual movements can be used as a form of resistance as they allow Black people to escape the hegemonic grain.

Through the case studies of Fermina, Carlota, Nelly and Celia, we see violence is utilized as a Black feminist method to fight back against the physical necropolitical realm. The protesting of injustices caused by police brutality is a way to fight back against the physical necropolitical realm. Additionally, the demonstration of humanity by Black individuals daily is a way to fight against necropolitics because the notion of the “other” is destroyed. These are just a few examples of how Black people can continue to fight against quotidian necropower. By utilizing Afropessimism and Black optimism as theoretical frameworks to discuss ways to escape necropolitics and mechanisms of resistance, I realize that escaping from quotidian necropower can happen.
Necropoem

snatched out of their mother’s arms
the Black body becomes a natural resource
used to keep the wheels of civil society turning

the Earth
soaked in the blood of Black people
past and present

an indoctrination of sorts
creating us all
children of racism

the blood of Black people
nurturing the western world
as the “new” and “old” world is “reborn” through death

the Black body
bruised, broken, and battered
by a white, eurocentric world

the jezebel, the sapphire, the mammy
the dehumanization of Black women
to preserve civil society

the distinction between life and death blurred
as death always seems to overpower life
condemnation beyond my control

the white, hegemonic norm lurking at every corner
screaming and shouting deviance
deeming Black people unworthy of life

how do I escape death?
when death is all the Black body has known
for four hundred centuries

am I really free?
how can I exist in a world created to destroy me?

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1 This poem was originally performed at the inaugural Africana Salon on March 31, 2022, at the Center for African American Studies at Wesleyan University. Many thanks to the Africana Research Collective and to the Department of African American Studies for organizing the Salon and for inviting me to share my work.
as necropolitics creates worlds that legitimize my death

REBORN THROUGH DEATH
STILL, I RISE
DEMOLISHING DEATH-WORLDS
Afropessimism: created by Frank Wilderson, a metatheory that argues that Black people are not considered to be political subjects or human subjects rather they function as adversaries of society.

Agency: a person or group of people’s ability to not only define themselves but carry out the actions they wish to take.

Black optimism: created by Fred Moten, the belief that Blackness is a condition of possibility and generativity.

Cultural racism: imposing socially constructed cultural norms and standards onto racial and ethnic groups considered to be “less than” in society which in turn contributes to the creation and preservation of racial hierarchies.

Eurocentric: centered on European culture and history.

Freedom: the ability to do what one wants without obstacles.

Hegemonic: cultural, economic, political, and social domination of one group over another.

Necropower: violence and power used to subjugate life.
Necropolitics: the racial calculus and political arithmetic of who may live and who must die. This definition is a combination of two ideas. The first part “the racial calculus and political arithmetic”–is a line from Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008) which she uses to define the “afterlife of slavery.” The second part–“who may live and who must die”–is from Achille Mbembe’s “Necropolitics” (2003). This combined definition better captures my own sense of necropolitics.

Other: a term used to describe those that are considered to be divergent from the White, hegemonic natural group of society.

Othering: the process of differentiating those that are considered to be outside of the social and cultural norms of society, determines who is in the natural group and who is not.

Quotidian necropolitics: the racial calculus and political arithmetic of who may live and who must die with an emphasis on violence enacted by everyday White sovereign subjects onto Black individuals.

Quotidian necropower: the force or actions that are used to dominate those considered to be disposable by everyday actors from below who are the sovereigns.
Resistance: violent and nonviolent actions used to refuse something or someone.

Slavery: In *Slavery and Social Death* (1985), Patterson defines slavery as “the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons.”

Sovereign subject: a predominant ruler who has preeminent authority in rank and power. In Max Weber’s “Politics as a Vocation” (1919), Weber states, “the state is the form of human community that (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a particular territory–and this idea of ‘territory’ is an essential defining feature.” When sovereign subjects enact violence it is considered to be legitimate because they are recognized by social and cultural institutions that preserve the state.

Sovereignty: the ultimate expression of determining who is worthy of life and who must be condemned to death.

Ungendering: eradicating gender from individuals, used during slavery to commodify Black bodies.

Violence: actions that go against the hegemonic, dominant power that is used to cause injury and destruction to something or someone.
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