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The Evidence of Things Unseen: Experimental Form as Black Feminist Praxis

Shelly Eversley

Few have read the novel central to this investigation of black women's experimental writing. The imperative to feature this novel is motivated by the absence of black women's creative and critical contributions to most conversations about experimental literatures, the avant-garde, and about the ways in which black women's narrative innovations disrupt and challenge linear formulations of knowledge and history that shape the very notion of black humanity and black existence. Carlene Hatcher Polite's novel *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* (1975) tells the story of Arista Prolo—Sister X—an African American woman, who, the novel's narrator explains, is deceased and mostly unknown and unremembered:

Does it necessarily mean that, because You or I have never heard tell of someone, that this same “someone” has no claim to fame? . . . You are absolutely right about Arista Prolo; that because You never heard tell of the likes of her by no means that You are dumb, a country hick, a super-square, unaware of a superstar-born-over-night . . . please allow me to introduce her posthumously, or to freshen your memories; so that our memories and thoughts are able to collectively move with the same quickness as those of her old friends, who are seated silently and certainly remembering when

Sister X was a dancer, an exotic dancer, a tiptop tappin' past master of the art of "interpretive" terpsichore, the darling of the beau-hawg grind, a rubber sole, the chic of shake, Princess Yasmina, Lottie the Body, La Bombie, Broadway Rose, the China Doll, Little Egypt, Alberta, New Caldonia, Alabama Mama (shake it up, shake it down, shake it all over town), all rolled into one. Aw yeah, Good People, the Sister would be doin' it, doin' it to death, in fact.

But that's cold, hunh? I mean, considering the fact that she really is dead. (51)

This introduction announces consciousness of an extraordinary life buried beneath a history that has obscured it. It calls attention to certain failures of knowledge and it insists that Arista Prolo's unknown status does not undermine her relevance as a "superstar-born-over-night." The narrator's invocation to readers who subsequently join the protagonist's friends, Black Will and Abyssinia, situates the reconstructed memory of the dead woman as a performance, one in which memories "move."

Initiating a dramatic shift in temporal perspective, the "posthumous" introduction takes "You" backward in time, to a moment readers do not know, in order to recalibrate their understanding of how the past exists within the present. Philip Brian Harper, in his analysis of abstractionist aesthetics in African American art and literature, describes "a *muddled* temporality" that ultimately compels the reader to "*participate* in that figuration" and to "recapitulate its distinctive grammatical engagement, acquiescing in the alternate semantic order that it thereby promulgates" (173). In this context, Polite's narrative provides an alternative conception of narrative time, one that disrupts and muddles the epistemological stability of a known grammar, and in Harper's terms, "recruits us to an effectively world-making activity" (173). In *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play*, the storyteller positions the friends like mourners at a wake; "seated silently" they witness and participate in the dynamic memories of the dead black woman's life. The "You" whom the speaker addresses, also shares the friends' attentions. The narrator's opening question invites the opportunity for an object lesson about a life to which individual readers, now

friends, become collective witness. “You” and “I” join, shifting from “your memories” to “our memories” that finally sync to the “same quickness” as Arista’s friends’ remembering. For readers, called to become spectators and participants, this remembering is a praxis—movements and positioning—that make Arista Prolo conceptually possible, as if her living continues beyond death.

As an experimental form, *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* is far outside the critical expectations for black women’s creativity since African American literary criticism has been plagued by the imposition of realism as the necessary form for telling the ‘truth’ about black life. Harper, advocating for critical investigations of what he calls “abstractionist aesthetics” in African American writing, attends to the cognitive imposition that couples realism and race; he also inspires innovation in critical race theory through reading experimental black literatures. He writes, “formal *unconventionality* has been *rendered* inconspicuous through long-standing practices that recruit the texts to realist significance,” and notes that “highly abstractionist African American literature can register trenchant social critique but also . . . train us in reading protocols that differ productively from current realist norms” (160). His claim resonates with Polite’s underdiscussed novel precisely because of its inconspicuousness: her novel’s unconventional form makes it easy to dismiss. This investigation of *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* thus presents an opportunity for invigorated reading protocols of African American women writers within Harper’s call to “*reconceive* literature as a much more capacious category than African Americanist discourse has typically allowed” (160). This reconception imagines space for complexity in black art, not only in terms of narrative but also, as Fred Moten, Anthony Reed, and others describe, in terms of how experimental forms can “transform our understandings of race” (Reed 9).¹ Polite’s novel invites this kind of reconception, particularly as it imagines black women.

Formally, *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* mixes genres. The text positions musical scores alongside a range of symbols, such as “@#%&+)=(!#&¢%” (35), lists, enjambed words and phrases, poetry, slang, numbers, and unconventional spacing that undermine the reader’s access to complete understanding. Its assemblage insists on multimodality as a response to the limitations of the written word while asserting the notion that knowledge is neither linear nor rational. Intensifying the chal-

lence of accessing *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* is the complexity of its protagonist's personhood. The novel's intergeneric form demonstrates an intervention in what Hortense Spillers describes as "the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative," and whose control over naming and organizing meaning restricts black women, as writers and as human beings (210). These two categories of identity—writer and human being—are not the same. Yet black writers and black women encounter distortions within the ruling episteme, distortions that *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* reject: the unknown experimental novel invites readers to join in remembering a black woman whom they "never heard tell the likes of" (51). Polite's audacious decision to craft a story grounded in the unfamiliar claims a new "world-making activity" (Harper 173) for black women as heterogeneous, unpredictable subjects and as originators of complex, creative experiments. Her novel represents a regime change for the dominant ways of thinking.

Within months of the novel's publication, a review in *The New York Times* effectively condemned its abstractionist aesthetic ambition. It created a protocol for reading *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* that not only distorted its details, but also relegated it to the race and gender-specific margins of non-art. The reviewer, Frederick Busch, opens with a nod to Polite's first novel, *The Flagellants* (1967), which was initially published in Paris as *Les Flagellants* (1966) by Christian Bourgois Editeur, a new and prestigious avant-garde press.² And then he proceeds to slaughter *Sister X* for its failure to correspond to realist expectations of African American literature in general, and of black women's writing in particular: "The outstanding feature of this second novel is its sledgehammer social protest: a tough street singer turned clever nag." According to Busch, a novelist noted in *The New York Times* as "an artist who counts, a writer who matters to the cultural health of a nation,"³ Polite's experimental writing is not art but clumsy protest. He derides it for its recitation of "every conceivable cliché about black pride and the beauty of blackness." He judges Arista, Abyssinia, and Black Will as failures because they do not reflect "that crucial feeling people in good novels generate. . . . They live not in the world of stones or insects—facts of our lives—but in the realm of political abstraction." As the signal instance of establishment recognition, this review of Polite's work insists the novel's characters are unlike "people in good novels," while positioning realism, "the world of stones or

insects—the facts of our lives—,” as the standard for critical evaluation. Busch’s gender-specific dismissal suggests either the novel or the novelist is a “clever nag.” His phrasing is ambiguous and grammatically problematic, yet it effectively achieves its purpose. Aside from a few mentions in lists of new books by African Americans, *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* is lost to obscurity.

Busch’s focus on the “facts of our lives” fails to recognize the lives and contexts so crucial to Polite’s literary innovation. Hers is a text that needs to be situated within the aesthetic experiments of the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts /Black Aesthetic movements. For Polite and her peers, the pride and beauty of blackness is central. The writing, visual art, and music associated with this moment of aesthetic and political rebellion claim new forms of articulation, whose reliance on political abstraction mark their independence from mainstream aesthetic standards. Within this Black Arts/Black Aesthetic context, political abstraction is synonymous with critical and creative speculation envisioning a radically different future world that would enable a black freedom and a black existence beyond the literal ghettos of *de facto* segregation, and beyond the epistemological constructs that marginalize black people’s creative and intellectual projects. Larry Neal, in his essay “Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic”—included in the groundbreaking anthology, *The Black Aesthetic* (1971)—presents an important characterization of this speculative, abstractionist view. His essay, which appears horizontally, in multiple columns with lists, short phrases, complete sentences, and without pagination (an experimental form in itself), announces new standards for black art that resonate with *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play*. Among them, is a greater concern “with the vibrations of / the Word, than with the Word itself. / Like signifying . . . Ethical stance / as aesthetic . . . // . . . Black love, conscious and / affirmed. Change.” This black aesthetic is committed to revolution; it is, what GerShun Avilez calls, *radical aesthetics*, which should be read as the political imperative of black freedom struggles merging with art. In this way aesthetics is a politics. It experiments with new creative forms that can inspire black people—especially the black working classes—to conceive black personhood independent from the value systems that oppress them. Blackness is an aesthetic practice and a critical posture.

Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play appears at the especially trans-

gressive intersections of Black Arts/Black Aesthetic, feminism, and global creative experimentation. Polite's integration of vernacular, sonic performance (e.g., "tiptop tappin' past master of the art of the 'interpretive' terpsichore" [51]) insists on multiple modalities within the written text while the novel's narrator claims a performativity more closely associated with theater, Sister X's status as a dancer, whose erotic performances invoke transnational, chameleon identifications and embodiments (e.g., "Princess Yasmina, Lottie the Body, La Bombie, Broadway Rose, the China Doll, Little Egypt . . ."), calls attention to the visual and physical spectacle integrated into the narrative. These intergeneric layers—particularly, as they feature subaltern female bodies in movement—suggest feminist assemblage, an important consciousness of race and gender within time and space. Hortense Spillers's opening of her groundbreaking "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," offers telling insight into Polite's experiment:

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," . . . I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth . . . they demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical preposition that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean . . . I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time; over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. The personal pronouns are offered in the service of collective function. (203)

The markings Spillers describes here echo Arista Prolo's many roles as a dancer on tour in the world. And, rather than read "Princess Yasmina," "Lottie the Body," or "Little Egypt" as instances of cultural appropriation, these character names expose the ways in which ruling epistemes of race and gender distort and mark black women. Spillers' argument focuses on the ways in which these markings function in the U.S. context; Polite's version attends to the similarly coded logics that diminish women of color

globally. As Spillers describes it, “not everybody knows my name,” while Polite states of her dead protagonist, “You never heard” of her (51). Black women’s mystery is their erasure by and within the political economy that orders human value. Readers of Polite’s novel follow recollections of Sister X’s markings in hopes of discovering the “agents buried beneath” these layers. Polite’s feminist experimental form is thus a project of invention, of a new world-making activity, one that aspires to recover a person despite the loaded myths and epistemologies that deny her.

Polite’s experimental form explains this coded logic as deeply connected to appearances and to capital exchange. It offers this explanation in order to dismantle it; and, like Spillers’s discussion of literature and culture, particularly in the paradoxical ground between “African” and “American,” style is “a *political* choice” (7). Arguably, Polite would concur with Spillers’s assessment in “Peter’s Pans” that “the *materiality of discourse* is as solid an aspect of political economy as the Gross Domestic Product” (7). For both, words are not neutral. A writer’s style is consequently located within a politics. Thus, when *The New York Times* reviewer characterizes the novel or the novelist as a “clever hag,” he cashes in on an economy in which insulting black women, or the books they write, functions as critically respectable knowledge from “a writer who matters.” The institutional power that publishes and circulates the slur imposes its own hermeneutic discipline on the novel and, by extension, on the author. The ways in which this slippage between author and text takes place in that decisive book review expose a major critical intervention in Polite’s forgotten novel. *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* experimental assemblage provides the tools to reveal the contours of seemingly neutral and invisible epistemological processes that mark the black woman protagonist to such a degree that her shape-shifting, dancing body no longer belongs to a person. Instead, readers and friends bear witness to the problematic thinking that constructs Sister X and destroys Arista Prolo. The novel’s frontispiece offers a translation of its title:

better known as: M3 S2

(which is likened to those active ingredients
and that secret formula contained in a
nationally known brand of toothpaste:

WINNING SMILE BRAND

When used as directed, this dentrifice is guaranteed to remove all those hard-to-remove stubborn stains of “victim yellow,” and to leave you instead, as confidentially reported, with either your money back, or with that winning smile of those who have scientifically discovered that M3 S2 is:

THE WAY THE GAME IS PLAYED)

Square Bu\$ine\$\$

Here, the “secret formula” of M3 S2 discloses the terms of an economy in which the characters of Polite’s novel move. The “game” is an exercise dealing in appearances rather than reality; its object is to sanitize the “stains” of a power that, in actuality, destroys persons. This is a game Arista and her friends are not meant to win. The “winning smile” toothpaste that removes “victim yellow” recalls Harryette Mullen’s reading of Ralph Ellison’s brilliant rendering of the “Optic White” paint that paradoxically covers the buildings in Washington, D.C. For Ellison, the optic of whiteness exists only because of a secret process that makes its crucial ingredient, blackness, disappear.⁴ In *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play*, the “dentrifice” bleaches away the proof of corruption. This opening passage blends symbols and vernacular style with the language of advertising; “\$quare Bu\$ine\$\$” makes it clear that M3 S2’s function is inexorably informed by money.

The narrator who recalls Sister X’s life, and who offers the contours that enable questions regarding the circumstances of her death, also details the critical components of the life “game” in which Sister X moves:

Winning Smile brand toothpaste’s active ingredients are:

M to the 1 st Power	Masters
M to the 2 nd Power	Money
M to the 3 rd Power	Merchandise
S to the 1 st Power.....	Slaves
S to the 2 nd Power.....	Spectacles
M3 S2	The Way the Game Is Played, folks—fair or foul! (84)

Polite’s creative experiment thus offers the details of an ontological negation that ultimately denies black persons from participation in the various

social, political, and epistemological realms of the human. Polite's assemblage situates her dead protagonist within the oppositional space of blackness and among the gendered, sexual economies that shape hierarchies of literature and humanity. Her project illustrates Spillers's concept of a "hieroglyphics of flesh" ("Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe . . ." 207) to challenge the demeaning effects culturally assimilated antiblackness imposes. Polite's project elaborates on the structural processes of racism, capitalism, sex, and sexism that disfigure and assault black personhood, particularly that of black women. In *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play*, readers and friends, all part of the novel's collective witness, remember Arista Prolo, aka Sister X, and her various stage personas as critically bound to the political economy that continually misnames, marks, and diminishes the presence of her now absent, dead body.

Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play thus functions as "wake work," Christina Sharp's term, offering a consciousness of the layered history of a dead black woman whose life is mostly forgotten. Readers, as listeners, viewers, and wake mourners, follow the abstracted story of her life dancing across the globe. Polite's experimental form anticipates Sharpe's concept by offering a story that recognizes "the fact of Black life as proximate to death" (17). For Sharpe, whose critical investigations on blackness and being explore experimental writing by Dionne Brand, M. NourbeSe Phillip, and Claudia Rankine among others, "Black death [is] a predictable and constitutive aspect of this democracy" (13). Violence against black people is normative; it is "the ground we walk on," she argues, noting the structural consistencies of antiblack violence from slavery to the present. Her acknowledgement of this immanent state of affairs is a call for a "new analytic," one that collects the "archives of the everyday" in order to develop a "blackened consciousness" that resists and "rupture[s] the structural silences produced by and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate, Black social and physical death" (22). Readers of Polite's novel, joining in Black Will and Abyssinia's remembering, assemble an archive of the circumstances surrounding Arista Prolo's death, and they recognize "foul play," M3 S2, or the power dynamics that shape Aristas existence as a life always endangered by literal and metaphorical erasure.

The narrator's "blackened consciousness" of Arista Prolo's birth as a "Woman Child" illustrates this precariousness when Arista's mother recalls asking "some young city-hospital intern if he happened to be out of

his tree; because he had the nerve to tell her . . . that ‘her’ Love Child was, quite naturally, going to be born dead. Well, thank God-in-Her! Not only was Arista born undead, she was born after eight months instead of nine” (48). If Arista’s birth defies nature, her life is proof of survival defying status quo expectations. In this way, the novel’s archive of her life is itself a disruption of an allegedly order in which there is no life expectancy for a black “Woman Child.” The memory readers receive is one that insists on an extraordinary birth “after eight months instead of nine,” and it provides another disruptive reminder, an “annotation,” in Sharpe’s words, of black persons’ survival in the face of institutional practices that systematically work against them (Sharpe 113). As Sister X, Arista’s personhood invokes 1970s vernacular for any woman, a “sister,” and it anticipates Spillers’s use of the “personal pronouns . . . in the service of collective function” (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe . . .” 207) In the novel, the protagonist’s blackness symbolized by the letter X—“a slave nature (X)” (60)—recalls the political and historical violence that introduced Africans to the Americas and that, in its various incarnations, continues to deny black being. Polite’s attentions to political economy and historical violence, rather than backward facing, are an ontological reckoning. The novel offers Arista Prolo’s human being as a defiant one. That is, if black death is normalized as natural, the novel’s narrative experiment is a reversal of this norm. To be born “undead” is to defy a version of black being that conceives of the black human as a non-person, dead.

Reading *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* through the critical lens of black studies is to read it as an experimental black feminist form. The significance of these intersecting approaches to critical thought, dissent, and alternative phenomenological possibilities is especially apparent in black feminist creative and intellectual works emerging from within the cultural and political context that frames *Sister X*’s publication. For instance, Toni Cade Bambara’s “Preface” to *The Black Woman* (1970) anthology claims for African American women an aesthetic and political commitment to “a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitative and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society; liberation from the constrictive norms of ‘mainstream’ culture, from synthetic myths” (95). Bambara insists that black women’s creative work is an effort of recovery, of excavating black female personhood “too long lost among the bills of sale and letters of transit” (95),

much like the effort of Polite's narrator and audience to remember Sister X's lived experience with M3 S2. Bambara explains that the experimental forms assembled in *The Black Woman* provide an "effort to deal with the reality of being Black and living in twentieth century America—a country that has more respect for the value of property than the quality of life, a country that has never valued Black life as dear" (95). Indeed, for Bambara, as for Sharpe, black lives matter. Her introduction to *The Black Woman* anthology offers another striking example of experimental form as black feminist praxis; the anthology as assemblage delivers a solution to the social, economic, and political systems of black women's erasure. The introduction also challenges black women's marginal status in the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic creative and political interventions of the 1960s and 70s and links diverse aesthetic, experimental projects by Nikki Giovanni, Joanne Grant, Abbey Lincoln, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, and Shirley Williams to black freedom struggles and to liberation from "constrictive norms" authorizing economies of knowledge that rank human value. This same era witnessed not only U.S. Congressional passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (1973), but also the formation of the National Black Feminist Organization (1973), and black feminist manifestos such as "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977) by the Combahee River Collective.

In the larger frame of experimental forms, whether of the avant-garde or women's literature, black women's texts such as these often appear minor, isolated from central critical conversations about art, commerce, and the human. Yet, as Alexander G. Weheliye's sophisticated and incisive argument about the tremendous influence of black studies makes clear, any sustained exploration of personhood, especially as it emerges through literary representation, is inadequate without considering the intellectual endeavors of black feminist thinking since it "illuminates the essential role that racializing assemblages play in the construction of modern selfhood, works toward the abolition of Man, and advocates the radical reconstruction and decolonization of what it means to be human" (4). He develops his position through analyses of Spillers's and of Sylvia Wynter's works in order to acknowledge the "deeply gendered and sexual provenances of racializing assemblages," and to "counteract the methodological disremembering of the intellectual contributions black feminism has made to black studies and knowledge production in the academy" (5). Just as *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* has been disremembered in print and in circulation among critical investigations

in black and feminist studies, the novel's requirement to actively remember the protagonist asserts the essential interstitial contributions of black feminist thought to the question of the human. Race and gender are central to the practice of political violence; Weheliye, unconcerned with biological and cultural classifications, reads race as "a set of sociopolitical processes of differentiation and hierarchization, which are projected onto the putatively biological human body" (5). Building on Bambara's introductory assertion in *The Black Woman*, Weheliye draws attention to the "visual modalities in which dehumanization is practiced and lived" (6). This interest in how the human materializes in the world is particularly illuminating with regard to *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play*. Polite's experimental form makes tangible Weheliye's critical interventions. It articulates his assertion concerning racializing assemblages, that "the human functions as a relational whole" (21), and it foregrounds the ways that experimental writing by black women can recalibrate the epistemological conditions for what it means to count as a human being.

It is critically necessary to explore these seemingly 'minor' instances when black women's bodies appear in experimental forms, and also importantly, when they do not. Even among writers, readers, and audiences who advocate experimental forms because they demand the kinds of alternative logics for thought and representation that can inspire new, more inclusive knowledge, black women do not usually appear. And, if the text functions like the body—as proof of existence—this black female body and black feminist text matters precisely because it makes visible and concrete the intellectual and sociopolitical processes that bury black women as well as the intellectual work they produce. *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* represent Wynter's argument that being human is a praxis.⁵ Wynter's praxis of being human invites a new kind of thinking, an "intellectual struggle" that conceives of being human as a dynamic, relational activity—as assemblage.⁶ Polite's novel requires active engagement with multiple genres at different times and within various spaces; its experimental forms are simultaneously dynamic and relational. Its provocative aesthetic and political concerns demand a mind at work, a mind imagining a "new analytic" (Wynter) for being human that can change the static categorical thinking in which race, gender, class, and sexuality marginalize some humans while privileging others. In *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play* storytelling—the archive of a black women's life and death—pro-

ceeds multimodally, as assemblage, and it provides new analytic categories which reject the collaborating systems that distort black female personhood and stratify human value.

Thus when Abyssinia's declares, "[a] long time ago mankind figured out that the most valuable 'thing' which we have to offer, in exchange for food, shelter, sex, is our life" (74), she explains a troubling tautology. A person must trade her life, her humanity, in order to participate in the economy of living. And, in the context of M2 S3, the price of survival is social death. This economy locates antiblackness at the center of the novel's investigation of Arista Prolo/Sister X's life and death. Abyssinia's calculations prompt her to reject the official cause of Arista Prolo's demise, "They' say she had cancer (42) . . . That's what the jive death certificate stated . . . I diagnosed her case altogether differently . . . Death killed her" (41). In other words, Arista's story is witness to a world defined and instantiated by a racism. Abyssinia explains her theory through spoken word performance:

"they" are forever having folks dying of some sort of national disease that starts with the letter C. First they blamed it on the lack of vitamin C, scurvy on the slave ships. Cooking, cleaning, child-raising, cotton fields, chain gangs, colonial correctional facilities.

. . . Black Folk die from CCC KKK (same difference) since [you] couldn't hear the difference between a C and a K anyhow, when it comes to the sound of English-spoken here. (43)

Her speech continues as a list, offering an alliterative accounting of the C killers that destroy black people, notably black women:

Crow, Jim
 Chastisements
 Craziness
 Convicted
 Confined
 Conked-out
 Chile, 'cause you colored, chased, cooked, boiled in coconut oil, chicken-fried, Southern lynched, candied, Northern bar-be-cued

Crossed-off (X'ed)
Categorized. (43)

Abyssinia's performance calls attention to the sonic and visual features integrated within Polite's experimental work, particularly as sound and text advocate a nonlinear organization that occurs in multiple frequencies at the same time. It also heightens consciousness of the various political economies that inform the personhood of the black woman who, though dead, stands at the center of the novel. Her legacy and her inheritance—such as “chilliness of coal-less cold stoves,” “CCC KKK (same difference),” “Crow, Jim,” and “Crossed-off (X'ed)” —force the reader to literally view the novel with renewed attention to class disparity, racialized violence, institutional racism, and social death. Here, the novel becomes a kaleidoscopic presentation of a life and a death, muddling not only time, but also logic. For Abyssinia, cancer is no more deadly than “cotton fields, chain gangs, and colonial correctional facilities.” Her alternative diagnosis is a direct confrontation with the very paradigms of power and legitimacy that assault black humanity and that paradoxically render a person dead even before she dies. In other words, the C killers confronting Arista everywhere she turns diminish the black human so much that living is an act of survival; she was born “undead,” and the record of her existence, of her life, is a subversive opportunity to enact Sharpe's call for “wake work,” to “keep breath in the Black body” despite “virulent antiblackness everywhere” (109). Abyssinia's rap about the factors not listed on Arista's “jive death certificate” offers a counterpoint to the knowledge systems that can imagine a black woman only as abject, dead. Its defiance recovers the political as a condition of narrative so that, for example, instances of U.S. apartheid—“Crow, Jim”—and dead thinking—“Categorized”—become necessary features of articulating a black woman's life.

Abyssinia believes “we are in a trap, in a Dead World . . . in a boundless ghetto of international misery” (27), yet she continues living. Her list of C killers, not only in its orality but also in its manipulation of standard English, invites engagement with Ntozake Shange, whose experimental form, her “choreopoem” for *colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* appeared in 1975, the same year as *Sister X*. Abyssinia's living is a survival; it is “wake work.” She voices a counterintelligence to the official narrative of her best friend's birth, life, and death,

and she offers an opportunity to recover a black female protagonist who had been “Crossed-off (X’ed).” For Shange, her performance piece represents “our struggle to become all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender, all that we have forgotten” (“a history: for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf” 12). Her interest in her art as a “struggle” against relational oppressions invigorates the notion of black women’s experimental forms as black feminist praxis. Like *Sister X*, Shange’s theater piece integrates poetry, music, dance, and women’s bodies as central media for exploring alternative, non-linear possibilities for imagining black women. It produces meaning through assemblage, and it appears as direct confrontation with the intersecting violences of sexism, history, and everyday life, “the arbitrary nature of life as an african-american has been heralded, bemoaned, denied, wisht away, yet we are still here” (“my pen is a machete” 25). Shange’s aesthetic project thus intersects with Polite’s. She likens her manipulation of standard English to Frantz Fanon’s notion of “combat breath . . . the living response / the drive to reconcile the irreconcilable” (20). Extending itself beyond words, this breath inside the black freedom struggle is concerned with claiming a life despite paradoxical conditions that would diminish it. For these reasons Abyssinia’s rap, her combat breathing, defies the official record’s inability to see black female humanity personified in the novel about a black woman.

Sister X’s death, as well as her traveling life of performance, exposes a hegemony that exceeds the boundaries of nation, culture, class, and language. Her symbolic passport to travel occurs within gendered particulars, within what Sharon Holland calls “the erotic life of racism,” in which “there is no ‘raceless’ course of desire” (41). Within the context of queer and feminist studies, Holland’s interest in the coupling of racism and desire, particularly as it attends to the materiality of the everyday and to the question of individual agency, can clarify the complexity of Arista’s chosen profession: erotic dancer. In this reading of *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play*, Arista, through her profession and her artistic ambition, acknowledges the physical body—its movements, its significations, and its visibility as her own. This attention to the body insists on the physical form as critical to black feminist praxis. It represents an archive of flesh, of a physical theater for the political and for the everyday economies of human value; it instantiates the political abstractions, “the secret formula” that

conditions Arista's "undead" life. As a dancer, Sister X participates in a history of black bodies travelling, another praxis that signifies survival despite terrible odds. Polite situates her hero among a collage of black performance legends:

Bill Bojangles Robinson Florence Mills Josephine Baker
 Al Mims Leon James Katherine Dunham Pearl Primus
 Janet Collins . . . Alvin Ailey Carmen de Lavallade Peg Leg
 Bates . . . Cotton Club Shuffle Along My Darling Aida . . .
 Judith Jameson. (119).

The novel inserts its protagonist within the twentieth century history of black cultural performance and modern dance; the fictional heroine who tours the world participates within an ensemble of real-life creative practitioners whose artistry offers an important lens to see and discern complexity in black culture—and whose work, even in telling moments of racist reductionism, insists on the necessary pairing of black minds with black bodies.

As Arista's best friend and costume designer, Abyssinia recalls the conditions surrounding Arista's labors as an erotic dancer: "the Dead was alive and kicking up her heels to live her life by earning her living, though pretending to be live persons whom she really wasn't, simply because that was what-it-was which was being bought and sold as reality" (87). Here, Abyssinia's combat breath acknowledges that her friend's performances were bought and sold as the real thing. Her words describe the "hieroglyphics of the flesh," which mark and distort black women's bodies as the hegemonic prerogative. She refers to Sister X as "the Dead," accentuating the capital exchange that dehumanizes while amplifying the ways in which black experimental forms can disrupt this economy by creating new knowledge forms. Global demand for the black woman "kicking up her heels to live her life by earning her living" stems from the appearance of Sister X's symbolic erotic power, so it is no wonder that her visual and racialized presence classifies her externality as the "thing" ultimately exchanged for essentials such as "food, shelter, sex" (74). These audiences misrecognize the false personas (Abyssinia's artful costumes) as essential to Arista's personhood. But rather than rest on this presentation as reinforcing a depressing portrayal of an absent, dead, black woman, perfor-

mance in the novel should be read as an opportunity for a new analytic. *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play's* experimental form, its praxis, includes the reader in a conceptual resistance; its verbal, sonic and physical pyrotechnics sustain a spontaneity beyond text, insisting that a commitment to political transformation is also a question of aesthetics. This spontaneity conceptually intersects with Fred Moten's readings of improvisation in his *In the Break: Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, particularly as he details the important improvisational layering of genre, voice, bodies, and minds: "[b]orn out of a simultaneous rupture and collision, all about forced and stolen labor and sexuality, manifest in ritual and mundanity, in production and consumption, in the aesthetic and the anaesthetic, each of the elements of black performances and the study of black performances animate each other, each is articulated in and as any given performance, each operates under a general history of the objectification of black bodies and the denial of black minds, under the imperative to perform and in the endurance of a mode of life forged as performance" (23).

The novel ends with a spectacle climax. Arista Prolo and a crowd of friends, all persons of color in a global diaspora, "No finer representation had been seen since, perhaps, the Bandung Conference" (121), have returned to the theater where she was recently terminated. The conflict with her employer stems from her unwillingness to perform naked: "From now on, Arista Prolo, Mahala Gueddek, in my establishment it will be birthday suit, inside the cage, take 'em off, or else. . . ." Arista responds with her own powerful agency, "Monsieur, I AM an Artiste, a first-class Dancer. I have a Gawd-given talent. I AM not forced to exhibit my Gawd-given beautiful black body in out of your Jack Diamonds Supper Club in order to be seen" (121). Here, her speech declares her existence, her being ("I AM"). In a capacious and black opposition to the businessman who profits from her objectification, "inside the cage," and with an identity so meaningless it is interchangeable, "Arista Prolo, Mahala Gueddek" claims the expansiveness of art for herself. Her point especially resonates because it pairs her aesthetic craft with her black female body (a body sanctioned by God), and it insists on the knowledge that her visibility is not contingent on demeaning her status as a woman or as an artist. When Arista arrives at the theater to demand her back pay, she meets her replacement, "Mademoiselle Ann, the Queen of Spades," a white woman ("Miss Ann") in blackface, who is willing to dance nude (133). The replacement offers

the perfect imitation of the stereotypical “Queen of Spades” whose naked performance inspires “an auctioneer-style dialogue,” a barrage of coins, shouting, and a commotion that creates a frenzy. In horror Miss Ann explodes at Arista, “you black bitch!” The narrative provides a lasting detail of the protagonist’s life, “the first fixed image—to stare them all dead—in the eyes—was Arista Prolo’s flying, falling, resisting” (144). In “the intellectual struggle” until the end, and despite the official record of her death, Arista Prolo/Sister X insists on her own active personhood. She returns the gaze. Audiences in the novel, as much as readers of the narrative, witness her “stare them all dead,” and they see the person beyond the distortions, while assembling the knowledge of one black woman’s life and art.

Notes

1. In a different context, I have argued that there is an imposition of realism in African American literature that helps to enforce a static notion of blackness as authenticity (*The Real Negro: The Question of Authenticity in Twentieth Century African American Literature*). Experimental writing challenges this imposition. See, for example, Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* and Fred Moten, *Black and Blur*.
2. Polite’s obituary in *The New York Times* describes *The Flagellants* as centering on a “turbulent affair between a couple, Ideal and Jimson. Over the course of the book, the two deal each other repeated physical and verbal violence. As the novel makes clear, it is a reflection of the violence that the larger culture does to black people.” The obituary refers to *The New York Times* review of the novel, published twenty years after its original publication, which describes it as “a complex, scathing and often brilliant depiction of the disintegration of a black couple’s relationship,” and notes that it “was among the first fictional works by a black woman to focus directly on the theme of the sometimes bitter antagonism between black men and women” (Margalit Fox, “Carlene Hatcher Polite, Novelist, Dies at 77”). While the obituary’s description of *The Flagellants* acknowledges “the violence that the larger culture does to black people,” the contemporary book review characterizes it as a “brilliant depiction of the disintegration of a black couple’s relationship” that is the result of a bitterness between black men and women. This discrepancy in perspective reflects an important shift in recognizing the role of antiblack violence within black communities, such as between lovers.
3. Busch’s obituary in *The New York Times* notes his favor among critics more than among readers. It compares him to Anton Chekov and John Cheever and quotes a fa-

avorable review in *Publisher's Weekly* that noted his “inviting opening sentences. One read, ‘Did I tell you she was raped’” (Douglas Martin, “Frederic Busch, Author of Poetic Fiction, Dies at 64”). This celebratory reiteration of rape as an “inviting opening sentence” illuminates Busch’s free use of misogynist speech in his review of *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play*.

4. See Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952). Also, Harryette Mullen “Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness.”
5. See Sylvia Wynter. “Human Being as a Noun? On Being Human as Praxis—Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtturn: A Manifesto.”
6. See Katherine McKittrick, “Yours in the Intellectual Struggle: Sylvia Wynter and the Realization of the Living” and “Axis, Bold as Love: On Sylvia Wynter, Jimi Hendrix, and the Promise of Science.” Wynter asserts that an “intellectual struggle” and “new analytic” are central to conceptualizing black humanity. Her manifesto is not published, yet black feminist critics are increasingly reading and writing about it.

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