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Faith in Fugitive Time: Safiya Sinclair's Poetic Temporalities of Racialization

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Abstract

Time is of increasing concern in Black studies, with scholars studying the ways in which standardized narratives of time are historically imposed on racialized populations. This essay reads Safiya Sinclair's 2016 poetry collection *Cannibal* as offering a fugitive temporality that ruptures the stability of the racializing present. In *Cannibal*, Sinclair's speaker does not attempt to release herself from the racializing condemnation of the past. Rather, she summons a fugitive social past in the present, antagonizing the homogeneity of the present by exposing it to the repressed and relegated wounds that haunt the foundations of modernity's racializing program. In *Cannibal*, this summoning is occasioned through a practice of faith. Following J. Kameron Carter and Fred Moten, among others, this essay studies the ways in which this fugitive poetic temporality of faith builds on contemporary developments in the critique of time, religion, and whiteness in Black studies.

Keywords

Black sociality, Caliban, contemporary poetry, faith, fugitivity, poetics, white time

Introduction

The striking difference between Black radicalism and other contemporary critical traditions is its peculiar dedication to social forms of faith. The Black radical tradition develops out of historical studies of the *quilombos* and other 18th- and 19th-century communities of escaped enslaved people in the Americas. The architectural, juridical, and economic segregation of these fugitive communities, as Harris (2018: 40) writes, led to 'the development of an alternative sociality structured by its own aesthetic acts and aesthetic judgments'. They were neither the 'prepolitical' remnant of an African past – to which Marxists have often relegated struggles not directly countering capitalist commodification, as Chakrabarty (2008) has canonically criticized – nor a countersociety in

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contiguous development with colonial capitalism (Robinson, 2000: 73). Instead, they brought divergent and disruptive pasts into the present as a political strategy, gathering around rituals of faith as the formation of a fugitive present (Chakrabarty, 2008: 12; Robinson, 2000: 132–3).

This counteraesthetics of sociality reveals ‘how strategy and faith rub up against one another in a kind of haptic eclipse’, as Harney and Moten (2021: 116) write; the fugitives’ dedication to rituals of faith exceeded the enslavers’ regulated individuation of the enslaved. Black faith is here conceived, as Carter (2008: 222) writes, as rituals ‘of apocalyptic self-disclosure and self-knowing’ through which Black social life becomes so obscured to the racializing visuality of whiteness that it can no longer be seen, no longer be kept in the order of the hold. These practices of survival in assembly are ‘the spiritual vocation of black sociality’ (Carter, 2023: 46).

Both religious faith and the faith demanded by nation-states from their citizens – what Lauren Berlant (1997: 27) calls ‘the infantile citizen’s faith’ – are based on subordination and subsumption. A presumed a priori individual is obliged to offer themself over to the collective of which they form a constitutive part through willing participation and moral duty. In the case of Black faith, crucially, this temporality is reversed (Harney and Moten, 2021: 119–29). Instead, an appeal to prior assembly, summoned by faith into the present, disrupts the presumption of individuation as the grounding of a stable present and presence.

As Charles W. Mills writes, the racialization of space is a familiar point of critical theory, studying the ways in which spatial distinctions are marked according to a racial difference that is itself instantiated by the spatial divide. The racialization of time, however, is less frequently theorized (2014: 27), despite time being literally transferred from racialized to white lives through the process of racialization (Tadiar, 2022). The importance of this racializing temporal transfer is the imaginary it makes available to different populations. The potential accumulation of time in white subjects – in subjects whitened by this potential accumulation – produces the possibility of a future, socially demarcating those subjects as the possessors of future time, against those racialized lives consigned to a limited past of appropriable and appropriated time.

In Black studies, the methodology proposed for disrupting this temporal transfer is not so much a reappropriation but rather a refusal of the terms of appropriation and its temporal order. Where Khosravi’s (2018) condemnation of ‘stolen time’ and the practices that ‘steal [it] back’, as Sarah Philipson Isaac (2025: 7) proposes, affirm the logic of appropriation and theft as the only means of radical subversion, while implicitly affirming legal discourse as the arbiter of determining what is theft as opposed to proper ownership, Black studies refuses the given order of legal or extrajudicial appropriation. Instead, this tradition opens a fugitive past where a hidden sociality is not observable within the temporal framework of appropriation.

The specifically Black refusal of the terms of temporal order – designating the stagnant past as the time of the racialized/colonized and the open, speculative future as that of the white/colonizer – is what Harney and Moten (2013) have theorized as *fugitivity*. Especially concerned with Black art in the USA, Harney and Moten study the ways in which Black *life* survives despite the incessant erasure of Black *lives*. This difference between *life* as a social totality and *lives* as individuated units exposes a surviving

sociality within the practices consigned to the dead past from the perspective of 'white time' (Mills, 2014).

While the time appropriated from racialized lives appears in a universal form through its transfer into a white future, the exposure of a fugitive past in which Black sociality survives reveals this transferred time as limited to the ideological frame of the social, political, and economic mode in which the racialization of time obtains. Before that, beyond it, behind its operation, other temporalities survive simultaneously, opening the possibility of another form of life – of 'counterlife', as Carter (2023: 31) writes – within this brutal and racializing present.

Often in Black studies this fugitive counterlife is theorized as a 'poetics' (Carter, 2023; Da Silva, 2014; Harney and Moten, 2021; Harris, 2018) without, however, any actual study of poetry. My intention in this essay is to study the operation of this fugitive temporality in a recent poetry collection, exposing a location for this 'poetics' of fugitivity in poetry itself. By studying Safiya Sinclair's 2016 poetry collection *Cannibal*, which provides something of a biography of Black faith as a social practice, I bring out the ways in which poetry productively performs disruptive temporalities, discursively continuing these fugitive practices by challenging the stability and colonial rationality of language.

Situating the authority of time in the white present of her adult life in the USA, opposed to the familial past of her upbringing in Jamaica, Sinclair proceeds to pull apart the composition of this historical, political, and deeply personal scene. What appeared to be a coincidence of individuals in a family in Jamaica, summoned in the mnemonic rituals of poetry by a poet living in the US, is exposed as a multitemporal assembly of social forces contorted into the violent frame of simultaneity. In its unique proposition for a poetics of faith that accesses an obscured, surviving temporality that is neither fully past nor fully present, *Cannibal* is a crucial work for Black radical critiques of time.

I understand Sinclair as producing a temporal disruption through and as poetry, adding poetry itself as a radical tool to the 'poetic' imaginary of Black studies. Given this primary concern with poetry's theoretical antagonism, I engage neither with Sinclair's recent memoir, *How to Say Babylon* (2023), nor her earlier chapbook, *Catacombs* (2011). My concern is with the narrative and poetic form of *Cannibal* specifically as the poetry of faith that exposes a fugitive, surviving past. This exposure, I argue, antagonizes the presumption of the stable universality of the present. The contribution of this essay, then, is to locate the fugitive temporal 'poetics' of Black studies in contemporary poetry, which I read as the living antagonism of occluded pasts in the present.

The Homelessness of Home

Safiya Sinclair's poetry collection *Cannibal* opens with an epigraph defining the title:

> The word 'cannibal,' the English variant of the Spanish word *canibal*, comes from the word *caribal*, a reference to the native Carib people in the West Indies, who Columbus thought ate human flesh and from whom the word 'Caribbean' originated. By virtue of being *Caribbean*, all 'West Indian' people are already, in a purely linguistic sense, born savage. (2016a: xi)

This historical-linguistic confusion initiates a theme that will not only run through the collection's poems, but temporally into the history on which they ruminate, too. Every

act of speech is already, to some extent, determined by a process of violence that pervades the scene of poetry, of its writing and its imaginary. At the same time, a certain social way of being is always in excess of that predetermination.

The concept of home begins this ambiguity. The first poem, 'Home' – ordered neatly into unmetered couplets – opens with a question that establishes the simultaneous linguistic and spatial referent of home, signifying the loss of a way of speaking as well as a place of being:

> Have I forgotten it—
> wild conch-shell dialect,
>
> black apostrophe curled
> tight on my tongue?
>
> Or how the Spanish built walls
> of broken glass to keep me out
> (2016a: 3)

The personal rumination on shifting language becomes a physical barrier, a wall marked by militarized hostility (broken glass) and exoticized imagery (conch-shell). It meanwhile implicitly affirms the speaker's subsumption within the cultural projections of the US; the Caribbean has become metonymized as a conch shell, a persistent Caribbean symbol of temporal dislocation and 'the archive itself' (Currents, 2021: 4).

The historical barrier of imperial violence grows into the present, overshadowing the memories of life, of the local way of speaking, the black apostrophes cutting off the ends of words. This temporal complexity eradicates a singular trajectory from which a steady subject emerges. The speaker was already not at home when she was at home, because home's language bears within it the possibility of its erasure by spatial displacement, and because home's architecture can always be filled with broken glass and turned into a menacing specter.

Sinclair brings all of this out in an essay reflecting on *Cannibal*. 'Home for me has always been a place of unbelonging. This is the strange yet all-too-familiar exile of living in the Caribbean, of being a part of the African diaspora: belonging in two places and no place at all' (Sinclair, 2016b: n.p.). Nothing quite coheres with the illusive ideal of *home*; everything at some level is disturbed by the instances of violence that survive the attempt to constantly escape its force.

Home, instead, was 'a place I carved out in my head. [. . .] Home for me has always been poetry' (Sinclair, 2016b: n.p). An act of poetic self-mutilation is the way in which Sinclair finds an ethical return to what never really existed: home. Once she can no longer be as herself – with a home nowhere – she can return to a way of being that could never otherwise have been.

Sinclair's return is not to something given already, but rather to the fact of giving itself. Writing poetry creates the possibility of an impossible home. This givenness is presented by Fred Moten as exactly the homelessness of home, the ethics of home as the place that is always given away:

> home is not this sovereign [. . .] place, where everybody has a fence and you [keep] motherfuckers out. It[']s this constantly violated thing. [. . .] That's what it means to be

> homeless. In other words, homelessness is not the condition in which you ain't got no place to stay. [. . .] Homelessness is the condition in which you *share* your house. Literally, it's the condition in which you *give your house away*, constantly, as a practice of hospitality.
> (Moten and Harney, 2020: 13–14)

The reason for being together in a place called home is that home is always given away; it is already a place that cannot be claimed as one's own. It is formed, instead, as the sharing of space, and also – as Sinclair's poetry emphasizes – of time.

In *Cannibal*, this homelessness as the giving away of home is formed as a relation between the speaker and her absent mother, reflected in references to Caliban. The monstrous slave from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* features throughout *Cannibal*, assuming the island voice of the racialized native whose form of life is stolen, bringing out, as Moten writes, 'Caliban's eternal internal alienation from his maternal home' (Moten, 2018b: 54). Rather than directly poeticizing a postcolonial conversation with her mother or Caliban, however, the speaker of *Cannibal* brings her mother and Caliban together as impossible sites of home, as constitutive moments in that forgotten Black apostrophe on her tongue. There is neither a direct temporal separation between the speaker in the US and her mother, nor a temporal simultaneity occasioned through this mnemonic poetry. Rather, their cohabitation of a persistent homelessness occurs by way of an altogether alternative temporality, which is staged as a reflection of Caliban on his colonized island, once given to him by his absent mother, Sycorax.

The first mention of Caliban is in 'Dreaming in Foreign'. Here, the body is the locus of a compromised opening, a space that can never be fully closed:

> Give your throat to everything,
> not the word but the thing of it.
> What the body speaks is untranslatable
> (2016a: 17)

The body constitutes the general outsideness of being without a home, not because of *house*lessness but because the constitution of memory as a sovereign place is already rendered impossible by the fact of having to dream in foreign, the fact of one's dreams being labelled 'foreign' by an authority whose code is global.

> Circumstance has made us strangers here,
> wild dance we are slowly forgetting; what home.
> (2016a: 17)

In *The Tempest*, the once-Duke of Milan, Prospero, has been living on a remote island for 12 years with his daughter, Miranda, and a native, Caliban (an anagram of *canibal*), whom he has enslaved. Caliban is the son of Sycorax, a deceased witch who never appears in the play. The first mention of Caliban focuses on this peculiar position he inhabits between slave and son. In reminding his spirit-slave Ariel of how he saved him, Prospero recounts the story of Caliban and Sycorax:

> Prospero:
> [. . .] Hast thou forgot
> The foul witch Sycorax, who with age and envy
> Was grown into a hoop? Hast thou forgot her?
>
> Ariel:
> No, sir.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Prospero:
> [. . .] Then was this island
> (Save for the son that she did litter here,
> A freckled whelp, hag-born) not honored with
> A human shape.
> Ariel:
> Yes, Caliban, her son.
> (Shakespeare, 1611: 31–33; Act 1, sc. 2, lines 308–311)

Prospero then calls Caliban in, who begins to curse the duke and his daughter.

> Caliban:
> As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed
> With raven's feather from unwholesome fen
> Drop on you both [. . .]
> (1611: 35; lines 385–387)

An argument ensues which explains the biographical background of the narrative. Caliban inherited the island from his mother. Prospero then arrived and taught Caliban how to speak, initially relating to him with intrigue but soon treating him only as a slave. Caliban no longer has immediate recourse to the things he knew before he was enslaved: 'Circumstance has made us strangers here', and all he can ask, like Sinclair, is: 'what home?'

Bringing these networks of meaning from Shakespeare to Black studies to memory to her father's Rastafarianism, under whose patriarchal rule Sinclair grew up (Sinclair, 2016b), the final poetic paragraph of 'Dreaming in Foreign' imagines home as the possibility of faith in a code given as the mother in her necessary absence. The maternal home – which in this case is doubly absent, where both her mother and her home are rendered foreign by absence – is the place to which one can never return, because return is precisely the a priori fact of *having given*; home has already been given away. Sinclair's speaker opens herself to this impossible return through faith, a practice that pierces a hole in the assumed totality of the present and its grieving marks of absence and loss.

> We are tongue-tied with the songs
> of unknown birds, an extinct diction. Fireburn
> that shipwreck, its aimless curse. Jah, guide
> these words, this life an invisible column, my one
> bloodline stretching, red livewire vein, to appear across
> these hijacked decades, inventing Paradise.
> (Sinclair, 2016a: 18)

The insurgency of foreignness survives from before its determination as foreign: the curse of the colonizing ship is aimless, not enforced against any specific order, because what precedes and exceeds its power already survives as foreignness. The way the island speaks is the sociality of what Moten (2018a: 39) calls the 'unruly, disagreeably ornamental outskirts' where strangers are 'homelessly at home'. The sociality deemed foreign against the order of the colonizers' language precedes that imposition, just as the impulse to burn the ship, and the social meaning of that fire, precedes the arrival of the colonizers' fleet.

In her pursuit of the exposure of that surviving temporality of tongue-tied fireburn, of radically disruptive speech, Sinclair appeals to faith. Despite seeking the guidance of Jah, the Rastafarian god, however, the speaker does not submit herself to his authority. Her appeal instead is animated by a 'livewire vein' that stretches through 'hijacked decades'; there is no humble withdrawal from the brutal conquest of her family and her history, beckoning God to appear from the discrete and sacred past and redetermine the conditions of her present. Instead, the speaker summons the burning animation of her brutalized past in the present, rupturing the claims of a universal future of progress that arrived with the colonizers' ships. Bringing the 'foul witch Sycorax' back to life in the form of her absented mother, the speaker fugitively breaks into Paradise.

Returning to the Present

In the narrative running throughout the collection, the speaker's mother has disappeared at sea, either an undescribed material death or a symbolic loss through the father's patriarchal rage. In the first section of *Cannibal*, in which the speaker – speaking as Caliban – undertakes a mnemonic poetics of summoning her mother – as Sycorax – by way of the ambivalent sea, the narrative is mostly personal and situated in Jamaica. In the second section, with the speaker now living in the US, the narrative expands to a broader historical scale, focusing on the intergenerational trauma of colonization, which is carried through the sea: 'Child of the colonies. Carrying the swift waves of oceans inside you. The wide dark of centuries, the whole world plunged down [. . .] You wear your mother's face in the mirror' (2016a: 31). The loss of herself as a cohering moment in her experience of space and time is most clearly marked by the loss of 'I' as a referent. She is 'you' now.

In the temporal division of colonization, marking the colonized as the primitive past brought into the present through the process of colonization, the speaker is withdrawn from the past to the present. Now she is only a marker referencing general difference: she is like her mother, and later, her 'brother, dark and beautiful', will repeat the scene in front of snarling crowds of homogeneous Americans holding xenophobic signs (2016a: 32).

The temporal disorder of the first section, in which Sycorax is summoned through an appeal to faith, has resulted in the speaker's spatial and temporal displacement. The narrative of this displacement, however, is never total. While the duality of colonized past and colonizing present is reproduced in the speaker's family structure, with the present eradicating the memory of her past, something of her social life survives, exceeding that imposed temporal division.

The temporal antagonism between obscured past and its racialized referent in the present is staged in the second section, between the elegy for Black people murdered by the police in ‘America the Beautiful’ and the astounding retort of the past, ‘One Hundred Amazing Facts About the Negro, With Complete Proof’, parts I, II, and III. Here, there is only room to study one of these poems closely.

‘American the Beautiful’ depicts an apocalyptic battle between the speaker’s Black brother and ‘twelve white men’ (2016a: 32). Twelve – the number that foreshadows apocalypse in Scripture – is crucial throughout *Cannibal*, with the speaker’s mother consistently described with reference to twelves (2016a: 9, 10, 11). Here, however, the number casts a different specter of apocalypse: the racializing end-times in which Black people are eradicated from the present. From the ‘Disney effect’ (33) of always slightly unreal white skin, the speaker’s brother is condemned ‘every night in America’ (33) as a target of racializing weaponry. Three pages later, this scene is turned on its head.

‘One Hundred Amazing Facts’, part I, opens with a note on historical context, describing laws passed in what is now the USA in 1670 and 1818 that prohibit Black people from buying white people. Immediately, the historical assumption of agency is reversed: where in ‘America the Beautiful’ the police are the murderous agents of history from whom Black people run and hide to survive, in ‘One Hundred Amazing Facts’ it is the racializing authority of white America that reacts to the existent threat of Black people, on whom they were entirely economically reliant through slavery at the time. The primacy of history is inverted, with antecedence and survival passed from the white assumption of origin in the first poem to Black primacy in the second. By escaping into the past, a past that precedes that imposed on them by colonization and enslavement, those Black people of the 1670s and the 1810s become the primary agents of the present to whom the whites can only *re*act. This primacy, though, is conducted from within the prohibition of ownership, producing a profound catachresis. The owned are the agents of the present through the fact of not being able to own.

Written as a warning to whites, the poem draws out the political stakes of this entangled, fugitive temporality:

> Hope, an ache culled taut in his throat,
>
> will strain to form a black bark of words. Do not
> attempt to understand the diction of the Negro;
>
> he wakes in strange tongues and speaks entirely
> with his body. [. . .]
> (2016a: 36)

These warnings in the future aspect disrupt the racialized split of past and present. To the extent that ‘[r]ace does not ontologically preexist the social; race is ontologically dependent on the social’ (Mills, 2014: 36), the temporal split of racialized lives is the condition for their racialization. Without the spectral encroachment of a racialized past on the universal claim of a white present, that embodied racialized distinction itself collapses.

In this poem, the Black threat arrives from the future, but, in another temporal twist, the Black experience of the future is futureless. Here, the *hope* of ‘the African’ – a sentiment with only one standard temporal direction: hope moves from the present to the future

– is situated in the past. It is an ache in his throat, a trauma binding him to an impossible origin. His spatial residence in the future is distended by a fugitive presence in the past.

Here it becomes important that the conditions in which movement is allowed and enforced in the familiar context of Black studies – mostly theorized in the USA – are strikingly different in Sinclair's poetry. The specific struggle of Black Americans is centered on an impossible migration, of neither being fully *here* nor *there*. 'African American' is always a catachrestic referent, never referring to the object it names, since each designation undermines the other: to be African American means having been removed from the possibility of being African while being continually removed from the possibility of being American. The movement poeticized in *Cannibal* is, on the other hand, migratory, focusing on Black *foreigners* rather than Black *Americans*.

Obtaining nonetheless in both contexts is the imposition of 'not arriving', as Khosravi (2018: 41) writes. Despite being present, the presence of racialized lives in the US is temporally split between the present of being here and the past of having not been here. Those who never quite arrive carry a split temporality, on the one hand as the disturbing presence of the past in the present (they have arrived from elsewhere, from behind the white American contemporary), and on the other as the impossibility of the presence of the present (they have not arrived, not remained, not been here always). Their *remainder* in the present, however, is not solely imposed by racializing authorities, but also emerges as what Neferti X. M. Tadiar calls 'remaindered life': 'the forms and ontologies of life-making practice – in a word, life-times' that exist in excess of the normative present 'insofar as they are the means of fugitive life' (2022: 105). As Sinclair shows in 'One Hundred Amazing Facts', the survival of this fugitive remaindered life inverts the assumed agency of history, forming whiteness as a reactive response from racializing power to the threat posed by fugitive survival. The catachrestic name 'African American' is disrupted, with 'African' employed as a temporal antagonism in the totalizing claims of the 'American' present, and 'America' exposed to its disjunctive containment of Jamaica and its distinct temporalities.

This is, for Mills, the importance of 'white time' as a racializing rubric, which is both 'timelessness and racelessness. Postraciality thus merges into preraciality, which is araciality, which is the abstract universal' (2014: 32). The claim of white time is the claim to infinity, which is atemporal. This appearance of infinity is achieved through a total accumulation of other temporalities. As Tadiar (2022: 121) writes, 'the seemingly limitless resource that is the future [. . .] is in actuality the lives of people whose own futures are offered up as exchange values extractable in the present'. This marks the distinction between 'life-times of value', which accumulate temporal infinity, and 'life-times of waste', whose time is appropriable and whose temporal being is therefore relegated to a resolutely primitive past, defining the development of capitalist modernity as progress beyond the appropriability of time (Tadiar, 2022: xiv). The hegemonic narrative of a single world history is formed through this differential accumulation of temporalities (Chakrabarty, 2008: 12–13), but, crucially, a certain excess is also left in this production of 'life-times of waste' (Tadiar, 2022: 103).

The temporal excess of Blackness is its miraculous survival despite the totalizing regulation of white time: the 'pasts present in continuing living' that Tadiar (2022: 276) celebrates are also '*performed*', as Chakrabarty (2008: 10) writes, 'in the carnivalesque

aspects of democracy: in rebellions, protest marches, sporting events', which expose an assembly that cannot fully be appropriated into a homogeneous temporality. The primacy of this impulse to assembly – appropriated, but never fully subsumed – can 'actualiz[e]' or 'enact [. . .] the remaindered time of living' (Tadiar, 2022: 100, 83).

Sinclair poeticizes this enactment of fugitive temporalities through the rubric of hope: the hope of the past in the present is the traumatic 'ache culled' in the throat, the continued mark of the wound of removal. Perhaps most radically, the hope of the past is its fugitive emergence in the white time of now:

> [. . .] All Negroes prefer
>
> to be near the water. If they sense rain, they will swarm,
> strip naked, hum, dive, demand to be reborn,
>
> march barefoot through your garden to devour
> your weeds, to spook and mark new heirs
> with venom.
> (2016a: 37)

Those who are barred from ownership now disrupt the land owned by those they cannot own. The present's logics of possession are split into a fugitive temporality: neither past nor present, this time is the poetics of surviving, and its operation is the undoing of the present. As Levy (2017: 85) notes, the prefix 'un' plays multiple important roles in *Cannibal*: the fugitive venom developed here will be used in the very last line of the book, by a 'Predator coiled eager', to 'unjungle' (2016a: 109) the maps of colonial space and time.

In 'One Hundred Amazing Facts', the whites' own mechanism of universalization has been hindered by its adoption in someone with a memory – however blurred and traumatized – of another way of speaking. As Caliban says to Prospero, 'You taught me language, and my profit on 't / Is I know how to curse. Red plague rid you / For learning me your language' (1611: 39; Act 1, sc. 2, lines 437–439). Sinclair similarly argues that new heirs will be marked with venom once the islanders, in their island way of being, reach beyond the sea, once they return to Paradise, a return occasioned precisely as the fugitive disjunction of the present's hope in the past and the past's poetic birth in the present. The absented are (re) turned into antagonistic presence, like the speaker's mother: 'In this wet season my gone mother / climbs back again' (2016a: 8). Sinclair here *enacts* and *actualizes* the temporality of fugitive faith often celebrated as a 'poetics' (without poetry) in Black studies. In the following section, I study the meaning of poetic faith in recent Black studies scholarship.

The Aesthetics of Faith

Moten's (2008) Black optimism has become profoundly influential in Black studies because he maintains – alongside Tadiar (2022), Carter (2023), and Harris (2018) – that totalization is always an incomplete process (Harney and Moten, 2021). Slippages and fugitive practices survive in and despite every normative performance, 'an interinanimation of rupture and excess that carries the terrible gift of a whole other mode of social

bearing' (Moten, 2018b: 79). This gift of another mode of be(ar)ing, another temporality of life, is always at play in Moten's corpus.

At the level of this violence's imposition, shame and depravity enter the self-consciousness of racialization, demarcating Blackness as the self-constitutive site of reason's refusal.

> The problem isn't just the shame that attends double consciousness; the problem is that shame seems crucial to and constitutive of the struggle for freedom, to which we all are chained, as the impossible objects and subjects of a no less impossible ethics of observation. (Moten, 2017: 16–17)

The struggle for freedom is already refused by the logics of freedom, which assigns shame to the struggle in that it presupposes a prior unfreedom. However, Moten finds a refusal of that refusal in the social constitution of Black life, in the excess of this assignation of shame and depravity that attends double consciousness.

For Moten, this fugitive excess is practiced as an aesthetics of faith. As Carter (2023: 65) writes, after a section studying Moten, the excess of faith is Blackness: this 'is the more-than that is the blackness of black religion'. To bring out the specific matter of this excess of faith, Moten studies Frederick Douglass's account of the brutal beating of his aunt in his first autobiography (1845):

> Aunt Hester's violence, the gift she gives and is given, which is given again and again all throughout the history of the social music it animates and that animates it [. . .] must – in the most terrible of ironies – keep faith with the incalculable while accounting both for [. . .] the rapacious weakness of the master's response and the reactionary, totalitarian power of racial, global, state capitalist mastery that sanctioned him while he symbolized it. (Moten, 2018b: xiii)

In his poetically tangled idiolect, Moten here is getting at the double fugitivity that attends Black life: the fugitive is at once brutalized by the imposition of the impossibility of both remaining and escaping, and given through that fugitivity the gift of excess, of surviving without full erasure by the master's demand to remain (see also Tadiar, 2022: 100–103). Moten is consistently dedicated to this duality of fugitivity, its oppressive condemnation and its poetic and social survival, which is, in the passage above, bound precisely by an act of faith.

For Sylvia Wynter, this fugitive sociality is practiced specifically as 'the unofficial religion' of 'the black masses in the New World' against the opium of 'official religion' (Wynter, 1980: 180). Wynter's focus is on Black linguistic practices that construct a space of faith in excess of the totalizing signifying function of colonial Christianity. Where the initial Christian phase of colonization relied on the symbolic synonymy of divine light and whiteness, the scientific phase that follows it relies on the universalization of Bios as the evolutionary force that is supposed to reveal humans' purity and perfection (Rivera, 2021: 77).

As Rivera (2021: 76) writes, the importance of Wynter's 'religion as counterpoetics' is its affirmation of the mutual presence of Logos as cultural creation *and* Bios as evolutionary force in the process of social meaning-making. Wynter's thinking centers around

the notion that the imaginary that develops in a social group is the formation of the meaning of that social group. For Rivera, it is specifically the embodiment of these practices as the formation of social meaning that is brought out in Wynter's thinking (Rivera, 2021: 77). This embodied aspect is also practiced through language, by speaking-together as the coming-into-being of a way of knowing the world otherwise. As Wynter writes, unofficial Black religion 'may appear to be spontaneous resistance to the system' but is in fact a 'carefully structured reaction reimposed by ritual' (Wynter, 1980: 180).

The sociality that structures Black life in America is what, in different but connected ways, Moten and Wynter read as a poetics of faith, of holding onto a moment of social constitution that is necessarily lost but also always present: the mother consumed by the sea, (un)dead but (un)living; the home given constantly away; the absent-presence that provides the impulse to Rivera's 'religion as counterpoetics'. There is a sociality here that is beyond the function of signification, outside and before the dynamics of language. However, in Black studies it is difficult to strategically actualize this fugitive faith in sociality. In the next section, I study further how Sinclair's poetry achieves this poetic actualization.

Faceless Flesh

Sinclair's project in *Cannibal*, as a political tool in the Black radical tradition, is to bring together the *excess of language* through which maroon socialities fugitively communicate and the *excess of signification* occasioned by this fugitive poetics of speech. The complex temporality that exposes this doubly fugitive excess is the (re)turn to faith as a social practice of belief in what both is and is not present: i.e. faith in the past that is here, disturbingly and disruptively present. By giving faith to the radical presence of the open wound of the past, the stability of the present and its claims to possessive authority are punctured and exposed to open rebellion.

The most direct rebuttal to the representation of homogeneous presence is the disassembly of the human face that occurs both on the cover of *Cannibal* and in the poem 'Family Portrait'. The excess of language as the point of fugitive temporal access to a surviving Black past-presence, or presented-past, is exposed already on the cover of *Cannibal*, which shows a portrait from Wangechi Mutu's series of collages, *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* (2004–5). The series is formed of 12 portraits composed over extracts from a 19th-century medical textbook. These disembodied representations of female organs suggest an invasive history of experiments on bodies, especially racialized and feminized bodies.

Playing on the claim to an objective and scientific representation of doubly hidden body parts – both internal, invisible beneath the skin, and morally hidden, prohibited from revelation, but forced into exposure by representation – Mutu uses cuttings from fashion and pornography magazines, strips of tape, glitter, drawings, and fur to twist these diseased details into faces. The 12 faces are equally recognizable as faces whether they are made of expected parts (a cutting of eyes for eyes, a mouth for a mouth) or disjunctive elements (a knee for a nose, a vagina for a forehead). The disassembled parts of a body equally constitute a recognizable face; in the frame of a collage, on the wall of a gallery, they are subsumed into the recognizable form of bodies, but they carry

nonetheless a disturbing remnant of their history. They are marked by an accumulation of difference that the standardizing procedure of representation attempts to erase by representing them as faces.

In Mutu's portraits, the face is already a composition, but not a composition of representable parts. The gathering that assumes the form of a face is not composed of the divisible units of a face. Taken apart, these units are not recognizable as a face. Instead, they instantiate a different kind of temporality. They begin as faces, but they are not formed as faces. Their history does not lead to their present. They are formed, instead, as historical sites of experimentation. The doctor's hand and medical utensils probing vaginas in the forehead of these faces reveals an accumulated wound, the differential mark of history, where racialization, gendering, and sexuation are embodied. Before the face that was first a face, there was the history of face-production. The separable parts – diagrams of organs, medical procedures, body parts, clothing, paint, prints – can be assembled as a coherent face, but they will nonetheless always carry their history, and this history differentiates and dislocates their expression as a coherent assembly.

The history of fugitive assembly exposed through the disassembly of the present is explored further in 'Family Portrait', which presents the most normative visual emblem of the family, seated for a portrait.

> At our table we don't say grace.
> We sit silent in the face of our questions,
> a crown of mosquitos swarming our heads.
> (Sinclair, 2016a: 19)

There is no observer of this scene: no authorial presence, no one to say grace to, and no one providing the questions, which instead are *ours*. The language and the formation of family in this scene are internal and homeostatic.

In the first three stanzas, a protective poetics is built around the family, following the movements of light and the exclusion of dogs. Then in the fourth, the silence of 'our questions' snaps the tension.

> But what could I offer them, when I knew nothing
> of love, and took my corrections with the belt
> every evening? There in that city of exile, cobbled
>
> square of salt-rust and rebellion, my father's face looms
> its last obstruction [. . .]
> (2016a: 19)

There is nothing the speaker can give; even the absence of her love is separated from her knowledge by a line break, placed instead with the violence of her father's correcting belt. The sudden horror of the portrait, its flight out of the captured time of a photograph and into memory, into the permanent presence of trauma and its accumulated time, erupts the homeostasis of the home. No longer a closed space and a finite dining room, the scene has now become a city of exile, deforming the bodies of its inhabitants with the whip that

breaks not only the ideal body presented in family portraiture, but of home itself as a material referent. The family gathers now only in the accumulated shock of memory.

The father's face is fully formed, a whole face emerging in the scene, set starkly against the faceless women of the family. In each stanza, a dissected body part is offered, never constituting an entire being: 'a strange halo around my ear'; 'my weak heart'; 'the one clipped flower / of my objection'; 'my dress, my hands, bruised and falling / loosely about my thighs'; 'howling in my ear'. Halfway through the poem, these body parts become the dissected remnants of the speaker's mother, and then her sister: 'my mother / at his shoulder'; 'still wore the mouth of her youth'; 'her fingers' twelve points'; 'my Medusa hair'; 'shell and yellow fur snagged in her teeth' (Sinclair, 2016a: 19–20). The three women in the family are all formed of body parts, never made as fully human, while the two men – the speaker's father and brother – are defined only by their tools: the father with his belt and the 'brother with his dagger / at my throat' (Sinclair, 2016a: 20).

The speaker's own reflection is displaced from her body, a 'doppelgänger in the shadows of the frame'. The politics of representation are disfigured beyond recognition in this portrait that abolishes every familiarity of portraiture. There is no material coagulant holding together the family as a family, no visual regime of aesthetic representation, and yet something maintains these characters before their dissection. In the excess of their impossible bodily coherence, they gather still in this 'scene of subjugation', where Denise Ferreira da Silva, following Saidiya Hartman, situates racialization (Da Silva, 2022: 284); gathering here is an intransitive verb, never gathering *something* but gathering for its own sake, as its own stakes.

> [. . .] This is us. This is all of us.
> Before we knew this life would shatter, moving wild
> and unwanted through the dark and the light.
> (2016a: 20)

The impossibility of each character's homeostatic wholeness constitutes this shattered family life, in wild and unwanted movements. Each character cannot be one; they can only be 'all of us'.

In the scene of representation, archetypally constructed here as the family portrait, Sinclair does not posit the Black feminized body as the constitutive other to the ideal somatic form; Blackness here is not the past, lagging behind the colonial white time of global progress. Rather, the body is made to disappear through the logics of the flesh. Having been turned into flesh, as the impossibility of becoming the post-flesh ideal of whiteness, Sinclair abandons the form of bodily singularity. The family is not *each one of us*; it is *all of us*, a mass of flesh dissolved in a practice of disappearance through which *all of us* gathers somewhere else, beyond the frame of representation and its constitution of racializing white time.

Where does this deformed being called *all of us* temporally assemble? Where in time does it come from and how does it arrive? The second line of the final stanza assumes distinct forms depending on the breaths taken while reading it: (1) *Before [pause], we knew this life would shatter*, i.e. all of us were aware that this dissection of our bodies would occur; we have been waiting for it. Or (2) *Before we knew this life would shatter*

[without pause], as a relative clause, explaining the scene that precedes the movement into dark and light. Taking the pause as the semantic crux of this family's deformation, what is exposed in the slow reading of this line is a primary assembly as which the family has always already assembled elsewhere in the form of its disfigured flesh: 'Before [implicit pause. . .]', in the time of their knowing of this impending mutilation. This antecedent assembly is what I read, after Carter, as the temporality of faith (Carter, 2023: 73), the shared knowing of a way of being otherwise that is practiced not among *each of us* or between *you and me*, but in the specific operation of knowing that is *all of us*.

This family, as a form of sociality formed in the formless space of exile, is here disfigured beyond the optic operation of portraiture, which attempts to capture a single and complete moment of individuals momentarily occupying the same space. In Sinclair's portrait, the family is an already shared portrait of sociality's constant internal difference, which emerges as remnants of flesh and the proximity of their enduring residue in excess of the normative biomechanics of the body. This family is bodiless, only embodied in the fact of its habit of already having been shared – necessarily incompletely – before its capture and division into singular, complete, and discrete subjects bound by white time.

Sinclair's (re)turn to the assembly of faith is not an attempt to re-access something that was left behind or lost. It is rather a constitutive lack, the always-never-quite-thereness of Paradise, which Sinclair *turns to*, which is to say *believes in*. Sinclair's poetry is the moment of becoming aware of one's constitution by the constant presence of the absence of Paradise. While Black studies scholars often theorize this retrieval of a fugitive past and its antagonism in the racializing project of the present as a 'poetics' of faith and fugitivity, the actual means of accessing it through poetry is ignored. Sinclair exposes the incomplete disjunction of the present's 'white time' by bringing out the poetry of occluded but remaindered and surviving pasts. Here, poetry itself is a practice of faith, dismissing the apparent totality of the material present and excavating social forms that persist in the excess of what seems to be possible.

Sinclair returns to the sociality that precedes the racialization of the flesh, not because she ever left or arrived at that scene, but because her faith in its survival and its meaning in her deformed formation is exactly her return to Paradise, her wild movements through the dark and the light (2016a: 20). To be the speaking remnant of dissected flesh is to be the surviving assembly of faith, turning to the antagonistic past-presence of Paradise.

Fugitive Faith

What I find in Sinclair's poetry is a practice of fugitive Black time, which exposes the catachrestic survival of a form of life that was never fully eradicated, despite the obsessive eradication imposed by the racializing program of capitalist modernity. Sinclair, in my reading, provides access to a surviving temporality within the brutal project of white time. While it is faith that exposes fugitive temporalities – the very act of belief in survival produces the exposure of that survival – it is as poetry that this faith is practiced. Sinclair's poetry, as a speculative and incomplete performance of language, is a political antagonism in the temporality it encounters. Rather than an abstract 'poetics', poetry here is the practice of exposing fugitive temporalities.

Where Mills (2014: 29) discusses the 'mnemonic communities' of race-making, whereby certain narratives are privileged and accentuated over others, Sinclair's fugitive faith is better understood as a counter-mnemonic strategy of re-gathering that which has been forcibly obscured. For her, faith is dedication to the survival of assembly despite its erasure and occlusion.

Sinclair's poetry deploys the social structure of faith without religion's hierarchy of authority. Sinclair accesses this fugitive, remaindered life-time (Tadiar, 2022) through what Carter (2023) calls 'the anarchy of black religion'. The stakes of this fugitive temporality are radically disruptive to the normative presumption of the dominance of white time and its mechanisms of appropriation. While Black studies is concerned with the 'poetics' of fugitivity, I have attempted here to propose this crucial rubric as a practice of poetry.

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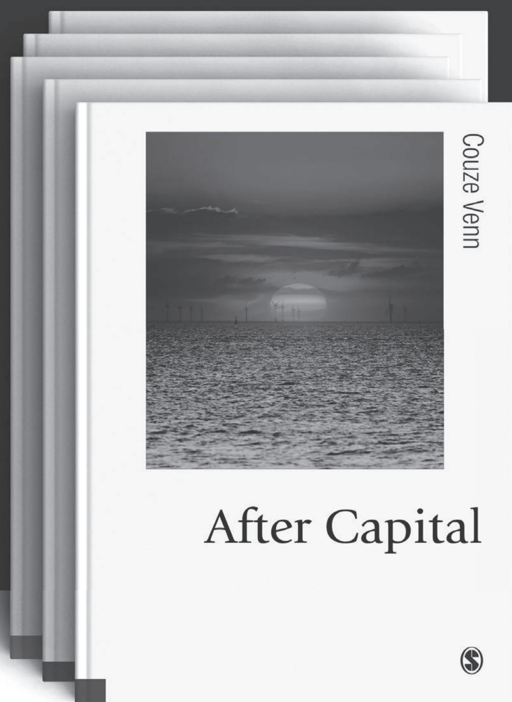

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