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She Had a Name That God Didn't Give Her: Thinking the Body through Atheistic Black Radical Feminism

Marquis Bey, Cornell University

Abstract: The article attempts to demonstrate the necessity of acknowledging the body when considering the current Black Lives Matter movement, give an account of Black female and trans erasure, and ultimately (re)affirm the lived embodiment of Black, female, and trans bodies, all through an atheistic lens. Atheism here, while indeed denying the existence of gods, has as its primary concern affirming life. Too often is theology, as theologian Anthony Pinn says, “a theology of *no-body*”; thus atheistic feminist Blackness, as understood here, seeks to entrench the body rather than abstract it. Atheistic feminist Blackness reinscribes and affirms the subjectivity and humanity of Black, female, and trans bodies, countering hegemonic discourse that explicitly and implicitly states otherwise. The article’s emphasis of an atheistic posture stems from the prescient words of Catherine Keller: “atheist or agnostic feminists ignore the God-word at their own peril.” Therefore, the Black feminist ideological argument takes the “God-word” seriously, reckons with it, and offers an alternative to a theological tradition that often imbues the body with inherent flaw (sin), abstraction (soul), and erasure of the ontological value of Black, female, and noncisgendered bodies.

Keywords: atheism, radical feminism, Blackness, embodiment, Black Lives Matter

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Everything I say about survival as a complication of the opposition life/death proceeds in me from an unconditional affirmation of life.... It is the affirmation of a living being who prefers living, and thus surviving, to death, because survival is not simply that which remains but the most intense life possible.

— Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally*

Here in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it, love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh.

— Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

It is clear from the numerous Black religious leaders, countless Black churches lining streets all over the country, historical documents, and statistical data that African American culture is permeated by religion. Belief in god¹ has often been the backbone keeping a brutalized people standing upright. Religious devotion was, especially for Black women “whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held,” a constitutive aspect of their Blackness, their womanness (Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”; quoted in Rich 2007, 30). But I seek to extricate a purported inherent religiosity from Blackness via my own Black feminist lens; I seek to critique James Baldwin’s claim that “It is axiomatic that the Negro is religious, which is to say that he [*sic*] stands in

fear of the God our ancestors gave us and before whom we all tremble yet” (1968, 54). What happens, I address throughout the argument of this essay, when “the Negro” is not axiomatically religious? Further, what happens when that Negro—normalized by Baldwin and numerous others as “he”—maintains a radical feminist posture in the world?

The assumption of an axiomatic link between religion and Blackness limits and essentializes Blackness and lends itself to the imposition of “not Black enough” on those African Americans who, like myself, identify as atheist. Blackness is arguably “Blackened” by departing from and moving beyond Christianity, by which I mean that the hegemonic tenets delimiting a kind of “authentic” Blackness are rebelled against, refused, fugitively eluded. Because of the strong historical connection between Blackness and religiosity, the Black embodiment of Christian religiosity holds power in producing knowledge of Black bodies as they relate to religion. In light of this, the epistemological framework of my feminist Blackness is, as Donovan O. Shaefer notes, “not just about gender, but the way that embodied power relations are embedded in the production of knowledge” (2014, 375). Grounding my critique in this epistemology, I seek to imbue the discourse of Blackness and feminism with a humanity that is not predicated on a belief in the existence of god(s). My goal is to address pressing issues that are of concern for Black/feminists without the use of theological language, a language often mired in a history of oppression of Black communities and women and trans folks. By removing theological language from the social-justice work of this essay I elude the trap of being tied to a doctrine that invalidates the lives of women and especially gender-nonconforming people, and which has historically been used to invalidate the ontological integrity of all Black people. By removing social justice’s perceived default link to religiosity, it is then possible to more readily validate the existence of Black people, women, and/or trans folks, considering how Christianity has served as a “sacred canopy” for certain inequitable power relations. This atheistic perspective has values much in line with those described as humanistic, according to Black humanist Norm Allen, Jr., in that atheism is structured around “a belief in reason, science, democracy, openness to new ideas, the cultivation of moral excellence, a commitment to justice and fairness, and a belief in the inherent worth of humanity.... [H]umanity—not divinity—is the *primary* concern of humanists” (Allen 1991, 10; emphasis added).

This essay will also join the small, but growing, number of studies engaging the conversations on Black/feminist atheism, and will help to theorize an alternative connection between Blackness, feminism, and Christianity. In this vein, I will focus almost solely on Christianity—although my critiques can readily apply to other monotheistic religions—not because it is more important per se but because of the vast Christian population in the African American racial category and female gender category, the Christian faith claiming 88 percent of all African Americans (85 percent of whom say their religion is very important to them) and 82 percent of all adult US women. The most religious demographic, then, are Black women, 91 percent of whom are religiously affiliated (Pew Research Center 2008; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2009; Dean 2014, 44).

Throughout the essay it will be implicitly evident that my words are what constitute me; “Language, incontestably,” as Baldwin eloquently puts it, “reveals the speaker.” Language is fashioned “in order to describe and thus control [one’s] circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they are submerged.)” (Baldwin 1979). So as the constitutive force creating me, what I think and the language I use to create my reality is twin skin to my feminist Blackness, thus they—my atheism, my feminist Blackness—speak one another in symbiotic co-constitutivity. An atheistic Black radical feminist vocabulary is a necessity as it allows me to inhabit a language in which I can dwell, and thus a means of speaking my subjectivity and the subjectivity of others who cannot inhabit

themselves fully—*embody* themselves fully—and honestly in theological language. Too often is (Black) theology “a theology of *no-body*, a system of theological expression without an organized (re)presentation of the body as body”; because the body is shaped and defined by dynamic power relations, it is, hence, “a story told to support the social system” (Pinn 2010, 3; original emphasis). Humanist theologian Anthony Pinn places the body at the forefront of his humanist thought, and it is the primacy and consequentialness he gives to the body that appeal to me. Pinn writes:

I promote the body as developed and defined by social structures (e.g., discourse) and in this it is not a biological reality. I couple this with an understanding of the body as biochemical reality, as biological “stuff” that is not captured through abstract references to social mechanism and epistemological structures.... Black bodies are material, are real, but what is meant by this and what is known/experienced about this body is not possible outside discourse (knowledge) generated in connection to power relationships. I do not want to dismiss the discursive body that is currently of concern to black theology but instead combine that understanding of the body with solid focus on the physical or material body. (Pinn 2010, 5)

What theological “no-bodying” does is deprive one of the humanity that structures our very being-in-the-world. Our subjectivity is gained, in large part, by our being-in-the-world as embodied humans, so for a theology to abstract us and in many ways devalue our embodiment consequently devalues the core of our subjectivity. Christian theology is often what Baldwin says of protest novels: It is a “theology that denies [us] life”; it is a “rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his [*sic*] beauty, dread, power...” (1968, 17). Atheistic Black radical feminism operates via entrenchment rather than theological abstraction; it emphasizes and validates the embodied life.

It is the reality of my lived Black feminist body that has driven me to my intellectual, ideological, and theological position. My body matters. Indeed, it is the mark of a feminist epistemology: “Poststructuralist feminist atheism takes seriously the embodiment of belief and disbelief” (Schaefer 2014, 383). I intend for my Black embodiment to be permitted to speak my atheism; for my feminism to speak my Blackness; for my atheism to speak my feminism. They exist with and through each other.

Satanic Feminist Blackness

It is imperative first that I do some “fessing up.” With the abovementioned importance of embodied knowledge, as a cisgendered male, my embodiment is always complicit to an extent in male supremacy. My corporeality always has the potential to appear hostile because of the hegemonic and violent legacy my embodiment carries with it. That I must own. As standpoint theory argues, my social status matters and affects how I interpret the world, since indeed I interpret the world through my body, a body that is coded as male. I cannot speak from experiential authority on women or trans folk, so it is important that this limitation is made clear.

And further still, I must also admit that my atheism is in many ways a luxury. I am not in such horrendous social conditions where my only salvation would seem to be belief in a great by and by, or the belief that there is someone eternal that loves me unconditionally. Enslaved Black bodies in large part could not fathom living without the presence of god, for their terrestrial conditions were so rough their hope came largely from belief in heaven. That I do not feel that necessity marks a luxury that many of my racial kin did not have, and I also must own and acknowledge this.

In the religious realm of Christianity, its doctrines and institutions cannot shake their historically constitutive past. Indeed, as cultural theorist Stuart Hall says, an identity is the “the [name] we give to the

different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall 1990, 225). The identity of Christianity and its components are dependent upon its past, a past that is deeply racist and sexist. As such, the constitutive elements of Christianity do not jive with my feminist or Black ideological mindsets. Therefore, because of the racist and sexist histories of Christianity, and because my Blackness and my feminism are large components of my identity, my Black feminism urges my atheism. In other words, I reject Christianity in particular, and religions in general, because they have done, and still do, a kind of violence to two of my identities to which I hold dear. I wish to make explicit, however, that Black feminist atheism does not advocate the persecution of theists; feminism, fugitive Blackness (defined below), and my atheism are by definition opposed to all persecution and affirm life, the antithesis of persecution (Winter 2001, 55). The goal of Black feminist atheism is to promote the recognition of the historical and contemporary racist and sexist discourses that are legitimated and perpetuated by an epistemology that takes god as given.

But the god concept not only legitimates racist and sexist discourses, it renders such discourse beyond criticism. As atheism scholar Michael Lackey has noted, “God’s objective is to secure order; He [sic] is the basis and foundation of the political, economic, and legal system of the United States of America. To oppose the political, economic, or legal system, therefore, is to oppose God” (Lackey 2007, 107). To challenge patriarchy is not to call into question the authority of men; it is to question god godself. To challenge whiteness is not to call into question the legitimacy of white institutions; it is to question god godself. And god is the ultimate form of whiteness. God is a transcendental signifier, a signifier that is unmarred and normative. God is a proxy for whiteness insofar as god is a hegemonic governing force that seeks to “fix” unruly acts and identities in place under god’s rule. This is evident also in images of Jesus, who was fashioned over time to sanction whiteness. “By wrapping itself with the alleged form of Jesus,” write Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, “whiteness gave itself a holy face. [It] create[d] the perception that whiteness was sacred and everlasting. With Jesus as white, Americans could feel that sacred whiteness stretched back in time thousands of years and forward in sacred space to heaven and the second coming” (Blum and Harvey 2012, 8). Thus, to challenge the white patriarchal establishment “is to be a renegade angel, a Lucifer who must be cast into perdition” (Lackey 2007, 107).

So I will cast myself into perdition. I will take an imaginatively historical and etymological leap, since my atheism stems from my Blackness, and construct an atheistic feminist Blackness that is Satanic. “Satan” derives from the Hebrew word *šāṭān*, which means “adversary, one who plots against another.” The Devil’s other name, Lucifer, comes from the Latin *lūcifer*, an adjective meaning “light-bringing” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). If we understand Blackness, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten argue it, as the “dismissal of any possible claim regarding the essence or even the being of blackness,” and as “in between that impropriety of speech that approaches animality and a tendency towards expropriation that approaches criminality,” then Blackness is “the black thing that cuts the regulative, governant force of (the) understanding and finds itself to be what it is not” (Harney and Moten 2013, 48–50). Blackness becomes a perennially critical posture. Drawing on the biography of Satan and Lucifer and synthesizing their etymologies, I conceive of Blackness as a kind of Satan/Lucifer-ness, an accusatory, critical, light-bearing adversary of the hegemonic forces attempting to govern (control) the unruly.

Thinking along similar lines as Harney and Moten, J. Kameron Carter speaks to the fugitivity of Blackness:

[B]lackness is a movement of the between ... an interstitial drama on the outskirts of the order of purity. It is an improvisatory movement of doubleness, a fugitive announcement in and against the grain of the modern world's ontotheological investment in pure being, or pristine origins, and of the modern world's orchestrations of value, rule, and governance (i.e., sovereignty) in the project or the ongoing exercise of inscribing pure being. Blackness is, to invoke Chandler once again, "paraontological." (Carter 2013, 590)

The prefix "para-" derives from the ancient Greek *παρα-*, meaning by the side of, beside, hence alongside of, by, past, beyond. As a paraontological category, Blackness eludes pure, pristine, primordial ontological origins and is characterized by its subversion of this dominant narrative. Wrestling Carter's words from their original Christian context, I seek to retool his language, engaging in what Hortense Spillers calls "logological refashioning" (2003, 4) to rewrite the meaning of his words for my atheistic aims. I wish to push his notion of the "paraontological" past its limit and make (my) Blackness exist on the outskirts of ontology—that is, I wish to aver a Blackness that is also theologically fugitive, existing past and beyond god, the primordial Creator. Rather than a mere moving "in and against the grain of the modern world's ontotheological investment in pure being," as Carter says above, I want to fashion a Blackness that moves *outside of* and *beyond* the grain of *any* ontotheological investment. This, I think, would be to take Blackness beyond its theological limit. It is to Blacken Carter's paraontological Blackness.

Blackness and feminism take the material body as vital to their goals of white/male supremacist dismantling. Bodies are raced and gendered; Black and female/trans bodies are interpellated into existing racial and gender categories, and are oppressed and marginalized based on their "legibility" as Black and woman/trans. Because of this racial and gendered oppression, their humanity is circumscribed and devalued. At base, then, my rejection of the premise of god's existence rests on a profound affirmation of life. As Pinn emphatically asserts, nothing trumps the integrity of life. This requires that we wrestle with the struggles in *this* world and that all gods must be destroyed (Cone and Pinn 2012). My affirmative atheistic ideology also mirrors what A. C. Grayling says, that "the argument against religion is an argument for the liberation of the human mind" (2014, 7). Too often does something like the doctrine of original sin function as a means by which one's humanity is imbued with an innate flaw. The doctrine "promotes the thinking that the human being, if left to her[-through-]his own devices, is unable to be morally good without divine intervention or dependence upon God through faith in Jesus" (Fonza 2013, 191).² Paul's writing to the church in Rome also bears vestiges of the characterization of the body as sinful and evil: "I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it" (Rom. 7:18). About Paul, Molly Bassett and Vincent Lloyd say that he "blames his lack of goodness on his body, the mass of matter that binds him to this earth and its creature" (Bassett and Lloyd 2015, 11). This is the very antithesis of life-affirmation, as Christianity then requires one to see one's life as incomplete and less valuable without belief in god and Jesus. Indeed, "the Bible teaches that we are all wicked in the sight of God, for 'none is righteous, no, not one' (Rom. 3:10)" (Redmond 2008, 21). It is this denigrated humanness that atheistic feminist Blackness attempts to free from the fetters of Christian doctrine. Feminist Blackness, to actualize itself fully, must be atheistic.

If we are to achieve full humanity, which are the precise goals of feminism and fugitive Blackness, then an atheistic posture must be assumed. Oppressive forms of patriarchy and racism—as epitomized by the Christian doctrine—are predicated on a circumscription of the ontological possibility and humanity of those oppressed by such hegemonic systems. This is all the more dire in light of the latest manifestations of the narrative of Black criminalization and Black/female ontological invalidation, as I will discuss in the

following section. Feminist Blackness offers a remedy to forms of racist and patriarchal oppression. It breaks the locks of racism and patriarchy that imprison people of color and noncisgendered people. But the added atheism opens the next lock barring our way to freedom; the theological shackles that bar the full range of one's human possibility fall away when we reject god and embrace a life-affirming ideology. This is what an atheistic lens of Black feminism adds: a fugitive maneuver that allows for the evasion of being governed and controlled—fixed—by Christian doctrine, the warden of which is the ultimate governing force: god.

From the lived, visceral position of my Blackness and my feminism I must fight to make clear that life—*my* life—matters. That fight can only be fully actualized, I think, by casting aside the belief in gods and courageously confronting the abyss. Truly, to peer into the abyss of unknown futures and embrace that unknowingness, positing nothing but that fear of unknowingness is life-affirming in that all that is not unknown is the perennial unfolding of the right now.

“Right Now Jesus Is Saying: ‘I Can’t Breathe’”³

It is worth pointing out here the necessity of feminist *Blackness*. The embodiment of Blackness has profound (a)theological consequences. Historically, Blackness has signified inherent guilt, innate sin, and inner maleficence. Contemporarily, Blackness still signifies that epidermal “confession” of guilt. To be Black is to always be guilty of crime. Black bodies “weaponize sidewalks; shoot [them]selves while handcuffed in the back of police cars ... [are] incarcerated, assaulted, and stopped and frisked for walking, driving, and breathing while black” (Sharpe 2014, 61). Citations of Black bodies gunned down for nothing more than the purported crime their skin confessed can persist for pages: Tarika Wilson, Rodney King, Sean Bell, Miriam Carey, Oscar Grant, Shantel Davis, Amadou Diallo, Nathaniel Jones, Tyisha Miller, Jordan Davis, Trayvon Martin, Sharmel Edwards, Ezell Ford, Renisha McBride, John Crawford, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Vonderrit Myers...⁴ These slain Black victims were all subject to the circumscription of their humanity by the insidious white gaze—a manifestation of the transcendental signifier: god—and in the presence of this white gaze Black bodies appear “in the form of a sheer exteriority, implying that the Black body ‘shows up,’ makes itself known in terms of its Black surface” (Yancy 2008, 21). Under the white gaze, people like Garner and Brown are undifferentiated: “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” as the old song goes. Or religiously speaking, as one white Mississippi Yazoo Delta planter said, “I think God intended the niggers to be slaves. Now since man has deranged God’s plan, I think the best we can do is keep ‘em as near to a state of bondage as possible” (Oshinsky 1996, 11).

The interiority of Black bodies undergoes abject erasure and becomes “ontologically mapped,” its cartographical coordinates leading “to that which is always immediately visible: the Black surface” (Yancy 2008, 21). The body, however, is not merely its materiality. It is never divorced from perception, interpretation, and consequently the actions based on those perceptions and interpretations. The body, in effect, is a text onto which scripts and meanings are inscribed. Bodies are the ways in which we constitute the knowledge of the world. The world appears to us through the body. Contrary to the religious mantra “be in the world but not of it,” which is a kind of world denial rooted in greater importance given to divine afterlife—as Eldridge Cleaver’s incarcerated context makes clear, “[religionists] could usher you through the Pearly Gates *after you were dead*, but not through the prison gate *while you were still alive and kicking*” (Cleaver 1999, 23; original emphasis)—bodies in the world are how we come to be the various aspects of our identities. One cannot be in the world and not of it, as many Christian discourses urge, since it is precisely

because we are in the world that we *are*, and thus our existence and identities as such stem from our worldly in-ness. While the placards in protest of Brown's murder read "Black Lives Matter," I want to underscore that there is no life without the body. That is to say, Black lives can only matter if Black bodies matter first. As the philosopher Drew Leder remarks, "we cannot understand the meaning and form of objects without reference to the bodily powers through which we engage them.... The lived body is not just one thing in the world, but a way in which the world comes to be" (1992, 25). More originary is the body; the body precedes the life of that Black body, thus must be deemed important before the life can.

Michael Brown, for instance, is put at war with his body. Extracted from his lived Black embodiment by the white gaze and deified by those who sought to use his death as a pseudocrucifixion, Brown in some sense was denied his enfleshment. The subtle relegation to a *topos ouranios*, a fate that has befallen many of the (largely male) aforementioned Black people, deemphasizes, in part, the fact that these bodies were born into the world, lived as Black, and died because of that fact. Not only was this characteristic accident (i.e., their incidental existence as Black-skinned) ontologized, it was done so outside of their Black bodies and, after their deaths, repositioned to T-shirts, memes, slogans, and causes. Let me be clear: I am not denigrating these efforts by any means. Black lives *must* be preserved in their deaths. The rise in poems and protests and activism in the name of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown signifies the importance and value that Black lives have. What I wish to suggest is that if these victims are not kept in close relation with their lived bodily experiences, which exist in a continual chain of other lived Black experiences that have succumbed to similar fates, we run the risk of dissolving the body that was of utmost importance to their experiences. This kind of martyrdom extracted from the bodies of the martyrs is indicative of specific theological ideologies of denying the world, disassociating oneself from one's flesh ("Our bodies are just shells for our souls. The body doesn't matter," my white Christian friend George once told me), or imprecise renditions of actual people, i.e., demigods and saints.

The atheistic perspective of my proffered Black feminism ensures that this deification does not occur. To deify is, quite simply, to dehumanize. As far back as Emmett Till, slain Black bodies often become symbols that stretch across time and the entirety of the Black race, deindividuating the lived, particular, embodied lives of the victims in an effort to make them Christlike. Mamie Till Mobley, Emmett Till's mother, wanted her son's death to *save* other Black boys and men who could have undergone the same fate. This is indeed admirable and useful in a period of overt anti-Black vigilantism, but it still makes Till a Christ figure, no longer a 14-year-old boy who lived but a symbol—i.e., not a human with a body in the world—who saves everyone else through his own nonhumanness: death. Only through abstraction, the taking of "souls," do these Black bodies have value.

We must hold in front of us the corporeal, not the abstracted heavenly afterthoughts of pristine, eulogized lives. We must not fall into the pattern of thinking of the dead as angels because, indeed, they were not. As "the steel-blue ghost standing at the podium" said, "Vonderrit Myers was no angel." No, he was not. He was human. He "had a name that god didn't give him" (Bennett 2015). Joshua Bennett's spoken-word poem "Still Life With Black Death" reveals the necessity of refraining from making angels and holy victims of murdered Black boys, Vonderrit Myers in particular, a Black 18-year-old killed in St. Louis by a police officer. "When he died," says Bennett,

he did not bleed starlight or gold.
 He was not half-bird.
 The gun spoke, and no flaxen wings shot from each shoulder
 as if to carry him beyond the bullet's swift assignment—

No, the boy was not a pillar of white smoke bright enough to break a nonbeliever,
make a holy man fall prostrate, heaving,
heavy with contrition.

Here, Bennett enacts a profound refusal of making an angel or divine entity of Myers. Myers was not a heavenly angel (half-bird), nor did his death cause him to sprout “flaxen wings.” To claim so erases Myers’s humanness, his flawed, (Black-)fleshy, embodied vessel, which was the grounds for his murder. In order to maintain Myers’s ontological integrity, we cannot erase him by painting him as perfect. He must remain “no angel,” i.e., human, flawed. Only here can he be redeemed, because for Vonderrit Myers to be seen as himself he must be seen as he was—Black, human, and flawed. No angel.

Bennett also urges listeners to reembody whiteness, unmoor it from its perceived transcendental perspective. The goal is not to reverse the statuses and imbue Myers and other Black bodies with holy omnipotence and divinity while white officers are condemned, demonized, and incarnated in visible white flesh. All must be embodied in themselves. Bennett continues and points to a white epistemology of ignorance and all-knowingness, asking, “How else to erase him if they cannot feign omnipotence, / lay claim to the sky, colonize heaven...” Indeed, omnipotence, the limits of living (the sky), and the ultimate *topos ouranios* (heaven) are colonized by whiteness. Thus they take on a status of unquestioned normality, the standard by which life is measured, and the ideological template structuring the world’s grammar. What must occur is the reembodyment of the abstracted whiteness used to “colonize” the heavenly, standardizing realms. Bennett does so by revealing the mundane humanness of Myers’s killer, a proxy for a murderous white gaze that truncates the subjectivity of Black bodies:

That killer woke up today,
probably ate scrambled eggs for breakfast,
brushed his teeth three times or fewer,
walked in soft slippers...
Checked the mail while a child decomposed underground.

Making an (a)theological shift, even though several historically Black denominations called for a “Black Lives Matter” Sunday, it is striking that a majority of churches were, for the most part, relatively silent on the matter.⁵ Professor of theology Brian Bantum asked poignant questions: “If theology does anything should it not at least speak to the realities that mark our lives together as human beings? And if this is the case, how can theology that confesses who God is, not also acknowledge the bodies that confess?” Bantum’s focus on the body’s importance is estimable. Theology must not only attend to the body but, I would add, must also hold the body accountable. This, I think, is where Bantum misses the mark:

To do theology faithfully, *confessionally*, we must see how Christianity participates in the social realities of a broken world. We must acknowledge and confess the ways we fail to see ourselves, the world, and Christ faithfully. But we must also confess that in our blindness the eternal Word has come nonetheless. We must confess that we are like the blind who have been made to see, even if in our sight we do not yet understand the images that are before us. In this disorientation of a world that seems more familiar when we close our eyes and return to our broken state of blindness, hoping to regain a familiarity of a world filled only with touch and sound, we must have the courage to keep our eyes open. We must learn to hear anew in the encounter with faces and bodies. In a way, we must be born anew again and again. (Bantum 2014; original emphasis)

Kudos to Bantum for shedding a prophetic light on the responsibility of Christianity. That he concedes that Christianity participates in social ills is a theological move that must become more widespread. That he also

acknowledges the failures of Christians keeps the church accountable not only for its good deeds but also for its less-than-adequate efforts at times. But Bantum slips into an evasiveness.

Admitting that “we’re blind and not living confessionally and prophetically,” which is true in the context of Christian thought, seems to also absolve god and Jesus of any responsibility. It is very common to attribute positive “blessings” in the world to god: good fortune bestowed upon the church in the form of money or larger venues, narrowly escaping a deadly car crash, or acing your calculus exam. But deities seem to be absolved of responsibility for misfortunes, and in fact justified by way of a mysterious plan that subsumes and puts a positive spin on the horrible event. This, however, is no new critique of theism. Atheists and freethinkers have leveled this critique countless times, and I do not intend to proffer it as novel. My intention from a standpoint that is Black *and* feminist *and* atheistic is to reveal the implications and consequences of such evasive thinking. Purportedly showing how believers can remedy the horrors of the world like the murder of Mike Brown, rather than *not letting it happen in the first place*, eschews the importance that would serve better being placed on preventative measures, and also fails, I think, to link Brown’s death with numerous similar historical events that were also not stopped, and thus becomes complicit in providing sanctioned precedent for the continuance of the criminalization of Black bodies. In other words, focusing on bearing honest witness to the troubles of the world and discussing how best to address and protest Brown’s killing—which, to be sure, are incredibly admirable actions that should be continued—deemphasizes the more desired outcome of the *living* body of Mike Brown. It also fails to adequately place Brown’s murder in a long chain of slain Black bodies killed on the basis of criminalized scripts imposed upon them, which potentially frames contemporary incidents as isolated. Mike Brown, in other words, was by no means the first and, unfortunately, not the last to be killed by white hands (or guns) on the basis of the signified meaning of his Blackness. In short, rather than holding god accountable for the numerous unjust murders of Black people in the practice’s centuries-long history, historical precedents are elided and the hot new murder is treated in a vacuum, god once again not being forced to bear the responsibility for, in part, enabling the historical struggle of Black people living under the murderous gaze of militarized whiteness. God does not value the embodied lives of Black people, as they only become divinely valid through death. God is one who does not make us “larger, freer, and more loving,” so, by Baldwin’s logic, “it is time we got rid of Him [*sic*]” (1993, 47). And this captures what is meant by atheistic feminist Blackness.

So what would it mean to “Blacken” god, to make god and Jesus “Black like me”? What might happen if god or Jesus were to become incarnate in the world through the suffering of Black bodies? What would it mean, as this section’s heading asks, for Jesus to be unable to breathe? Jesus, in effect, is suffocating just like the asthmatic Eric Garner who was put in an (illegal) chokehold by police officers and killed as a result. As one Twitter commenter said, “A state that can choke a man to death, on video, for selling cigarettes is NOT Rom. 13 justice” (Rom. 13:1–2: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. ²Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation”). Rev. Jeff Hood made this comment: “I keep thinking about Eric Garner saying, ‘I can’t breathe.’ It made me think—that’s what Jesus is saying in this culture. Jesus is fundamentally connected to the marginalized and right now Jesus is saying, ‘I can’t breathe’” (Kuruvilla and Blumberg 2014). Jesus here is mortalized, returned to his body, Blackened, and made in the image of Eric Garner, a reversal of the originary divine god-like fashioning of humanity. The move has atheological resonances—god and Jesus must die; hence they must become mortal if they are to exist, they must suffocate. And with god dead, we have atheism. One can say that god *is* this suffocation precisely because god is deemed immortal—god is death, the antithesis

of mortality and finitude. God's supposed immortality is inseparable from absolute immortality. In bringing Jesus to mortality through Garner, Rev. Hood's remark attempts to kill god. Indeed, he *must* die if he is to be able to be seen in likeness to Garner and other Black bodies. The affirmation of life, the crux of atheistic feminist Blackness, entails the affirmation of mortality. It values bodily being. Consequently, affirming life and mortality—the condition of life—means denouncing immortality, denouncing death—god godself. To paraphrase Langston Hughes's poem "Dear Lovely Death," "Dear lovely Death, [god] is thy other name."⁶

With this affirmation of Black life inevitably comes fear. Philosopher Jacques Derrida reminds us that the "unconditional affirmation of life," in which "survival is the most intense life possible," is filled with pain and fear precisely because of one's decision to live; life rests on the condition of its own eradication around every corner (quoted in Hägglund 2008, 34). For Black bodies, however, that fear is intensified, heightened because of the way that Black bodies are "seen" as perpetually and inherently criminal, gazed upon not as themselves but as static racial molds that exist ahead of themselves in the white gaze. But this is a negation of Black life since Black lives cannot be affirmed in and of themselves; their ontological value is circumscribed. So in order to affirm all lives, especially Black lives, they must first exist for themselves rather than as fixed images in the hegemonic purview. This is even more the case with female and trans bodies.

Radical Feminism

Catherine Keller articulates such insight when she says that "atheist or agnostic feminists ignore the God-word at their own peril," meaning that atheists and agnostics should not lightly discard god as important and a force to be reckoned within Western culture (Keller 2000, 228). The concept of god holds tremendous power in our culture, and it would be unwise to believe otherwise. Because of this power, the god concept must be diligently scrutinized, put under the interrogative light of criticism, and struggled with. The nature of that critical and interrogative posture, for me, is one deeply rooted in feminist Blackness.

The primary goal of feminism, from my perspective, is to end sexism, exploitation, and oppression. In this vein, those bodies that are most subject to oppression are female and trans bodies of color. As such, feminism seeks to empower these bodies—to dismantle the heteropatriarchal strictures that circumscribe their embodied movement and to allow them full subjectivity and autonomy uninhibited by hegemonic forces. In many ways, this requires a rejection of traditional religiosity, as the Bible, for example, is a patriarchal book that is markedly condemnatory of female bodies and autonomy, antiquated (considering its so-called timelessness) in its advocacy regarding the multiplicity of gender expression, and used to invalidate the ontological existence of those bodies—namely, trans and female—that fall outside of its extremely outdated ideologies.

Interestingly, a radical atheistic Black feminist ideological stance is in many ways prophetic. The word "prophetic" holds religious connotation, of course, but by definition a prophet is a radical social critic, one who exists outside of the normative ideological milieu and lays a trenchant critique of the prevailing power structure—precisely where a feminist atheist falls. To be prophetic, in many ways, is to be fugitive. As prophetic, feminism must deliver constant critique of social structures. In line with this essay's central theme of embodiment, feminism here will be articulated as prophetic and fugitive as it relates to particular bodies that are subject to gendered oppression and its (a)theological implications.

One might note the similarities in the values of atheistic Black radical feminism and, say, Womanist theology. Womanist theologians have done a phenomenal job of critiquing the sexism and androcentrism

of traditional Black liberation theology, and centering the lives and experiences of Black women, who went largely unmentioned in the male-oriented Black liberation theology. In large part, atheistic Black radical feminism advocates for much of what Womanist theology does, namely, as Monica Coleman (2008) outlines through her notion of “making a way out of no way,” radical possibility, human autonomy, social justice and individual well-being, and disruption and confrontation of existing order. But what differentiates atheistic Black radical feminism is its rejection of the structuring and governing—and thus limiting of human agency—force of god. (Coleman notes that radical possibility, for example, stems from *god’s* radical openness and possibility. Unforeseen possibilities, she says unwaveringly, “come from God.”) Womanist theology’s commitment to Black feminist aims is to be championed and supported, of course, but the fact that it is still mired in the language of god and avers that to “the extent that we use our freedom to diverge from God’s calling, there is evil in the world” demonizes human agency and is not really radical possibility (Coleman 2008, 33, 54). Such stance is still confined, which stifles the fugitivity that characterizes this essay’s conception of Black feminism. One could say, then, that atheistic Black radical feminism—delivering on its radical fugitivity—does present “a challenge to the existing order”: It challenges, quite vociferously, the existing order of god.

Critiquing the largely androcentric Black Lives Matter movement, I want to examine the ways that Black women and trans folks have been systematically erased from the discourse of violence against Black bodies and how atheism can supplement or justly speak to this erasure. Black women and girls who are slain by white police officers are elided from media coverage and thus relegated to a space of nonimportance in the social imagination, despite the fact that the very Black Lives Matter movement was started by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi—Black *queer women*. The list of unarmed Black women killed ostensibly because of their Blackness is just as long as that of Black men and boys: Aiyana Jones, 7, killed by a Detroit police officer as she slept on her father’s couch; Rekia Boyd, 22, killed by a police officer in Chicago; Yvette Smith, 48, who was unarmed when she was killed by a police officer in Texas; Pearlle Smith, 93, fatally shot in her home; Tarika Wilson, 26, whose one-year-old son was also injured when she was killed by a Ohio police officer; Tyisha Miller, 19, killed by a police officer in Los Angeles; Kathryn Johnson, 92, killed by a police officer in Atlanta; Gabriella Nevarez, 22, killed by a Sacramento police officer; Eleanor Bumpurs, 66, killed by a police officer in the Bronx (Dionne 2014). But few of these women’s deaths have incited protest.

That these women’s killings go largely untelevised or talked about bespeaks how women’s bodies, especially Black women’s bodies, are valued less than male bodies. Indeed, police violence and brutality are often coded as male. Because they frequently exist as caricatures that cast them as seductresses, hypersexualized, “bitches,” and sexually immoral (the classic minstrel figures of Sapphire and Jezebel), Black female bodies are deprived of the innocence culturally given to others. Western Christian civilization revolves around an unbreakable sacrament of innocence, conferred upon faithful bodies by the blood of Jesus Christ. And Jesus’s maleness, as many feminist scholars have noted, is consequential. Some Womanist theologians argue that Jesus is a Black woman (metaphorically, in that he is identified with the most oppressed) and assert that Jesus saved *all*, thus making his maleness irrelevant. However, Jesus’s maleness does, in fact, still matter. Jesus as a figure has been used not only to give whiteness a divine connection, as many Black liberation scholars have noted, but also to promote the divinity of masculinity and manliness, particularly after World War I. Jesus as male, while historically accurate, also serves as an imagistic and symbolic way to bolster the superiority—the godliness—of a maleness that, since it is hegemonic, operates on the subordination of all nonmasculine gender presentations (Blum and Harvey 2012, 167–78). This results in

the devaluation of women's and trans lives, which, contrary to male lives, are not seen as divine, innocent, or salvific, as played out in the male-centeredness of much of the Black Lives Matter protest movement.

While it is true that religious belief has spawned revolutions like Nat Turner's Rebellion and the radical politics of mid-twentieth-century civil rights activism, it remains that their revolutionary leadership was anomalous, in that people surrounding these religious radicals were largely passive, complicit, and docile. It is dangerous when particularly Black, female, and noncisgendered bodies begin to view their afflictions as normative, god-willed, and even redemptive. The idea of redemptive suffering has long been proffered as a way to validate the quotidian oppressions of Black people, especially Black women. It acted as an answer to the difficult questions posed by theodicies and salvaged Black humanity in the face of constant suffering. However, redemptive suffering, which is arguably the central theme of the New Testament, does more harm (literally) than good. Underlying the mindset of redemptive suffering is the belief that suffering without retaliation can transform the sufferer and the oppressor, converting, but not defeating, the oppressor's heart and revealing the love of Christ—"No cross, no crown." This belief ascribes virtue to suffering, stymieing opportunities for sustained activism; it beatifies the harm of oneself, a type of religious masochism. Embodied lives matter more than a worn theodicy—a way of explaining the existence of human suffering in light of god's omnibenevolence. This, at base, is what Black liberation theology is: "an extended treatment of the theodicy question: What can be said about the justice of God in light of human suffering?" (Pinn 2001, 26). In order to love oneself, to love life, it is crucial that redemptive suffering is rejected. Life is inextricable from one's lived experiences, experiences indelibly shaped by the gender and race of one's body. So if Black *lives* truly matter, redemptive suffering and the religious doctrines on which it is based must be jettisoned.

The notion of redemptive suffering, while deeply problematic, was rarely if ever used to beatify non-normative bodies that suffered on the basis of their gender nonconformity. If Black liberation theology's use of redemptive suffering was a method by which Black lives were given meaning and value in the face of oppression, then Black theology's silence on the suffering of trans bodies implies their deviation from the net of valid, redeemable life. Trans bodies are those that defy traditional categories of gendered embodiment, those that exist in varying degrees of liminal space between the binary categories of male and female. To be trans is to transition between gender categories thought to be static and mutually exclusive or to in many ways embody oneself queerly, that is, in a way that is outside of existing categories or oppositional to prevailing gendered categorical ideologies.

Trans bodies are deemed fundamentally invalid, uninhabitable, thus in need of extermination in order to preserve the order of things. The breaching of thought-to-be god-given gender binaries ("So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" [Gen. 1:27]) is seen as an abnormality of god's natural order, by extension marring the pristine image of god. To preserve god's purity—indeed, *god* godself, since to be god necessitates purity—the gendered anomaly cannot live.

In the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, to critique it even further, pulling a maneuver similar to Black feminists' critique of white feminists' white solipsism—essentially a critique of a critique—it seems that all Black lives do not truly matter, considering the veritable erasure of the murders of Black trans people. On August 7, 1995, in Washington, DC, Tyra Hunter was a passenger in a vehicle transporting her to work. At an intersection, the car was hit, critically injuring Hunter and the driver. By the time firefighters arrived, Hunter was pulled from the wreckage, awaiting assistance. Firefighter Adrian Williams and others began treating the injured victims, but Williams stopped abruptly when he cut open Hunter's pant leg and noticed she had male genitalia. According to eyewitnesses, Williams stood up, terrified, and backed

away from the semiconscious Hunter, who was writhing in pain and gasping for breath, unable to *breathe*. Williams was quoted by one witness as saying, “This bitch ain’t no girl... It’s a nigger, he got a dick.” Another witness heard another firefighter say, “Look, it’s got a cock and balls.” The firefighters—America’s heroes—stood making derisive, transphobic “jokes” while Hunter’s life-saving treatment went unaddressed. After some time, other firefighters attended to Hunter’s injuries, and she was transported to DC General Hospital, where she was placed under the care of Dr. Joseph A. Bastien, who failed to provide a necessary blood transfusion or insert a chest tube necessary for Hunter’s medical care. Later that day, she was pronounced dead (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013, 69).

Of course, this “treatment” is not uncharacteristic. Though most of the transgender discourse would interpret this event as representing a case of medicalized transphobia—which of course it does—there is a broader politico-theoretical framework that can read Hunter’s ill-treatment as a site where the subjects and medical practitioners enacted what Henry Giroux calls a “biopolitics of disposability” toward Hunter’s “illegible” trans body, a “new kind of politics ... in which entire populations are now considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and cosigned to fend for themselves” (Giroux 2006, 174). Thus,

neoliberal ideologies provide biopower with new ammunition in the creation of life-enhancing and death-making worlds, and offer an insidious addendum to rationales for population control. The consequence of this logic effaces the way power and life are maintained and reproduced through the deaths of certain others. (Juang 2006; see also Levi, n.d., 1; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013, 69)

Through this scenario, white/cisgendered/male life was buttressed and held up as archetypally valid by way of the disposability and invalidity of Hunter’s Black/trans/female-presenting (save for the “cock and balls”) body. Furthermore, and this relates directly to the theological, Hunter’s mother, Margie, referring to Tyra as her son Tyrone, which undoubtedly allowed for greater sympathy via the male embodiment implicit in protests combating violence against Black life, told *Washington Post* reporters that “Tyrone always was so sure he would be famous, that he’d be on the television. I don’t think he meant this way. I know I didn’t. But maybe this is God’s will and something good will come of it” (Slevin 1998). Margie Hunter presents the possibility that god orchestrated Tyra Hunter’s death, thus condoning the loss of life—divinely sanctioning the non-mattering of trans life—because of its perceived utility in promoting the good of others’ lives. God is invoked as sanctioning the death-by-transphobia because of its use in validating *other* lives, one’s own Black trans life not being valuable in and of itself, only as it validates other lives by way of its own invalidity. Here, Tyra Hunter’s embodied life is fashioned, via god, as a nonlife that serves only to promote a nebulous good for lives that are not itself.

And this is no isolated or outdated incident. Coko Williams was found dead by gunshot and cut throat in Detroit on April 4, 2012; Evon Young was tortured and murdered by five men in 2013; Kandy Hall was found dead due to massive bodily trauma by an unknown object in 2014; Yaz’min Shancez was found dead behind a garbage bin in Fort Myers, Florida, and burned postmortem in 2014; Aniyah Parker was murdered in a “robbery gone wrong” in 2014, though police say the murder was motivated by Parker’s being transgender; Penny Proud was murdered in 2015; and London Chanel was fatally stabbed in the back and neck by Raheem Felton, who was the boyfriend of one of her roommates; among numerous others.

Trans bodies are also subject to religious legal circumscription. During the 2014 Southern Baptist Convention, the official document “On Transgender Identity” had this to say regarding trans people:

WHEREAS, Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles as ordained by God are part of the created order and should find expression in every human heart (Genesis 2:18, 21–24; 1 Corinthians 11:7–9; Ephesians 5:22–33; 1 Timothy 2:12–14); and

WHEREAS, The Fall of man into sin and God's subsequent curse have introduced brokenness and futility into God's good creation (Genesis 3:1–24; Romans 8:20)...

RESOLVED, That we oppose efforts to alter one's bodily identity (e.g., cross-sex hormone therapy, gender reassignment surgery) to refashion it to conform with one's perceived gender identity; and be it further

RESOLVED, That we continue to oppose steadfastly all efforts by any governing official or body to validate transgender identity as morally praiseworthy (Isaiah 5:20); and be it further

RESOLVED, That we oppose all cultural efforts to validate claims to transgender identity.... (Southern Baptist Convention 2014)

To be fair, the document did also extend compassion to transgender people, saying "That we love our transgender neighbors, seek their good always, welcome them to our churches and, as they repent and believe in Christ, receive them into church membership" and that "we regard our transgender neighbors as image-bearers of Almighty God and therefore condemn acts of abuse or bullying committed against them." This indeed is admirable and loving. Feminist Blackness would have no qualms with this stance, as it largely affirms life. However, the quoted resolutions above nullify this act of compassion and discredit the validity of trans embodiment—trans humanity—on the basis of the divine. All traditional Christian gender roles are dichotomized and given divine origins, and deviations from those roles are seen as affronts toward god. We see the repeating of the common innate flaw in humanness ("The Fall of man into sin and God's subsequent curse have introduced brokenness and futility into God's good creation"), but this is supplemented with trans bodies being poster children for such brokenness. To oppose the refashioning of one's body so that it is in accordance with one's gender identity disqualifies trans people's personal subjectivity and autonomous will in favor of god's, a will that is used to justify hegemonic reign. The religious Convention also literally sees as praiseworthy the legal and cultural invalidation of transgender identity, which would otherwise discursively write trans humanity into law.

It is thus necessary to (re)affirm the humanity of female and trans bodies. Through a radical feminist framework this can be fully accomplished.

Returning to Catherine Keller's insight from the opening lines of this section, I have attempted to wrestle with the god concept and take seriously its implications. God occupies a vitally important place in the cultural discourse about justice, humanity, knowledge, and life, and therefore must be reckoned with if we are to take seriously the commitment to fighting for female, trans, and Black subjectivity and full humanity. By rejecting god and replacing the hole left by god with atheistic radical feminist Blackness, the stage is better set to affirm the life of those bodies that are most marginalized and subject to the dehumanizing, ontologically circumscriptive, and too-often murderous white gaze of the "transcendental signified," that is, god.

Notes

1. I use the word "god(s)" throughout instead of "God" for precisely the same reason as A. C. Grayling does. Grayling notes that

Religious people of course use the word [god] as a name or proper noun. Such uses, even by nonreligious people, appear to imply or assume the existence of an entity thus named or referred to. The shorthand convenience of

this usage perpetuates the illusion that there is a genuine subject of discussion in hand, and prevents people from distinguishing between the existence of religions—whose existence is a sociological fact—and the existence of gods, goddesses and other supernatural entities which those religions assert to exist—whose existence is a creation of man’s imagination. If we used the phrases “gods and goddesses” or “supernatural agencies” when discussing what religious people believe exists, we would have a clearer view of the task that the debate addresses. (2014, 23)

It is for this reason that I do the same. Furthermore, “god” is not a proper name—it is a catchall for an invented type of being. It is akin to “people” as a general term, while “Jeff” and “Joanne” are proper names of particular people. So, too, is “god” like “people,” and “Yahweh (YHWH)” or “Allah” like the proper names of particular gods.

2. My seemingly peculiar way of redacting the common phrase “her or his” to read “her-through-his” is meant to acknowledge the nonbinariness of biological sex. To say “her or his” denotes only two sexes when in fact there are a multiplicity of sexes outside of the male/female binary, which we broadly classify as intersex. The characteristics or traits that are most often considered when determining the sex of a person include chromosomal makeup, presence of a womb, hormones, external genitalia, and whether the body has ovaries or testes. There are “girl-looking” bodies with male genes and internal structures, and vice versa; there are bodies born with ambiguous genitalia. These variations of sexual development (VSDs) dissolve the binary thinking of male and female; thus, in an effort to enact more inclusive language, I connote the sex spectrum rather than the binary by using “her-through-his” (and also “male-through-female,” “him-through-her,” etc.).

3. Drawn from Kuruvilla and Blumberg 2014. Parts of this section also appear in Bey 2016.

4. According to Rich Juzwiak and Aleksander Chan, from 1999 to 2014 at least seventy unarmed people of color have been killed by white police officers (Juzwiak and Chan 2014).

5. This is certainly not to diminish the efforts of religious leaders who have spoken out, namely those like Cornel West, who was himself arrested for protesting the Ferguson murder, and others in Missouri. West in fact participated in Union Theological Seminary’s “Faith in Ferguson” rally and, during a discussion after the incident, said, “I didn’t come here to give a speech. I came here to go to jail.” Furthermore, religious leaders in Ferguson were named HuffPost Religion’s People of the Year. Since the day Mike Brown was killed, Ferguson’s religious leaders “acted as liaisons for conversations between protesters and the police, and in the most heated moments of protest created a human buffer that likely saved lives. One pastor even sustained a bloody bruise after being shot by a rubber bullet while praying between protesters and the police.” However, it remains that the religious support has largely been concentrated around Ferguson and other sites where Black victims were slain, and has as its forerunners Black churches. White religious leaders and congregants, especially white Evangelicals, express much backlash to notions of white privilege and racial disparities, and their numbers greatly surpass those who protest.

6. The idea of god as death is adapted from Hägglund’s atheistic interpretation of Derrida’s god in Hägglund 2008, 8.

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