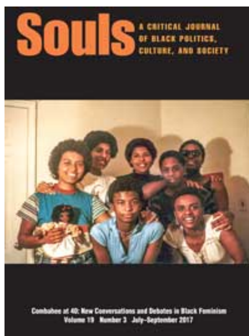

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Souls

A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society

ISSN: 1099-9949 (Print) 1548-3843 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usou20

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To cite this article: Terrion L. Williamson (2017) Why Did They Die? On Combahee and the Serialization of Black Death, Souls, 19:3, 328-341, DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2017.1389633

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2017.1389633

Published online: 16 Jan 2018.

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Souls
Vol. 19, No. 3, July–September 2017, pp. 328–341

Why Did They Die? On Combahee and the Serialization of Black Death

Terrion L. Williamson

Between January and May of 1979, twelve similarly situated black women were murdered in Boston, Massachusetts. Just two years past the writing of what would become their canonical feminist statement, the Combahee River Collective (CRC) mobilized around the series of deaths along with other grassroots organizations and members of the local community. The CRC's most significant intervention in that crisis was the creation and circulation of a pamphlet that was initially titled, "Six Black Women: Why Did They Die?" that was meant to (1) help women within the affected area know how to better protect themselves, (2) name the conditions that had produced the women's deaths and the city's subsequent failure to acknowledge or contend with their deaths in any meaningful way, and (3) evince the value of black women's lives. The serial murders of black women have continued on unabated since 1979, and this article uses the occasion of the Boston murders to discuss how the CRC's writing and activism enable a theorization of the serialization of black death that expands meaningfully on the scholarship around serial murder.

Keywords: Black feminism, black women, Combahee River Collective, death, racialized gender violence, serial murder, serialization of black death

> To bring out your dead is to say that these deaths are not unimportant or forgotten, or, worse, coincidental. It is to say these deaths are systematic, structural.
> —Grace Kyungwon Hong, "'The Future of Our Worlds'"[1]

On April 1, 1979 members of the Combahee River Collective (CRC), a radical black feminist organization established in Boston in 1974, were among more than 1,000 Boston-area residents who gathered for a memorial march meant to protest and mourn the lives of, at the time, six similarly situated black girls and women who had been murdered within a two-mile radius of each other over the course of just six weeks. The first in this vicious series were nineteen-year-old Christine Ricketts and seventeen-year-old Andrea Foye whose bodies were found discarded,

ISSN 1099-9949 print/1548-3843 online © 2017 University of Illinois at Chicago
DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2017.1389633

like so much trash, on a city sidewalk in Roxbury on January 29 of that year, one wrapped in a blanket, the other in a plastic bag. They had both been strangled to death. The next day, January 30, the body of fifteen-year-old Gwendolyn Yvette Stinson, who had also been strangled to death, was discovered in a yard near her home in Dorchester, and just days later, on February 2, twenty-five-year-old Caren Prater was found stabbed to death behind a hospital in Jamaica Plain. Twenty-nine-year-old Daryal Ann Hargett was discovered strangled to death in her South End apartment on February 21, and the last young woman killed prior to the march was seventeen-year-old Desiree Etheridge, whose bludgeoned body was found in Roxbury on March 14 buried beneath construction materials that had subsequently been set on fire.

For Barbara Smith, who was both a Roxbury resident and one of the founders of the CRC, the murders were "the culmination of everything [she] had done, learned, tried to do until then,"[2] and the march itself was emblematic of the dire need for the sort of "integrated analysis and practice" based on "interlocking" oppressions that she and CRC members Demita Frazier and Beverly Smith had outlined just two years earlier in the CRC statement, a document that has since come to be regarded as foundational to black feminist thought and organizing.[3] While the march had been organized by CRISIS, a grassroots organization established by black community women in the wake of the deaths, the speakers on the day of the event were primarily men who had no substantive language for addressing the specific vulnerabilities of poor and working-class black women or the sociopolitical conditions of the violence being systematically committed against them. Instead, they talked about the murders solely in terms of racist violence and asserted that in order to protect themselves black women needed to either stay indoors or find men to escort them if and when they needed to leave the house—this despite the fact that Daryal Ann Hargett had been killed in her own apartment.

Smith left the march that day "absolutely steaming" and she immediately began working on a pamphlet that was initially titled "Six Black Women: Why Did They Die?"[4] The pamphlet was intended to do several things: one, to explain in simple terms how sexist violence was implicated in the deaths of the murdered women; two, to provide a list of community resources and commonsense safety tips that women could use to help protect themselves; and, three, to evince to people both within and beyond the affected communities that black women's lives were deemed valuable and worthy of saving. The CRC initially produced 2,000 copies of the pamphlet, but due to an overwhelmingly positive community response those first copies almost immediately ran out and they ultimately ended up distributing some 30,000 copies of the pamphlet in various versions, including one that was translated into Spanish.[5] What the pamphlet was *not* originally intended to do but ended up doing to great effect was visualizing the ongoing nature of the crisis. Because as the number of murdered black women in Boston continued to rise, Smith decided that rather than changing the number in the title and "making it all nice and shit" successive iterations of the pamphlet would mark the progression by simply striking out but retaining the previous number.[6] Consequently, as six deaths became seven

and seven became eight, the pamphlet became a material artifact of the escalating terror to which black women were being subjected.

The killings of black women continued in Boston until May 29, 1979, the day the twelfth woman, fifty-three-year-old Lillie Mae Nesbitt, was found stabbed to death in her Roxbury apartment. Three weeks prior to Nesbitt's death, three other black women had been killed in quick succession: nineteen-year-old Valyric Holland was found stabbed to death in her Dorchester apartment on May 4; the next day the body of twenty-nine-year-old Sandra Boulware, who had been beaten to death, was discovered amid burning grass in a vacant lot in Roxbury; and on May 7 the body of thirty-four-year-old Bobbie Jean Graham, who had also been beaten to death, was found in an alley near her home in the Back Bay neighborhood. Approximately a week earlier, on April 27 and 28, both thirty-one-year-old Lois Hood Nesbitt and eighteen-year-old Faye Polner had been found strangled to death—Nesbitt in her home in Roxbury, Polner in a car parked in a school yard in Dorchester. Polner was the lone white victim. On April 14, less than two weeks after the memorial march and less than two weeks before the deaths of Nesbitt and Polner, the body of the seventh victim, twenty-two-year-old Darlene Rogers, was discovered in a park in Roxbury. She had bled to death after being stabbed multiple times.

Thirteen women, twelve of them black, murdered in the span of five months, all in Roxbury or adjoining neighborhoods, some within mere blocks of each other. By the same time the previous year, "just" one black woman had been murdered in Boston.[7] Yet city officials claimed over and over again that the series of deaths was merely a "bizarre" coincidence for which there was no satisfactory explanation.[8] In hopes of quelling community fears about a maniacal white serial killer preying on black women, officials were at pains to present the killings as individual "crimes of passion" in which the victims personally knew their perpetrators. Framing the deaths in this way allowed the police to claim, as did one of the lead detectives in the case, that there was nothing residents could do to protect themselves "unless they wanted to ostracize [themselves] from [their] family and friends."[9] It also gave cover to the police and city officials against charges of race-based neglect when it was alleged that they had responded much more quickly and effectively to a series of rapes and attempted rapes that occurred between November 1978 and February 1979 in Allston-Brighton, a middle-class and predominately white enclave of the city that did then and still does boast a large college student population. The differential treatment was explained away as a consequence of the fact that police suspected a single perpetrator in the rape cases.[10] And so we arrive at a curious logic: a single perpetrator (in a white neighborhood) requires a more intense police response than multiple perpetrators (in a black neighborhood), and victims who know their victimizers personally are owed less protection than those who do not. It was an "official" logic made legible by the unofficial assumption made in Boston and elsewhere that the violence experienced by black women in black communities was a mundane fact of black life that mandated no real cause for alarm, while the violence experienced by middle-class white women in a predominately white

community was an extraordinary occurrence that compelled the full hue and cry. This assumption was borne out when a white male *New York Times* reporter responded to a request that he attend a press conference being convened in response to the murder of the twelfth black woman in Boston that such a story was "not news" because he could "call any city in this country and get that statistic."[11]

It is true that more than one person was found to be responsible for the deaths of the black women murdered in Boston in 1979. By the end of 1980 four different men, all of them black, had been convicted in the deaths of Christine Ricketts, Andrea Foye, Caren Prater, Lillie Nesbitt, and Sandra Boulware, while two other black men had been acquitted in the deaths of Gwendolyn Stinson and Lois Nesbitt. Only the deaths of Ricketts and Foye were linked to the same killer. It is also true that some of the women knew their killers or suspected killers personally, even intimately. The man convicted of Lillie Nesbitt's murder, for instance, was reportedly her boyfriend. Bobbie Jean Graham lived with the man who was suspected of her murder, and Valyric Holland also lived with the man who was arrested in conjunction with her murder (although it is not clear what the final outcome was in either of these cases). But what is not true is that the fact that multiple killers were involved means the cases were not connected. Nor does it mean there was no discernible rationale for the women's deaths.

The anger that compelled Barbara Smith to begin drafting the "Six Black Women" pamphlet was not just about the deaths themselves but about the wholesale inability of so many residents, from city officials to local activists, to understand or talk about the women's deaths as "a thread in the fabric of violence against women."[12] The pamphlet therefore included statistics about the rates of sexual and domestic abuse women experience in their lifetimes in order to register the deaths of the Boston women as an extension of the violence women experience on an everyday basis. That is to say, the CRC did not need evidence of a single crazed killer in order to believe the women's deaths were connected because, for them, the notion of connection was "a broader, but equally palpable, phenomenon."[13] Moreover, the CRC, unlike certain members of the Boston Police Department, refused to shrug off the danger to which they and other black women were being subjected as the inevitable consequence of being in community and therefore something that they could do nothing about. While they had opined in their 1977 statement that "black feminists and many more black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in [their] day-to-day existence," they grounded their understanding of this reality in a critique of "the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy."[14] The CRC thus recognized that the violence that so often conditions the lives of black women is not simply an ordinary byproduct of black life or black kinship, but a socially and politically constructed outcome of the various intersecting modalities of oppression endured by black women—including sexism, heterosexism, classism, and racism—that everyone, including people who do not identify as black or as women, have a stake in doing something about, not only because it will save black women's lives, but because it will save their own lives as well.[15] In the current instance, the notion that the deaths of

black women were "not news" while the rapes of white women were effectively discounted the extent to which gender violence affects *both* groups. By rendering the deaths of black women unremarkable and the rapes of white women extraordinary, this narrative failed to consider that the pervasiveness of violence against black women was precisely what made it so remarkable, that the stranger-rapist terrorizing white women in Allston-Brighton was a singular instance of the sexual terror that continuously threatens the lives of *all* women, and that ending said terror mandated responding to the deaths of black women in Roxbury and elsewhere. But this understanding was at the heart of the CRC's analysis and it compelled their insistence that attending to the material conditions of black women's lives is a necessary precondition for the making of a better place and, we might also add, for imagining what Audre Lorde in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," another foundational black feminist essay first published in 1977, called the "future of our worlds."[16]

The organizational work and writing of the CRC in the late-1970s was thus instrumental in laying the groundwork for a contemplation of the relay between serial murder and the serialization of black death. For the present purposes, "serial murder" is defined as the intentional killing of three or more similarly situated victims by one or more persons in separate events within a designated geographic area. Because I do not mandate a single killer and do use geographic area as a form of demarcation, this definition is both more broad and more narrow than the working Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) definition of serial murder, which is "the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offenders in separate events." Rather than serve as a general definition, the FBI deliberately operationalizes a definition of serial murder that is intended to set forth the criteria by which it can assist local law enforcement agencies with their investigations.[17] What the FBI definition shares in common with most scholarly definitions of serial killing, however, is the focus on a singular killer or, as happens in some cases, killers who work together to target the same victims. But while the majority of the cases I cover align with this normative definition in that they involve a single killer, because my research into serial murder is grounded in the scholarship and activism of the CRC and other black feminist thinkers, my definition works to privilege the victims rather than the perpetrators.

Although it bears a significant relationship to "serial murder," my use here of the term "serialization of black death" as informed by the CRC is meant to substantially expand on the former term. At base, the notion of the serialization of black death signals that the serial murders of black women are a particular iteration of the many forms of premature death, of which murder is just one, that condition black people's lives, and that serial murder must be contextualized within what the CRC referred to as the "cultural and experiential nature" of black oppression.[18] Holding that racism is what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has defined as the "state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death,"[19] the serialization of black death is a victim-centered inquiry that does not require that a series of murders be committed by a single person in order to be understood as an instance of serial murder—however much the authorities might want to deem it

otherwise—and it recognizes the role "the authorities" and concomitant socioeconomic inequalities play in the precarity of black life.

James Baldwin took on this latter claim in 1985 when he reflected on a series of twenty-eight murders[20] committed in Atlanta beginning in the summer of 1979—what came to be known as the Atlanta Child Murders—and the convenient attribution of most of those deaths to then twenty-three-year-old Wayne Williams, a black Atlanta native, following his arrest in June 1981. Although most of the victims in the Atlanta case were in fact children, at least six of them were adults and it was the murders of two of the adult victims, twenty-seven-year-old Nathaniel Carter and twenty-one-year-old Jimmy Ray Payne, of whom Williams was eventually convicted. Then, as now, Williams maintained his innocence, and ever since he was sentenced to life in prison in 1982 questions have continued to be raised as to whether he was responsible for all, most, or indeed *any* of the deaths linked to the Atlanta Child Murders.[21] Whatever Williams's degree of culpability, Baldwin, who was clearly among those suspicious of the fingering of Williams, surmised that *whoever* the killer or killers, the preyed-upon black children and young black men of Atlanta were the "evidence of things not seen," whose dead bodies did not alter the climate of the city so much as "epiphanize it," arguing further that "the cowardice of this time and place—this era—is nowhere more clearly revealed than in the perpetual attempt to make the public and social disaster the result, or the issue, of a single demented creature or, perhaps, half a dozen such creatures, who have, quite incomprehensibly, gone off their rockers and who must be murdered or locked up."[22]

Ten years earlier, Angela Davis had referred to the sort of cowardice of which Baldwin spoke—the fallacious theory of a rogue figure or figures who were individually responsible for the terror being enacted on Atlanta's black children and, ultimately, black communities—as the "brutal paraphernalia of racism."[23] In an article published in *Ms*. magazine in June 1975, Davis opined on the case of Joan Little, a black woman who at that time was on trial in North Carolina for killing in self-defense a white guard who had sexually assaulted her while she was serving a seven-to-ten-year sentence in the Beaufort County Jail. Following a national defense campaign organized on her behalf largely by black women, Little was eventually acquitted in July 1975. In the vein of Davis's earlier essay, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," which she famously wrote while she was herself in prison for charges of conspiracy and murder for which she would later be acquitted,[24] Davis linked the assault on Little to the treatment of black women in slavery by their white masters who used rape as a "weapon" not only to further violate and oppress black women, "but also as a means of terrorizing the entire black community."[25] It followed, then, that the frequent depiction of black men as bestial rapists of white women served as ideological justification for the sexual assaults historically committed on black women by white men, and helped explain why almost ninety percent of the prisoners executed for rape convictions between 1930 and 1967 were black men—to say nothing of the extrajudicial lynchings and castrations of black men committed in the name of vindicating white womanhood—while violence against black women went largely unchecked. By attending to the

"dialectical unity" between racism and sexism,[26] Davis anticipated the CRC's call for a more sustained analysis of the "synthesis of oppressions" that condition black women's lives and, like the CRC, simultaneously rejected a separatist agenda that would deny the effects of racism on the lives of black men.[27]

The nexus between racism, gender violence, and imprisonment that grounded Davis's analysis highlights a critical intervention made by radical antiracist feminists who were committed to a feminist analytic oriented toward making demands for social justice rather than the provision of social services, and that understood violence against women not as an individual or private matter but as the result of larger social inequalities of which penal institutions were part of the problem rather than the solution.[28] As Emily Thuma has shown, the Joan Little case was one of several high-profile self-defense cases involving women of color that helped to initiate an anticarceral feminist agenda in the 1970s. The Little case, along with the cases of Inez Garcia, Yvonne Wanrow, and Dessie Woods, all of whom were charged between 1972 and 1975 with the murders of the men who sexually assaulted them or, in the case of Wanrow, her daughter, collectively helped to underscore the racist-sexist dimensions of the logics of incarceration and therefore "played a pivotal role in inspiring new feminist antiviolence efforts that interrogated the systematic violence of imprisonment."[29] At a moment when many feminist organizations and women's groups were becoming increasingly invested in state intervention and law and order approaches to rape and domestic violence,[30] the activism around the cases of Garcia, Wanrow, Woods, and especially Little, evinced how these same strategies often function to oppress women of color specifically, and communities of color generally, and helped lay the ideological foundation on which the CRC would build.

As indicated earlier, the defense campaign for Joan Little, like the serial murders of children and men in Atlanta, became a national cause célèbre that garnered significant mainstream media attention—although local grassroots organizing and alternative media such as feminist periodicals were primary mobilizing forces in both instances as well. In the case of Little, national feminist groups and civil rights organizations including the National Organization for Women, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and local branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) all solicited funds for her legal defense and, besides Angela Davis, other well-known activists such as Rosa Parks, Ralph Abernathy, and Bernice Johnson Reagon were also instrumental in advocating on her behalf.[31] In Atlanta, all manner of psychics, prophets, politicians, and amateur crime-solving groups turned the city into "a kind of grotesque Disneyland."[32] Eventually, the murders even compelled the attention of celebrities like Muhammad Ali, Sammy Davis, Jr., Frank Sinatra, and Dick Gregory, the latter of whom reportedly suggested that the deaths were the result of scientific experimentation á la the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study.[33] "Black death ha[d] never before elicited so much attention," Baldwin contended.[34]

By the time Joan Little was arrested in 1974, the most dominant civil rights coalitions of the previous decades had largely fractured and given way to more radical and diffuse organizing, and the campaign to free Little ultimately mobilized a loose

collection of disparate activists who saw the case as representative of their particular interests: "feminists and women's liberation organizations spoke out against sexual violence and advocated a woman's right to self-defense; civil rights and Black Power groups saw the Little case as another example of police brutality and Southern injustice; opponents of the death penalty and prison reformers hoped the case would draw attention to their emerging campaigns."[35] As suggested by Dick Gregory's speculation, the attention brought to bear on the Atlanta murders was bolstered by rumors that either a governmental agency—the Centers for Disease Control, the FBI, and the Central Intelligence Agency were all prime suspects—or the Ku Klux Klan, independently or in conjunction with the government, was responsible for the deaths.[36] Another important factor in bringing attention to Atlanta was that the murders primarily involved children, particularly *male* children, given that all but two of the child victims were boys.

To this last point, Barbara Smith noted that the murders in Boston received none of the national attention that the Atlanta case received, although the murders in Boston occurred just months before the killings in Atlanta began. Likewise, the serial killings of nine black men and a man identified as Hispanic that were committed in western New York and New York City in late 1980 by a white man anointed the .22-Caliber Killer (in western New York) and the Midtown Slasher (in Manhattan) made national headlines, while the deaths of the Boston women the year before had barely registered as newsworthy outside of Boston itself, and even in Boston the press coverage was initially sparse and often hostile, depicting the victims as prostitutes, drug addicts, or runaways who seemingly deserved what had happened to them.[37] To be sure, Boston was not an anomaly. In fact, seven black girls between the ages of ten and eighteen were murdered in the Washington, D.C. area between the spring of 1971 and the fall of 1972—that is, less than ten years before the *other* series of black child murders began in Atlanta. Two former police officers, both of them black men, were eventually convicted in the death of fourteen-year-old Angela Denise Barnes, while the deaths of the other six girls were linked to a killer dubbed the "Freeway Phantom" who has still never been conclusively identified. Given the identities of Barnes's killers, it was more than mere rumor that linked the state to the killings in the D.C. case but, perhaps at least in part because Barnes's killers were *black* men even if they were also police officers, the case still compelled very little media attention beyond the metro area, and the cavalry never came riding in.

The aforementioned is not to suggest that the failure by outside groups or individuals to attend to the deaths of black girls and women in Boston and Washington, D.C. was wholly intentional. Certainly, at a moment before social media, the internet, and twenty-four-hour cable networks made news-gathering instantaneous, continuous, and global, there were those who might have gotten involved *had they only known*. Nor is the critique meant to suggest that national attention necessarily correlates to a just outcome or that such attention does not come, at times, with significant negative consequences. Baldwin argued that Atlanta became such a spectacle that "the attention, the publicity, given to the slaughter [became], itself, one more aspect of an unforgiveable violation."[38] What the critique is meant to suggest,

however, is that as critical as the interventions made on behalf of Joan Little were, and as laudable as much of the attention paid to the murders of the children and men in Atlanta and New York by sincere advocates like Baldwin may have been, the relative silence that met the deaths of the twelve black women in Boston and the seven black girls in Washington, D.C. remains a forceful commentary on the implications of the intersections of race, gender, and class that the CRC outlined in 1977. Whereas the Little campaign galvanized a range of activists whose bread-and-butter issues her case directly represented, and the Atlanta case involved men and boys and rumors of a conspiracy devised by racist white institutions, the murders of black girls and women living in poor and working-class black communities who died or were thought to have died at the hands of black men who typically came from those same communities did not, at least on the face of it, implicate the power structures that were the primary aims of many activist organizations, and may potentially have been thought to undermine the work of some groups for whom combating racism was the primary objective, especially given the historical tendency to treat issues principally affecting black women as "distractions" from struggles thought to be more urgent. The main point, then, is not to indict particular individuals, organizations, or media outlets for their oversights or failures, as the case may be, but to emphasize the enduring importance of the CRC's mandate, made first in their statement and then in their implicit elaboration on the terms of serial murder in the Boston case, to link the violence against black women, even violence at the hands of black men, to the same forces that condition the build-up of prisons, a draconian criminal justice system, and targeted violence against black boys and men.

Bring Out Your Dead[39]

In the nearly forty years that have passed since the Boston women were killed, the serial murders of black girls and women have continued on unabated throughout the United States. From cities as small as Rocky Mount, North Carolina, where eleven black women and a twelfth victim who the local newspaper referred to as a "male crossdresser" but was likely a transgender woman, were killed between 2003 and 2009, and Gary, Indiana, where seven black women were killed between 2013 and 2014, allegedly by a man set to stand trial, as of this writing, in the fall of 2018—to major metropolises like Los Angeles, where to date five different men have been convicted in the murders of thirty-eight black women killed between 1984 and 2007, black female life has taken a heavy, though rarely acknowledged, toll. All told, since the early 1970s no fewer than 500 black girls and women have been the victims of serial murder, and more than fifty men, most of them black, have been convicted in their deaths.[40]

But what to make of numbers such as these? How does one reckon with, as Saidiya Hartman puts it in her discussion of her own work on the Atlantic slave trade and its afterlife, "the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance"?[41] And how do we resist what Katherine McKittrick terms in her

response to and citation of Hartman, a "descriptive analytics of violence" that the enumeration of black death so readily enables?[42] For those of us whose work regularly requires us to mine the archives, if indeed archives exist, for a trace of those who no longer remain, and the no longer remaining are black and they are women or they are black and they are girls, the numbers are often what direct us toward the point of excavation. Anything more can be hard to come by. A name? Perhaps. But those uniquely patterned, beautifully multisyllabic black-girl names, names like Nenomoshia and Telacia and Charquanaque and Kaliquah,[43] are often ravaged by the record. A misplaced vowel or a missing flourish here and (often) there making it hard to know the giver's—usually the parents', often the mother's—true intent. And even when the names are simpler, like Rhonda and Maxine and Pammy and Opal,[44] the record sometimes gets it wrong. Or the name goes missing altogether. Sometimes Jane Doe—itself a brutal slight to the richness of black naming practices, to say nothing of the brutality it puts a name to—is all that remains.

Yet the name is but a glimpse of the life it archives, and life is something the archive rarely accords victims such as these. It is instead death—violent, torturous, and unrelenting—that acts as the remainder. Bodies left in bags on public sidewalks. Bodies discovered burning in the trunks of cars. Bodies rotting in attics. Bodies found naked. Bodies found strangled. Bodies found desecrated and dismembered. Bodies never found. If and when the headlines come, it is the bodies that compel them. No. It is the body *count*. The death toll becomes the (origin) story.[45] To the extent that the bodies matter it is because the numbers have threatened to overwhelm the populace. Violence thus begets value, and the publicity attends not to the lives that were lived but to the savagery that made those lives available for public consumption in the first place.[46] It is, as Baldwin warned us, an unforgivable violation.

What, then, can be the resolution? Is there any possible virtue in rendering the depravity of black death visible, or are we resigned to a vicious dichotomy—either neglect counting altogether or be consumed by the numbers? To put it another way, how do we "revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence"?[47] McKittrick suggests that we "[read] the mathematics of these violences as possibilities that are iterations of black life that cannot be contained by black death,"[48] and that perhaps we can read the archives "not as a measure of what happened, but as indicators of what else happened."[49] Following from this, I want to suggest that when black women and girls are massacred what *else* happens is that their lives become, first and foremost, the domain of those they have left behind. While their deaths may be neglected by law enforcement and city officials and the media and national organizations, the *loss* is, if not redressed, *rendered* by way of the familial and the communal. Since "what is not there is living,"[50] the archive becomes the inevitable extension of a black sociality that refuses the degradation that enables its loss.

All of this is to cite the epistemological possibilities of scratching out but retaining the numbers. Barbara Smith's decision to render the loss and terror her community was feeling visible on a document meant for that very community mitigated against the inconsistencies and laxity of the official record. By *claiming,* rather than simply

publicizing, their dead, the CRC and other similarly affected members of the Boston community expanded the archive, essentially becoming an archive in and of themselves. For them, what it meant to be "affected" by death was not simply to give in to despair or futility, as warranted as those feelings may have been, it was to *reckon* with it, to refuse to allow death to masquerade as individual—either in its giving or its taking. When the local community activist Sara Small cried out "Who is killing us?" to the crowd of people gathered for the memorial march in Boston in April 1979, she was not just asking a question in need of an answer, she was staking a claim for the collective.[51] In that single utterance, wherein the terms of death were made deliberately communal, Small scratched out the numbers. She, in accordance with and alongside the CRC, interdicted the bare tabulation of death, counted it all out differently,[52] and said that *we* are what else has happened here.

In many places where the numbers of slain black girls and women have mounted up, black women have been at the helm of grassroots efforts to reckon with and bring out their dead. Not only the CRC and CRISIS in Boston, but also the Freeway Phantom Organization, which was established by the family members of victims in that case as a support group in the early 1970s[53]; the Black Coalition Fighting Back Serial Murders founded by community activist Margaret Prescod in Los Angeles in 1984[54]; Mothers of Murdered Offspring started by Dee Sumpter, the mother of twenty-year-old Shawna Hawk, who was one of at least nine black women killed by Henry Louis Wallace in Charlotte, North Carolina in the early 1990s[55]; and Parents and Relatives of the Missing and Murdered begun in 2009 by family members in Rocky Mount, North Carolina.[56] This is to say nothing of the countless vigils, tributes, rallies, forums, marches, townhalls, meetings, and informal gatherings that are organized by community members in the wake of their loss. If Grace Kyungwon Hong is right that "to bring out your dead is not a memorial, but a challenge, not an act of grief, but of defiance, not a register of mortality and decline, but of the possibility of struggle and survival,"[57] then we might view the communal praxis that emerges by way of the murders of black girls and women as a response to and refutation of the "grammar of violence" that conditions their premature death—because, as Barbara Smith once put it, "you don't survive if you don't know how to get things together, keep things going, and get things done."[58]

In 1977, the CRC relayed to us, in no uncertain terms, the necessity of developing an antiracist, antisexist politics that is simultaneously committed to fighting against all forms of oppression, including heterosexism and classism, and fighting for "the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism."[59] This politics was perhaps never more urgently realized in the CRC's history than two years later when the dead bodies of black women began turning up in Boston. The murders began in the shadows of a series of racial incidents that had convulsed Boston's black community—a school desegregation crisis, unrelenting police brutality, flagrant antiblack violence, *the soiling of old glory*—and were thus immediately understood solely in terms of race.[60] The CRC said not so. They recognized the importance of attending to their "sisters" in their specificity as black women who "died because they were women just as surely as they died because they were

black,"[61] while simultaneously understanding their deaths as being conditioned by forces much larger than the individual men who took their lives. And because theirs was a politics of the alternative, the CRC did not place their faith in the structures of governance or its byproducts—prisons, marriage, curfews, male rule, law and order, longer skirts—but in a radical commitment to freedom. The lessons are many, but among the most life-and-death of them is that the violence meted out to black men on the street and elsewhere often comes, metaphorically and actually, home to roost. Acknowledging this is not to acquiesce to the failed logics of "black-on-black crime," but to grapple with how violence against black women is implicated in the serialization of black death.

Notes

1. Grace Kyungwon Hong, "'The Future of Our Worlds': Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization," *Meridians* 8, no. 2 (2008): 97.
2. Barbara Smith, "Black Feminism: A Movement of Our Own," in *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith,* edited by Alethia Jones and Virginia Eubanks (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 63.
3. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,* 4th ed., edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 210.
4. Barbara Smith, interview by Kimberly Springer, in *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,* 72.
5. Ibid.
6. Jaime M. Grant, "Who's Killing Us?," in *Femicide: The Politics of Women Killing,* edited by Jill Radford and Diana E. H. Russell (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 150.
7. "A Climate of Fear in Boston," *Boston Globe,* May 9, 1979.
8. Robert Jordan, "Arrests Ease Black Community's Fears," *Boston Globe,* August 17, 1979.
9. Timothy Dwyer, "Woman Identified in 12th Murder," *Boston Globe,* May 8, 1979.
10. Michel D. McQueen, "As Different as Night and Day," *The Harvard Crimson,* March 17, 1979.
11. Barbara Smith, introduction to "Twelve Black Women: Why Did They Die?," in *Fight Back! Feminist Resistance to Male Violence,* edited by Frédérique Delacoste and Felice Newman (Minneapolis: Cleis Press, 1981), 68.
12. Combahee River Collective, "Six Black Women: Why Did They Die?," *Radical America* 13, no. 6 (November–December 1979): 45.
13. Grant, "Who's Killing Us?" 151.
14. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 211, 213.
15. Ibid., 215.
16. For a discussion of the importance of black feminism to epistemological critique in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," see Kyungwon Hong, "'The Future of Our Worlds,'" 108–09.
17. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Serial Murder: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives for Investigators* (Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, 2008), 8–9.
18. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 213.
19. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.
20. While law enforcement would eventually link twenty-nine deaths to the Atlanta Child Murders, there were discrepancies in the reported number of victims throughout the case, with

some commentators arguing that the list of victims could and should have been much longer and more inclusive. Eric Gary Anderson, "Black Atlanta: An Ecosocial Approach to Narratives of the Atlanta Child Murders," *PMLA* 122, no. 1 (January 2007): 197.

21. Jeffry Scott and Bill Torpy, "Atlanta's Nightmare: Doubt Lingers," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* May 15, 2005.
22. James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1985), 74, 72.
23. Angela Davis, "Joan Little: The Dialectics of Rape," *Ms.* 12, no. 2 (1975; repr., 2002), 39.
24. Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought,* edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 200–18.
25. Davis, "Joan Little," 39.
26. Ibid., 40.
27. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 210, 213.
28. Beth E. Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 66–68.
29. Emily Thuma, "Lessons in Self-Defense: Gender Violence, Racial Criminalization, and Anticarceral Feminism," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2015): 59.
30. Marie Gottschalk, *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 115–64.
31. Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 246–78.
32. Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen,* 11.
33. Ibid., 86–87.
34. Ibid., 10.
35. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street,* 249.
36. Patricia A. Turner, "The Atlanta Child Murders: A Case Study of Folklore in the Black Community," in *Contemporary Legend: A Reader,* edited by Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith (New York: Routledge, 2011), 299–310.
37. Smith, introduction to "Twelve Black Women," 68.
38. Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen,* 10.
39. Ibid., 39–40.
40. I know of only one case, a series of eight murders committed across several Midwestern states in the summer of 1984, in which a woman was convicted in a serial murder case involving black girls and women. In that case, the female perpetrator, Debra Brown, was the accomplice of her male partner, Alton Coleman.
41. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 12.
42. Katherine McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 18.
43. Nenomoshia "Neno" Yates (12) was one of the six black girls killed by the so-called "Freeway Phantom" in Washington, D.C.; Telacia Fortson (31) was one of eleven black women killed by Anthony Sowell in Cleveland, Ohio between 2007 and 2009; Charquanaque Johnson (33) was one of eight similarly situated black women killed in and around the Roseland neighborhood of Chicago in 2000; and Kaliquah Gilliam (21) was one of four black women killed by Daniel Jones in Kansas City, Missouri between 1998 and 2001.
44. Rhonda Jackson (23) was one of eight black women killed by Ivan Hill in Southern California between 1986 and 1994; Rhonda King (24) was one of eleven black women killed in Chicago by Andre Crawford between 1993 and 1999; Rhonda Tucker (21) was one of five black and Latina women killed by Vincent Johnson in Brooklyn, New York between 1999 and 2000; and Rhonda Myles (45) was one of at least two, but as many as seven, black women killed by

Shelly Andre Brooks in Detroit, Michigan between 2001 and 2006. Maxine Walker (41) was one of eight black women whose murders Eugene Britt confessed to committing in Gary, Indiana in 1995, and Pammy Annette Avent (16) and Opal Charmaine Mills (16) were both victims of Gary Ridgway, known as the Green River Killer, who was convicted in 2003 of killing forty-eight women (he confessed to killing more than seventy women), at least eleven of whom were black, in the 1980s and 1990s in the Seattle, Washington area.

45. McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," 17.
46. For a further discussion of the relay between violence and value as pertains to black female victims of serial murder, see Terrion L. Williamson, "In the Life," in her *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 113–34.
47. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4.
48. McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," 20.
49. Ibid., 22.
50. Ibid., 23.
51. Grant, "Who's Killing Us?," 145.
52. McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," 23.
53. Freddie A. Brown Jr., "A Helping Hand for Families of Suitland Victims," *Washington Post,* February 12, 1987.
54. Jennifer Steinhauer and Rebecca Cathcart, "In Los Angeles, Unresolved Serial Killings Reflected Era," *New York Times*, July 20, 2010.
55. C. J. Clemmons, "Support for the Grieving," *Charlotte Observer*, December 31, 1995.
56. Mike Hixenbaugh, "Victims' Families Organize," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, December 23, 2009.
57. Hong, "'The Future of Our Worlds,'" 97.
58. Barbara Smith, interview by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, in *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,* 255.
59. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 213.
60. Barbara Smith, interview by Kimberly Springer, 71.
61. Combahee River Collective, "Six Black Women," 44.

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