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RATCHETING A WAY OUT OF THE RESPECTABLE: GENEALOGICAL
INTERVENTIONS INTO ATLANTA'S RESPECTABILITY POLITICS

by

SARAH ABDELAZIZ

Under the Direction of Tiffany King, PhD

ABSTRACT

What do Black Lives Matter and Freaknik have in common? In this paper, I will argue that moments of Black Lives Matter in Atlanta exhibited refusals and undoings of respectability politics through the method of the ratchet. I define the ratchet as moments of non-normative embodiment and political possibility that refuse statist and Eurocentric norms through slippage of the self and the engagement of Black queer sexual politics. Freaknik is foregrounded as a ripe space for excavating such a display of the politically ratchet in Atlanta. I will look at a few different moments in the Black Lives Matter movement in the city of Atlanta and read each for currents of ratchetness and respectability, highlighting the importance of the ratchet in political imagination and possibility.

INDEX WORDS: Black Lives Matter, Respectability Politics, Freaknik, Ratchet

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SARAH ABDELAZIZ

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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2017

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I have drunk from wells I did not dig, I have been warmed by fires I did not build.

-Clarence N. Stone

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BLM, Black Lives Matter

TMOC, Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee

BRI, Black Ratchet Imagination

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the Study

Black Lives Matter is a movement that has occupied a central and visible role in the US collective imagining since 2013. The movement began when George Zimmerman was acquitted of killing seventeen-year-old Black boy, Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman killed Trayvon because he believed the boy's hoodie made him look suspicious. Zimmerman's acquittal and the demonization of Trayvon throughout the trial sparked a nationwide movement that would come to be known as "Black Lives Matter". Black Lives Matter was started by three Black, queer women—Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometti, and Alicia Garza. The movement diverted national attention to police and police-like vigilante killings of Black people in the United States. Though containing common themes internationally and nationally, localized iterations of Black Lives Matter contain unique qualities and articulations based on the history and social forces present in a place. How does Black Lives Matter look in the "Black Mecca" of the south? As a city that has outwardly represented the proclaimed values of progressivism, Atlanta has had its fair share of BLM rumblings and missteps.

Black Lives Matter in Atlanta has taken on a form of decentralization and has been born in multiple waves. Deciphering who composes Black Lives Matter in Atlanta is easier said than done. Although there is an official chapter of Black Lives Matter in the city, this was not created until late 2015, whereas Black Lives Matter messaging and activity was occurring in the city since the spark of the national movement in 2013 (Mariano, 2016). Many different groups in Atlanta can be viewed as operating through the call for Black Lives Matter. In the summer of 2013, Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee (TMOC) made a call for rallies across the nation the day after the Zimmerman verdict, regardless of the outcome. TMOC was a national network

of organizers and radicals; the local Atlanta crew coalesced around this national demand for rallies and was multi-racial, with a heavy presence of queer, Black, Brown, and femme folks. TMOOC would go on to call for a second rally, almost a year later, after turmoil surrounding Mike Brown's death. Groups such as the locally born, #ITSBIGGERTHANYOU which was the most visible force for the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2014, consisted of a core of mostly young, Black, and queer activists. The largest rally called for by the group occurred in August of 2014 after the murder of Mike Brown, pulling an estimated 5,000 people into the streets of Atlanta (Carmichael, 2014). The most visible member of the group, Aurielle Lucier, went on to be a celebrity amongst young activists, eventually meeting with then presidential nominee Hillary Clinton as part of a national Black Lives Matter event (Carmichael, 2015). The most recent wave of protests in the summer of 2016 occurred through coalitions, but mainly through the collective ATL is Ready, a group that includes at its core Black, Brown, and white queers, in response to the deaths of Anton Sterling and Philando Castile. These mobilizations occurred in a succession of five days, and accumulated, at their height, upwards of 10,000 people (Mariano, 2016). ATL is Ready is the most recent and visible of these groupings at this moment, and one of the few Black Lives Matter formations in Atlanta that went on to do community organizing after street mobilizations. The group is currently engaged in anti-gentrification work.

Though occurring through a series of collectives and moments, the Movement for Black Lives in Atlanta is unified in its need to consistently speak to, in some manner, respectability politics. Regardless of whether these collectives have desired an outright rejection of respectability politics or a symbiotic relationship to it, each collective's messaging and motions have had to be shaped by the immortal shadow of respectability that lies at the heart of any

grassroots political activity in this city, particularly when such activity centers on the violability of being Black.

In order to situate the BLM movement in Atlanta, it is important to contextualize the specificities of this city. In particular, I am interested in how respectability politics are responded to, adapted by, and subverted by the recent Black Lives Matter formations in Atlanta. I trace some of the genealogy of respectability politics, locating its popular emergence in the public sphere in Atlanta around the time of Mayor Hartsfield's ascent to power in the 1940s, and developing through the coalition of Black and white business elites, until the eventual outright rule by Black elites at the death of de jour segregation around the mid 1970s. However, my focus is on the way that respectability politics informs the activities of protests, both by the organizers that envision a certain plan for protests and for the people who participate in these events. From the conception of the activity, to the messaging, to the way that attendees respond to and participate in the events, the ethos of respectability politics or the rejection of it is ever-present. I am additionally interested in the tension brought on by the literal embodiment of many of the leaders of these BLM formations, as well as the dueling tensions of the city of Atlanta itself: sometimes Black, queer, young, and poor and sometimes Black, wealthy, and empowered. Given the strain between those that embody a form of respectability politics which acknowledges the need for equality but "only if", and a growing movement which adamantly fights for the sanctity of Black life "no matter what", how are we to understand the way this tension informs moments of rupture? In order to begin to answer this question, I will be looking at different moments of street activity in Atlanta spanning from 2013 to 2016.

Additionally, I will be relating Freaknik to Black Lives Matter by locating Freaknik as a mass rupture in respectability politics, as well as a supple site for the ratchet. Freaknik emerged in 1982 as an opportunity for Black students from the Historically Black Colleges (HBCU) of Morehouse and Spelman to come together during spring break. Many students would use this time to network with others. The “nik” of Freaknik came from the idea that this networking would occur in picnic like settings (Thompson 27, 2007). As time wore on, the “freak” aspect of the yearly event would come to more accurately capture the festivities. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Freaknik began to change from an innocent networking opportunity for students, to a prolific cultural and sexual celebration that pulled in musicians, students from all over the country, and Atlanta residents of all socioeconomic classes to party (Thompson 27, 2007). Once Freaknik did emerge as a popular, cross-class, Black expression of sexuality and social pleasure, the city government would respond through violence, intimidation, and cooptation until the event eventually moved out of Atlanta and was officially banned by current mayor, Kasim Reed.

As a non-Black participant, spectator, and commentator on Black activity and struggle, I must be clear with what I believe my position allows and bars me from. I will always be an outsider to certain understandings of moments of Black radicalism and being, because I do not have the lived experience. As an outsider who has often times found myself engaged in struggles for Black liberation, I believe I carry a unique perspective. I attempt to employ the ethical strategy coined by Trinh Minh-Ha of “speaking nearby”, in which I never mistake my observations as speaking on behalf of, because there is no way I could, or speaking about, because that implies a view of knowledge as unbiased and static, but as someone who has proximity to these cycles of struggle and an ethical commitment to it (Chen 1992, 84-87). I similarly look to the belief that, “Blackness is everybody’s matter because it is constructed with

the cooperation of everybody's sensorium", as well as the call by Fred Moten for a proliferation of the study of Blackness (Raengo 2014, 6; *The Black Outdoors*, 2016). "Scholars with various kinds of motivations should engage in the exercise of completing the phrase 'Blackness is [blank]'" (Franklin Humanities, 2016). Dismantling anti-Blackness and the sibling oppressions wrought in it requires the work of all people, as it was the creation of it by non-Blacks that birthed its condition, and it is the systematic propagation of it through various institutions and peoples that keeps it thriving. With this ethical undergirding, I seek to contribute to the dismantling of anti-Blackness by looking at radical, Black responses to centuries-long oppressions rather than offering solutions from the outside.

1.2 Literature Review

In order to better understand the role that Black Lives Matter actions have had in offering transgression that can be read for political possibilities, I look to the ratchet. These moments of "ratchetry" are defined by refusals of normative and hegemonic actions and discourses, particularly in relation to Blackness and particular gendered and sexual embodiments of it. My understanding of ratchetry is partially defined as a Black queer sexual politic. I do not intend to unnecessarily sexualize or fetishize the bodies of those that participated in these political events. Instead, I view the role of Black queer sexual politics in regards to moments of ruptured street activity as a form of activated imagination in which the necessary split between mind and body that capitalism and Eurocentrism engender are restored into glimpses of alternative life (Stallings 2015, 6-7). I understand the possibility of the ratchet as connected to Black sexual politics in the same way that Audre Lorde understood the erotic as not only a sexual pleasure, but as a way to deeply connect with the self and with others radically, so as to empower the ability to fight for and manifest liberation (Lorde, 1984). Black Lives Matter in Atlanta has been marked by the

visibility of queer Black bodies at the helm of activity, but more importantly, it has manifested moments of queering or transgression, in which the regulatory norms that govern even what is meant to be subversive (protest) but sometimes is not, are discarded or replaced with different modes of relation. Black Lives Matter, at moments, manifests this politics of Black sexuality, which is unrespectable by an establishment ethos. These politics allow for glimpses of new social relations alongside the resistance, which they immediately manifest, actively creating a new world in the shell of the old.

Central to my thesis are the two characters of respectability and ratchetness, which have been oftentimes at odds, vying for central dominance in Atlanta's self-identity. Respectability politics is generally understood as a belief that personal behavior determines life chances. For instance, if a person works hard, follows and respects the rules, and carries themselves with dignity, then, barring some rare, but unforeseen disaster, that person will live successfully. Those, who, on the other hand, do not follow or respect the rules, carry themselves in a non-dignified manner, and have poor work ethic, earn their lot in life: poverty, arduousness, and stagnation. The basis of respectability politics is a flawed understanding of the world as, though difficult, ultimately fair and equitable. In other words, "this is why what's most disturbing about Michael Brown... is our reaction to him, our misunderstanding of him, and the sources of that misunderstanding that manifest and reify a desire for standing, for stasis, within the state war machine which, contrary to popular belief, doesn't confer citizenship upon its subjects at birth but, rather, at death" (Harney & Moten 2015, 84). Harney and Stefano are stating that the narratives—narratives built with the great aid of respectability—questioning Brown's culpability in his own death were one of the most disturbing aspects of the whole ordeal. Furthermore, respectability assumes integration and it assumes citizenship: two qualities that I argue are not afforded to Black people

in America. Importantly, respectability politics assumes a *desire* to integrate into a genocidal state. The implication of respectability politics, given capitalist exploitation built upon a racialized and gendered hierarchy, is to blame femmes, the disabled, queers, and people of color for poverty, crime, and general misfortune. People who consciously and subconsciously disrespect respectability politics or the worldview it requires, such as certain queers and gender benders, Black and Brown folks, poor youth, and more, often resist the forms of surveillance respectability politics requires by enlisting the tactics of evasion, subversion, play, and exhibitionism.

1.2.1 Respectability Politics

In order to understand the Black Lives Matter movement as part of a genealogy of Black youth-led movements for political and sexual freedom, such as Freaknik in Atlanta, we must understand the local iterations of the politics of respectability in this city, particularly since respectability politics has an acute fascination with the sexual. Respectability politics defines proper sexual decorum as unquestionably heterosexual, as well as modest and to be conducted in private. This decorum is all the more constraining on Black bodies as the historical sexualization of Black people, for instance in the case of Emmett Till or in the case of the Jezebel stereotype, always already assumes the promiscuity of a Black person. According to Tricia Rose, respectability affects genders differently. For Black women, sexuality becomes a defining feature of acting respectably as the birth of children within wedlock, if any, the particular clothing donned, and the number of sexual partners becomes the principal obsession (Rose, 2016). Respectability politics was a phrase developed by Evelyn Higginbotham who studied the work done by Black women in the National Baptist Convention from 1890 to 1920 (Higginbotham, 1993). The strategy that these women promoted for improving the lives of Black people was

two-pronged: protest politics coupled with a demand for “respectable behavior” (Higginbotham, 1993). These members of the National Baptist Convention felt that if Black people could act “respectably”, i.e. if they could act to the standard of upper-middle class, white social mores, then Black folks would be seen as fully human and their grievances directed toward the state and civil society through protest, would be heard (Higginbotham, 1993). These 19th century and early twentieth century women also believed that in a sea of rhetoric which declared Blackness as genetically and immutably inferior and deviant, a politics of respectability could imbue Black children with inner strength and understanding of themselves as “worthy” (Rose, 2016). Since then, respectability politics has morphed and changed over time. The respectability politics of today, in the close of the Obama era nationally and the continuance of Black elite governance locally, differs somewhat from the definition put forth by Higginbotham, as today’s version is now devoid of the structural inequities that the women in the church were simultaneously attempting to highlight, instead focusing solely on individual behavior. Respectability politics is now the belief that personal comportment defines life chances and opportunities (Rose, 2016). As in, if folks were to act respectably, by the definition of mainstream, middle class, white America, then they would be able to become productive citizens and would be afforded more esteem, and therefore, equal opportunity.

At the heart of twentieth and twenty-first century politics of respectability is personal responsibility, which absolutely ignores structural constraints. Respectability politics marries itself seamlessly to neoliberal narratives of individual culpability. Rather than recognizing structures as largely responsible for creating social problems and pathologies, neoliberalism defines personal “shortcomings” as a weakness of the individual. Similarly, rather than blaming and focusing energy on the way that structures of racism constrain Black folks and others,

respectability politics diffuses systemic responsibility, blaming lack of opportunity on personal or familial shortcomings. The basis of the truly respectable is the nuclear family, as it is the legal coupling of the heterosexual mother and father that defines life opportunity. From the emergence of the nuclear family follows an endless list of dictates. Some of the activities barred are those that are queer or exhibitionist, those that engage in play outside of prescribed places, and those who are too loose, too free, and too loud. As Tricia Rose notes, respectability politics puts under most scrutiny Black people's sexuality (Rose, 2016).

Higginbotham's work entails understanding a politics of respectability through white and Black creation. Although respectability politics was born as a reaction to white supremacy, the specific adoption of it as a positive and affirming force was taken up by Black women. Similarly, respectability politics today cannot be merely written off as a "white thing"; to do so would be to deny Black people who propagate it their agency (Harris, 2016). Respectability politics can be seen on the national stage through figures like Barack Obama, Steve Harvey, Jay Z, and Raven Symoné. Locally, it can be seen through the mayor of Atlanta, Kasim Reed, Civil Rights veteran and Atlanta public Figure, Andrew Young, and Congressman and Civil Rights leader, John Lewis. For instance, when Andrew Young declared during the most recent wave of Black Lives Matter protests in Atlanta, that protestors were "unlovable little brats" in a meeting with police officers, he was employing the chastising paternalism of respectability (Kempner, 2016; Rose, 2016). Similarly, when Atlanta, and the global order, really, chooses to highlight certain aspects of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy, they do so with the use of a respectability that is meant to silence. For instance, through obfuscation, or sometimes outright lies, solely the qualities of King that were non-violent, engaged in orderly debate, and with respect to the rule of law are attended to. Any piece of his ideology that would complicate or contradict this narrative is purposefully

not dealt with. Even the engagement of King on the material level in Atlanta is through tours of his childhood home or Ebenezer Baptist Church where he preached, both (family and church) key sites of the respectable. In fact, Atlanta's historical role as a "Black Mecca" is largely based on the fact that a Black middle class and bourgeoisie were able to amass wealth beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, despite intensive segregation and racism (Kruse, 2005). John Wesley Dobbs once called Auburn Avenue in downtown Atlanta, "the richest negro street in the world" (Hatfield, 2016). As has become clear, a capitalist economic and moral ethos is the bedrock of respectability.

During the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, as de-segregation resulted in riots, protests, and flourishing Civil Rights and Black Power movements throughout the US, "the city too busy to hate" was meant to disguise the racial turmoil lurking behind the veil of Atlantan civility. Atlanta was a historical anomaly; it was one of the first cities in the United States to seemingly "peacefully" transition out of segregation. Though white, Mayor Hartsfield knew that the violence and turmoil surrounding desegregation provoked economic instability. Hartsfield knew that to be flagrantly racist and to invite a sharpening of lines was to commit a grave mistake. "The image-conscious Hartsfield wanted not only to avoid violence but to have the city look very good in the process. Public rhetoric stressed the benefits of racial progress for business, and it included statistics showing how damaging Little Rock's 1957 riots had been economically" (Stone 1989, 48). The mayor made a purposeful and strategic decision to make racial transition in Atlanta a smooth and uncontroversial process. In order for this to happen, Hartsfield had to pacify racist whites while simultaneously convincing a growing constituency of Black people that desegregation was a welcome process. So, Hartsfield made a decision to partner with the Black middle class and rising elite: bankers, clergymen, and other community leaders. The novel

alliance at the time, of Black folks and white elites, was entirely concentrated amongst the Black middle class and not in the multifaceted desires of Black people from other classes. Hartsfield was known to be a devout ally to the business elite, largely because he viewed their relationship as mutually affirming and symbiotic: the business class could infuse the practically bankrupted city government with the resources necessary to survive and flourish, while also showing that the mayor was willing to be an integrationist. One of the key tactics used by Hartsfield was to paint upper middle class whites as allies. In reality, many upper middle class whites lived in suburbs on the northern fringes of Atlanta, and as the city's population began to tip towards a Black majority, Hartsfield, concerned, attempted to annex these white suburbs several times in order to reverse the demographic trend. Painting these whites as sympathetic was key in successfully doing so (Stone 1989, 30). At the same time, these whites were fine-tuning their strategy, ditching the Klan robes for a "civil" racism that centered on the idea of "preserving community" (Kruse 2005, 141).

Simultaneously, Black leaders pushed for reforms that had the chance of passing in such a quietly tense climate. For instance, one of the first successful moves towards desegregation was the hiring of Black police officers who only had the jurisdiction to arrest other Blacks (Stone 1989, 29). As state enforcers of respectability politics, it is telling that this was one of the first monumental "progressive" actions of the Atlanta government. As tensions nationwide became sharper and the emergence of a national Civil Rights movement began to trouble the almost decade long collusion with the city government, Black leaders in Atlanta played a conservatizing role in developing local movement. For instance, elders blocked any activity that would disrupt capital from its normal circulation. Black leaders would tell engaged youth that they could have

sit-ins at public buildings, but not private business such as Rich's, which was one of the most profitable stores in Atlanta at the time (Stone 1989, 54).

Eventually, students and other youth would undermine this tacit agreement between whites and Blacks of a certain class; the deeply rooted divisions revealed key differences in political imagination. While many of the Blacks that had infiltrated the elite had an interest in holding onto the little power and wealth they had been able to amass, they also did have an interest in ending systemic racism. It was not that they did not care to do so. It is that they manifested respectability politics, similarly to the way the women in the Baptist Convention had, and thought it only rational for the coming generations to do so as well. Through their own experience, they had been integrated into a city structure which just years previous had ignored their very existence. They believed that through negotiations, business deals, and moral pleas, they could advance political progress. This required certain ways of dress and speak and certainly, a respect for the rules, even if there was disagreement. This political "moderation" was present in even the 1973 mayoral election of Atlanta in which the first Black mayor not just of Atlanta, but of any major city in the south, was elected to office. Maynard Jackson came to hold that title. Interestingly enough, Leroy Johnson, another Black man, ran in the same race as Jackson. Johnson had earned many stripes from the Civil Rights movement, as he was a prominent attorney who advocated on behalf of several Civil Rights cases (Crawford, 2008). Johnson was closely involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), seen by many as a group that was more to the left than King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and was also a critic of the Vietnam War (Crawford, 2008). Arguably, if this vote had been a vote for the advancement of the Civil Rights movement in Atlanta, Johnson

would have been the victor. This commitment to a moderate Black leadership that held tightly onto the edicts of respectability would continue for decades.

Respectability still governs the rhetoric of the Atlanta elite. Civil Rights leaders such as Andrew Young, who occupied the role of codified and respectable movement figure and conservative commentator on movement activity, critiqued the Movement for Black Lives for being directionless. Young said that in order to succeed the way that King Jr. did, protestors must make demands (Mariano, 2016). It is no wonder that Young could sit with police officers rather than protestors for a pep talk in the midst of the rallies in Atlanta, calling protestors “unlovable little brats” (Kempner, 2016). However, offensive this paternalism was, Young embodied, in the midst of a moment of intensive political action in Atlanta, the very respectability politics that has existed in Atlanta since the 1940s. By at once seeming to give loving advice to those enacting their political will, and simultaneously chastising them as immature, Young and those in the respectable establishment are able to conservatize activity into legible modes of protest that ultimately steer the power nowhere but straight back into the seat of power.

1.2.2 Ratchet

In order to delineate “ratchet”, I am relying heavily on definitions put forth by Black and hip hop feminists who glean from popular culture what is meant by the use of the word “ratchet.” “Ratchet has become the umbrella term for all things associated with the linguistic, stylistic, and cultural practices, witnessed or otherwise, of poor people; specifically poor people of color, and more specifically, poor women of color” (Bowen, 2015). The term ratchet is an incredibly textured one—it immediately elicits an imagery of poor, often times Black, but at the very least, racialized, feminine existence. It is a word that has wide use as epithet. The word conjures particular raced, classed, and gendered bodies, as well as a certain mode of behavior (Stallings,

2013). The ratchet woman is everything that respectability politics tells her not to be: she is loud, does not follow bourgeois social norms be it in dress or cadence, and is likely sexually deviant. A ratchet woman could be imagined as a more contemporary instantiation of the “welfare queen” or “Black matriarch” as detailed by Patricia Hill Collins. In essence, she is a failure of her circumstance: born to die in the hood. At the same time, ratchetness is a form of political possibility defined by a Black, feminist politic that at once rejects the racist, classist, and misogynistic logic underlying “the ratchet” while also embracing the transgressive possibilities within such an existence. I define ratchetness with the aid of Black feminist scholars such as Stallings and Cooper. It is a historically epithetic term that has been used to demean poor and working class women of color, in particular, Black women, as being lewd and promiscuous. A politics of ratchetness seeks to take back the word as a positive method of demeaning Western and hierarchical norms through the introduction of alternative ways of being and relation towards the self and each other. Both uses of the word “ratchet” elicit pause. “Ratchet acts are meant to be so over-the-top and outrageous that they catch your attention and exceed the bounds of acceptable saying” (Cooper, 2012).

As Cooper and Rose have noted, although for distinct reasons, the ratchet should not be posed as the opposite to respectability, and therefore as its solution. For instance, in regards to personal embodiments of the ratchet, be that in clothing or promiscuity, it is not the ratchet alone that delivers revolutionary possibilities of overthrow and equitable life. The personal disregard of norms of dress, vernacular, sexuality, and work ethic should obviously not be met with humiliation, but it also should not come to represent, unequivocally, examples of insurgent possibility: “More and more...I am coming to understand that subversive and transgressive politics do not a revolution make” (Cooper, 2012). To believe that such embodiments alone are

the seed of revolutionary possibility is to fetishize what is ultimately a reaction to constraining norms. Refusal and playfulness surrounding such norms can certainly offer different ways of being within a system of normalized restraint, but it is in escaping such constraining norms altogether that possibility will truly flourish. In order for “subversive and transgressive” politics to have the possibility of overturning institutions as vast as capitalism, cissexism, racism, abelism, and more, we must consider them in conjunction with conscious imaginings and dismantlement of these institutions.

I am positing the ratchet as moments of conscious and unconscious normative refusal through bodies that are *least* allowed that refusal, i.e. Black and Brown femmes, queers, and trans folks. So while disentangling the stigma surrounding the ratchet in personal embodiments is at the basis of any socially conscious feminism, my focus here is to carve out the ratchet as found in movement activity that has as its general goal, a political and economic upheaval. For this reason, I look to the “Black Ratchet Imagination” as an almost “surrealis[ti]c...way of drawing attention to how transformed thought patterns and dreams have historically provided a revolutionary space for beginning to think of liberation within the Black community” (Stallings, 2013; Brown & Young, 2015). At the same time, on the meta-level, to see ratchetness as the polar prescription to respectability is to merely substitute decrees: a ratchet ethic should refuse the privileging of one way of being as that is the very edict that respectability suffers from (Rose, 2016). As a moral ideology that governs a hierarchical world, of course respectability politics privileges and shames the bodies that it does, because respectability politics emerges as a fundamental misunderstanding of social systems. Respectability sees white, wealthy men succeeding, reads the Eurocentric values they embody, and spits out success on the other end. Value systems that offer singular ways of being will often find the morality within the

hegemonic, as it is the hegemonic that is thought of as rational and good. For this reason, I read ratchetness not only for the momentary embodiment it is manifested in, but for the difference it offers.

1.2.3 Social Death

Black Lives Matter's form of gathering is in direct response to Black social death. As Black Lives Matter has been proclaiming, simply appearing as a Black person is a crime punishable by death. Given this verdict, the appearance of Black people congregated, be it within pleasure or collective pain, is itself an act that destabilizes Atlanta and the myth of post-racism propagated here. Given that the Atlanta establishment fetishizes and capitalizes upon aspects of mass protest, sit-ins, and other technically illegal acts during the Civil Rights era in order to coopt these moments into a narrative of the city as now racially harmonious, the reemergence of thousands of Black people in the past few years has proved to be quite a denunciation to the progress narrative. The cooptation of Atlanta's protest politics spans from the economic to the governmental; walk into a number of local Wells Fargo banks in Edgewood, West End, or other historically Black neighborhoods, and witness the flat, plastered-on historical images of moments of desegregation, school integration, and other markers of racial "progress". Never mind the systemic subprime mortgages offered by the bank to Black homeowners that ended in mass foreclosure (Powell, 2009). Similarly, Mayor Kasim Reed drops the name of MLK Jr. whenever it suits his aims, recently saying in regards to the string of protests after Castile and Sterlings' deaths, "We hear this generation's concern, and the protest tonight, but we're going to have to do it in a King-ian fashion" (Bluestein, 2016). Although mass protest by Black people has come to be accepted as a narrative of the state and its success, as in the case of the Civil Rights movement, the refusal to respect the state's narrative through large demonstrations that

point to Atlanta's hypocrisy is a blatant show of force which disrupts hegemonic discourse. Additionally, as I have been noting, the particularity of the Black bodies that this generation calls out onto the streets (queer, trans, and femme), are immediate points of contention.

I am arguing that the appropriations of public space and reorganizing of space by Black Lives Matter in Atlanta is a form of life beyond death. The literal death of Black people in America is a tale older than the country itself. The social death of Black people is a phenomenon that has been recently re-circulated to describe how the legacy of slavery has stripped Black people of kinship structures and genealogies which otherwise work to make non-Black people a part of the human family. In 1982, Orlando Patterson published this thesis of social death in his book *Slavery and Social Death*. In it, Patterson likens slaves to the "living dead" as they have experienced "natal alienation" (Patterson 1982, 13). The slave is the living dead in the sense that the slave is without contemporaries, as well as in the sense that the slave exists as a necessary component of the concept of freedom. Patterson argues that rather than being an aberration to freedom, slavery is freedom's necessary condition of possibility. Slavery may not necessarily be signified by shackles today, but by the impossibility of being allowed to live (Bailey & Leonard 2015, 71). Fanon argues that the social construction of Blackness as other immediately traps the Black body into the fixation of all who are not Black. Since the Black body is immediately visually recognizable, there is no evasion of this othering. The Black body cannot escape its social condition except through revolution and the destruction of whiteness (Fanon, 1952). The abolition of legal slavery in the US has not undermined the social death of Black people. Saidiya Hartman argues in *Scenes of Subjection* that the afterlife of slavery never ended, but just manifested itself in new form after formal Emancipation (Hartman, 1997). The social death of

Black folks in this country is a necessary condition for the U.S. project itself. Black exploitation and social death ground Atlanta's success as a major capitalist city in the US empire.

In *Black Lives Matter: Post-Nihilistic Freedom Dreams*, the authors argue that BLM displays a moment of Black death publicly through its “attempts to bring blackness into the light; an attempt to make clearly discernible what is, and long has been, ‘illegible’ in America”, thus revitalizing the life within Blackness (Bailey and Leonard 2015, 73). Through refusing the social and physical extermination of Black people, BLM ruthlessly insists on narratives of life beyond survival. It also insists on narratives of life beyond that which is categorized as acceptable within the modern nation-state. The nation-state interprets life through the identity of the citizen or the civil-subject. Due to the fact that the Black body is not allowed the qualities of citizenship (protection by the state, recognition of certain rights), Black people have not existed within the sight of the state as citizens. Resistant Blackness allows for possibilities of life outside of the social death that it has been consigned to (Bailey and Leonard 2015, 74). Black Lives Matter creates alternatives outside of these narratives of citizenship or (re)habilitation to the category of citizen by refusing the respectability politics that dominates post-racial discourses today and that dominated many aspects of the Civil Rights movement, and the public rhetoric that defines it presently. Whereas the Civil Rights Movement sought integration into the nation-state, Black Lives Matter offers a messy refusal to the empty promise of integration into the nation. At times on the national level, such as with the Movement for Black Lives Platform, a slant towards integrationist tactics or rhetoric is visible, however, due to the decentralization of the movement, each local exhibits unique qualities. Locally, Black Lives Matter organizers have repeatedly refused the state's attempts to integrate it into its structure. As I detail in the rhetoric of the Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee in the next chapter, refusing state integration was

apparent in the very fact that the action was called for *prior to* the results of Zimmerman's trial due to an absolute refusal to believe in any act of the state as fair. This refusal to integrate was also apparent in the rhetoric of the #ITSBIGGERTHANYOURALLY which mockingly asked, "How good must we look to be considered innocent?" in regards to the rhetoric of respectability politics circulating around Mike Brown's death. ATL is Ready showed an integrationist lean on the fifth and final day of the rallies for Sterling and Castile by demanding a meeting with the mayor and the chief of police in order to end an occupation in front of the governor's personal home, but when granted that meeting a week later, BLM activists walked out immediately, dissatisfied with the tone of the affair.

The Black Lives Matter events I speak of refuse the social and material death that America offers Black people, and in so doing, also refuse to wholly accept the fable that freedom is possible through state integration. In this sense, these instances of Black Lives Matter in Atlanta could be seen in relation to separatist and non-integrationist plights such as the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements. However, each of these movements had entrenched hierarchies, particularly surrounding gender and sexuality. Such an internal structure upholds certain notions of respectability like the nuclear family or gendered divisions of labor. So although there maybe similarities in the lack of faith in the US project, the possibility of ratchetry could not be seen in either the Black Power or Black Nationalist movements due to the sexual politics propagated in those ideologies.

Bailey and Leonard see that there is a life beyond the nihilism that an existence of social death must engender. They name this space as the "midway point between the optimism of those who feel themselves on the threshold of real progress and the nihilism of those who see that the apparent proximity of the promised land is chimerical" (Bailey and Leonard 2015, 71-72). I

believe that it is in this space as well that the ratchet becomes possible as the prescriptions for living well, according to respectability, prove themselves fraudulent in the face of the persistent state of social death. Or as Harney and Moten offer, “there is a social erotics of the lost and found in fallenness’s refusal of standing” (Harney & Moten 2015, 82). The refusal/fall offers its own process of discovery and creation inaccessible to those whom cannot fall—those who haven’t experienced social death. If, “to fall is to lose one’s place, to lose the place that makes one, to relinquish the locus of being” when being is reduced to social death, then to “relinquish the locus of being” offers great possibility (Harney & Moten 2015, 82). The ability to abdicate the “locus of being” relies on a non-belief in any possible viability of a system—a loss of faith that I believe even the most knowledgably jaded often cannot access—likely in conjunction with the total loss of self or ego that pleasure or the ability to absolutely exist in the present, can afford. I believe that this is partially what the Black Ratchet Imagination is composed of and that the ability to participate in this political ratchetness for the brevity with which it lasts has within it the promise of a life beyond death.

An additional factor of the social death specific to Atlanta is the current rapid gentrification of Atlanta. Just five decades shy of having accumulated a Black majority, Atlanta’s Black population is being displaced by whites. One of the material realities of being Black is negotiating a segregated landscape with less ease than is afforded non-Blacks, and in particular, whites. Although Atlanta has had a Black majority since the 1970’s, that hasn’t meant the free movement of Black people (Kruse, 2005). The urban planning of the city of Atlanta is one that easily lends itself to de facto segregation even after the end of formal segregation. This can literally be seen as streets such as Moreland (Black) turn into Briarcliff (white), or Boulevard (Black) turns into Monroe (white). The gentrification of the city of Atlanta is a furtherance of

this social death—segregation suffocates the social contact which moments such as Black Lives Matter or Freaknik provide. Places for congregation—the city center, the neighborhood, store fronts—are broken apart and sold to the highest bidder, disassembling circuits of contact. Freaknik’s life and forced death coincided with this campaign of relentless gentrification. As Freaknikers claimed social space across the city of Atlanta, disregarding the unspoken segregation, the city’s government and wealthy white citizens tensed with unease. The complaints of many respectable citizens acting on behalf of whiteness, and the compliance of Atlanta’s mayors, ended in a gutting of the yearly rendezvous until it was ultimately disbanded. Similarly, in a city which daily sees rising rent costs, increasing foreclosures, and chronically inaccessible transportation for the working poor, the sight of hundreds or thousands of people in the streets in affirmation of queer, poor, and “disorderly” Black life is a form of living beyond that which has been allotted to the Black people of Atlanta. Atlanta desires to be known as an LGBTQIA friendly city, however it only cares to do so in so far as it is profitable. Given the concentration of bars in Midtown that cater to a wealthy, white, gay and male clientele only, it is obvious how vapid Atlanta’s “queer” friendliness is. For young, poor, and Black queer and trans folks who experience the social death of not having public spaces of sexual leisure, an undercommons has had to be built (Harney & Moten, 2013). Often these undercommons can be found in certain houses, in the basements of galleries, and in old warehouses where curtains hang instead of bathroom doors (Southern Fried Queer Pride, Shine Black Femme Shine). However, once every few months, in moments of fevered rupture, when material death inevitably calls again, these sexual politics can be found in the streets. At moments they call back to Freaknik, offering a looseness and ease to feel emotively and sensuously the impossibility of Blackness.

1.2.4 Research Questions

This project seeks to examine how key moments of street demonstration, as part of the Black Lives Matter movement in Atlanta, has exhibited ratchetness, and in particular, the construction of a Black Ratchet Imagination (Stallings, 2013). I ask of these moments of ratchetness their relation to respectability politics as embodied by state actors and “the old guard” of the Civil Rights Movement. I search the instances of street demonstrations that undermine respectability politics for the dialectic possibilities of dismantling in the here and now and creating new, liberatory forms of life. I ask of the ratchet and the Black Ratchet Imagination how it aids in deconstructing hierarchical systems and social relations.

1.2.5 Methodology

Michael Brown by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten develops a methodology that I desire to use in my own work. The piece is a lyrical and affective exploration of Michael Brown’s death. Rather than speak of the sequential events before or after his death or the exact ways in which Brown’s death provoked a widespread response, the authors massage hand picked moments for meaning and reflection. The question that is being posed by Harney and Moten is how is genocide survived? The authors pose the imagination as the way in which genocide has been and can be survived, but rather than the imagination being posed as that which is removed, surreal, and immaterial, Harney and Moten push a material imagining that allows for analysis and deep exploration, as it is the *activity* of imagination that creates the real (Harney and Moten 2015, 81). I also seek to employ this tactic of “stretching”. This is not to say that Harney and Moten stretch truths or that I plan to, but that they take real and imagined possibility as simultaneous realities. Given the impossibility of Blackness, as well as my desire to excavate the micro (moments of ratchet street activity) and theorize about its possibilities (prototypes for fighting and creating different existence), this methodology strikes me as particularly useful.

Harney and Moten employ a multi-disciplinarian approach, in that they weave theory, poetry, and observation seamlessly. I too hope to intertwine first hand observation with the theories of those that I have borrowed from in order to create a particular position on the possibility of what Atlanta has offered to national and global re-imaginings. Harney and Moten also use several analytical tools that I employ: Black Marxist understandings of capitalism, revolutionary critiques of the state, feminist attention to the effusiveness and importance of affect, Afropessimist undercurrents, and mindful consideration of sensuous data. Harney and Moten are speaking to this moment, of Michael Brown's death specifically and Black Lives Matter generally, in hopes of creating an alternative world which not only dismantles hierarchical structures of capitalism, racism, cissexism, etc., but one which insists on an unmediated existence between the self and the self, the self and the other, and the self and the earth, and in this lack of mediation, a state of being which is harmoniously undetectable. I believe that their method of writing lends itself to a goal so large and necessary. For this reason as well, I look to their methodology as an inspiration for two intents which are quite similar.

As a non-Black scholar participating in observation and theorization surrounding Black existence, I also will employ the methodology of "speaking nearby", which is the belief that I am unable to speak on behalf of anyone that is not myself with full knowledge, or that I am able to speak *about* anyone but myself with full knowledge. Therefore I claim to do neither, instead choosing to speak nearby (Chen 1992, 84-87). I also employ the critical feminist practice of Linda Alcoff who requires of herself a ruthless self-reflexivity so as to research and write ethically. I will be clear about the "location" from which I speak throughout the piece, so that it is clear what my first hand experiences and observations are (Alcoff 1991, 25). Finally, I will be

accountable and responsible for what I am saying. I will do so by not only being open to criticism, but by asking for it (Alcoff 1991, 26).

My research methods were composed of my first hand observations, reading newspaper articles, scanning social media sites for commentary and event details, and looking at videos/photos taken at the event and posted publicly on social media or news sites. I look at different demonstrations that attended to the intent of Black Lives Matter. In speaking on these events, I look at the ways that BLM confronted and defied the dictates of respectability politics by relating these instances to queer and ratchet traditions in Freaknik.

2 CHAPTER ONE: MAPPING A GENEALOGY OF RATCHETRY IN FREAKNIK AND BLACK LIVES MATTER

Using respectability politics as a backdrop from which to contextualize recent Black Lives Matter protests in Atlanta, I use the sight of Black sexual leisure exploding into street activity during Freaknik to inform my analysis of ratchetness in Black Lives Matter. Though beginning as a respectable form of middle class networking, Freaknik quickly changed into an event which overwhelmingly attracted Black Atlanta residents from all social classes, as well as entertainers and party-goers from all over the nation (Thompson 27, 2007). As time wore on, the “freak” aspect of the yearly event would come to more accurately capture the festivities. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Freaknik began to change from an innocent networking opportunity for students, to a prolific cultural and sexual celebration that pulled in musicians, students from all over the country, and Atlanta residents of all socioeconomic classes to party (Thompson 27, 2007). “Seemingly overnight, Freaknic ballooned from an Atlanta happening to a national event drawing 20,000 people” (Thompson 28, 2007). In order to accommodate the size of the event, Freaknikers began to use Piedmont Park, a much larger park than those on the southwest side,

located in the wealthy, white area of Midtown. Due to the number of attendees, however, Freaknikers of course spilled out onto the surrounding streets and areas, unable to be contained within a singular park. White residents complained that the event caused a major inconvenience in their part of town (Thompson 29, 2007). Beginning in 1994, police cracked down on Freaknikers attempting to push them out of zones such as Midtown and Virginia Highlands (also a wealthy, white suburb of Atlanta) into small, highly patrolled areas. In response to this kenneling, Freaknikers switched from occupying the parks, to relishing in each other on the streets and even the highways, parking their cars anywhere they could find (Thompson 30 & 35, 2007). As the repression by police increased, so did the politicization of the event: “Not only did Freaknic shift from park to streets and from black diasporic student participation to a more local one, but the very meaning of the event changed...Freaknic became associated with the right to claim, possess, or take over city streets. The occupation of the streets and temporary control of urban public space in Atlanta became the precise reason many students were determined to participate in the event. It was an outright rejection of the city’s authoritarian controls” (Thompson 35, 2007). City officials attempted to shut down the event through brute police force and media slander (Thompson 29-34, 2007) Eventually, when that failed, the city would turn to the more insidious tactic of co-opting the event into a city approved festival, eventually deflating the very aspects that made Freaknik such a beacon and an anomaly (Thompson 36-39, 2007).

In order to understand the city of Atlanta’s obsession with shutting down Freaknik, it is important to understand what scared them so much about the event. During its height, Freaknik was a place of total sexual leisure. Cars were used as simultaneous speaker systems and stages upon which women would dance, often times removing their clothing as their audiences become more and more vocally engaged by their performance (Thompson 42, 2007). Men would

videotape women dancing provocatively and often times, women, at the sight of these video cameras, would perform all the more willingly towards the spectator (Thompson 29-33, 2007). Freaknik was an eruption of Black queer sexual politics, where the main actor and attraction were Black women who seemed to thoroughly enjoy the performance of their sexuality for total strangers. The engagement of such “lewd” activity in such a public space infuriated white residents, city officials, and the Black elite. Not only that, but Freaknik interrupted the circuits of commerce in order to do so, trading out the relatively public space of the park for the absolutely unimaginable zone of the highway when provoked by cops and angered residents. Freaknik was everything that respectability politics abhorred, and Freaknik relished in this. As Freaknik changed from a college picnic to a carnival that attracted many of Atlanta’s Black residents of all economic classes, an “interclass contact” interrupted the class segregation that plagues cities, aiding in the destruction of “gender and sexual categories of Western imperialism and colonization” by destroying puritan notions of sexuality and social commerce (Stallings 188, 2015; Thompson 81, 2007). Freaknik had the ability to recreate the city from a system meant to propagate capitalist exploitation and segregated existence, to one of sexual leisure and communitarianism. Engaging in total ratchetry from the perspective of the elite and also from the liberatory perspective that sees the ratchet as the possible challenge to respectability, Freaknik forever changed the landscape of Atlanta.

Similarly, certain moments of political street activity are able to restructure the function of the city by rejecting modes of respectability and employing a “ratchet” ethic. Ratchetness allows for a “strategy in the public sphere to combat the restrictions and ills of black respectability” that seek to disparage Black life which does not uphold notions of Eurocentric and capitalist morality (Stallings 2013, 137). I seek to understand the cultural phenomenon of

Freaknik and the political phenomenon of Black Lives Matter protests not as separate spheres, but as moments that are able to speak to one another while speaking back to respectability simultaneously.

The question of respectability and ratchetness centers in large part on the permissibility of the Black body, as does Black Lives Matter. Politics of respectability define the Black body as legitimate “only if” (and the if, even then, is very iffy); in contrast to a politics of ratchetness, which opens up possibilities of acceptance beyond uniform boundaries of constraint. A Black Ratchet Imagination allows for the understanding that moments of ratchetness open up the bounds of possibility by unabashedly embracing “failure” (Stallings 2013, 136). Respectability believes success to be a matter of the will, and so to not succeed could only point to a personal failure. Embracing the ratchet would be the celebration of that failure, particularly given the understanding that the failure is one of properly alienating the self, submitting to or participating in exploitation, and accepting harm to the earth and others. The failure is a failure to subsume oneself into the morality of capitalism, and is thus a beautiful failure worthy of jubilation. Drawing on Halberstam’s notion of queer failure, Stalling describes the failure of ratchetness as boundless, overtly and latently renouncing mores such as heteronormativity, bourgeois reproduction, and the violent discipline of middle class social relations (Stallings, 2013). This ratchetness “interrupts the order of knowledge and eros with antiwork activities, posthuman subjectivity, and postwork imagination” thus creating a simultaneous refusal to, and creation of, nonhierarchical modes of being (Stallings 2013, 136). Black Lives Matter has clearly articulated the impossibility of the Black body in space as citizen, as is seen, for instance, through the extrajudicial murder of Black people for no other reason than the weight of a Black body in space. Calling upon Freaknik to contextualize this genealogy, Freaknik similarly embodied a

threat realized. Black bodies roamed the city more freely than is customary, en masse, and in a manner which was neither respectable, nor as many media outlets stated, “tamable” (Thompson 2007, 34). Cars littered the streets, blocking intersections and highways, as people recreated a city center wherever it suited them. Black women danced on top of cars with or without clothes on and became a central spectacle of the event, defying sexual and racial mores (Thompson, 2007). To the white fear of a singular Black body, Freaknik answered with thousands, not only in numbers, but with a loudness. Freaknikers literally ratcheted up all that capitalism and the project of whiteness fear: the unabashed engagement in sexual leisure at the direct cost of circuits of capital. Similarly, Black Lives Matter answered with thousands of bodies in the street, disrupting the narratives of racial pacifism in Atlanta. At times, Black Lives Matter refused to listen to “its elders”: civil rights leaders and state officials who claimed to have the best interest of protestors at heart. Imbuing the streets with a childish playfulness that toyed with the not so removed concept of death, Black Lives Matter protesters hastily looked to the establishment and swerved onto its own path.

As people that are always already limited to cordoned spaces or to the total absence of space through literal and social death, this method of appearing en masse is, in it of itself, a refusal to be victimized or sequestered. In regards to Freaknik, Stallings states, “Freaknik’s failure to adhere to heteronormative common sense and black respectability results in a liminal space of undomesticated black communal eroticism that overcomes the class divisions set up by work society, as well as the public mediation of black women’s mobility and sexual expression” (Stallings 2015, 91). By unpacking the “undomesticated black communal eroticism that overcomes the class divisions set up by work society”, we can understand that the “eroticism” is not only present in moments such as Freaknik which overtly engaged in sexual activity, but is

also present in the sense popularized by Lorde, as the creative potential for radical self love and love for others and the necessary compulsion to destroy genocidal systems for that love. Black Lives Matter rallies engaged in this “undomesticated black communal eroticism” by fighting for liberation while also marking itself queer. The leaders of these rallies I profile are all Black and queer. Some present their genders in ways that are disrespectful to clear binaries, a few have bodies that defy fatphobic constraints on which forms can appear and where, and almost all have “questionable” sexualities. Not only are the sexual politics of BLM in Atlanta visual, they are in the intergroup conflicts that demarcate positions and priorities. The communalism is one that insists on the viability of life for all. The eroticism of the capacity for a love for self and others that does not shirk visibility despite being deemed “lewd” by society helps stake out the sexual politics of Black Lives Matter. This “undomestic”-ation also engages the way in which ascent into the ratchet requires the momentary loss of the self-evaluating self. The binds of respectability are externally created, but do to the insidiousness with which it circulates, becomes an internal policing as well. Engagement with the ratchet then requires a loss of this aspect of ego as a necessary condition. This was apparent in Freaknik, in the way that women, en masse, engaged in acts of public nudity and lust—an act that the socialization of femininity overtly rejects. Similarly, as I will describe in the next chapter, moments of engaging in ratchet street action demonstrated the loss of the internal panopticon.

The queer appearance of the leaders at the helm of this movement, and the unapologetic nature of highlighting the plight of Black femmes, trans folks, and queers on the streets and on social media conversations happening in the in between, lubricates the atmosphere of demonstrations from one of dignified grievance to carnivalesque engagement. When groups such as the NAACP or student groups of reputable institutions such as Morehouse call for rallies,

there is an already masculinized form of engagement that is expected. Names such as this elicit a self-policing that often denies protestors the opportunity to engage in political action salaciously. Upon hearing of such names, there is already an unspoken understanding that rules will not be broken here, or if they are, it will be through pre-planned civil disobedience. If, somehow, rupture does occur, it is expected that groups such as these will immediately denounce said action. On the other hand, groups such as Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee, Rise Up, #ITSBIGGERTHANYOU, and ATL is Ready immediately offer something different if only in their relative anonymity. Whether it is in the language they use to promote their action, through the bodies attendees will view on the megaphone, or the way that the organizers touch, tease, and comfort one another, the experience an attendee has is immediately different. Environments such as the ones I profile by these Black Lives Matter activists invites participation in more creative and unmediated ways. Similar to the way that Freaknik brought out the sexual in people who likely returned to their families that night, church that Sunday, or work that next Monday with all the straight laced performativity required to do so, protests that strike others as out of the codified norm allow for an experimentation of tactics, performance, and orientation.

By blocking traffic, stalling highways, and turning roads into walkways, space is reconstructed from the roads that carry Black people to prison, workers to soul-sucking jobs, and immigrants to borders, to avenues of communion, where dreams of new worlds are brought into reality and shared with hundreds of others. Anti-work ethics are manifested, particularly in the moments when mass street action defies an established itinerary, instead lazing on the roads, sitting under street intersections, jumping on work trucks (all activities that Black Lives Matter protestors took part in). The use of such tactics reconstructs the city's purpose from one of segregation and surveillance, to one of contact. Stallings, borrowing from Delaney, makes a

distinction between networking and contact. “Networking ‘is what people have to do when those with like interests live too far apart to be thrown together in public spaces through chance and propinquity’ and ‘is heavily dependent on institutions to promote the necessary propinquity’” (Stallings 2015, 188). Networking is the necessary tactic of bourgeois capitalist society, which impedes upon each facet of life, even leisure, and alienates us from one another despite technological and mechanic innovation that can bring us into closer, albeit estranged, proximity. Contact on the other hand “tends to be more broadly social and appears random” (Stallings 2015, 188). Stallings importantly notes that as Black communities become ever-stratified into upper, middle, and lower classes, contact becomes increasingly impossible (Stallings, 2015). This exacerbates the delineations between the respectable and the ratchet, allowing simple dichotomies to exist and be projected. Black Lives Matter often brings to the street Black business owners, students, precarious workers, unemployed youth, politicians, and homeless folks.

This method of playfulness and interclass contact is a threat present in Black Lives Matter. Although many of the organizers behind Black Lives Matter may come from middle-class backgrounds, or at least carry some of the trading currencies of such a class position such as higher degrees or knowledge of and access to resources, the movement itself includes members of working and precarious classes. For instance, the rallies that occurred in the summer of 2016, those that were at times composed of over 10,000 people, were populated with young Black workers recently gotten off of a shift from fast food, janitorial jobs, and blue collar work. The victims and families of those slain are often insulted by mainstream media as “ratchet” or of a lower class: “thugs” who had it coming. The interclass contact of a movement like Black Lives Matter reorders interclass relations and the streets themselves; protestors come together

playfully, overtaking black asphalt that tended to order their interaction, instead roaming, ruminating, lamenting, often times, laughing and dancing in the streets.

3 CHAPTER TWO: TRAYVON MARTIN & THE BEGINNING OF BLACK LIVES MATTER IN ATLANTA

Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee (TMOC) was a loose network of activists and organizers across the United States who were committed to the idea that the justice system and the state were incapable of impartiality and integrity. The group's tagline states: "Justice for Trayvon Martin and all victims of white supremacy & capitalism". Trayvon Martin was a seventeen-year-old Black child who was killed on February 26th, 2012 while walking from a convenience store to his father's fiancé's house in a gated community. Trayvon was killed by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer. Zimmerman shot Trayvon Martin while on the phone with police for looking "suspicious" (Gutman & Tianabeso, 2012).

The network's politics could loosely be defined as left of liberal with critiques of systemic white supremacy and capitalism as the core of its tactical ideology. Exactly three days before the announcement of George Zimmerman's culpability or innocence, Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee announced on its Wordpress page that, regardless of the outcome of the verdict, there would be protests nationwide. The justification for the protests, prior to knowing the outcome of the verdict, was based on the dual beliefs that the way Trayvon Martin's innocence was put into question throughout the trial by the media was disturbing and racist, and that the justice system was rigged from the start, and thus unable to break away from its white supremacy and classism ("No Justice in the Courts! National Action for Trayvon Martin when the Verdict Comes", 2013) There were to be simultaneous rallies in dozens of cities all across the

United States organized by those affiliated with TMOC, or just those that were inspired by the desire to organize a rally regardless of the outcome.

At the behest of this call, a small collective of about six to eight organizers in Atlanta, including myself, coalesced into a local collective of the Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee in order to call for an action. The composition of the collective in Atlanta was multi-racial: some white, Brown, and Black. Some of us were queer, and all of us were young. We decided to host the rally in West End Park. This was an unorthodox decision. The majority of protests and rallies in Atlanta took place somewhere downtown, be it in front of the CNN headquarters or Woodruff Park, the centrally located park downtown and the site of Occupy Atlanta in 2011. Residing southwest of downtown Atlanta, West End Park was fine but unremarkable. West End is a suburb of Atlanta that is comprised of mostly Black and working class residents. The average annual income for a West End resident was \$19,447, a low income by any stretch of the imagination, but a shocking number when compared to the income of an average Atlanta resident at \$47,527 per year (Kelly, 2016). There are no particular institutions of power to direct protest vitriol at in the West End. In comparison, downtown Atlanta is the financial and tourist center of the city. It contains important corporations such as Coca Cola and the media giant CNN, as well as City Hall, the Capitol, dozens of four and five star hotels and restaurants, Atlanta's largest university, corporate headquarters for companies such as AT&T and Bank of America, and an endless list of other powerful institutions. West End in 2013 was looked at as a neighborhood that was relatively untouched by the rapid gentrification ravaging neighborhoods in central and east Atlanta, and a simultaneous hub of Black culture. West End houses the Shrine of the Black Madonna, as well as a sizeable Black Muslim population. To the organizers of the event, some of whom had been involved in grassroots politics in the Atlanta for years and others who partook in

organizing in other cities, there was no immediate recollection of rallies outside of downtown in Atlanta, much less in the oft neglected neighborhood of the West End. The decision to call for a rally in the West End was an intentional decision to center working class Black people in a moment of frustration and protest. The point was to speak inwardly and amongst each other. Whereas downtown provided the space for a networking of activists, community members, perhaps even, politicians, West End allowed for “contact”: public exchanges that happen in one’s own neighborhood with one’s own people—a “getting to know”, rather than a series of cold exchanges or alienated gestures (Stallings 2015, 188). At the same time, a few of us, including myself, lived in West End, and felt we knew our way around the area and had positive ties to our neighbors. The rally was about Black life, so it simply did not make sense to have it in downtown: a mostly sanitized, white space where buildings loom large over manicured experiences in hotels and restaurants.

In hindsight, the rally in the West End after George Zimmerman’s acquittal was the genesis of the Black Lives Matter movement in Atlanta. At the moment that it took place, this was not the thought process as BLM had yet to coalesce into a national movement, but given the fact that the rally in West End was similarly sparked by anger at the murder of Trayvon, and the obscene trial after his death, the link is evident. Subsequent rallies would happen that week, but the first night of rallying began in West End Park at 6 pm on July 12th, 2013 and was hosted by two Black women of the recently formed TMOC. The Facebook event page for the rally was put up two days prior to the verdict, and by the time of the rally had amassed about a thousand, seemingly interested, participants who were interacting with the page by posting pictures, comments, and questions. The Facebook event used the same statement published by the national Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee as its event details:

We have no plans to celebrate any conviction, since all possible “legal” outcomes point squarely toward a re-imagined Jim Crow justice. A verdict is coming in the trial of George Zimmerman, for the cold-blooded murder of Trayvon Martin. We don’t know what the mostly white jury will decide, but this much we do know: there will be NO justice for Trayvon or the thousands of others like him. Zimmerman may be acquitted, and while this would be a slap in the face, the entire trial has been a slap in the face, the media campaign to demonize this young man is a slap in the face, and the entire system of racial profiling, mass incarceration, capitalist exploitation, and police terror is a slap in the face and a punch in the gut. Trayvon Martin stood his ground, and we applaud him, although it didn’t save his life and has been used to justify his death.

Zimmerman is certainly worthy of a murder conviction, but even this unlikely outcome doesn’t bring Trayvon back certainly does not mean an end to similar vigilante executions or the more official executions carried out daily by police. A conviction would serve as false “proof” that we are truly post-racial, that justice has been served, something we know is a brutal lie.

A manslaughter verdict would be even worse than an acquittal: the “justice” system could crow about how it had delivered the goods while Zimmerman is locked up for a couple of measly years. We have no plans to celebrate any conviction, since all possible “legal” outcomes point squarely toward a re-imagined Jim Crow justice, where only those interested in upholding a white supremacist and classist status quo will find freedom.

Thus we ask you to stand up on your block, in your community, in your city and join us in the streets at 6pm on the day of the verdict, regardless of what it is. Come to express your sorrow, your rage, and your continuing demand for justice for Trayvon and beyond.

The legal system won't save us, as the California Hunger Strikers remind us.

The clergy won't save us, and some are already teaming up with the police to prevent the righteous anger of the people from being expressed.

The politicians damn sure won't save us.

Only we can save us (www.facebook.com/TMOC).

The statement was one that skirted the narrative of respectability politics that often panders to substantiations of why a life is worthy (they were young, they were smart, they were brimming with potential). The statement repelled the very logic at the root of respectability, which is a logic that believes it is possible to thrive under the system, as it exists, but with certain modifications. By demanding action regardless of the verdict, TMOC was foreclosing on the idea that any justice could come about from the system, even if the conviction was one of guilt. Simultaneously, to the attendees of the events, narratives of dialoguing with power in any fashion were outright rejected as a viable end on the event page by the organizers, prior to the march. Respectability survives off of whole or partial legitimations of the state or systems of power. To invalidate the state outright is to cut off the air supply respectability requires to gain traction. By invalidating the state and media, prior to any activity from protesters, TMOC was also declaring any forthcoming coverage on protest activity as illegitimate in the hopes of foreclosing the inevitable categorization of protests as violent or nonviolent. I did not interact at all with the Facebook page at the time, feeling that as one of the organizers who lived in the West End, my time was best spent flyer-ing neighbors to come out. Questions by attendees on the Facebook page of whether or not the march would be peaceful were either unanswered by the organizers, answered by saying that some of the organizers would be bringing their children and children were welcome, or redirected into a question of whether or not the cops would choose to

be peaceful.

The aim of the rally was humble, because the expectations were small. The organizers believed that few people would show. We were hoping that the crowd would top a hundred. The aim was not necessarily to “speak truth to power” as we felt many rallies and protests tended to do. Instead, the aim was to bring into contact the people directly affected by state violence and anti-Black vigilantism to an event that could provoke movement at best, and conversation at worst. By calling for the rally in a Black neighborhood, the energy was being focused towards the community, rather than outsiders. There was no planned march, because the expectation was that not enough people would show to make a march not feel demoralizing. The forecast predicted a chance of rain which we predicted meant even less people than expected. The area of the park that was chosen for the rally was because it provided a few dozen feet of coverage where the basketball court was.

On the evening of July 13th, one day before the projected verdict announcement and the rally, George Zimmerman was declared not guilty. For this reason, the rally the next day would exceed every organizer’s expectations. Around 6 pm on July 14th, people began to amass in West End Park. The MCs riled folks up through speak-outs and chants, the usual prescriptive elements of a rally. As the clock approached 7 pm, the crowd encircled in multiple layers, growing into the hundreds and becoming too large for the basketball court, inevitably spilling onto the surrounding green area and playground. The crowd was mostly Black, young, and included many families. We were all nervous and unsure of what to do. I was helping scout people out from the crowd to get on the megaphone and say a few words. At that point, only one MC, Taryn, was left. The other MC, perhaps overwhelmed by the unforeseen amount of people, stood silently, passing her megaphone to others who wanted to participate in the speak-out. We were all

nervous. We didn't know what to do with this many people. Taryn was one of the organizers with the most years of experience, but also hadn't participated in political activity like this in many years. I could see the beads of sweat forming on her forehead and upper lip. I circled around to her several times while also making the rounds to our other fellow organizers, all of whom were offering more shoulder shrugs than definitive answers. The numbers were there, but perhaps our capacity to mobilize wasn't. The anxiety and elation of that day made me forget how we finally decided to march, but we did. Led not by the megaphone, but by a banner brought by attendees which simply stated, "Emmett Till 1955=Trayvon Martin 2013," the crowd began by taking the street. The moment that hundreds of feet hit the pavement, we were no longer organizers. The delineation between those with the megaphones and experience, and those who had never before been to a rally, fused into a public affect of impulsive possibility. We mixed into the crowd; the MCs rested their arms, letting the heavy megaphones dangle from their straps, as the crowd created sound and verve enough for itself.

It was the dead heat of summer in Atlanta. Humidity was high and the heat saturated the air. We were cloaked in the stickiness of sweat. The sky increasingly bore the grey marks of a brewing storm. The crowd still moved and chanted steadily, but I noticed people looking up anxiously at the sky every so often. We were now almost two miles away from where we had started: if it did start to pour, it would be a long walk back. With a few more sharp claps from the sky, the sky let loose. Something about that water falling heavy on us all caused euphoria. I had never seen grown people respond in such a way to rain unless under the influence. By that time we were on the wide and hilly road of Northside Drive, the main thoroughfare that connects the poor and Black southwest side of the city with the wealthy and white north. Perhaps it was the combination of being on a road that bifurcates the fragile distance between the colonized and

the colonizers, or the fact that we all felt the looseness of the new, or perhaps it was the incongruence of being in the middle of the road crying for justice when the sky decides to wail on you, but regardless, something was happening in the crowd. As babies got drenched in ways that parents would tend to fearfully avoid, and little kids ran around hollering devilishly, an ease of ego took over the “adults” in the crowd as well. Several Black women with soaked shirts did not worry about the increasing conspicuousness of their undergarments. Adults, including grown men, literally, skipped down the large hills of Northside Drive in pure, transgressive thoughtlessness. To see the heavy veil of masculinity removed struck me as a rare moment of forgetting about the respectable. The ease that I locate in moments of unmediated pleasure; an ease that results in looseness and the momentary distraction from the persistent voice that we have internalized which tells us to adjust, suck in, wipe, shrink, feel bad, was noticeably not present in the bodily movements and affective dispositions of several of the people there. Rather than running towards shelter, people that had been observing the march from under awnings and doorways ran towards the rally, joining in on the infectious laughter and joy. I, who was at that time in my life truly consumed with self-conscious thoughts of attractive presentation, felt the water beating the mascara out of my eyes into what most have been black streams and stains onto my cheeks and chin, but for some reason, I didn’t think about that until hours later, on the other side of the city, when I put my fingers to my lashes and realized they were bare. I, who would run to the bathroom if the weather were humid to see precisely how much my hair had frizzed, didn’t think about it.

I believe the inconsistency of our vulnerable pleasure and joy with the somber reason of why we were all gathered, increased the disassociation of social mores I felt many people experience. We were not attending to death properly. Given the prescriptions we are taught from

youth in regards to the proper embodiment and manifestation of grief, our joy was a disrespectful act. Similarly, we were not attending to political protest properly. That moment of intoxicating exultation changed the dynamic of the rally from airing grievance to engaging in contact (Stallings, 2015). Experiencing moments of disarray with strangers was an act that created certain affectionate bonds. Rallies always bring together strangers; they break apart some of the partitioning of our time and bodies from one another, congregating common and unknown people to us in spaces where we tend not to gather. However, moments of looseness, of the loss of self, of the intoxicating loss of self-awareness, are rare events that do not necessarily grace all rallies, and for this reason, this march remains a sort of birth and response to the Black Lives Matter movement.

The march weaved from Northside Drive into the heart of downtown Atlanta, making its way to the CNN headquarters where people chanted loudly for a few minutes, climbing the symbolic “CNN” red letters that stood in front of the building gleefully, eventually making their way to the intersection of Peachtree Street and Andrew Young International Boulevard where a rally reemerged in the middle of one of the most notable intersections in the downtown area. After this, the rally dwindled to a smaller number than the near thousand that were marching at its height, although a contingent of attendees and organizers still marched all the way back to the West End.

The rally in West End in response to Zimmerman’s acquittal was notable for several reasons. First off, as previously stated, this seems to have been the first rally of the Black Lives Matter movement in Atlanta. Although as organizers, Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee did not understand that it would help usher in an era of the BLM movement in Atlanta, in hindsight, this is, in fact, the case. A few hours before the rally in the West End, on the night of July 13th,

2013, Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, would write a note on Facebook entitled, “A Love Note to Black People”; inside the note she wrote, “Our Lives Matter, Black Lives Matter”. Less than a day later, as people congregated in West End Park, the hashtag and movement #BlackLivesMatter would not yet be within the consciousness of the vast majority of people there; instead, #HoodiesUp would be the hashtag that brought people out. Over the next few days and weeks, #BlackLivesMatter would come to imbue the many rallies that happened in the days after Zimmerman’s acquittal with particular meaning and lineage. The beginnings of movements are often not self-narrated as such, but are instead realized in hindsight as common themes, frustrations, and goals are articulated in multiple places.

The Justice for Trayvon Martin Rally was a particularly interesting start to the Black Lives Matter movement locally because of the way that it engaged respectability politics rhetorically and materially. A defining feature of respectability politics is that it consistently engages the state or the state’s affects through validation. By the state’s affects, I am saying that engagement with the state does not always necessarily mean engaging on a legislative, policy, or lobbying level: engagement with the state does not have to be through direct engagement with an arm of the government. Engaging with the state can also come in the form of validating the structures of the state, even when chastising them. This can be simplified into a “we are better than that” rhetoric, which romanticizes the purpose of the state, therefore glossing over any immoral actions by the state as a case of “falling short”. According to this ideology, the state is imagined as either well intentioned, or at worse, corrupt, but ultimately able to be pressured into following the correct moral strictures. So when TMOOC states in the first few lines of its statement leading up to the rallies in Atlanta and other cities, “We have no plans to celebrate *any* conviction, since all possible ‘legal’ outcomes point squarely toward a re-imagined Jim Crow

justice (emphasis is my own)”, then there is an overt rejection of respectability (“No Justice in the Courts! National Day of Action for Trayvon Martin When the Verdict Comes”, 2013).

TMOOC further details this rejection of a politics of respectability by overtly calling into question the respectability politics that went into play in demonizing Trayvon in the media all throughout the trial. As the media hypothesized about the degree of Trayvon’s “thugishness” and the inevitable criminality that wearing a hoodie reveals, resulting in his undoubtedly “warranted” murder, liberal responses failed to unequivocally shut down what amounted to an argument that deduced the worthiness to live on the ability to manifest white, capitalist decorum. As pictures of Trayvon, pushed forth by conservative media, circulated around the internet showing him flicking off the camera, wearing a grill, and blowing out smoke, it seemed that progressives’ response was to instead choose the image of Trayvon in a red Hollister shirt, smiling kindly and properly. This debate measured the worthiness of Black life in terms of its approximate distance from perceived ratchetery and would only amplify with the subsequent deaths of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and Sandra Bland.

In addition to the articulated politics of the Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee, the politics emerging from the actions of the march itself are instances of rejection to respectability. The decision to have the rally take place in a neighborhood which represents much of what Atlanta seeks to rid itself of—Blackness and poverty—is an attempt to reframe the goal of public protest from one centered on speaking to, at, or with, zones of recognized power, to a goal of turning inwardly, to community, to channel power, plan, and feel. The point was not for media to come either. Though the march ended up in front of nodes of power such as CNN or downtown businesses, the encounters were brief asides, not determining focal points. Rather than originating in nodes of state or state sentinel power, the rally began to form and harness its power

in a neighborhood of its own people. Atlanta experienced disruption not just because a group of people were trampling on roads meant only for vehicles; the city was disrupted because a mass of Black bodies treaded upon a roadway that at once connects and alienates the southwest side of the city (Black, poor) with the downtown and north sides (white, wealthy). These bodies are not meant to trample so openly in these roads: these bodies should only be seen on these roads when encapsulated in vehicle, and perhaps, even then, not (The Black Outdoors, 2016).

Ultimately, this rally would be the first of the Black Lives Matter movement in Atlanta not only due to the content, but because of the affect which it garnered. Previously, I argued that engagement in the politically ratchet requires the person to “relinquish their locus of being” (Harney & Moten 2015, 82). Regardless of what activated this relinquishing for each of those that experienced that slippage momentarily, the necessary condition for engagement with the ratchet in mass political action was set into motion. The openness brought about by what I read as a momentary evaporation of the ego’s mediation of the self began to open the door to a rejection of respectability politics. Though perhaps certain individuals at this march might have read their perfunctory participation in a non-normative act such as gleefully running down a hill with a shirt soaked through as ratchet, I do not read the *activities* of that day as necessarily ratchet. I do, however, read them as moments of refusing normative self-maintenance, such as respectability politics. This is important, because as the critique of respectability politics becomes an increasingly key part of the Black Lives Matter movement, the possibility of engaging in ratchet acts increases (Rose, 2016). In the next moments that I profile, the development of the national rhetoric and local struggle will reflect the increasing tension between the ratchet and the respectable.

3.1 #ITSBIGGERTHANYOU & TMOC's Queer Failure

On August 9th, 2014, Mike Brown was killed in broad daylight in Ferguson, Missouri. Mike Brown was an eighteen-year-old Black boy whose life was taken by white police officer, Darren Wilson. After being shot at twelve times around noon on August 9th, Mike Brown's body would lay face down in a pool of his own blood on Canfield Drive for four hours while his family was barred from getting to him (Bosman & Goldstein, 2014). In the days following, the disrespect to Brown's life would only continue. On August 10th, a memorial site containing flowers, candles, and a teddy bear for Brown was ruined when a police officer allowed his dog to urinate on it (Follman, 2014). That night, standoffs between police officers and protesters began. The tension that had been holding the city hostage erupted into riots (Follman, 2014). This unrest in Ferguson would continue, in waves, for the next several months. The unrest in Ferguson ushered in a new epoch of the Black Lives Matter movement nationally and heightened the tensions surrounding respectability politics. As the language surrounding the riots in Ferguson mirrored the same racist language used to justify the murders of Black youth ("thugs", "criminals"), the Black Lives Matter movement was forced to respond to how it would orient itself to the "violence" being propagated in Ferguson. Would the movement support or chastise the rioters?

#IT'SBIGGERTHANYOU formed in the summer of 2014, debuting online days before their first rally on August 18th, 2014 in downtown Atlanta. The rally was called for in the wake of the escalating events in Ferguson. The mission of the group is to mobilize "millennials to invest themselves in action-based social reform by utilizing modern avenues and trending tools that redefine community centered engagement both nationally and internationally" (facebook.com). Although the group's mission seems broad, the function of the group, in reality,

centered on mobilization and response to the various murders of Black people at the hands of the police. The text for the rally stated that it was a “peaceful protest on the steps of the CNN center”. Under the date and time, it stated, “The time has come for us to fight for our right to be human. Help us gather together and demand radical change!” Interestingly, the event asked for a certain dress code: “We’re calling all people, young + old, black + white alike, to wear #SundaysBest...Students, wear your graduation cap & gown.” Underneath this dress code, in red, bolded text the flyer asked: “How good must we look to be considered innocent?” (facebook.com).

The messaging of the rally seemed to be confronting the way in which the media and the Ferguson Police Department had questioned Brown’s criminality, and in turn, ethics, in order to justify his death. However, it also seemed to not confront the violence erupting in the streets of Ferguson. Right on the flyer were the words and the command: “non-violent”. The dress code offered the possibility of directly confronting and disparaging respectability politics. It also begged the question of how the organizers would confront the looting and rioting in the streets of Ferguson.

By most measures, the rally was a huge success. The organizers of the rally believed that there would be a few hundred people when, in fact, several thousand showed up (Carmichael, 2014). The rally’s central figure was Aurielle Lucier, a 19 year old queer Black woman who would become a key public face of the Black Lives Matter movement in Atlanta based off her presence that night and in the events #ITSBIGGERTHANYOU would come to organize in the weeks and months after this rally. The crowd filled the sidewalks and dozens of people climbed onto the giant red CNN letters to get a view of the speakers. Some came in the prescribed clothing, but the vast majority wore their regular casual clothes to the event. Organizers rallied

folks on the bullhorn through chants and short speak-outs. After this, folks spilled out onto the streets for a march with a line of the organizers and others at the front, arms locked, with bullhorns in hand. The image could have easily been mistaken for one fifty years earlier during the Civil Rights Movement. The enormous crowd marched down Marietta Street where the CNN center is located towards the then just built National Center for Civil and Human Rights on Ivan Allen Boulevard. Before reaching Ivan Allen, a heavy rainfall came down on the crowd. Undeterred, marchers locked arms once again, fists in the air, chanting loudly, “No justice, no peace”. The march arrived at the Center and circled back towards the CNN center.

By then, the rain had gone, but the remnants still showed itself in damp shoes and t-shirts. Back at the CNN center, Lucier gave an electrifying speech—arguably the highlight of the entire night. She began: “There is a high running through this crowd right now. And it ain’t from weed, it ain’t from no pills, and it ain’t from drink. It’s from the spirit — the spirit of civil disobedience” (Carmichael, 2014). Every few of Lucier’s words were met with applause. She is an orator: her talent is undebatable. Her words shook and moved the crowd. Lucier continued with a statement that celebrated the unity with which the crowd had come to appear in the streets that night. She said that folks had come together because, “there are people still being fired upon in Ferguson. There are people still losing their lives at the hands of the law enforcement we pay for” (Carmichael, 2014). Lucier seemed to be addressing the initial murder of Mike Brown, as well as the increasingly militarized presence of the police in Ferguson as a result of the riots. She then gave her first prescription, “So you wanna know what you can do? You wanna know what you can do?” The crowd screamed: “Yes!” Lucier replied, “Educate. Yourselves.” (Carmichael, 2014). Lucier said that the task of the people there that day was to go back to the social media where they had found out about that day’s rally to tell all the people they knew about why and

how they had gathered there that night. She told the crowd that #ITSBIGGERTHANYOU would be hosting panels and events, and it was the task of all those concerned to attend those and spread the word to others. “So it’s your job, I challenge you, I task you, I demand that you go home: Upload the Revolution. Upload the Revolution. And download your education”, Lucier said (Carmichael, 2014). After telling the crowd what they should go on to do, Lucier then said, “I think we can do it,” to which the crowd replied “Yes we can! Yes we can!!” in unison fifteen times over (Carmichael, 2014). There is no way that the almost entirely Black crowd did not mean that chant in a way that called upon the imagery of a young Barack, running for the office of president in 2007. The refrain was such an interesting one. What place of praise had Obama earned here? He hadn’t come out in support of the riots, of course. Of course, he had condemned them, saying that those out in the streets of Ferguson had “no excuse” (Miller, 2014). The crowd seemed to resolutely hold the truths of a condemnation of the state for systematic violence and the joy of Black presidency at once. Lucier continued to rile up the crowd with similar appeals to continue coming out to the group’s events, to spreading the word, and to creating an intergenerational knowledge of how to spread education on social media, and in so doing, she spoke to the “old heads” of the Civil Rights Movement (Carmichael, 2014). Lucier closed with these words, “That’s all I have for you. That’s all I have. Please disperse peacefully.... We’re all accountable for our actions.”

I remember leaving that rally feeling odd. The event was called as Ferguson was being set on fire and yet the allusions to Ferguson were vague and unspecific. The organizers seemed as though they were not ready to condemn or support the riots outright. The unrest in Ferguson was all over the media. Police killings of Black people had happened since the start of the BLM movement and marches had happened in response to those police killings, but these were

certainly the first riots that the movement had borne witness to. There was an escalation that was unfolding and it was bringing respectability politics to a point of rupture. So, where was the stance? Thankfully, no members of #ITSBIGGERTHANYOU had condemned the rioters, as a devout rhetorician of respectability politics certainly would have, but still, in the absence of a language of support, the critique the organizers seemed to have put out in regards to respectability—“How good do we have to look to be considered innocent?”—seemed to not go far enough. The consistent references to non-violence visually and semantically also left an odd feeling. Lucier’s impromptu speech was striking in its ability to capture thousands of peoples’ attention. It also was impromptu in a moment of high energy and emotion and therefore should not be judged as fleshed out ideology. However, it was not just her speech but also the event as a whole that contributed to a feeling of unease. Her call to attendees of educating themselves could mean a million different things, some of which have the potential to be radical. But the call to do so, in conjunction with the call to show up in caps and gowns, partnered with the absence of outright support of the rioters, created a respectability vortex of its own. The march’s route, from the largest media center, to the newest emblem of the Civil Rights Movement, alongside the tactic of interlocked arms and raised fists, alongside the calls for nonviolent engagement—it all seemed to not go far enough in a moment when those in Ferguson were giving it their all. The call to educate oneself captured a core tenant of respectability politics of having the credentials to do and think. A few hundred miles away, rioters in Ferguson were not engaging in education; they were engaging in the unmediated ratchetness of the unlocated self. They were engaging in the self-discovery of violence against the oppressor (Fanon, 2004). However, by most standards, the rally that night was a huge success. A majority Black crowd of thousands of people composed an intergenerational and enthused crowd. The event was well covered and would

propel #ITSBIGGERTHANYOU as the main vehicle for the Black Lives Matter movement in Atlanta for at least the next year.

Two days later, Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee was hosting its second rally in Atlanta for the very same reasons as #ITSBIGGERTHANYOU: the murder of Mike Brown and the unrest in Ferguson. The Atlanta collective that had come together to host its first march after the death of Trayvon coalesced again with the addition of one or two people. There had been another national call to have a rally by TMOG organizers nationwide and we decided to once again participate. Though plenty of other Black folks had been killed since Trayvon's death, riots hadn't happened. TMOG was enraptured by the fact that the riots were occurring and were drawing the attention of larger America. We felt it was our opportunity to push the conversation on violence and self-defense further. TMOG called for the rally in the West End again, as our first had been a success. We hoped that the credibility we had built in the neighborhood during our first march would result in even more numbers. The event's name immediately set a particular tone: "Hands Up, Turn Up", a take on the phrase "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" which had become popular in the days after learning of Brown's death and how he had been shot with his hands in the air in a gesture of innocence. Our Facebook event description began with passionate support for the rioters and with an absolute dismissal of respectability: "Another Black man dead. This would be just another day like every other day in America, if it weren't for one simple fact: Ferguson turned out, stood up, and has refused to get back on its knees. Mike Brown was days away from college? Don't care. Didn't he steal some cigars? Don't care. What about the looters? Don't care." The Facebook description continued its scathing review of respectability and its insistence on measuring whether a person "deserves" death: "Mike Brown's life was of value—is of value. Full stop. No college degree makes that so; no robbery takes that away. The

people of Ferguson recognize this. White supremacy's subtle baiting of thievery, college degrees and saggy pants and talking back does not." Although the Facebook event was made two days prior to the #ITSBIGGERTHANYOURALLY, I cannot help but think that we were partially affected by the flyer we saw for that event, and so chose to use even stronger vitriol towards anything resembling respectability than we perhaps would have if it had just been the larger media narrative. The description ended with, "We talk back. We turn up. We stand tall. With Ferguson—for Mike, for every black body in America robbed of its right to live—for every injustice that we are growing sick and tired of. We are done with your police/media slander campaigns. We are sick with anger." It was an appeal to violence and ratchetness. There was no skirting around which side we were on. We were with the rioters, we were against the state, and we were against attempting to police any reactions to the daily carnage of Black life.

This time the rally was hosted by Taryn and a young, Black, stud, Dean. The MCs worked the crowd, attempting to energize them before the march we planned to take. Taryn and Dean split turns talking on the megaphone, repeatedly conveying to the crowd the bravery of the rioters in Ferguson and the racist pandering of the media's coverage. As time passed, it became quickly apparent that there would not be as many people as last time. In fact, it turned out to be almost a quarter of the number of people as our first rally. The dip in numbers left us with an anxiety unlike the rally previous. Rather than ecstatic giddiness, we were left with a fearful anxiety: were we going too far? Were people not ready to embrace the riots? The possibility of failure began to seep into my consciousness. It was the failure of the organizer to read the moment, to understand the "correct" step, to "capitalize" on the moment. After inviting members of the crowd to speak out, we took to the streets. This time, our route was much shorter and was punctuated by an assemblage of responses, the likes of which we had not experienced in the first

rally we had hosted. We took a stop on the march at the West End Marta station, only a mile or two away from the park where we had started. There seemed to be a dueling desire in the crowd to stop at the Marta station or to keep going: it was fragmented and uneven. It seemed some folks wanted to be there because of the possibility of damaging property or running loose at the station. There were certainly more folks masked up than the previous march. There was a tension to the rally that seemed to arise from the divide between those willing and desiring to engage in ratchet behavior and those who were not willing. The march left the station without anything of significance happening. As the march snaked around the West End neighborhood, chants of “Fuck the police!” were screamed by some and refused by others. Each time a cop car rolled by, there would be middle fingers thrown while others chastised those engaging in this behavior, shaking their heads disdainfully. Night had fallen, and my most vivid memories of that evening were of the affective circulations of unease as flashing blue lights illuminated the faces of varying tension around me. Some were on the verge of losing themselves in the moment, beginning to flirt and engage with the ratchet through a pleased anger, hollering about hatred for the police and running ahead or behind the crowd for no apparent reason. Others had the aura of a clenched fist: each affect circulated, solidifying the other against it. As we made our way back towards the park for what seemed like it would be an end to the march, again the affective division showed. It was obvious that many had not had their satisfaction and were not ready to disperse. As we came face to face with a cop car that was blocking the roadway on the path to the park, several protesters, masked and unmasked, surrounded the car: an object of emotive vitriol had been located. In a communion of circulating ratchetry, several protesters began taunting the police. A possession of impossible conjuring took hold of those surrounding the vehicle and the cop: there was one cop in the car and at least a dozen of us—in light of Ferguson,

what was possible? Some walked up to the window miming a range of violent emotions and intentions, while others took the liberty of kicking tires, or scraping little bits of the blue paint, toying with the rush of detection and the fear of discovery. The descent into total loss of self seemed impossible given the layer of people that were watching what was happening, creating a noticeable distance between themselves and those that were face to face with the cops. Others chose to leave at that moment, muttering quite loudly that this is not what they signed up for. Eventually, the thrill of trifling with the police officers dissipated, and most everyone that was left, a crowd that had likely dwindled down to 50 people, made their way to the park. Once there, the tensions of the night finally boiled into a heated argument. A couple of older Black women and white women began to engage in a condemnation of the acts that had taken place. TMOOC organizers and some of those that had engaged in flirting with the ratchet, fought back against these emotions, defending the right of people to engage the state in whatever way they saw fit. One of the most vocal of the older women, who was Black, then accused all of those engaging in the taunting of police to be white anarchists that were masked and therefore, able to shrug off responsibility. Although there certainly were white anarchists, and they certainly were engaging in taunting the police, it was simply not true that all those who participated were white. Upon hearing this condemnation from the mouth of a Black woman, a young white woman began to proudly tell a story of how she had reported to the police the identity of a masked white anarchist at another rally when she had run across a picture of said person on a news website, so that she could protect Black people from being unfairly blamed for the property damage that had occurred that night. Of course, upon hearing this, the exchange of emotive responses became even more inflamed, as those who held the line of freedom of engagement became incensed at what was a glorified story of snitching. Tense words were exchanged, with an obvious

generational divide informing the conversation. Attempts to reaffirm courteous exchange would punctuate the conversation in a continuation of the roller coaster-like feeling that night offered.

Eventually everyone would disperse, and the queasiness of being unable to read the rally set into those involved in organizing it. In comparison to the rally two days previous at the CNN center, the TMOOC rally in the West End was a failure. From the number of people that came out, to the inability to curate certain feelings among the crowd, it would be no question to most of which rally properly succeeded. The failure of TMOOC that night was a queer failure: by all standards of progressive and liberal principles, of successfully quantitative means and linear, rational messaging, we failed. And the reprieve of that failure, an intent which we unknowingly manifested, was that we engaged in the undoing or unbecoming necessary of the ratchet. By engaging in non-linearity and falling from intention to the unknown, TMOOC was forced into the uncomfortable dimension of unraveling norms. Norms that govern movement work, even though movement work allows us the hope of becoming ungoverned. The uneven engagements between members of the crowd also showed the ways in which ratchetry deftly circulates when confronted with different affective responses to queer failure (Halberstam, 2011). When the engagement with the ratchet is marked by a loss of the locus of being and the subsequent descent of such an act as a shared, collective pleasure, the movement feels fluid, almost natural, similar to the euphoria circulating in the first TMOOC march. When the desire for undoing is contained to atomized beings in a crowd, it jumps awkwardly, skittishly, perhaps pleasurably to those desiring it, but in a sadist fashion. The starkness of the two rallies indicates another layer of the ratchet—the extension of failure to a literal failure of the collective affect. In this failure, perhaps the possible moves in less pronounced ways, in ways that are awkward and uncomfortable, and in that movement, the almost alien act of unbecoming must arise from the sharpness of its reflection

in the face of the respectable, rather than in the collective intoxication of its refusal (Halberstam, 2011).

4 CHAPTER THREE: ATL IS READY AND THE BATTLE FOR THE RATCHET

On July 5th, 2016, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, two white officers shot and killed Alton Sterling. Alton Sterling, known throughout the neighborhood for selling CDs on the street, was wrestled to the ground by the two officers after they supposedly received a call that a man selling CDs had threatened to use his gun on someone (Lau & Stole, 2016). Sterling had recently and legally acquired a gun after a string of robberies of street vendors in the area had occurred. After forcibly taking Sterling to the ground, with one officer digging his knee into Sterling's chest and another officer digging his knee into Sterling's thigh, the officers shot at Sterling in close range about 6 times. Sterling died of shots to his chest and back. Less than 24 hours later in Minnesota, Philando Castile was shot and killed by a police officer in front of his girlfriend and her four year old daughter within 1 minute and 43 seconds of having been pulled over. Philando was stopped by the police officer and his partner for possibly fitting the description of someone who had recently been involved in a robbery, as both the robber and Philando had, according to the police, "wide-set noses". The officers approached the car on both sides, hovering over the passenger and drivers' seats. When the officer asked Philando for his license and registration, Philando gave the officer a heads-up that he had a pistol on him because he was licensed to carry. The officer, apparently feeling threatened, then told Castile to not move. Castile began to put his arms in the air to show that he was unarmed, at which point the officer dislodged four to five bullets in Castile's arms. Immediately afterwards, Diamond, Castile's girlfriend, live streamed the rest of the interaction, including Castile bleeding out, to Facebook . According to records released after his death, Castile had been pulled over by the cops fifty-two times before (**cite**).

Meanwhile, in Atlanta, Georgia, as people all over the nation were processing the almost concurrent deaths of two Black men, a security guard walking his route in Piedmont Park found the lifeless body of a Black man hung from a white rope on a tree near the “Free Nelson Mandela” monument. Once officers arrived on the scene, they stated that an investigation was not necessary because the event was clearly a suicide. As news of this event slipped out on the morning of July 7th, people began to tweet at local news stations to report on the unsettling event at Piedmont Park. News stations such as WSB-TV tweeted back curtly that they did not report on suicides (Blau, 2016). These moves by the police and media caused a wildfire on social media with the odd circumstances of the hanging and the subsequent disregard by authorities creating a haze of paranoia in an already tense environment of Black death. Within a few hours, someone tweeted out that just thirty minutes from the scene of the hanging KKK flyers were found littering the ground. #PiedmontHanging became a nationally trending topic, with people all over Atlanta and the nation suggesting that the young Black man found in Piedmont Park had been lynched by white supremacists. By the afternoon of that day, Rise Up, “a multi-racial leftist organization born out of the Ferguson struggle”, had called for a rally alongside ATL is Ready and Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, that night in response to the deaths of Sterling and Castile, as well as for the man found hung in Piedmont Park (Anonymous Contributor, 2016). The rally was to meet at the main train station of downtown, Five Points, at seven and then march to Piedmont Park, the site of the hanging. The rally was several hundred strong, if not over a thousand, a large rally by Atlanta standards. The energy was high throughout the march from downtown to the park in midtown, as the organizers with megaphones kept energy high. At the park, the rally came to a stop and had a speak out mostly composed of various Atlanta organizers riling up the crowd. Organizers alluded to the strange circumstances of what had

happened in the park just hours previous; the chant of, “What happened at Piedmont Park?” overtook the crowd several times.

After the speak-out, the rally seemed to have officially ended, however hundreds in the crowd still felt angry and unsatisfied. These people broke back out onto the streets again, riled up with the death of three looming over them. Police presence was high, but for the most part, hands off, a tactic that was visible at many of the rallies in the past couple of years. Once the march neared the on-ramp of the highway, we veered towards the ramp where a few state troopers attempted to block the path. Some of those that were the first to confront the troopers locked arms in order to push past the cops and onto the highway. Other members of the crowd, masked and unmasked, ran forward, past the state troopers and past those with linked arms, breaking apart the stoicism of the march form. Hundreds followed, running, screaming, chaotically gaining in numbers onto the highway so as to stop cars in their tracks. Protesters lost composure when confronted with that which is not supposed to be: they skipped around, laughed manically, darted between cops. The cops, of course followed, arbiters of order and decency, and began to grab at protesters. Several de-arrests occurred with protesters pulling away those that had been grabbed by police, something which, upon the regular surface streets where most rallies take place, tends to rarely happen in Atlanta’s demonstration culture, as protestors are gripped by the fear of the illegal in the face of a cop (Anonymous Contributor, 2016). Within a few minutes, the frantic police officers were joined by reinforcements: police cars and an arrest van rolled onto the highway (Anonymous Contributor, 2016). The agitation that had possessed the crowd and resulted in a disturbance of the highway’s function turned into a wildly gripped fear: the sight of dozens of cops, zip ties, and the van which they planned to throw us in caused people to scatter, running off the highway, towards the ramp, into the hope of safety on the streets. Highway

takeovers, though a staple of protest politics historically, had been a relatively unused tactic in Atlanta in recent history, and when it has been, it is usually pre-coordinated (Gray, 2014). The threat of arrest had been thwarted and perhaps with the particular intoxication that comes from “getting away with it” and discarding the respectable, the mob of protesters continued onto the streets, moving towards the center of the city. At times, lines were drawn in the crowd and allegiances shown. When some people attempted to build barricades against riot police in a downtown park, liberal forces dismantled them, alleviating the cops of the extra work. The march continued this way for hours, roaming aimlessly and insatiably. The march that had a clearly defined beginning seemed to have no end. Those with megaphones were nowhere to be seen; we moved forward directionless and vibrating with the energy of a shoplifter who has successfully pocketed an item for the first time; we were the nightmare of Atlanta: mostly Black, young, roving, daring, and aimless.

That night, July 7th, as hundreds roamed Atlanta’s city streets, news trickled in that a few cops in Dallas, Texas had been shot at a Black Lives Matter rally. Many of us did not hear of these incidents until we got home that night or the next morning as the news told us that the shooter had been killed by a bomb detonated by a robot after an hours long standoff (Domonoske, Chappell, & Hu, 2016). The fact that the shooter was a Black man targeting cops at a Black Lives Matter rally gave the media and much of the American populace the fuel it needed to galvanize the crusade of painting Black Lives Matter and its sympathizers as terrorists and cop killers. All the next day while at work, I thought about how tame the rally that was slated to happen in succession, on the night of July 8th would inevitably be in the face of this news. Close friends and fellow organizers I knew texted me about it. We would walk out tonight to apologies, to chastising, to dichotomies of good and bad protesters. The energy that we felt the night before

would dissipate as crowd managers would imbue attendees with the dysphoric feeling of empathizing with the state when it is your enemy. The organizer of that night's rally, the NAACP, exacerbated this fear as we knew they would likely deflate the energy of a rally in favor of respectable platitudes and historical revisionism. A few hours before the slated rally, Kasim Reed, Atlanta's mayor, held a press conference. Calling for peace, Reed chastised the short-lived highway takeover the night before, saying that Martin Luther King would not approve of such an act (Davis, 2016). Reed, generously reaching well beyond the truth, said that MLK Jr. had respected the law, and so those that followed in his footsteps (seemingly all protesters) should similarly abide by the rules (Davis, 2016).

I arrived at the rally around 7:30 or 8 pm, after the speakers of the NAACP likely came on. As someone who was recently recovering from feeling like I had to attend almost every rally in the city, I decided that this night, I would sit it out. The combination of factors with the police shooting and the call for a rally by the NAACP made me feel as though this rally would do nothing but demoralize and upset me. I had a bad and long day at work. I had resolved to go alone to the movies and heal up from another stressful week. As soon as I had paid for my ticket, my popcorn, and my beer, and found a seat inside the theater, my phone started blowing up. Several of my friends were asking if I was at the rally or if I had seen how wild it was. My mother texted me saying that she saw TV footage of thousands of people downtown and she was worried about me. After a cursory search on local news sites, I immediately got up and left, driving towards downtown as quickly as I could. I parked my car when traffic got to be an impediment, walking as quickly as my legs would allow. I couldn't find the rally at first, so I followed the seeming dozens of police and news helicopters in the sky until I fell upon the largest amount of people I had, until that moment, seen congregated in Atlanta's streets. The wall

of human beings was as thick as a fortress. As though in a stupor, I tried to make my way through to what seemed to be the other side—perhaps the front—of the rally. I pushed through hundreds and hundreds of people, moving my body edgewise so as to get through the crowd. I recognized two people I knew as I walked through, a shockingly low number given my familiarity with Atlanta organizers in relation to the amount of people there. I overheard a few people say that Atlanta rapper T.I. had just come through. I felt giddiness and power and shock as I bumped shoulders with people. There were chants, there was dancing, and there was yelling. The allusion to Freaknik made itself from the thick wall of people that radiated jubilation, boredom, and stimulation to the place where the crowd chose to gather. As I made my way to the other side, I saw that the crowd was butted up right against a highway on-ramp. However, rather than a few police officers standing guard as was the case the day before, there were at least three rows of cops in cars, motorcycles, and cops on foot. Their presence was exacerbated by the fact that all of them had their flashing blue and white lights on. However, more striking than the number of the cops, were the numbers of people and the energy of the crowd. In front of the wall of police officers were a variety of affects. Some people stood in the face of the cops, yelling at them and giving them the middle finger. Others, right next to them, were sitting on the ground, as though having a picnic, chatting with each other, laughing. Still others were roaming around nervously, like me, taking in the scope, tense at the overt presence of the police and at the possibility of such a moment. There was lightness to the weight of the moment that could have only been brought about by the bodies in that space and the numbers of them. The crowd was almost entirely Black, incredibly young, and was largely working class. Workers from the businesses downtown were just getting off shifts still in their work shirts, Snapchatting the event as though it were a party. In fact, in many ways, the atmosphere was one of a subversive festival.

Whereas joy often times feels ethereal, weightless in the way it moves through and around us and the way it makes us feel, the joy within that space was dense and heavy. The joy was one that sat on the chest and grounded the feet, and in so doing, allowed for the rest of the body to move effortlessly, and for the mind to skip that step of reflection between ideation and action.

As I came to understand through bits and pieces that day and through reading later, people had coalesced in front of the highway connector downtown because the NAACP rally was not satisfying to them. The original rally was called for at Centennial Park: “the event consisted of a speak out that went on for hours before people expressed their desire to march. The march was highly coordinated at first and went in a circle around the park time and time again. Eventually there was a point at which the crowd almost universally decided it was time to break out...it was at this point that the organisers [*sic*] officially deemed their event over” (Anonymous Contributor, 2016). The schism between what attendees and organizers of this rally wanted seemed so vast and uncontrollable that it could not be contained by the basic march format of speak out, march, closing remarks. Something else—something new—was desired. The crowd, seized by a shared affectivity of irritation and impossible desire, marched “almost immediately” to a highway on-ramp (Anonymous Contributor, 2016). Due to the attempts of the night previous, the cops were already blocking off several intersections in the area. This led the crowd to break up. At the point at which I joined, I was astounded by what was only a fraction of the crowd. The clogged roadways on my way to the rally were the result of the fact that at least two other crowds of hundreds were roving the streets of Atlanta, perhaps with a one track passionate desire to take over the highway, or perhaps with the affective energy of purposelessness. The NAACP rally had an ethos of respectably approaching issues through linear modes. By having attendees march endlessly in a circle around a small radius, the NAACP

was creating a literal ring around which engagement cycled repetitively into an acceptable mode of propriety. From this perspective, the circular cycle's attempts failed, engaging instead the irritation of mundane repetition. Though occupying streets without proper jurisdiction, the act itself was empty of any signifier beyond what the state would wish such an act to be. The rote orbiting left intact the spatial underpinnings of the city: order, linearity, continuity, and respectability. The decision of thousands to break away was a decision to break away with order and procedure.

As the sunlight slipped into darkness, I witnessed protesters tying handkerchiefs, tee-shirts, and bandannas onto each others' faces. Unlike many narratives that were pushed through by the state, the media, and many of the left and liberal forces in the city, these were not "white agitators" or "outsiders": these were young Black people taking precaution. The stand off with the cops at the exit on Williams Street vacillated between the careless ease that I had seen earlier and high confrontation and tension. At one point, several masked protesters quickly jumped onto cop cars and vans on the ramp, gleefully relieving the frustration at not being barred from taking the highway (Anonymous Contributor, 2016). Similar to the way that the desire of the city and its respectable residents to shut Freaknik out of Piedmont Park provoked Freaknikers to respond by taking the streets and the highways in a way that was part pleasure and part vengeance, the crowd revealed in the tension of total lawlessness and simultaneous restraint. Unlike most marches I had been to, call and response did not arrange the crowd into a particular structure. When there was a call and response, it was spontaneously screamed out by a person in the crowd, megaphone-less—in fact I saw no megaphones in sight—and then taken up by others. I heard the chant of, "What happened in Piedmont Park?" more times than the night before and this time it was directed at police officers. It seemed to me that even more people had heard of

the strange circumstances of the hanging. At some point, a semi truck closed in on the crowd, somehow successfully getting past all the cops and protestors before, and attempting to make the final ascent onto the highway. Of course, this was not possible. There were hundreds of people littering the truck's path to the highway. The driver, aggressive and obviously frustrated by this blockade, moved his truck forward at a high speed for the few feet of emptiness between the grill of the truck and protests. He stopped inches away from a couple of protesters. The driver was white; his face turned red as he started yelling at us to move. Several protesters climbed the truck, laughing at the man. Dozens of others threw water bottles and other handy objects at his window, his truck, and his contorted, red face. Next thing we knew, the driver had ducked down into his seat, and rolled up his window quickly. A few minutes later, his face reappeared, cheeks wet with tears and self-pity. This made the crowd lose their minds; we howled with laughter. The sight was beautiful. Black bodies jumped all over the truck, hollering loudly and without reserve. It would require several cops and a lot more time to eventually clear the man and his truck from the area. The message was clear: this white man was either for Black life or he was against it. Whether his threat of mowing down bodies to move capital through its circuits effectively was an empty threat or a full one, it was real, and the realness with which it fell upon the crowd, fell back unto his body and his truck. Perhaps if he were Black, perhaps if he had shown empathy, perhaps if he courteously tried to move through, he would have been given the benefit of the doubt, but because of who he was and what he did, his aggression was met by force.

The one friend that I knew closely and had seen, I tried to roll with for safety but for some reason or another—perhaps my non-Blackness—they seemed to have no interest. Wandering around alone, a young woman approached me and quickly befriended me. She was on the cusp of her twenties, young, Black, petite and baby-faced. I don't remember the

conversation that she sparked to introduce herself, but I do remember the connection feeling natural and immediate and not because we had common interests or goals—there wasn't the time to discover that. Our connection was one that could only be born in moments of total spontaneity and the rejection of the social mores that dictate that relationships should be built slowly and over time, with linear stepping stones as markers of development. She came up to me as a man was hitting on her, seemingly seeking a kinship of rejection, which I offered. We rolled together and when the crowd started to move forward a couple of hours later and we seemed to have different intentions for the rest of the night, we parted by embracing hands tightly.

The hours long standoff at the highway ramp on Williams Street may well have continued for hours. Mayor Reed came to address the crowd after night had fallen in an attempt to bring the specter of respectability crushing down onto the crowd. He cloaked his attempts to deflate the crowd and awaken the inner morality of the state within each person by saying, “Right now I want to make sure all you of you are safe” (Davis, 2016). Then Reed, as though possessing any controlled power in that moment, surrounded literally from all sides by thousands of protestors, said: “We’re gonna let these young people go forward with this protest. We’re respecting their first amendment right and we’re the home of Dr. Martin Luther King.” Stirring the ever-immortal spirit of Dr. King to dispossess power and control crowds, Reeds words deflated in the face of his mission. A few minutes after the call to respectability, a huge portion of the crowd broke from that area and began wandering the streets. I followed the crowd as we moved all over downtown. At certain moments, there were confrontations with police officers, and at other moments, the feeling of lawless empowerment enveloped the bodies in the crowd. Contrary to the reservations I had about this march before coming, there was no general apology for the events that happened in Dallas. I actually heard, in bits and pieces of conversation

throughout the crowd, praise and an imaginative agility that dared to wonder how it would feel to commit the unspeakable. I lost sense of time here. This would be proved to me several moments throughout the night when time had come to be reaffirmed to me from those who were not held by the sticky stupor of the night's events. I have a feeling that the majority of the crowd lost track of time too. We were in a haze of the unlikely, and perhaps even the impossible. The hours passed with different forms of elasticity as we ran around simultaneously with and without purpose. Our emotions rebuilt the city structures of linearity and control. We stopped traffic in ways unlike those in Selma, unlike those planned, unlike those with locking arms: traffic was stopped by unpredictability, by skipping, running, jumping, knocking over, laughing, crazed, manic explosion. The elusive looseness rarely brought to our bodies and minds, which we chase to its death through trying to reconnect with our childhoods, through drugs, through orgasm, graced our bodies on those streets and radiated outwards, threatening the city of its fragile order. The area around Williams Street was as close a Freaknik as could be (un)permitted. Black bodies in mass, in summer heat, congregated on and off of cars, amongst strangers, with music, dancing, unrestricted jubilation. This was a place for and by Black people: all others, including myself, were varying degrees of interloper, welcome only if embodying the same ethos. This was the overtaking of the respectable by the ratchet: the NAACP by the working class, hood rich, queer, and poor. This was the inversion of Freaknik from professional contact building to dancing on cars, topless. This night was the inversion of the city for capital's gain to earthy delight, with all the range of emotion possible in it's splendor: anger, prowess, passion, and ungrounded love.

Somehow we found ourselves in front of another on ramp again. This time, there were hundreds more of us than the night before. This time, we were not hesitant: the cops held the power of order, but we held the power of impulse. We flooded the highway with the power of

lawlessness urging feet forward. The officers were either scared or angry, which, it didn't matter, because the outcome was the same. "When a single police car with one officer tried to block the demonstrators from getting onto the highway, several people attacked the car, throwing stones, glass and plastic bottles. One protester immediately started jumping on the vehicle. The officer responded by tasing [*sic*] one protester and then pulled out a shotgun, causing the crowd to panic and run" (Anonymous Contributor, 2016). The show of violence caused protesters to jump back off of the highway and onto the surface streets, continuing the hours long evasion of legal culpability. What ensued were endless hours of roaming the city streets. My first inclination to the length of time that we were spending in the streets was the chaffing of my thighs. I had come unprepared, in work clothes, with no barrier against the repetitive friction. The second moment was when, well past midnight, I turned to see my partner grabbing me by the shoulder. My phone had died, a fact I was thus far miraculously unaware of. After not coming home for hours, my partner had frantically reached out to my friends, some of whom guessed that I would be at the rally. My partner watched a live feed of the march, locating me eventually, dislodging me from the universe that I had temporarily waded into. A few hours later at 3:40 AM, the Atlanta Journal Constitution updated its website to say that protesters had finally cleared the area in front of Williams Street (Davis, 2016). The possession of that night's will was acted out over the course of hours and hours all over the city "unit[ing] as many as 10,000 bodies at a time" (Mariano, 2016).

These rallies would continue for three more days. There would be five days of protests that took place in Atlanta that July. On the third day of protests, a similar disorder would occur with thousands roaming the streets for hours and hours until the early hours of morning the next day. That night, a protestor—white—would be maced by Atlanta Police (Wolfe, 2016). At some

point, thousands of people were making their way around the streets of Midtown Atlanta, an area successfully gentrified to the benefit of whites and middle class Blacks, when, rounding a corner, a Shell Station at the intersection of one of the most used highway ramps in Atlanta, came into view. Stupefaction came over the crowd. It was as though that moment of hesitation between thinking of doing something, stepping back, and then deciding to do it, and therefore, lunging forward, was experienced by dozens at once. As though a switch had flipped, people made a run for it, straight to the glass doors of the Shell Gas Station. I immediately saw a worker jump over the counter and run to lock the doors. People continued running, slamming their body weight onto the doors, others threw whatever was in their site at the doors. I am not sure what overtook the crowd at the moment that they saw the Shell. Perhaps for each of us distinctively, the Shell materialized one reality or another that we wanted to smash immediately. Perhaps the affectivity spread from body to body linking each of us in a unified thought that didn't have a specific rational basis except to destroy. These nights in Atlanta were the closest I have seen to total rupture, or riot. Similar to the hot summer nights of Freaknik where riot meant not only the narrow definition we attribute to it as violence against community property, but where riot embodied the collective exercise of the erratic and uncommon. Freaknik was the uncommon, the exhibition of all that was not allowed: Blackness, women's bodies, sexual leisure, mass disregard to rule of law. Similarly, these nights in Atlanta carried a valence untranslatable to the present state of affairs. It lacked the coherence of movement language with defined beginnings, middles, and endings. It evaded legibility of singular demand or pursuit. It evaded even capital T truth, as the suspicions around the hanging of the man in Piedmont Park were eventually revealed to, in fact be, suicide (Reynolds, 2016). These nights in Atlanta rolled into a haze of temporality that

were later on defined as five days. This illegibility would eventually end, however, at the very moment that the organizers chose to put a demand on the state.

The last day of protests, July 11, was called for by ATL is Ready in coalition with other groups. The planned event was a march on Buckhead, beginning at Lenox Station. Buckhead is the one of the wealthiest enclaves of Atlanta and has historically occupied a space of white suburbanism that comfortably rests on the northern edges of the city (Kelly, 2016). Many of the wealthiest people, nicest homes, and financial headquarters of Atlanta are located in the neighborhood of Buckhead. Though the stated mission of the event was said to be bringing the grievances of the Black Lives Matter movement to a neighborhood of privileged elites, the plan for the march may have been different to the organizers. The march began again with strong numbers at the underground station then moved through the Buckhead streets. The show of police power was large with dozens of cops, arrest vans, an LRAD (a vehicle that emits sounds at such a high or loud frequency so as to disable protestors), and more. The march, it seems by design, ended up on West Paces Ferry Road where the Governor's Mansion resides. Georgia's governor is republican Nathan Deal. Protesters chanted, "Wake Up, Nathan" as night fell. It was there that an occupation was announced. Organizers of the rally said that there would be an occupation of the area surrounding the mansion until Governor Nathan Deal, Mayor Kasim Reed, and Atlanta Chief of Police, George Turner, met with protestors. For hours, protestors chanted at the fortified manor. Eventually, close to midnight, Chief Turner and Mayor Reed came to meet protestors. It turned out that Deal was out of the country. A handful of organizers disappeared into the van with Turner and Reed. When they reemerged about 30 minutes later, one of the organizers of the event told the crowd that "progress" had been made because now protestors were able to secure a two hour meeting with Reed and Turner for the following

Monday, where the grievances of those present could be heard (Bluestein, 2016). Within about an hour of that announcement, protesters had cleared the area in front of the Governor's Mansion.

I am arguing that the legibility of the fifth night of protests that July necessarily made it the final night of protest. Firstly, the desire to host the rally in the wealthiest neighborhood of Atlanta moved the string of protests from ratchet to respectable by bringing a lucid coherence to the street rebellions that could be read and discerned by the state. The maturity of the five-day arch, from roaming the city well into the morning hours, to “speaking truth to power,” enabled others to understand the movement to be outwardly directed in a linear fashion—from infancy to maturity. Furthermore, the coherence of the demand lobbied by the organizers the night of July 11th further proved the desire to bring something decipherable to the halls of power. This is not to delegitimize that it was the power of the thousands of people protesting that night and the nights previous that caused the demand to be met; it certainly was not out of the compassion of Reed or Turner. I am in fact very much arguing that it was people power that caused for this demand to be met. However, in so formulating this demand—in so descending directly upon the most visible seat of power in the city—the possibility of the ratchet fell away into the orderliness of the state. Now, Reed, Turner, Deal, and all others who spectated in the days previous quizzically and with fear, with a lack of comprehension and with racist language forming on the tips of their tongues, were at least now able to move from the terror of the unknown to the reassurance of privilege. Rather than the fear of riot, for instance, which many of those in power must have worried about during those days, there was the understanding that the bureaucracy of the state could now move in without great controversy, because they had been invited to do so. The division that then occurred when this demand was met between professional organizers and

attendees also established respectability by marking who amongst the crowd had proper credentials, reinstating a hierarchy that had been successfully evaded in the days previous. Although a week later when the meeting came around, ATL is Ready organizers attempted to go in with more than just organizational leadership, were told to only bring a handful, and then marched out, rejecting the meeting all together, the death of the moment had already come in the suffocation of the very air it had been relying on: ratchetness. The re-gridding of hierarchical notions of power and credibility happened when a select few people stepped into the police van on that night in Buckhead. By creating a demand that had the ability to be met (or likely, refused) by those in power, the power of those few days was switched from those in the streets, where it momentarily had come to reside, back into the hands of the state. The demand of the previous four days was as vast as the destruction of racist capitalism to as narrow as the desire to run onto a highway—its characterization was effusive.

5 CONCLUSION

As a non-Black participant of this movement, I have at times acted as an organizer and at other times, a participant. I recognize my limitations in understanding that which I have not lived. Regardless of my proximity to such a struggle, I will always be in some ways an interloper. For instance, when the official Black Lives Matter chapter was created in Atlanta last year, meetings were intentionally made for Black folks only. This specific example demonstrates the ways in which I am not privy even to a full-fledged observational role, and do to that fact, I invite engagement and critique of the analysis I have put forth in this thesis. I believe that as someone who toes the line of interloper and participant, I am able to provide a unique perspective that reflects this positionality. Furthermore, I am complicit in the creation of anti-Blackness so long as I do not actively work to dismantle it. In order to dismantle it, I look to the radical actions of Black folks in certain moments of Black Lives Matter and Freaknik in order to theorize on how oppression can be combatted while actively engaging in chimera (Bailey & Leonard 71-72, 2015).

I have laid a foundation for understanding respectability politics as it has emerged and adapted in Atlanta. I looked at moments of critical engagement and outright rejection of respectability, which I have understood as ratchetness. I have argued that ratchetness should be seen as a realm of political possibility that simultaneously engages non-hierarchical tactics for present dismantlement of oppressive structures with a future conjuring of alternative ways of being. I recognize these moments of ratchetness as emerging from an unlocated self and/or a Black queer sexual politic, whose bursting was highly visible in Freaknik. The unlocated self has the ability to slip into a different temporal and spatial relationality as it navigates an ego unmediated by the dictates of a respectable personhood. A Black queer sexual politic emerges

from the necessity to create spaces of sexual leisure by and for the Black community as the doubly binding restriction of a general Victorian, purist sexual ethos as established through Eurocentric values and the particular non-allowance of sexual agency for Black bodies creates an interlocking system of repression (Stallings, 2013). Such an ethos is queered by a flexibility of relationality, where experimentation replaces regulation, bringing along with it creativity and a decentering of the self. This decentering occurs in moments of ego slippage wherein the activity engaged in allows for such an absolute absorption, that the internalization of respectability falls away. I have located this space of the pleasurable as not only purely sexual, but as experiential generally. Ratchetness, as a racialized space that must be seen epithetically by a capitalist order that propagates respectability politics as the ultimate good, takes as its basis a Black queer sexual ethos that navigates territories lewd to common sensibility. The ability to engage in the ratchet is liminal, due to the consistent “snapping back” to respectability internally and externally, and will be liminal so long as hierarchical structures such as capitalism, racism, heteropatriarchy, and the like exist, and therefore must justify their existence through a moral ideology. However, these rare moments of embodiment or flirtation with the ratchet allow for the aggregation of the Black Ratchet Imagination, a space where “postwork imagination and antiwork activities” abound (Stallings 2013, 137). Black Lives Matter, infected at moments by the ratchet possibility in Atlanta as evidenced by Freaknik’s remarkable existence and swift repression has helped to build this Black Ratchet Imagination. As a city that has in many ways perfected the castigation of respectability politics given its entrenched Black elite, Atlanta imbues its residents with particular heightened affects in regards to the respectable and the ratchet.

In order to understand respectability, ratchetness, and how they interact with one another, it is important to understand the way that each arranges bodies and the space around them.

Respectability moves through the spatial and temporal linearly, because it must. The point for respectability is coherence and order. The legibility of the respectable is key to the propagation of its existence, whereas the ratchet's presence is illegible to a system of coherence. The respectable colonizes, makes its mark upon, and can know no other way of existing without imposing itself upon (Franklin Humanities, 2016). The ratchet does not necessarily decolonize, but it opens up the *possibility* of imagining and beginning to create the de-colonial through a creative engagement with incoherency. This incoherency creates opportunity in so far as its illegibility can carve out new ways of relating to ourselves, one another, and the earth. This is not to overstate the ratchet. I do not intend to imagine the ratchet as a magical serum that once introduced to the world will alleviate it of all its problems: the ratchet would likely skirt such a wholesome and holistic characterization of it. However, it does prove itself an ethos incompatible with the racist, classist state, because of the very fact that the ratchet employs the non-normative, and the state as the arbiter of all moral principles as decided by a racialized and gendered capitalism is certainly the normative. Exposure to the ratchet and unpredictable at once disorients and reorients us to our bodies. If the alienation of capitalism, classism, racism, disorients us from our bodies by, for instance, making us ignore our need for sleep, sun, wholesome food, laughter, and so forth, then the ratchet reorients the body to itself in that the experiential moves from a synthetic (dis)affect to a visceral attunement. The social constraints that harbor our bodies and our minds is broken, at least momentarily, so that we are able to, without barrier, experience. The gaze, be it male, colonial, or otherwise, is able to fall away for a moment: the necessary self calculation of what it means to be Black and wearing a hoodie, to be Black and walking at night, to be Black and breaking the law is briefly forgotten. The step from impulse to action moves fluidly. Similarly, if the systems of the state serve to consistently tether

me to a bodily orientation in the sense that I am aware of every cellulite dimple, the lightness or darkness of my skin, the proximity of my body to violence, than the ratchet is the ability to disorient from the self awareness that mediates bodies under capital.

I urge moments that lubricate communal ratchetness. These brief moments of active movement politicize the self and others towards engaging in activity that develops innovative breadth; something that is necessary to creating an alternative world that does not replicate the behaviors in this one. The Black Ratchet Imagination awakens and enthralls. We would be mistaken to not pay attention to these gasps of alternative life in our present predicament.

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