Review Essay

"A vibrant life force": A Review Essay on *Black Queer Flesh: Rejecting Subjectivity in the African American Novel*

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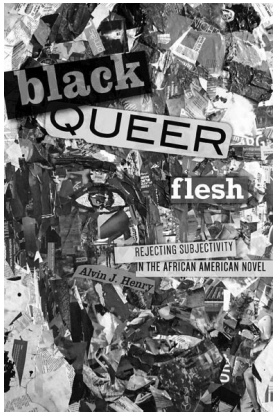

BLACK QUEER FLESH: Rejecting Subjectivity in The African American Novel. By Alvin J. Henry. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2020.

Throughout my reading of Alvin J. Henry's *Black Queer Flesh: Rejecting Subjectivity in The African American Novel*, I hummed the song, "Ima Read" by the Berlin-based, Jamaican born rapper Zebra Katz. "Ima Read" has a catchy and seductive two-step dance beat and the video-visual is produced with a haunting black-white medium reminiscent of classic horror films from the early twentieth century. Even more, the song's lyrics dance with the profane as Zebra Katz constantly says that he is going to "read that bitch/ ima school that bitch," while repeating throughout the chorus, "Ima read/ Ima read/ Ima read."[1] Reading, then, constitutes the point of the song—and not just any reading. Here, Zebra Kats enacts a reading performative deeply rooted within the Black queer vernacular—a reading that slays, arrests, destabilizes, and checks the offender for their acts of aggression, if not violence.[2] A reading, furthermore, that simultaneously throws—as the drag icon Dorian Corey reminds us in the documentary *Paris is Burning*—a little shade and reveal interpretive strategies crucial to examining the ways that Black queer drag queens fashioned and made meaning of their lives within and against a world that limited and reduced their existence to mere entertainment and violence. Thus, at

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the intersection of the performance and practice of reading Zebra Katz, Dorian Corey, and Alvin J. Henry converge in their efforts to, as Zebra Katz sings, "give that bitch some knowledge."

If we readers are bothered by my prioritizing the profane, the in your face/ness of the b-word "bitch"—and instead desires a much more "civilized" or responsible, if not typical, way to write about/ read/ introduce/ scholarship, and in this case Henry's *Black Queer Flesh*, then we might want to rethink our complicity in the ways that we imagine subjectivity. Furthermore, given these concerns, we might want to deeply ponder our participation in liberal humanism—which, in simple terms, constitutes the project of expecting respectable self-making determined by white power brokers; and, in my case, expecting me to frame the introduction to this review in the typical fashion of academic writing. In *Black Queer Flesh* then, Henry advances a study of radical reading practices that asks us to rethink, and wholly reject, notions of subjectivity and liberal humanism. In our rejection of subjectivity, especially, Henry argues for a paradigmatic shift in the ways that we read for and examine meaning-making in African America Literature. Discovering Black queer flesh—the liberating and, indeed, "vibrant life force" (7) of black queer life often negated and denied in and beyond Black life—is the reward of our new, radical reading practices.

To start with, Henry is not cursing anyone out throughout *Black Queer Flesh.* Though, he does challenge, and thus take issue with, the ways that despite their attempts to narrate the experiences of Black folkx in America, Black novelists have relied on formulations of agency, self-determination, and triumph to construct the subjectivity of their central and secondary Black characters. Agency, self-determination, and triumph—which here is read as defeating the economic odds of poverty expected of black people—co-constitute the subjectivities predetermined for Black characters. These predetermined subjectivities are wrought forth by Western literary aesthetics, and chiefly the Bildungsroman literary genre. The Bildungsroman (henceforth "Bildung"), limits, Henry argues, ways to examine self-making and knowledge production at the center of Black literary production. He insists that because of these limits, Black novelists not only struggle to expand representation, experiences, and the knowledge-making of Black characters within the African American novel, but that even the most astute readers of Black literature approach analysis of these novels with these narrow subjectivities in mind. Typical readings, then, lead to oversight into the ways that some of the most well-known Black characters develop strategies to cope with and not deny their experiences with anti-black racism and racial anxiety, on the one end, and on the many other ends, challenge expectations of their livelihoods—and a key aspect of this livelihood is the possibilities that black queer, disabled, and otherwise vilified characters reject tropes of Black subjectivity and, in turn, construct new ways of living liberated lives without these subjectivities.

Henry examines novels that constitute portions of the African American Literary canon. Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing,* Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Richard Wright's *The Long Dream* and pieces

of his protest novel *Native Son*, have all collectively argued that Black life in America has been conditioned by anti-black racism, up-lift politics, the politics of respectability, the regime of heterosexuality, and the normalization of ability and, thus, the rejection of disability. To resist these conditions, Black characters, within the Bildungsroman genre, must present themselves not as victims of racism/ patriarchy/ systemic injustice and oppression but as those who triumph over these violences. In short, Black characters must craft psychological, material, and embodied experiences that reflect success. They must deny and forget about the hard, conditions—and chiefly anti-black racism—from which such success manifests. In short, the sustainability of their success for the long-term measures, hinges on their ability to always deny the psychologic impacts of, for example, remembering their experience with anti-black racism.

It's easy to say that novelists have urged a compartmentalization of these struggles. However, Henry argues that compartmentalization is not enough. Instead, in order to "make it," to survive, and even to thrive, then Black characters engage not in what historian Darlene Clarke Hine theorizes as "a culture of dissemblance" alone but they must also develop a false sense of happiness. Henry names this false happiness "surplus jouissance," and when performed effectively, it serves as a buffer against any memory of suffering that perpetually conditions their Black lives. More dangerously speaking, though, Henry argues that surplus jouissance constitutes an emotion (and 'ego') that limits Black possibility to social expectations: being straight/ heterosexual, able-bodied, compliant and complacent. Surplus jouissance constitutes safety for Black folks while it placates any fears that white folk have internalized about Black people as inherently criminal and violent.

To say that Henry's approach is bold—to take on Black literary giants—is an understatement. I find his approach critically necessary because the stakes in not doing so are too are high. If, in fact, a Black literary canon exists and if, within this canon, Black novelists struggle to expand Black life because they adopted limited and narrow practices of Black representation, then what happens when Black queer people look towards these novels for inspiration? For some sense of belonging? For some narrations of their possibilities of existence? If Black literature is literature of and for the people, then how do we make sense of the exclusion of some people, and namely Black queer people, from this literature? From the Canon?

Black Queer Flesh has an invested preoccupation with these questions with a possible solution. Henry offers the discovery of Black Queer Flesh as a solution for Black queer redress in African American novels. Black Queer Flesh is a kind of freedom of existence; an existence, Henry argues, without subjectivity; without those tired and weatherworn tropes of expectations of Black life. Black Queer Flesh ruptures skin and punctures histories. Black Queer Flesh makes visible ideas of living represented by characters that we know very well but have not always read into the ways that their actions signify Black queer freedom. Black Queer Flesh does not prioritize Black queer characters, per se. Taking queer as a non-normative register that signals non-normative difference, writ large, enables Henry to examine,

for example, the homosocial erotics, punk aesthetics, and disability embodiments in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*—arguing, rather provocatively, that the nameless character "Invisible" is indeed a disabled queer punk (gag on that, honey!).

In many ways, Black Queer Flesh performs a central tenet of queer of color critique—a disidentification with both power structures that defined Black life as heterosexual and the respectable tenets that underwrite homonormativity; which means, chiefly, signifying ways of being gay that are visible, socially accepted, and non-threatening. Black Queer Flesh resists these tenets and enacts its own mode of being *and not being*. Because Black Queer Flesh is a performance of disidentification, it refuses containment and being grasped or held. Indeed, Black Queer Flesh resists the seduction of subjectivity. Black Queer Flesh, theoretically speaking then, is a "thingfication" that signifies multiple resistances—and, it seems, that's it.

Throughout *Black Queer Flesh*, Henry allows for Black Queer Flesh to operate as a thing that surfaces when characters resist subjectivity. That's to say, when characters defy the logics or social order of their being. When, for example, Nella Larsen's Clare Kendry of *Passing* defies the logics of motherhood, Henry suggests that, if only fleetingly, she embodies Black Queer Flesh. When the Invisible of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, or Wright's Fishbelly of *The Long Dream* resist heteronormativity and embrace a queer sociality and erotics, they represent Black queer flesh; When, in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiment*s—that last text of Henry's analysis—Saidiya Hartman engages in a unique form of narrating the histories of black queer and riotous women against archives that ignore their stories, she, too engages in Black Queer Flesh.

Yet, in its refusal to be hailed as subjectivity—or "dispossessed from dispossession" (220), Black Queer Flesh merely exists, appears and reaches an apex, a performance of stasis if you will, that left me wanting more of its performative power. What else is Black Queer Flesh beyond a puncture, a "methodology of the oppressed" if you will? As soon as Black Queer Flesh surfaces, it disappears—a result, Henry might argue, of the discursive and aesthetic limits of the Bildungsroman and the real inability for Black queer people to exist in the world. If, however, we take Henry at his argument, that the Bildungsroman poses great limitations for Black writers, then I wonder what Black Queer Flesh looks like, how it moves beyond surface manifestation, when we consider literature and even poems written by self-identifying Black queer writers across different periods of the twentieth century. Not only does there seem to be a limitation by genre, but also the choice to focus on canonicity (it seems) disallows for a consideration of literature written, say, in the "long 1980s," the period explored in Darius Bost's *The Evidence of Being,* for example. Outside of this era, however, I wonder where James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain* fit into this conversation? Does Jimmy experience Black Queer Flesh at the altar, or anywhere throughout the novel? I ask: how do Black Queer Writers write and imagine Black Queer Flesh? Henry gestures towards this possibility with his praise of Nella Larsen's recognition of the limits

of the Bildungsroman early in the text. Yet, despite her knowledge, Larsen, Henry argues, does not achieve Black Queer Flesh beyond surface/ puncture.

For me, these questions are especially important given Henry's provocative reading of, for example, Trueblood—a minor character in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. An implication of his reading of Trueblood through a framework of Black Queer Flesh asks readers to excuse/ forgive Trueblood of raping and impregnating his daughter so that we might see, in his trickster ways, new meanings of how he navigates the aftermath of his raping-impregnating his daughter; how his telling and retelling of this scene of subjection, if you will, offers something important that readers might have missed about his "move without moving." I can only imagine how Henry's reading might trigger survivors of sexual violence, rape, and incest.

These critical observations aside, Henry gifts us with ways to learn to un/ read, and re/read with a very Black queer sensibility. Indeed, reading as gesture, as an unfinished towards, powerfully signals Henry's contribution to how we can do literary criticism. Although at times, his readings are exhaustive—at times, long winded to the point of distraction—the reward lies at the idea of reminding readers about the power of the performative—to gesture, signify, without desiring ends that are all tied with a bow-tie; to disidentify with logics of closure. Ironic, given that the higher education complex espouses a timeline, a ticking tenure clock, that presupposes a creative start and a sound, packed, finished. We can agree that this is unhealthy—and here lay a major point of Henry's "read." Racial anxiety is yet and still anxiety and in the current moment—of Covid-19, we can all admit that we have experienced degrees of anxiety that impacts how we engage our mental health, our subjectivities, and more importantly our flesh. How we make meaning, how we embrace our flesh, our anxiety, can be the difference of faking it until you make it—of "because I'm happy" surplus jouissance in the Pharrell sense—and actually sitting with this anxiety, even if it means going underground, as does the Invisible Man, and attending to our feelings, self-caring it up without judgement, fear, or shame. Black Queer Flesh has the potential to free you.

Notes

1. Zebra Katz (featuring Nneja Red Foxx), "Ima Read" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oo4Sqt2Bmag

2. I'm using "read" here in a Black queer vernacular sense. In Black queer culture, reading is a stylized form of critique that intersects camp culture and the Black vernacular. To read in this sense, then, means "to tell someone off," or tell somebody about themselves. See Urban Dictionary and E. Patrick Johnson's reading of queer theory in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology.*