To be Black in this Skin: Anti-Black Racism and How Heterosexual Black Men Engage with HIV Vulnerability in Toronto

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Abstract

Toronto is home to Canada's largest and fastest growing Black population and it is also the probable epicenter of the Black HIV epidemic in the nation. While the HIV response in Ontario recognizes African, Caribbean, and Black people as a "priority population," HIV in Canada has historically been thought of as an epidemic among gay white men, thereby impacting the preconceptions of service providers and the manner by which services are targeted and administered today.

Based on 26 months of fieldwork in Toronto, this dissertation ethnographically explores how HIV-negative and HIV-positive heterosexual Black men navigate HIV-related stigma and anti-Black racism. Three key questions ground this project: 1) What does it mean to be straight, Black, and male in a world predicated on anti-Blackness?; 2) How do we philosophically conceptualize contradictory forms of resistance and agency in the lives of Black men—particularly those living with HIV?; and 3) How do enduring modalities of racial slavery structure how Black folks experience HIV?

In analyzing how Black subjects come into being or, more precisely, struggle to be realized, I critically reflect on the writings of Afro-pessimist and Afro-optimist thinkers. In doing so, I expand on the concept of fugitivity—the notion that Black life represents a ceaseless act of ontological disobedience (Moten 2008). Fugitivity is employed as a productive lens to understand straight Black men's attitudes about their own vulnerability to HIV, and the different ways they engage with socially imposed forms of subjectivity. I conclude that although Black men's sexual acts and choices exist within anti-Black systems predicated on their negation, they are not passive objects of racial oppression. Rather, I argue that when Black men engage with the limitations of Black life it can produce remarkable acts of creativity, vitality, and affirmation.

This dissertation contributes to a theory of Black subjectivity that upholds the idea of racial slavery as the basis of Black ontological production. My research seeks to expand anthropological discussions on Blackness and being, the anthropology of HIV, and broader social scientific inquiry on HIV critiquing responses that privilege behavioral change over structural determinants.

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List of Acronyms

AAA	American Anthropological Association
ACB	African, Caribbean and Black
ACCHO	African Council on HIV/AIDS in Ontario
APAA	Africans in Partnership Against AIDS
ARV	Antiretroviral
ASO	AIDS Service Organizations
BAA	Black Action Alliance
Black CAP	Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention
CAHR	Annual Canadian Conference on HIV/AIDS Research
cART	Combination Antiretroviral Therapy
CATIE	Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange
CCDIC	Canadian Guidelines on Sexually Transmitted Infections
CD4	Cluster of differentiation 4 (Indicator of immune function)
G7	Group of Seven
gbMSM	Gay, Bisexual, and other Men who have Sex with Men
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Viruses
IDI	In-depth Interviews

MSM	Men who have Sex with Men
NPT	New Prevention Technology
OHESI	The Ontario HIV Epidemiology and Surveillance Initiative
PHAC	Public Health Agency of Canada
PrEP	Pre-exposure Prophylaxis
TasP	Treatment as Prevention
UNAIDS	The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
U=U	Undetectable = Untransmittable

Introduction

"The uncompromising nature of the Western self and its active negation of anything not itself had the counter-effect of reducing African discourse to a simple polemical reaffirmation of black humanity. However, both the asserted denial and the reaffirmation of that humanity now look like two sterile sides of the same coin." (Mbembé 2001:12)

This dissertation contributes to a Canadian social scientific inquiry on HIV critiquing responses that privilege behavioral change over structural determinants. It also expands discussions of Black subjectivity by introducing avenues to conceptualize HIV as a site in the anthropological study of diasporic Black experience in Canada. I show in this dissertation that the real problem isn't how much, with whom, or what kind of sex Black people are having. Instead, I argue that the problem is that Black people's intimacies and choices exist within an anti-Black system of violence, and so, their overall perceived vulnerability to HIV is independent of the behaviours that enable the transmission of the virus (Geary 2014:44). Ethnography, specifically the story-focused approach I employ in this dissertation, allows for a focus on narrative form that complicates the notion of natural data, but also singular epidemiological categories and biomedical logics.

Research for this project took place between July 2015 to April 2018 in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)—herein referenced as Toronto. Comprised of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, much of the ethnographic work was conducted at a small AIDS service organization (ASO) in Toronto's downtown east side where I helped facilitate a support group for heterosexual men living with HIV. As a matter of anthropological standard, I use a pseudonym, Black AIDS Action (BAA), to avoid naming the ASO. This dissertation is informed by 8 HIV support group meetings with a total of 12 participants, as well a series of focus groups interviews with self-identified HIV-negative

heterosexual men (n=2), newcomers (n=2), and community health promoters (n=1). One-on-one interviews were also conducted with BAA support group members (n=12), BAA staff (n=2), researchers (n=6), and clinicians (n=1). My field site is composed of three overlapping spaces: (1) BAA, (2) the support group for heterosexual men living with HIV, and (3) a wide range of Black community gatherings and events in Toronto that I frequented. A more detailed account of my methods, field sites, and participants is provided in Chapter Two.

The following key questions ground this project:

- What does it mean to be straight, Black, and male in a world predicated on anti-Blackness?
- How do we philosophically conceptualize contradictory forms of resistance and agency in the lives of Black men—particularly those living with HIV?
- How do enduring modalities of racial slavery structure how Black folks experience and encounter HIV?

Objectives of This Dissertation

The objectives of this dissertation are threefold. The first is to examine how, in Toronto, predominantly immigrant, straight (heterosexual), Black men who are living with HIV or who are at risk of contracting HIV, navigate HIV stigma and vulnerability, while trying to locate themselves as straight, male and Black. In doing so, I explore gendered, sexual and racial projects in the everyday lives of participants and how these projects enable and disable meaningful self-connections and understandings of self. I use the term project(s) in reference to how gender, sexuality, and race are enacted and represented in discourse and performance, and how they are used as referents for a set of socially constructed norms that impact these participants' everyday lives.

Second, I interrogate the ways in which Black misandry influences heterosexual Black men's attitudes about their own vulnerability to HIV and wellbeing. Black misandry refers to what William Smith and colleagues (2007: 559), who coined the term "Black misandry," define as "an exaggerated pathological aversion toward Black men created and reinforced in societal, institutional, and individual ideologies, practices, and behaviors." I argue that, in the context of the HIV epidemic, Black misandry perpetuates anti-Black stereotypes that reinforce ideas about recklessness and blame. I also argue that while Black misandric stereotypes justify the oppression of Black men, these stereotypes can still be seductive to Black men. To illustrate this, I focus on how participants enacted and appropriated misandric stereotypes to wield counter self-affirmations. These counters, I argue, blur the symbolic boundaries between acts of capitulation and resistance, as well as normative understandings of Black male respectability politics.

Third, I engage with the concept of fugitivity—the notion that Black life and Black lived experiences represent a ceaseless act of escape and ontological disobedience (Moten 2008). I focus on how fugitivity is enacted on a subjective level, and as such, how participants draw on different framings of Black consciousness to reject socially imposed forms of subjectivity. I look at these framings as performative retrievals of Black knowledge and consciousness. I argue that while on one level, these performative retrievals appear to be survivalist or fugitive because they affirm Black life, they could also be interpreted, on another level, as working in service of the same subjugating system participants purport to reject. To this end, I try to show that not all acts of escape elude whiteness, even if they potentiate complex moments of Black vitality.

A Note on Black

It needs to be noted that when I use the term "Black" in this dissertation, I am referring to a diverse, self-identifying group that includes Canadian-born Blacks (i.e., third generation and more), first- and second-generation Blacks of Caribbean descent, and first- and second-generation Black immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa. More importantly, I am referring to people and communities, old and new, that are inscribed with Blackness or, put differently, who are coded Black.

Few topics in Black Canadian writing and cultural production have generated more debate and interest than the diasporic politics and dispositions of Blackness. This dissertation probes the paths previously pursued by postmodernist and poststructuralist Black Canadian writers such as Rinaldo Walcott, Dionne Brand, NourbeSe Philip, and others. Like these writers, I understand that the roots and routes of Black people and Blackness in this country have multiple entry and exit points, and vertical and horizontal connections. As such, the Black experience that I recount in this dissertation is one that refuses the disciplining of boundaries and discourses of nation and homeland imposed by whiteness.

To refuse racially polarizing notions of "Canadianess," however, can sometimes inadvertently invite essentialism. It can make it seem acceptable to talk about "a Black Canadian experience" in Toronto. In no way do I to intend to suggest that being African in Toronto is the same as being Caribbean. Or still, that being Jamaican is the same as Haitian, Nigerian the same as Somali, nor being first-generation the same as Canadian-born, and so on. Indeed, in Toronto and Canada, where Black bodies "originate," how they arrive, and how far back they can trace their Canadian heritage, are all markers

that—under whiteness—produce particular narrations, proofs, and rehearsals of Blackness, and also play a critical role in how Black people recount and enact their own stories and artifacts of Blackness and dwelling.

Blackness as Ontology

This project is concerned with the possible and impossible ways to be a Black person in a world that not only enacts racial violence onto Black people, but is predicated on this racial violence. Ontology, the study of being and becoming, is one way to examine how people are constituted as human subjects capable of acting on other human subjects (see Hacking 2002). There is also ontological study interested in being on a galactic scale—what physicist-philosopher Karen Barad (2007) describes as quantum being. This is an approach that has sought to displace the foundational anthropocentrism of the humanities and the social sciences by introducing a multispecies paradigm (see Ogden, Hall, and Tanita 2013) to think about how human and non-human beings "intra-actively co-constitute" the world (Barad 2007:90). In Chapter Two, I provide a brief overview of a body of literature associated with the work of Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Bruno Latour around reimaging being and becoming in the age of the Anthropocene. From a Black critical vantage point, I argue that the problem with this reformulation of being that embraces non-human agency is that it abets rather than interrupts the white free autonomous subject in Euro-American modernity.

The ontological thinking that frames this project is much more interested in theory that is rooted in alternative Black epistemologies and ontologies—theory that complicates processes through which Black subjects, and even ideas, come into being or, more precisely, struggle to be realized. Throughout this dissertation, I use the term ontology

and some variations—such as ontological suffering, ontological disobedience, and ontological weight—as a means to describe different aspects of Black subjectification under whiteness. These concepts have attracted notable anthropologists and philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Ian Hacking, Bonnie Mann, Judith Butler, and Veena Das, but their pronouncements on the subject are not the main focus of my work. Again, I'm attracted to how these concepts are invoked by Black theorists such as, Franz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, Fred Wilderson, Jared Sexton, and Hortense Spillers. In Chapter One, I elaborate on how Black being and becoming is understood from this critical Black perspective.

To be concerned with the (im)possible ways to be a Black person in a world is to be equally concerned with Blackness. When I talk about Blackness, I'm describing two interconnected phenomena: (1) the process of being marked as Black in Toronto and (2) a condition of ontology—a particular way of existing, on a particular plane of existence that is the by-product of a particular kind of gratuitous violence. The idea of racial slavery as the basis for a system of Black ontological production is a key precept of Afro-pessimism, a field of thought that offers a framework to understand Blackness on a metaphysical level.

Racial slavery, isn't the only analytical tool available to understand Blackness. In fact, the notion of racial slavery as the basis for a system of Black ontological production has prompted speculation both within Black radical thought and beyond—an issue I also expand on in Chapter One (see Ray et al. 2017 and Weddington 2019). The approach I take engages with racial slavery as a productive lens to think through how Blackness is essential for, but at the same time excluded from, the modern order of things. This order

is to be understood broadly as comprising of the organized global and local response to HIV, health science techniques, and technologies—in other words, HIV knowledge as we know it. This is a theoretical project that conceptualizes racial slavery not just as an event of experience, but as an ongoing symbolic and experiential process of ejection from the world.

The philosophical problem at the core of this project is what Afro-pessimists call the predicament of Black nonexistence or social death.[1] Admittedly, it's easy to see how this predicament may seem far from everyday thought—a philosophical rather than real-world problem. I try to show that to be concerned with how Blackness is constituted isn't just a Black esoteric preoccupation. That is, if we adjust—or rather, situate our thinking—we can see how this is a predicament with very real stakes. To demonstrate the real-world effects of nonexistence, by which I mean what nonexistence does to ones' self-awareness, social relationships, and life chances, I examine how straight HIV-positive and HIV-negative Black men in Toronto recount, rehearse, and refuse imposed forms of subjectivity in their day-to-day lives. I try to show that sometimes to be legible under whiteness Black men say and do things that intensify their erasure—even put them at risk of HIV. My critical reflection on key precepts of Afro-pessimism is an attempt to connect what Black men say and do (and don't) about their HIV vulnerability to a deeper ontological struggle—a struggle to exist. I believe Afro-pessimism can help us understand the particularities of such a struggle in context of HIV, and Black health and wellbeing more broadly.

[1] I use both terms interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

Futures of Black Possibility

In the chapters that follow, I express little interest in a purely pessimistic understanding of Black men's self-making. I think of myself as an optimist, interested on the one hand in how HIV intensifies systems and processes of exclusion but, on the other hand, how this encounter can actualize deep counter-consciousness and resistance. I argue that it can be a transformative experience for Black people when they are forced to engage with the conditions under which they live (or cannot live)—whether due to an adverse life event (e.g., an HIV diagnosis) or because of a saturation of adversity (e.g., Black misandry). But more specifically, it can produce a special kind of sentience or, what I call in Chapter Four, being-towards-death. By sentience or being-towards-death, I simply mean an awareness of the limits of one's world and place and time in it; such awareness can at once be creative, playful, resistant and affirming, but also massively unpredictable, disorienting, and contradictory.

For me, this awareness is a political act onto the world—a sort of future making that is yet to be realized. It's what Fred Moten calls "fugitivity" (2008). As a concept, fugitivity is another way to look at how Black people are not passive objects of racial oppression. The basic idea is that for Black people, engaging with the limitations of Black life can in itself become an act of escape. In Chapters Three and Four, I demonstrate how these fugitive acts of escape (or counter seeings and knowings) are seldom what we might expect, insofar as they don't always register with dominant understandings of resistance and intentionality. Like other "optimists," I argue that while these complex forms of escape are integral to what it means be a Black person in this world—and in the context of this study, a straight Black man—they don't always represent a clean break

from subjugation. As I argue in Chapter One, my interest in putting fugitivity to work is motivated by a desire to show that straight Black men are capable of rejecting the inner white gaze and forging meaningful relationships and identities, but that this process can also be complicated and contradictory.

The next section explores another line of contradiction—this one entangled in HIV narratives of progress and victory.

Storylines of Victory

As we enter the 5th decade of the international response to HIV/AIDS, the narrative of the epidemic is told in grandiose storylines of progress. Following jurisdictions around world who have endorsed targeted initiatives to end HIV, including the UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets[2], Canadian health authorities herald that it is the beginning of the end of AIDS (see CCDIC Public Health Agency of Canada, 2017). They proclaim that we are five to ten years away from halting the spread of HIV and virtually eliminating deaths from AIDS in Canada.

On one level, the big aspirational storylines of victory are true—unthinkable progress has been achieved and numbers support this fact: the estimated 1.8 million people newly infected globally in 2017 is nearly half the number of new infections compared to the epidemic's peak in 1996 (UNAIDS 2018 Factsheet). This is mainly due to the success of innovative biomedical research and new prevention technologies (NPT), starting with the development of combination antiviral therapy (cART) in the mid 1990s,

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[2] In 2014, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) and partners set the '90-90-90 targets'; aiming to diagnose 90% of all HIV positive people, provide antiretroviral therapy (ART) for 90% of those diagnosed and achieve viral suppression for 90% of those treated, by 2020.

followed by new treatment guidelines around 2004, which recommended that therapy be initiated at diagnosis, known as Treatment as Prevention (TasP). Today, people who are living with HIV and maintaining their treatment can eliminate onward transmission to serodifferent sex partners (undetectable=untransmittable or U=U) and the use of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PreP) has been shown to limit new infections, in particular among men who have sex with men (see Grulich et. al. 2018; Grace et. al. 2018; Eisinger et. al. 2019).

While these remarkable biomedical technologies represent a breakthrough in the global HIV/AIDS response, in Canada, differential access to NPTs is deepening racial and gender disparities in HIV infection. A recent paper in *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* supports this claim, arguing that the Canadian guideline for prescribing pre-exposure prophylaxis, if not revised to be more attentive to racial disparities in dispensation, will likely exacerbate HIV vulnerability in Black communities (LaRon et al. 2019). Despite the accessibility and universality of Canada's health-care system, Ciann Wilson (2016:1) points out that "the recent political push for a post-HIV era" is ultimately one that "solely centers the realities of middle-class white, gay men." For John Paul Catungal, this erasure of racialized subjects within the mainstream Canadian HIV response has produced "race-blind spaces of white privilege" that have led to the "exclusion of people of colour, queer and straight" from "white AIDS service spaces" (2013: 253).

In late 2019, two op-eds in the *Toronto Star* sought to draw attention to these inequities. An op-ed by Lauri Edmiston noted that approximately 19% of Canadians diagnosed with HIV were not accessing treatment, an estimate that she said ranked

Canada last compared to all other G7 countries (Laurie Edmiston 2019, Toronto Star). A few weeks after Edmiston's op-ed, the *Toronto Star* published a related op-ed, this time by a group of well-known scholars and activists in Ontario's Black HIV response (Winston Husbands et al. 2019, *Toronto Star*). These Black community leaders also acknowledged the inequity and attributed this, quite pointedly, as being fundamentally connected to anti-Black racism. They argued that "tools to track the impending end of HIV," such as the 90-90-90 targets, ultimately leave Black folks and other marginalized communities behind because these targets are focused on treatment numbers. The targets assume an equal distribution of risk, onward transmission, treatment uptake, and viral suppression among *all* people living with HIV. But by treating everybody as the same, the 90-90-90 targets become refracted and entrench the liberal colour-blindness in the AIDS sector. That is, they end up differentially spotlighting the progress of those who experience the fewest barriers.

Likewise, a growing body of observational data from around the world is beginning to demonstrate that universal treatment approaches may actually be slowing down the global HIV response (Baral et al. 2019; Bavinton and Rodger 2020). Rather than help to reach those at greatest risk, approaches focused on treatment numbers instead amplify disparities in marginalized communities. More pointedly, they don't allow for thinking beyond dominant biomedical individualism. They fail to address, as Adam Geary (2014) might say, the conditions of structured, racist domination that violently contain HIV vulnerability in Black sexual intimacies. There is serious concern in Ontario's Black HIV movement that when all is said and done and governmental and international agencies

declare that AIDS is over, it will still not be over for Black folks. And this will not be accidental—it will be a direct outcome of anti-Black racism.

One way to try to understand trends in Black health is to think about how social and material environments impact Black people's health outcomes (Dryden and Nnorom 2021). That is, to think about what Adam Geary (2014:45) calls, after medical anthropologist Merrill Singer, "a disease enabling ecology." This is an ecosocial perspective that helps us to make connections to see how, for instance, poverty, xenophobia, and anti-Black structural violence work synergistically to "increase the possibility of exposure to and infection with HIV, which in turn further compromises the overall health of those within the environment" (Geary (2014:45). As discussed in the next section, anti-Black structural violence has long been a part of how Black people and sexualities have been rendered in AIDS discourse.

Discourses of Black Heterosexuality and AIDS

An important dimension of HIV in Western epidemics is its association with white homosexual men. Conversely, in Africa, HIV transmission is generally viewed as being exclusively heterosexual and Black. This analog of "white gay AIDS" (North-American AIDS) and "Black heterosexual AIDS" (African AIDS) plays an important function in how Western societies have come to view and respond to diasporic Black men and women living with or at risk of acquiring HIV. Marc Epprecht (2008) argues the constructed imaginary of "African AIDS" fabricated evidence in support of African sexual perversion, which, in turn, engendered a dominant framework—a concept of heterosexuality in AIDS epidemiology that reinforced the connections between racial Blackness and deviant sexual behavior (see also Lorway 2006; 2016).

In the context of the North American epidemic, the appearance of "heterosexual AIDS" in the mid-1980s registered serious concern. What was interpreted as heterosexuals' vulnerability to infection brought with it an urgent need to define and police not just the category "heterosexual," but the very edifice of white male supremacy. Part of the fear was that AIDS had somehow snuck its way into heterosexual life and sex. But this assumption, writes Adam Geary (2014), couldn't have been more distorted. The reality was that heterosexual infection had been occurring since the start of the epidemic, mainly affecting injection drug users, sex workers and diasporic Blacks (first Haitians and then others)—folks that weren't considered "respectable" heterosexuals in the first place. Geary offers the following explanation as to why health authorities were both indisposed to acknowledge growing rates of heterosexual infection and why certain groups of heterosexuals seemed to slip under the epidemiology radar. He writes:

> Heterosexuality was (as it continues to be) much more connotative and normative than it is simply descriptive. It described particular kinds of racial, gendered, classed, and domesticated sexual relationship (white, non-drug-using, suburban, and nontransactional), rather than any and all sexual relationships between men and women. (2014:103-4)

The early panic surrounding "heterosexual AIDS" was fuelled by fears that HIV was spreading beyond so-called deviant heterosexuals and starting to affect "good" white middle-class nuclear families—folks that were considered respectable and "normal." This fear further incited researchers to look for signs of "abnormality" (e.g., secret homosexuality and sexual predation) in emerging heterosexual infections. [3] This dissertation approaches the construction of "gay AIDS" and its analog

[3] For Canadian examples, see Miller (2005) and Adeyanju (2010).

"African/heterosexual AIDS" as symbolic structures that work in service of dominant framings of risk that collapse deviant identities and behaviours: gays and anal sex, Blacks and compulsive (gay and straight) *fucking*, addicts and reckless drug use—which in turn guards and sanitizes white heteronormative morality and ideals.[4]

As I argue in the next section, not much is known about the experiences or epidemiology of Black heterosexual men living with or at risk of HIV. What we do know is transmission through heterosexual contact is occurring, and that HIV rates among Black communities are stable or increasing, while overall rates are declining.

The Numbers: Trends in Black HIV Diagnoses

Before I delve into the characteristics of Ontario's Black HIV epidemic, it must be acknowledged that Black communities are not the only racialized group in Ontario or elsewhere in Canada effected by HIV. Indigenous communities in particular are shouldering a disproportionate burden in the current Canadian HIV epidemic (Haddad et al. 2021). In Ontario, Indigenous people are more at risk of HIV than non-Indigenous people, but less at risk of HIV than Indigenous people in other parts of Canada (See Haddad et al. 2021). It's estimated that in 2018, Indigenous people in Ontario represented around 5 % of first-time diagnoses but made up only 3 % of Ontario's population (OHSEI unpublished). Ontario-based social-scientific HIV research specifically interested in ethno-racial communities is growing rapidly, and has tended to focus on two broad topics, HIV stigma (Gardezi et al. 2008; Newman et al. 2008; Poon et al. 2005; Tharao and

[4] For an excellent in-depth analysis of public health theories that characterize AIDS in Africa as an unambiguous heterosexual epidemic see Robert Lorway's (2006) article, Dispelling "heterosexual African AIDS" in Namibia: same-sex sexuality in the township of Katutura.

Massaquoi 2001; Williams et al. 2009; Wong et al. 2012) and access barriers to care (Li et al. 2015, 2016, 2018; Li et al. 2018; Logie et al. 2011). Research among Indigenous communities has largely been treated separately (Flicker et al. 2014; Jackson 2018; Jackson and Mashing 2017; Wilson 2013; Wilson et al. 2016). While I don't engage with this aforementioned body of research, I want to make clear that structural racism and HIV disparities experienced by Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities in Toronto and elsewhere only reinforce why mobilizing across community lines is crucial, not just to halt the epidemic, but to hold our systems accountable and committed to social justice and reconciliation.[5] My decision to focus exclusively on Black HIV-related experiences is premised on the notion that anti-Blackness is distinct in both form and origin. It's this distinctiveness that frames my analytical thinking around how Blackness and Black being is constituted, and how HIV vulnerability features in Black people's lives. In Chapter One, I elaborate on this foundational percept in greater detail.

Epidemiologist Stefan Baral (2019: 632) writes in a recent publication, "[a]t the current rate of new infections, over 40 million people will be living with HIV by 2025. The global optimism about the HIV pandemic has not been matched by decreases in new HIV infections." Even in Canada, after nearly a decade of declining HIV rates, the epidemic remains persistent and shows signs that it may remain so if, as Baral writes, we do not try to "[understand] who is being supported with treatment rather than just how many" (363).

[5] A body of critical inquiry interested in solidarity building approaches in HIV prevention between Indigenous and Black communities in Ontario exists (Chambers et al. 2019; Flicker 2018; Wilson 2016), and while this dissertation is not in conversation with this important work, future research may benefit form theorizing the role of fugitivity in forging cross-community social movements.

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) reports that a total of 2,561 new HIV diagnoses were reported in 2018, which was an increase of 8.2% compared with 2017, and an increase of more than 20% since 2014 (Haddad et al. 2019:304; Haddad et al. 2018). In 2018, Ontario, Canada's most populous province, accounted for the highest proportion (39.2%) of reported HIV cases in the country (Haddad et al. 2019:306). This report of new diagnoses includes people who were already HIV-positive upon their migration to Canada and disaggregating the out-of-country cases from local transmission, that is within Ontario and Canada, is difficult because the necessary information isn't always collected nor is it available in surveillance and public health reporting.

Giving this limitation, the impact of migration on Ontario's HIV epidemic has been largely based on inferences and estimates, namely that out-of-country cases in Ontario and Canada are disproportionately concentrated among Black immigrants. There are about 25 million people living with HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa and about another 340,000 in the Caribbean.[6] When combined, Black people from Africa and the Caribbean account for 93% of people from endemic countries living with HIV around the world (Public Health Agency of Canada 2007; 2008). Out-of-country cases also have an impact on the demographic characteristics of the prevalent epidemic in Canada. For example, in 2017, 28% of newly diagnosed Black people in Ontario were considered "out-of-province"

[6] The vast majority of people with HIV are in low- and middle-income countries. In 2018, 57% of people with HIV (20.6 million) lived in eastern and southern Africa, 13% (5.0 million) in western and central Africa, 16% (5.9 million) in Asia and the Pacific, and 6% (2.2 million) lived in Western and Central Europe and North America. (https://www.hiv.gov/federal-response/pepfar-global-aids/global-hiv-aids-overview)

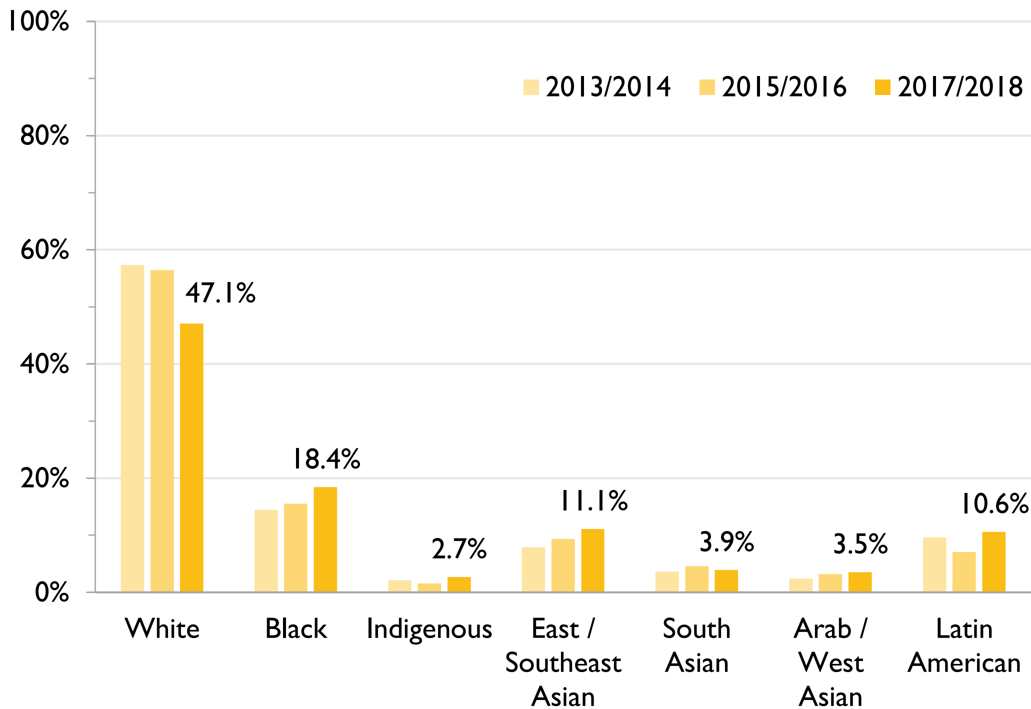
(OHESI, 2017 New Diagnosis Report, published 2019) and, inferring from immigration patterns, these Black people were likely African and Caribbean immigrants.[7]

Black people constitute around 5% of Ontario's population, yet in 2018 accounted for an estimated 25% of new diagnoses of HIV. I might add here that, while Black immigration is an important characteristic of the prevalent epidemic, I am not implying that HIV among Black people in Ontario is an immigration problem,[8] nor am I suggesting that restrictions on immigration from Africa and the Caribbean would result in a reduction or subsequent end in the number of Black HIV diagnoses. There's compelling evidence to suggest that in addition to the rise in out-of-country cases, we are also witnessing increases in local incidence (i.e., first-time HIV diagnoses) among Black males and females. This may be a sign that the success of targeted initiatives in Ontario (such as TasP and PrEP) have accrued mainly among whites. Surveillance data (see Figure 1.0 below) seems to supports this claim, indicating that there has been a relative *decrease* in the percent of first-time HIV diagnoses among white males (17.8%) between 2013-2014 and 2017-2018, and a relative *increase* in the percent of first-time HIV diagnoses among Black males (27.8%) during that same period.

[7] Up until the 1980s, African immigrants represented a very small proportion of the total number of immigrants to Ontario. For decades, the majority of Ontario's Black immigrants came from the English-speaking Caribbean. Today, Black immigrants in Ontario come from more than 100 different countries, but mostly from countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 91-551-X, 2017). Equally important to note is the growth of Ontario's Black population: in twenty years, it has doubled in size, going from about 300,000 in 1996 to slightly more than 600,000 in 2016 (Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 91-551-X, 2017).

[8] In each of the past five years (2013-18), between 820 and 1003 people have been diagnosed with HIV in Ontario. Of those, between 21 and 36% are Black – even though Black people make up only 5% of Ontario's population. The majority of ACB people diagnosed with HIV in 2018 live in Toronto, Central East, Ottawa and Central West. More than 60% of ACB people diagnosed in Ontario are between the ages of 25 and 44 (OHESI forthcoming).

Figure 1.0: Percent of First-Time HIV Diagnoses by Race/Ethnicity (where known), Males, Ontario, 2013 to 2018[9]

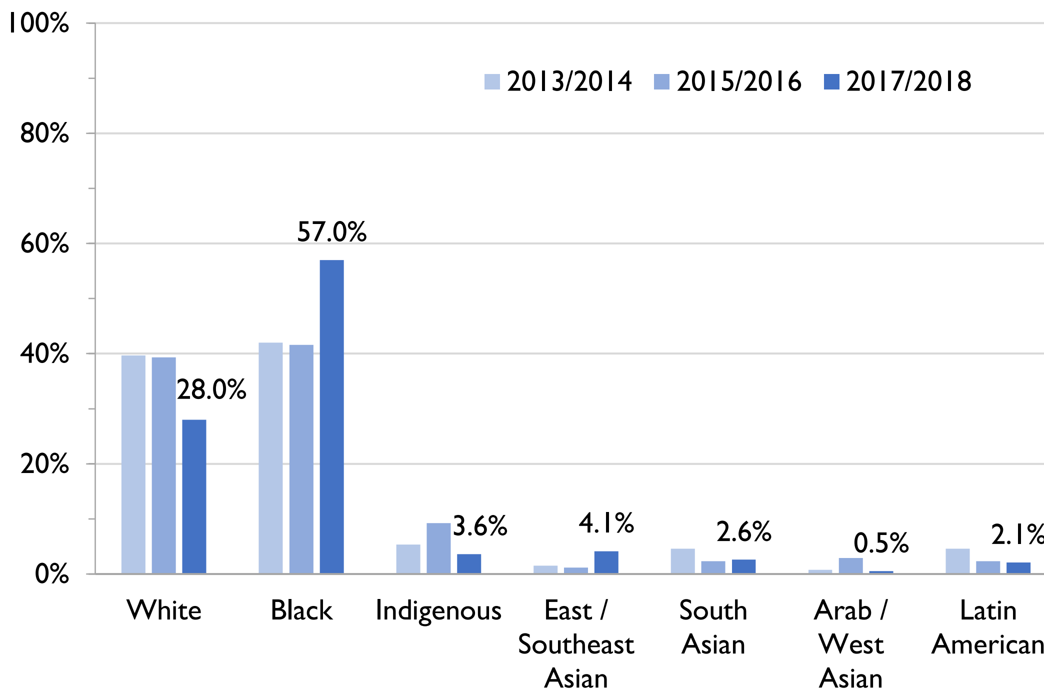


Likewise, as shown in Figure 2.0 below, in 2017-2018 compared to 2013-2014, there was a relative *decrease* in the percent of first-time HIV diagnoses among white (29.5%) females and a relative *increase* in the percent of first-time HIV diagnoses among Black (35.7%) females.[10]

[9] Data provided by Public Health Ontario Laboratory in partnership with The Ontario HIV Epidemiology and Surveillance Initiative. Diagnoses where race/ethnicity was unknown were excluded (approximately 33% of diagnoses, per year, between 2013-2018).

[10] When we include diagnoses with previous evidence of HIV (all new diagnoses, including out-of-country), the proportion of overall HIV diagnoses among Black females is higher (68.4% in 2017/2018) and the proportion of white females is lower (18.4% in 2017/2018).

Figure 2.0: Percent of First-Time HIV Diagnoses by Race/Ethnicity (where known), Females, Ontario, 2013 to 2018



This shift is especially stark when we look at gay, bisexual, or other men who have sex with men (gbMSM). Provincial data shows that while diagnoses among white gbMSM are falling overall, the incidence of new HIV diagnoses among Black gbMSM has steadily gone up. In about a decade, the percent of Black males among new gbMSM diagnoses nearly doubled to around 15% in 2018. Put differently, around 1/3 of first-time diagnoses among Black people were in Black gbMSM (OHESI, unpublished).

While increases in HIV incidence may be occurring in Black gbMSM in Ontario, Black females and heterosexual Black males remain disproportionately affected. We know that since the years 2002-2004 there has been a sharp increase in the number of diagnoses of Black females in Ontario, driven both by migration and local transmission.

Black females represented 62% of new HIV cases among all females in 2018 (OHESI, unpublished), a statistic that cannot be understood independently of heterosexual Black men's sexual networks. Although it is estimated that up to 20% of new cases in Black people may be heterosexual men, our ability to understand the heterosexual Black epidemic in Ontario is complicated by missing data, data misclassification, and underreporting. Despite the significant percentage of new HIV cases estimated to be attributable to heterosexual Black men, they have not been recognized as a priority population in the Ontario government's official response to HIV.[11]

To be clear, these data do not suggest that heterosexual Black men in Ontario are more vulnerable to HIV compared to other groups of Black people, or that they carry a heavier burden of the epidemic. What they do register is that contrary to dominant thinking, heterosexual Black men are impacted by HIV and yet we know little about their experiences. The relative invisibility of heterosexual Black men in the response to HIV has been, for me, a flash point for thinking specifically about what the epidemic and its narratives conceal. As I go on to explain in the next section, when the numbers began to increase soon after 2002, there was much uncertainty in Black communities about what was taking place.

Researcher Background and Positionality

In 2011, when I began working in the HIV sector, it was unclear what the rise in new Black diagnoses in Ontario represented—whether it was a temporary blip or

[11] African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) people are a designated priority population in Ontario's response to HIV along with men who have sex with men (MSM), women*, people who use drugs, and Indigenous people. Consequently, in the context of HIV in Ontario and Canada, heterosexual Black men are under-researched.

something more serious. Regardless, this rise led Black AIDS service organizations (ASOs) and ACB strategy workers[12] to start thinking about who they were not reaching and why. In spring 2010, Africans in Partnership against AIDS (APAA), a Toronto-based ASO, formally presented its concerns about the relative absence of straight Black men's voices in the provincial HIV response to the coalition responsible for the ACB strategy in Ontario—the African and Caribbean Council for HIV and AIDS in Ontario (ACCHO). This was accompanied by a request for ACCHO to advocate for provincial funding that would support a formal research study of the HIV-related needs of straight Black men—the first such request by an ASO in Ontario. In late 2010, ACCHO announced that it would support formal research on straight Black men and, as part of this catalyst project, several focus groups were conducted across Ontario to learn more about the HIV-related needs and experiences of straight Black men.[13] I was recruited as a research assistant to analyze the interview data—it was an exciting time for me and, as I immersed myself in the research, I felt that this was a story that needed to be told.

By 2015, when this doctoral project became a reality, several community-based research projects had already been funded and research activities had started to roll out (see Husbands et al. 2013; Husbands et al. 2017). Being involved in some of these activities, I saw a need for my own work to go further in terms of theorizing the relationship between straight Black men's experiences of HIV, sexuality and gender, and anti-Black

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[12] As part of Ontario HIV/AIDS Strategy for African, Caribbean and Black Communities, strategy workers are designated HIV prevention positions funded by the AIDS Bureau to support the implementation of the African, Caribbean and Black (ACB) Strategy. There are 15 positions located in 14 agencies across Southern Ontario.

[13] The focus groups were part of a CIHR and AIDS Bureau funded catalyst research project known as the "iSpeak Project". In 2013, the project produced the following report, "Talking Black: Understanding the HIV-related needs, challenges and priorities of heterosexual African, Caribbean and Black men in Ontario, Canada". This report was the first ever AIDS Bureau funded report to draw attention to the HIV-related experiences and needs of straight Black men. It informed a major push in HIV research interested in straight Black men in Ontario.

racism. It seemed to me that the work that was occurring in 2015 was highly invested in resilience theory and, as a result, grappled conceptually with Black men's contradictory acts of racial defiance—acts that too often perpetuated the same subjugation they claimed to be resisting. Resilience theory's incorporation into HIV research is not new. While there are diverging definitions and applications of resilience in the field of HIV (See Dulin et al. 2018), they remain generally premised on the idea that at-risk individuals and communities can overcome or adapt to the negative effects of risk exposure (Fergus et al. 2005). For some, resilience is understood as a trait or attribute that facilitates coping with trauma and adversity, while others conceptualize it as a process that shifts and progresses over time and across social and cultural milieus (Herrick et al 2014). At the time, my concern was that mainstream resilience theory was the wrong theory to critically examine the multiple levels of deep negation that I felt embodied Black stories about HIV and specifically straight Black men's stories of manhood. I wasn't against theorizing coping, but I knew that talking about Black folks' protective factors inevitably required also talking about the structural conditions that inscribed Black social life—destructive conditions that, in my view, no amount of resilience could correct or change.

The stories that I recount in this dissertation have stirred my own internalized anxieties around my identity as a straight Black man. They have forced me to think hard about the patriarchal disciplining that I endured by the different figures in my life, particularly in my youth. Growing up, I understood that being less "manly," less "hard," less "straight," automatically meant also being *less* "Black." And as a light-skinned mixed-raced person, Black was important to me—I felt my manhood depended on it.

As a pre-teen who thought he was a young man at the age of eleven, I learned how to hone my Blackness to intimidate others, to get the cool patriarchal masculinity and sexual attention that I ached for. In high school, I felt that my female classmates owed me their attention and that their bodies were objects that I could eventually possess through seduction and charm. Determined to show everyone how I was “The Man,” one Halloween I decided to come to school dressed up as a pimp. I wore a faux fur coat and a kitsch looking straw hat to which I pinned a fake feather fedora. Underneath the coat I opted for gaudy colours that rhymed with a pair of bombastic oversized shades that barely clung to my face. The flashy threads, meant to emulate characters I knew from Blaxploitation films, made me feel cool and confident. As I swaggered through the school cafeteria, I was met with applause from my mainly white classmates, but what followed was totally unrehearsed. Two white female students, whom I hardly knew, suddenly volunteered to be, as they put it, my “bitches” and escorted me around for the rest of the lunch period, draping themselves all over me. I revelled in the idea of having “bitches” and even more the idea that “pimping” was natural to me. In the eyes of my white classmates, Blackness was a special sexy-cool weapon that only we, Black male students, had and, for the first time in my life, my Blackness made me feel awesomely powerful and desired.

Not surprisingly, the relationship between Blackness and AIDS wasn’t something to which I had given much thought. Like others of my generation (born in the mid-1970s and early 1980s), whose sexual coming-of-age coincided with basketball star Earvin "Magic" Johnson's self-disclosure, AIDS was a distant and bizarre spectacle. I knew about it, in part, because of Magic, but it just didn’t feel relevant to me. I was enculturated to

believe that AIDS affected people who "broke the rules"—like gay men, people who injected drugs, Haitian refugees, and of course, unlucky but lucky guys like "Magic"—guys who had massive amounts of sex. These were folks that got what they deserved, or so I was told. Even if I hadn't made the conscious connection between Blackness and AIDS, I had already made the connection between homosexuality, deviance, and disease. I had already begun to internalize racist and homophobic AIDS stigma. All of it registered as normal—undoubtedly the same normal that governed my self-understandings around my racial Blackness and manliness.

Shortly after high school, I joined the Canadian Armed Forces. These were formative years where the world and my place in it seemed self-explanatory. When I returned from deployment in Afghanistan in the early 2000s, that order had vanished and I left the forces for good. After Afghanistan, things stopped adding up anymore. Instead of feeling like "The Man," I felt defeated and betrayed. I felt estranged from myself and didn't fully know why. These feelings forced me to question what I thought I already knew about imperialism, race, heterosexuality, and gender, and about Black diaspora and Black consciousness both in Canada and elsewhere. I also questioned what it meant to be straight, Black, and male in a world so hostile to Black life.

The stories and experiences told to me by the participants in my research, and which I retell in this dissertation, felt like a gift to me because they are as contradictory and ambivalent as those that inform my own personal experiences of manhood and self. There's one important caveat however, and that is my own embodied whiteness and HIV-negative status. As a mixed-raced individual, I was aware of how my whiteness conferred certain privileges relative to them. I like to think that I was seen and understood as a

straight Black man, as I see and understand myself, but I know not everyone always did. In many ways, I think my whiteness intrigued the participants and made them curious—I imagine they felt that we connected so well and at the same time I asked questions that they might have expected from a white person. I still wonder if my whiteness might have helped me get away with asking questions that pushed boundaries. Still, I like to believe that we shared a way of seeing and experiencing the world, as men marked by Blackness, and that this shared experience offered an intimate point of convergence and understanding, which facilitated conversation—the type of conversation that was easier with someone who could relate to the pain, pleasures, violence, and desires that come with being a Black man in Canada. The "positioned truth" (Abu-Lughod 2006:156), that is, this ethnography, seeks to illustrate the powerful insights that are possible when we unsettle the boundaries between "self" and "other."

Organization of this Dissertation

Chapter One situates this project within the broader social scientific study of HIV and provides a condensed overview of the analytical frames that I employ to make sense of Blackness. This chapter also elaborates on key Afro-pessimist precepts and lays the foundation for analytical engagements in Chapter Two through Five.

Chapter Two is organized into three sections. The first examines how evidence is constructed and narrated in the field of HIV research and public health, and how it reinforces anti-Black stereotypes. The second is an attempt to think through—in line with key precepts of Afro-pessimism and Black Studies—different yet corresponding conceptual and methodological challenges associated with ethnographically writing Black

social life. The final section lays out my data collection methods and field sites, timelines, and interviews with key informants.

Chapter Three focuses on Black heterosexual masculine scripts and performances. Here, I weave together multiple interviews and ethnographic vignettes to examine the different ways in which straight Black and mainly HIV-negative men critique and mobilize stereotypes about their vulnerability to HIV. Conceptually, this chapter examines how Blackness ontologically *arranges* gender, sexuality and experiences of HIV that, in turn, enables and disables specific ways of living “like a Black man” in Canada. To demonstrate the seductive “humanizing” allure of masculine scripts in the lives of participants, I draw on two vignettes—one with George Musa, a member of the HIV-positive men’s group, and another with Andre, a focus group participant. I contend that participants enact patriarchy not always by choice, but to secure a semblance of place in white patriarchal society—a place that ultimately dehumanizes Black men even if it pretends or promises to empower them.

Chapter Four focuses on the politics of HIV recognition in Toronto’s HIV sector. Centered exclusively around the voices of members of the men’s HIV-positive support group, I ask: what does it means to be straight, Black, and living with HIV, in an epidemic in which Black bodies remain largely invisible or on the margins. Using ethnographic material, I analyze how members of the group enact fugitivity by mobilizing their heterosexuality to carve out space in an HIV sector that they believe has denied them the same recognition as other groups. This chapter uses an Afro-pessimist lens to think through participants’ fugitive struggle for mutual recognition in the HIV sector alongside the struggle for Black ontological recognition or, put simply, for the right to exist.

Chapter Five explores fugitive formulations of Blackness and humanity. Here, I present perspectives from a group of mainly Caribbean men who are HIV-negative (or did not disclose/know the status) juxtaposed against the views of African members of a men's HIV-positive support group. The purpose of this juxtaposition isn't to compare the two groups, but rather to examine how critical awareness around Blackness is used to foster ontological placemaking. I also consider how participants' diverse understandings of Blackness in Canada are the result of converging factors that produce different "routes" (Hall 1994), that is, different ways of thinking existentially around what it means to be Black and human under whiteness. I show that participants' critical awareness around their existence and humanity registers different forms of diasporic insight and self-knowledge that can be used in the creation of subversive alternatives to whiteness.

In closing the dissertation, I review my key findings and highlight corresponding analytical threads between chapters. I end with a brief reflection on how social death, as an existential modality of thought, might open up new research avenues interested in how Blackness intersects with HIV and other health crisis.

Chapter 1: What Blackness Does: A Framework

"In western societies, modernity has constituted itself in a particular logic of the subject, and it has done so by creating a philosophically justified freedom of the white subject that presupposes the non-subjectivity of others by way of direct, or indirect, ownership of those others." (Broeck 2013: 106)

"The social death of the slave goes to the very level of their being, defining their ontology." (Wilderson et. al. 2017: 8)

Situating this Study

To date, therapeutic and public health responses to HIV/AIDS have privileged biomedical models, such as randomized controlled trials, multivariate statistical analysis, and computer modelling (Colvin 2015), as the strongest possible evidence (Mykhalovskiy and Rosengarten 2009); this type of systematic, empirical research that depends on rigorous scientific standards has been seen as the most effective approach for developing health policy and therapeutic interventions. Contemporary ethnographic and critical social inquiry is less than enthusiastic about biomedical modes of conceptualizing and evincing the epidemic (Adam 2011; Colvin 2015; Lorway 2014; 2017; Mykhalovskiy and Weir 2004). Since the 1990s, medical anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, and historians have argued that biomedical reasoning in HIV research has generated a technical rendering of the epidemic that depoliticizes the "social life of the virus" (Kippax and Stephenson 2012: 790) and, as such, fails to explain racial and other disparities of the epidemic. These works confirm that the emphasis on risk behaviours has perpetuated a logic that pathologizes different types of sex, practices, and peoples.

This dissertation adds to a vibrant body of ethnographic work that, since the start of the HIV epidemic, has deepened critical analysis around a wide range of structural and

social processes that affect the everyday experiences of people living with, and at-risk of HIV (Bourgois 2000, 1998; Lorway 2016b; Cohen 2005; Epstein 1996; Farmer 2001, 2006; Fassin 2007; Geary 2014; Mykhalovskiy and Betteridge 2012; Nguyen 2005; Patton and Kim 2012; Patton 2002; Sangaramoorthy 2014; Rhodes et al. 2005; Treichler 1999; Whitehead 1997). More specifically, this dissertation contributes to a quickly burgeoning interdisciplinary Ontarian and Canadian literature and critical social inquiry that seek to understand the HIV-related experiences of Black and racialized communities (see Adam and Rangel 2015; Bisaillon 2010; Catungal 2013; Chamber et al. 2018; Flicker et al. 2014; Gardezi et al. 2008; Husbands et al. 2013; Husbands et al. 2017; Husbands, Oakes, and Ongoiba 2013; Jackson 2018; Jackson and Mashing 2017; Lawson et al. 2000; Li et al. 2015, 2016, 2018; Li et al. 2018; Logie et al. 2011; Miller 2005; Murray 2020a, 2020b; Mykhalovskiy 2015; Mykhalovskiy and Betteridge 2012; Mykhalovskiy et al. 2016; Newman et al. 2008; Poon et al. 2005; Tharao and Massaquoi 2001; Williams et al. 2009; Wilson 2013; Wilson et al. 2016; Wong et al. 2012). This body of literature lays the foundations for a more politicized engagement with questions of Blackness and health equity in the context of the Canadian epidemic.[14] I draw on some of this literature to contextualize participants' experiences in Chapters Two through Five.

[14] Toronto-based social-scientific research interested in HIV among racialized communities is not extensive and tends to group experiences of Black (African, Caribbean and Black), Latinx and East/South East Asian communities. Research among Indigenous communities has largely been treated separately. I don't engage much with research on non-Black communities in Toronto or elsewhere. The main reason for this is that I believe Black HIV-related experiences are qualitatively different compared to other racialized and non-racialized groups. It's also worth noting that Black people represent just over half (40%) of all positive HIV tests in Toronto, but make up around 9 % of Toronto's overall population (OHESI unpublished).

This dissertation is informed by and speaks to three overlapping bodies of theoretical literature: (1) the literature in Afro-pessimist thought that treats the Middle Passage as a starting point for what Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire might call the thingification of Black flesh and negation of Blackness within the sphere of the Human (Hartman 1997; Hartman and Wilderson 2003; Spillers et al. 2007; Moten 2008; Sexton 2016; Wilderson III 2010); (2) theoretical currents in Black Feminist and Black Queer theory interested in how Blackness arranges gender and sexuality and enables and disables ways of living gender and sexuality under whiteness (Spillers et al. 2007; hooks 1990; 2004; Warren 2014; Allen and Jobson 2016; King 2016; Hayward and Gossett 2017; Walcott 2014); and (3) the bourgeoning postcolonial anthropological literature on the critique of critical race theory (Saucier and Woods 2016; Allen and Jobson 2016).

Throughout this dissertation, I take cues from postcolonial psychoanalytic thinkers such as Franz Fanon (1952) who teach that human subjects are not self-contained and that the formation of the human as a social subject requires the consideration of theories that deal with internal/psychic and external/anthropological forces. I argue that to appreciate how colonialist and racist thought enter the skin of the Black subject, we must pay close attention, as Stephen Frosh (2013) says, to the ways in which the postcolonial and psychological mediate Black subjectification—that is, how and why Black people engage (or don't engage) in particular forms of intimacy and self-making, and how that intimacy and self-making is profoundly political. Note that my emphasis on the psychic in this dissertation is not meant to suggest that anti-Black racism is a mental fabrication. Anti-Black racism is, first and foremost, a concrete reality and must be thought about on multiple and overlapping registers, including the psychic register as an important

dimension of how Black people experience their social realties and affirm their sense of self.

The following seven sections review key analytical frames that lay the theoretical groundwork for thinking about what Blackness *does* and *why* it matters in relation to HIV/AIDS research on/about racialized Black communities. In *A Lens for Understanding Anti-Blackness*, I provide a brief background on Afro-pessimist thought as an analytical lens and movement. In *From Flesh to Thing* and *Afro-optimism and Fugitivity*, I examine the foundational assumptions of Afro-pessimist thought, including the irreconcilability of Blackness as a position in the sphere of the human. In the latter section, I draw attention to the so-called fault lines that demarcate Afro-optimists and Afro-pessimists. This dissertation uses an overarching Black critical lens, one which ethnographically tracks between both Afro-pessimist and Afro-optimist formulations within the tradition. Fugitivity, a mainly Afro-optimist perspective, is used as a critical entry point for engaging with Black resistance and escape.

In *Theorizing Against the Grain* and *The Anthropological Study of Race*, I begin with an introduction of some of the debates and disputes associated with Black nonexistence. I also elaborate on what Afro-pessimism sees as the connection between slavery and modernity's Enlightenment and how this connection hampers engagement with Black political ontology. In the latter half, I elaborate on the historical development of the race concept in anthropology and reflect on important theoretical directions in the ethnographic study of Blackness.

Lastly, *From Racial Formation Theory to a Theory Formative Blackness* and *Black Agency and Fluidity*, I examine conceptual inheritances from racial formation theory and

its corresponding limitations for the study of Black ontology. I also incorporate lessons from Afro-pessimism to explore Blackness' fluidity, agency, and its ontological foreclosure. These two sections are critical for how I ethnographically recount participants' fugitive acts of defiance and refusal. They are also essential for thinking about how Afro-pessimist thought is experienced on an interpersonal level. In subsequent chapters, I draw on ethnographic material to explore how fugitivity might play out in real-world encounters and relations and provide unique insights into the experiences of Black heterosexual men and their relationships with HIV/AIDS.

A Lens for Understanding Anti-Blackness

As a theoretical approach, Afro-pessimism could be described as a charged collage of the critiques of Black radical thinkers and revolutionaries of the 1960s and 1970s (Wilderson et al. 2017). I say charged because it injects fresh vigor into this particular tradition of modern Black critical thought. In many ways, Afro-pessimists see their theorical projects as simultaneously addressing the failures and short-comings of early radical Black theory and as an intervention in contemporary political thought.

Afro-pessimism began to garner attention in the U.S. in the late 1990s by advancing a framework for engaging racial slavery as a social phenomenon. Its theoretical breadth has since produced competing positions, internal debates, and disputes. There are at least four basic theoretical threads that ground Afro-pessimism. The first includes Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan and Fink 2002), after Frantz Fanon (1952), in the works of Fred Wilderson (2010) and Saidiya Hartman (1997). The second includes intersection of race and biopolitics, incorporating Jaret Sexton's (2011) engagement with Giorgio Agamben (1998) and Orlando Patterson (1982). The third

draws on Marxist theorizing, by way of Agathangelou (2010), Sabine Broeck (2016), Daniel Barber (2016), and Wilderson (2003, 2003). Lastly, the fourth thread is concerned with the legacy of racial slavery and colonialism in the Americas, mainly as the origin of a system of Black production (Hartman 2008; Wilderson 2010).[15]

As a lens, Afro-pessimism hones in on Euro-American modernity's dependence on anti-Black violence; it brings into focus the ways in which white supremacy necessitates anti-Black violence to maintain order. Making this relationship of violence my starting point, Afro-pessimism allows me to situate HIV directly in relation to anti-Black regimes of violence that undergird Black experiences and that are experienced and embodied on different planes. By embodied, I am referring to the ways in which anti-Black violence enters assemblages of self-making—that is, becomes foundational in how participants learn, think, perform, but also resist gender, sexuality, and other registers of their Blackness. Afro-pessimism makes it possible to draw connections between the structures that place Black people at risk of HIV and the power relations that maintain white supremacy in Canada and elsewhere. To apply Afro-pessimism is to look at how HIV in participants' lives amplifies Blackness' structural position under whiteness yet, at the same time, creates striking forms of resistance and fugitivity—what Fred Moten (2008:188) calls, "impossible sociality."

From Flesh to Thing

The irreconcilability of Blackness as a position in the sphere of the Human is a foundational analytical concept in Afro-pessimist thought and a central theoretical anchor

[15] See also Weddington (2019) for a detailed description of these theoretical treads within Afro-pessimism.

point in this dissertation. This notion is based on the Middle Passage as a process through which the subject position is violently stripped from the captive slave. Grounded in the Black feminist writings of Hortense Spillers (Spillers 1987) and Saidiya Hartman (Hartman 1997), the general idea of Afro-pessimism is that slavery turned Africans into fungible things or, put differently, "thingified" them. Fungibility refers to the commodity-like status that Black bodies attained but also to its unlimited figurative and metaphoric value. For Spillers and Hartman, Black bodies aren't classical fungible commodities; they don't adhere to economic theory's one-to-one ratio of exchange, as Tiffany Lethabo King (2016) points out in her work on ontological regimes of labour (plantation landscapes). Instead, Black fungibility extends in ways that classic commodities cannot—they are open-ended, slippery and elastic, which makes them super commodities for infinite kinds of spatial, cultural, and material productions and relations (King 2016:1024-5). As Hartman (1997:21) writes, "[t]he fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values." It is in this sense that fungibility not only commodifies, but "thingifies" the Black body and, in turn, sequesters Blackness to a state of nonexistence or social death.[16] For Afro-pessimists, such unmaking (or theft) of the Black subject is understood as a permanent and universal configuration of modernity.

By incorporating in its analytical framework Black Feminist theory, Black Queer, Gay and Lesbian theory, and Queer of Color Critique's analyses of Black fungibility, Afro-

[16] When Afro-Pessimists refer to the slave as socially dead, what they mean is that they are: "1) open to gratuitous violence, as opposed to violence contingent upon some transgression or crime; 2) natally alienated, their ties of birth not recognized and familial structures intentionally broken apart; and 3) generally dishonored, or disgraced before any thought or action is considered." (Wilderson et al. 2017:8)

pessimism gives voice to a Blackness that arranges gender—a Queerness that inhabits the Black.[17] It brings the margins to the centre (hooks 1984) and makes the subject-unmaking work of Blackness the starting point from which to understand figurations of desire and sexuality in Blackness[18] or, in Calvin Warren's words, to think of the Black Queer as an "ethical dilemma of humanism" (2015: 8). Warren writes:

> The "black queer" signifies a double-death, a redoubling of the internecine processes of erasure. Indeed, "queerness" is impossible without the derelict being of blackness—its grammar, object, and predicating "subject" emerge through the death sentence of blackness. Queer theory is always already in a relationship with blackness, but not as an "ally." (Warren 2015: 8)

Rinaldo Walcott, whose early work is often retrospectively incorporated by Afro-pessimists into their project, has addressed this issue of disavowed humanism quite powerfully in his essay (Walcott 2005) *Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora*. Walcott calls for diaspora reading practices that disrupt the coherent linkages of Euro-American modernity, linkages between place and consciousness, as well as linkages between racial Blackness, desire, gender, and

[17] As a body of theory, Afro-pessimism incorporates Black Feminist theory and critiques from Black Queer theory and Queer of Colour Critique. For example, theory interested in the corporeality of the Black woman and the hyperembodiment of the fungible object forms the basis of foundational Afro-pessimist precepts. Key thinkers have contributed to this Black feminist theory, including but not limited to, Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe. Calvin Warren's (2017) Onticide: Afropessimism, Queer Theory, & Ethics is a notable example of Afro-pessimist theorists engaging with Black queerness to make sense of Black being under whiteness. There are many other contributors to Black Feminist theory and critiques from Black Queer theory and Queer of Colour Critique who are often retrospectively incorporated by Afro-pessimists into their project, Rinaldo Walcott is a perfect example. It is important to note that in these works, Blackness and Black ontology structures the possibilities and impossibilities of sexual and gendered subjectivities.

[18] The following works, to varying degrees, are often retrospectively incorporated by Afro-pessimists into their project: Cathy Cohen's (1999) *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, Siobhan Somerville's (2000) *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Roderick Ferguson's (2003) *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Samuel Delany's (2001) *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Rinaldo Walcott's (2005) *Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora* and Sharon Holland's (2000) *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and Black Subjectivity.*

sexuality. Although Walcott's text was written before the ascendance of Afro-pessimism in Black diasporic studies, I believe that it has inspired a new cohort of Black queer and feminist scholars to re-read and re-engage with Black diaspora scholarship in ways that have expanded Afro-pessimism's repertoire (see for example, Sharpe 2016; Tinsley 2008; Allen 2012; Ochieng' Nyongó 2009).

Black suffering is an organizing principle in Afro-pessimist thought because Blackness is understood as coming into being through, and as, violence (Sexton 2011, 29). In *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Wilderson III 2010), Wilderson writes that if we really want to understand experiences of Black suffering, then we must also think of Black suffering in relation to a set of assumptions about what it actually means to be Human and the epistemic conditions that make such a project impossible for Black folks. From Wilderson's perspective, to critically talk about Black suffering is to go against the grain of humanist assumptive logics—to interrogate, in ontological terms, the intelligibility of Black personhood in a world that Afro-pessimists and other radical thinkers say already and has always refused Blackness as humanity.

The linkages between suffering and Black personhood are implicit in Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), where she describes Black suffering as elusive, especially when we try to "bring it near" (20). The reason for this, she explains, is that Black suffering always comes to us by way of a white proxy. Even though it is intimately a part of how Black people experience themselves, it still only becomes intelligible through whiteness and white bodies. And this is because Hartman understands Black people's alienation as an alienation from their own affective and ontological connection to suffering—what she notes as "the effacement of sentience integral to the wanton use of

the captive body" (1997:20). For Saidiya Hartman and other Afro-pessimists, the ejection of Blackness from the sphere of the Human is a part of the ontological fabric of the world. It is a predicament that cannot be altered or resolved.

Fault Lines: On Afro-optimism and Fugitivity

While the term "pessimism" in "Afro-pessimism" gives the impression that the theory is in essence cynical or negative, Afro-pessimists assure that there is nothing gloomy about their work, but rather the opposite. In fact, there has been debate in recent years around the so-called fault lines demarcating scholars described as Afro-pessimists and those described as Afro-optimists. This debate often pits the work of Fred Wilderson and Jared Sexton (Afro-pessimists) against the perceived optimism of Fred Moten and his students. But as Stephen Marshall (Marshall 2012:13) points out, there are "crucial moments of convergence" in both these theoretical currents as it pertains to Hartman's concept of fungibility. First, writes Marshall, they "affirm [B]lack vulnerability as an effect of fungibility;" second, they each posit "that vulnerability and fungibility are achievements won through the reconstitution of slave law;" and last, "both positions strive to formulate, in theoretical terms, the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of fungibility as a structure of political antagonism" (12).

Perhaps the greatest difference between Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism is that while Fred Wilderson and Jared Sexton's analyses appear more death-bound, Moten's stresses "mining the discordant sounds of racial injury for traces of life stolen away" (Marshall 2012:12). For Fred Moten, the notion of "stolen life" describes what has been violently disavowed, but also what Blackness does as a "fugitive movement" of "stolen life" (12). This double gesture—movement in absence, life in death—conceptualizes

Blackness as ceaseless and expansive, always escaping its positioning in law and representation (Marriott 2016:5). For Moten and his students, Blackness' alterity is embraced as a "cause for optimism" (Marshall 2011:12) because it is through this activity of escape that fugitive movements align with what Marshal terms "freedom's possibility" (12).

To help frame participants' agency and acts of self-making, I approach fugitivity as an inherent part of Black lived experience and as an act that hazes the line between resistance and capitulation. Moten (2018) teaches that fugitivity is disruptive and always automatically a refusal of the world's theft of Blackness. For Moten, to exist in a world that is premised on one's negation is the ultimate affirmation of one's radical vitality. However, what is important about this radical act of defiant vitality (that is, escape or optimism) is that it doesn't quite beget the arrival of freedom—a point that critics of fugitivity say confines Blackness to this activity of escape and to the ontology of its production (See Marriott 2016).

Fugitivity offers no detour around Blackness' predicament; it is not the kind of action that aims to rescue Blackness' place in the human. It's an act that wants to return to Blackness' void place of origin—a way of thinking and doing Blackness that, as Calvin Warren (Warren 2015: 240) puts it, "disables and invalidates every imaginative and symbolic function" upon which Black being is conceived. Fugitivity is a divestiture from the Western order of things, which includes a rejection of the emancipatory rhetoric of hope and optimism. This is an important point in terms of how I approach and frame acts of Black affirmation in the lives of participants; it also has important implications for how I

conceptualize Black agency and resistance in this dissertation, which I will elaborate on in the latter half of this Chapter.

Theorizing Against the Grain

One of Afro-pessimism's most controversial pronouncements is that racial slavery was formative to the ontological production of Blackness as nonexistence. Postcolonial historians and critical race theorists, including anthropologists, don't need to be convinced of slavery's enduring impact on Black diasporic populations; however, there's much less consensus about racial slavery as a system of Black ontological production. Afro-pessimists have tried to explain this skepticism from several perspectives, always centred around the same central point: to accept that racial slavery was ontologically formative to Blackness, one must also accept that it was formative to European thought, its systems, and its categories of social and cultural production. Afro-pessimists see a connection between slavery, modernity's Enlightenment, and transatlantic history; they say that this connection hampers engagement with critical theory beyond a narrowly defined ethnocentric humanist legacy. For proponents of Afro-pessimism, such as Sabine Broeck (2016: 2017), it boils down to a deeply entrenched and often unquestioned white agnostic attitude vis-à-vis slavery and the epistemic world it made possible.

Whether we restrict anthropology's inception to the nineteenth century or trace its roots even further back to the Enlightenment period, a new cohort of scholars are re-examining the entanglements of Atlantic slavery, knowledge production, and colonization in shaping early anthropology as well as the modern world (Kamola 2017; Thiaw and Mack 2020; Pierre 2020;). My aim isn't to downplay the critical reflexivity that marked a major theoretical shift in the discipline in 1980s (Rabinow 1978; Clifford and Marcus 1986),

nor the pioneering work of Black anthropologists like Lee Baker, Johnnetta Betsch Cole, Arthur Spears, Audrey Smedley, and others. Rather, I want to suggest that anthropology's historical association with colonialism and slavery lurks in the background, particularly as I attempt to locate several unresolved issues that I view as repressing the discipline's limited engagement with Black political ontology. But before I do so, it is necessary to briefly review anthropology's contribution to the most powerful analytical fulcrums of modern history: race.

The Anthropological Study of Race

The anthropological study of race goes as far back as the late nineteenth century; it emerged in response to two central Enlightenment concerns. The first concern had to do with the political and philosophical dimensions of emancipation and individualism; the second, scientific developments that spurred Charles Darwin and Gregor Mandel to radically challenge European concepts of geology and history (Baker 2010: 15–16). In line with eugenicists and raciologists, early anthropologists viewed culture and race as singular and innate—blood, civilization, and culture were interchangeable and timeless. Race was posited as an explanation of difference between cultures. Early anthropologists not only viewed the world around them through a lens of biological and taxonomic categories, but also through a raciocultural paradigm that placed the European man at the apex of human cultural, intellectual, and racial evolution (Baker and Patterson 1994; Armelagos and Goodman 1998). Colonial conquest would entrench the idea that it was the white man's God-given right to rule and govern peoples whose skin was not considered white (or white enough)—people who were deemed innately inferior and less evolved.

Anthropological ideas concerning racial hierarchy were challenged in the early twentieth century by German-born American anthropologist Franz Boas (see Stocking Jr. 1966; Stocking 1989; Harrison 1992; Baker 1998). He argued that history, rather than primordial faculties, explained the achievements of particular civilizations (Liss 1998: 131). While some assert that Boas held on to the idea of immutable genetic differences between races, his emphasis on history as a process—as something contingent on cross-racial and cultural contact—strongly repudiated the idea of racial hierarchy and biological purity. Through Boas' rejigging of the culture concept, he was able to talk about culture in the plural form and as something that changed over time across racial groups; this laid the foundation for a major intellectual shift in the discipline and beyond, marking a departure from an anthropology of racial thinking, to a much more politically engaged anthropology of thinking about race.

The "Cultural Turn" in anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s brought about the deconstruction of the culture concept. The result was a re-evaluation of anthropology's theory and contributions on one hand, and an emergent new dialectic between race and culture on the other (Hartigan Jr. 2005:544-45). While the Cultural Turn is attributed with the emergence of a more self-reflexive and engaged anthropological practice, anthropologists like Jason Antrosio and Sallie Han remind us how it still has a way to go. In their Editors' Note for the issue *Race, Racism, and Protesting Anthropology* (2015) of *Open Anthropology,* they point out that although anthropology is used to challenging structured racism, the discipline's "institutional position as an anti-race science has often also insulated it from a necessary self-critique of the discipline's own silences, exclusions, and practices around race" (2015:1). Antrosio and Han recall how, in the late 1970s and

early 1980s, there was great optimism from Black pioneers (like St. Clair Drake and others) that Black anthropologists would help transform and diversify the discipline. Now, the big question is, as Karen Brodkin and colleagues (2011) put it, “how far has anthropology come in becoming racially inclusive?”

Brodkin’s article *Anthropology as White Public Space?* (2011) analyzed an online survey of graduate students and faculty of colour undertaken by the *AAA Commission on Race and Racism in Anthropology*. The analysis draws attention to how anthropology departments remain predominantly white and overwhelmingly environments where race-avoidant thinking is reproduced in hiring practices and department culture, despite the discipline’s contribution to addressing racial ideologies (554). Brodkin noted that, despite some progress, anthropology departments have done poorly “when it comes to decolonizing their own practices around race” and that “[it’s] still true all too often” (545). Meanwhile, credit for the inroads forged in critiquing anthropology can be given to the *“decolonizing generation”* (Allen and Jobson 2016), that is, “the cohort of Black, allied antiracist, feminist, and political economy–oriented scholars that gave rise to the landmark volume *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology for Liberation* (Harrison 1997c).” Credit is also due to the more recent interventions of anthropologists of the African diaspora (see Smith 2015; Ulysse 2017; Torres 2018; Saucier 2011; Alves 2014; Pierre 2012; 2020). All of these are scholars that have taken up a “re-read[ing] [of] the longue durée of humanism” (Broeck 2017:1137), but making room for this sort of re-reading still isn’t easy in many anthropology departments, even amid what is said to be a major generational shift happening in the discipline (Nordling

2020). In the next section, I elaborate on the challenges associated with the influence of racial formation theory in the anthropological study of race.

Critiques of Racial Formation Theory

With the exception of the interventions that I named above and perhaps a few others, overall, the anthropological study of race and racism has not engaged with Black political ontology (see Stocking 1982; Smedley 1999; Shanklin 1994; Goodman et al. 2012; Baker 1998; 2010); this also applies to subsections of anthropology that have adopted insights from critical race theory (CRT). Critical race theory (see Delgado and Stefancic 2001) is an evolving and shifting field and movement concerned with the social construction of race and the institutionalization of racism.[19] However, there is still connectivity between Afro-pessimism and anthropologists who employ critical race theory more broadly. In this section, I want to highlight a few points of friction between CRT and Afro-pessimism.[20]

For instance, Afro-pessimists posit that racial slavery's ontological production of Blackness automatically structured the status of all other racial groups. CRT's criticism is that this essentializes Blackness by overlooking socio-cultural and political distinctions among Black people—especially among different cohorts and groups of Black immigrants in the United States (see Ray et al. 2017 and Weddington 2019). Afro-pessimism insists on the distinctiveness of anti-Blackness in both its form and origin. That is, Blackness isn't

[19] Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, CRT emerged in legal advocacy and spread to other fields of scholarship and civil society movements. For a comprehensive overview, see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's *Critical Race Theory An Introduction* (2001).

[20] Afro-pessimists are not the only ones to identify shortcoming with racial formation theory. Joe Feagin and Sean Elias' (2012) critique offers another entry point to assess the deficiencies of Michael Omi and Howard Winant's influential racial formation theory.

understood through a singular relationship with whiteness or simply white people; rather, it is characterized by a Black and non-Black plane of existence. As Victor Ray (2017: 149) and colleagues point out, for Afro-pessimists, "antiblackness, not white supremacy, explains the social conditions of blacks across the globe (Sexton 2016)." Afro-pessimists don't reject the notion of white supremacy; they simply don't conceptualize it as something that can be independent of anti-Black racism. Again, this is a position rooted in the understanding that other racialized groups form part of, and contribute to, a world premised on Anti-Blackness. Critical race theory's concern is that the effects of Black non-existence are often described without considering the experiences of Black populations on the other side of the Atlantic—that racial difference and identity forged through the slave trade may have had a different impact on continental African communities; that the slave trade's legacy in Africa was different. Even though emerging research shows that the psychosocial impact of slavery on continental Africans was significant (Pierre 2012; 2020), questions still remain as to whether first- and second-generation Africans in the United States experience the effects of Black non-existence at all. The same logic applies to Black diasporic communities from other parts of the new world, as well as individuals of mixed ancestry. One can see how such skepticism may at the same time provoke similar questions about Blackness in the Canadian context—particularly in Toronto where a large proportion of the Black population have ties to Sub-Saharan Africa.[21]

[21] As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, for decades, the majority of Ontario's Black immigrants came from the English-speaking Caribbean. Today, Black immigrants in Ontario come from more than 100 different countries, but mostly from countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 91-551-X, 2017). Equally important to note is the growth of Ontario's Black population. In 20 years, it has doubled in size, going from about 300,000 in 1996, to slightly more than 600,000 in 2016 (Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 91-551-X, 2017).

To be perfectly clear, I understand the concerns around how Afro-pessimism might appear to reify Blackness—even if I'm not convinced that such is really the case. In my view, Afro-pessimism's theoretical abstractness is partly to blame for this. To the detriment of the paradigm, field-based research hasn't been a priority among Afro-pessimists; this seems to be changing and could help provide the socio-cultural nuances skeptics say are missing to support a theory of ontological production. There are a few examples of ethnographers who have put Afro-pessimist precepts to work, several with backgrounds in anthropology (Alves 2014; 2020; Saucier 2015; 2016). For instance, P. Khalil Saucier's (2015) ethnographic study of second-generation Cape Verdean youth in the Greater Boston area is an attempt to examine the conflation of Blackness with Black identity through a counter-critique of racial formation theory. His work in particular challenges the social constructionist notion of Blackness as the product of racial identity formation. Put differently, that Black identities are socially constructed in more or less the same way, and at the same level, as other racial identities in our contemporary social world. Saucier's work demonstrates that ethnography informed by Afro-pessimism is different from other 'critical race' informed ethnography because the focus is on how racial Blackness in everyday life is prefigured by Black political ontology and not just the outcome of racial formation and social construction—a critique of race that continues to dominate the study of race and racism today.

Black Agency and Fluidity

One of the key arguments I advance in this dissertation is that the effects of nonexistence is something Black people experience insofar as they are coded Black by society. To be made or coded Black doesn't inevitably mean that Blackness is static or

unchanging; to the contrary, Blackness' fluidity is apparent in how participants in this dissertation understand their own Blackness and, in turn, understand their HIV vulnerability. I try to show that participants have slightly different understandings of Blackness based on their own histories, lived experience, social circumstances, and cultural backgrounds. I also note that, while participants sometimes enact and recount contradictory stories of Blackness, the experiential process through which they arrive at their Blackness is more or less the same. My point is that their awareness around how the world constructs them as Black, male, and straight is also a kind of awareness around anti-Blackness—an awareness that I believe demonstrates that the different possible and impossible ways to be (and become) a Black person in this world do not exist prior or outside anti-Black racism. As such, my approach is one that conceptualizes Blackness' fluidity as illustrative of the obstinacy of its structural determinism. This Afro-pessimist position helps us think about how HIV and anti-Blackness converge on different social and experiential levels, and how HIV-related stigma in the context of Black communities is also never outside the structural position of Blackness.

The social scientific critique of racial essentialism—one that anthropology has helped establish—provides context for understanding the resistance around Black political ontology in the academy. But, as others have pointed out (see Saucier and Woods 2016), to get beneath the surface of this critique requires an examination of racial formation theory (based on Omi and Winant's first publication of *Racial Formation* in 1986) and its corresponding social construction thesis. Saucier and Woods (2016) dedicate considerable attention to examining racial formation theory in *Conceptual Aphasia in Black*. They write that the underlying problem with racial formation theory is that it's "left-

liberal" humanistic framework is premised on the critique of colourblind ideology as a starting point for understanding racial experiences. They state that, because racial formation theory is based on a rebuttal of colourblindness, "it begins with the recognition that race is a biological fiction and a social construct" and that "[i]nvesting meaning into this inherently meaningless biological referent produces racism" (Saucier and Woods 2016:5).

There are various aspects of racial formation theory that are paradigmatic to the anthropological study of race, such as the notion that race, at the cultural level, is a fluid zone of meaning making. Anthropologists have relied heavily on this approach to equally advance a basic conception of culture, even if it isn't characteristically a culturalist one. The premise is that to truly engage with race, one needs culture or, more specifically, a field of intelligibility to not only decode racial enactments, but to also "enculturate against" the culture of racism (Hartigan 2005:556).

As I attempt to highlight the complicated reality of Black fluidity and agency, I'm not suggesting that Black subjectivities are simply projections of white imagination nor that Black people are, and can only become, what white people see and fantasize. On the contrary, in this dissertation, I interrupt the idea that heterosexual Black men just passively interiorize whiteness. At the same time, I share Tiffany King's (2016) concerns that more must be done to demonstrate how Black life, despite its ontological foreclosure, still acts on (or enacts) violent white imagination in ways that push and even refuse its limits (2016:1038). So, I try to clearly show that straight Black men are capable of dismantling patriarchy, of rejecting the inner white gaze, of standing up against HIV stigma, and of forging meaningful relationships and identities, all while I recognize that

this process is fraught with troubling contradictions that demand a critical reformulation of Black resistance and agency.

Much like the notion of agency Cathy Cohen (2004) articulates in her discussion on deviance and resistance, I understand agency within a context of constrained choices, whereby agency emerges in the form of opportunities to "secure small levels of autonomy" by people with "limited access to dominant power" (30). Where I think Cohen's analysis falls short, however, is that she understands this autonomy as the essence of Black liberation (30). One of the difficulties with this stance is that it doesn't account for Black subjects that privilege from the normative structure, such as heterosexual Black men. That is to say, while straight Black men may not reap the same rewards from the capitalist system as straight white men do, they still participate in a sex-gender system which confers them unearned privilege over women and queer folks. My argument is that Cohen's framing of autonomy as an act with liberating potential works best when applied to the choices and acts of deviance that are seen as rejecting dominant normalized understandings of family, desire, and sex. That is, it doesn't extend to account for choices and acts of deviance that are incoherent or that uphold subjugating norms. For instance, what happens when straight Black men find autonomy in acts of masculinist patriarchy?

My approach has been to use fugitivity as a lens to conceptualize my participants' resistant acts as ambiguous, tactical, and contradictory, but still within the delineations of their structurally determined agency. I argue that not all acts of agency are liberating, but also that perhaps liberation (in its modern sense and application), as the fulcrum to an anterior Black humanism, is the wrong paradigm through which to understand possibilities of Blackness. Like most Afro-pessimists, I'm chary of heroic conceptualizations of agency

and resistance that posit celebratory narratives of the oppressed that are contingent on imparting motives to Black folks' behaviours. I argue that it might be more productive to think of resistance and autonomy, and ultimately fugitivity, as existing within, as opposed to outside, the clutches of the power structure. Working with the negation of Black agency and humanism provides more room to critique, imagine, and resist than those espoused by current humanist conceptions of agency.

In the following Chapter I examine further the implications of adopting an Afro-pessimist lens as methodology for analyzing Black agency and resistance.

Chapter 2: Writing the Unthinkable, Unhearable and Unspeakable: On Black Nonexistence

"What is it to be an irreducibly disordering, deformational force while at the same time being absolutely indispensable to normative order, normative form?" (Moten 2008: 180)

This chapter works through corresponding conceptual and methodological challenges associated with research in line with my critical reflections on the key precepts of Afro-pessimism introduced in Chapter One. The chapter is organized into three parts: The first part examines how evidence-based approaches and discourses that are grounded in positivist health science marshal a kind of recounting, subjectivity, and knowledge about Black communities in the context of HIV. I write about how evidence is constructed and narrated in the fields of HIV research and public health, how that reinforces anti-Black stereotypes, and how it fits in a broader context of state-sanctioned control that sustains the existing social order, rather than fundamentally challenging it. My main argument is that HIV community-based research is a site where so-called non-conforming communities—that is, those labelled as difficult or hard to reach—can be linked to a calculus of state control (Guta et al. 2014:259). I recognize that it would be simplistic to claim that this dissertation lies completely outside the state-sanctioned control apparatus that Guta describes; I consider the narrative inquiry that anchors my research methodology to be a strategic attempt to make room for critical voices and stories that are too often excluded in the mainstream recounting of the HIV epidemic.

The second part of the chapter focuses on conceptual challenges associated with ethnographically writing what Afro-pessimists say is, in ontological terms, unwritable and unthinkable. In other words, how does one use ethnography to make sense of a human experience that Afro-pessimists contend is fundamentally irreconcilable with the

paradigm of the Human? Afro-pessimists claim that conventional anthropological concepts and analytical frames, like race and identity, don't always help us to meaningfully understand Black people's experiences in social death. For Afro-pessimists, including the optimist within this tradition, the problem is that Black people occupy a positionality that "exists outside of, but that is essential to, the construction of humanity" (Weddington 2018:5). I argue that this positionality puts pressure on ethnographers and others to theorize and articulate racial Blackness in a manner that goes beyond difference and that attends to the cultural and social forces that enable or disable Black political ontology in the diaspora. As highlighted in Chapter One, a key interest of this dissertation is to ethnographically examine how racial Blackness in everyday life is prefigured by Black political ontology and not just an outcome of racial formation and social construction.

The final section of this chapter lays out my data collection methods and field sites, timelines, and interviews with key informants.

Hard Data and the Hard-to-Reach

During fieldwork I became accustomed to hearing from HIV scientists and decision-makers in provincial and national public health agencies that hard-to-reach Black communities in Ontario and elsewhere in Canada had fewer government funded HIV programs and services because there wasn't sufficient hard data to warrant greater public expenditure for what was considered a small community in comparison to larger historically affected communities[22] (e.g. gay white men and injection drug users). In

[22] I might add that such claims around what is valid as hard data and the resulting impact on HIV services aren't unique to Black communities. Randy Jackson and colleagues illustrate this in their 2017 article *The Wisdom of Thunder: Indigenous Knowledge Translation of Experiences and Responses to Depression Among Indigenous Peoples Living with HIV*.

mainstream public health responses to HIV, hard data is synonymous with an approach to "evidence-based" research that purports rigorous and systematic scientific standards to produce the strongest possible evidence. Of course, what is understood by hard data, what practices and processes are deemed appropriate or inappropriate for its production (see Biruk 2018), and, conversely, what is inferred in language like "hard-to-reach," must be understood in relation to anti-Blackness that these terms foreground. A senior community figure in the Black HIV response explained to me that the language of hard-to-reach reinforces the dominant (and problematic) societal perception that Black people are not like other folks (i.e., white folks); they are hard—hard because they don't cooperate, hard because they are reckless (especially Black men), and hard because working with Black folks is always an inconvenience that requires deviating from the "normal" way of doing things. His concern, one that echoed the worries of many in the Black HIV response, was that discussions around hard-to-reach Black folks framed the community's needs in a way that masked deeper anti-Black racism (June 08, 2017. conversation with the community interlocutor). Likewise, other activists, researchers, and community leaders in the Black response to HIV also refused the dominant narrative that the limited scope of HIV services for Black communities was due to a lack of hard data or because Black folks were more difficult to reach than other communities, nor did they think that more hard data would guarantee that the needs and experiences of Black communities would be prioritized in the bigger scheme of the Canadian HIV response.[23]

[23] Community-based researchers have made a number of similar observations regarding other ethno-racial communities in Toronto in the context of mental health (Li et al. 2018) and HIV stigma (Li et al. 2015).

A senior community researcher expressed that Black HIV researchers and Black ASOs weren't being provided with the same opportunities to produce their own research evidence and forms of accountability, and that the social scientific research on Black communities produced by Black communities and their allies wasn't being given the same importance compared to "evidenced-based" research being produced by researchers with—at best—tenuous connections to Black communities (May 12, 2017. conversation with the community interlocutor). My conversations between April 2016 and February 2018 with different Black community-based researchers revealed that the so-called evidence was often staged to explain and legitimize poor HIV outcomes in Black communities and surreptitiously concealed anti-Black racism within and beyond the HIV response, thereby maintaining boundaries and marshalling certain kinds of acceptable knowledge practices, truth claims, subjects, and citizens in existing discourses.

When community-based organizations do research, they typically need to seek out academic partners to serve as co-principal investigators. These academic partners are essential in order for the organizations to access CIHR funding, navigate bureaucratic funding requirements, and lend credibility to the findings from their community-based research. At the same time, in their analyses of the Canadian HIV community-based research (CBR) movement, Adrian Guta and colleagues (2014) argue that, in our neo-liberal society, community participation in research can often be antithetical to the notion of community, especially for marginalized communities, because it functions to depoliticize community action and ensure conformity with top-down administrative decision-making (258). This kind of depoliticization was expressed to me often by Black HIV agency staff and community leaders. One Black community stakeholder, who is an

established employee of a provincially funded community health organization, expressed that partnerships between researchers, research institutions, and community were structured in a way that diminished her ability to influence the agenda. At a systems level, this infrastructure for health research funding in Canada shapes the relationships between community HIV stakeholders and university-based researchers in a way that sustains the social order, rather than fundamentally challenging it.

In his work, Adrian Guta (2014) argues that this calculus of state control always finds a way into community-based research (CBR), often with the help of state-sanctioned research initiatives and funding structures that promote “scientific citizenship” (Guta 2014: 205). Rooted in Science and Technology Studies, scientific citizenship provides a way to think about scientific knowledge production as a nexus for participatory public engagement, however, observers like Guta point out that it is also a form of knowledge-making that is inseparable from the social order. Current social theorists of scientific citizenship, such as Guta, view the growth of scientific citizenship in line with new forms of governmentality—that is, forms of state control exercised through both practices of self-disciplining and state sponsored technologies. Through scientific citizenship, Black folks participate as subjects of research, for the benefit of others, which maintains social order, rather than as full and equal participants. During a presentation entitled *If It Don’t Fit, Don’t Force It* at the 2017 Annual Canadian Conference on HIV/AIDS Research, Rinaldo Walcott argued that when it comes to HIV research, Black folks are less than citizens—they are the object of white sexual fantasy. He was clear about how Black folks in general, and queer Black men in particular, get used in the field of HIV research to propel the careers of white men and to entrench white heterosexual morality. In other words,

scientific citizenship is realized for white men, maintaining their place in social order, at the expense of Black folks. As he put it, "Black queer men can research [themselves] […] people who are repulsed by how we fuck must move on, you can no longer broker your careers while we seroconvert and die [..]."[24] The Foucauldian subtext is precisely what Guta is alluding to: state-sanctioned bio-politics is a calculus of letting some people (poor people, people of colour, queer people) die in order to make others live. After Roberto Esposito, Guta (2014:289) writes that this is how the Canadian state "immunize[s]" itself against threats like HIV by constructing divisive notions of community and the other: "immunity constitutes or reconstitutes community precisely by negating it."

Afro-pessimism as Methodology

What does it mean to speak about Black suffering and vulnerability and, ethnographically, to write it? Attending to these questions is paramount as the narratives I redeploy in this dissertation are saturated with suffering but what Afro-pessimist thinkers describe as ontological suffering, which is like a deep wound. However, rather than put a Band-Aid on this wound, Afro-pessimists prefer it be left open—or better, that it rots. This is because, for Afro-pessimists, the kind of suffering that Black life presents isn't something that can be treated. While this might appear problematic, Afro-pessimists argue that suffering, in fact, enables possibilities for thinking about Black liberation. This may seem counterintuitive, particularly within some currents of the Black consciousness movement where empowering Black people is generally seen as synonymous with Black people letting go of their internal suffering and pain.

[24] Walcott, Rinaldo. "CAHR 2017 - Special Session "If It Don't Fit, Don't Force It". Filmed April 6th, 2017. YouTube video, 38:29. Posted April 18th, 2017. https://youtu.be/eZ0RaBNs3lM.

Consequently, it seems that there is an inclination among certain intellectuals—especially those invested in a Black liberation rooted in affirmation and transcendence—to want to focus instead on the resilience and agency of the Black experience, not tragedy and suffering of Black people, and I think, rightly so. This approach is conspicuous in the new work on heterosexual Black men and HIV emerging from Black community-based researchers in Ontario (see Husbands and Oakes 2017). What stands out in this work (work that I myself have contributed to) is an attempt to outflank social death by privileging Blackness' livability, that is to demonstrate straight Black men's ability to be caring, sexually responsible, civically engaged, resilient and agentic subjects. Livability in this context is clearly about fightback—about refusing to let anti-Black racism define what Blackness is. For Afro-pessimists, including the optimists within this tradition, the problem is that the only way to counter the un-livability of Black life is to resist the urge to believe that Black life can ever be "livable" under whiteness. From this perspective, true refusal is the refusal of what has already been refused. Afro-pessimists have nothing against showing how straight Black men are capable of challenging racist and sexist stereotypes; their problem is when we ignore the structural irreconcilability of Blackness and claim that Black liberation is contingent on correcting racial discourses and ideas, rather than fundamentally obliterating the racist and sexist system that we live in (Wilderson 2010:38; Sexton 2011:33). Following the way in which Black suffering is conceptualized by Afro-pessimist thinkers like Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, Hortense Spillers, Alexander Weheliye, Rinaldo Walcott, Fred Moten, Christina Sharpe and others, what I think can be asserted is that Black suffering raises an ethnographic and onto-

epistemological challenge. By onto-epistemological, I mean a challenge to a theory of being (ontology) and theory of knowing (epistemology) (see (Barad, 2007).

On Writing the Unwritable

By ethnographic challenge, I'm referring to textuality—the act of writing Black suffering. While writing about any kind of suffering poses a challenge (see Coutin and Vogel 2016), I posit that writing Black racial suffering introduces a special set of methodological and ethical dilemmas, particularly when writing from the Afro-pessimist tradition. The big question is, how do you write what is, according to Afro-pessimists, by definition epistemologically unthinkable, unhearable and unspeakable? Anthropologist P. Khalil Saucier (2016:52), a proponent of Afro-pessimism, explains the problem is that "ethnography has, historically and conceptually, neglected the formative signifier of Blackness as the defining logic of modernity." Saucier maintains that this conceptual problem has prevented ethnographers from appreciating Blackness as anything more than simply "identity" (see also Spady 2017). According to him, ethnographers need to do more in terms of formulating analyses of Blackness predicated on its structural position—that is, one that understands Blackness as the conceptual basis "from which the human, the white and non-Black ethno, emerges" (Saucier and Woods 2016:52).[25]

[25] The notion of writing the "unthinkable", "unhearable" and "unspeakable" as it relates to referential problems of ethnographic description have been well examine by Clifford Gertz (1988), James Clifford (1986; 1988) and others (see Hirschauer 2007); however, this body of work is not aligned with how Afro-pessimists employ the "silent" dimension of the social (see, for example, Warin and Dennis (2008) on unspeakable trauma). For Afro-pessimists, the frame is different—it's not a concern with verbalizations or "thick description," but instead a critique of the conditions that constitute Black being (see, for example, Warren 2015). From this perspective, the work of Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, Margaret Lock (1997) and others (Kleinman, and Kleinman 1997; Walley 1997; Willis and Trondman 2000), although more politically engaged, still fails to engage with humanist assumptive logic—indeed what Afro-pessimisms claim produces and structures anti-Black suffering in the first place.

For Saucier, too much ethnography is amnesic. It can only narrate Blackness if it diachronically dislodges it from racial slavery and its afterlife. To take Saucier's intervention seriously means to resist the temptation to "write" subjectivity into existence. Saucier proposes that ethnographers not give the void subject a voice, but the opposite. Instead of ventriloquizing it, filling the vacuity in its place, he's asking that they excavate its absence, and to this end, reject the semblance of Black personhood or, in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's words, "refuse what has been refused" (2013:8). Saucier (2016:56) writes:

> Much ethnography now reads as if its "subjects" resist classification. In this way ethnography on race often focuses on the complexity of racial identity and agency, evidenced by identarian complexity, in order to unhinge from racial essentialism, biopolitical determinism, and the yoke of pessimism. As a result, ethnography does not contest the grounds from which blackness is constructed; instead, it glosses over this important social fact, the ontological significance of blackness, in order to write subjectivity into existence.

There are high stakes associated with how ethnographers choose to ethnographically redeploy or "write" Black subjectivities in their work. Quite frankly, when it came time to write, I felt like my analytical toolkit wasn't equipped to critically engage with Black subjectivity the way I wanted to. One reason for this is that up until that point I hadn't seriously engaged with the Middle Passage and racial slavery in a way that linked Blackness and political ontology. In fact, early in the writing process it became evident that I couldn't simply "write" Blackness in the descriptive sense of writing identity, but that I had to look and think deeper and that entailed examining what was submerged beneath Blackness as a category, what it relied on.

I didn't want to redeploy narratives that privileged a fictive positive and feel-good portrait of heterosexual Black men over the suffering and violence that kept lurking in my

data. Yet at the same time, I felt stuck. A part of me desperately wanted to tell a story that empowered Black heterosexual men, one that showed how they could be in touch with their feelings and ready to do the work of dismantling patriarchy and homophobia. But I also knew that I had to tell another more troubling story, one that talked about the deep internalized and material reality of phobic, masculinist, capitalist patriarchy. The latter story is difficult to square when I have been taught that Black empowerment and fightback feels good and is achieved by blocking out the violence that saturates everyday Blackness. Christina Sharpe explains in an interview with Selamawit Terrefe (2016) that what good feelings sometimes preclude is that the world that Black people live in "is a structural position always-already punctuated by the violence" and this reality stands, whether or not "the Black psyche recognizes and/or is ready to wrestle with that positioning" (76). Like Sharpe, Terrefe and other Black critical thinkers, I want to move away from conversations that recursively stage around proving the semblance of Black people's humanity when our everyday experiences of being Black seem to tell us that Blackness is structured by the opposite truth, its absence from humanity.

My fascination with ontological Blackness is a fixation on imaging what a world not hostile to Black life might look like and at the same time, a fixation with escape—that is, fugitive Blackness. Like Moten and other Afro-pessimists, while I support the idea that Blackness exists outside current conceptions of the human, I don't believe this to mean that Black life is, as Tiffany Lethabo King succinctly puts it, "always already and forever limited by white imagination" (King 2016:1038). What I hope to show in this dissertation is that, despite the everyday gratuitous violence that Black people face, they don't cease to do and recreate Blackness through valances of improvisation, memory, disjuncture,

ambivalence, subversion, phantasm, recuperation and grief. That is to say, Black folks don't simply lie down and die a "slow death" à la Lauren Berlant (2007), even if they are dying. I believe that using our imagination to wrestle with our own death and suffering is what helps us sustain life, even if that life is unlivable and unsustainable under current conceptions of the human.

The "ontological turn" in anthropology, a body of literature associated with the work of Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Bruno Latour, represents another theoretical trend which attempts to radically reimagine being and becoming in the age of the Anthropocene. This provocative theoretical current has stirred considerable interest among a special cohort of contemporary anthropologists. Eduardo Kohn (2015) argues that the ontological turn is a response to the perceived limitations of social construction as both a mode of human reality and as theoretical framework for anthropological inquiry. He argues that social construction simply isn't sophisticated enough to help us meaningfully make sense of the different kinds of realities and problems that confront the Anthropocene. Proponents of ontological turn posit a reformulation of being, one that embraces non-human agency and, in turn, one that makes conceptual room for possibilities and openings in radical forms of alterity and ontology.

But how alternative is this turn of anthropological investigation? Can it illuminate the path towards Black ontological possibility—the way out of the slave ship's hold? Jafari Allen and Ryan Jobson's (2016) essay in *Current Anthropology* suggests that perhaps the turn is actually the same old cul-de-sac. For Allen and Jobson, while the ontological turn promises to advance a theory of multiple ontologies and constructions of nature, thus challenging the idea of nature as an abstract universal in Western philosophy, it still

problematically clings to a “wholesale Latourian opposition between moderns and non-moderns as the foundational, but equally inaccurate postulate of ontological anthropology” (2016:144). To this end, they argue that the false opposition between Western (moderns) and non-western (non-moderns) “bracket out the West as an uncomplicated metaphysical comportment divorced from material regimes of dispossession and primitive accumulation” (144). The opposition provincializes the West and, as a result, provincializes the structural antagonisms of anti-Blackness that undergirds the project of the West.

As I see it, to engage seriously with the precepts of Afro-pessimism and Black Studies means recognizing that any paradigm shift which purports to advance a reformulation of being without adequately recognizing anti-Black structural antagonism does nothing to dismantle dominant conceptualizations of the Human. As Allen and Jobson (2016:145) write:

> Ontological anthropology perpetuates the dangerous and by now unsupportable myth that anthropology can save itself from its own methodological shortcomings and conceptual blind spots by conflating an idealist projection of the West with the material conditions of its development. Even if we accept that the West is not an absolute geography but a mode of apprehending reality espoused by only a segment of the North Atlantic, this projected reality is nonetheless dependent on a sturdy and intransigent “savage slot” that conveniently elides the brutal histories of plantation slavery and colonization.

I support the deft swerves of Allen and Jobson and their sympathetic commentators (Subhadra Mitra Channa, Nina Glick Schiller, Charles R. Hale and Francis B. Nyamnjoh). I think Schiller’s final remark sums it up nicely: “Within the contesting visions of anthropology emerging at this moment, decolonizing anthropology requires us not to be intoxicated by the wordsmiths of the ontological turn but to craft an anthropology

empowered by domains of commonality that emerge within just struggles to save the planet" (Allen and Jobson 2016:141).

The unresolved ethical, ethnographic and existential concerns and dilemmas that I have highlighted here show that all "turns" eventually lead back to the trailhead—the slave ship's hold. The hold is not just in the slave ship, as Jack Halberstam beautifully reminds us in his introduction to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's 2013 book, *The Undercommons: fugitive planning and Black study*—"it's also the hold we have on reality and fantasy, the hold they have on us, and the hold we decide to forego on the other, preferring instead to touch, to be with, to love" (Harney and Moten 2013:12). For me, the invocation of the hold is an invitation to think about the work that Black suffering can do, the theoretical openings and reimagining it makes possible and impossible. However, the violent particularities of the narratives that I redeploy in this dissertation are not an attempt to transcend the category human. On the contrary, they are an attempt to firmly breach it through and through. As Tiffany Lethabo King writes, "if Black lives were to be absorbed into the category of the human, the social order and the scaffolding that upends and holds together the human would collapse" (2017:180).

Methods

I conceptualize and locate my ethnographic object of study within two conceptual terrains: the terrain of HIV-related vulnerabilities and stigma, and the terrain of anti-Black racism. My field site is composed of three overlapping spaces: (1) Black AIDS Action (BAA), a small African-identified AIDS service organization in Toronto's downtown east side, (2) a support group for self-identified heterosexual Black men living with HIV that I helped facilitate at BAA, and (3) a wide range of Black community gatherings and events

in Toronto that I frequented. BAA is a pseudonym for the ASO, however I do use the real name of more prominent organizations in Ontario's HIV response. I also use pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of my participants; the pseudonyms are consistent with each participant's background.

The Field

When my research began in July 2015, I was a full-time employee of BAA.[26] As an insider, I had access to perspectives that could not have been obtained through other methods. At the same time, conducting research at one's place of work, particularly among oppressed groups and communities, raised a number of ethical concerns around transparency, ethical conduct, and confidentiality. These issues were taken very seriously and monitored by me and my manager. BAA staff were aware of my research activities, as were the clients that I directly engaged with. My position as Prevention Coordinator doubled as another position—Strategy Worker. As part of the provincial Ontario HIV/AIDS Strategy for African, Caribbean, and Black Communities, strategy workers are designated positions funded by the AIDS Bureau to support the implementation of the African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) Strategy. I had access to decision-making structures connected to the implementation of the ACB Strategy, as well as to ACCHO council members and other strategy workers working for funded agencies across the province. One of the privileges that came with being a strategy worker was the access it provided

[26] A formal agreement between myself and BAA outlining the scope of my research and REB approval was executed prior to the start of data collection. Separate participant consent forms were signed by all staff and interviewees, including the men in the support group I participated in. I also signed a confidentiality agreement as required by all employees.

to the HIV research milieu. I had countless discussions with diverse groups of scientists, community-based researchers, and knowledge brokers. I attended special roundtables (CATIE's 2016 National Deliberative Dialogue on Reaching the HIV Undiagnosed), symposiums (ACCHO's Strategy Worker Symposium, ACCHO's Research Strategy for African, Caribbean and Black Communities in Ontario) and scientific conferences (The OHTN's 2016 HIV Endgame Conferences, Annual Canadian Conference on HIV/AIDS Research). Immersion in these knowledge spaces was an important continuation of the exploration of the ways in which knowledge regimes reinforced seemingly contradictory constructions of heterosexual Black men as both a group that was underserved and blameworthy, yet also in need of rescue.

Black AIDS Action

As my first site of research, BAA was an opening into the world of ASOs. It provided multiple points of view from which to observe how heterosexual Black men's HIV-related vulnerabilities were being negotiated, especially at the level of service provision. I used participant observation to become an active looker and listener (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). I paid careful attention to how colleagues and managers performed routine activities and tasks including program evaluations, client intakes and advocacy, health literacy training, and case management. I observed staff and client interactions at BAA in their natural setting, but also actively participated in various staff activities.

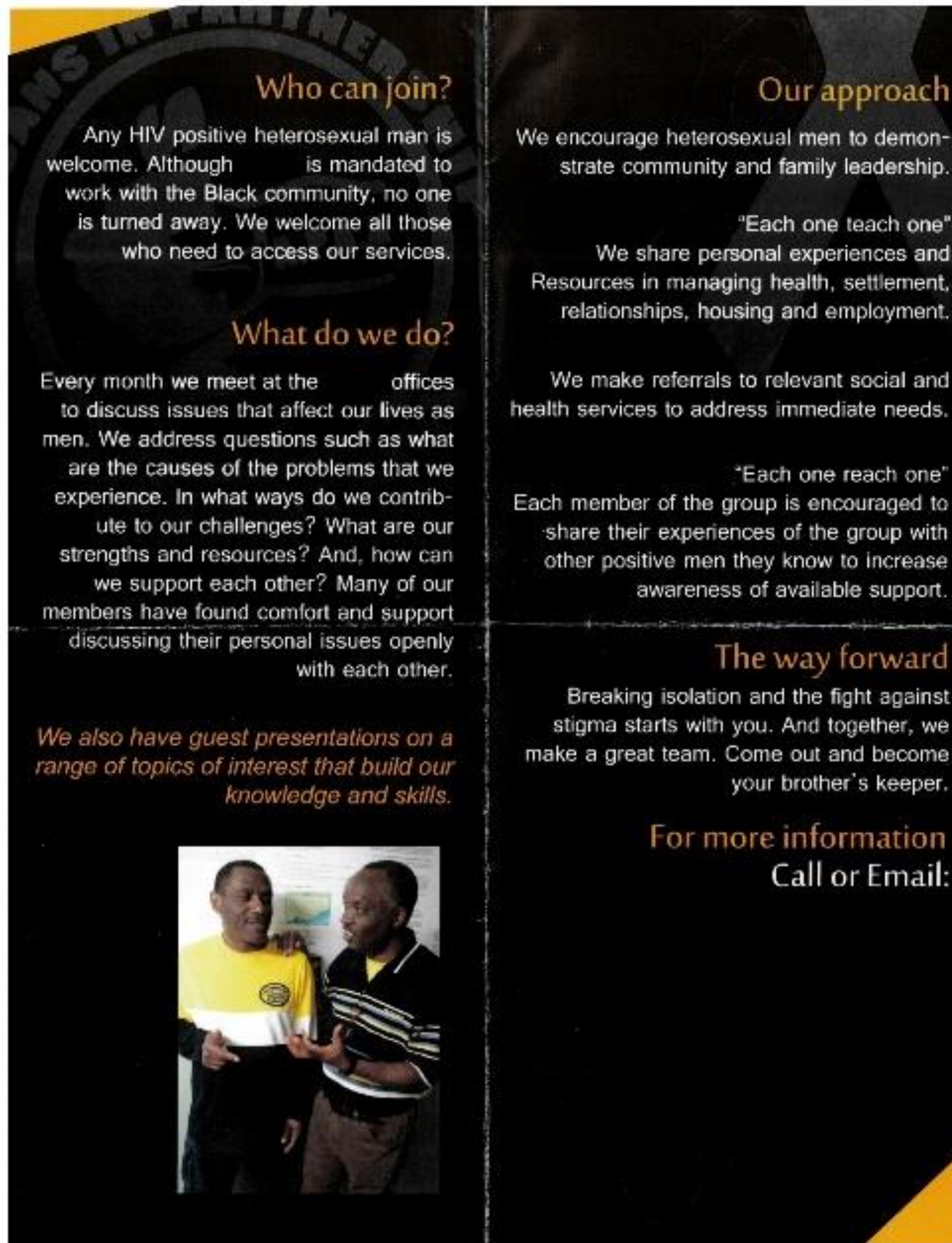
I formally interviewed all six of BAA's frontline staff. The interviews were loosely structured with open-ended question and my notes were taken in shorthand. The length of these interviews varied between thirty minutes and two hours. I conducted life-story interviews with the executive director, program manager, and a community and support

worker that lasted between one hour and one hour and a half, meeting with each person three times. In addition to these formal interviews, I journalled about thirty-six informal conversations that I had with staff; these were random conversations that typically happen over the course of a workday with colleagues. I usually noted things that I found interesting without overthinking the actual relevance of the note at the time. My colleagues were aware of my journaling. Key messages from these conversations are incorporated in broader messages in this dissertation, often in reference to the attitudes of frontline staff in Toronto's Black response. However, the actual conversations or field notes are not featured in any of the vignettes presented in this dissertation.

Heterosexual Men's Support Group

The second site of research was a monthly client support group at BAA for self-identified heterosexual Black men living with HIV. This group was the main focus of my research at BAA. With the approval and guidance of Ernest Kamara, the group's primary facilitator and a manger at BAA, I participated in the group between March and October 2016. In Chapter Four, I provide additional background on Ernest, our relationship, and the group's founding.

Illustration 1.0: BAA Brochure Used to Promote BAA's Heterosexual Men's Group. Source: BAA Archive 2009



The men in the group were aware that I was a researcher and that I took notes, journalled, and recorded the meetings for research purposes and they gave their written consent to these activities.[27] I audio-recorded and transcribed six of eight group meetings that ranged from just over one hour to three hours in duration. The meetings were semi-structured insofar as each session had a scheduled theme (e.g., what does it mean to be straight?). However, in practice, discussions during the meetings were free flowing and casual. In addition to attending the group, I also conducted 12 formal, one-on-one, semi-structured life story interviews with the men, five of which were audio-recorded and transcribed. Depending on the setting and context, audio-recording was not always possible.

BAA was an organization that employed and served primarily members of Toronto's Sub-Saharan African community and a small number of people from the Caribbean and the Arab speaking world (at the same time, I never saw anyone turned away because they were not African or Black). In my overall observations, I found that, compared to other local ASOs, BAA presented as a discernably more conservative, "African," and hetero-normative space—there was an unspoken expectation that the men who came there as clients would conduct themselves as straight African men. This was obvious by how the men presented themselves, their interactions with support staff, the clothing they wore, their mannerisms, and the language they used (for example, talking about being a breadwinner and their sexual prowess). It was like the men felt compelled, to some degree, to demonstrate straightness and maleness. By contrast, the closed-door nature of the support group offered some reprieve from the fixity of cultural markers and

[27] Participant consent forms were signed prior to collection data in accordance with REB protocol.

boundaries of regulative norms, but it didn't dislodge them completely. The camaraderie that the group engendered contributed to a setting wherein the men felt more or less comfortable talking about their desires and feelings without the fear of being judged. For this reason, it's important to think of the site, at least conceptually, as one that inhabited the complex cultural and political backdrop of BAA, but one that never totally dissolved into it.

At its height in June 2016, the was group comprised of 14 regular participants: 11 men born in Africa and three born in the Caribbean, with most having been born in the 1960s and 1970s. I want to point out that this section only provides an overview of the group's 14 participants. More background on key individuals is provided in the vignettes that I present in the chapters that follow. Nevertheless, among the group of African men, nearly all were long-time HIV survivors, with the exception of Adewole, 31, who had been diagnosed in Nigeria just months before joining the group, as a newcomer to Canada. Most of them acquired HIV outside of Canada, even if some were diagnosed for the first-time in Canada. For instance, Ernest, 59, who immigrated to Canada in 1979, believes that he likely acquired HIV in the 1990s during a visit back home to Liberia. Jonas, 38, born and raised in Zambia, believes he was infected in the late 2010s while on a nine-month work stint in Qatar. Edgar, 44, originally from Côte d'Ivoire but who grew up in Ghana, was diagnosed in Toronto in 2016 after suffering a seizure at work. Based on his CD4 count at the time of his hospitalization, doctors think he had probably been living with HIV for at least eight years though he had been in the country for less than five years. George Musa, 66, a native of Freetown, Sierra Leone also believed he acquired HIV

following a visit back home. More details about key participants will be provided in later chapters.

Another important characteristic of this group is that many of the African men had spent varying amounts of time living in other countries before settling in Canada. This was the case for Abdullah, 44, who had left Djibouti and spent extended periods of time in Guatemala, Mexico, and the U.S. before coming to Canada. Like many of the men, Abdullah came from a middle-class family that owned land and a small business in his country of origin. Had it not been for mandatory conscription back home, he would have likely gone on to pursue tertiary education in Egypt or Saudi Arabia like his eldest brother. While most of the African men came from large urban centers and belonged to middle class families, political and economic turmoil often meant major interruptions in their education and professional development.

The three Caribbean-born men were Tobias, Sheldon, and Cleavon. Tobias, 44, was from St. Vincent but grew up in Toronto. He worked as a part-time taxi driver and whatever odd job he could find. Sheldon, 36, had grown up in a small parish in northwest Jamaica and had come to Canada five years earlier, also working at odd jobs. Cleavon's situation was markedly different. Cleavon, 65, was from an upper-middle class family in Grenada and had gone to study dentistry in Ohio in the 1980s. Retired, he seemed considerably well-off; his wife taught at a local college and his daughter was attending law school in the U.K. Interestingly, all three of these men stopped showing up at after a couple of the group's meetings. I tried to reach out to them—Tobias and Sheldon were very difficult to keep in touch with, while Cleavon occasionally returned my calls. The word in the community was that Sheldon had gotten into some trouble with the law and decided

to leave town. I'm not entirely sure why they stopped attending the group while I was there, but it did become apparent to me that BAA's Caribbean clients were not very visible at the organization, even when they had been clients for years, as was the case with Cleavon and Tobias. A staff member suggested to me that BAA's Caribbean clients were likely also accessing services at another local more visibly Caribbean Black ASO and so, as she put it, were more particular about which services they accessed at BAA.

The socio-economic status of the group was, on the whole, remarkably low. With few exceptions, these were men who survived on social assistance and cash jobs. Whatever income and financial support they received, it seldom covered their basic needs and certainly wasn't enough for them to also support the needs of their dependents back home. Another source of financial hardship was related to immigration. When I began facilitating the group, a third of the participants had applied or were preparing to apply for asylum in Canada, while several others were applying or had recently completed the process of sponsoring one or more relatives. Asylum and family sponsorships were, in most cases, costly and impoverishing processes—there were costs for application fees, DNA testing to establish proof of a genetic parent-child connection, third-party medical examinations, accessing, notarizing and couriering documents, and also financially compensating the oversees brokers who were integral to this process.

My interactions weren't limited to our monthly in-house sessions or the physical space of BAA. We grew closer over the six months that I attended the group and, within weeks, several of them began to spontaneously visit me in my office between the support group's meetings. At first, the visits were short and sporadic but that changed over time. During these office visits we talked openly about whatever they wanted, including trading

life stories about race, sex, and manhood. These stories provided insight into the intimate lives of my participants, including how they individually conceptualized their HIV status, Blackness, and desires. They also learned about my background and life story. I journalled these casual conversations on the same day that they happened. The men were aware of my journaling.

Additionally, a significant proportion of my time as Prevention Coordinator was spent accompanying individuals from the group to their HIV specialist appointments. Some of the most informative conversations I had with the men were in hospital, clinic, and pharmacy waiting rooms. The accompaniments also provided me with opportunities to get to know HIV physicians, nurses, and pharmacists that were directly involved (or problematically, not involved enough) in the men's care. As time progressed, my relationship with the men grew stronger and more personal, and I began spending greater lengths of time with them after work and on the weekends. I attended baby showers, birthdays, Eid and Fasika celebrations, and many other gatherings where I socialized with their families and circles. This immersion in their worlds deepened my understanding of the everyday calculus they employed in their lives to conceal personal information like their HIV status and to ensure that they maintained a range of normative gendered and cultural expectations within their communities.

In the Community

The third site of research was Black communities. By community, I'm referring to a loosely connected group who experience a concept of being Black; I am not intimating that there is a singular Black consciousness or community in Toronto. I considered that I was observing "Black communities" whenever and wherever Black people were present

or interacting with other Black people. This more open understanding of Black community space allowed me to explore Black experiences in a more fluid way. Within my definition of Black communities as a site of research, I also include several structured interviews and focus groups that I conducted, apart from those associated with BAA. Below is an overview of the specific spaces of this research of "Black communities."

Between May 2015 and July 2016, I participated outside my role at BAA in numerous public Black community events (that is, where Black people were present and interacting with other Black people) organized by the Black Daddies Club, weSpeak, TAIBU Community Health Centre, Sojourn House, Centre francophone de Toronto, George Brown College, Women's Health in Women's Hands Community Health Centre, the Anti-Black Racism Network, the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention, and Rexdale Community Health Centre. I used these events and spaces to informally talk to Black folks about their views around anti-Black racism, heterosexual Black men, HIV, and other related issues. At the Black Daddies Club, I had multiple discussions with folks who seemed interested in unpacking Black male self-making and its connections to HIV-related vulnerabilities. These discussions led to an invitation to facilitate a community conversation on HIV during an event entitled, "Breaking Bread Brunch: Un-Masking Black Maskulinity." Then, via my BAA connections, I was able to get an interview with a case manager at the Centre francophone du Grand Toronto's HIV support unit. My visit to the Centre allowed me to observe client and staff interactions and learn more about their HIV support services. On two different occasions, I attended a closed session for African and Caribbean men and women also hosted by Centre's HIV support unit.

I also conducted five audio-recorded focus group interviews with three other groups (see Table 1.0) that were separate from the BAA client support group: newcomers who volunteered at BAA but whose HIV status wasn't disclosed, community-based health promoters, and heterosexual men who were not directly connected to the HIV sector. With the exception of the newcomer focus groups, all of these groups relied on referrals for recruitment and were conducted offsite (i.e., not at BAA).

The two focus groups with heterosexual men consisted of two separate meetings with discrete participants. The majority of men in one of these focus groups were of Caribbean ancestry, although the focus group did not specifically target Caribbean men—it just turned out that way. The men were either HIV-negative or didn't know their status or didn't wish to disclose their status. As such, while I considered this Caribbean group as an HIV-negative group, I suspect that some participants were HIV-positive. The men in the other focus group had more diverse ancestry and backgrounds; no one openly disclosed their HIV status in that group but, much like the former group mentioned, I suspected that there was a mix of HIV status. Throughout this dissertation I draw on excerpts from the focus groups, each time providing additional ethnographic details on the groups and their members.

Table 1.0: Focus Groups Discussions

		Participants		
Categories	# of focus groups/meetings	# Men (HIV+)[1]	# Women	Total participants
Newcomers[2]	2	13 (0)	4	17
Self-identified heterosexual men[2]	2	20 (12)	-	20
Health promoters[2]	1	3 (0)	3	6
Heterosexual men's support group[3]	8	12 (12)	-	12
TOTAL	**13**	**48 (12)**	**7**	**55**

[1]HIV+ refers to the number of men in each category of focus groups who disclosed that they were living with HIV (e.g., of the 20 men who participated in the focus groups for self-identified heterosexual men, 12 identified as living with HIV)

[2]Focus groups

[3]This was a support group comprising 12 men, and I co-facilitated discussion among the group on 8 occasions

Table 2.0: In-Depth Interviews (IDI)

	Participants		
Participant Categories	Men (HIV+)[1]	Women (HIV+)[1]	Total participants
Self-identified heterosexual men	12	-	12
Health promoters	1	3	4
BAA staff	2 (1)	4 (1)	6
Researchers/scientists	6 (1)	3	9
Clinicians	0	1	1
TOTAL	**21 (2)**	**11 (1)**	**32**

[1]HIV+ refers to the number of men or women in each category of IDI who disclosed that they were living with HIV (e.g., among BAA staff, 1 of 4 women and 1 of 2 men identified as living with HIV)

On Anonymity

Unlike other remote anthropological field sites, I cannot count on the obscurity of my field sites to limit the risk of compromising participants' actual identities. In the

relatively small world of Toronto ASOs and HIV research, it's impossible to guarantee anonymity to all participants. But as a matter of anthropological standard, I still use pseudonyms to avoid naming names, including BAA, and created composite individual narratives with less identifiable information. When I began my research at BAA, I was upfront with my participants in letting them know that even if I replaced the name of the organization with a pseudonym, that anyone with basic knowledge of the sector might be able to guess the actual organization. My concern to anonymize my research sites and participants is also partially motivated by fear that others may be inclined to use my data in ways that perpetuate the same anti-Black racism that I'm attempting to problematize and expose in this dissertation.

Chapter 3: Black Masculine Scripts and HIV Vulnerability

"The subject is certainly seen, but she also sees. It is this return of the gaze that negotiates at every point a space for living, and it is the latter that we must willingly name the counter-power, the counter-mythology." (Spillers 2003:163)

Weaving together multiple interviews and ethnographic vignettes to highlight the voices of straight Black men, this chapter takes cues from bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, and others to think through Blackness' relation to whiteness and the different embodied and affective dimensions of participants' self-making. I attempt to conceptually address how Blackness ontologically arranges gender, sexuality, and experiences of HIV that, in turn, enable and disable ways of living "like a Black man" in Canada. Although gender, sexuality, and race are experiential—that is, things that we *do* and *feel*—I try to show that for Black folks, especially those living with HIV, these things are also charged with a heaviness accrued from the ongoing consequences/effects of racial slavery.

In this chapter, I use ethnographic material to show that when participants are *made* straight, Black, and male under whiteness, it impacts them on two levels: first, at the level of self-making, where particular kinds of stories, images, dispositions, and awareness about being a Black man and HIV coalesce; and second, at the level of intimacy, where these stories, images, dispositions, and forms of awareness translate (or don't) into vulnerability to HIV. When I use the term HIV vulnerability, I am referring to social processes through which structural factors produce HIV risk (Hirsh 2014). I am suggesting that HIV vulnerability in the lives of participants has less to do with the behavioural determinants of HIV risk (for example, risky fucking), and more to do with how structural factors embodied through race and gender coincide to create the conditions for HIV risk. My claim is that straight Black men's gendered and sexual experiences and encounters

with HIV in Toronto are not independent from, nor occur outside of, whiteness, regardless of their HIV status.

As I mentioned in my introductory chapter, while anthropologists and others have written about structural violence and HIV risk (Farmer 2001; Parker 2002; Susser 2009), the connection between factors that produce HIV risk among Black people and the ontological problem of Blackness is not a topic that has received much attention. In looking at straight Black men's self-constructions in relation to their vulnerability to HIV through an ontological lens, this chapter contributes to a Canadian social scientific inquiry on HIV critiquing responses that privilege behavioural change over structural determinants. This chapter also deepens our understanding of how race, gender, and sexuality are "fused" in such a way that binds multiple and contradictory levels of existence and experience together to "make our contemporary lifeworld" (Mann 2016: 9). The latter contribution forms a part of my dissertation's greater objective, which is to introduce new avenues to conceptualize HIV as a site in the study of Black subjectivity and ontology in Canada.

The chapter is organized as follows: The first section, *Black Hypersexualization* and *Sex and Vulnerability* examines Black male heterosexuality under whiteness. In the first-half of this section, I reflect on a passage from Dany Laferrière's (1987) novel, *How to Make Love to a Negro without Getting Tired.* The passage consists of a playful interaction between two Black men in the washroom of a Montreal nightclub. One of the men provides pointers to the other on how to hookup with white women, but the other man seems puzzled by the advice. I use this evocative passage to foreground an interview with a group of mainly Caribbean HIV-negative men.

In the second half, I turn to an in-depth one-on-one interview with Andre and a separate ethnographic vignette with George, a member of BAA's HIV positive men's group. While Andre doesn't disclose his HIV status, both his and George's story provide insights around Black men's racial-sexual self-understandings and desires, particularly as they intersect with forms of resistance under whiteness. In the next section, *The Ego: Interview with Health Promoter* and *That's How You See Me: Fanon's Mirror Subject*, I apply a Fanonian lens and draw on the focus group with six community-based health promoters to examine how, under whiteness, Black men are sometimes forced to enact identities that efface them ontologically. I conclude with an analysis of how participants' strategic and creative expressions persist, even when encounters with HIV are overdetermined by Blackness' relationship to whiteness. In other words, despite participants' social death under whiteness, they are nevertheless able to find ways to creatively (re)make an unmade self. This section continues earlier discussions on fugitive acts by further examining the ways in which Black alternative possibilities are: 1) enacted in participants' everyday lives and subjectivities, and 2) necessary for their survival.

Black Hypersexualization

The concept of Black hypersexualization forms an important circuit in the Euro-American imaginary of Black male sexuality and, for this reason, it's a central concept in discussions about Black male subjectivity and HIV. While white fetishization and exotification of Black male sexuality far precedes the HIV epidemic, one could argue that HIV discourse has reinvigorated a social and cultural obsession with Black men's sexuality and sexual appetites (Epprecht 2008; Geary 2014; Miller 2005).

Building on the early work of African American anthropologists like Tony Whitehead (1997) and Jerry Wright (1993), Lisa Bowleg (2011) writes how Black men's ideologies of masculinity endorse sexual behaviours and attitudes that facilitate the spread of HIV in African-American communities. While Bowleg's work underscores the importance of "understanding implicit ideologies of masculinity" (554), it doesn't provide much room to recognize how public and academic critiques of Black masculinity and sexuality feed neoliberal notions of responsibility that shift the blame of social, health, and economic disparities onto Black men and Black communities. Another important limitation of this work is that it can make straight Black men appear passive in relation to the forces that shape their reality; it doesn't help us to understand how straight Black men engage on different levels with HIV discourse and Black male sexual stereotypes, and how this engagement produces complex counter-responses and forms of HIV awareness and self-actualization.

As I will show in the following sections, my participants were aware of the stereotypes that circulated about Black masculinity and HIV, and as such, sometimes felt pressured to insert themselves into white imagination—to understand and experience their Blackness, sexuality, and maleness through white conceptions that denied them their humanity. At the same time, I show that this insertion into whiteness is complicated—on the one hand, it's enticing and fantasy-like, while on the other, disavowing and violent.

The following passage form Dany Laferrière's (1987) novel, *How to Make Love to a Negro without Getting Tired* serves as a primer—a way to begin to think about not just straight Black male hypersexualization under whiteness, but also about the politically creative, fantasmic, and ambivalent ways in which straight Black men engage their

hypersexualization. Set in Montreal and anchored in the mid-1980s, the novel is about a writer, Vieux, who is a straight diasporic Black man whose native country Laferrière keeps mysterious. With the wisdom of his African philosopher roommate, Vieux works on his auto-biographical novel, *Black Cruiser's Paradise*, a "story" about a Black guy and his African roommate and their tales of fucking, jazz, and fame.

> ***FIRST NÈGRE***: You'll have to be quick with these girls, brother, or they'll slip through your fingers. […] They came here to see some Nègre. We've got to show them some Nègre.
>
> ***SECOND NÈGRE***: What's this "some Nègre"?
>
> ***FIRST NÈGRE***: Listen, brother, cut the innocence. You're here to fuck, right? You're here to fuck a Blanche, right? That's how it works.
>
> ***SECOND NÈGRE***: But a woman can be…
>
> ***FIRST NÈGRE***: There's no women here. There's Blanches and Nègres, that's all.
>
> (Laferrière 1987:119-20)

The excerpt narrates a conversation between two Black men in the washroom of a Montreal nightclub. The sequence is what one might call a schooling on interracial fucking—a lesson on the rules and roles of the game. It is one of many instances in the text where Laferrière uses a nexus of performance and pedagogy to force his reader to grapple with Black hypersexualization and its relation to whiteness and sexual fantasy. There is an element of parody and playfulness here, but also an intentionality—a jab at white Canadian men, letting them know, as it were, that "Black might be in bed with [their] daughters […] [and] smiling about it too" (Laferrière and Coates 1999:912). As Karen Yaworski (2016:107) remarks, "the Nègre-Blanche relationship is an allegory for the

writer-reader relationship, and […] the white reader gets fucked by the writer much like the *Blanche* gets fucked by the *Nègre*." But his "discursive revenge" which aligns with the "racial [and sexual] revenge the Nègre exacts against the Blanche" (2016:107), seems in the end still overdetermined by a white Canadian imagination. Daniel Coleman (1998) writes that Laferrière's novel is unsettling because his parodic devices give way to tensions between the subversion of anti-Black discourse and the discursive constraints of this subversion. Coleman (1998:53) writes:

> The book remains troublingly ambivalent: at one and the same time, it exposes and ridicules the discursive system that produces the racist stereotypes which degrade men of African ancestry, and it recycles and recommodifies those very stereotypes in the process.

Coleman's observation resonates with a central theme in this dissertation: the ambivalence of Black Canadian subjectivity under whiteness and the deep tensions and fragmentations that this produces in Black male self-making. By infusing his own voice into that of his straight diasporic Black male protagonist-narrators, Laferrière brings these tensions to life, exposing in the process, the insidiousness of anti-Black racism and misandry.

Scholarship on Black masculinity in Canada is still growing, but some of the most interesting work continues to emerge from the Black literary, performing, visual, and cinematic arts. The literary works of George Elliott Clarke, Austin Clarke, Dany Laferrière, Dionne Brand, David Chariandy, Wayde Compton, and Neil Bissoondath together exemplify a Canadian inscribing of Blackness into the narrative of the nation.[28] These

[28] For an alternative review of key works and authors in this body of literature, including the works of Lawrence Hill, Cecil Foster, M.G. Vassanji, André Alexis, and Neil Bissoondath, refer to Donna Bailey Nurse's book (2004) *What's a Black Critic to Do? Interviews, Profiles and Reviews of Black Writers*

works have produced powerful reflections or “refractions” (Daniel Coleman 1998) on the complexities of diasporic Black manhood and Black Canadianness. This body of work along with Laferrière’s passage provide a flashpoint to think through how Black hypersexualization in the subsequent interviews is overdetermined by a white Canadian imagination and sexual fantasy. As such, it informs my analysis of the ways in which Black men engage on different levels with HIV discourse and Black male sexual stereotypes.

Sex and Vulnerability

The short transcript excerpt that follows is from a focus group interview I refer to as “The Sweetness.” It spotlights how participants’ gender, sexual and racial scripts—that is, ways of narrating, feeling, and acting based on socially prescribed norms—sometimes congeal very contradictory messages and experiences. I suggest that there is more than one way to interpret their stories of HIV vulnerability. On one level these stories seem to reinforce dominant assumptions about heterosexual Black male hypersexuality and the onward transmission of HIV; on another level one can appreciate how they are also stories that conceal deep emotional pain. I also suggest that participants are well aware of the ways in which mainstream society views them and this, in turn, produces complicated counternarratives.

The focus group I have arranged takes place in a classroom at a downtown Toronto college campus. Participants were recruited into the group using informal referral networks and word-of-mouth via individuals I knew within and outside the HIV sector. In my conversations with these individuals, I made it clear that I was looking for adult men who self-identified as straight and Black, and who were prepared to talk about HIV vulnerability in a group setting. I provided no specific criteria around ethnicity, immigration

status or HIV status. The men in the focus group are the men who accepted to participate and turned up to the meeting that I organized. In the group are six self-identified Black men who are either HIV-negative or do not know or do not wish to disclose their status (see Table 3.0). Four of the six men are of Caribbean ancestry, of which three were born in the Caribbean and one was born in Toronto. The two men who are not of Caribbean ancestry identify as African-American and African and both were born outside of Canada. While all six men identified as Black, three of them also identified as having mixed Indo-Caribbean and/or European ancestry. The men in this focus group claimed to have never met before, but given the close-knit character of the Caribbean community in Toronto, and their relative age (between 30 and 50), I suspect some of them might have had concerns around privacy, perhaps even HIV disclosure.

Field Note, June 9, 2016

Table 3.0: Demographics: Sweetness Focus Group Interview (Part I)

Participant	Age	Country of Birth	Length of Time Canada (yrs.)	HIV Status	Ancestry
Andre	39	Trinidad	>20	Unknown	Afro- and Indo-Caribbean
Blessing	33	Malawi	<6	Negative	African
Lou	32	Jamaica	>30	Did not disclose	Afro-Cuban and European
Nathaniel	50	Canada	-	Negative	Afro-Caribbean, European, Indo-Caribbean
TJ	28	USA	>8	Negative	African-American
Trevor	48	Trinidad	>40	Unknown	Afro- and Indo-Caribbean

Note: the dialogue sequence I have selected is mainly between Andre, 39, who is originally from Trinidad and Tobago and came to Canada as an older teenager, and Lou, 32, who was born in Jamaica into an Afro-Cuban family that immigrated to Canada when he was a child.

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I begin the session by handing out Post-its to each of the guys. The goal of the exercise is clear-cut: jot down three ideas that come to mind when they hear "straight Black men and HIV." The Post-its are then randomly collected by me and pinned onto the wall adjacent to where we are seated. I step back to read out loud each Post-it:

> **Me:** 'Not common,' 'African continent,' 'no association,' 'vulnerable,' 'just love the sweetness;' I also got here a dollar sign.
>
> **Andre:** That means money.
>
> **Me:** I also have 'bomboclat.'
>
> **Andre:** [interjects] And that's a Jamaican *ting*.
>
> [There is an air of conviviality, which I take as a sign that the guys are feeling comfortable with the discussion and setting. I continue reading out loud the Post-its.]
>
> **Me:** 'Not a major concern,' 'one-night stands,' 'raw dog.' I also got here, 'death,' 'careless,' and then 'player,' and again 'player.' Here's another one: 'cheating girlfriends.'
>
> **Andre:** [blurts out] The *sweeeetnesss*!
>
> [Laughter rips again through the room. Andre is getting more and more animated—the quips are obviously meant to be bawdy.]

I take the word-association activity to show that the guys are comfortable enacting dominant sexist and masculinist narratives. At the same time, on a deeper level, I also

believe that Blackness is at play here. What I really want to know is how these narratives make them feel. I want Andre to elaborate on this "sweetness"—what is he really saying? The more I probe, the more he describes an all too familiar narrative in discussions about straight Black men and HIV: Black men can't turn down sex, even when they know it's risky. In the excerpt below, Andre describes Black men's alleged lack of self-control when it comes to sex.:

> **Andre:** The ignorance comes from people not wanting to accept that HIV happens; it's there and we need to protect ourselves. But people rather go into the activity, and become infected, and then deal with it afterwards. And even as a promiscuous man for many, many years, I use the expression of 'sweetness,' because I still see that sex, you still want to get closer to that sweetness and you're thinking, 'But I have a wife, but I have a girlfriend, I may infect her if I go there,' but the sweetness is right there in your face and you [stops and laughs] you're a straight Black man and that tears the shit apart in you, and you just want to get in there, mount her, and *crush*. You want to get close to that and so you don't think of how it will end.

His analysis is simple: if you are a man, turning down sex could do irreparable damage. The sentiment is quickly picked up by Lou.

> **Lou:** What pisses me off is that women see you with condoms, they get mad at you. But what if I'm fucking?
>
> At this point, I can almost feel the oxygen being sucked out of the room. Lou is touching on something that has everyone alertly listening.
>
> **Lou:** And if she sees you with condoms, she gets mad, she goes crazy, right, but if I'm fucking, aren't you happy that I'm protecting? And so, it just pisses me off how much women put pressure on you to not use a rubber. You understand?
>
> [I see heads nodding and giant grins from just about everyone.]

Lou: [trying to contain his laughter] And you have no idea—you might, [pauses and looks up at me] but unless you really experience it, you have no idea like the type of pressure, you know what I'm saying? [pauses, takes another deep breath] You're fucked, and I'll tell you why you're fucked. You're fucked because you want to fuck! You want to fuck right here, right now, and she's like, 'Yo, don't, what you doing?'

One of the guys: [unexpectedly] But you've come all that way.

Lou: Right! And you're ready to go.

Someone else: [interjects] It's staring right in front of you!

Lou: Yes sir, and I'm like, 'Yo, [furrowing his brow, he eyeballs his genital area] he's a manly man, I have to put on a Magnum.' And she's like, 'You put on that Magnum and you ain't getting no sex.' So, you're like, you're vulnerable.

***

As mentioned earlier, there is more than one way to read this short excerpt. In my reading, Andre and Lou are attempting to counter the notion that Black men are unable or unwilling to engage in safer sex. I see something subtly subversive in the masculine showmanship of Andre and Lou, something perhaps aimed at complicating the terms in which Black masculinity is understood within the hegemonic field. The problem, however, is that low-profile subversive displacements such as these, which perhaps fail to transform the racial and gendered terms of hegemonic masculinity, seldom result in a thorough dismantling of patriarchy and anti-Black racism. In fact, they make conceptualizing resistance difficult, especially if resistance is understood as oppositional action that must be easily apparent to others. From this perspective, Andre and Lou's comments are probably not likely to be recognized as resistance; one could argue that they register the opposite—they entrench compliance to stereotypes. Seen this way,

Andre and Lou’s comments become vulnerable to another dominant societal interpretation: the belief that the ideals of Black masculinity, inculcated in patriarchy and homophobia (Jewkes et al. 2015; Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012), discourage Black men like and Andre and Lou from maintaining health-promoting behaviours which would protect them from acquiring and transmitting HIV (Fleming, DiClemente, and Barrington 2016; Bowleg 2004; Doshi et al. 2013; Duck 2009). In other words, Andre and Lou’s masculine self-understandings are proof that what Black men say and think directly impacts their sexual risk (Bowleg et al. 2011).

Theorists who study the performativity of gender and race have long argued that what we say and how we say things matters. These are not just words when Andre says, “You're a straight Black man and that tears the shit apart in you” (i.e. turning down sex could do one irreparable damage), or when Lou says, “You're fucked because you want to fuck.” The words do something beyond just representing what is being named (Jackson II and Givens 2006). On one level, Andre and Lou are stating what many people would expect straight Black men to say as the obvious. On a deeper level, however, there are indications that Andre and Lou are not just passively performing the stereotype. I believe that the word association exercise, to some extent, suggests they are aware of how they are portrayed in society and how HIV vulnerability is narrated in discussions about Black men. In fact, it is almost as if they were trying to tell us “Hey we know what people out there think of us, so why not flip it back at them?” In this sense, it is reminiscent of the parody and playfulness in Laferrière’s opening passage, there is a similar spirit of resistance that can be felt in Andre and Lou’s comments—even possibly a jab at white society—"Yeah, it’s sweet—we know you want it too”. From this perspective, Andre and

Lou's comments embody the troubling ambivalence that Daniel Coleman's (1998) uses to describe Laferrière work—that is, they expose the racist system but at the same time recycle the stereotypes.

For Coleman, there is an obvious intentionality in Laferrière's writing that is either ambiguous or missing in this short focus group excerpt. While this may be true, there is a group of authors in the scholarship on the intentionality of resistance (Hoffman 1999; Wietz 2001) that contend that determining intention may, in fact, be a non-issue. They even suggest that resistance can happen "at a level beneath the conscious" (Leblanc 1999:15), but also note that the notion that one's public dispositions reflect one's inner self is a Western idea (Hoffman 1999). The point here is that "to assume that actions always display one's underlying political and ideo-logical tendency" may not only misconstrue how different ethno-cultural groups understand and enact resistance, but also reify Eurocentric ideology (Hollander and Einwohner 2004: 543). I believe that Andre and Lou are enacting resistance and that Black men like Andre and Lou may sometimes not want their resistance to be apparent. As one might imagine, in a society where Black men are constantly being scrutinized and surveilled, it might be more strategic for one's everyday acts of resistance to go unnoticed. It might be more useful to think of Andre and Lou's comments as acts that are sometimes meant to escape the notice of others, that have a "hidden transcript" (Scott 1990), but that may not always register if resistance is treated as though it were always intelligible and unproblematic. It is a reminder that when we speak, there is always something that remains unspoken and assumed—a grammar, a structure, a (de)meaning system—a violence.

George's Story

The ethnographic vignette that follows is another way to think through straight male performativity, particularly in contexts where narratives of hypersexualization and HIV vulnerability intersect. Like the *Sweetness* excerpt above, the encounter that I recount, as part of this vignette, highlights masculine sexual imaginaries that Black men deploy, resist, and re-deploy in very contradictory ways to affirm a sense of manhood, especially in moments of vulnerability. An important characteristic that sets this vignette apart from the previous is that it features a man who is living with HIV. From this perspective, one sees how HIV status adds another complex layer to performance.

The vignette is based on life story interviews and ethnographic notes that I made after my one-on-one interactions with George Musa, 66. He was one of the first clients that I got to know when I started working at BAA in 2016. Mercy, who was then heading BAA's support department, thought it would be a good idea for me to join his circle of care, which meant that I would sometimes help him with chores and accompany him to appointments. Mercy also recommended that George participate in the heterosexual HIV-positive men's support group that I was facilitating. So, in my time at BAA, George and I spent a lot of time together; we got along well, we had a similar sense of humor, we both loved Peter Tosh and enjoyed our Guinness beer at room temperature.

Field Note, March 03, 2017

It's about 7:00 AM and my cell phone pulsates hysterically—it's George—he must have finally received his package.

***

Born and raised on the outskirts of Freetown, Sierra Leone, George had immigrated to Canada in the late 1980s after idle stretches in Vienna and later, Antwerp. Idle, because, according to him, it was a period of ease and enjoyment; thanks to the generosity of his wealthy uncle, he didn't have to worry about money. It was the best idle life worth living, as he described it. At first, the idleness continued unabated when he arrived in Toronto, until it was clear that the carefree, laissez-faire lifestyle he'd become accustomed to was significantly costlier in Toronto. George knew he had become a financial liability to his uncle and that it was only a matter of time before he would cut him loose. So, for the first time in his life he decided to look for a job. But where to start? He'd gotten to know a few Sierra Leonean taxi drivers at a taxi stand around the corner from the Diamond, a midtown nightclub he liked to frequent. They seemed to be doing okay for themselves, he thought. He loved to drive—it was settled. In the beginning, the taxi business was good. It allowed him to earn enough money to make regular trips back home and still live comfortably without having to rely too much on his uncle.

In 2007, weeks after returning from a visit back home, he started to feel sick. Convinced that he had returned with malaria, something that had already happened to him twice before, he decided to make an appointment with Dr. Woobay, his friend

and family doctor—a man who hailed from the same southeast region of Sierra Leone as he did. Dr. Woobay agreed that it was likely malaria, but to be sure he requested that George do some blood work but George was unaware that his doctor had also ordered an HIV serology test. The lab found no trace of malarial infection but instead acute retroviral syndrome—the early stage of HIV infection. When Dr. Woobay broke the news to him, George was outraged. He had known Dr. Woobay for years and felt betrayed; that was one of the last times that he and Dr. Woobay saw each other. George understood that the only way to treat his HIV infection was to start antiretroviral therapy, but the anger inside of him was too much to reconcile and the idea of having to do more tests with more doctors just made him angrier. Things seemed to get better with time. The malaria-like symptoms went away, but then they started to return. Over the years, George's health began to slowly deteriorate, but he was still not ready to start treatment and was especially averse to seeing doctors.

In early 2016, nearly ten years after his HIV diagnosis, the migraines and insomnia were intolerable. In March 2016, George suffered a stroke while driving his taxi. Luckily, the passenger he was carrying noticed his shortness of breath and trouble speaking and immediately called 911/emergency services. Paramedics rushed him to the hospital where he was admitted for weeks, under observation. Though fortunate to be alive, test results indicated that, in addition to having developed AIDS, he had also developed HIV-encephalopathy, a condition which is the result of damage to the brain by untreated HIV infection. They explained to George that, although they couldn't force him to start antiretroviral treatment (ART), he was likely going to die soon if he didn't. In the worst shape of his life, George finally

agreed to start treatment and asked that the hospital's social worker reach out to BAA to help with this transition. I would later discover that George had initially completed an intake form at BAA in 2008, just a few months after he found out that he was HIV-positive. According to BAA staff who were there at the time, George came in alone, did the intake, but never returned.

At the time of George's hospitalization in 2016, I had just started working at BAA. Our relationship grew over time and, along with accompanying him to doctor's appointments and supporting him with basic housekeeping and other chores, I also helped him keep track of his drug refills. In fact, it often felt like we spent more time at the pharmacy than anywhere else.

I'm not sure exactly when, but roughly six weeks before that early morning phone call, he and I were at the pharmacy waiting for another of his refills, when he said something to me that I will never forget and it was hardly surprising that this all transpired at the pharmacy. It was a place where we talked about anything. Sometimes we talked in the waiting area next to the blood pressure machine that seemed perpetually out-of-service, but normally we talked as we strolled up and down the aisles of the pharmacy inspecting the different products on the shelves, not with the intention of buying anything, but simply to pass the time while we waited for the refills.

As we walked and talked, a box of condoms on the shelf caught my eye. Embossed in large golden letters the packaging read "ULTRA RIBBED Designed to

Increase Stimulation”. As I reached for the box, I noticed an air of displeasure on George’s face.

Me: Steep, I know—the ones we have at the office are just as good—it’s criminal to pay that kind of money.

I said this thinking that he and I were on the same page about the exorbitant cost of the brand.

George: You need to help me with something.

Baffled, I looked up at George.

George: You know, I’m not young like you anymore, I’m losing too much power with these meds.

At this point I realized that George couldn’t care less about how much the condoms cost; what he was really concerned about was his inability to maintain an erection.

George: When I was your age, I fucked a lot, a lot of women, a lot. In one night, I could fuck sixteen, seventeen times—non-stop, man I used to fuck too much like sex machine. I drove all over this city to fuck, fuck, fuck…

I’m not sure what overtook him, but George just waxed on enumerating with a striking level of detail how he would fuck, where he would fuck, the frequency, the sexual techniques he practiced, and so on. I couldn’t help but grin as I listened to him lose himself in his fulmination. It made me laugh on the inside. I thought to myself how a man of his age (he was approaching his late sixties), a man who struggled daily with severe memory loss, could suddenly have such vivid, sexual recollections. Still, I wondered how much of what he was telling me was true. It sounded more like fantasy than real life.

[Maintaining his train of thought, his voice intensified.]

George: But now, I can't fuck!

[I looked around to see if anyone could hear us.]

George: I don't have any power! Wesley, this is too bad! You know that girl that called me the other day, the horny Jamaican one? [I nod my head to say yes] Man, she wanted to fuck. But no power. You have to do something for me. You have to get me the *vitamin V* that doctor Bernstein gave me that one time to try.

He told me that he had recently become reacquainted with an ex-girlfriend who was very keen to have sex with him but that he had to turn her down because he didn't feel like he could perform sexually. I also found out that, a couple months earlier, Dr. Bernstein had given him a free sample of what he called "vitamin V"—otherwise known by its brand name, *Viagra*, a medication used to treat erectile dysfunction.

The sachet that Dr. Bernstein had given him contained two tablets, but George couldn't remember what he did with the sachet. For this reason, he was adamant that I help him order some vitamin-V online.

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In his work, David Marriott (2000b; 2007b) has shown that the sexual scripts of Black men, like the above anecdote, feed anti-Black political-visual cultures of suspicion and state terror that are hegemonic at the cultural level. In line with Marriot's point, George's performative talk resonates with a special kind of HIV-related suspicion and terror. The kind that James Miller (2005) would probably attribute to the deeply racist "exotic excess" that prevails when Black men's sexual behaviours become the focus of

HIV transmission, a topic that Adam Geary (2014) and Marc Epprecht (2008) examine in detail.

While sexual fantasy may be an important and complicated dimension of the exotic terror that HIV-positive Black men conjure in white society, fantasy also seems to be a characteristic of how George interprets his own sexual behaviour. What is perhaps most apparent here is that when George says "I used to fuck like a sex machine," such a statement can easily be interpreted as feeding stereotypes around Black men's alleged sexual compulsion. But is the illocutionary speech act doing something for George beyond possibly suggesting that he has accepted the sexual script as reality? Writers such as David Marriott contend that white society's fetishization of Black men's sexual behaviours does something for the white imagination, but what does it enable for George, a straight Black man living with HIV? Shifting the focus away from intent—a subject of considerable contention in discussions about resistance (Hollander and Einwohner 2004)—sheds light on how the performance is conveying something about what living with HIV means for straight Black men to be considered men. At the most basic level, it is also a message about the negative impact that HIV medication may have on HIV-positive men's sex life. For George, being on antiretroviral treatment (ART) has led to an ailing sex life that is likely compounded by other realities such as being older, which may be another contributing factor—not just in terms of erectile changes—but also in failing to confer desirability. The reality is that, since his diagnosis, George has had difficulty finding sexual partners. I know this because the issue was a recurring theme in our conversations that triggered a lot of shame and stigma. I also know that it made him feel less manly and less respectable among his peers.

It is possible that stories about fucking, stories that society forces Black men to enact through enforced racialized shame, are also stories that George feels he must hold on to. And this may be because, although problematic, they help him recuperate a sense of manhood and validate an experience of injustice. By injustice, I'm not just referring to being denied an opportunity to fuck like a "real man," but more pointedly to the deeper injustice that surrounds being a Black man living with HIV in a white society where anti-Black racism constantly projects its worst kind of violent pornographic sexual fantasies on Blacks. For bell hooks (2004), this is because we cannot make sense of Black pornographic sexual fantasies, whether imparted by Black folks or trafficked by mainstream white culture, without apprehending how this kind of sexual fantasm derives from the experience of slavery. Much like Marriott, hooks' point is that the dehumanization and mutilation of Black bodies was not simply a consequence of slavery, but the basis for a "dominator system" that normalized racial-sexual self-understandings and desires, and, in turn, served as a model for Black men—one that ensured that when slavery ended, it wouldn't actually end (hooks 2004:4). Seen this way, the work of hooks, Marriott, and others (see Holland 2012) helps us to see how in discussions about HIV and Black men, Black masculinity must always be accounted for. Rinaldo Walcott (2009) writes that critiques of Black masculinity—specifically discussions of Black heterosexual men requiring rescue and repair due to their inherent inadequacy, whether sexual, moral, intellectual, and so on—are premised on the assumption of a coherent heterosexuality and masculinity. They are also premised, writes Walcott, on a neoliberal progress narrative that frame Black folks as having overcome the political obstacles of their past (e.g., slavery) and having achieved victory over victimhood. Within this narrative, Black

men who don’t measure up—who don’t emulate neoliberal progress—become relegated to wasted men and wasted masculinities who appear “to have nothing to contribute to the global engines of capitalism” (Walcott 2009:79). This may well be the case for George, who is down-and-out, unemployed, and in poor health. The neoliberal project works by demarcating both what kinds of Black masculinities society considers useful or redundant in economic terms, and those it considers, in moral terms, innocent or guilty. In this sense, HIV-positive Black men who are unable to work automatically double as redundant and immoral—each presumably explaining the other.

Andre’s Story

The following field transcript, a one-on-one conversation with Andre from the *Sweetness* focus group interview presented earlier in this chapter, provides a closer look at the “ambivalent space of living Black masculinity” (Walcott 2012:203) and further reflects on how race and gender are always already intertwined. Not long after that focus group discussion, I reached out to Andre to see if he would be interested in meeting with me one-on-one so that we could talk about the messages that had emerged and so I could also learn more about his story and reasons for participating. Without any hesitation, he accepted my invitation; two months later, we finally met.

Field Note, August 22, 2016

I have managed to book the same downtown college room to conduct a follow-up one-on-one interview with Andre. At his request, we have scheduled to meet at 6 p.m. so that, by the end of our meeting, he can avoid peak evening traffic on his way home.

It is nearly 7 p.m. and I still had not heard from him. Right when I decide to pack up and go, Andre casually strolls in with a grin painted on his face, his eyes visibly droopy. We exchange a warm embrace and fist-bump and sit. He smells like he just “hotboxed” his car, but I don’t say anything about it.

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Determined to pick up from where we left off in our previous focus group, I ask Andre how he felt after the focus group and whether it aroused any kind of reflections.

Andre: [awkward pause] Nothing.

His tone is short, and I find his response puzzling given how evocative his contributions had been. I also feel that we had connected as a group.

Me: No? You’re sure?

Andre: Nothing… I did the conversation and then I just dropped it.

Andre explains that as a professional actor, he’s learned to, in his words, “switch it on and off.” I fire back hoping to get a reaction.

Me: So, were you acting during the last focus group?

[His demeanour changes as he sits up in his chair without uncrossing his legs.]

Andre: No, [takes a breath] part of being an actor is about honesty and if there's any acting, it will show through, and you don't get a job period, because you have to be believable and just like when you think of…what is it?…‘The Dark Night,’ you believe the performance.

Me: Yeah, it was convincing. [disguising whether I mean the film or his performance in the focus group]

Andre: Because the person has to go into that dark place. I have to go to those dark places and tell the stories that I tell and then walk away and that's why I let it go.

Andre is revealing a side of himself that he has not been fully exposed during the focus group. His figurative language gestures to a much bleaker reality than the wisecracking that he previously led with. I ask myself: if Andre was acting during the previous conversation, and possibly at this very moment, what is it that he isn't showing me? I see before me someone who is charming and at ease with himself, reminiscent of the "talking broad" masculine man described by Roger Abrahams (Abrahams 1983). What is this metaphorical dark place that Andre is alluding to? I tell Andre that I think our conversation has been anything but dark; on the contrary, I find it insightful and intimate, and I am pleased that the guys felt comfortable enough to share their stories.

Me: This kind of brotherly sharing doesn't happen often.

Andre: [shoots back] More so now though.

Me: [confused] What?

Andre: Think about conversations you have with people that you're around. Think about the conversations your father had when you were a little boy and it wasn't that intimate, but now we actually talk about our feelings and feel about our talks.

I'm a little stunned by Andre's lyrical response. I can't tell by his body language if he's being serious. His persona has changed. There is a contrast—the gregarious

Andre I conversed with months earlier was fixated on the seductive power of sex, not feelings. Aware of this shift in persona, I ask him if he feels that his views on manhood are different from those articulated by the other guys. What I really want to know is whether he sees himself as being different from the other participants in the group. Does he consider his contributions to be transgressive? Does he really see his quips about the power of "wet pussy" as challenging dominant narratives about Black men and HIV?

> **Andre:** No, I think everyone stepped up and just kind of went deeper. I mean I challenged – I pushed the conversation to a certain level, because we could have all been surface level and just said what was appropriate, but I took personal stories and anecdotes and added them to the conversation.

While there were moments in the focus group where Andre's contributions had struck me as critical, even transgressive, his contributions overall seemed to perpetuate rather than complicate stereotypes about Black masculinity. Yet now it seems to me that Andre is trying to reel back that persona, suggesting instead that the stereotypes were his strategy to get others engaged in the conversation; his goal was to challenge stereotypes, not reproduce them. Suspecting that Andre might be leading me on, I decide to be more direct and confront him about his suggestion that men—specifically Black men—are incapable of turning down sex. Was this just another one of his strategies or did he believe this? I try hard not to come off as confrontational, but the tone in my voice suggests I wasn't buying his story. Andre pauses for a few seconds as if mentally rehearsing his response. And then in a cool voice he says:

Andre: Absolutely. When you've been as sexual as I have been with dozens and dozens, if not hundreds of women, and you grow up in a culture such as mine, where promiscuous behaviour always had a duplicitous meaning…

[Andre takes a second to clear his throat and steel himself.]

Andre: I was told not to behave a certain way, yet I saw my mom date many men while I was a child, coming and going, married men. My father was the same; he had several wives, a dozen children with at least six different women, children that are younger than my kids.

[He stops as if to collect his train of thought and then carries on, but his eyes remain shut.]

Andre: My grandfather's eulogy read, 'He was a man that couldn't say no, he always said yes,' and so he had seven children in wedlock and seven out of wedlock. When I speak to my grandmother—grandmothers, they share the hurt and pain of what they have experienced, but that's kinda the culture that I grew up in, an ability to know what to ask for, when to ask for it, how to ask for it; you may or may not always get it, but yeah.

Even though Andre is laughing at the end of this, he seems unsettled and I can feel it. He has just made himself vulnerable, but he isn't trying to shield it with his usual rude humour and masculine showmanship. Like many boys, Andre learned at a very young age, from the men in his life and from the way women related to such men, including his mother, that fucking was part of being a man—specifically a Black man. Experiences such as these where gender and race are always intertwined teaches Black boys that spreading their seed and making babies will assert their manhood. These are not experiences that teach men or women to recognize the pain that is caused by equating manhood with *fucking* (hooks 2004:71). Instead it forces

men to unlearn sensuality and ignore their bodies. In hooks' words, it deprives them of healthy Black sexuality (2004:75).

While Andre is an example of how patriarchy structures male self-understanding, his introspection is also an example of how that structuring is complex and unstable. The idea of duplicity alludes to patriarchy's opacity and its ability to turn things topsy-turvy, create ambiguity or "duplicity" even when things seem, at least on the surface, clear and singular. It was an idea that he had introduced in the previous group interview that, for me, registered an important subtext: nothing is quite what it seems—an idea that signals to what presumably belies patriarchal masculine scripts may also speak to the masculine persona that Andre enacted as a young man. I want him to elaborate on the notion of duplicity in his adult life.

> **Me:** Having grown up in this kind of environment, today, as a man, as a mature man, do you find it challenging to have relationships that are not duplicitous, as you describe, you know, relationships that are meaningful? Have you been able to transcend that experience?
>
> **Andre:** [unfazed and without hesitation] No, it's always been a struggle, and so two years ago when my wife received a call from some girl that I was having sex with, and says, 'You should talk to your husband' because she wasn't going to get what she wanted out of me [referring to the woman he was having an affair with], and realizing that I loved my wife very much, decides that she was going to destroy my marriage, yeah.

What had happened was that the woman with whom Andre was having an affair contracted chlamydia from him and was using the situation to intimidate him into leaving his wife.

Me: How did you feel at that point?

Andre: It feels like a sense of powerlessness when your penis controls your behaviour and that behaviour becomes an external engagement you have no control over, until I was able to take control of it back and let everything else be compromised... But also understanding who I am as a person and what I want as an individual and understanding how important it is to communicate with my wife what's important to me in our relationship, so that I don't step out. But also, being able to identify all the things that have informed me and my behaviour to be the kind of person that I have been to this point. So, it's a lot of self-reflection and self-understanding of who I am, what I am, what I want, what I don't want, how to behave…and how to manage my yearnings.

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Listening to Andre makes me think about how much of his sexually active life he had felt vulnerable and disconnected from himself and intimacy. He had lived a life that disavowed deep connections and feelings. At the same time, it sounds to me that, at age 39, he is now beginning the process of engaging with this deep sense of self-loss. This process is not without its own complicated duplicity (to again borrow Andre's terminology). When we take Andre's story and try to make sense of it, we see tensions—masculine subjectivities that embody, at once, coherence and incoherence, what Mark Anthony Neal (2013) describes as "legible" and "illegible" formulations of Black masculinity under whiteness. Taking up this tension requires homing in on the entanglements in Andre's performance. For example, in examining Andre's reflection on taking control of his penis, note how domination is the solution: by dominating his penis and not the other way around, Andre refashions himself as in control and reinvigorates a symbolic order that equates manhood with man's natural place as dominator. From this perspective, we see ambiguity

in the tension between the will to dominate and his desire to undo the same domination that deep down makes him feel powerless.

bell hooks offers another way to read Andre's subjectivity in a way that credits his personal self-awareness, struggle, and creative expressions—even if that self-awareness and creativity still incubate problematic essentialist ideals. I believe that hooks would want us to focus on Andre's desire to unlearn patriarchy and to learn to give and receive pleasure that is meaningful. She would also want us to focus on how tensions in Andre's self-making also tell the story of an everyday artistry that is a playful self-affirmation that enables ambiguous and complex acts of resistance and self-care. hooks is not commonly associated with the ascendance of Afro-pessimist thought, however, it is clear that her everyday artistry embodies what Afro-pessimist optimists might consider as the foundation of fugitivity. I think Andre, Lou, George, and the other men's stories exert theoretical pressure on anti-essentialist philosophical projects to reimagine, as Afro-pessimism demands, what a truly radical position and consciousness might look like, one that fundamentally addresses anti-Black racism and rejects dehumanization and is a movement that "enables creative, expansive, self-actualization" (hook 1990:15).

The Ego: Interview with Health Promoters

The field note that follows builds on the previous one examining how tensions in Black male self-making can produce complex forms of personal self-awareness or unlearning, as hooks would say. The field note also continues to probe at this question of radical consciousness under whiteness by introducing a notion of Black subjective self-seeing. By self-seeing, I am referring to introspection about one's own state (or absence

of state) in the world as a way to resist oppression and actualize political subjectivity. The idea of self-seeing has wider analytical value as it marshals a rejection of dehumanization.

The discussion is an excerpt from a focus group interview conducted with six individuals who work in Toronto's social and health service sector and have experience doing health promotion work among Black communities in the Greater Toronto Area[29]. All six self-identify as Black and the majority are of Caribbean ancestry (See Table 4.0). They were all referred to me by personal contacts. Interested individuals were told that the discussion would focus on their experiences working with straight Black men in the broader context of sexual health and HIV vulnerability. To my knowledge, none of the participants access services at BAA; one participant is quite familiar with the organization and Black HIV response. The participants do not disclose their HIV status during our meeting. I am accompanied by a colleague who has offered to drive me to the interview location and take notes. The meeting takes place in a community room in a housing cooperative on the city's outskirts.

Field Note, May 26, 2016

Table 4.0: Demographics: Health Promoters Focus Group Interview

Participant	Age	Country of Birth	Length of time in Canada (yrs.)	HIV-Status	Ancestry
Cindy	34	Barbados	>20	Did not disclose	Afro-Caribbean

[29] 3 of the participants work for two separate public health units while the others for community organizations that offer basic health promotion programing but are not funded AIDS service organizations.

Everton	60	Jamaica	>40	Did not disclose	Afro-Caribbean
Maurice	34	-	-	Did not disclose	-
Rachael	42	Canada	-	Did not disclose	Afro-Caribbean
Sheldon	41	Canada	-	Did not disclose	Black-Scotian
Tatianna	31	Canada	-	Did not disclose	-

It is a Thursday evening, and I am in a predominantly Black and low-income neighbourhood in the northeast corner of Toronto.

The atmosphere in the room is tense. Everyone has come directly from work – Tatianna, 31, Cindy, 34, and Rachael, 42, are dressed in more formal office attire, while the men, Everton, 60, Maurice 34, and Sheldon, 41, are casually dressed in loose jeans and t-shirts. Everton stands out with a slightly more coordinated look, rocking thick-framed retro glasses and a chic scarf draped around his neck.

We are twenty-five minutes into it, but the atmosphere still seems off. In fact, the conversation feels like it is going nowhere until Everton makes a striking comment about vulnerability:

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Everton: I think for Black men and vulnerability, you're talking about ego. We have this thing that we have to deal with called the ego.

Me: What's the ego?

Everton: The ego is the way I want people to perceive me and the way I'm going to act out.

Me: And how is that for men?

Everton: Very troubling, because you spend more time on this ego—playing this ego, acting out this ego, and you don't focus on the realities, right. So, you're playing a game.

Maurice: [interjects] Or playing a character!

Everton: Exactly! You're playing a character [sits up to make eye contact with me]. Yeah, and at the same time, when it comes to the issue [HIV] – it's about the perception that nobody understands how I got it and why, whatever, right.

[He pauses for a few seconds.]

Everton: Being judgmental, that's going to be bruising to my ego, right, so why would I go and discuss HIV or go and seek help? So, it's the defense of this ego that makes you vulnerable.

Me: Maybe it's connected also to what Maurice said earlier, this sense of emasculation?

Everton: Of course, it is! We're focused on the ego, the male ego, the Black male ego, it trumps a lot of other things. The defense of that ego trumps a lot of things, which doesn't allow us to seek help and support when situations occur that make us be perceived as being vulnerable.

Cindy: [interjects] And that ego comes from how people view you because, in the Black community, if you don't have three and four women, you're not the man.

A detail that catches my attention in the above conversation is the underwritten idea that the Black masculine ego, and thus Black men's ability to practice safer sex, depends on a set of internal and external subject relations. By evoking the ego, it is as if Everton is trying to say that being a Black man is a dynamic experience that

requires us to look at the subject in relational terms. Note, for example, how he described the ego as “the way I want people to perceive me and the way I'm going to act out.” This conceptualization of the ego suggests a schema of the subject that points on the one hand towards an internalized self-seeing and, on the other, an externalized acting.

Everton’s formulation resonates with a familiar Fanonian conceptualization of the subject. Like Franz Fanon, Everton and Maurice make a connection between self-seeing and what they described in the focus group interview as the delusory hegemonic masculine personas that Black men act out in everyday life. Fanon refers to a very specific kind of self-seeing—one that has implications for all aspects of Black personhood, beyond the spheres of gender or sexual expression. Secondly, and more importantly, this self-seeing is inseparable from prevailing racial “imagoes” that circulate in culture. By “imagoes,” I’m referring to Black peoples’ interiorized image of the self under whiteness. One of the key premises of *Black Skin, White Masks (Peau noire, masques blancs)* (Fanon 1952) is that the problem with the Black ego is that it is not actually Black. For Fanon, the Black ego reflects a white-identified imago produced by an anti-Black dominator culture through slavery and its enduring modalities. Here, we are talking about a subjectivity that whiteness imposes on Black people that is inherently singular and that denies the multiplicity and changeability of radical Black subjectivity. Put differently, the Black ego flattens Black peoples’ lived experiences, multiple cultural identities, contexts, and diverse worldviews.

It is important to remark that racial Blackness and anti-Black racism did not explicitly surface in the focus group conversation, even though its subtext seemed to

suggest the centrality of both. The failure to name and speak of racial Blackness and anti-Black racism seems only to support Fanon's claims. What does arise is a notion of vulnerability as a by-product of the ego. Everton explains that the more men attempt to conceal their general vulnerability, the more vulnerable they become to acquiring HIV. But it's not just the concealing that aggravates their vulnerability to HIV; he also explains that it is the thought of being perceived as vulnerable, or perhaps failing to measure up to normative masculine ideals that prevents men from engaging in health-seeking activities like getting tested for HIV. It is the thought of being anything but the opposite of vulnerable that makes them vulnerable in the first place.

Fanon famously used the analogy of the mirror to describe the dialectal gaze wherein the subject peering into the mirror is incapable of discerning that the reflection is not its own. This analogy lends itself to also understanding how deep subject–object connections and processes, such as the fear of being perceived as weak or vulnerable, prevent men from knowing who they are or could be. Therefore, I want to go further and suggest that the unimaginable and invisible Blackness that Black ego denies under whiteness is that which at once makes Black men vulnerable to contracting HIV and effaces them ontologically.

Maurice's comment below provides insight into how being made Black and male under whiteness can be at once affirming and effacing, attractive and repulsive.

> **Maurice:** I would say personally as a Black man, I think it's very tiring that every time I meet someone new, whether it's a colleague, a female, or whoever, I have to start from scratch. So I either have to work my way up from proving that

I'm a certain way or a certain person, or I have to audition for a group of people that I'm a certain way and that's very tiring because you got to do it every day. So after a while you just give up and you say okay, whatever, 'however you choose to see me, that's how you see me.'

To steel himself, he takes a long pause and then continues somewhat hesitantly.

Maurice: Because some of the ways that people perceive you, some of it is pretty cool, someone who sees you as powerful and strong and the list goes on, but now because you're strong, there's no reason why you should be complaining about anything. There's no good reason why you should consult with someone, there's no reason to acknowledge your flaws and weaknesses…because as soon as you let someone get to know you below the surface, once they see your weakness…

[Maurice takes another pause, this one longer than the previous one, then continues.]

Maurice: The conversation changes and once it changes, the relationship changes. So, you can never ever get a person to appreciate who you are as a person, not as a Black man, because that's just the presentation, that's the shininess, that's the labels, but once you get below that, that's where people get scared. And I think there are Black men out there who want people to see them below the surface, but society doesn't allow us to go below the surface, so you keep getting all these…fictional characters… To get below that, people are already saying, 'Well that's not you, that's that guy, and that guy, and that guy, but that can never be you.' That to me is disturbing. So, if I can't address those things how can I ever address HIV?

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The emotional tone of Maurice's comment is palpable to everyone present. It takes a lot of guts to open up the way he has in the presence of folks that he hardly knows.

Maurice may be channeling diasporic Black men more generally—to be Black and male is to lead a life punctuated by repeated acts of self-negation. For example, note how Maurice uses the term “fiction” to elucidate a dualism between an external and internal self. The external Maurice benefits from the “positive” attributes that whiteness confers on Black maleness: strength, virility, and charisma. This part of himself that lives, as he put it, “on the surface,” is legible under whiteness. It is the part of him, à la Fanon, that whiteness fetishizes. Conversely, the other Maurice, the submerged Maurice, is witness to his own invisibility. From this perspective, Maurice’s sense of manhood is derived from an embrace of his own negation, an awareness that, to be legible under whiteness, he must submit to his own erasure. What I want to highlight here is how seductive Black male legibility can be under whiteness, as contradictory as this might sound. It is contradictory, because to be made into something that whiteness recognizes, in fact, extends Maurice’s status as less than, or other than, human.

Manning Marable (2001:17) writes:

> The essential tragedy of being Black and male is our inability, as men and people of African descent, to define ourselves without the stereotypes the larger society imposes upon us, and through various institutional means perpetuates and permeates within our entire culture.

One way to read Maurice’s story in line with Marable’s point is that Black male stereotypes do more than just distort Black men’s realities—they exclude them from reality. Here the idea is that stereotypes function in the service of an established ontology which culturally undergirds who gets registered as a real man, but at the same time who gets registered as Human. However, Maurice seems intent on resisting his own erasure: he is determined to cease being the Black man that society recognizes. In other words, Maurice is

determined to assert his Blackness even though he recognizes that the odds are stacked against the Blackness he imagines. More broadly, he helps us to see how Black men's ability to productively engage with HIV vulnerability and stigma may also depend on their ability to grapple with their erasure. In my view, there is a connection between the kinds of discussions and reflections Black men are able and willing to have about HIV, and the deeper struggles that mediate Black personhood under whiteness.

Conclusion

Drawing on a combination of ethnographic vignettes and field notes highlighting the voices of a diverse group of HIV-positive and HIV-negative straight Black men, my goal in this chapter has been to examine Black male performative scripts about sex, gender, and race to elucidate the ontological weight that Blackness has on HIV awareness and vulnerability.

I argued that Blackness *arranges* gender, sexuality, and experiences of HIV that, in turn, enable and disable different ways in which straight Black men experience themselves as "Black men" under whiteness. This argument is connected to the central argument in this dissertation—that experiences of HIV and encounters with HIV are overdetermined by Blackness' relationship to whiteness. Put differently, this is an argument about the exceptionalism of anti-Black racism and how it cordons off a Black HIV experience that mediates on multiple planes of gender, race, and sexuality.

An example of how anti-Black racism shapes and is shaped by experiences of HIV is seen in the ways in which cultural-level discourse and visual cultures advance singular and coherent Black masculine and sexual scripts. Such scripts are what some claim to

be behind Black men's alleged pathological sexual behaviours. While I recognized that on one level Black men can, at times, endorse scripts that are singular and even problematic, I also demonstrate how, for instance, Andre, George, and Maurice are not just submissively performing those scripts. Illustrating how participants' scripts are laden with complex forms of self-awareness allows me to also advance the idea that, although Black masculine scripts can embody problematic ideals that are projections of whiteness, men like Andre and others are not passive objects of racial oppression. On the contrary, they are actively trying to survive it.

Another important message in this chapter is that Black men's perception of their own behaviour can appear contradictory, including behaviours that are intentionally or unintentionally subversive. For example, this seemed apparent in the one-on-one discussion with Andre, where his rhetorical savviness allowed him to present his lewd comments as part of a deep personal introspection. Conversely, Maurice's comments shed light on how performing racialized sexual scripts can be a desperate attempt to assert voice in the face of dehumanization.

Another argument I made in this chapter is that the scripts that Black men wield can constitute both resistance and accommodation to different aspects of whiteness and, as such, may make them feel anywhere between powerful and powerless, and sometimes both simultaneously. For George, this inspired ostentatious stories of fucking that help him to cope with shame and HIV stigma. Again, Afro-pessimists would contend that stories like George's embody the deep erasures that permeates Black social life—the constant hypnotic push and pull of Black erasure. At same time, while Afro-pessimists might posit the impossibility of a Black subject under whiteness, the stories and fugitive

acts that I have presented paint a more ethnographically elaborate reality, where subject-level possibilities are not an impossibility. In other words, there are moments, although sometimes incoherent, of remarkable strategic and creative expression that cannot simply be ignored.

Chapter 4: Carving out space: HIV Recognition and the Struggle to Exist

"In Freud's theory, the wish-producing, fear-generating power of these body parts lies within them, not, with their strategic position within a historically specific, male-dominant, phallus-favoring, social organization of powers, bodies, and symbols." (Katz 2014:77)

In the previous chapter, I examined the anti-Black forces that shape understandings of straightness, Blackness, and maleness—under whiteness—and how such understandings inform specific stories, images, and awareness about HIV on multiple experiential planes. I argued that the stories that participants recount and perform represent forms of self-awareness that may be viewed as complicating simplistic notions of agency that surround straight Black men's encounters with HIV vulnerability, but also anti-Black racism.

I push this analysis further in this chapter; I ask, what does it mean to be straight, Black, and living with HIV? Drawing on ethnographic material, I examine how members of BAA's heterosexual men's support group understand, experience, and marshal their heterosexuality to carve out space in an HIV sector that they believe has denied them the same recognition as other groups. This chapter pushes my analysis further in two major ways: 1) unlike the previous chapter, it focuses on the experiences of Black men living with HIV, and 2) it critically engages an Afro-pessimist lens to think through participants' struggle for recognition within the HIV sector juxtaposed against the backdrop of their struggle for Black ontological recognition—that is, for the right to exist. In other words, this chapter explicitly connects the struggle for ontological recognition with a particular struggle for HIV recognition. For Afro-pessimists, without ontological recognition, Black (social) life is an impossibility (Sexton 2011:28-29). I draw inspiration from optimist Afro-

pessimists—a theoretical junction within the Afro-pessimist paradigm—to explore how, despite being repeatedly stripped of their humanity, participants' performative enactments of self and their pursuit to affirm that self represent movement towards Black (social) life rather than away from it.

Afro-pessimists who critique optimist formulations within the tradition, such as Jared Sexton and Frank Wilderson, contend that the "signs of life" that emerge from performativity are merely "shadows of life" (Eubanks 2017:5-6). Optimist Afro-pessimist writers, such as Fred Moten, instead choose to focus on what the performative potentiates, rather than what it must negate. Moten and others (see Katherine McKittrick, Saidiya Hartman, Alexander Weheliye, and so on) emphasize a "being-towards-death" and keep the possibility (and necessity) of an authentic Black performance free flowing. The Heideggerian derived notion of "being-toward-death" is the idea that an authentic Black Human life can only be realized through an encounter with its own finitude and attempting to make meaning out of it. It is in line with this that I examine the ways in which the support group serves as a staging ground for fugitive acts of Black belonging, resistance, and placemaking.

It is worth noting that this chapter focuses exclusively on the voices of Black, mainly African, HIV-positive men from BAA's monthly client support group, while the previous chapter recounted the views and stories of a range of participants and whose HIV status varied. The group was established in 2009 by Ernest, a long-term HIV survivor and highly respected figure in Toronto's Black HIV response. Ernest is an important role model to members of the BAA client group and my access to group meetings was entirely thanks

to him advocating on my behalf; he believed that having a researcher around would help bring attention to the plight of men who are straight, Black, and living with HIV in Toronto.

The excerpts that I present in this chapter are taken from a combination of group meetings that took place at BAA. Each meeting was markedly different than the other in terms of who attended and what topics were discussed. Who was in attendance often made a difference, especially when older and longstanding members, like Ernest and Bongani, were present; both men were direct and had a great deal of influence over the members and the discussions.

The first part of this chapter provides background on Ernest and Bongani. It also provides insight into how other men in the support group understand, experience, and construct their heterosexuality to carve out space in an HIV sector they feel has abandoned them. I try to show how the performative can be a powerful resource for fugitive survival under whiteness, even if it is always overdetermined by Blackness' structural place of violence. The second part of this chapter examines how Ernest, Bongani and Tobias—all long-term HIV survivors—are aware of anti-Black misandric stereotypes surrounding them, specifically those that construct them as guilty "HIV offenders" and "deviant heterosexuals." In the final section, I turn my attention to an exchange between Ernest, Bongani, and Adewole during a conversation in my office at BAA. I refelect on how group meetings were intimate and reflexive and how this was encouraged by men like Bongani and Ernest who fundamentally believed that emotional introspection and bonding was essential for their survival as straight HIV-positive Black men in a world that saw them as expendable.

The Elders

Ernest, 59, and Bongani,61, held special status in the group as charismatic father figures. They were also guys who, as the first meeting excerpt shows, had no difficulty articulating their opinions. For this reason, my questions in this meeting were persistent, especially when I could sense avoidance around an issue or idea. In hindsight, I wonder if I was too persistent. Self-censorship was discouraged in the group; on the contrary, members were reminded at the start of each session, often by Ernest, that the group was a safe space where anyone could talk about anything, so long as it was done respectfully, even if conversations got heated. Before delving into this particular meeting, I want to provide background information about these two men.

Ernest, 59, was originally from Liberia and was the co-founder of BAA. Men in the support group he helped establish would refer to him as their "*Oga at The Top*" — a colloquial phrase that playfully means senior or boss. He had come to Canada as a student in the 1980s from a wealthy Kru family that had invested large sums of money so that he could comfortably attend one of Toronto's prestigious universities. He was to become a pharmacist like his father who had been trained and worked in England for a short period before setting up a string of pharmacies in Monrovia's highbrow Mamba Point in Liberia. He was diagnosed with HIV in Toronto after an unusual bout of illness. He was not sure exactly where or when he contracted HIV, but suspected that it was during one his many visits back home, a journey he would make three or four times a year. After his diagnosis, his health began to deteriorate noticeably and, despite being in his final year of the pharmacy program, he had no choice but to stop his studies and focus on his health. He never completed the pharmacy program, much to the disappointment of his father.

When his health began to improve many months later, he managed to use his background in pharmacy to get a job with a national HIV/AIDS organization. As part of his job, he frequently travelled across the country to speak to healthcare providers and community organizations about the benefits and outcomes of HIV treatment.

At the time of his HIV diagnosis in the late 1980s, there weren't many spaces or services in Toronto for straight Black men like himself. During this early period of the epidemic in Canada, despite routine reports that HIV had arrived in the country by way of infected Haitians, it was still viewed as a disease that primarily affected white gay men. While white gay men and their allies in Toronto had begun to mobilize in-step with other cities like New York and San Francisco, it took a long time for Toronto's grassroots HIV response to actively engage with Black communities. In the 1990s, HIV organizations began to emerge and offer services specifically targeting Toronto's Black communities, beginning with programming for gay Black men and, eventually, heterosexual Black women; heterosexual Black men still didn't feature as a specific group that needed to be targeted. For Ernest, at the time, this seemed problematic given that through his work he encountered many Black men like himself who had contracted HIV through heterosexual sex. He knew firsthand that straight Black men living with HIV were out there and yet no one paid attention to them. The exclusion of Black heterosexual men in the national and local response to HIV resonated on a personal level and inspired him early on to become an advocate.

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Days prior to the group session that I present below, I happened to run into Bongani, who had missed several consecutive sessions, and I urged him to join us. It was one of those

awkward encounters where neither one of us knew what to say. I had not seen him in weeks, and I could tell that he wasn't doing very well. He had lost weight and it looked like he had stopped taking care of his physical appearance—his beard was unkempt and his nails visibly stained by nicotine (he preferred cigarettes without their filters). Bongani, born in Lesotho but raised in Soweto, South Africa, was an outspoken veteran in Toronto's African HIV community. When Ernest introduced me to the group for the first time, Bongani had been present and supported the idea of me taking over from the group's previous coordinator.

At age 61, Bongani lived alone in a dingy, 450 square-foot apartment on the 28th floor of a subsidized Toronto housing tower complex. Like many of the guys I met through the support group, he worked under the table at a poultry factory on the outskirts of the city. The work was never regular, but he did it, in part, because it paid cash and he could get away with not reporting the income, so it wouldn't affect the modest amount he lived off via monthly government benefits. He was a man that had lived a difficult life through apartheid in South Africa and, while he waited for life to improve after apartheid ended in 1994, it never did. During much of his youth, he struggled with addiction, including with a South African drug known on the street as "sugars" which was a cheap mélange of cocaine, heroin, and filler drugs. I clearly remember meeting him for the first time at a hotel in Toronto at a community event for ACB (African, Caribbean, and Black) people living with HIV. In front of an audience of frontline HIV workers, researchers, and peers, he proclaimed that the spread of HIV in Black communities could be stopped if more was done to engage heterosexual Black men. He also uttered to the researchers in the room, who had just presented on HIV cure, that he had had enough with scientists tinkering in

their fancy laboratories. He proclaimed, “You have it—why don’t you just give it to us? But you won’t because you like to see us suffer.” Although he wasn’t the only vocal community member to stand up and share what was on his mind, his boldness stuck with me. This was a man who felt injustices had been committed—injustices that stemmed from the idea that the white people in power didn’t care about Black folks.

Our chance encounter in the days before the session was enough to convince Bongani to return to the group. I hoped that being surrounded by the guys would do him some good, seeing that it looked like he had been on some sort of skid.

The Definition in the Dictionary

Field Note, April 30, 2016

Table 5.0 Demographics: Group Meeting - The Definition in the Dictionary

Participant	Age	Country of Birth	Length of time in Canada	Approx. # of years since HIV diagnosis
Binyam	48	Ethiopia	> 16 years	8
Bongani	61	Lesotho	> 20 years	20
Caesar	42	Uganda	<15 months	6
Ernest	59	Liberia	> 30 years	27

The sequence below is an excerpt from a meeting that lasted well over 2 hours. I have included it because it is a good example of the kinds of emotional and reflexive exchanges we were able to have during our meetings. It is also a perfect example of how my questions could elicit responses and power-dynamics that, at times, frustrated me, as well as them. The discussion that ensues around heterosexuality supports my larger argument around the high stakes involved in performing heterosexuality as an HIV-

positive Black man. This is also Bongani's first time back after a long hiatus from the group. We are convened in our usual place, BAA's boardroom. The circular table allows for everyone to maintain eye contact. I am trying to guide a discussion around the meaning of heterosexuality without having any clear idea of where I want to take it.

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Me: Okay, what I want to do now is talk about what it means to be heterosexual, right? What is heterosexuality? Or being straight—what is that?

Bongani: It means your choice in terms of sex gravitates towards women only.

Me: Women sometimes… and men sometimes?

Bongani: No, not men. Just women!

Me: [with a wry smile] Only women? Ok.

[Cesar, a well-dressed Ugandan man I have only met once before, interjects.]

Cesar: To me, I grew up knowing that a man has sex with a female. So, this thing here about whatever, gay whatever, I just learned it here! [His comment ignites a roar of laughter from the group] So that's what I know, for me, I grew up knowing that a man should have a good time with a female.

Me: Really?

I'm not impressed by Cesar's comment, but I try not to show it. He is new to the group and I wonder if the topic makes him uncomfortable. His comment came at a time when Uganda was making headlines for not rescinding a bill that criminalized homosexuality. Part of me wonders if his comment is, in part, a reaction to what was transpiring back home. Looking for a little more elaboration, I continue.

Me: Okay then. Is heterosexuality just about sex?

Bongani: Gender!

Me: Say that again? [I heard him clearly the first time.]

Bongani: [with a pronounced authority in his voice] It's also about gender.

Me: What do you mean it's about gender?

Bongani: It's—it's—men, it's men who actually… [he pauses and then stolidly continues] heterosexual people that are actually getting married to women, not to men.

Me: [In a provocative voice] Hmmm. But I know men that are married to women but also have sex with men.

Bongani: They are not heterosexual. [There was impatience in his voice.]

Me: Why not? [I respond, with more tenacity.]

Ernest: Because they're involved with the other, they're in a same-sex type of relationship.

Bongani: Those are bisexuals! [The intonation in his voice was letting me know that I was asking a senseless question to which the answer was blatantly obvious.]

Ernest signals to me with his eyes and continues.

Ernest: My understanding is this, like Bongani said, but let me use the 'I' statement, so I'm speaking for Ernest; once you say to me that you're heterosexual, either you're a one-woman man, or have a variety of women but your sexual partner is a female—that's what a straight person is. That's a heterosexual!

I notice that Ernest is avoiding taking up the idea of gender and marriage as a marker of heterosexuality like Bongani has done. Instead, he opts for the term "sexual partner." I know Ernest well, but I can't tell if he is deliberately trying to veer away from the notion of gender. I want us to talk about heterosexuality beyond the sex binary.

Me: [with hesitancy] And…that can't change?

Ernest: No! it doesn't change [as if the matter had been settled once and for all]. If it changes, you're not heterosexual.

Amid the conversation, I look over to my left where Binyam is seated. He is in deep thought with his eyes closed and his head resting on the back of his hand. At age 48, he lives a rather solitary life mainly divided between his car and his one-bedroom apartment. He lives alone but communicates regularly with his parents and eldest sister back home in Ethiopia. While he has driven a taxi in Toronto for over fifteen years, he still feels like a stranger in a city he has mapped out in his head. He is, without question, an introvert. But he is also different in another way; his visibly feminine mannerisms and manicured hands contrast with the overt masculine demeanor of his peers. I turn to Binyam and ask him to share his thoughts on the meaning of heterosexuality.

Binyam: I think it's like the same thing as he said [he points to Ernest]. A man having sex with a woman. It's a kind of category.

Me: Is it fixed, or can it change?

Binyam: I don't know; we have to see the definition in the dictionary or whatever.

Me: But you are the dictionary!

I want Binyam to tell me what is actually on his mind as I suspect it is probably a little different than what Bongani and Ernest have been articulating. But before the last words leave my mouth, Ernest is shaking his head in disapproval of my insinuation that the dictionary doesn't contain the answer we're looking for. Binyam doesn't let this interrupt his train of thought and continues.

Binyam: The person can make sex the way he wants to make it. It's up to the person. The dictionary might have the perfect definition, but every individual is by himself. As you said, if a man is heterosexual and goes with a man, or he's married with a woman and decides to go with a man, it's up to him.

Me: That person might see himself as heterosexual?

Binyam: Yeah, but there must be some kind of logical definition about it.

[Before Binyam can continue, Ernest cuts him off.]

Ernest: For me, that is the qualification I had wanted to make, because once that other option comes in, it means you're having a choice. Let's talk about this issue of choice. Cesar just spoke, and the way he spoke is the way he was brought up in Africa. That's what he was made to believe. When we are talking here, I want us to have that distinction clear. When we're here in North America, you are independent, you think differently. By that I mean, yeah you might come from Africa, but you got on a train in Toronto and you saw two girls kissing, or two boys kissing, and you made that choice. So once you make that choice to follow a boy, ahh… you are no longer heterosexual.

Me: And that choice defines you? [I didn't mean to sound quite so antagonistic.]

Ernest: That defines you!

At this point, Bongani and Ernest are dissatisfied with the direction the conversation is taking. The sentiment is that the conversation is stuck—and it is my fault. In a firm fatherly-like tone, one that is undoubtedly meant to remind me of my age, status, and place, Bongani urges me to "talk about straight people," otherwise "we're trailing and trailing." Ernest, however, is not one to mince his words and boldly points out to me that I had scheduled one-and-a-half hours for the meeting and therefore, we should utilize that time accordingly with the idea that "we know, we all know, this meeting is for the straight people."

In hindsight, I probably should have heeded their advice and shifted my probing, but in my mind, I felt like I was getting close to something, even if I didn't know exactly what that was. In a desperate attempt to rescue the conversation, I rephrase my question.

Me: [with a bit of bounce in my voice] Okay, for the purpose of our conversation we are saying that heterosexuals are men who have sex with women, right?

Bongani: Only!

Me: Yep. Only with women. Okay…but is heterosexuality only about sex? Or does it involve other things as well?

Again, I want the group to open up about the meaning of heterosexuality in relation to what it meant to be a man living with HIV. Ernest gets my cue and jumps at my question.

Ernest: Ehh ehh ehh…very interesting question because if I recall how you started this conversation asking us about HIV and straight men. 'Tell me three things that comes to your mind,' that's how you started this conversation. And we wrote down whatever we wrote down and you took it. But for the sake of this conversation, I will say what I wrote, since nobody knows what I wrote. If you are HIV positive and you are a straight man, the next thing you'll hear out there, you're either a druggy or you are a party-goer. And you like to have sex.

Me: [in a half-cheeky, half-serious voice] With women!

I find it striking how he doesn't mention homosexuality. I know Ernest is aware of the stereotypes out there, particularly those that equated HIV/AIDS with gay sex. More and more, I feel like he is resisting something, but I can't quite put my finger on what that is.

Ernest: I'm bringing it back to the conversation just the way Bongani said it, okay? I think I know where you are going with this. But we want to see how does this conversation benefit a heterosexual man, not the notion of what goes into your

head, what makes you think you are a man or a woman? No, no, no! Don't! That is for somebody who is not here, who doesn’t know what they want to do. I’m sorry, that's the way I see it.

Ernest decides that he has heard enough. He isn’t going to entertain a conversation that, in his eyes, isn’t relevant for heterosexual men. The idea that heterosexuality could have different meanings was trivial. What matters is that he and the rest of guys are straight. There is no use interrogating what doesn’t exist.

Cesar, who has not said much since his earlier statement, interjects in what looks like an attempt to defend me.

> **Cesar:** Yeah, it's the right conversation for the sake of the group, and yes, we can go that line. But don’t forget, [his body leans towards Ernest seated across the large boardroom table] change is a fact of life. So, I’m here and I’m heterosexual, but as you just said that when you come to North America you are independent, so change may occur on you.

I’m taken aback by Cesar’s comment as it seems to contradict everything he had said earlier. At the same time, I am grateful for his comment. But before I can respond, Ernest fires back.

> **Ernest:** And I think that is what’s giving base to Wes’ argument, you see? And by me saying his argument, I'm not putting it to be unconstructive, no. It's an argument that you guys can carry forward. But I'm innately a heterosexual man living with HIV. [He clears his throat and then continues.] How are you Wesley, going to help me? That's where we are, anything other than that, forget it. I'm not after that. How are you going to help me? I'm a man living with HIV—help me! Do some research that will help me! Don't play with my psyche about, ‘are you—do you think you’re gay, do you think you’re whatever?’ I'm not gay, I'm a straight man. How can you help me?

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I have to be honest when I say that this conversation with Ernest, Bongani, and the rest of the guys left me feeling like, after all these months of fieldwork, I knew absolutely nothing. These were guys that I got to know on a personal level and whose approval meant a lot to me. Ernest had always figured as a teacher in my eyes—someone I felt indebted to for providing me with access to the group, but also helping me learn about HIV in a way that no textbook could ever do. The thought that my probing, but really my framing of gender and sexuality, overall, was undermining my ability to produce research that would help straight Black men living with HIV was very hard for me to digest.

I labeled this excerpt, after Binyam's comment, *The Definition in the Dictionary* because it invokes a simplistic but useful analogy between dictionaries and performative scripts—acts that, in the context of this excerpt, help to constitute and reconstitute participants' understanding of heterosexuality. Dictionaries are a reference book for prescribed language, whereas scripts are a social reference for feeling and acting based on prescribed norms. Both denote singularity and symbolize the proper—proper language, proper sexual behaviour. Yet what is fascinating about dictionaries and also holds true for participants' heterosexual scripts is that though they represent the rule, that rule is always changing as it contends with real-world experiences that are messy and challenge normative rules and ideas. Like dictionaries, participants' heterosexual scripts are constantly in flux, responding and adapting to shifting social contexts.

Seen this way, Binyam's comment is intriguing because it is indirectly saying something about who gets to make the rules and, in essence, about power not just between members of this group, but at a societal level. In my view, Binyam was holding

back in the exchange, perhaps feeling like his ideas around heterosexuality, which I knew were not normative, would be rejected by Ernest and Bongani. This tension between normative and transgressive ways of feeling and acting is an underlying theme in this chapter and an important thread in the dissertation.

The excerpt provides context against which to examine the high stakes involved in performing heterosexuality as an HIV-positive Black man. It brings three issues to light. In the first instance, the excerpt signals to the performative; the guys are not simply describing or defining what heterosexuality means to them, they are engaged in a meaning-making activity that is registering and rehearsing rules. It is a heterosexual script that is consistent with prescribed norms about heterosexuality. It is also a script that conveys meaning around being African and a cis man. What makes the performative in this excerpt special is what speech act theorists call felicitous uptake (see Austin 1975), which is when the performance affects its listeners and, in doing so, allows both the utterer and listener to enact meaning. Felicitous uptake has a certain transformative force that can enable a statement about heterosexuality to become the very doing and making of heterosexuality itself.

Second, it spotlights the inherent tensions buried in scripts that relate to my earlier point about how all scripts—and specifically those performed by men in the group—are constantly being recalibrated as they are being enacted. What stands out in this excerpt is that there is a master script that narrates an unchanging concept of (hetero)sexuality, yet the more I probe on the changeability of sexual behaviours and identities, the more open the responses become, suggesting that, while the guys are invested in a hegemonic script, there is a recognition from them that there are other ways of understanding

(hetero)sexuality, and that in the real world, sexuality is complicated, particularly living in the West than in Africa.

Lastly, I believe the excerpt draws attention to how participants' experience of being HIV-positive and straight occurs under whiteness and produces feelings of devalued otherness. The tone of Ernest's comment at the end of the excerpt, imploring me to do research to help "real" straight Black men, demonstrates how the topic of heterosexuality is not just an abstract idea—it is about survival. As a long-term HIV-survivor, Ernest knows that being straight, Black, and HIV-positive is a matter of life-or-death and that his survival, and that of others like him, depends on being able to marshal a Black heterosexuality in order to advocate for oneself in an epidemic in which gay white male bodies are at the centre. While it may not be apparent in the excerpt, Ernest is not the only one to think that HIV organizations in the sector privileged the wellbeing of white gay men above Black folks, especially straight Black men. He is also not the only one who has endured anti-Black misandric violence at the hands of HIV organizations and care providers that were, as he liked to put it "messing around with Black people's lives." It was a topic that kept coming up in our group meetings and that channelled larger discussions around claiming back space for heterosexual Black men in the HIV sector.

Our Needs are Different

In this section, I further examine this notion of claiming back space, with a focus on how participants understand and experience Toronto's HIV sector. The following excerpts are taken from an earlier BAA group meeting with Bongani and Ernest and two other members, Abdul-Malik and Tobias. Abdul, 42, is originally from Sudan, where he was diagnosed about 10 years ago; Abdul has been in Canada for less than 3 years. In

Khartoum, he was involved in HIV advocacy work that got him in trouble with Sudan's secret police forcing him and his family to seek refuge in Ethiopia and then Egypt, before finding his way to the U.S. After 6 difficult years in Minneapolis where he failed to get immigration papers, he decided he had a better chance in Canada. Like several other men in the group, Abdul literally walked into Canada from the U.S. by using an illegal country road between border points. While these crossings are risky, they are sometimes the only way for individuals seeking asylum to enter Canadian territory. It took a long time, but his refugee claim was successful. His wife and children remain in Nasr City, in Cairo, but he plans to sponsor them to Canada as soon as he can save enough money to cover the sponsorship fees. At the moment, he has a cash job at a meat packing factory that one of the guys helped to organize. Abdul joined the group about roughly the same time that I began at BAA and is another one of the members with whom I connected immediately.

Tobias, 44, was born in Kingstown, Saint Vincent but grew up in Toronto. He was diagnosed with HIV about 13 years ago and was good friends with Ernest's wife who is also Vincentian. Tobias was not someone I saw too often, but when he was around, he was loud and critical of the HIV sector and how straight Black men like himself were being mistreated. He had a politician-like vibe and was always ready to embark in lengthy debates about Black revolution and Walter Rodney. I was told that his revolutionary persuasions had resulted in him being banned from attending an annual picnic activity collaboratively organized by BAA and two other local HIV organizations because he had publicly accused one of them—a much larger mainstream organization—of being racist and colonial. This incident was dubbed the panic fiasco and it is a bit of a running joke in

the group. Although well liked at BAA, Tobias has a bad reputation among mainstream HIV organizations and I think he knows this. Tobias just didn't give a shit, and I believe that the guys like that aspect about him.

The discussion snapshots below, taken from a group meeting, provide insight into how the guys talked about their sense of marginalization in the HIV sector vis-à-vis other populations affected by HIV. Like the previous longer excerpt, it is important to keep in mind that this is another example of utterances that are *doing* something.

Field Note, January 8, 2016

Table 6.0: Demographics: Group Meeting - Our Needs are Different

Participant	Age	Country of Birth	Length of time in Canada	Approx. # of years since HIV diagnosis
Abdul-Malik	42	Sudan	< 3 years	6
Bongani	61	Lesotho	> 20 years	20
Ernest	59	Liberia	> 30 years	27
Tobias	44	St-Vincent	> 40 years	13

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> **BONGANI:** For me, I'm of the view that HIV/AIDS service organizations in Toronto are doing a good job, which is appreciated. However, it's only this organization that has a specific program for straight men. Other organizations, mainstream, the white ones, they don't have anything specific for heterosexual men, whether white, or brown, or Black and they're not welcoming—that needs to change! There's another organization, it's not friendly or welcoming to heterosexual Black PLHAs. Yet, if it's an AIDS service organization, it's supposed to service everyone, including gay and straight, but I feel there's a gap. And so, what has to change is having at least a support group, or services, or support workers

that are welcoming, that identify with us. I think that will open more doors for someone like me.

ERNEST: Again, mainstream agencies, I'm sorry if you go there and you say HIV positive, they will look at you. But if you go there and say you are heterosexual, I don't know of any help they can give to you. So again, this is the only agency that sees to the wellbeing of heterosexual men. I actually feel bad for my heterosexual, Caribbean people. Because here in-house, at least a few of us show up here from time to time, which is okay. The question that is on my mind is where do heterosexual, Caribbean men go? But nonetheless, if this group gets going where it's full-fledged and flourishing, sure Caribbean or whatever, come in, we're all heterosexual men, and we're all Blacks.

ABDUL-MALIK: I noticed that many organizations are oriented toward homosexuals to help them against AIDS, to give them means. But for heterosexuals it happens very rarely, I rarely see AIDS prevention organizations reaching out to heterosexuals. Here in Canada, it's exceptional. I was even surprised. So, heterosexuals who think of themselves as being strong, behave irresponsibly as if HIV does not exist. Homosexuals already understand that HIV is there, they take things seriously and we who think of ourselves as strong, actually we're weak, we don't take things seriously. Organizations do not have enough means to reach out to heterosexuals, they only focus on homosexuals and when you ignore or abandon the heterosexuals, HIV will keep spreading.

TOBIAS: There's a need for having a group for Latino heterosexual PLHAs, Asian heterosexual PLHAs, white heterosexual PLHAs, I mean, because our needs are different. We can't undermine the fact that the HIV movement, in Canada, North America, was led by white gay men, but that has changed in terms of where the epidemic is. Although white gay men are still mostly affected, but now we're also seeing us, the numbers are on the rise. And so, we need to have such discussions. I think these meeting

> we're having are really critical, they have to continue. So that's identifying the needs of heterosexuals, otherwise we are just a small drop in the ocean, because even funding for services, if other organizations apply for funding for gay men research, they get funded. Heterosexual, nothing!

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These excerpts point more or less towards the same things: feeling unwelcomed or excluded by mainstream HIV organization; feeling that when HIV is still primarily associated with white gay men, it takes away from the reality of HIV in Black communities; and having a sense of solidarity amongst themselves, amidst the sense of abandonment by the broader HIV sector. Largely, when looking at HIV literature and the local response to HIV, straight Black men's experiences of discrimination in Toronto's HIV sector has received little attention. One reason for this is because straight Black men's claims in the HIV sector are sometimes seen as baseless or even prejudiced (Husbands et al. 2017). I also witnessed this time and again. I would be told by staff of mainstream HIV organizations in Toronto that because their organizations were "gay friendly," straight Black men had developed the misconception that the sector catered exclusively to gay men. As they saw it, the root of the problem was that straight Black men, in particular, were fearful of being misidentified as gay, which is why they perpetuated this misconception in the first place.

The corresponding idea with this narrative is that if straight Black men changed their assumptions about heterosexuality and gay organizations, then they could appreciate that the sector is far more inclusive than they think. Straight Black men are framed as disingenuous, possibly even homophobic, and as responsible for their own marginalization—issues that Husbands and colleagues have also examined in their

research (Husbands et. al. 2017:13). Part of what is problematic in these narratives is that they talk about mainstream inclusive and welcoming environments in Toronto's HIV sector without also talking about how the production of social and institutional space, as Catungal's (2013) research demonstrates, still happens along colour lines. In Toronto, predominantly white mainstream HIV organizations are at centre and well resourced, while Black and other ethno-specific organizations are on the periphery, struggling to get by.

Deviant Heterosexuals

Another important point to be highlighted is that men like Ernest, Bongani and Tobias—all long-term HIV survivors—are aware of the anti-Black misandric stereotypes surrounding them, specifically those that construct them as guilty "HIV offenders" and "deviant heterosexuals" (see Mykhalovskiy et al. 2020). When I use the term deviant heterosexuals and deviant heterosexuality, I am referring to anti-Black misandric stereotypes about antisocial behaviour, recklessness, and sexual compulsion that are commonly associated with Black male heterosexuality and the calamitous spread of HIV by Black men.

These stereotypes have been perpetuated by Canadian media, such as the case of journalist June Callwood's racist recounting of the Charles Ssenyonga story (Miller 2005: 31). Ssenyonga was a Black Ugandan immigrant who notoriously became the criminal face of HIV non-disclosure in the Canadian press in the early 1990s; he was portrayed as an HIV offender for having had repeated and unprotected sex with various white women over the course of several years without allegedly disclosing his HIV-positive status to them. Canadian media's continued racist fixation with Black men living with HIV

was confirmed in a recent report by Eric Mykhalovskiy and colleagues' research (2016:5). Based on the largest dataset of news coverage on HIV criminalization in Canada, the report showed that between 1989 and 2015, although Black male immigrants and refugees living with HIV accounted for only 15% of defendants charged, they were the focus of 61% of newspaper coverage during that period (2016:53).

The anti-Black misandric stereotype associated with Black male heterosexuality is also seen in the "DL" stereotype, which is a nebulous term that is used by Black folks and others to describe masculine heterosexual Black men who maintain relationships with women but who also secretly have sex with other men. This DL narrative further reinforces notions that straight HIV-positive Black men are fearful of being misidentified as gay and are disingenuous. American scholar Layli Phillips (Phillips 2005:4) describes the DL discourse as "a neo-racist weapon of mass destruction that functions by engendering anxiety among and around Black people and Black sexuality." Phillips argues that this stereotype, which prevails in North American AIDS discourse, pushes the assertion that bisexual Black men are callously responsible for high rates of infection among Black heterosexual women and, in turn, re-inscribes tropes of Black male sexual pathology by constructing Black men as sex fiends who can't get enough from women or men because their sexual appetite is limitless. For Husbands (2013), this is in line with a prevailing HIV/AIDS knowledge base around Black (hetero) sexuality, that has, for well over a decade, constructed Black men as having greater tendency for risky sex, concurrent sexual relationships, and supposedly higher rates of bisexuality (see Millett et al. 2005).

James Miller (2005) reminds us that the "mythic identification of African maleness with homosexuality" is a rather new storyline in the "history of racist discourse" (41). While

eighteenth and nineteenth century racist and heterosexist caricatures of Africans as bestial and naturally heterosexual have long marked white sexual constructions of Black sexuality, Miller points out that mainstream AIDS discourse of the late 1980s took sexual fantasy to a new level by introducing yet another white sexual preoccupation: secret homosexuality. Miller writes:

> AIDS discourse of the late 1980s shifted the mythic erotic power of the African male from its once healthy foundations in heterosexuality into the diseased domain of homosexuality. The reason for this shift goes beyond the convergence of analogous alterities. The vectoring of the virus from rampantly promiscuous Negroids in Africa and the Caribbean directly into the anuses and bloodstreams of White gay fast-laners and size queens in the West forged an epidemiological link between the animal origins of AIDS in the Dark Continent and its eruptions in North American gay meccas like New York, San Francisco, and Toronto. (2005:41)

Anti-Black misandric stereotypes, especially those associated with Black male immigrants living with HIV, impact the men in the BAA support group in very real ways. In large part, it is why the group is seen as so necessary for their survival; it allows them to create belonging and brotherhood. The following section takes a closer look at the inter-male intimacy that the group rendered possible.

Love Has More Than Two Eyes

The title of this section, *Love Has More than Two Eyes,* is taken from a comment made by Adewole, another member of BAA's HIV-positive men's group. A witty retort to the saying "love is blind," his point is that when one is living with HIV, love is never blind but instead has powerful sight which can make falling or staying in love impossible. Part of this impossibility has to do with another underlying notion, reason. When love sees "with all of its eyes," reason, not love, prevails. For Adewole, reason cannot see past this virus in his body. Another way to think about this metaphor is to link it back to the theme

of tension discussed earlier which underscores participants' ideas and experiences of self—tensions that relate directly to what is deemed reasonable and unreasonable when you are a straight Black man living with HIV under whiteness. In the case of Adewole's comment, what is reasonable and unreasonable is not independent of dominant assumptions about HIV and Black men, and how society expects them to behave.

This section considers this tension in exploring how, despite being invested in normative gender scripts, the BAA support group is also a space where participants enact forms of inter-male intimacy that also complicate these normative scripts and assumptions. It is also worth noting that this intimacy and vulnerability is not based on a requisite that it not be acknowledged to avoid it being construed as unmanly—on the contrary, I would argue that such intimacy is seen by the guys as a demonstration of their manhood. Moreover, my argument is that these kinds of spaces and what transpires in them provide the essence for fugitivity—an engagement with social death that helps participants realize themselves ontologically as well as on other experiential levels.

The following excerpt is an exchange between Ernest, Bongani, and Adewole during a conversation in my office at BAA. Adewole is the group's newest and youngest member. At age 31, he was diagnosed with HIV eight months earlier in south-western Nigeria where he lived a comfortable life in Ibadan. In Toronto, he resides with his eldest sister and her husband; they support him financially and are the only family members to whom he has disclosed his HIV status. He hopes that the remaining 8 months on his student visa will buy him enough time to plan his next move—whether to return to Nigeria and deal with his new reality there, or as his brother-in-law strongly recommends, apply

for asylum to remain in Canada. The older guys in the group have taken an obvious liking to him, especially Ernest and Bongani.

Field Note, April 30, 2016

Table 7.0: Demographics: Group Meeting - Love Has More Than Two Eyes

Participant	Age	Country of Birth	Length of time in Canada	Approx. # of years since HIV diagnosis
Adewole	31	Nigeria	> 3 months	8 months
Bongani	61	Lesotho	> 20 years	20
Ernest	59	Liberia	> 30 years	27

The three of us are bunched in my miniscule office space at BAA as our regular meeting room is being used. We are waiting for other members of the group to arrive. Our conversation has, on its own, gravitated towards talking about women and relationships and the topic of HIV disclosure. The focus is less on disclosure itself and more on what follows, in terms of love, when one does disclose. Just before his diagnosis, Adewole was about to propose to a woman he was deeply in love with but decided to end the relationship when he received confirmation of his HIV status. He was now, as he put it, a single man.

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> **Adewole:** Okay, [he clears his throat] let me quickly react to that here what he said [referring to a playful comment directed at him about being single]. It's easier for people with family, with children to actually accept the fact that they've already got it [HIV] and those sorts of things. They've married, they had children already before being diagnosed so they don't have anything to lose. But it's more difficult for people who are single because evidently when you have it, even if you're the most handsome man in the world, even if you say God sent you, even if you're an angel, if you tell a woman 'I love you but I've got HIV…'—it's, it's ludicrous. [He takes a

long pause and continues.] You know, for those who are single, it's a difficult thing. Because they will tell you, 'you must disclose your status before you do anything. No matter how she sees you. Even if [love] is blind you still have to disclose,' but I think love has more than two eyes now. It's no longer blind!

Bongani: Can I say something?

Adewole: Yes!

Bongani: It's interesting that you brought this up, but you know why? I think the whole thing about, I'm HIV positive, I'm single, yes, I know it's difficult to meet somebody and tell them your status, I'm not down playing that. I'm not. But I think what I'm trying to say here is that the whole challenge starts with you. What do I mean by that? Do you accept where you are at right now? I will start with you my brother. This is us, we are all citizens of that country called HIV. So no, don't worry about no immigration.

Adewole: We must accept the fact. We don't have any choice.

Ernest: Aahh! And when you say you accept the fact, try to help me understand that. What do you mean by you accept it?

Adewole: Because you know it doesn't change. There's nothing that you're going to do about it!

Ernest: That's right!

***

I am impressed by how Adewole handled himself in this meeting. He is new to Canada and still processing his diagnosis, life at his sister's is turbulent, and accessing HIV medication on his international student health plan is proving to be a serious challenge. Yet, despite the hardship he is experiencing, he is able to open up to a group

of men who are all old enough to be his father and whom he barely knows. It took enormous courage to do so and everyone there that day recognized this.

A common assertion in both HIV literature and discourse is that straight Black men don’t want to talk about their feelings, especially not with other men (Bowleg 2004). However, it is clear from the excerpts presented in this chapter that perhaps some do want to talk and feel connected to community and to their feelings. I found that, while at times group talk could be superfluous, it could also be intimate and reflexive and this was encouraged by men like Bongani and Ernest who fundamentally believed that emotional introspection and bonding was essential for their survival as straight HIV-positive Black men in a world that saw them as expendable. It seemed, at times, that the group’s receptiveness to intimacy helped them accept their HIV status, feel less vulnerable, and perhaps more inclined to challenge and change— in their own personal way—certain ideas about gender, race, and sexuality.

Husbands’ pioneering work in *Talking Black* (Husbands et al. 2013) as well as more recent research (Antabe 2021) shows that both HIV-positive and HIV-negative straight Black men want spaces where they can talk about their health experiences and learn together as Black men. As one *Talking Black* participant explained:

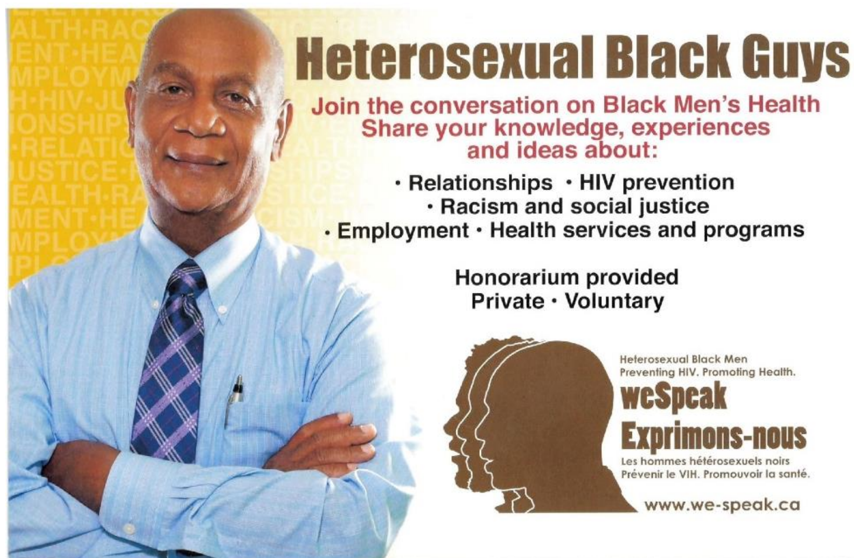
> For me I don’t find it an issue, discussing HIV with any of my peers. Whether it’s men or women or they are mixed, I get a lot of strength from them and I think everybody in this group discuss HIV openly. We have a society of our own, very close-knit society where we know each other ... But I find myself very, very comfortable because even when we started meetings as a group of men, as straight men when we sit down, we discuss all these kinds of issues. We share jokes. We tell each other, ‘You look as if you’re going to expire’, these kinds of jokes (laughter). We are very free with each other. This kind of support, the support that we give

> each other is very, very therapeutic. I don't think this kind of support you get from this kind of a group you can get it from any doctor. (Husbands et al. 2013:12)

In his Ontario-based study examining how heterosexual men living with HIV seek health care and support services, Tony Antoniou (2012) observed similar patterns. Men in his study perceived themselves as relegated to the margins of a health care and HIV sector, felt that gay men were better positioned to obtain and advocate for HIV-related services, and they wanted programs and services that would encourage "bonding and peer support" (2012:8). Consistent with the Talking Black report, men in Antoniou's study expressed that they were tired of feeling isolated and alone.

The weSpeak study (see Husbands et al. 2021), an ongoing program of research and related activities with Black heterosexual men in Ontario, seeks to respond to what straight Black men are asking for. Building on Husband's trailblazing work, the study has sought to engage Black men by creating spaces where they can come together and talk about HIV in ways that holistically encompass their social and cultural realities by drawing linkages between what it means to be Black under whiteness and what that means for people with and at risk of HIV.

Illustration 2.0: weSpeak: Heterosexual Black Guys brochure. Source: weSpeak archive 2019



These types of interventions are in line with the kind of fugitive placemaking that the BAA group embodies; they are examples of being-toward-death. They are forms of placemaking that provide opportunities for Black men to collectively and individually make meaning out of their social death. From an optimist Afro-pessimist perspective, it is encounters like these that potentiate Black human life, that provide a pathway for recognition, and, as such, provide the possibility of Black (social) life.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the ways in which Ernest, Bongani, and other men in the BAA support group understand, experience, and construct their heterosexuality to carve out space in an HIV sector they feel has abandoned them. I also analyzed how their struggles for mutual recognition within the HIV sector takes place within a larger struggle for Black recognition. I have shown that participants' performative enactments of self set the stage for forms of fugitive belonging and placemaking that help them resist their negation on a social and existential plane and, in doing so, generate behaviours and

dispositions that make meaning from erasure. An example of this is the way in which Ernest formulates a notion of heterosexuality that embodies both refusal and survival. In this context, for these men, heterosexuality underpins a much larger political and ontological project that is necessary for them to get by. For Adewole, the group will become a space where through the support of men like Bongani, he will learn about the high stakes involved in performing heterosexuality as an HIV-positive Black man in Canada. While Afro-pessimists caution against the deceptive signs of life that can emerge from performativity, what I have presented in this chapter illustrates that the performative can be a powerful resource for survival under whiteness, even if it is always overdetermined by Blackness' structural place of violence. An optimist Afro-pessimist perspective contends that acts of escape (i.e., fugitivity) in the current paradigm of the human rarely, if ever, result in a clean break. This is the topic of my next chapter, where I examine how Black invocations of humanity embody and fuse Black diasporic insights and self-knowledge.

Chapter 5: Wrestling with Blackness

> If pessimism allows us to discern that we are nothing, then optimism is the condition of possibility of the study of nothing as well as what derives from that study. We are the ones who engage in and derive from that study: blackness as black study as black radicalism (Moten 2013:774).

In the previous chapter, I examined performative constructions of heterosexuality among members BAA's HIV-positive men's group. I argued that these performative acts set the stage for forms of belonging and placemaking that helped them do two things: first, to carve out space in an HIV sector they felt refused to recognize their existence, and second, to make meaning out of their social death. In this chapter, I expand my analysis to look broadly at how critical awareness around Blackness can also be used to foster different kinds of placemaking that challenge whiteness. In line with the previous chapter's emphasis on the artistry of being-toward-death, a modality for thinking about fugitive possibilities in Black social death, this chapter considers the different ways in which Black invocations of humanity embody and fuse Black diasporic insights and self-knowledge.

This chapter broadly draws on the concept of Black diaspora (Hall 1990, Gilroy 1993), the notion of Black movement based on the different routes and roots that underpin the involuntary and voluntary dispersal of Black people, ideas, and artifacts throughout time and space. My use here of the term "diasporic" has two functions: first, to reposition Blackness in opposition to hierarchized relations that rely on a certain organization of time and space. What is upheld in this terminology is the porousness of boundaries (Gilroy 1993), not simply the normative borders that tend to shape home and nation, but the violent ontological boundaries produced by the Middle Passage that maintain Black social death (see Ellis 2015; Walcott 2016). Second, to engage with a constellation of ideas

around Black male existence that invoke duality—the irreconcilable, dislocating "two-ness," as DuBois (1996 [1903]) would have it, of living Blackness through and under whiteness.

In this chapter, I deploy a fugitive lens to explore acts of "escape" and "disobedience" (Moten 2008) as it relates to notions of Caribbeanness and/or Africanness and to sites and settings where this identification occurs (i.e., the Black diaspora). I show how these diasporic identifications, often enacted through particular notions of manliness, provide participants with an important means of escaping and subverting anti-Blackness. My analysis draws on two perspectives: that of men in the Sweetness focus group who are HIV-negative (or did not disclose their status) and mainly Caribbean, and that of members of the HIV-positive men's group who are African. However, while participant voices are grouped this way, it is not with the objective of comparing HIV-negative with HIV-positive individuals. In the excerpts that I have selected, HIV is in fact not a topic that emerges in either group's mediations about Blackness. In my view, this is in part because participants living with HIV are not merely interpolated through HIV as it intersects with gender and race. As I will demonstrate, there are times whereby the complexities and experiences of participants' self-making are encountered and negotiated through other intersections, such as diasporic Blackness.

Before delving into my analysis, it's worth mentioning that, overall, the social scientific study of Black communities and HIV in Canada and the United States is seldom carried out with a critical analysis of diasporic Blackness. It begs the question, why is the notion of diaspora relevant to a dissertation on Blackness and HIV in Toronto? I believe the answer starts with the basic premise that Black displacement throughout history,

beginning with the transatlantic slave trade, has had a profound effect on Black people's wellbeing and ability to maintain their health. Another reason is that Black displacement has produced diasporic geographies that starkly mirror the global HIV epidemic. My point is that Black HIV disparities whether in Toronto, or Baltimore, or Port-au-Prince, or São Paulo, are part of a much bigger story and historical flow. They must be understood against the backdrop of racial slavery and its enduring modalities. From this perspective, understanding the multiple routings of Blackness is relevant to research on Black communities and HIV because it helps connect transatlantic slavery, displacement, and movement of Black people (with or without HIV), and ideas, with the complex realities of contemporary Blackness and being. In other words, it is an attempt to bring this dissertation's analysis of Blackness and HIV back to the slave ship.

Moreover, my objective is not to compare African and Caribbean perspectives on Blackness. While some differences do surface in the excerpts, I do not attempt to make specific inferences around Carrbeanness or Africanness. Rather, my objective is simply to demonstrate how participants' diverse understandings of Blackness cannot be reduced to a single notion of race or gender, and that these identifications are connected through diasporic positionalities and formations. Put differently, I argue that in the context of the lives of participants, the concept and affect of "Blackness" and "diasporic" work synergistically in rendering meaning to, and from, diverse Back identifications and experiences.

Examining how participants construct and narrate their Blackness, provides a closer look at how different experiences of anti-Black racism, HIV stigma and migration, intersect and figure in participants' critical awareness of Blackness in Canada. As I try to

show, participants' diverse understandings of Blackness are the result of a confluence of factors that produce different "routes" of Black consciousness—routes that are, at times, contradictory and unpredictable. The idea of routes is riffing off the work of Stewart Hall (1993) and James Clifford (1997), and is a reference to the alternative and fugitive standpoints that diasporic thinking and feeling recovers.

Counter "Seeings," "Realities" and "Beings"

In chapter 2, I explored how participants at times endorsed masculine scripts that relied on problematic ideals, but I also demonstrated how men like Andre were not just submissively performing race and gender scripts. Instead, I tried to show how these scripts constituted both forms of resistance and compliance that helped them affirm a sense of self despite deep feelings of loss. Here, I return to Andre and the Sweetness focus group to reexamine in greater detail how different forms of resistance and compliance are also tied to a critical awareness of Blackness and to identification with Caribbeanness. It is worth reiterating that four of the six men in the group are of Caribbean ancestry, and among them, three were born in the Caribbean while one was born in Toronto. The two men that are not of Caribbean ancestry, TJ and Blessing, identify as African-American and African respectively. These men are HIV-negative, or did not know or want to disclose their status.

Field Note, June 9, 2016

Table 8.0: Demographics: Sweetness Interview (Part II)

Participant	Age	Country of Birth	Length of time in Canada (yrs.)	HIV-Status	Ancestry
Andre	39	Trinidad	>20	Did not disclose	Afro- and Indo-Caribbean
Blessing	33	Malawi	<6	Negative	African
Lou	32	Jamaica	>30	Unknown	Afro-Cuban and European
Nathaniel	50	Canada	-	Negative	Afro-Caribbean, European, Indo-Caribbean
TJ	28	USA	>8	Negative	African-American
Trevor	48	Trinidad	>40	Unknown	Afro- and Indo-Caribbean

Everyone is locked into the conversation. After all, we are in the middle of discussing *sensitive* things: What does it mean to be conscious about one's Blackness?

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Me: [with a tinge of sarcasm] How's the Black male experience particular? Is it different from being, say, a white man?

Andre: I tried being a white man recently and it didn't really work out.

[The room erupts in laughter.]

Me: Well, what happened?

Andre: No man, I'm just being very facetious, I'm a mixed-race Black man and I'm *Indo* [Indo-Caribbean], and I got some white inside of me too—so, often times it's like 'how do I identify?' Recently, I find myself hanging out a lot with South Asians, I feel a close affinity to that side of my culture…and sometimes I forget that I'm actually a Black man being around South Asians. And so, being mixed-race, I often times don't look

at the concreteness of what a Black man is because I'm so fluid in my association with Blackness.

Andre's reflexive comment has the effect of dynamite. Firstly, it catches all of us totally off guard. At this point in the discussion, Andre hadn't struck me as someone willing to forgo fixed notions of identity. If anything at all, his wisecracks had reinforced Black male stereotypes. Secondly, it isn't just Andre, so far no one has dared to interrogate their Blackness. I am curious to see how the guys will respond. What's more, Andre isn't the only mixed-raced person in the group. Lou is of Cuban-Jamaican decent and can easily pass as Latino—even white; Trevor and Andre also have apparent Indo-Caribbean traits, and then there is me, and though I have not said anything about my own mixed-raced background, I think the guys probably suspect as much.

Me: Does someone want to relate to that? [I ask awkwardly, deliberately trying to keep my question vague].

We all just sit there and look at each other in silence. I am not sure if my own discomfort mirrors that of others, but there is certainly a cautious type of silence that sets in. TJ is the first to say something.

TJ: I feel like we're strong but people want to believe that we're weak and so we live through this constant dichotomy of what you see in the media, that we're not powerful, yet we're a threat because we actually are!

I am glad that TJ breaks the silence, but I am also a little taken aback by how he has dodged Andre's previous comment on Black fluidity. It almost feels as if he wants us instead to focus on the exact opposite—Blackness' powerful and unmistakable starkness. Andre is quick to interject.

Andre: [interjects] To elaborate on what you're saying [he turns his attention to TJ], I think Black males are extremely competent despite systemic outcomes that change that actual reality. Black males, and even Black women, excel further than their counterparts when the playing field is leveled.

In this sequence, Andre and Lou's comments set the tone for a series of formulations that attempt to articulate the potential for, and existence of an authentic Blackness—one that resonates with the idea that Black folks have what it takes to succeed in the world, even if that world is fundamentally rigged against them. In doing so, they invoke counter concepts of "seeing," "knowing," "power" and "reality." These counter concepts are deployed to establish a deeper truth about Blackness, that is, deeper than the reality which whiteness imposes and fabricates. TJ's message is that this false reality under which Black people are forced to live becomes the same problematic reality through which they come to know who they think they are, or more specifically, will never be. As will be shown, it is this distorted reality that TJ, Andre and the others believe must be interrupted if a true Blackness is to be restored. My argument here is that the deployment of these counter concepts ("seeing," "knowing," "power" etc.), represents a form of action that seen from an optimist Afro-pessimist perspective, brings political awareness to their situations, and in turn, produces a "being-toward-death." Or put differently, fugitivity.

As noted in the Introductory chapter, fugitivity is not a theoretical paradigm unique to optimist Afro-pessimists. For instance, if we think of bell hook's (1990:111) concept of "artistry in everyday life" in its optimistic Afro-pessimist orientations, one sees how fugitivity is central to her teachings around critical resistance under whiteness. By artistry, hooks is referring to an aesthetic and sensorial qualities of life, but also its connection to the ontological, or as she puts it, "a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way

of looking and becoming” (hooks 1995:65). It is worth noting that for hooks, this artistry enables Black folks to enact creative changes that make meaningful experience of Black pleasure and beauty possible, no matter how brutish their world might be. In this sense, both the concept of “artistry in everyday life” and “being-toward-death” evoke a political consciousness that has the power to create a Black social life—a fugitive life—under the most hostile conditions.

In the comment that follows, Andre continues to gesture against the grain. I say gesture because he is tactical in his delivery. His comment is a response to TJ’s point about Black men’s capabilities even under a system that oppresses them. As I see it, Andre’s cutting reply is a perfect example of this “artistry” that seems critical for a fugitive life.

> **Andre:** Yeah, as Black men, we’re quite innovative. We’re constantly finding ways of doing things easier because we want to make life for ourselves easier, but we also tend to find shortcuts…and because of these shortcuts we figure things out a little later in life, later than Black women, because we're like, ‘oh there isn't a shortcut, we actually have to go through each step’. Being a father of a 3-year-old son and twins, and raised by predominantly women, as a Black man, growing up I felt like I had to be strong, that I couldn’t be emotional. Looking at my son now and how he’s sensitive, I'm encouraging this sensitivity, but what will I raise by the time he becomes an adult? Am I going to have a straight Black man or am I going to have a Black man that is *fluid* in his approach to life? And so, if I was given that same chance to explore my sensitivity as a young man, would I be a straight black man right now?

What feels like an endless slog of silence engulfs the room. This is the second time that Andre’s comments leave us speechless. He is pushing “sensitive” buttons, and

though his message is cryptic, it is still transgressive—what does he really mean? That he might not have turned out “straight” had he been given an opportunity as a child to connect with his feelings? That Black men’s “emotional” shortcuts explain why so many suffer on the inside? Or perhaps he is implying that Black men can learn something from women about how to be “more fluid?” What catches my attention in this comment is the subtext. Andre is attempting to complicate TJ’s assertion that strength and power, in the heteronormative sense, are inherent attributes of Black maleness necessary for their survival. From this perspective, Andre’s comment intentionally complicates binaristic gender categorizations to counter how the guys are fashioning their critical awareness of being Black, male and straight.

To break the silence, I fire another question.

Me: Right. What were some of the things that you learned early on in life about being a boy or being a Black man?

Trevor: Punch back!

Me: What does that mean?

Trevor: That means if you get punched, you punch back.

TJ: You got to fight back!

Me: And that’s something that you learned?

Trevor: Yeah, that's how you survive. That's how you rise up in the ranks, that's how you get welcomed into the brotherhood, that's the way you become part of the crew, *for real*. At least they know you got fight. [His body language and face tense up, but his hands cut and glide in space to gesticulate his point.]

While silence had permeated the group moments earlier, Trevor’s comment changes that—his words are spellbinding, and I sense a kind of adrenalized buzz take over us. Not letting the buzz go to his head, Blessing passionately interrupts.

> **Blessing:** I think many times as a Black man you look at yourself as strong. The Black man always identifies as strong, but this person is in a box. They’re very strong, very smart, full of potential but for some reason, still in a box. TJ talked about having to strive for what you want a little more than other people, and yet you have the potential, you are strong, you are very smart. And Andre talked about how we kind of always take shortcuts around things. It's madness… and there’s a way it puts you in a box, this madness to excel, and then you take a shortcut. Still, it shows the potential of being very smart and your strength and fight. You can't allow to be stepped on because you know you're strong, you see it inside of you, and going for shortcuts is a way of you saying, ‘I’m smart, you know? I'm actually smarter than other people, I can get this done.’ So, that's kind of the experience, being a Black man is like you're in a box and yet you possess all this potential, but sometimes the way we do it is kind of what makes you be in the box.

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The melancholia in Blessing’s voice is conspicuous even though it is gushing with masculine righteousness. As much as he tried to contain his vulnerability, it was not enough to recoup its outward reverberations. There are two overlapping threads in his comment consistent with the narratives presented by TJ and Andre at the opening of the conversation. The first is a message relating to the burden of having to constantly disprove what the world thinks it already knows about him and other Black men. It is this burden, claims Blessing, that moments of desperation push Black men to take “shortcuts”—to find ways to show the world that they are capable human beings. The second thread re-invokes ideas around the essence of Black power, self and

consciousness. Underwritten is the idea that power can be found deep inside the self—a power that again induces counter "seeings," "realities" and "beings." As Blessing put it, "You can't allow to be stepped on because you *know* you're strong, you *see* it inside of you." It seems to me that this strength and power, viewed as vital to Black male survival, can also be connected to an ability to do violence.

In her book (2004) *We Real Cool, Black men and Masculinity,* bell hooks states, by way of Orlando Patterson's (1998) *Rituals of Blood*, that young Black males learn early on in life that "showing aggression is the simplest way to assert patriarchal manhood" (2004:46). Showing the world that you are capable of violence is necessary when you live in a culture of violence. Trevor's quip about "punching back" and "surviving," or as Blessing's put it, not allowing people to "step on you," are not only embodiments of this culture of violence that hooks eludes to, but also show how such violence is profoundly anti-Black at its core. I think that behind the performative language of "fight" and "survival" is a strategic attempt to resist anti-Black oppression. Like hooks, I believe that many Black men "fight" because they feel that if they don't, they may not "survive"—they "fight" because in the eyes of white dominator culture, their life is expendable. But the guys' comments throw up more than simply a fierce critique of anti-Black racism. They also provide a perspective that challenges the pathways Black men take to realize their "survival" (i.e., fugitive life). From this perspective, not all forms of anti-Black resistance are liberating. The box metaphor, I would argue, provides further support for my claim, insofar as it may be taken to symbolize at once the conditions that subjugate Black men, as well as their response to subjugation.

Blessing's comment calls to mind a response by Christina Sharpe in an interview with Selamawit Terrefe published in *Rhizomes* entitled *What Exceeds the Hold?* (Terrefe 2016). In this interview, Terrefe asks Sharpe, "What does it mean to suffer?" Here is how Sharpe answered:

> I think that once one accepts that violence precedes and exceeds the Black, that it's not situational violence or a conflict in civil society—that that violence is the grammar that articulates 'the carceral continuum of black life' (Wilderson 2010)—then one has to take up the question of what it means to suffer (2016).

Andre, TJ and Blessing's comments help us to appreciate how something as theoretically abstract as fugitivity is experienced and enacted in ways that have real-world implications. As a lens, Afro-pessimism brings into view how men like Andre are capable of critical awareness, and in doing so, are also capable of, as Afro-pessimists would say, turning towards Blackness. It is this move towards Black social death that I believe Fred Moten and other optimists would say fundamentally constitutes fugitive life—even if it remains, as Sharpe reminds us, infiltrated by gratuitous violence. There is much to learn about the work fugitivity does, about unlivable existence, but also, about Black folks' creative ability to reimagine, against all odds, what Moten (2008:188) calls a "terribly beautiful vitality." However, in the following section, I will show how fugitive life is not always about moving forward in time, it can also be about going back, literally and metaphorically, to an elsewhere and a past, or as it were, a memory space. In this section, what emerges is that the affirmation of authentic Blackness—what I consider to be a form of fugitive action, involves holding on to a diasporic "elsewhere" while at times simultaneously shaking off the "here."

The Black *Here* and *Elsewhere*: Diasporic Self-making

As I listened to Andre and guys it became more and more evident that they were thinking through their experience as Black men by way of identifications that lead to places beyond the boundaries of the Canadian nation state. The more they articulated the adversity associated with being Black, the more I began to see a desire for a diasporic elsewhere. A place where Blackness was infinite and full of possibilities.

Field Note, June 9, 2016

The following except is a continuation of the Sweetness group discussion above. The sequence starts with a comment by Andre. He is responding to an earlier comment made by TJ about the absence of visible Black-Canadian male role models and authority figures, an observation that became apparent to TJ as an adolescent shortly after he moved from Baltimore to live in Toronto with his maternal aunt.

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> **Andre:** Conversely speaking, I come from the same place that your family comes from [he gestures towards Trevor]. I don't know if you were born there, but growing up I saw people that looked like me in positions of authority, when I came to Canada I expected the same, I didn't see the difference between white and Black and the opportunities that I could or could not access. And then I went to pursue those opportunities and it was like, 'oh, you're not supposed to be here.' So, I reaffirmed myself as a Black man, that yeah, I could do this too… One of the things of being a straight Black man is knowing and being enculturated with a sense of ownership and responsibility, but also having the images that you can start seeing. As a social and cultural creator, that's one of the things I try to create for my children is images that look like them, that they can represent and replicate.

> **Lou:** [interrupts] And that's so important, what Andre said. I get very surprised when I'm in different places, when I go to my friend's house who lives in the suburbs [of Toronto] and see his li'l brother, who was born in the same suburb, pimp walk into the kitchen, right!
>
> **Me:** Pimp walk?
>
> **Lou:** I'm seeing this guy walk into his kitchen from the basement like he's on the block, right and he's never really lived on the block. His family did, but by the time he was born, they had moved out, right. And so, I'm watching this and I see it in a lot in different places, I go all over Canada and I see people pick up what they think Black culture is, and then when I go back home to Jamaica and I see all of our authority figures are Black, and there's a completely different level of prestige that doesn't coexist with this ghetto-minded behavior, you understand? Which is what happens when we're distant from our culture—we are told that this is 'your culture' and it keeps us from understanding how *our* culture is broad and from tapping into our real self-identity, that's what really moves us forward. It's like, in my mind, the self-determination of Marcus Garvey, you understand? I'm a Jamaican and it's these things that give me my strength, that make me understand that yeah, I'm capable of everything. The rest is poison, it limits us, it's what put us in that box because we're trying to be what we *think* is Black or trying to be what we *think* is 'keeping it real'. We have lots of brothers in lots of different places!

Read together, Lou's and Andre's comments evoke Rinaldo Walcott's claim that "Black diasporic utterances are cluttered with references to how their histories relate to other histories of Black people elsewhere" (2003:35). The Black *here* and *elsewhere* signals two contrasting Black identities—a problematic counterfeit Black Canadian identity and cultural landscape characterized by what Lou called "ghetto-minded behavior," and a more authentic and emancipatory Garvey-esque Blackness that lived

elsewhere in the Caribbean[30]. Once again, Lou and Andre draw on narratives of "seeing" and "knowing," of discerning between *real* and *false* Black culture and self-affirmation as a grammar for articulating feelings and experiences of exclusion and subjugation in Canada, but also as a kind of subversive act of self-making. What stands out for me in Andre's comment is his use of terms like "enculturate," "ownership," "cultural creation" and "replicate." One way to interpret these terms is to view them in line with a desire to create a counter—or better yet, fugitive worldview. It is language that dovetails back to bell hooks' *artistry* and the aesthetic and sensorial qualities (and possibilities) of life that it offers.

I can see that Nathaniel is trying to get my attention. There is a calm aura about him, he had made quite an entrance when he sauntered in late decked out in flashy motorcycle gear. At age 50, he is the eldest in the group.

> **Me:** Go ahead, Nathaniel!
>
> **Nathaniel:** For me, the questions before I got here [to the interview] was, 'so, am I Black or am I West Indian? Which one is it?' And that kind of threw me off because my strength has been the fact that I'm West Indian and Black [he looks at Andre]. I was born in Toronto from West Indian parents, my household was a West Indian household…it was a bubble, in it I was taught that I was powerful and strong, and that I was capable of working twice as hard to accomplish as much as anyone else or more. And that was reaffirmed when I would go back to my other home where I was not born but my parents were, and I would see Black people in positions of power. But at the same time, I was like 'why do I have to work twice as hard to accomplish the same as others? Is that because I'm not as good?' But as I grew up, I got to understand all the forces upon us, including this being looked at as a

[30] By Garvey-esque I mean a formulation of Black consciousness based of political ideas of Marcus Garvey and specifically the focus on reclaiming a Black/African heritage and solidarities severed by slavery.

> threat that I keep hearing here. The system is trying to suppress us, I heard this in different ways from so many of you. Some of us don't get out of that, we keep ourselves in this box of either 'A', 'you don't want to see me as a threat, so I won't be a threat'—or 'B', 'I am a threat, but I'm only going to be a threat on the block and never a threat in the boardroom, or a threat in business,' just kind of feeding into the same stereotype. And I don't know, if it wasn't for that bubble I grew up in and witnessing my parents' place of birth growing up, I don't know if I would have had the same strength, or if I would have gotten lost in *what is* power and *what is not* power? So, for me, my Blackness is shored up because of my West Indian background and if I didn't have that and only was fed all the things that we're fed through the media, and sometimes each other…I don't know where I would be."

Like those that spoke before him, Nathaniel relates to his 'West Indian' roots as the source of his strength and self-knowledge but also an incubator that insulated him from a world that was hostile to Black people. His reinvocation of the box metaphor reinforces the theme that not all forms of power are liberating, and in the same vein, that not all forms of self-knowledge actually come from the "self." Once more, we *see* how the diasporic elsewhere rescues room for Black possibilities and imaginations, and as such, provides solace from a world of subjugation and false truths.

Another way to read these counter narratives of "seeing" and "knowing" is to view them as acts of disruption meant to engender fugitive views of the world wherein Black men are human, powerful and capable of realizing their desires and beings. But still these acts show signs of essentialist thinking, of ideas that flirt with a Black essence, even if such accounts are complex, manifold and contested.

In his book *Queer Returns*, Rinaldo Walcott (2016:21) shows how diasporic insights "can provide us with perspective on the universal from a non-dominant source."

Put differently, diasporic insights like those alluded to by Nathaniel provide clues as to how diasporic experiences, sufferings and desires, together coalesce strategic Black solidarities and universals that disrupt the myth of modernity and its empty promises. For Walcott, diaspora, as articulated from the position of the dispossessed, holds modernity accountable by problematizing the essence of modernity itself, as he writes, “It [diaspora] disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness” (2016:23).

To be Black in this Skin

The following section attempts to explore this subaltern perspective on the universal that Walcott (2016) alludes to, by examining the ways in which notions of universal humanity and Black authenticity are mobilized by members of the support group to make sense of their existence as Black African men living in Toronto. Here, I focus on how participants’ diasporic insights and other forms of self-knowledge shape their understanding of Blackness and humanity. To be clear, although these are men living with HIV, in this particular discussion, HIV remains in the background and I don’t believe this is out of avoidance. As already mentioned, at a basic level, this demonstrates how HIV is not always the dominant lens through which participants make sense of their realities.

Field Note, August 6, 2016

Table 9.0: Demographics: Group Meeting - To be Black in this Skin

Participant	Age	Country of Birth	Length of time in Canada	Approx. # of years since HIV diagnosis
Bongani	61	Lesotho	> 20 years	20
Ernest	59	Liberia	> 30 years	27
Jonas	39	Zambia	< 1 years	2
Mwisho	48	Tanzania	> 20 years	14

It is Saturday and a group of us are gathered in BAA's empty parking lot where Ernest and I have set up a BBQ and a few folding tables and chairs. We had only BBQed once before and that had been earlier that summer for BAA's annual client social. This was different, it was just us, and though the parking lot lacked shade, there was a fresh breeze and the comfort of being "home."

Bongani and Ernest have roped Jonas and Mwsiho into a serious discussion about anti-Black racism that I can overhear as I am packing food for the guys to bring home. Jonas, 39, a trained quantity surveyor originally from Zambia, lives in a nearby shelter that provides transitional housing to newly arrived refugees. He learnt about his status a couple years ago after failing a medical for a foreign workers program that would have allowed him to return to Doha—a lucrative work stint he had done twice before. Because he didn't trust the results from the government clinic, suspecting that someone had tampered with his HIV serology test to extort money from him, he decided to get retested in a private clinic far from where he lived, but it too came back positive. His wife, who tested negative, and children are in Zambia, and though he misses them, he is also relieved that they are not here. Life has been especially challenging—he lives in a shelter

where he has little privacy, his savings have run out, and his refugee hearing has been postponed.

Mwisho, 48, originally from Tanzania, had not experienced the same kind of hardship as Jonas, but his life is equally upside-down. He has been in Canada for over twenty years, and I am told that at one time, Mwisho lived a very comfortable life—he had an import/export business, a home and luxury car, and a family. As the story goes, he was a well-known personality in the East African community and then suddenly vanished. For years no one heard from him, not even his family. There were rumours that Mwisho was jailed for diamond smuggling—and another rumor that he worked as a spy for the Canadian government and had been sent on a secret mission. When he finally did reappear in Toronto, he had visibly aged, was bankrupt, divorced and living alone. He is someone I am intrigued by, but whom I really haven't had an opportunity to get to know first-hand.

The discussion, which I can feel intensifying, is too interesting for me to just ignore, I drop what I am doing and reach in my pocket for my voice-recorder.

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Me: What does it mean to be Black in Canada?

Mwisho: It's a challenge. When you're Black in this country, it's a challenge because we're immigrants, we're newcomers. We come from a different country. This is just my experience. I've been here living in Canada since 1995. I'm of African descent and Black. So, from my experience, being a Black person is a challenge, and I'm still trying to overcome it. The challenge could be employment, could be health, could be housing, it could be education. I'm still struggling with all of them, so that's how it is.

Bongani: Being Black to me means belonging to a visible minority in the sense that you have to do twice as much as the other person.

Me: Why?

Bongani: Because even when you work, or you go to a job interview for instance, you might have the same qualifications as a white person but because you're Black or because you have an accent, you have to perform twice as much as that white person. But it's still not enough, you always know that you have to perform more.

Ernest: Yeah, just to piggyback on what others have said about dealing with stigma and being ready to over-perform and overachieve, I think that's definitely characteristic of being Black in Canada. You have this stigma and because of that, you have to disprove them all the time.

Me: Tell me more about this stigma.

Ernest: Being less educated, more violent and just being to be able to deal with what is called the 'dominant society', we're not able to achieve as much as they white people are. So, you have to always be ready to overachieve or over-perform just to be able to match.

When we examine the comments above of Black men living with HIV against those of Andre, Lou and the others in the Sweetness interview who are presumably HIV-negative, they don't seem so different. In fact, they echo a fundamental message: surviving as a Black man in a white settler country like Canada requires not just *hard work*, but working *harder* than whites for the same thing. From an Afro-pessimist perspective, the subtext here is that Blacks are only on par with whites when they give up the equivalency of their value—that is, when they accept that to be "the same" (human), they must always be less.

Jonas, animated by the discussion, interjects. Being so new to Canada, but also someone with considerable international experience, I wasn't sure how he was going to receive Ernest's forbidding gravitas.

> **Jonas:** My experience coming to Canada being a Black person and having Black skin, say I'm seated on the train and I'm the only Black person. The reaction I get from people just because of my skin colour makes me feel that maybe people don't want to be near me. So, I feel somehow isolated, it somehow lowers my capacity, I feel like I can't do anything because of my skin colour, I feel like disowning who I am. So that's the kind of feeling I was feeling when I first arrived, but as I went on, now coming to 10 months, I've come to learn how to adjust to the environment around me. If people try to isolate me, I know how I can assert myself, so that's how I think about being Black here.

Jonas' comment sends my stomach in full revolt. The alterity and disavowal that he expressed conjures a famous line from Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* (*Peau noire, masques blancs*) where he writes, "I am a slave not of an 'idea' others have of me but of my own appearance" (1952:87). The line is an important flashpoint for thinking about how encounters like the one Jonas described, as Afro-pessimists argue, can produce powerful critical—even fugitive awareness around ones' Blackness. The kind of awareness that can be at once liberating and paralyzing. Clearly, Jonas is conscious of how he is being dissected by white eyes, and while I am unsure if this is the first-time he has experienced this sort of being "laid bare," as Fanon might say, he gives the impression that he knows what must be done to survive in his Black skin. Bongani, also seems to know what needs to be done. After all, he is an elder, an HIV survivor, and has been in Canada far longer than Jonas.

Bongani: As an African man, I find it's a challenge to be Black in this skin, but for me that's a motivation to work harder. I try and use it as motivation for me to work not just twice but three times harder. We always want to say racism is what's keeping us back in the Black community and I personally think that it should be a motivation for us to work harder and be successful in whatever we do. I can't deny it, racism is out there but things have changed, look the US has a Black president and Toronto's chief of police is Black, so for me it shows we're progressing as a people, so especially for newcomers in Canada, racism shouldn't be a drawback but motivation because Black people ahead of you are making a way for you.

Bongani's comment evokes another theme—that is, the "hard-knocks-and-bootstrap" narrative—the idea that unfair racial hierarchies can be overcome if Black folks are motivated to work and take personal responsibility. It is an idea wedded to another narrative, that of racial progress—that race relations in Canada and elsewhere are improving and that Blacks people ought to recognize this and be grateful. The problem with these narratives is that they are predicated on the idea that hard work equals success and conversely, lack of success equates personal failing. From this perspective, an individual's failure to overcome systemic anti-Black racism is an indictment of Black progress and sacrifice.

Bongani's comment is all the more interesting given the opposite course of his earlier remark, that no amount of "hard work" was ever enough to change Black subjugation. The comment is also interesting because I know Bongani's politics are more radical than what he is letting on. This was an individual who had lived through the 1976 Soweto uprising. The same individual who once spent hours educating me on Steve Biko's Black consciousness and recounting Chris Hani's life-story as if he himself had written his memoir. Put simply, I am a little surprised that Bongani in particular, but that

the guys in general are not more resistant to this bootstrap narrative. This was obviously a group of men who knew something about hard work and conversely the harsh realities of underemployment. With the exception of Ernest, they all worked under the table in factories under difficult conditions. However, they worked these low-skilled and low-waged jobs not because they lacked motivation, but because these were the kinds of precarious jobs that were available to immigrant men like them. That is, men who because of their race, class, and immigrant status have struggled to adequately participate in the Canadian labour market. These were also men living with HIV, and although that seldom physically impacted their ability to work, these were jobs that overtime impacted their physical and mental health—and could interfere with their ability to look after their HIV.

While I plan to circle back to Bongani's impervious comment, I decide for now to probe in a different direction. I want to see if I can pique Jonas, Mwisho and Ernest's curiosity by getting them to reflect on their relationship to home: how was their ancestral home shaping their new home, and viscera?

> **Me:** Okay, you've been all over the world, maybe some of you have multiple homes. How do all these places and all these *travelings* in your life change the way you understand Blackness?
>
> **Jonas:** I look at it like this—it's more psychological, it all depends on what you think about being Black or white. I can give you some scenarios, I have friends from the Caribbean and they actually don't want you to address them as Africans. They're not African and they're not Black [Canadian], but they'll tell you they're Jamaican or somewhere from the Caribbean. There's this scenario where you look at someone who is born here and calls himself an African Canadian, but you cannot address them as just African or just Black, so, there's people trying to group themselves differently. To me it's all psychological, I don't mind it but that's my experience because it's all individual, it comes from someone's perspective.

I don’t think that the “scenarios” Jonas presents are meant to reinforce discrete territorial Black identities or unchanging links between place and consciousness. Rather, I think he is indirectly saying that Black people are connected through their racial Blackness and African ancestry. By the tone of his voice, I can tell that he is fascinated by the diversity of diasporic Blacks in Canada and the multiplicity of identifications this diasporic experience has produced. I also suspect that Jonas’ sense of Blackness is tied to a concept of Africanness that corresponds with how he might have come to understand his own Blackness as someone born, raised, and until recently, who lived in Africa. I want Jonas to elaborate on this connection, but I am not sure how to go about it.

> **Me:** [teasingly] Back home, did you think about your Blackness? Were you as aware of it? Would you wake up in the morning and be like ’ah, thank God I’m Black?’ Did you think about your Blackness in that way?
>
> [While I have directed my question at Jonas, Mwisho chimes in.]
>
> **Mwisho:** Personally, when I’m back home or here in Canada, I don’t think about what I am or what people are. I don’t usually want to talk about Black and white.
>
> [I notice nods of approval from the other guys. Jonas, speaking over the chatter, interrupts.]
>
> **Jonas:** For me, I never chose to be what I am, I never chose to be Black, but I appreciate what I am. I appreciate the potentials that I have and what I can do, being what I am, I can compete with whatever person is around me, whether Black or white, I feel I have the potential to do whatever else anyone can do. So, to me, when I wake up and go to the world, I see myself in a very objective way as an individual who can compete and do whatever anyone can do as long as I have the will. So, for me, skin colour is not my problem. The only problem is we tend to think maybe we’re subordinate, and we pass on that feeling to the next generation…it’s psychological.

[I turn to Bongani who looks quite pensive and ask if there is anything that he wants to add.]

Bongani: Just listening and learning. In my view, being Black or blue, whatever colour, I don't give it too much thought; I didn't make myself. I look at a person Black or white, or whatever, as a human being. But yes, I'm also proud that I'm a Black [takes a dramatic pause and then continues]. When I look at where I am, a Black around other races, then I go back and think it's the geography, the physical location leads you to be who you are. Physically, I'm only an African, and even if you're African you're maybe East African and then you go to Egypt, you're still in Africa, but you're gonna find different [skin] colours, what does it mean to be a human being? That's all we are. Now, when it comes to the kind of isolation and whatever, I try to take it positive. Positively in a way that I'm a human being, you've got a brain I got one too, we are all the same, and maybe I can do better than you, but discrimination is there in some way.

Whatever concerns I had earlier around getting the guys to reflect on the in-betweens of place and Blackness have by now slipped away. What was shared came from a place of intense emotions, but at the same time, a place that we could all feel. These are men that I believe are attempting to resist essentialization and anti-Black racism. They are refusing, as Fanon and Afro-pessimists might put it, to be overdetermined from without—to allow their appearance—their Black skins—to be used to cannibalize and dissect them under whiteness.

When Jonas says "I see myself" he invokes the same kind of "true seeing" echoed by Andre and others in the Sweetness focus group. Once again, it is worth noting that these are the views of mainly first-generation Black men with varying lengths of time in Canada and transnational experiences. Their perspectives on Blackness may be different from those of second- or third generation Black Canadians, and conversely, those who

trace back their heritage even further. And although this is an important characteristic of difference that I think should be recognized, it's not intended to diminish the heterogeneity within and between groups of participants in this dissertation. From this perspective, it's still interesting to observe how participants in both the Sweetness group and the HIV-positive group are articulating an aspirational and fugitive humanness that cuts across race and place.

There are two sets of overarching themes that emerge in the group discussions that were presented. The first set invokes ideas around Blackness tied to notions of resilience, perseverance, inner strength, and ingenuity. The second set invokes ideas around common humanness and universal humanity that could be viewed as reinforcing notions of color-blindness and of the human understood through the gaze of the white subject as captured in refrains like "we're all the same" (Bongani), "I don't think about what I am or what people are" (Mwisho), and "skin color is not my problem" (Jonas). Refrains like these suggest that race shouldn't matter since we are all human. But ultimately, it does matter—and men like Bongani don't actually need to be convinced of this, even though his and others' comments might lead us to think otherwise. From this perspective, such refrains demonstrate how wrestling with what it means to be human in a world where one is not supposed to exist produces enactments, affective and symbolic, that are hard to distinguish, and that are not always coherent or deliberate but that play a crucial role in how Black folks processes their realities.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how participants' diverse understandings of Blackness in Toronto are the result of converging factors that produce different "routes" (Hall 1993)

of critical ontological awareness, or in simpler terms, ways of thinking existentially around what it means to be Black and human under whiteness.

I have shown that participants' critical awareness around their existence and humanity registers and mobilizes different forms of diasporic insight and self-knowledge that can be used in the creation of subversive alternatives (seeings and knowings) to whiteness. I have attempted to demonstrate how these subversive modalities represent a complex form of ontological refusal that challenges white subjectivity and helps in creating conditions that make "dwelling" in a place like Canada possible (see Saunders 2008:13). In describing participants' diasporic connections and identifications, I have shed light on not just the metaphorical and imaginary-like qualities of places, but also on the materiality of places of Blackness—the concrete gratuitous violence associated with being out of place, or in the wrong place—or from a "Black" place.

In this chapter, perspectives from two different groups were presented: the views of a group of mainly Caribbean men who were HIV-negative (or did not disclose/know the status), and the views of African men living with HIV. I have shown that when we examine these two groups' understandings of Blackness side-by-side, HIV recedes into the background while other social, cultural and political makers advance to the foreground. Such markers also seemed inseparable from participants' individual characteristics, such as, their length of time in Canada, age, ancestry, country of origin, immigration and socio-economic status. One way to think about the backgrounding of HIV in this particular context, in line with what was shown in the previous chapter which focused exclusively on the accounts of HIV-positive participants, is to see it as another example of how symbolically and affectively layered HIV-related experiences often are. From an Afro-

pessimist perspective, it means recognizing how HIV is always already overdetermined by pre-existing anti-Black structures and relations—rather than something that is discrete or outside of Blackness' structurality. In other words, HIV manifests in the intensification of what Blackness always already is, through relations and markers that maintain Black social death and conversely undermines Black people's health and inflates their exposure to HIV.

Lastly, the inter-play between Black authenticity, diasporic identities and universal humanity invites us to rethink, in an almost death-bound manner, the terms of the human as traditionally understood by the Western modern philosophical tradition. I have offered an ethnographic sketch of what being-toward-death (i.e., fugitivity), as a concept, can do analytically for understanding Black social life under whiteness. This approach, however, should not be regarded as a complete parting with humanness but rather as a critical curiosity around the possibilities that emerge when social death becomes the vestibule for theorising the human. This chapter has brought attention to the vital everyday dispositions that shape engagements with social death and the structural and ontological forces that control actions and movements within this violent state of existence. It is through this optimist Afro-pessimist lens that we see that Black folks are not passively accepting their formation outside the Western order of things, but rather through and in this existential encounter are finding fugitive ways of making meaning of their existence, and in some instances, transforming its plane. In this sense, transformation here is tied to the political and ontological leeway that thinking about social death makes possible.

Conclusion

This dissertation contributes to anthropological discussions on Blackness and being, the anthropology of HIV, and broader social scientific inquiry on HIV critiquing responses that privilege behavioral change over structural determinants. My analysis is situated within a radical Black postcolonial tradition forged by the interventions of scholars of the African/Black diaspora. It is my hope that the lines of inquiry in this dissertation will motivate others studying the response to HIV in Canada to think on multiple registers about the weight of anti-Black racism on the health and wellbeing of Black communities. As Black communities continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden in Ontario's HIV epidemic, we are left to wrestle with an underlying problem—and it has nothing to do with "how much, with whom or what kind of sex" Black folks are having (Geary 2014:44).

As it concerns heterosexual Black men, the problem, as I have outlined in this dissertation, is that their sexual acts and choices exist within a violent anti-Black system predicated on their negation. This doesn't mean, however, that heterosexual Black men's dispositions have no bearing on their HIV vulnerability. On the contrary, I have argued that although we ought to push back against HIV paradigms of vulnerability that privilege the structuring of Black men's risk behaviors, we must also carefully attend to what Black men say and do, and think about how and why it matters. It matters because Black folks are not simply passively experiencing their erasure, nor are they passively emulating sexual behaviors and attitudes that facilitate the spread of HIV. Drawing on a range of Afro-pessimist positions, I have argued that straight Black men's attitudes about their own vulnerability to HIV and wellbeing, are the product of, and response to, underlying conditions of structured, anti-Black racism—what Afro-pessimists call social death.

As outlined in this dissertation's introduction, the link between social death and slavery is a key tenet of Afro-pessimism and based on the notion that slavery permanently striped the slave of personhood. For Afro-pessimists, the state of non-existence or social death created by slavery serves as the foundation upon which the Western social and ontological order is built (Wilderson 2010; see also Wilderson et al. 2017). As such, I have engaged with two broad Afro-pessimist streams of thought: 1) a stream inspired by the teachings of Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton who argue that Blackness' social death is impermeable, and 2) a stream of Afro-pessimist thinkers (Afro-optimists) that posits fugitive movement borne through stolen life—a movement in absence if you will—as the basis for escaping social death (Spillers 1987; Hartman 1997; Moten 2008).

This dissertation has engaged with the perspectives of both Afro-pessimists and -optimists with an emphasis on how the two streams converge. I have demonstrated that as a lens for thinking about slavery across time and space, Afro-pessimism's broad strokes help elucidate Blackness' ontological heaviness. However, as my research demonstrates, Afro-pessimism's philosophical abstractness can also obscure figurations of social life in social death. Another limitation of Afro-pessimism as an overarching theoretical framework, is that much of the work on fugitivity to date by Afro-optimists has primarily focused on forms of Black artistic and vernacular expression like jazz, hip-hop, dance and cinema (Eubanks 2017; Linscott 2017; Albert 2020; Zondi 2020). And although this body of work has advanced a critical analysis of Black cultural production, overall, Afro-pessimism has not engaged with more mundane forms of Black lived experience (see Sojoyner 2017). From this perspective, this dissertation is an example of how the mundane and insignificant, the ordinary and extraordinary (i.e., the *sweetness*) can be

channeled through ethnography and used as a means of initiating and expanding philosophical discussions and debates about Black subjectivity and humanism under whiteness.

In Chapter Two, I discussed how evidence is constructed and narrated in the field of HIV with special attention paid to how this evidence-making marshals a problematic lens through which mainstream HIV organizations and state institutions come to view and understand Black communities. I also tried to show how discourses about insufficient “hard” evidence—that is, about the so-called dearth of reliable quantitative information to support certain kinds of HIV-related interventions in Black communities entrench anti-Black stereotypes and systems. I went further to argue, after Adrian Guta (2014), that scientific knowledge production as a nexus for participatory public engagement is always entangled in a larger calculus of state control that works in favor of the social and political order. From this perspective, I argued that when Black communities in general, and heterosexual Black men more specifically, are labelled as difficult or hard to reach, and becomes acceptable knowledge, it inhibits meaningful engagement.

In the second part of the chapter I turned to the methodological and corresponding theoretical challenges associated with ethnographically recounting Black social life. I examined the idea of ethnographically writing Blackness under whiteness and why some Afro-pessimists say it is by definition impossible. I spotlighted how anthropologists inspired by Afro-pessimist thought such as Khalil Saucier (2016) believe Blackness is not something one can write into existence. He argues that attempts to ethnographically “write” Blackness into existence invariably end up having the opposite effect, they perpetuate Black non-existence. Heeding Saucier’s forceful reminder, this dissertation

attempted to make the nothingness left by Blackness' nonexistence the starting point from which to reimagine—and possibly even rewrite, Black futures *out of* existence rather than *into* existence. In the final section of this chapter, I outlined my data collection methods and field sites, timelines and interviews with key informants. I briefly described the main interview groups: (1) BAA's HIV-positive heterosexual men's group comprised of mainly African immigrants, (2) the interview with mainly Caribbean-born HIV-negative men, (3) the one-on-one interview with Andre, and (4) the interview with a gender-mixed group of health promoters of Afro-Caribbean ancestry. Together, this dissertation used a story-focused ethnographic approach to present the voices of diverse heterosexual Black men, including HIV-positive and -negative men of Caribbean and African ancestry.

Chapter Three examined Black heterosexual masculine scripts and performances. Using interviews and ethnographic vignettes, the first section examined the different ways in which straight Black HIV-negative men critiqued and mobilized stereotypes about their vulnerability to HIV and conversely, their hypersexualization. I argued that heterosexual Black masculine scripts that are hegemonic at the cultural level are seductive because of their "humanizing" allure under whiteness—even if deep down enacting such anti-Black scripts caused participants to feel estranged from themselves and intimate others. I also demonstrated that patriarchal power is desirable, particularly for folks who feel that the system is rigged to emasculate them and keep them down.

I highlighted how participants deployed a wide range of discursive and inter-personal strategies to navigate, counter, disrupt and wield imposed subjectivities in ways that allowed them to maintain a sense of Black male self in a world that violently negates their existence. However, I also showed how these deployments could also embody

problematic anti-Black ideals. The main argument here was that although these strategic deployments didn't always transcend whiteness, they were also not passive responses to racial oppression. Instead, I suggested that such deployments were essential to surviving Black social death. Another related message in this chapter was that the scripts that straight Black men deploy can constitute both resistance and accommodation to different aspects of whiteness, and as such, may make them feel anywhere between powerful and powerless, and sometimes both simultaneously. To illustrate this, I offered a short vignette of George Musa, a member of the HIV-positive men's group. I tried to show that while living with HIV intensified hetero-normative masculine and sexual expectations, the underlying disavowal that George was resisting was fundamentally the same disavowal that participants who weren't living with HIV were also resisting. It is worth noting that while machinations of Black hypersexualization and patriarchy can confer, as Maurice pointed out, "special fantasy-like powers," that make Black men feel manly and powerful, I also showed how it ultimately denies them healthy and fulsome sexual identities, relationships, and pleasures.

Returning to the theoretical precepts of Afro-pessimism, I concluded in this chapter that participants' stories embodied a deep ontological erasure that connected the realities of Black men of different serostatuses. I also concluded, however, that while Afro-pessimists posit the impossibility of Black subjectification under whiteness, the stories that were presented gestured towards remarkable creative expressions that shed light on Black subjectivity's fugitive possibilities.

Chapter Four centered exclusively around the voices of members of BAA's HIV-positive heterosexual men's group. In this chapter I examined the politics of HIV

recognition in Toronto's HIV service sector with a focus on how members of the group understood and mobilized their heterosexuality to carve out space and existence they believed was being refused to them. I analyzed how participants' struggles for mutual recognition within the HIV sector took place in a larger struggle for Black ontological recognition. I showed that participants' performative enactments set the stage for forms of belonging and placemaking that helped them resist their negation on both a social and existential plane, and in doing so, generated performances and dispositions that could at times challenge normative gender rules and ideas. I also examined to what length men in the group were prepared to go to realize their affirmation (i.e., to refuse what whiteness and HIV had refused them) as straight Black men, not just out of moral imperative, but out of what David Marriott might call, with Fanon, "psychopolitical necessity" (Marriott 2007:273). I argued that for members of the group, this deep desire for affirmation was occurring at the intersection of two overlapping experiences: the experience of being straight and living with HIV in an epidemic where HIV is associated with gay men and gay sex, and the experience of being a Black immigrant in a white settler society. I tried to demonstrate how these experiences produced different enactments of placemaking. I argued that while Afro-pessimists call attention to the limits of Black performative placemaking, particularly as a site for the possibility of social life, this chapter demonstrated that placemaking can also be a powerful activity for making meaning out of social death.

As I illustrated in Chapter Three, death-bound Afro-pessimist frameworks can make it difficult to appreciate what Black optimists say are the unbounded possibilities of social death. In Chapter Five I expanded my analysis to look at how critical awareness

around Blackness can also be used to foster different kinds of ontological placemaking that challenge whiteness. In line with the previous chapter's emphasis on the artistry of being-toward-death, a modality for thinking about fugitive possibilities in social death, this chapter considered the different ways in which Black invocations of humanity embodied and fused Black diasporic insights and self-knowledge. With an optimist Afro-pessimist focus on acts of ontological "escape" and "disobedience" (Moten 2008), I argued that participants' critical awareness around their existence and humanity registered and mobilized different forms of diasporic insight and self-knowledge that were used in the creation of subversive alternatives to whiteness. I demonstrated how these subversive modalities represented a form of ontological refusal that challenged white subjectification and helped create conditions that made dwelling in a place like Canada possible (see Saunders 2008:13).

This chapter invited a rethinking of the terms of the human as traditionally understood by the Western modern philosophical tradition. I offered an ethnographic sketch of what being-toward-death, as a Black optimist concept, could do analytically for understanding possibilities of Black social life under whiteness. In the conclusion to this chapter, I argued that being-toward-death is paramount to a critical curiosity around the fugitive possibilities that emerge when social death becomes the analytical vestibule for theorizing the human. This chapter shed light on vital everyday dispositions that shape engagements with social death and the structural and ontological forces that control actions and movements within this violent state of existence. By engaging with this Black optimist lens, I have argued that Black folks are not submissively accepting their ontological formation outside the Western order of things, but rather through and in this

existential encounter are finding fugitive ways of affirming their existence, and in some instances, transforming its plane.

This dissertation demonstrates that heterosexual Black men living with HIV, and those at risk of contracting the virus, are often navigating HIV stigma and vulnerability in ways that run up against Blackness' metaphysical social death. There are many more avenues to be explored, many more ways in which to think through social death as it intersects with HIV and other health crises. For instance, an Afro-pessimist lens could lend a fresh perspective to current Canadian research examining the ethical challenges posed by seemingly benign molecular-based HIV surveillance techniques, particularly around issues of consent and criminalization (see Bernard 2020; McClelland 2019). Another avenue could involve thinking about what a study of social death might analytically impart on existing discussions around the Canadian response to COVID-19 and the implementation of data collection measures to enforce public health orders (see Luscombe and McClelland 2020; Mykhalovskiy et. al. 2020).

I hope that this dissertation will inspire system leaders within the HIV response to think ontologically, not just about the state of Canada's HIV epidemic, but also about the state of existence for those disproportionately affected by this disease. To think ontologically, is to think beyond conventional biomedical and public health paradigms. It's to think about Black people's health and wellbeing in Canada as an existential issue. My hope is that this project will motivate other researchers in the social sciences and humanities to examine the nature of existence of those living with and affected by HIV, and the 'truth claims' that serve to philosophically justify the freedom of the white subject by way of the non-subjectivity of the other (Broeck 2013: 106).

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