

ARTICLE

## Resisting Dispossession: Performative Spatial Irruptions and the LA Poverty Department

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I was so unimpressed with the city council. ... They had a line of homeless people who were allowed to vote because Kevin [Michael Key] was running for councilman and everything. So, they wanted IDs ... [The person tabling] asked me, “Well I need some id. Do you have any ID?” And the way he said it, he knew I wouldn’t have any id. It was like I wasn’t even there. I was invisible. He was just going through the motions of making the sound. But he didn’t know he was dealing with *R-C-B*. So when I dropped my passport, and I do mean *dropped* my passport on the table, *that’s* when I got respect.

—RCB, Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD)<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to perform presence or selfhood? What conditions necessitate these performances? In the opening epigraph, RCB articulates an instance when transparency was mapped onto his body—a moment in which he was simultaneously invisible as an individual and hypervisible as the projections of stereotypes surrounding homelessness and blackness collided on his body, rendering his history, present, and future as instantly knowable. During the election cycles of 2010, 2012, and 2014, KevinMichael Key, a prominent, formerly homeless Skid Row activist, community organizer, and member of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), ran for a position on the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council (DLANC). As part of his campaigns, Key sought to help homeless residents of Skid Row exercise their right to vote. One instantiation of this objective involved tabling in the neighborhood. In a show of support, RCB lined up to vote and subsequently encountered the tabler. “And the way he said it, he knew I wouldn’t have any ID. It was like I wasn’t even there. I was invisible.” As understood by RCB, the tabler did not expect homeless individuals to possess government-issued identification. Instead of acknowledging RCB’s individuality and subjectivity, the tabler assumed that RCB’s status as homeless meant not having state ID, an official marker of occupancy in a state-recognized residence. In this interaction, RCB’s political subjectivity was under erasure, invisible. For RCB, in this confrontation, homelessness marked him as a knowable (non)subject—a generic homeless man.

I open with this excerpt from an interview I conducted with RCB because it highlights what I term *performative spatial irruptions*—one of the many ways

that people in precarious sites contest the homogenization (and/or erasure) of their subjectivities through everyday, spatial practice. My elaboration of this term draws on Judith Butler's extension of J. L. Austin's concept of performatives as "speech acts," or words that "do something." In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Butler notes that Austin identifies two forms of performative: *perlocutionary*, words that do not commit actions themselves but are instrumental; and *illocutionary*, words that act.<sup>2</sup> Here *performative* includes both perlocutionary and illocutionary speech acts as well as actions that "do more." When RCB drops his passport, he not only literally releases an object from his hold, but also actualizes the action's performative potential, rejecting the assumed transparency of his personhood. In doing so, RCB performs a performative spatial irruption that brings to the fore "subtle" violences often present in ostensibly mundane acts, like voting, which occur in and tangential to sites of spatial dispossession. Unlike the term *erupt*, which connotes a breaking out from within a given (read dominant) structure, performative spatial irruptions are invasive. They attack head-on, interrogating hegemonic structures and making space for the visibility of what Katherine McKittrick might term "black geographies." In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, McKittrick argues that black geographies are "subaltern or alternative geographic patterns that work alongside and beyond traditional geographies and site a terrain of struggle."<sup>3</sup> Black geographies cite sites of contestation and disruption that occur in both the psychological and physical world, highlighting often untold stories of how black bodies have and continue to create, maneuver around, and take up space. As a performative spatial irruption, RCB's gesture highlights a black geography occluded by the tabler's behavior—an ideological and lived space where a black, male world traveler is also homeless.

As an LAPD actor, RCB's use of performative gesture in his everyday life mirrors the types of performative citation that are central to the work of the Los Angeles Poverty Department. This article explores *State of Incarceration* and *Chasing Monsters from under the Bed*, the two LAPD plays that speak most directly to performative spatial practices in the carceral state.<sup>4</sup> I turn to *Chasing Monsters* and *State of Incarceration* for three key reasons:

1. The plays represent iterations of everyday performative spatial irruptions performed by individuals and collectives.
2. They were written collaboratively between LAPD founder John Malpede and LAPD artists and are based on members' experiences in sites of spatial dispossession.
3. They interrogate psychological effects related to spatial dispossession and their multifaceted physical manifestations.

Navigating moments when the LAPD cites performative spatial irruptions as well as times when they enact their own irruptions through performance, this article uses *Chasing Monsters* and *State of Incarceration* to highlight the complex relationship between two seemingly disparate sites of spatial dispossession—homelessness and incarceration.

My analysis is informed by ethnographic research, specifically a set of personal interviews and notes from observational fieldwork I conducted from October 2014 through April 2016 with homeless, formerly homeless, and formerly incarcerated individuals living in Los Angeles; most, but not all, of the people interviewed are current or former members of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), a theatre company primarily comprising homeless and formerly homeless residents of downtown Los Angeles's Skid Row. It is important to note that both the interviews and the LAPD projects took place during Barack Obama's presidency—an era that included health-care reform, but also the continued encroachment upon and overhaul of historically low-income communities, like Skid Row, by processes of gentrification. This period also saw the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, a response to continued state-sanctioned violence against black people. The LAPD's work responds to questions of access to health care and affordable housing as well as grassroots activism around respect for black life. All of the LAPD members interviewed for this project performed in at least one production of *State of Incarceration* or *Chasing Monsters*, and several cast members performed in both projects. When engaging with sites of spatial dispossession, one often encounters a plethora of stereotyped images and simplistic narratives that fail to account for the complexity of the lives of people occupying these sites. Furthermore, these narratives also fail to articulate the structures feeding (and keeping) black, brown, and poor bodies into spaces of dispossession. Ethnography gave me a way to interrogate the relationship between theory and materiality by seriously engaging with the voices and experiences of (formerly) homeless and incarcerated people in scholarship around spatial dispossession. In addition, situating personal narratives alongside state and media narratives allows me to emphasize the tensions present among these archives.

My use of ethnographic research aligns itself with work by scholars like Forrest Stuart who wrestle with the complexities of homelessness, particularly as it manifests in downtown Los Angeles' Skid Row. In his ethnographic work, *Down, Out, and Under Arrest*, Stuart interrogates the overpolicing and increasing criminalization of residents of Skid Row. Weaving together personal interviews with Skid Row residents and police officers with field notes and historical research, Stuart argues that “policing has become intimately woven into the social fabric of everyday life, restructuring how those relegated to the bottom of the social order come to understand their peers, their communities, and themselves.”<sup>5</sup> While Stuart's sociological study strongly contributes to the growing scholarship on homelessness through its emphasis on ethnography and constructions of space, as well its attention to power structures, it focuses heavily on space and spatial practices related to the police but does not attend to gender. My project seeks to supplement this scholarship by using personal interviews to highlight the gendered performative spatial practices of Skid Row residents, and in doing so, to foreground citational practices and creative dissent responses that engender survival.

Like RCB's performative gesture, scenes throughout the LAPD's *Chasing Monsters* and *State of Incarceration* make visible the racializing assemblages propagating and sustaining the spatial dispossession of some bodies and not others. Alexander G. Weheliye draws on the work of Deleuze and Guattari to elaborate the term “racializing assemblage,” yet pushes on their assumptions about race.

For Weheliye, racialization is an articulated assemblage that deterritorializes some and territorializes others. Expanding upon the scholarship of black feminists Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, Weheliye investigates alterity to the present conflation of “Man,” as white, heterosexual, property-owning subject, with “human” by pointing to the relationality of assemblages and the need to understand race as a sociopolitical entity that is made to appear natural versus race as biological or ideological.<sup>6</sup> Weheliye posits that racializing assemblages “materialize as sets of complex relations of articulations ... structured in political, economic, social, racial, and heteropatriarchal dominance.”<sup>7</sup> Racializing assemblages help create and maintain stereotyped images and related affective responses through continuous (re)citation on multiple platforms (the media, institutionalized narratives of conquest, etc.) as well as through the creation of institutions and laws positing “the Other” as less than human or object.

Building on Weheliye’s work, I argue that the collusion of racializing assemblages supports capitalist logics, creating transparent space,<sup>8</sup> which in turn hides the racializing assemblages that propagate spatial dispossession.<sup>9</sup> Dispossession names the polyvalent ways that nonnormative bodies, subjectivities, and forms of community are rendered unintelligible and the avenues by which their histories are erased from, fall out of, or never make it into, the archive. Spatial dispossession then engages with the ways that multifaceted notions of space mediate and inform instances of dispossession. An analysis of *Chasing Monsters* and *State of Incarceration* highlights how the overrepresentation and maintenance of black people in sites of spatial dispossession are tied to capitalist assemblages that articulate black people as naturally belonging in those spaces. Additionally, understanding the forms of oppression indexed in the LAPD’s work as part and parcel of said assemblages illuminates how the plays themselves are performative spatial irruptions that confront transparent space and unburden the individual as the sole factor in dispossession. The LAPD’s work makes racializing assemblages visible and cites black geographies under erasure.

### The LAPD and Spatial Irruptions

The Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) was founded by John Malpede in 1985 and, as noted, primarily comprises past and present residents of Skid Row. Its repertoire includes devised work based on members’ experiences, verbatim scripts from court cases, and performance parades, to name just a few examples of the LAPD’s diverse oeuvre. Situated in Skid Row, an area of downtown Los Angeles that arguably hosts the largest concentration of homeless individuals in the United States,<sup>10</sup> the LAPD’s overtly political work addresses issues pertinent to its immediate community, such as gentrification, policing, and mental illness. Drawing on performance methodologies including Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, Malpede and associate director-producer Henriette Brouwers utilize their training as performance artists to cocreate productions with their ever-changing cast. As a community-specific theatre company, the LAPD differentiates itself from similar grassroots theatres. For example, Cornerstone Theater, a company also based in Los Angeles that works with disenfranchised communities to create plays, has been around almost as long as the LAPD. However,

Cornerstone often produces reconstructions of canonical plays, or of plays composed by a single playwright, that take the concerns of the current community of interest into account rather than creating new, dialogical pieces intricately shaped by members' experiences.<sup>11</sup> While other grassroots theatres function similarly to the LAPD, to my knowledge there are no other theatres in the United States that have specifically focused on issues related to homelessness for a comparable period of time. For the LAPD, movement is an important aspect in the construction of a piece. When creating and rehearsing a new play, the cast do so on their feet. Since all the theatre's work is related to everyday concerns of people living in sites of spatial dispossession like Skid Row, the LAPD relies on members' own spatial practices and experiences to block the production, especially when the play makes use of personal narratives. LAPD members come with a variety of performance experience: some having never acted in a stage production prior to their involvement with the company. In fact, the only requirement to be involved with the LAPD is presence—you "just"<sup>12</sup> need to show up. LAPD's approach to membership in combination with its repertoire distinguishes it from other grassroots theatres working with spatially dispossessed populations in the United States.

The Los Angeles Poverty Department is well known in the realm of grassroots theatre and academia related to that field, but the body of scholarship around the LAPD tends to focus on the structure of the organization and/or a specific production that exemplifies LAPD's success as a community-based theatre. For example, James McEnteer's *Acting Like It Matters: John Malpede and the Los Angeles Poverty Department*, chronicles the origin and development of the LAPD, providing an in-depth look at the events that led to Malpede's founding of the organization as well as a close reading of their internationally traveling piece, *Agents and Assets*.<sup>13</sup> *Agents and Assets* is also the title and subject of the LAPD's own book. As a printed text, *Agents and Assets* situates the playtext (taken mostly verbatim from a court hearing about CIA involvement with drug trafficking in Los Angeles) next to interviews and transcriptions of the productions' talkback sessions. My work builds on this scholarship by shifting the focus from the qualifications or exemplifications of the LAPD as community theatre to explore instead specific instances in which the LAPD's work foregrounds spatial practice. If prior work on the LAPD emphasizes successful performances of theatrical aptitude and audiences' affective responses, my work attempts to flesh out the relationship between the spatial practices represented onstage and historical and contemporary quotidian practices. Rather than focus on the spectacular as the point of analysis, I use LAPD's theatrical representations as an avenue to investigate everyday practices that black people in sites of spatial dispossession utilize in their navigation of precarious space.<sup>14</sup> In this article the word "black" (with or without appended nouns, as in "black life"), unless otherwise indicated, is used broadly to refer to people's lives, which have been historically and systematically devalued in the United States. Here, then, "black" refers to a set of experiences in racist, classist, heteronormative, patriarchal America that often, but not always, corresponds with phenotype. Through an analysis of LAPD's work, I show how dissident spatial practices in sites of dispossession map a transnational and transhistorical cartography of struggle. While much of the LAPD's work connects seemingly disparate geographical locales, *Chasing*

*Monsters* and *State of Incarceration* depart from the company's productions in that they forefront spatial practice as a tactic of survival, illustrating the LAPD's deepening investment in cataloging acts of dissent alongside their traditional emphasis on naming oppressive structures.

In sites of spatial dispossession, such as solitary confinement or homelessness, individuals undergo absentification—they are rendered flesh. In her influential essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Spillers argues that the body holds subjectification, and when one is absented from a subject position through violence, the body becomes flesh. Indexed earlier in RCB’s claim that he was “invisible,” this process produces “hieroglyphics of the flesh” that document racial–sexual domination.<sup>15</sup> Throughout this article, I expand upon Spillers’s theorization to explore the implications of reading differently gendered bodies as made flesh and putting gendered symbolic and material violences in conversation with one another. Although Spillers and Weheliye specifically focus on blackness in their texts, I find their theorizations useful in my interrogation of homelessness and incarceration because black people are grossly overrepresented in sites of spatial dispossession, and blackness is not only about phenotype—it is a subject positioning. I turn to performance, specifically work by the LAPD and its racially diverse cast, because it is a space where this subject positioning, as well as the racializing assemblages propagating said hierarchy, become visible through citation. An examination of the spatial irruptions cited and produced in *Chasing Monsters from under the Bed* and *State of Incarceration* show that incarceration and homelessness are so intertwined that one cannot thoroughly engage with one without addressing the other.

### *Chasing Monsters from under the Bed*

*Chasing Monsters* draws from the experiences of LAPD members and chronicles the stories and experiences of people living with mental illness in Skid Row. Serving as a spatial irruption, the piece showcases black life and black death as meeting points of commonsensical narratives,<sup>16</sup> state-sanctioned violences, historic and present-day hegemonic structures, and spatial dispossession. Throughout the piece, the LAPD divulges members’ personal encounters with gendered spaces of precarity and black geographies, including homeless shelters, nontraditional community formations, and hallucinations due or attributed to mental illness, to explore the meeting and collapse of psychological, affective, and physical space in sites of spatial dispossession. The opening scene portrays the shooting of Africa, a homeless, middle-aged black man, and the subsequent crime scene. Walter Fears, playing Africa, gets up from his seat in the audience and walks toward the center of the stage. As Africa nears the center, he abruptly grabs first his right arm, then his stomach, then his chest signaling to the audience he has been shot. He collapses. Two actors drape caution tape about the scene, further framing the stage. The narration begins. Wearing graphic T-shirts proclaiming, “#CAN’T KILL AFRICA,” Suzette Shaw (a black woman) and Henriette Brouwers (a white, immigrant woman) stand in front of the crime scene and narrate the story of a Cameroonian man’s engagement with Skid Row. Meanwhile, two other black



actresses outline Africa's murdered body with tape. This outline refuses the erasure not only of Africa, but also of histories of state-sanctioned, racialized violence; it catalogs the process of symbolic and physical dispossession:

- Suzette: Here I am, back in Africa with my family.  
 Henriette: On my own I was never able to raise enough money for the journey back, but the people of Skid Row did—they  
                   *(pause)*  
                   brought me home.  
 Suzette: And my family, they grieved. They don't understand who to believe—  
 Henriette: The police say that I'm a thief. That they shot me because I had grabbed their gun.  
 Henriette: They tell me to stay calm—  
                   *(yelling and pointing)*  
                   "CalM down, sir!"  
 Suzette: They don't sound so calm themselves.  
                   *(places body in recognizable "Hands up, don't shoot" gesture)*  
                   "Come out and put your hands in the air, sir."  
 Henriette: *(pointing)*  
                   "We'll have to come in if you don't come out, sir."  
 Suzette: I know they have guns.  
 Henriette: Man I freak out. I freeze, I hide, I curl up like a spider, make myself invisible.  
 Suzette: No way am I coming out of my tent. No way.  
 Henriette: They tell me to break down my tent. They tell me that it's illegal to have a tent up on the sidewalk before 9 PM. Four, five cops jump on me, they kick me in my face, in my gut, they throw me on the sidewalk.  
 Suzette: *(vehemently)*  
                   I fight for my life. I see the fear in the eyes of the rabbit.  
 Henriette: *(softly and fearfully)*  
                   They are going to kill me.  
 Suzette and Henriette: *(shouting)*  
                   They do.

This condensed excerpt<sup>17</sup> dramatizes the killing of Charly LeundeU Keunang, also known as "Africa" in Skid Row, by the Los Angeles Police Department on 1 March 2015. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Africa was shot six times.<sup>18</sup> On 7 March, hundreds of protestors marched from the Los Angeles Police Department's downtown headquarters to Skid Row to protest the fatal shooting of Africa, who was homeless, unarmed, and had a history of mental illness. While it is unclear from the documentation exactly when Africa immigrated to the United States under a stolen French identity, it had been more than fifteen years earlier.<sup>19</sup> In 2013, Africa was granted parole for a fourteen-year sentence for bank robbery. During his incarceration, he had been committed to the prison's mental hospital.<sup>20</sup> Following his release, Africa settled in downtown Los Angeles's Skid Row. Eight months after his death, the company publicly engaged with this controversial incident in *Chasing Monsters from under the Bed*, performatively

narrating the attempted dispossession of Africa's subjectivity through the systematic rendering of his body as flesh.

In their affirmation of subjectivity, the actresses map Africa's experience in a cartography of struggle. Made flesh through both the literal dispossession of life as well as the symbolic, through abjection from a subject position in official police narratives,<sup>21</sup> Africa's body serves as a site where historic and present-day forms of spatial dispossession collide. Lying prostrate in the center of the crime scene, his body reminds the audience of contemporary state-sanctioned violence against black peoples—the killing of Tanisha Anderson, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Janisha Fonville, Natasha McKenna, and Trayvon Martin. However, Suzette and Henriette's narration also simultaneously reminds the audience that Africa is in fact from Africa. Calling forth images of recent African American and black death, centuries of black death associated with transatlantic slavery, as well as current dismal economic conditions in African countries related to histories of colonialization and theft that prompted Africa's immigration, the combination of Africa's still body and the actresses' narration situates Keunang's death as related to histories of the violent devaluation of black life pre- and postemancipation across the Atlantic, or what Harvey Young might term "phenomenal blackness."<sup>22</sup> Although the legislation and discourse around black bodies and black life have evolved throughout the history of the postbellum United States, traces of the racist logics that undergirded the beginnings of capitalism remain integral to the present-day functioning of this system. As articulated by Spillers,

dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show [s] movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise.<sup>23</sup>

For Spillers, a change in rhetoric simply disguises the continued symbolic violence enacted upon black subjects; the emancipation of slaves did not alter the ruling episteme that classified blacks as less than human. Located in a structure that also devalues black life, Africa symbolically and physically undergoes absentification—he is made flesh.

As a performative spatial irruption, *Chasing Monsters*' opening scene begins to decode the hieroglyphics imprinted in Africa's flesh (including the carceral state's infliction of physical and psychological violence) by questioning how the pervasive racializing assemblages that proffered blacks as property are tied to the contemporary capitalist system that mediated Africa's movements. What capitalist logics necessitated Africa's emigration from Cameroon to the United States? What economic circumstances, upon his arrival to the United States, compelled him to rob a bank? What conditions led to Africa's movement to Skid Row and his subsequent death? Arguably, Africa emigrated from Cameroon because, despite the country's growing economy, per capita income has remained relatively unchanged for the past few decades<sup>24</sup> due to socioeconomic conditions produced, in part, by histories of European colonization of Africa; Keunang came in search of economic opportunity. While it is unclear if Africa developed his mental illness prior to



arriving in the United States and/or before his incarceration, the LAPD's placement of Africa's story in conversation with the overrepresentation of blacks and people suffering from mental illness in Skid Row makes it clear that limited access to resources to deal with trauma—produced by living blackness in a racist, classist, hegemonic state—engenders involvement in coping mechanisms and survival economies, creating a cyclical structure that keeps black people in sites of spatial dispossession. What I'm trying to suggest is that the difficulty of surviving the everyday in a system that does not value black life, in addition to the myriad of obstacles to lawful economic advancement for black people, creates psychological trauma. I argue that through their attention to the processes by which the contemporary racist, classist episteme renders Africa's body flesh, the LAPD documents Africa's experience as predicated on the intertwining of transhistorical and transnational processes, and, in doing so, locates “the politics of daily life”—at least within the context of homelessness and, arguably, other sites of dispossession as well—“as inherently spatial,”<sup>25</sup> that is, tied to pervasive symbolic and physical geographic structures.

Through its exploration of Africa's symbolic, material, and affective presence, *Chasing Monsters* marks sites of spatial dispossession as battlegrounds of flesh and subjectification. Suzette and Henriette articulate the presence of multiple narratives around Africa's murder: “And my family, they grieved. They don't understand who to believe.” The official police narrative is that Africa attempted to gain control of a police officer's firearm and was consequently shot. However, an analysis of the cellphone video points to the narrative articulated in the LAPD's performance—that the police used unnecessary force and killed Africa without provocation. In sites of spatial dispossession, there is often a disconnect between official, state disseminated narratives and the quotidian experiences of people living in those sites. Suzette and Henriette foreground a narrative that contests the official one. If, as Spillers posits, the body is the vessel that holds subjectification, then the two women embody the subject of their narration and in doing so, locate the articulation of presence—the charting of a black geography or positing of subjectivity—as a practice of contestation. By affirming Africa's subjectivity within a ruling episteme that recognizes Africa only as flesh, Suzette and Henriette perform a spatial irruption that challenges the racializing assemblages that deem Africa less than human.

Invoking a larger narrative about spatial practices in Skid Row, the removal of Africa's body after his postmortem “chalking” questions the extent to which the traces left by individuals (or their bodies) document presence. The tape outline refuses the erasure of not only Africa, but also histories of state-sanctioned, racialized violence. Although Walter (playing Africa) leaves the playing space following the opening scene, the white tape outlining his body remains for the duration of the play—his presence ghosts the remainder of the production, and the outline becomes a place that can be filled by differently gendered bodies. Ungendered and unraced, the outline opens up the space for transnational bodies, mapping the global effects of a capitalist system. Simultaneous with its gesture to a larger scale, as past presence, the outline reminds its audience that Africa was there—a black body inhabited that space. As a material manifestation of flesh, the outline catalogs the process of absentification—a process of enfleshment that includes the mapping of knowability or transparency onto the black body; it is a process

that encapsulates both hypervisibility and invisibility. Throughout the rest of the production, the ambiguity of the outline allows the LAPD to engage with gendered narratives that depart from conditions specific to Africa's spatial dispossession.

By placing the murder of a Cameroonian immigrant by the Los Angeles Police Department in conversation with experiences of women (largely of color) living with mental illness in Skid Row, the company forefronts some of the ways that gender conditions spatial practice in sites of dispossession. In scenes focusing on the gendered experiences of dispossession, Africa's outline suggests the specific precarity of female bodies in Skid Row, particularly the experiences of women dealing with mental illness. The longest scene focusing on women managing mental illness occurs about midway through the production. In this scene, Silvia portrays a woman dealing with mental illness that manifests as aggression expressed through heightened emotions, profanity, and body language. She curses out both her date and the concession stand vendor at the movie theatre once she is informed that there are no more pretzels for purchase. In this depiction of mental illness, Silvia appears to embody stereotypes associated with the wayward Latina or the emasculating black woman. Juxtaposing her aggression with the passivity of Africa not only documents the different forms that mental illness can take, but also suggests that the categorization of different forms of mental illness are tied to gender difference. Although neither Silvia nor any of the women from the opening scene in the production dies, the presence of the outline during their scenes implicitly speaks to the precarity of their gendered bodies.

During our interview, Silvia, a formerly homeless Latina in her early 40s, explained a hyperawareness of her femaleness during her time living on the streets in Skid Row:

I met a friend—a woman. She was a girl with some diagnosis, some mental diagnosis, and she helped me. At that point I was in a walker and I was taking a lot medicine, my back in a condition. So she was helping me to go places and (*pause*) protecting me when I was sleeping with her on the street. I was right there on Broadway. We were there for about like a month or so. ... You know, when you're on the street, you don't know what can happen. What I learned, there's people, they are just looking for an opportunity to rob you if you have some valuable. Or there's people who have been molested, sexually molested. In my case, thank god, you know, I was never in that case. But because [of] her experience, and she's been homeless for so long, she knew.<sup>26</sup>

For Silvia, her friend's extended time in Skid Row gave her specialized knowledge that conditioned both of their spatial practices; she learned that sites of spatial dispossession are gendered spaces. Attempting to decrease the vulnerability of their bodies, Silvia and her friend took turns sleeping and protecting one another; they created what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten and might term a community of indebtedness. In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Harney and Moten explore what they call the *undercommons*, fugitive communities that function through a system of indebtedness. They argue that, unlike the violence of privatization enacted through the marriage of debt and credit, "debt" or indebtedness is a proactive force embedded in fugitive places, marking the undercommons as a site of socialization and collectivity.<sup>27</sup> Aware that Skid Row is a

gendered space that marks them as potential objects of (sexual) desire, Silvia and her friend created a two-person undercommons to combat the further precaritization of their bodies.

Although the two of them formed a noninstitutional entity in response to specific forms of racial–sexual domination present in sites of spatial dispossession, other women I interviewed turned to women-only shelters in search of a similar type of protection. As an explicitly gendered space, women-only shelters in Skid Row contend with gendered violence related to spatial dispossession and consequently become key points of intervention in racial–sexual domination. In our interview, Stephanie, a formerly homeless, African American woman in her early fifties, articulated her experience of gendered violence and its influence on her movement to a shelter in Skid Row:

I never lived downtown on Skid Row, but I have lived on Skid Row in the streets—period. It started when I was about, let's see, how old was I, twenty—put it like this, I spent sixteen years in the streets and pregnant with my third child. I stayed at a place that was for battered and shelter women because at that time my ex had hit me with a metal pipe, so it had messed me up. It didn't break no teeth, but my whole face was twisted like I had a stroke. For months and months I just had to suck out of a straw—horrible ... the devil been trying to get me for a long time but he ain't got nothing on me, can't win.<sup>28</sup>

Specifically designed to help women who are seeking safety from abusive relationships, the shelter in which Stephanie stayed pushes against the precaritization of women (mainly) from low-income urban communities in which domestic violence is not a rare occurrence. Understanding the demographics of low-income communities, their limited access to resources, and the ways that the collusion of racializing assemblages creates and sustains the precarity of black lives in these communities by providing obstacles to economic movement, the shelter serves as a black geography that attempts to counter some of the gendered effects of those assemblages, including access to physical safety. Stephanie's search for safety in a shelter for battered women resonates with Silvia and her friend's attempt to create a safe place for themselves in the streets. Situated in a terrain where their gender marks them for specific violence Stephanie, Silvia, and Silvia's friend strategized their movements and adapted their spatial practices to protect themselves from sexual and other violence.

Taking into account the women's elaboration of Skid Row as a gendered space posits another reading of Suzette and Henriette's embodiment of Africa. In their interviews, Silvia and Stephanie map a cartography of struggle by exposing some of the ways racial–sexual domination affects geography and spatial practice. Viewing the opening scene of *Chasing Monsters* with an awareness of gendered experiences in sites of spatial dispossession alter the reading of Suzette and Henriette's relationship to Africa, suggesting backgrounded narratives. Standing outside of the crime scene, the women not only usher forth Africa's subjectivity, but also foreground how gender mediates their movements in ways that do not necessarily resonate with Africa's story. While embodying Africa, the women gesture to commonalities between his experience of spatial dispossession and their own. However, separated from him by caution tape, the women also mark their

difference. In this scene, then, the caution tape performs in at least two distinct ways: (1) as a border between the official police narrative that renders Africa flesh and the company's assertion of Africa's subjectivity, and (2) as a border acknowledging the mediating role gender plays in sites of spatial dispossession. McKittrick argues that "[b]y defining and constructing the world they inhabit, black subjects challenge how we know and understand geography; by seriously addressing space and place in the everyday, through the site of memory and in theory and text, they also confront sociospatial objectification by offering a different sense of how geography is and might be lived."<sup>29</sup> By holding multiple subjectivities—their own in addition to Africa's—Suzette and Henriette carve out a geography that illuminates subjectivities *and* accounts for gendered experience in sites of spatial dispossession. It is in this space that Silvia and Stephanie's narratives encounter Africa's; his "chalked" outline reveals the potential for differently gendered bodies to inhabit space that catalogs death. But more than this, the outline suggests that *how* one is rendered flesh is contingent upon constructions of gender.

Through its use of narration and costume in the Africa scene, the LAPD rewrites women into discourse surrounding homelessness and other sites of spatial dispossession that rarely attends to gendered experiences, and in doing so, creates a performative spatial irruption. "Come out and put your hands in the air, sir." When Suzette places her body in the recognizable "Hands up, don't shoot" gesture while delivering her line, she cites not only the prevalence of police brutality against people of color, but also the foregrounding of women of color in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in contradistinction to other historical black liberation struggles. Black Lives Matter began in 2012 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the insurance-fraud investigator and neighborhood watch coordinator who shot and killed seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin. Since that murder, images of #BlackLivesMatter continue to circulate as grassroots organizations and individuals protest the devaluation of black life. The organization's emphasis on voices that have been historically marginalized in Black Liberation struggles<sup>30</sup> suggests an attempt to excavate black geographies that are often under erasure in dominant discourse. As indexed in the BLM mission as well as in a survey of scholarship around homelessness and incarceration, the gender-specific experiences of women in these sites have been (and continue to be) rendered as a backdrop. By locating Africa in the BLM, the LAPD opens up space for a critique of a monocular view of homelessness as a male-specific space.

The Africa scene highlights histories of racialized violence and addresses the myriad ways gender matters in Skid Row. The LAPD's assertion of Africa's subjectivity can be viewed as a response to the attempted rendition of Africa as flesh in the carceral state. In *Chasing Monsters*, it is primarily black women who articulate Africa's subjectivity: black actresses outline his body with tape, and Suzette coembodies his subjectivity. In "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," Spillers argues that, in the symbolic order, black American men and women paradoxically exist as nonbeings—their subjectivities are not acknowledged—and yet the empowered recognize their own beingness only by defining themselves against black Americans. Spillers writes:

Having encountered what they understand as chaos [the term Spillers has just used to describe “the veritable nemesis of degree and difference” located in the black female], the empowered need not name further, since chaos is sufficient naming within itself. I am not addressing the black female in her historical apprenticeship as an inferior social subject, but, rather, the paradox of non-being. Under the sign of this particular historical order, black female and black male are absolutely equal.<sup>31</sup>

Although in hegemonic systems both black men and women have been regulated to the status of nonhuman, in sites of spatial dispossession the avenues by which they are regulated differ. Through Suzette and Henriette’s shared embodiment of Africa, the LAPD catalogs these differences.

It is only through collectivity, through their coembodiment, that Henriette and Suzette can affirm Africa’s subjectivity. If, as Spillers posits, white femininity is defined by everything that the black woman is not, then it is Africa’s maleness that allows Henriette to illuminate his subjectivity. However, the postulation of black subjectivity through a white (female) body can always only be partial. Since in the dominant symbolic order whiteness equals human (although within the hierarchy, levels are mitigated by gender and class), on her own Henriette could never embody Africa, who has been constructed as a nonbeing. In other words, as a subject recognized as such in the ruling episteme, Henriette cannot serve as a pathway for Africa’s subjectification without substituting his body for her own, thereby repeating the process of absentification.<sup>32</sup> Suzette, however, who shares the symbolic space with Africa, allows for the illumination of race-specific violence without the eradication of Africa’s presence. Instead, by serving as a vessel for her own subjectivity in addition to part of Africa’s, Suzette marks racialized gender violence. The embodiment of Africa by each woman showcases the specific ways that, as a black male, Africa becomes spatially dispossessed both figuratively and materially. In *Chasing Monsters*, the LAPD interweaves its members’ lived experience with psychological imaginings, and in doing so, foregrounds how, through spatial practice, both individual members and smaller collectivities within Skid Row posit their subjectivity and agency in sites that refuse to acknowledge their presence as individual, human subjects. The utilization of multiple voices to verbalize Africa’s story utters forth the collectivity often present in sites of spatial dispossession. Serving as a black geography, *Chasing Monsters from under the Bed* catalogs black performative spatial practices and highlights individual and communal acts of dissent.

### *State of Incarceration*

The LAPD’s *State of Incarceration* charts disparate communities in a shared cartography of struggle through its exploration of the (male) prison. The project began in 2010, and in 2014 the play toured to the Queens Museum in New York. The project lives on through both YouTube<sup>33</sup> as well as intermittent museum installations, of which the most recent manifestation (at the time of this writing) was in April 2016 at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, California. At the Armory, the installation included a projection of the filmed Queens Museum production. Viewers could watch the production while seated on bunk beds in a small room that re-created the intimate set, a prison. All the actors perform male roles,

consequently emphasizing the overrepresentation of black males in the US prison system. While this demographic focus potentially occludes the growing presence of women of color and other bodies in carceral spaces, a close reading of the performance suggests otherwise. In the scenes in which women appear in dialogue with one another, the women perform hypermasculinity, such as grabbing their crotch and using profane and erotic language. This and the fact that everyone in the play appears to perform “male blackness” highlight what is not present. In other words, the excessive reiteration of black masculinity through diction, vernacular language, and gesture pushes one to ask which bodies are not represented both onstage and in popular discourse.

Similar to the Armory installation, the Queen’s Museum production is set in a prison. As described in the film, “[p]rison bunkbeds are crammed wall-to-wall into a gallery, and the audience sits amidst the performers, who interact or deliver monologues in the narrow aisles, sweep or scrub the bedframes, or sleep or ruminate on their backs, individually or as a chorus in choreographed sequences.” The placement of the audience “onstage” blurs the line between audience and spectator—a line that continues to disappear as LAPD actors interact with the audience, at one point aggressively relocating an audience member to a different bunk. The performance opens and closes with song. The somber music sung by the twelve-person cast at the beginning sets the tone for the dismal conditions emphasized throughout the performance through guard–prisoner (physical and dialogical) interactions and monologues. The upbeat closing number connotes a party atmosphere that celebrates community and collectivity as an avenue of resistance, and in doing so, gives physical form to the pedagogical work that went into the project. As with many of the Los Angeles Poverty Department’s devised pieces, the script for *State of Incarceration* was produced from story circles, conversations, and writing sessions conducted with LAPD members. Indeed, even the blocking pays tribute to members’ experiences, as the choreography developed out of corporeal exercises with the actors that spoke to their physical engagement with carceral space.

In one of the most intimate scenes in the play, Anthony Taylor, a phenotypically Asian, nonblack male, performs an internal dialogue about solitary confinement, aptly titled “In the Hole,” which foregrounds spatial practice as a key tactic of resistance in sites of spatial dispossession. Anthony’s monologue illustrates the paradoxical relationship between stillness and movement in sites of spatial dispossession. The majority of the scene switches between medium and long shots through which the video-watching audience can see the majority of Anthony’s body as well as the audience members sitting in the bunk beds to the lateral sides of Anthony. Behind Anthony is a blank, gray, wall. He wears a white T-shirt, dark blue jeans, white socks, and a white beanie:

Thirty days in the hole, oh my god. What am I gon’ do? What would I do? (*pause*) Four walls, one toilet, zero everything else. No TV, no books, nobody to talk to, no nothin’. Just me. Four walls, toilet, thirty days in the hole. (*pause*) I walk. I sit. I look. I think. I walk. I sit. I look. I think. (*stops walking and crouches down*) Can’t nobody see me. (*stands up, hands over face*) Why me? (*pause*) (*begins walking*) I walk. I sit. I look. I think. I count the holes in the wall. I count the rips in the mattress. I count the



spots on the makeshift mirror. I count. I count. I count and I count. (*looks up and out to the distance, pointing*) Hi mama. I'm doin' alright pop. I'm doin' good mama. I walk. I sit. I look. I think. I think. I think. I think. I think. I think. I can walk through the wall, I think. I think I can walk through the wall, I can. I can. I can. I can. I can walk through the wall. I like walkin' through the wall. It's so nice to walk through the wall. (*claps hands and starts singing and dancing*) Yeah, a party of the other side of the wall. Whoop. Whoop, whoop. (*back to mellow*) I like the other side of the wall. I'm so happy on the other side of the wall. I walk. I sit. I look. I think. I walk. I sit. I look. I think. I walk. I sit. I look. I think.

*Fade to black.*<sup>34</sup>

As a site of stillness, solitary confinement cells rarely have windows, and frequently prisoners do not have access to items, such as books, to help pass the time. Time, in essence, stands still. To counteract this enforced stillness, Anthony moves both physically and psychologically. "I walk. I sit. I look. I think." With each movement, Anthony moves time forward. Interspersed with moments of counting, his daily cyclical movements denote the imperative to move in order to keep the envelopment of state-sanctioned precarity (produced in part through mental trauma) at bay. "I walk. I sit. I look. I think." When Anthony completes the cycle, he starts again. The repetition of Anthony's movements in itself articulates a type of stillness—a circular motion that ends where it begins and vice versa. That is, until the cycle breaks. "Hi mama. I'm doing alright pop. I'm doing good mama." In this sequence, Anthony imagines his parents in the space (or at least within listening distance). He navigates the enforced absence of everything but self in solitary confinement both to invite people into the space and to break free from it: "I like walkin' through the wall. It's so nice to walk through the wall." Like Suzette and Henriette's imagined crossing of boundaries to protest state-sanctioned precaritization, Anthony permeates his mandated enclosure. In both *State of Incarceration* and *Chasing Monsters* freedom is imagined as accessible through movement.

Anthony's psychological spatial move challenges a state-sanctioned attempt to precaritize his (black) life further. As mentioned earlier, the use of the term "black" throughout this article refers to a subject positioning that is not necessarily tied to phenotype. This formulation of black(ness) aligns with Spillers's and McKittrick's theorizations, which mark race as produced rather than a preexisting ontological category. However, my analysis of Anthony's performance complicates the scholars' arguments by foregrounding the role class plays in constructions of race. If we understand black geographies as sites that illuminate hieroglyphics of the flesh, then how might the rendering of Anthony and his body as flesh, as non-being, complicate our understanding of not only the broader ruling episteme, but also everyday spatial practice? Derived from Anthony's personal prolonged engagement with the carceral state as a Filipino male, "In the Hole" indexes a black performative spatial practice aimed at survival that is not predicated on a visually discernible black (female) body.

By methodically walking while delivering his monologue, Anthony illustrates how the physicality of his body catalogs histories of spatial dispossession as directly

linked to socioeconomic status. Earlier in the play, Anthony articulates physical movement as a way to deal with incarceration. In this scene, he monologues about freedom while performing jumping jacks in solitary confinement. During our interview, Anthony described the scene this way:

My next piece, I don't even think there's a name for it, but it's pretty dramatic because I do jumping jacks while I'm saying my monologue and that comes from being in the hole. When there's nothing else to do, you exercise, and I made a monologue up and they [LAPD members] knew I could do a lot of jumping jacks. Matter of fact, I want to go for the world record. I think I can do it. Anyway, I don't know where that come from. If you see it, you ever see it, they got film on it, so I do jumping jacks continuously as I do the monologue, and it's not really that easy. You know, for me it was at the time because I could just do thousands and thousands and thousands of jumping jacks. I learned how to do that being in the hole. But actually, let me say this part, because initially it was so painful to be in the hole with nothing to do on my mental psyche that I thought that if I do enough jumping jacks, maybe my heart would burst and they would take me to the hospital. That's how my thinking got to be. I never took any medicine. I'm not on any now. I never been diagnosed with any mental illness, but it was that bad. It had got to the point to where it was so lonely and so hopeless that at least I did, I can keep it on me, I thought of doing enough jumping jacks where I would actually maybe even die. That's how bad it got.<sup>35</sup>

In this excerpt, Anthony exposes the disciplinary effects of solitary confinement. The space of solitary confinement conditions his body into a healthy, physical entity able to perform aerobic exercise, yet the confinement also simultaneously injures his mental faculties. Through exercise, the carceral state molds Anthony's body, marking his flesh as a site of suffering. In her text, Spillers argues that the distinction between body and flesh is as central as that between the captive and liberated subject position.<sup>36</sup> She writes: "These undecipherable markings on the captive body [from violence inflicted upon it] render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color."<sup>37</sup> While here Spillers specifically refers to the production of race in reference to the African diaspora, her claims about hieroglyphics of the flesh are relevant to Anthony's experience. Although his conditioned body does not, at surface level, denote the violences enacted on his body, the LAPD member's performance, as well as his personal experience, demonstrate that spatial dispossession is not mitigated only by race and gender; it is also about class.

Through his semiautobiographical monologues, Anthony performs a spatial irruption that highlights the role class plays in the creation and maintenance of precarity. Adopted as an infant, Anthony Taylor was raised by a Japanese mother and an African American father in a predominantly low-income, black neighborhood in Norfolk, Virginia. Anthony was twelve the first time he was arrested. At age fifteen, he was locked up in a youth detention center, and while there, Anthony was held in solitary confinement, an 8 × 10 cell. Throughout his adult life, Anthony was in and out of spaces of incarceration until he became sober in the 2000s. He drew inspiration from his experience "in the hole" to compose the monologue cited above. As articulated by Anthony, "I wrote that monologue, and that's the way I felt then [when I was fifteen] in solitary confinement ... it was over a period of time but

yes a lot of it came from then because it was devastating at first, more devastating because I wasn't use to it. Eventually I got used to it."<sup>38</sup> Anthony was in and out of sites of incarceration mainly because his engagement with survival economies and self-medication, which are commonplace practices in low-income urban communities. Putting his personal history in conversation with the performance foregrounds the ties between socioeconomic status and the process of absentification in the carceral state. While the markings that illustrate him as a captive body, including mental trauma, are related to Africa's hieroglyphics, they differ in that some of Anthony's undecipherable markings are physically cataloged through his body.<sup>39</sup> Without context, Anthony's toned body does not suggest a history of violence inflicted by the carceral state. However, the stark juxtaposition of Anthony's conditioned body with his injured psyche in the monologues indexes the ways in which the racializing assemblages supporting prison systems disciplined his body into flesh. In his illustration of the process, Anthony points to a larger-scale oppressive regime that focuses on the policing of all bodies categorized as less than human. Anthony's self-composed monologue articulates the precarity of marginalized bodies in general, not just phenotypically black ones. By vocalizing his trauma in a way that resonates with his subjective experience in a hierarchal structure that posits his being as less than human, Anthony articulates himself as part of a broader collectivity that utilizes spatial practice to break out of the spaces in which the dominant symbolic order has enclosed them.

As indexed in *State of Incarceration*, as well as *Chasing Monsters* and the LAPD's pedagogical practices, collectivities found in sites of spatial dispossession have the potential to become undercommons, spaces of dissident practice and community indebtedness. In his monologue, Anthony's recognition of freedom is dependent upon the presence of multiple bodies on the other side of the wall—a party. His envisioning of other bodies cites a legacy of community building as a tactic of survival. Anthony's turn to creating community by bringing both his parents and the partygoers into the space of confinement serves as a spatial irruption that allows him to disrupt cyclical stillness and chart resistant black geographies through psychological movement.

The juxtaposition with "In the Hole" of a scene earlier in the videorecording highlights how transnational collectivities might manifest through shared engagement in sites of dispossession in the carceral state. As the film fades in from a black screen, viewers hear a conversation between a middle-aged black male, Ricarillo Porter (R), and an older white male, John Malpede (J). The camera pans left to a close-up (head and shoulders) of J (left) and R (right). J and R stand face to face with about an inch between their noses; later their noses touch, even press together. The shot is angled in such a way that the audience sees J's upper back and R's upper chest. Both are dressed in the standard white T-shirt and jeans worn by the cast, a costuming choice that cites at least two specific antecedents: prison uniforms as well as the association between criminality and the wearing of large T-shirts with jeans or shorts by brown and black people.

*Black screen.*

- R: (voice only) What's up, bro?  
 J: I'm doing good, man.  
 R: You feeling real good?  
 J: I'm doing REAL good.  
 R: For real?  
     *Shot fades in. Pan to close-up of J and R, who stand practically nose to nose.*  
 J: For real.  
 R: (yelling) For real?  
 J: For real, for real.  
 R: Who made this?  
 J: That shit got made on the stove, homes.  
 R: Technicolor didn't make this shit.  
 J: Nah.  
 R: Take a deep breath.  
     *(pause)*  
     It's that California cheese, everybody loves it!  
 J: Happy cows, man. Happy cows.  
 R: Are you feeling indoors?—going up a lot of nostrils, up a lot of veins ...  
 J: They smell this shit they got it.  
     *Their noses are now literally touching.*  
 R: Are you feeling it, though?  
 J: I'm feeling it.  
 R: Are you feeling the potency of it all?  
 J: Yeah, man—  
 R: (crescendo)  
     That shit is better than Viagra! You know that? Everybody's getting  
     hard off this shiiiit!  
 J: They all over me, man.  
 R: (loud)  
     Are you hard, homie?  
 J: I'm hard, man.  
 R: Are you for real hard?  
     *(screeches)*  
 J: For real.  
 R: (softly)  
     Are you ready to die hard, man?  
 J: If that's how it goes.  
 R: It's a live and die thang, you know that?  
 J: Yeah, man.  
 R: You can't take it back once you got that tattoo on your body.  
 J: For life.  
 R: For life.  
 J: For life.<sup>40</sup>

As their dialogue slips in and out of public and private spaces, R and J speak, for the most part, in a black vernacular. The conversation begins in the public—salutations are exchanged—and then moves to food, which teeters on the boundary of public–private. “R: Are you feeling indoors?—going up a lot of nostrils, up a lot of veins.... / J: They smell this shit they got it.” In this iteration, food is public in the

sense that the two prisoners are conversing about the making of a spread—a communal act whose product will be shared with audience members during the show. But in the discussion of the communal/public presence of the food and its movement into bodies, slippage occurs where the diction employed mirrors language associated with the use of illegal drugs, namely cocaine and heroin,<sup>41</sup> which, throughout the past century, had been tied to differently raced bodies. Toward the end of the Vietnam War, American veterans were dealing with not only post-traumatic stress, but also heroin addictions. According to Connecticut Congressman Robert Steele, in 1971, approximately 15 percent of US soldiers in Vietnam were addicted to heroin.<sup>42</sup> Despite this history, since the 1980s both the media and the United States government have articulated black and brown bodies as the main sources of criminality around the drug trade.<sup>43</sup> By highlighting Anthony's experience with the carceral state, the LAPD makes visible histories of US involvement with the drug trade.

Through *State of Incarceration* and *Chasing Monsters*, the LAPD connects US imperialism in Asia and colonization in the Americas, illustrating not only the pervasiveness of hegemonic structures, but also that the shared experiences present in transnational sites of spatial dispossession map distant communities in a shared cartography of struggle. LAPD's repertoire thus points to hieroglyphics of the flesh that have yet to become intelligible as such. In order to grasp and convey the magnitude of the human hierarchal structure and spatial practices opposed to it, black geographies must be understood as created and inhabited by bodies that frequently not only do not read as black, but also undergo forms of violence that do not easily read as such—like Anthony's conditioned body. An understanding of blackness as a subject positioning rather than skin color opens up potentialities for the resistant community structures that refuse to coalesce around constructions produced and enforced by the carceral state.

*State of Incarceration* comes to a close with a scene that matches the LAPD's intentional cultivation of solidarity among marginalized groups in a racist, classist, heteropatriarchal society: the making and sharing of the spread discussed in R and J's earlier dialogue. R narrates this scene, and throughout the narration the camera pans from R to the characters making the spread and zooms into a close-up of the process. "Now that you're clean, you get your ramen, you get your tomatoes, you get your onions, you get your garlic." The camera zooms out to a medium, overhead shot, and the audience sees R with his arms almost fully extended in front of his body, parallel to the floor, reaching over the tarp laid out for the making of the spread. His hands are flapping, invoking popular images of primitivism (shaman or witch doctor, for example). During this pause in dialogue, the audience hears the shuffling of the actors and the items used to make the spread. R then picks up his narrative and begins to give orders pertaining to the garlic. "Mince it down ... it's the music of the mincing." Upon this cue, the characters begin to make noises that evoke images of African tribal dances while pounding the garlic. They hold a clove of garlic in the palm of their left hand and slap down on it with their right. They walk around the space and continue this sequence until R yells, "Stop!"<sup>44</sup> Like the repetition in Anthony's monologue, the repeated pounding highlights the continuous, cyclical nature of the prisoners' precarity. The pounding also accentuates the labor involved in navigating sites of spatial

dispossession. The making and dissemination of the spread is a communal (and classed)<sup>45</sup> act.

In a dominant symbolic system that renders blacks less than human and actively creates obstacles to the formation and maintenance of black community life, the articulation of (collective) presence is a labor-intensive act. The “spread scene,” like “In the Hole,” illustrates some of the black geographies that manifest in response to the devaluation of black life and suggests the presence of undercommons in disparate sites of spatial dispossession. As an instantiation of collectivity, multiple people contribute to the preparation of the meal, and in the production the actors share the spread with the audience. While in that collective space gender matters—in the sense that it often mitigates and affects the types of violence enacted upon the body and, thus, the avenues by which one undergoes absentification—in that space of “nonbeing,” the body becomes, to a certain degree, ungendered and unraced (or, more accurately, raced as anything and everything but white). The opening up of the performance to audience members, who are seated in prison beds throughout the set, marks their bodies as part of the incarcerated community. Echoing Anthony’s psychological search for community, the cast maps a cartography of struggle that implicates all bodies in the room.

## Conclusion

As indexed throughout the Los Angeles Poverty Department’s performance archive, spatial dispossession is a complex, violent process. In capitalist sites of spatial dispossession, not only are black and brown bodies removed/re-placed, but also the capitalist logics that promote that dispossession naturalize the presence of black and brown bodies in spaces of homelessness and incarceration. Both *State of Incarceration* and *Chasing Monsters from under the Bed*, derived from the experiences of members of the Los Angeles Poverty Department who have lived or are currently living in sites of spatial dispossession, are archived via filmic excerpts online. Regarding these archives of spatial dispossession, it is important to address how technology variously mediates readings of the pieces.

During the beginning of “In the Hole,” the camera zooms in and out of close-ups of Anthony’s face. The camera then pans to the audience, emphasizing their presence. For the remainder of the scene, the camera zooms in and out of long and medium shots of Anthony. These shifts appear to attempt to align with Anthony’s choreography: if he uses mostly his upper body to convey meaning, the camera zooms in; if he uses his lower body (while dancing, for example), the camera zooms out to capture his entire body. Regardless of the range of the shot, throughout the majority of the scene the online audience can see audience members of the Queens Museum production.

Unlike *State of Incarceration*, *Chasing Monsters* was filmed by an LAPD member, and that is reflected in the archive. The Africa scene begins as a medium shot of Africa’s murder, the delineation of the crime scene with yellow caution tape, and the white taping around Africa’s body. For the remainder of the scene, the camera zooms in and out of close-ups and medium shots of the actors in the piece. Though



the online viewer can see the audience in the medium shots, it is clear that they are not the focus of the lens; they exist as background text. In the juxtaposition of these two documented productions, the question becomes, “Who is this for?” The camerawork of *State of Incarceration* seems to suggest the production is for the audience—the cameraperson attempts to capture audience engagement and, for a moment, moves completely away from the LAPD actors to capture a broader range of audience members. However, the camerawork of *Chasing Monsters* is about and for LAPD members and their communities. At no point in the filmed production does the camera focus on audience members. Throughout the Africa scene, the camera attempts to capture the corporeality of the actors embodying the text. It appears as if the cameraperson’s investment is in documenting the narratives of the LAPD performers and their attempt at making their experiences legible through speech and embodied practice; the focus is on the visibility of a specific black geography: living with mental illness in Skid Row. Consequently, the film’s aesthetic matches the play’s emphasis on making visible the complexities of living with mental illness in Skid Row.

Despite the disparity in filmic emphases, though, what if we view *State of Incarceration* and *Chasing Monsters from under the Bed* as examples of the articulation of *presence*, as spatial irruptions that foreground subjectivity? What if, through these devised pieces, the Los Angeles Poverty Department underscores not only the presence of obstacles facing communities of spatial dispossession, but also the presence of vibrant communities in these spaces that continue to flourish in opposition to the devaluation of their black lives? What future possibilities can be imagined?

## Notes

1 RCB, actor, Los Angeles Poverty Department, interview with the author, recorded as MP3, Los Angeles, 2 August 2015. Emphasis in the original.

2 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 44.

3 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 7.

4 My use of the term “carceral state” draws on Dominique Moran’s *Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration* (Farnham, Surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014). In her work, Moran posits that carceral spaces exist outside of prisons and highlights “the relationship between the carceral and an increasingly punitive state” (2).

5 Forrest Stuart, *Down, Out, and Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 7.

6 Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 4–8.

7 *Ibid.*, 49.

8 See McKittrick’s argument about the logic of transparent space in *Demonic Grounds*, 5–6.

9 Drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, dispossession “refers to processes and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural intelligibility and that regulate the distribution of vulnerability.” Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 2.

10 Dain Morain, “A Walk along Skid Row in Los Angeles—Block by Bleak Block,” *CALmatters*, 27 June 2018, <https://calmatters.org/articles/a-walk-along-skid-row-in-los-angeles-block-by-bleak-block/>, accessed 26 January 2019.

11 Robert H. Leonard and Ann Kilkelly, *Performing Communities: Grassroots Ensemble Theaters Deeply Rooted in Eight U.S. Communities*, ed. Linda Frye Burnham (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2006). For more on Cornerstone, see Sonja Kuflinec's *Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

12 I place the term "just" in quotations to acknowledge the variety of factors that can hinder attendance to rehearsal, thinking specifically about transportation and time obstacles often present in sites of spatial dispossession.

13 James McEnteer, *Acting Like It Matters: John Malpede and the Los Angeles Poverty Department* (North Charleston, SC: Streetwise Press, 2015). Other scholarship on the company includes Jan Cohen-Cruz's *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), and Leonard and Kilkelly.

14 In my project, I understand *precarious bodies* as those that lie outside of or on the borders of frameworks of intelligibility in dominant material, affective, and/or psychological landscapes. *Precarious space*, then, is the site(s) in which the subjectivities of the spatially dispossessed are disavowed or under erasure.

15 Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Film and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 203–29, at 207.

16 Kara Keeling, in *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 14–15, argues that people share a set of collective memory-images that are called forth when one is presented with an image. The memory-images are often found in the form of clichés or stereotypes.

17 Los Angeles Poverty Department, excerpt from *Chasing Monsters from under the Bed*, directed by Henriëtte Brouwers and John Malpede, [www.lapovertydept.org/monsters/](http://www.lapovertydept.org/monsters/), accessed 21 May 2016. In the online video, only an edited version of this scene is available. Rather than analyzing the full opening scene, my analysis focuses on the condensed version of the scene archived online.

18 Kate Mather, "Skid Row Shooting: Autopsy Shows Man Shot Six Times, Had Meth in System," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 July 2015, [www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-skid-row-shooting-autopsy-20150729-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-skid-row-shooting-autopsy-20150729-story.html), accessed 29 April 2016.

19 Kelly Goff, "Homeless Man Killed by LAPD Officers ID'd," 5 March 2015, [www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Homeless-Man-Killed-by-LAPD-Officers-on-Skid-Row-IDd-295254401.html](http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Homeless-Man-Killed-by-LAPD-Officers-on-Skid-Row-IDd-295254401.html), accessed 4 May 2016.

20 Gale Holland and Richard Winton, "LAPD Body Camera Video of Skid Row Shooting Raises Questions on Tactics and Training," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 2015, [www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-body-cam-keunang-20150925-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-body-cam-keunang-20150925-story.html), accessed 4 May 2016.

21 Mather.

22 Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 9. In his elaboration of the black body, "an abstracted and imagined figure [that] shadows or doubles the real one" (7), Young argues that "[t]he phenomenon of the black body, or, for short, phenomenal blackness, invites a consideration of history, habit, memory, and the process of racial mythmaking" (9).

23 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 208.

24 "The World Factbook: Cameroon," *Central Intelligence Agency*, [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cm.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cm.html), accessed 1 September 2017.

25 Neil Smith, "Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale," *Social Text*, no. 33 (1992): 54–81, at 58.

26 Silvia, Skid Row resident, interview with the author, recorded as MP3, Los Angeles, 31 July 2015.

27 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013), 58–68, esp. 63–5.

28 Stephanie, Skid Row resident, interview with the author, recorded as MP3, Los Angeles, 4 August 2015.

29 McKittrick, 92.

30 "About the Black Lives Matter Network," *Black Lives Matter*, <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>, accessed 23 April 2016.

31 Hortense J. Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Black, White, and in Color*, 152–75, at 156.

32 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20–1.

33 "Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD): *State of Incarceration*," Queens Museum, NY, 2 February 2014, video, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8CG4FLJ4Yk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8CG4FLJ4Yk), accessed 21 May 2016.

34 “LAPD: *State of Incarceration*,” video, ca. 29:20–32:52.

35 Anthony Taylor, actor, Los Angeles Poverty Department, interview with the author, recorded as MP3, Los Angeles, 13 April 2016.

36 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 206.

37 *Ibid.*, 207.

38 Anthony Taylor, interview with the author, recorded as MP3, 13 April 2016.

39 Although the hieroglyphics of Africa’s flesh may have been cataloged in his physical body as well, it is outside the scope of this paper to make that argument, as the only engagement I have with Africa is through the *Chasing the Monsters* production and media clips and news stories about his untimely death.

40 “LAPD: *State of Incarceration*,” video, ca. 25:30–26:40.

41 For a more detailed delineation of discourse around drugs in the latter half of the twentieth century in the United States, see Curtis Marez, *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

42 Liz Ronk, “The War Within: Portraits of Vietnam Veterans Fighting Heroin Addiction,” *Time*, 20 January 2014, <http://time.com/3878718/vietnam-veterans-heroin-addiction-treatment-photos/>, accessed 21 August 2016.

43 During the 1970s, President Nixon called for a “War on Drugs.” Continuing into the Reagan administration, state-sanctioned narratives demonized the usage of crack cocaine, linking the drug to black communities and criminality.

44 “LAPD: *State of Incarceration*,” video, ca. 32:55–36:39.

45 In the United States, ramen noodles are often a staple in low-income as well as college-student communities; they are relatively inexpensive, versatile (thinking here about the spread), and require only hot water to cook.

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