

Citizenship and Its Outside

How can citizenship be rethought from the perspective of its outside, or that which is superfluous, excessive, or unintelligible to modern citizenship regimes? And why should it be? In this book, I advance the notion of “civic intimacies” in an effort to answer these questions, examining how and to what extent different forms of intimacy catalyze the cultivation of collective belonging, care, and support among Black queer folks—quintessential outsiders who are systematically marginalized, not just by society at large but also within Black and LGBT communities. On the basis of my ethnography of Black queer world-making practices in Baltimore, Maryland, I argue that civic intimacies perform the everyday reparative work of building support structures that draw on carefully cultivated intimacies, thereby enabling Black queer Baltimoreans not just to survive but also to thrive, despite the proliferation of violence and insecurity in their lives. Thus, civic intimacies are not just a matter of speaking publicly about private intimacies or making rights claims in defense of intimacy to protect it from state interference, as much of the scholarship on sexual citizenship would have it.¹ Rather, they point to the queer relational forces that constitute the intimate as itself an underappreciated mode of articulating citizenship, one of its “regimes of enunciation” (Latour 2011) that is folded into many others—political, economic, moral, and aesthetic, to name a few. In other words, this project aims to rethink citizenship through Black queer intimacies. Rather

than conceiving of citizenship as a practice that predominantly consists of claims making or other types of acts in the official public sphere, I urge an analytical shift, based on my experiences in Baltimore, that treats citizenship as a practice of composition. As such, it forges affective attachments in and across a variety of public and private spaces in which Black queer Baltimoreans collectively seek to sustain the things that imbue their lives with meaning, worth, and joy in order to expand their agency and to stake out their place in a hostile polity. From this perspective, then, citizenship and intimacy are formally similar in that they are both saturated with the optimism of building worlds. However, this obviously does not mean that the terms “citizenship” and “intimacy” are identical or that their optimistic investments are always warranted.

As psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically inspired queer theory have insisted, intimacy and its accompanying affects are not the most dependable resources for building a cohesive life, whether individual or collective.² For example, Lauren Berlant (2000: 2) has noted how intimacy’s “potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress ‘a life’ seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability.” Intimacy is a volatile adhesive, so to speak. It comes loaded with expectations and demands. It is sought out for its promise to deliver all those things we (are supposed to or think we) want and need in life: comfort, trust, safety, stability, recognition, understanding, and reciprocity. It can also offer a break from ourselves, or the chance that something amazing might happen, a fortunate event or connection that would sweep us off our feet, away from the drudgery of reproducing ordinary life. But whenever intimate connections do take shape, there is always the concomitant risk of rupture, detachment, excess, incoherence, cruelty, obsession, and, yes, trauma.³ Indeed, many of my interlocutors in Baltimore suffered various forms of violence and carried with them the scars, visible and invisible, of being disappointed by the very intimacies in which they had invested. Yet they still managed to carry on and allow themselves to be affected by new impulses, daring to be vulnerable with others in the hope of generating intimate episodes that, this time, will be rewarding. While such episodes frequently assumed the couple form, their aspirations and practices also stretched far beyond the boundaries of coupled domesticity, assembling and maintaining much more expansive kinship networks that were vital to the survival of Black queer life in the city. Despite the opacity and negativity inherent to intimacy, then, the stories collected in this book attest to the political value of intimate moments, gestures, and connections that mediate the composition of Black queer forms of life, whose

social and cultural expressions are structurally depreciated, marginalized, appropriated, and depleted.

Meanwhile, critics have been less than sanguine about the category of citizenship and have questioned its relevance for analyses that aim to interrogate both the violence perpetrated against sexual and racial minorities and the ways these groups cultivate their own forms of community in response to such violence. For many scholars in the fields of queer theory, queer of color critique, and critical race studies, the “legitimate violence” enacted by citizenship as at once a biopolitical and a disciplinary institution perpetuates the structural subordinations and exclusions it should ostensibly protect against (Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira 2008; Brandzel 2016; Reddy 2011: 17). While, in principle, I concur with such assertions, and even though the argument I develop in this book is indebted to the abovementioned fields of scholarship, I nevertheless make a case for retaining a (thoroughly revised) notion of citizenship when studying how Black queer outsiders manage to sustain themselves and others in the city of Baltimore. As my study shows, the frequently precarious settings that Black queer Baltimoreans have to navigate on a daily basis also harbor alternative infrastructures and imaginaries of the good life, despite their recurrent lack of resources. Instead of rejecting citizenship wholesale as a critical term for the analysis of minoritarian world-making practices, I believe it is more fruitful to inquire how we can harness the potential of this overdetermined concept. As Linda Bosniak (2006: 12) has argued, “Describing aspects of the world in the language of citizenship is a legitimizing political act,” and given that this language is highly contested, efforts to reorganize it and take it beyond itself can become a mode of “political innovation.” This innovation is necessary if the notion of citizenship is to mean anything at all to the communities I have studied, which articulate modes of collectivity, care, repair, and belonging that persist under the radar of conventional citizenship imaginaries.

Citizenship, to borrow the words of Étienne Balibar (2010: 2), should be conceived of as “a problem, a stake, an enigma, an invention, a lost object or treasure to be sought and conquered again.” This enigmatic character of citizenship as a partly withdrawn or obfuscated object-to-think-with, which we should continue to probe and experiment with even though it can be approached only obliquely, highlights the political nature of its constitution—both in conceptual work and in everyday struggles. Rather than as a given or as an institution or practice with clearly defined attributes, citizenship is more productively conceived of as something that has to be *taken* or made anew by actors whose commitments arise from concrete political stakes, even

when these stakes are poorly articulated or fail to be identified as properly political. In fact, the question of how, when, and where the political can be articulated—and, indeed, what counts as political practice in the first place—forms an important thread running through this book. One of the central arguments developed in the following chapters is that appreciating the civic intimacies of Black queer life is crucial to the task of rethinking citizenship, which requires critical scrutiny of the immunitary (bio)political logic that lies at the heart of modern citizenship regimes. Here I follow Roberto Esposito, for whom the paradigm of immunization—in which the “self-preservation of life” in the face of continual threat becomes central to all logics of governing self and others—is not a symptom of modernity but, rather, “invents modernity as a historical and categorical apparatus able to cope with it” (Esposito 2008: 55). In other words, the development of Western (i.e., white supremacist and heteropatriarchal) modernity forms an ongoing response to, and marks an intensified preoccupation with, a defensive imperative that mandates the protection of proper/propertied life from outside (i.e., foreign, alien, nonwhite) forces that threaten to negate it.⁴ Accordingly, I argue that to break away from this immunitary model of citizenship we have to look for alternatives at—and beyond—the margins of civic intelligibility, taking cues from Black queer outsiders who problematize the very boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, through the exuberant and improperly political world-making practices I call civic intimacies.

As Engin Isin has convincingly argued, the category of citizenship has always been shaped by its outside. Thus, its meanings and values have been negatively defined throughout its history. Indeed, one of the most pertinent conclusions of Isin’s study is that the boundaries of citizenship have been significantly more permeable and dynamic than many had hitherto believed to be the case. In his important work, Isin shows how “strangers,” “outsiders,” and “aliens” have historically constituted themselves as political beings, whose “becoming political” is enacted through various practices that strategically question and destabilize existing technologies of citizenship. In this way, his concept of “citizenship as alterity” not only points to the fact that categories such as woman, slave, and immigrant exist in mutually constitutive tension with the category of the citizen (in the sense that each category becomes legible only in relation to its others) but also elucidates the extent to which citizenship is a radically discontinuous and antinomic phenomenon whose transhistorical unity has been retrospectively constructed (Isin 2002: 3). Yet as important as Isin’s contribution to the study of citizenship is, especially in its effort to assert the immanent nature of the alterity that shapes citizenship’s

constitution and texture, he tends to underestimate the racist immunitary violence exerted on strangers, outsiders, and aliens within the (bio)political architecture of modern citizenship. As Esposito's work (2008, 2011) teaches us, immunization operates through the partial integration of the negative force that threatens proper life, which allows the body politic to suppress this force that is no longer excluded by but, rather, safely contained within its boundaries. So while it is true that citizenship has never been an autonomous, impermeable category and requires outsiders to achieve its shape and consistency, it is exactly this plasticity that allows immunitary citizenship regimes to constantly experiment with new ways to govern and violently neutralize difference (cf. Cervenak and Carter 2017).

In Baltimore, as I discuss in Chapter 2, such experimentation is mobilized to discipline, contain, and ultimately ruin Black lives, which historically have figured as the alien yet constitutive outside of American modernity. This means that without the institution of chattel slavery and its systematic proliferation of anti-Black terror, modern notions such as liberal humanism, market capitalism, citizenship, and personhood could not have emerged in the United States (Baptist 2014; Best 2004; Jung, Vargas, and Bonilla-Silva 2011). Even though Black Americans have been nominally included as full citizens of the U.S. body politic in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, Black life and wealth continues to be devalued, expropriated, and rendered superfluous to the entangled imperatives of state and market (Barrett 1999; Sharpe 2016; Wilderson 2010). This duplicitous violence underwrites the logic of our immunitary citizenship regime. While, until the advent of the Trump era, the outsider's entry into the fold of liberal citizenship was generally hailed as an occasion for celebration, this admission has by and large been formal and symbolic: racial outsiders are allowed to roam inside the parameters of civic recognition without ever being fully legible or legitimate as humans (Wynter 1994). We should thus be careful not to praise the insurrectional potential of the "xenos," as the figure of political alterity, without attending to how some outsiders' claims can be acknowledged while others cannot due to the sheer negativity of the claimants' existence.⁵

Making Something from Nothing

For Cleo, a radical Black community organizer who had recently relocated to Baltimore from Atlanta, such negativity was always acutely at the forefront of his thinking and activism.⁶ Perhaps the primary object of his anger and frustration at the time was the city's HIV-prevention system and its outreach programs,

which he deemed entirely ineffective without a broad and concerted effort to face up to what he termed “the perpetual tax on Black men in this country.” As he told me in an interview, “The things that harm, hurt, or compromise the lives of Black people are dimensional; they’re not just one thing. They have to do with living in a white-biased society, a history of slavery in this country, and not having been encouraged to heal, only to pray.” In response, Cleo has been developing his own programs and strategies since the late 1980s, when he founded two organizations that provide (mental) health services and promote cultural affirmation by teaching African Americans to value, love, and take care of themselves and their communities. One of his organizations, Black Men’s Xchange (BMX), focuses specifically on Black queer men, although he refrains from using the words “queer” or “gay” because he believes that these historically white terms “have no relevance for the Black experience.” Instead, to explicitly distinguish his projects from the white gay community he deems “racist and self-serving based on its own agenda,” he coined the term “same-gender-loving (SGL)” in the early 1990s to reclaim and affirm a specifically Black experience of homosexuality and bisexuality. I noticed a resurgence of this term in Baltimore as I was conducting my fieldwork, among not only young people but also an older generation of Black men who previously identified as gay. This increasing popular appeal, which followed Cleo’s arrival in the city, seemed to index a need among Baltimore’s Black queer community to articulate a sense of collective identity and experience that clearly distinguished itself from the white gay culture dominating the city’s visual and discursive representations of homosexuality. As I discuss in the next chapter, this need had been articulated in various forms for a much longer time—most notably, through the annual Black Pride festivities—but I believe that the defiant antagonism introduced by Cleo’s presence on the scene intensified the racial tensions that circulated throughout Baltimore’s LGBT community. Through his scathing condemnations of the structural violence against Black people in general, and against Black SGL people in particular, together with his affirmation of Blackness against its continuing pathologization by white hetero- and homonormative institutions, he fueled a climate in which Black queer Baltimoreans could carve out their own sense of space and time in a more conscious, articulate, and determined manner.

Cleo did not like to talk about his background or private life with me, unless the subject matter directly related to his message or his accomplishments as a community organizer and “health strategist.” He had been involved in social services ever since he was a teenager growing up in South Central Los Angeles in the 1970s. After finishing high school, he continued his education

at various institutions, specializing in public health, education, religion, and cultural anthropology. In the late 1980s, the death of his partner due to AIDS pushed him to dedicate himself more completely to the Afrocentric cultural affirmation of Black homosexual and bisexual men, leading to the foundation of BMX in 1989. By the time he was invited to give a presentation at Baltimore's Metropolitan Community Church in 2008, BMX had become a national organization, with other chapters operating out of Detroit, Atlanta, New York, Chicago, and Kansas City. After his presentation, he was asked to open a Baltimore chapter, and even though he lived in Atlanta at the time, he agreed to create and remotely coordinate a BMX program at the Portal, a fledgling African American LGBT community center that opened in 2002 but had been experiencing recurrent problems trying to maintain a regular program and attracting young community members. "We began training and preparation early the following year, focusing on leadership training, because BMX is a leadership-development organization," he said. "We teach Black men how to be leaders, how to be self-sufficient, self-determined, and constructive. We teach them to have an analysis." This was Cleo's idiom of choice. To "have an analysis" means to practice rational, critical thinking that promotes Black affirmation in an effort to counter and subvert anti-Black discourses that induce self-hate among SGL men.⁷

However, as he was organizing leadership training he quickly found out that the Portal was in much bigger trouble than he had anticipated. After its director asked him for help, he decided to move to Baltimore. A couple of months later, the Portal and BMX merged, and the new entity assumed the latter's nationally established name. Since the merger Cleo has been trying to get more involved in the city's HIV-prevention system, because he feels that his affirmative message and training and most sorely needed among the young Black men this system is consistently failing. I first met Cleo at a meeting convened by and at Maryland's Infectious Disease and Environmental Health Administration (IDEHA), which I attended regularly.⁸ These monthly meetings provided a space where organizations engaged in HIV care and prevention work targeting Black "men who have sex with men" (MSM) could come together to coordinate and plan their projects pertaining to Baltimore City and its surrounding counties—at least on paper. As an unfunded and discretionary entity, the working group remained relatively powerless in terms of decision-making or project-initiating capacities, which was a source of frustration for many who attended its meetings. It was not uncommon for members to be absent for longer periods of time, and some stopped coming altogether. Those who did show up regularly worked on

prevention projects in three subgroups, yet these projects never seemed to materialize, which added to a general sense of discontent. Cleo, for whom this was only his third meeting, was most vocal about his dissatisfaction with the group's inefficiency, and his caustic performance caught my attention as much as it seemed to annoy and embarrass the others in the room. I later learned that Cleo had quickly gained a reputation as an antiwhite troublemaker, and several individuals and groups had apparently made attempts to discredit or shun him. He did not seem to mind and even appeared to relish the hostility, knowing that his notoriety would get him more attention from the people he was looking to reach: Baltimore's Black community. Cleo aired his grievances with respect to IDEHA's working group to me, saying:

Frankly, I can't stand those meetings. They are potential resources but have very little value in changing the epidemic. Because people around the table . . . I'm just telling you this because you asked me: . . . all the data presented there was the logical outcome of the fact that there's no interventions truly catering to Black men. The whole culture of it is just so dysfunctional. What has happened all over this country is funders have put an HIV carrot job in these people's faces, and it's, like, "A job! I need to fucking eat!" And they take these jobs, [and] they have no skills, no clue, and the whole system is dysfunctional. . . . [*I ask him about the problem of poverty in the community.*] This poverty thing is bullshit as far as I'm concerned. It's race and it's self-concept. Otherwise you'd see a[n] HIV epidemic among poor white people, and there's none. You can be poor and still be functional; Black women do it all the time. They learn how to become more actively involved in self-preservation when they have the skills to do so and when they feel valuable enough to implement those skills. You got to realize you have value; it's Black self-hate that kills.

In Chapter 3 I examine how race, self-preservation, and "self-concept" are co-articulated in Baltimore's HIV epidemic, but here I want to make a different observation. I believe that what many of Cleo's white peers found most threatening about his positioning (some called it posturing) within the city's LGBT community and HIV-prevention system was his grassroots mobilization of a particular notion of racial negativity that in recent years has become a much debated issue in the field of Black studies, where it has gained traction under the moniker of "Afro-pessimism." Although Cleo never

used this precise terminology, his analysis of Blackness in the U.S. context is inextricably tied to and shaped by the afterlife of slavery. To reproduce Saidiya Hartman's (2007: 6) well-known formulation: "If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of Black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment." Such an anti-Black climate produces Blackness as a negative space associated with disease, decay, and death, which forms the very condition of possibility for non-Black life to thrive in the national body politic.⁹ However, this space also harbors a negative remainder, a nothing that is also something that cannot be fully assimilated or accounted for. Hartman again notes: "On the one hand, the slave is the foundation of the national order, and on the other, the slave occupies the position of the unthought. So what does it mean to try to bring that position into view without making it a locus of positive value, or without trying to fill the void?" (Hartman and Wilderson 2003: 184–185). In this book I aim to sit with this question, to critically interrogate it in order to formulate a provisional answer that is informed by my interaction with Cleo and other interlocutors who have so generously shared their time and knowledge.

While Cleo's analysis converges with Hartman's in its identification of the paradoxical position occupied by the slave, whose captive body metonymically stands in for the persistent captivity of Black people and of Blackness as a structural (ap)position, their respective responses to this diagnosis differ significantly. For Cleo, as for other community organizers in Baltimore, to try to bring this negative position into view without rendering it amenable to affirmation or the attribution of "positive value" would be deeply counterproductive insofar as, in their daily practices, affirmation as revaluation is an indispensable tool that enables Black queer (trans) men and women to resist death and survive this anti-Black/queer world.¹⁰ Cleo's life is dedicated to the arduous work of "filling the void," which emphatically does *not* equal the pursuit of citizenship as "an integration into the national project" (Hartman and Wilderson 2003: 185). He abhors this national project for the systematic way it kills so many Black people and lets so many more of them die, but this is precisely what drives him to teach his community to—as he says—"become more actively involved in self-preservation, making sure they have the skills to do it when they feel valuable enough to implement those skills."

Now, of course, this difference in response may be rather obvious, given that both thinkers/teachers have their own personal and professional commitments with respect to the afterlife of slavery in the United States, but I nevertheless want to highlight the conceptual and political space that mediates their diverging positions because it points to a tension between critical and reparative approaches to anti-Black/queer violence that I address in Chapter 6. Cleo's work poses a pressing question to Afro-pessimist scholarship: if Black queers survive in and through "social death,"¹¹ then what about belonging, kinship, intimacy, or collective flourishing? What capacity for common world making and political agency can Black queerness embody, and how could this capacity be nourished? Should it be nourished at all? I address these questions most explicitly in Chapter 6, where I discuss my ambivalence with respect to negative ontological theorizations of Blackness and queerness, but each of the chapters that follow contributes to the elaboration of a response that is rooted in the experiences and perspectives of Black queer Baltimoreans.

My project thus exists in close proximity to recent scholarship in the field of Black studies that broaches Blackness as something that is more than nothing, or a queer nothing constituted by anti-Black forces but not exhaustively so, not fully exhausted and void due to the lifegiving forms of care and celebration that persist despite and *because of* the violence that never ceases to inform them. Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake* (2016) and Ashon Crawley's *BlackPentecostal Breath* (2017) are two poetically incisive contributions to this thought of the otherwise as immanent to the given, which I see as being in generative conversation. Both works reimagine the space of Black (queer) possibility by attending to cultural practices and resources that are mobilized "to produce a break with the known, the normative, the violent world of western thought and material condition" (Crawley 2017: 5).¹² For Sharpe (2016: 18), such practices and resources constitute "wake work," an ethical project that insists on imagining "new ways to live in the wake of slavery" by inventing "a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives." Without seeking to somehow remedy or resolve the systematic negation of Black life, wake work strives for the cultivation of a "Blackened" ethics of care and consciousness as material and epistemological iterations of the "enfleshed" labor of imagining otherwise (ibid.: 21–22). One modality of this ethical project comes in the form of "aspiration," the word Sharpe uses to describe the activity of "keeping and putting breath back in the Black body in hostile weather" (ibid.: 113). It is here, in her emphasis on the necessity of breath and breathing (space), that Sharpe's analytical framework most explicitly touches Crawley's, in which breath features as the central

concept with which to think through the “otherwise possibilities” immanent to “Blackqueer aesthesia” (Crawley 2017: 238). Starting from the premise that “I can’t breathe”—Eric Garner’s repeated exclamation as he was being choked to death by New York City police officers in 2014—does not just form “raw material for theorizing” but also is a call to action (*ibid.*: 1), Crawley offers a lyrical meditation on Black Pentecostalism as an alternative mode of social organization deeply rooted in performative and visceral forms of knowledge production whose queerness destabilizes white epistemologies and theologies that continue to produce a world “wherein Black flesh cannot easily breathe” (*ibid.*: 3).¹³ Like Sharpe’s wake work, and like my notion of civic intimacies, Crawley’s celebration of Blackpentecostal breath is invested in the survival and thriving of Black flesh, that queer nothing or “non/being” (Sharpe 2016: 20), which, as both theorists know, is also “a multitude, a plenitude, a social world of exploration” (Crawley 2017: 267). Yet whereas neither author seems interested in theorizing the relationship between such survival/thriving and citizenship as anything other than mutually exclusive, I posit the concept of civic intimacies to problematize this dichotomy and to rethink what being a citizen—and being political—can encompass when approached from the outside.¹⁴

The Political Stakes of Civic Intimacies

What *does* it mean to be political? And what does it *take* to be political? To answer these questions in a way that is responsive to what my interlocutors in Baltimore have told and shown me requires that I distance myself from a strand of radical democratic theory that underscores the a(nta)gonistic processes constitutive of the political realm. But let me first explain what I find valuable about this school of thought, which includes scholars such as Wendy Brown, William Connolly, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière. Despite their considerable differences, these scholars have been persistent in their efforts to imagine modes of *becoming political* that resist the all-too-present tendency to withdraw into the safety of the known and the similar, favoring instead a more courageous engagement with difference that cannot be neutralized or assimilated. To put it in terms closer to my project, radical democratic theory offers models of political citizenship that deviate from the modern immunitary tradition to the extent that they break with its privatizing logics of self-defense and boundary policing, instead promoting a different orientation that associates citizenship with collective struggle. Take, for example, Brown’s (1995: 25) argument for conceiving of freedom as “a

project suffused not just with ambivalence but with anxiety.” True political freedom, in Brown’s influential account, is ambivalent because “it is at odds with security, stability, protection, and irresponsibility” and requires that we give up “familiarity, insularity, and routine for investment in a more open horizon of possibility” (ibid.). It is anxiety inducing because, far from dispensing with power, political freedom is faced with the problem of power everywhere, necessitating “a permanent struggle against what will otherwise be done to and for us” (ibid.).

Brown’s ambitious and courageous vision resonates with Isin’s work, which likewise identifies political conduct with ongoing struggles and takes “acts” as the constitutive unit of citizenship, positing the city as the transhistorical arena formative to both. As he writes: “The city is neither a background to . . . struggles *against which* groups wager, nor is it a foreground *for which* groups struggle for hegemony. Rather, the city is the battleground *through which* groups define their identity, stake their claims, wage their battles, and articulate citizenship rights, obligations, and principles” (Isin 2002: 283–284). Despite its conceptual appeal, I find this abstract image of the city much too restricted and preoccupied with incessant contestation to account adequately for daily life in specific cities such as Baltimore, which have experienced decades of stagnation and depletion. To many Baltimoreans, their city feels less like an open and dynamic force field than an enclosed neighborhood whose sedimented physical and social boundaries keep insiders and outsiders neatly separated. As I discuss in Chapter 2, everyday life in Baltimore is often marked by inertia and immobility, which contrasts the image of action and mobility conjured up by Isin’s imaginary. Moreover, the kinds of action that Isin prioritizes as central to citizenship—staking claims, waging battles—do not speak to how many of my interlocutors negotiated a sense of collectivity and belonging. For them, the city is not so much—or, at least, not predominantly—a political battleground, as it is for Isin. Instead, it forms an ambiguous environment in which care, coasting, and daily improvisations are frequently more vital to “being of the city” (or the neighborhood) than are antagonistic orientations.

Yet does this mean that these practices, insofar as they do not articulate rights claims or stage a scene of conflict in the public sphere, fail to live up to the criteria of “proper” citizenship? And does this, in turn, entail that those who engage in such practices fall short of becoming political (Isin 2002: 275)? As much as I appreciate the radical democratic vision of political life proposed by Brown, Isin, and others, and despite the fact that I normatively subscribe to many of its arguments and objectives, my experiences in Baltimore have

pushed me to recognize the limits of identifying political citizenship solely with scenes of conflict and “permanent struggle.” Ultimately, even though such a vision breaks with the paradigm of immunization that structures our modern citizenship regime, it nevertheless retains a strong investment in the sovereign acts of claim- and decision-making citizens who can afford to relinquish their security and routines in favor of disruptive and anxiety-inducing modes of political conduct. For many Black queer Baltimoreans, in contrast, the intensity of living with recurrent psychic, physical, and socioeconomic pressures generates a precarious situation in which rupture is not a deliberate strategy but a frequently overwhelming state of affairs that needs to be navigated and can only intermittently be circumvented. Their tenuous acts of citizenship are more about developing and maintaining infrastructures of care and support than the breaking up of existing structures, however ambivalent their nature.¹⁵ If we accept that Black queers are positioned “outside the structures of human filiation, hegemonic consent, and the social contract through which civil society is composed” (Woods 2013: 439), and as such occupy a world that is located at once inside and outside the world inhabited by non-Black citizens and strangers, their only viable claim to the city is articulated through fugitive experimentations with civic intimacies.

But how, then, do civic intimacies diverge from the modern immunitary citizenship regime that conditions their existence? Surely the persistent pressure on Black queer support structures generates a desire for, and the necessity of, protective measures that provide a degree of immunity from the various forms of violence that threaten the world-making practices that depend on these structures. However, as I show in the following chapters, the kind of immunity that civic intimacies help to cultivate is rooted less in an individual will to power and self-protection, modeled on and appealing to the political sovereignty of the state, than in a political ethics of maintenance and repair that tentatively accomplishes what one might call, following Esposito (2011: 177), a “common immunity.” Having essentially been abandoned by market and state institutions, many Black queer folks look for alternative anchors to secure their turbulent existence and experiment with new ways not just to endure their predicaments, or to bear them more gracefully, but also to thrive. These experiments take place at parties, fundraisers, workshops, support groups, leather BDSM classes, HIV outreach facilities, church services, and many other spaces where Black queer life proliferates. In these spaces, the old guard often teaches younger generations how to conduct themselves in relation to others, informing them about the gestures,

rituals, and values passed on as a common inheritance, as well as opening up newcomers to a shared sense of what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011a) has called “immanent obligation.”¹⁶ Central to civic intimacies, immanent obligation emerges from a deep ethical attunement and commitment to the lives and life stories that accrue as a collective history of love, loss, hope, defeat, and transformation. This transformation does not have to entail radical change or rupture, and it much more often emerges from ongoing and patient work on self and others. Once again, the civic intimacies presented in this book are *political* because they embody the flourishing of Black queer culture through a range of practices that express its variegated modes of existence. Refusing their imposed disposability, my interlocutors translate their intimate encounters and relationships into collective articulations of support, maintenance, and care that not only distribute the necessary resources for survival—such as food and medication—but also preserve and promote the rich, dynamic vernacular cultures that form an enduring testament to the incalculable value and vitality of Black queer life. Thus, to paraphrase Bonnie Honig (2009: 10), who in turn follows Jacques Derrida, civic intimacies are political to the extent that they surpass the *mere* life of survival and strive for the *more* life that is also part of survival, as disclosed in its etymological roots: to live beyond, to outlive or “overlive” the historical present of racist immunitary violence. Civic intimacies generate “the surplus that exceeds causality” (ibid.).

Still, civic intimacies clearly do not represent some kind of panacea, and neither do they exist in a vacuum. I instead develop this concept to describe and appreciate a range of world-making practices and support structures that persist at the margins of possibility. In this space, they are at least partly *embedded in, dependent on, subordinated by, and resistant to* larger institutions, such as Baltimore’s HIV-prevention system (Chapter 3), the Black Church (Chapter 4), and the city’s majority-white gay leather/BDSM community (Chapter 5). Accordingly, in Chapters 3–5 I attend to the struggles that take place at this threshold, focusing primarily on the Black queer “mediators” who move between margin and center in an effort to safeguard the well-being of their communities. Furthermore, the scenes and stories relayed in these chapters are deeply informed by Baltimore’s vexed history of racial segregation and economic depression, which have created the setting for its contemporary struggles with poverty, drug-related crime, property vacancy, and alarmingly high rates of new HIV and hepatitis C infections (see, e.g., Bor 2007; German and Latkin 2012; Pietila 2010). As I detail in Chapter 2, the city’s LGBT community historically has borne the brunt of these problems, although since the late 1990s white, middle-class gays and lesbians

have increasingly unburdened themselves as they have found a place at the table of civil society's governing institutions, subsequently relinquishing their political obligations to communities of color that saw many of their problems intensify. The scenes of care, support, creativity, pleasure, love, and activism that I encountered across the city form necessary responses to this abandonment, which is exacerbated by the increasing withdrawal of federal and state-organized safety nets. These developments have placed the burden of responsibility in the hands of nonprofit community-based organizations and other networks of frequently underpaid staff and unpaid volunteers who attempt to keep their communities healthy and vibrant. In other words, it is in this climate of social and economic precarity that Black queer Baltimoreans see themselves forced to draw on their kin to invent and reproduce forms of coping and thriving that allow them to maintain their nonjuridical right to the city they cannot give up on—even if it has frequently given up on them.

Inside Out/Outside In: Reflections on Positionality and Method

It took me a while to get a grip on all of this, as my initial research plan had a different focus. This plan was part of a postdoctoral research grant application I submitted in the summer of 2009 while putting the final touches on my dissertation. At the time I was a doctoral candidate at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research and a lecturer in the Department of Communication Science, both at the University of Amsterdam. My doctoral work examined online identity formation, with a specific focus on the digital performance of gender, sexuality, and embodiment, but as my trajectory developed I became increasingly motivated to expand my research beyond the parameters of digital culture and representation. Inspired by the so-called affective turn in social and queer theory, as well as by “nonrepresentational” approaches in human geography and urban studies, I wanted my next project to examine how queer communities mobilize networked digital technologies to form affective support networks that traverse physical and virtual environments. This literature was pushing me to consider the role of material as well as intimate infrastructures in the creation of spaces for and by sexual minorities, rather than just studying how these social formations are represented in online settings. Moreover, it suggested that such infrastructures were *political* matters whose pertinence exceeded the field of representational politics, which gave me a different perspective on

the notions of sexual and intimate citizenship I had been thinking through within the context of my doctoral work. Ultimately, the concept of citizenship grew increasingly enigmatic and compelling as it became more detached from legalist and identity-based frames of reference, and while I was no longer able to integrate my ideas into my soon-to-be-finished dissertation, I decided to pursue this problematic in the research project, whose proposal I was drafting that summer.

When I received notice in February 2010 that I had been awarded the research grant, I knew I was moving to Baltimore in the summer. The grant stipulated that recipients were expected to conduct their research at an acclaimed foreign host institution, and I had chosen Johns Hopkins University because I admired the work being done in its Political Science and Anthropology departments. Other than this, however, I had no previous connection to, or much knowledge of, Baltimore—I hadn't even seen *The Wire* at that point. Moreover, I had never lived or worked outside the Netherlands before, so this opportunity was quickly starting to feel like an overwhelming endeavor. To prepare the best I could, I decided to survey the web and make a provisional inventory of Baltimore's LGBT organizations and resources, which turned out to be more difficult than I expected, given that only a few organizations had a solid Internet presence, and, as I would later find out, the city's LGBT community was generally rather "low-tech" at that time. After compiling a short list of resources and sending out introductory emails that explained my research and inquired into fieldwork opportunities, I ended up with two responses. The most promising one came from the executive director of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center of Baltimore and Central Maryland (GLCCB). His email was welcoming, and so was the center's website, so it seemed like a good place to start my project. This *was*, after all, the city's official LGBT community center. I was bound to meet a lot of people there.

After my arrival in blazing hot Baltimore at the end of August 2010, the first thing I did after finding a place to live and settling into my new academic environment on Johns Hopkins's Homewood campus was pay a visit to the GLCCB, which was only a five-minute walk from my new apartment in the center of Mount Vernon. I remember thinking that the center was probably on some kind of summer break, because there was so little activity. I didn't run into anyone on the first two floors, and the computer lab was empty, so I kept wandering around, knocking on doors and peering through windows until somebody greeted me, somewhat hesitantly and surprised. "Perhaps I should have called in advance?" I thought, suddenly worrying that this might

not have been the best decision and searching for the proper words to put the man in front of me at ease. After I introduced myself, I learned that the man was the center's program coordinator and that the executive director wasn't in that day. He told me a bit about his job and gave me a tour of the entire building, which was quite spacious, and finally we discussed volunteer opportunities I could take up while conducting my research there. I left the center that day feeling mildly anxious yet hopeful about the time to come and was eager to start my fieldwork, which, unfortunately, was delayed pending the official approval from Johns Hopkins's Institutional Review Board (IRB). However, as I was awaiting the approval and spending a large chunk of my time in the campus library over the following weeks, my anxiety increased considerably when, after more informal visits and a volunteer shift sealing envelopes, it started to dawn on me that nothing substantial was happening at the GLCCB. There were no running community projects or upcoming events to speak of, and I met only a handful of people—some assistants, a couple of volunteers—other than the program coordinator. Where was the rest of the community? Around this time, I also met the executive director, who seemed rather standoffish and perhaps had second thoughts about my conducting fieldwork at the center, which made me feel even more insecure about my position and the future of my project. Nevertheless, I decided to hang in and make a renewed effort once I received the IRB approval that would allow me officially to begin conducting interviews and participant observation, and when I got the green light in early October, my plan was to focus on the peer support groups that met on the second floor of the community center during weeknights.

Sitting in on a number of these groups, which ranged from gay-oriented Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to lesbian spiritual healing classes and transgender support networks, gave me my first opportunity to meet and get to know some community members beyond the GLCCB's staff. It also allowed me to get an initial sense of the importance of material and psychic support structures as technologies of care and belonging. But since most groups met rather sporadically and didn't draw many people, I felt the need to further expand my network, also because I was now learning about different kinds of initiatives happening around town. In addition, I found out that a lot of these initiatives and programs were health-related and focused especially on HIV prevention, given the city's exorbitant rates of new HIV infections among its African American population and particularly among young Black queer men. Not only because Baltimore's LGBT community has a long history of fighting HIV/AIDS and has spawned important grassroots

organizations such as AIDS Action Baltimore and HERO (the Health Education Resource Organization) in response to the crisis during the 1980s and 1990s but also because HIV prevention was one of the few activities that could still attract funding for community-based organizations, quite a few LGBT groups and individuals were teaming up with the city's Health Department and its two partner research universities—Johns Hopkins and the University of Maryland—to develop new programs and projects that could stem the tide of infection.¹⁷ Although the GLCCB had made little effort to seriously engage with the issue of HIV/AIDS in the community over the past two decades, it was still interested in the possibility of securing funds for prevention initiatives that would improve the relevance of the center and provide a modest revenue stream, which is why its program coordinator had recently started attending meetings of a collective named Connect to Protect (C2P), which convened at the University of Maryland's Baltimore City campus.

After some negotiations and checkups with the other members I managed to convince the center's program coordinator to let me join the next meeting, which really formed a "watershed" moment in my research to the extent that it opened me up to the existence of many different people and organizations in the city—a great number of them not present during that particular meeting—as well as their ongoing struggles and tensions with city officials, funding agencies, and other community-based organizations. Moreover, it highlighted the pertinence of race, racism, and racialized poverty to whatever I was hoping to study in Baltimore—I wasn't so sure anymore at that point. Even though I was obviously aware of the entanglements of gender, sexuality, race, and class in the city, the latter two notions did not yet figure explicitly as focal points in my research project. Now, however, it was becoming painfully obvious that I had been relying on a color-blind and therefore inadequate understanding of queerness, unable or unwilling to see how it was articulated within an urban climate of anti-Blackness. I had to seriously rethink what I was doing and try to attune myself more carefully to how this climate was affecting so much of what I wanted to learn more about. I needed new conceptual tools, as well as practical guidance. I was also feeling increasingly overwhelmed by the sheer number and complexity of issues, interests, group dynamics, networks, funding schemes, and power relations. What was I to make of all this? How did it connect to the initial aims of my research project? To make matters worse, the first C2P meeting I attended also turned out to be the last because the collective's funding had been abruptly discontinued, leaving several members suddenly at risk of unemployment and threatening

partnered projects. Baltimore's HIV-prevention network and its many allied LGBT-oriented initiatives were obviously experiencing tumultuous times, and I wanted to understand what had led to this situation and how it affected the Black queer youth this network was supposed to serve and protect.

In the meantime, helped by my new contacts at the community-based organizations involved in HIV prevention, I also began to establish connections to a host of other groups operating in various realms of LGBT culture and politics, including artists, (mental) health and wellness programs, civil rights advocacy groups, the city's gay leather and BDSM scene, and faith-based organizations. Probably due to a backlash of sorts in the wake of my period of relative inactivity at the GLCCB, I decided that I should attempt to get a grasp of Baltimore's LGBT communities that was as comprehensive as possible. Over the next several months I tried to attend as many events and meetings as I could and speak to as many people as I could manage to sit down with. I found myself on buses and light rails traveling between different parts of the city, from Towson to Dundalk and from Upton to Middle East, all in an optimistic and ultimately vain, yet not unproductive, effort to achieve a sense of the "totality" or "ecosystem" of LGBT life in Baltimore. A lot of the time I was in a state of controlled mania, in transit and in between destinations and ideas about which leads to follow up on, which direction to take my research, and how to translate the different threads I was trying to weave together into a coherent narrative argument.

One device that played an increasingly crucial role in ordering my thoughts and research activities was my smartphone, which I bought when I arrived in Baltimore. Whether I was making phone calls; sending and receiving text messages; conducting interviews; or producing notes, pictures, and videos, it assisted me with aligning the different rhythms, trajectories, and worlds of (potential) participants as they intersected with my project's own shifting coordinates. When conducting what is traditionally called participant observation, one usually has to negotiate a variety of actors and environments that each has its own characteristics in terms of habits and routines, history, scale, pace, accessibility, and atmosphere, to name but a few attributes. This results in a great amount of logistical and affective labor that takes up most of one's research time, to such an extent that "observation" often seems like a minor activity on the daily to-do list—if it adequately represents the process of ethnographic knowledge production at all. Rather, the practice of alignment, or calibration, is a much more crucial and omnipresent aspect of ethnographic fieldwork when it is understood as the gradual and tentative movement toward the translation of intimate interactions and embodied knowledge into a

sustained account of a particular social scene. For such an account to obtain a sense of consistency and coherence, much of the logistical and affective labor of fieldwork must be geared toward an alignment of the multiple currents and cadences that constitute the research field, which effectively means learning to maneuver, order, and respond to the diverse challenges that come up along the way. In my project, these challenges came from various angles and assumed different shapes, ranging from limited mobility and having to navigate flirtation during an interview to dealing with racial, gender, class, and sexual difference.¹⁸

Looking back, I realize that my urge to keep spreading out also made me spread myself too thin, and my holistic intentions inevitably detracted from the thickness my ethnographic account could have achieved if I had started out with a focus on the Black queer contingent of Baltimore's LGBT community rather than trying to map all of its complex iterations. What makes this especially regrettable is the fact that so much of my fieldwork—all of the mapping, tracing, and recording I was doing for months—eventually hasn't made it into the book. This omission can be partly explained by the sheer unwieldiness of the data I amassed, which made it increasingly difficult to translate my findings into a narratively coherent and conceptually/politically relevant argument. But, more important, I also became less interested in the very idea of creating a holistic account of the “totality” of Baltimore's LGBT community as the months passed, instead developing a more sustained focus on the resources that enable Black queer collectivities to survive and flourish in the city. During my fieldwork in the HIV-prevention community, I had already become acquainted with several members of Baltimore's Ballroom scene—an alternative kinship system organized around competitive dance and gender performance that formed a crucial support structure for Black queer youth who find themselves “at risk” of much more than HIV infection. About halfway into my research I was also spending an increasing portion of my time studying two other key—and, as I was to find out, interrelated—resources for Black queer world making: religious faith and kinky (leather) sex/BDSM. More specifically, I started attending services and classes at a Black Pentecostal congregation with a gay and SGL clergy, which I had heard about through my engagement with the Interfaith Fairness Coalition of Maryland, while also spending more time in the gay leather and BDSM scenes to get a better understanding of how Black practitioners negotiate their position in a community that is overwhelmingly white.

It was during this part of my fieldwork that I was most deeply confronted with the ethical, political, and epistemological difficulties—if not outright

impossibilities—of attempting to navigate stark sexual, racial, and gender differences and translate them into an ethnographic account. In the most practical sense, there were physical limits to what and who I could include in my “field” of study. While I was welcome at various public events and people were usually very hospitable, patient, and generous, some sites and occasions remained inaccessible to me as a male-identified researcher—most notably, the private lesbian play parties that were organized at Baltimore’s premier BDSM venue, the Playhouse, and in the homes of practitioners.¹⁹ Next to such gendered spatial boundaries, I also frequently had to negotiate and come to terms with a more intimately felt limit that marked an epistemological incommensurability between embodied forms of knowing. How could I ever hope, let alone claim, to bridge the extensive gap between my white, Dutch, middle-class, heterosexual sense of the world and the sense of what, for all intents and purposes, is another world inhabited by my Black queer American interlocutors, many of whom were working class and poor? Could ethnography, this exemplary method of embodied knowledge production that ostensibly is well equipped to tease out and interpret the most obscure sociocultural idiosyncrasies, really allow me to “understand” what they had been through, how they sensed and made sense of their daily environments, how they struggled to survive and to flourish, or what it is like to be Black and queer in the United States? Obviously, the answer in each case was and remains a resounding “no.”

Yet if this is so, then how do I account for the possible misalignment between my conceptual and political commitments and the concerns and aspirations of those who have participated in my research? Quite a few interlocutors felt confused or weary about my intention to rethink citizenship by studying the intimate ties that hold together Baltimore’s LGBT communities. Juxtaposing these terms, let alone reading one through the other, did not make sense to a lot of people I spoke with insofar as civic institutions were mostly irrelevant—if not antagonistic—to the intimate relationships and practices that held up their worlds. Citizenship simply had very little to do with their immediate needs and desires other than, for some, speaking to a rather abstract aspiration to achieve full legal inclusion in the unforeseeable future. Yet despite this terminological incongruity, I repeatedly encountered collective efforts to build and maintain support structures for belonging, survival, and flourishing, which I understood as deviant/defiant and invaluable improvisations on citizenship and have chosen to call “civic intimacies.” I have ventured to expand and revise the language of citizenship not just as a “legitimizing political act” (Bosniak 2006: 11) but also in an attempt, as Didier Fassin (2014: 46) writes, to “render visible

and intelligible what may not [have] been seen or grasped by the agents” in my study, given that it is not always easy or possible to think “beyond one’s biography and experience” or to account for “the social structures and political events that frame them.”²⁰

This rendering visible and intelligible was done in collaboration with my research participants as much as possible. Through participant observation, formal interviews, and informal conversations, I have sought to make sense of their sense making by linking their biographical narratives and personal experiences to the impersonal forces—“social structures”—that inform their texture. This allowed me to dialogically explore what motivated my interlocutors to create alternative ways of being in and *of* the city with others and to examine how or to what extent these practices could meaningfully be associated with the notion of citizenship. These conversations, which were often difficult and certainly hesitant at first, not only provided much needed contextual information that could augment my field notes but also opened up a mediating environment that enabled me to interpret participants’ vernacular language, theorizing, and sense-making styles in light of my own conceptual framework—and vice versa. This turned out to be a space of insurmountable gaps as well as evocative resonances: sometimes it felt senseless to translate among the different languages, concerns, and explanations I was assembling from a variety of different sources, while at other times a theoretical argument I had been mulling over made an illuminating surprise appearance in or between the words a participant used to narrate an event, describe an institution, or justify a decision. Words and things seemed to suddenly fall into place, at least for a while. And then there were times when the words directed at me seemed inscrutable or nonsensical, forcing me to dig deeper, talk to other community members, and look for additional conceptual (re)sources that could help me reduce the distance between my sense of their world and their own (cf. Stack 1974). Reducing this distance was the most I could hope for, given that a full “understanding”—a complete closure of the gap—was and remains impossible, given the aforementioned epistemological incommensurability of our differently embodied and inhabited worlds. While I cannot claim that I really got to *know* the world of my interlocutors, I can say that I have *learned* a lot in the relatively brief time they shared some of it with me. And as I demonstrate in the following chapters and return to near the end of this book, one of the most important things I have learned during this necessarily partial and incomplete process of sense making is that citizenship, if it means anything at all to Black queer Baltimoreans, is about making space for new forms of kinship and solidarity, about sharing memories and faith, about caring for

others' health and well-being, about getting each other off and lifting each other up. Proliferating against and besides dominant immunitary citizenship regimes, civic intimacies pervert citizenship by rendering it ecstatic, turning it inside out.

Outline of the Book

In Chapter 2, which sets the scene for the analyses presented in the subsequent three chapters, I take the reader on a historical journey through Baltimore. Drawing on my fieldwork, as well as on literature and archival research, my account is guided by three central features that shape the city's urban fabric: superfluity, immunity, and ambiguity. I start by examining the long and profitable relationship between the City of Baltimore and its largest employer, Johns Hopkins University, whose extensive history of displacement and exploitation of African American residents has received remarkably little attention. I then move to a discussion of Baltimore's public transit system as a way to analyze the city's long history of racial segregation, accomplished by legal and extralegal means. This leads to a consideration of the Black Church's ambiguous role in this history, deepening my historical account of segregation in Baltimore while addressing how certain prestigious middle-class Black churches have become tied up in activities that exclude and damage poor Black communities. Moving on to more recent ways the city's successive administrations have attempted to extract value from racialized urban (re) development projects, I show how the efforts of Martin O'Malley, Baltimore's former mayor, to cultivate a "creative class" in designated areas of Baltimore builds on earlier endeavors to govern and revitalize the city by managing its immunitary geographies of cultural production and consumption in the wake of deindustrialization. These efforts have also implicated Baltimore's LGBT community, whose own racially tense historical present I survey before focusing on the history of Black queer Baltimore.

Chapters 3–5 present three case studies, each of which examines one intimate matter of concern that is central to Black queer life in Baltimore: HIV/AIDS (Chapter 3), religious faith (Chapter 4), and kinky pleasure (Chapter 5). Focusing on the biopolitical capture and containment of Black queer youth, Chapter 3 assesses federally orchestrated HIV-prevention initiatives dedicated to a scaling up and integration of testing, treatment, and linkage to clinical care in select cities such as Baltimore. I pay particular attention to the fundamental incongruity between a biomedically defined notion of life that informs immunitary prevention strategies and the carefully cultivated yet precarious

form of life articulated in Baltimore's Ballroom community, which serves as a vital support structure for Black queer adolescents and young adults. On the basis of my engagements with Ballroom community members who work as peer outreach specialists and are thus responsible for mediating between their community and Baltimore's HIV-prevention system, I suggest a different take on prevention strategy that is inspired by Ball culture's vernacular intimacies, imaginaries, and capacities. I continue my reflection on the conditions of Black queer endurance in Chapter 4, where I look at how religious faith informs Black queer practices of self-formation and world making at a Black Pentecostal church with an LGBT/SGL clergy. Both chapters show how day-to-day survival is never "merely" anything, given that it requires collective effort and is suffused with aspirations to flourish and build more accommodating good life architectures that draw their energy from a variety of sacred and worldly sources. This focus on religious spirituality as a vital resource for Black queer flourishing returns in Chapter 5, where I examine how the ethics of sexual pleasure and violence shape the life-making practices of Black queer women in Baltimore's predominantly white gay leather and BDSM community. I argue that, as a minority presence whose sexualized racial alterity forms an object of both denial and fetishism, Black queer women disrupt the purported unity and universality of the gay leather and BDSM lifestyle. The chapter's central protagonist is Monica, who continually negotiates her ambivalent investment in an intimate support structure that offers her valuable resources for experimenting with pain, pleasure, and power, despite this structure's historical marginalization of Black (women's) sexuality and its reluctance to critically scrutinize BDSM's fraught relationship to the history and afterlife of slavery.

Finally, following from my discussion of the racially charged tension between pleasure and violence in Baltimore's leather/BDSM scene, Chapter 6 offers an extended reflection on the valences of negativity and reparativity as forces that inform and propel the civic intimacies I describe in this book. I start with a comparative assessment of the death-driven (a)political nihilism that connects the otherwise disparate work of Frank Wilderson and Lee Edelman, providing a critical reading of what I call Edelman's "digital metaphysics" and its problematic understanding of survival and relationality. After developing a different, more ambiguous perspective on these notions, I consider the intellectual exchange between Fred Moten and Afro-pessimist scholars such as Wilderson and Jared Sexton in light of the persistent negativity that marks Black queer world-making practices in the past, present, and future tense. Drawing on the ethnographic narratives presented in the preceding chapters,

I argue that the reparative value of ethnography is to affirm and revalue the often tentative ways people give form to their lives and to the political as the empowering potential for things to be otherwise. While Blackness and queerness may be ontologically defined by dereliction and nothingness, this is never the entire story. The mode of existence that is Black queerness is also the unstable outcome of ongoing efforts to work with/through/against the force of the negative and collectively compose an aberrantly joyous life that is worth living—that indeed *claims its worth through the obstinate practice of living*. This is the wager of *Civic Intimacies*.

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