

## Reflections on Gayle Salamon's *The Life and Death of Latisha King*

ANDREA J. PITTS

Gayle Salamon's recent book *The Life and Death of Latisha King: A Critical Phenomenology of Transphobia* is an important work detailing the systematic valences of transphobia and racism within the U.S. legal system. Perhaps the most appropriate way for me to describe this book is as *heavy*. By this, I do not necessarily mean that the book is "heavy" solely in terms of generating a deep sorrow due to the tragedy of Latisha King's death, or even "heavy" in an overly dense philosophical sense. While the book does provide a harrowing account of the end of the life of a vibrant 15-year old girl, and deals with a range of complex phenomenological resources, the sense of heaviness of the book feels akin to but slightly distinct from these features of the work.

That is, reading Salamon's book brought up a very personal sensation of heaviness for me, like the feeling of moving through the thick, suffocating stares of other people, or a kind of heaviness that accompanies painful slurs that catch and burrow into your being. The weaponization of words like "faggot" and "spic" have taken on a kind of gravity in my own life, and these words have borne down on my sense of self and the people I love. In this way, I felt an uncomfortable familiarity with Salamon's descriptions of some of the daily harms that were committed against Latisha King, harms which appear as forms of racial and gender violence that seek to "purge transpeople from public spaces, [and] [t]o make [us] disappear" (169). Because such sentiments have been present, at times, within my own life, Salamon's book captured the sense of an existential weight I take to be part of the everydayness of being a trans person.

Salamon's book also felt heavy like the heaviness of my hands, as a child, in my pockets while walking through a grocery store, sinking into my sweatshirt while being reminded by my mother that the storeowner would think I was stealing. "Don't reach in your pockets." "Make sure they can see what you're doing." "Don't give them a reason to think that you're dangerous" usually seemed to be the mes-

sage. These patterned suspicions, perceptions of criminality, and unjustified fears that daily smother poor people, immigrants, and communities of color shape how we take up space, communicate, and inhabit our bodies. Perhaps this resonance is akin to what Frantz Fanon described as being “locked in” “suffocating reification,” a vicious form of objectification that, within the purview of Latisha King’s life and death, would prefer a corpse over a Black trans girl’s heeled bootsteps down a school hallway (Fanon 2008: 89).

In this vein, that talk of racism was largely absent from the trial of Latisha King’s killer, Brandon McInerney, is a point that Salamon develops throughout the book. This point is crucial in analyzing how the transphobic violence that Brandon McInerney committed was a *racialized* gender violence, and one that the U.S. legal system is not equipped to address. While it was known to the courts that Brandon McInerney had a predilection for neo-Nazi insignia and that Latisha King was biracial and identified as Black, few connections were made during the trial to the racialized facets of Brandon McInerney’s act of violence. However, a lens on the structurally racist dimensions of this transphobic killing requires us to focus on features of the sociohistorical fabric of Latisha King’s and Brandon McInerney’s lives beyond the space of the courtroom.

Namely, E. O. Green Junior High, the school both students attended, is located in Oxnard, California. Oxnard’s settler history traces back to the San Buenaventura Mission, formed through the displacement and forced labor of the Chumash peoples by Franciscan missionaries and Spanish soldiers in the late 18th century (García 2018: 6). The Spanish land grants that eventually became partitioned to Mexican landowners were eventually contested due to increasing Anglo encroachment in the region following the U.S.-Mexico War and the California Land Act of 1851. By the 1880s, the majority of Indigenous and Mexican inhabitants of the area “were rendered effectively landless” due to Anglo legal disputes and settlement (*ibid.*). This history places Oxnard within a broader context of colonial racial segregation and displacement, including the educational, housing, and recreational policies that would continue throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. For example, in 2008, the year that Brandon McInerney shot and killed Latisha King, E. O. Green Junior High’s enrollment numbers showed that roughly 88 percent of the school’s population were students of color (California Department of Education 2019). During the 2007–2008 school year, the majority of students enrolled at E. O. Green Junior High were enrolled as “Hispanic,” and the eighth grade class of that year had a total of fifty-five students who were enrolled as white, and only twenty-three who were enrolled as Black.

It is within this purview that we find Brandon McInerney doodling swastikas and carrying a copy of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, all of this within a school district and city that has perpetually fought to protect whiteness. For example, in David García’s recent book on racial segregation in Oxnard schools, García describes Oxnard as a

city constructed by “white architects” (García 2018: 3–4). By this, García refers to the white “civic and business leaders, members of fraternal and social organizations, teachers, parents, and homeowners that contributed to [Oxnard’s] tacit societal agreement to privilege Whites over ‘nonwhites,’ through the systemic ‘exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them” (ibid., quoting Mills 1997: 11). Within this context, that Latisha King identified as Black in a school where only twenty-three eighth graders were enrolled as Black seems significant, that she named herself “Latisha,” that her friends testified that “everyone knew [she] was part black,” and that she chose the name because it sounded like a “Black name” that might prevent others from “messing with her” (22). These facets of her life appear strikingly important when considering the white structuring of Oxnard.

According to García, Oxnard was designed to keep Mexican American and Black residents from living in the predominantly white east side of the city. More specifically, many Black residents of Oxnard moved to the city during World War II, and the city and schools became carefully orchestrated to prevent white residents from living and attending school alongside residents of color (García 2018: 4–5). For example, during the 1950s, Mexican American residents reported being refused applications for housing in the Pleasant Valley neighborhood, a neighborhood only a few blocks from E. O. Green Junior High. One resident was told by a seller in Pleasant Valley that “we don’t sell to Mexicans” (ibid., 50). Throughout the 1960s, Black residents reported that white neighborhoods in Oxnard operated like sundown towns where Black residents would be stopped and questioned, being treated as though they were “out of [their] area” (ibid., 111). In this sense, the segregation policies that shape Oxnard may play a role in the historical preservation and protectionism offered to white residents in the city and surrounding area, including the majority white neighborhood of Silver Strand Beach, an area with which Brandon McInerney strongly identified and that rallied to support him after he shot and killed Latisha King.

To frame how these sociohistorical arrangements may have impacted Brandon McInerney and the many other white people involved in the trial and daily disciplining of Latisha King at E. O. Green Junior High, we can turn to questions of *method*. Salamon introduces phenomenology as “careful attention to how the world is delivered to us through our perceptions” (15). “Critical phenomenology,” she states, focuses “on the intersubjective nature of the world and the relations of power through which that intersubjectivity forms, [engaging] issues of social justice, of racial inequality, of gender and sexuality, of incarceration” (17). Regarding this approach, Salamon cites the work of Lisa Guenther. Yet, surprisingly, in her framing of Guenther’s approach to critical phenomenology, one aspect of Guenther’s work on solitary confinement that Salamon does not elaborate is the

role of the *historicity* of our intersubjective relations of power. Regarding such historicity, Guenther writes:

[E]mbodied subjects have been racialized through (for example) the colonization of the Americas, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the practice of plantation slavery and its partial abolition, followed by the hyperincarceration of Black men and women in what is now the United States. This history, and the stories interwoven in this history, affect the formation of subjects in deeply constitutive ways that the contemporary phenomenologist is compelled to rethink basic concepts and methods in order to do justice to the social life—and social death—of consciousness. (2013: xiv)

Within this context, then, I wonder what this book might have been like with the aforementioned sociohistorical framing in mind, i.e., within the *longue durée* of the racial contract in Oxnard, the hyper-segregation of schools in the city, and the relationships between anti-Indigenous, anti-Mexican, and anti-Black policies and habits that have sedimented within Ventura County. For example, in this vein, how might Latisha King's death be linked to what Esselen/Chumash Two-spirit author Deborah A. Miranda calls the "extermination of the *Joyas*" or the *`aqi*, the Ventureño Chumash word for "third gender," in order to interpret racialized violence in southern California as a long-term project of gendecide (Miranda 2013)?

Such an approach also brings to mind the work of another critical phenomenologist notably absent from Salamon's book, although pivotal within Guenther's and Sara Ahmed's writings (Ahmed being another figure who Salamon cites in her methodological discussion of critical phenomenology). Namely, Frantz Fanon's approach to *sociogeny* seems especially relevant for shifting across temporal modalities such as the eventual horror of the shooting of Latisha King, the quotidian bullying, taunting, and disciplining of a Black gender-nonconforming child, and the sociohistorical conditions of anti-black, anti-indigenous, and anti-Mexican violence within Oxnard and elsewhere that reveal patterns of slow death that shape the social lives and deaths of so many Two-spirit, Black, and trans people of color. Interpreters of Fanonian sociogeny such as Sylvia Wynter (2001) consider colonial violence as formed via material, historical, and hermeneutical arrangements that condition human perceptions, relational modes of identification, and intersubjective agency. These might include, what Salamon rightly points out as the policing and fears of Latisha King's gender presentation. The desire of her teachers and school administrators to stop her from wearing clothing that would "make her a target" and which, they feared, would potentially increase the amount of daily harassment that she received from her peers. Such relations might also include investigating the depths of trans history within Oxnard, including, for example, the life of Lucy Hicks Anderson, a Black socialite and brothel owner in Oxnard in the 1940s, who was also subject to invasive legal scrutiny and state-sanctioned

violence due to presumptions about her gender and sexual relationships (Snorton 2017: 145–51).

Also, within this sociogenic register, we can note a kind of carceral logic, a logic akin to that which continues to place trans people in solitary confinement within sex-segregated prisons and jails. According to this logic, to prevent further violence against trans people, we must be eliminated from public view and confined “for our own good” and the good of others. A sociogenic framing might then bring to light how Salamon’s careful reading of the defense’s claims that Latisha King’s gender presentation was a form of aggression links us to the means whereby carcerality impacts colonized communities, communities of color, disabled people, and poor people. Such a focus might thereby alleviate a concern that critical trans studies theorists like Dean Spade (2015) have raised about placing too much emphasis on hate crime legislation and overt discrimination against trans people. Within this kind of carceral framing, transphobia, racism, misogyny, and ableism are considered the result of individual acts that are best handled through the expansion of state security, surveillance, and the confinement of supposed “wrongdoers.” Yet, such state-centered approaches, which are already responsible for the maldistribution of social goods and resources, often do little to prevent the kinds of slow death that operate through the denial of health care, the enhancement of administrative systems that require and constrain forms of identification and mobility, and the myriad social arrangements that place the average life expectancy of trans women of color at the age of 35. To be clear, however, I do not think Salamon’s book reifies this kind of carceral logic. She is, in fact, quite careful not to replicate a carceral response to the killing of Latisha King. Yet, with this concern in mind, were Latisha King to have lived beyond the everyday policing of her body in school, or lived through the foster care system in Ventura County, I wonder how Salamon’s book helps us shed light on other “death-dealing displacements of difference,” to use Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s phrase, that Latisha King might have continued to confront as a Black trans woman in Oxnard, California (Gilmore 2004).

To address this question, I also wonder whether Hortense Spillers, C. Riley Snorton, Nirmala Erevelles, and other theorists who have examined conditions of racialized gender violence and disability would be helpful to elaborate such facets of Latisha King’s social life and death. For example, Salamon mentions a revealing piece of testimony when Susan Crowley, a white teacher of Latisha King, tells Latisha that her statement to the class about crocheting scarves is inappropriate for her to discuss with her peers. Crowley’s response, that “Rosie Greer [*sic*] did cross-stitch but he was a pro-football player and he could get away with it” is significant from a racialized gender lens (118). Namely, this metonymic association of Latisha King’s desire and expression for a craftwork such as crocheting and a Black cis-masculine athlete’s popularization of what Rosey Grier called “Needle-

point for Men” in the 1970s is telling of the kind of racialized gender parameters that framed Latisha King’s life. Crowley’s juxtaposition of Rosey Grier and Latisha King demonstrates the terms by which Crowley can imagine Latisha’s future gender possibilities. Perhaps something like: only Black men who meet able-bodied norms and satisfy white audiences through the spectacle of sport are able to transgress gender boundaries through their artistry and crafts. In this sense, Spiller’s notion of the process of “ungendering” appears relevant. This is the process whereby Black people “lose . . . gender differentiation in the outcome [of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade], and the female body and male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender specific” (Spillers 1987: 67). Snorton, then, utilizes Spillers’ notion of ungendering as a way to interpret fugitive acts whereby freedom narratives of Black peoples come to rely on the very “cultural and political maneuverings” that comprise the fungibility of gender differentiation for Black peoples. In this way, Crowley imagines a narrative of possibility for Latisha King, yet Crowley’s is one that offers a confining and controlling space of inhabitation for Latisha to practice her craft, one that demands gender fungibility through an effective maneuvering into Black able-bodied cis-masculinity for the enjoyment and comfort of white people.

Erevelles also builds from Spillers’ work to articulate a form of relationality between disability and Blackness. Erevelles argues that “compulsory able-bodiedness becomes the ideological and material means to separate mainstream society from its dangerous outcastes” (Erevelles 2014: 89). The pathologization, or dis-abilization, of Black bodies, she proposes, enabled the commodification of, exploitation of, and profound cruelty inflicted against Black peoples within the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its afterlives. On this reading, according to Erevelles, “to become” Black is to become disabled, and to “become” disabled is to become racialized under conditions of anti-Blackness. Regarding schools, the assumed white “right” to displace, disfigure, and disdain Black peoples continues to shape patterns of control and punishment faced by students of color in the U.S. For example, students of color are often treated as “disruptive” and “choosing to act out,” and are thus funneled into juvenile punishment systems for these reasons. Another question, then, is to what extent factors of racialized disability and gender may have played a role in the control and disciplining of Latisha King.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, I want to return to that sense of heaviness that I described above wherein heaviness feels like the thick, suffocating stares of other people, or like the heaviness that accompanies the feeling of being misunderstood, misperceived, or disbelieved. These are the same feelings that tugged at me as I read the closing lines of Salamon’s book: that “[The state] will not see [me], [it] will not stand with [me], and [it] will do everything [it] can to strip [me and my communities] of protection going forward” (169). There is a deep dread in those lines, a deep sorrow accompanied by terror and rage about the ongoing violence committed against

people of color, trans people, disabled people, Indigenous people, migrants, and all of us who are vulnerable to the state's violence and refusal. From this, I wonder what possibilities for structural change, affirmation, and life might be able to be cleaved open by this book, not in the emptiness of a slogan like "it gets better," but in a thicker sense perhaps. I ask this in the hope that we can then bear the weight of such tremendous ancestral death, the dense networks of care and exhaustion by which we survive, and perhaps also the gendered feelings of proudly carrying a heavy object, like a sack of *masa harina* home from the grocery store for my mother, and dreaming of the beautiful transformations and future of nourishment that are, perhaps, yet to come.

University of North Carolina, Charlotte

## NOTE

1. Zurn 2019 begins to work through complicated questions of disability within Latisha King's life and death.

## REFERENCES

- California Basic Educational Data System. 2019. "Enrollment by Ethnicity for 2007–2008," *California Department of Education: Educational Demographics Unit*. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dataquest.asp>. Accessed Sept 23, 2019.
- Erevelles, Nirmala. 2014. "Crippin' Jim Crow: Disability, Dis-location, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline," in *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada*, ed. Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey, 81–99. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137388476\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137388476_5)
- Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- García, David G. 2018. *Strategies of Segregation: Race, Residence, and the Struggle for Educational Equality*. Oakland: University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520296862.001.0001>
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2004. "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography," *The Professional Geographer* 54(1): 15–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-0124.00310>

- Guenther, Lisa. 2013. *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816679584.001.0001>
- Mills, Charles. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Miranda, Deborah A. 2013. "Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, 350–63. New York: Routledge.
- Snorton, C. Riley. 2017. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9781517901721.001.0001>
- Spade, Dean. 2015. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822374794>
- Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17(2): 64–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>
- Wynter, Sylvia. 2001. "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be 'Black,'" in *National Identities and Sociopolitical Change in Latin America*, ed. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana, 30–66. New York: Routledge.
- Zurn, Perry. 2019. "Review of *The Life and Death of Latisha King: A Critical Phenomenology of Transphobia* by Gayle Salamon," *philoSOPHIA* 9(1): 153–59.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/phi.2019.0007>