

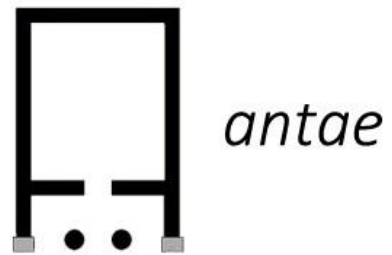
## Stacey Abrams: Never Conquered. Always Black.

Gail McFarland

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## **Stacey Abrams: Never Conquered. Always Black.**

Gail McFarland

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American politician, attorney, and author Stacey Yvonne Abrams is the undeniable object of political and social comment, both locally and nationally. A member of the Democratic Party, Abrams became the first African American to lead the Georgia House of Representatives, and the first woman to lead either Republicans or Democrats in the Georgia General Assembly in 2010. She served as the Minority Leader of the Georgia House of Representatives from 2011 to 2017 and, in 2018, became the Democratic Party's gubernatorial nominee, making history as the first Black female candidate for any major party in the United States. When term-limited incumbent Georgia Republican Governor Nathan Deal could not seek a third consecutive term, a subsequent primary runoff election between Republican candidates Casey Cagle and Georgia's Secretary of State, Brian Kemp, made Kemp the Republican nominee for the state's highest office. Kemp's primary challenger for the office was Democratic nominee, Stacey Abrams.

After a highly competitive campaign, Kemp declared victory over Abrams on November 7, 2018, with a claim of 50.3% of the vote; Abrams collected 48.7% of the electorate, while Libertarian Ted Metz trailed behind both with 0.9%. Assuming victory, Kemp resigned as Secretary of State—after having officially overseen the election. On November 13, 2018, U.S. District Court Judge Leigh Martin May ruled that the Gwinnett County Board of Elections violated the Civil Rights Act in its rejection of absentee ballots. A subsequent ruling from U.S. District Court Judge Amy Totenberg stated that all votes had to be counted and preserved. On November 16, after certification of the votes cast in every Georgia county, Kemp was found to have dominated Abrams by some 55,000 votes. The victory was sullied by Secretary of State Kemp's being charged with overseeing an election from which he benefited as a candidate—a direct and illegal conflict of interest. Additionally, under his oversight, irregularities in voter registration that directly rendered 3,000 people ineligible to vote, and the delay of approximately 53,000 voter registrations were found—all of which worked to disproportionately and adversely affect Black voters—leading to allegations of deliberate voter suppression through Kemp's office.

On November 16, Abrams suspended her campaign, with reservations. In so doing, she acknowledged Kemp as the next governor of Georgia, but not as the electoral victor. Her final campaign-related speech, which Abrams emphasised, was not a concession, because 'concession

means to acknowledge an action is right, true, or proper', ended the campaign.<sup>1</sup> However, as a function of ending her campaign, Abrams announced the launch of Fair Fight Georgia, a grass-roots initiative devoted to ensuring accountability and integrity in the voting process. She also announced the immediate intent of working across party lines to file a lawsuit against the state of Georgia 'for the gross mismanagement of this election and to protect future elections from unconstitutional actions'.<sup>2</sup>

In her non-concession speech, Abrams looked unflinchingly into the camera and declared,

I'm supposed to say nice things and accept my fate. They will complain that I should not use this moment to recap what was done wrong or to demand a remedy. You see, as a leader, I should be stoic in my outrage and silent in my rebuke. But stoicism is a luxury, and silence is a weapon for those who would quiet the voices of the people. And I will not concede because the erosion of our democracy is not right.<sup>3</sup>

The recorded moments of Abrams and her non-concession speech are laden with a surfeit of meaning, as her body, her voice, and her Blackness take on the weight of race, politics, and sociality. To fully appreciate the gravity of Abrams' non-concession, it is important to understand how Stacey Abrams works as a fugitive and resistant object. The clip of Abrams's non-concession speech is important because it chronicles a defining moment of political resistance, one in which Abrams ontologically defines a common vocabulary for a destabilised electorate needing to share information in a heretofore hegemonic political sphere. This domain, driven by hegemony and the apparatus and technology used for production, and exhibition and spectatorship, includes social and machine-interpretable definitions of basic political concepts of voting and representation, combined with visual and aural images of candidates and constituency, even as it contests Abrams's engagement with the aesthetics of Blackness, gender, and class. In her encounter with both popular and hegemonic domains, Abrams's non-concession confronts, disrupts, redirects, and reifies domain knowledge.

Radical theorist and poet Fred Moten considers fugitive Blackness to be the aesthetic manifestation of historically practised oppression expressed as social, political, and economic identity, experienced through the 'well-known, resonant relation to enslavement and persecution [found in African American history]'.<sup>4</sup> In assessing Abrams's performance and profound departure from traditional politics, Moten's work is useful through his arguments surrounding the inseparability of Black performance and radicalism. Investment in Moten's theories does not redeem patriarchy or hegemonic domination; rather, it works to subject the historical reverberations of race, class, and culture to close inspections of quotidian theories and performances in the political context of Abrams's digitally recorded non-concession. Beginning with the notion that 'formal resistance to

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Stacey Abrams Speech After Losing to Brian Kemp in Georgia', online video recording, *CNN* and *Goobi Peter*, 18 November 2018. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_flzjy0abo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_flzjy0abo)> [accessed 1 December 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 131 (see, in particular, pp. 115-40).

objectification is the essence of Black performance', this analysis agrees with Moten and considers Abrams's televised non-concession to be an essential performance of resistant Blackness—evidential representation that must not only be seen, but heard, if it is to be understood.<sup>5</sup>

The 11:41-minute long clip analysed in this essay was recorded and made available on YouTube by Cable News Network (CNN), an American news-based television channel owned by Turner Broadcasting System, a division of AT&T's WarnerMedia. As background to this analysis, it should be noted that prior to her arrival, the theme of Abrams' speech was heavily anticipated and assumed to bear bitter notes of antipathy and acerbic blame after days of contention surrounding voting irregularities. This clip was chosen for analysis because it does not include the abstractions of Abrams approaching or leaving the podium, thus eliminating all images and sounds outside of her on-camera performance and behaviors. Also, by tightly focusing on the delivery of her non-concession speech, this clip clearly centers Abrams as a resisting object of fugitive Blackness through performativity, materiality, and event.

As news footage, this clip deliberately pulls from observational and performative documentary traditions by using a single camera to reflexively capture the real-life moment of Abrams's speech from a single angle. The result is accomplished in a single take, in which the use of documentary technique brings an emotional and evidential feel to the moment, by using a neutral camera angle to centre Abrams in the frame. In a close shot intended to reveal details and highlight emotions, the camera makes Abrams's face and body its subject and object. As this is the first shot of the clip, it serves to establish the location and environment, while also establishing the mood of the people around Abrams—mostly assumed to be campaign staff, they are primarily white, dark-clothed, and somber-faced as they stand behind her—an ensemble of the social that Moten would suggest is charged with delivering visual cues as to the occasion and general situation of the gathering.

Professionally attired in richly coloured periwinkle blue, Abrams stands out from all others onstage, all the more visible because she wears the only bright colour seen in the shot, a challenge to the ensemble of the sense. The ensemble of the sense prioritises the success of the whole over the success of the individual, with all parts of the group identity to be considered only in relation to the whole.<sup>6</sup> In equating Abrams's place in the ensemble with art, Moten's lens further suggests an economy of form, tone, and colour, encouraging the perception of Abrams as art—which Moten suggests occurs in encounters with art, and with Black art, in particular. The blue suit encourages a spectrographic surrogacy through the gaze of the camera, operator, and other digital reproductive technologies inherent to media used to record or map the position of a Black aesthetic object on a scale between extreme or opposite points of politics, race, class, and gender. In this presentation, spectrographic surrogacy negotiates a visual relationship with social meanings, and is not a neutral activity: Abrams is engaged as a resisting gubernatorial candidate, and an irate voter, through the

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<sup>5</sup> Moten, *Stolen Life*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>6</sup> See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 172-75.

way her Black female body is visually and artistically framed, as a bust. Leaning on Fred Moten's artistic metaphors, and the understanding of a bust as a representation of a human, depicting the figure as a head and neck, and a portion of the chest and shoulders, a bust is generally intended to record the appearance of an individual or a type of person. This aesthetic experience is an active part of the formation of Abrams as a Black aesthetic object, as an object of the camera used to convey meaning through what Moten considers as the 'lawless freedom of imagination'.<sup>7</sup> Abrams's body, in contrast to its neat and professional blue suit, is lushly dark and thick, broad shouldered, clear-eyed, and obviously Black. In the moment, Abrams rejects and refuses objecthood by not acknowledging or courting erotic and fantastic notions of Blackness, especially those fancies attached to the wanton fullness of the Black female body. Arming herself with intellect and savvy politics, Abrams faces the camera, and in the uncut recording offers straightforward gender-neutral answers that push through social and political dissonances like misogynoir, race, and class, and other actively resistant abstract, socially problematic anaconceptual perceptions of Black females.<sup>8</sup>

Standing beneath white light, it is clear that Abrams is not wearing stage makeup because of the glare of the lights against her dark skin—marking her, again, as Black and female; on a secondary note, the makeup marks her as a non-professional actor, though she has undeniably consented to make this appearance as a constituent surrogate. When Abrams speaks, her vocal tone and language are decisive, civil, empowered, and credit her position as an attorney and politician. Her physical movements are contained to a point nearing stillness as she uses only her hands to bring emphasis to her statements, and the camera records this contained movement as her voice performs the labour of aesthetically challenging the prevailing political narrative. Her stillness in this moment of action demonstrate the fugitive Blackness that Fred Moten defines as 'a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed [...], a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument'.<sup>9</sup> Moten's definition reads like a mission statement and theme for Abrams's politics and public statement. For Abrams, the wealth and value of fugitivity is in the contravention claimed by her politics and her presentation of self.

Frank B. Wilderson III suggests that '[s]uch gatherings are always haunted by a sense that violence and captivity are the grammar and ghosts of our every gesture. This is where performance meets [moral] ontology'.<sup>10</sup> Moral ontology, in the political space of Abrams's resistant non-concession, demands that the electorate define what best practices are for the state of Georgia and its gubernatorial candidates, what those methods of definition are, why they are best, and how to practise them. Wilderson's notions of a hauntology bound by the violence and captivity of historic

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<sup>7</sup> Moten, *In The Break*, p. 219.

<sup>8</sup> Here, the term "anaconceptual" is used to refer to the excessive and blurred abstraction of race and gender stereotypes as collected items of subjective anecdotal information surrounding Blackness and Black females.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 131.

<sup>10</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, 'Grammar and Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom', *Theatre Survey*, 50(1) (2009), 119-125, pp. 121-22.

voter suppression speaks directly to Abrams televised performance of resistance. For Abrams, this gathering is haunted by the question of whether a moral and legal system of election can objectively exist independently, to be discovered by people, or if the morals of entrenched hegemony are merely a mental construct of people and therefore inseparable from people. As she begins her speech, Abrams assumes the resistant aural space of improvisation, generativity and intentional disruption, by recounting the events that brought her to the podium. From the first second, Abrams's nearly-twelve minute speech is necessarily self-aware, realising that under the aesthetically patriarchal gaze of Brian Kemp and the Republican Party, her voice will be recognised as fugitive sound. Abrams's non-concession speech is constructed as fugitive sound because while the words she voices compose sound in protest, they also work as sound without affect, that is, sound that does not have an effect on, or make a difference to, Kemp's seizure and hegemonic claim of political power. And yet Abrams's voice and language, enforced by her recorded image, along with the display of the emphatically composed forceful stillness of her delivery and tone, resist all notions of aural fugitivity. As an object, her resistance problematises the election results through questions of values and integrity, questions of political and moral performance. In short, Abrams consents to be seen as an immovable object to the infractions of a stolen election.

Addressing the reasons for appearing in public, Abrams considers the right vs. wrong binary of the gubernatorial election, but does not engage race or gender as tilting mechanisms because of her physical presence, which embodies both. Abrams's speech deliberately resists speaking to race, in precisely the way she speaks to it by leaving a hole in the accusation that 'this year, more than two hundred years into Georgia's democratic experiment, the state failed its voters [...], including a 92-year old civil rights activist who had cast her ballot in the same neighborhood since 1968'.<sup>11</sup> She purposefully resists the reductive mention of state and national history marked by chattel enslavement, Jim Crow legislation, and Civil Rights era disenfranchisement, thereby avoiding pornotroping herself and her constituency, and preserving the integrity of her voter ensemble. Through the logic of subtraction, and understanding this oppressive history, the Abrams ensemble and the viewers of this film clip will watch Abrams subjectively perform as a gubernatorial soloist for the remainder of her speech.

The speech and its diegetic sound, recorded in its moment of delivery, is subject to Phillip Auslander's notions of liveness through its performed negotiation with an intensely mediated political and social world. Auslander holds that 'the default definition of live performance is that [...] the performers and the audience are both physically and temporally co-present to one another'.<sup>12</sup> This liveness is seen through image and message manipulation, such as the addition of closed captioning to the NBC footage viewed on YouTube.<sup>13</sup> The claim of liveness and its control

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<sup>11</sup> CNN & Goobi.

<sup>12</sup> Phillip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> See 'Full Speech: Stacey Abrams Ends Candidacy For Georgia Governor | NBC News', online video recording, *NBC NEWS*, 6 November 2018. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1YXTP7u8Ds>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

over Abrams is also visible in the access of her image and voice by multiple media outlets, and in its continuous time-stamped re-presentation and re-sourcing through television and the internet. The claim of liveness suggests that in publicly delivering the non-concession speech and consenting to be recorded, Abrams engages in an ongoing unresolved struggle of sociality and pornotroping across multiple media forms, including television, telecommunications and the internet—if only because her presentation of self will succumb to rebroadcasting, editing, manipulation of colour, speed, and light, as well as mechanical image size and sonic distortion, with or without her permission, since she does not, either in the moment or in rebroadcasts or other reproductions, own the rights to her image and voice.

Standing in front of the camera and behind the microphone, Abrams's body and voice fill the frame with the 'potential absence of an ablative disjunction between the word [...] and the act, [as a] refusal of the antidactylic [...] mode which makes the artist-activist unique'.<sup>14</sup> Here, ablation can be defined as the removal of oppressive material from the surface of a political practice through chipping away at it, or some other erosive processes, while disjunction is understood as the relationship between two distinct alternatives when there is a lack of consistency in their correspondence. Abrams's words and posture are defiantly fugitive in that they work to move her 'outside [her] own adherence to the law and to propriety', demonstrating instead a 'thinking or pondering [associated] with [...] a certain lawlessness of imagination [...] dangerous socialism, and with the improper as such'.<sup>15</sup> Poised in the "unique" position of activist, and complicit in her public presentation and political performance, Abrams is aware of the myriad ways in which her identity and ethnicity might be read, territorialized, and co-opted. This suggests that the use of single camera placement is a deliberate enclosure and manipulation of Abrams's image and message, and not just a concession to news media. In offering herself as a performing image and sonic representative of the missing and oppressed voters, as political fact, Abrams completely resists being identified as either Black or female, and in so doing rejects and removes herself from patriarchal associations of hegemonic politics. In Georgia, a state with a tragic and unforgotten association and debt to chattel enslavement, the fugitive Blackness of Abrams's speech and its clear rejection of race resists the opacity of a system that has historically failed to engage its culpability in the voter suppression that has been a key factor in Black oppression.

Throughout Abrams's non-concession speech, the concept of liveness is steadily evoked in ways that suggest a relationship to Fred Moten's considerations of accessing maternal modes of Black and female 'thingliness' through the 'blur' of fugitive Black aesthetics. Moten suggests that this 'blur' occurs when something is experienced aurally, without a disconnection from other perceptual senses. For Moten, the 'blur' caused through liveness instigates a state in which one sense (hearing) is perceived as though through one or more other senses.<sup>16</sup> Abrams accomplishes the 'blur', leading to liveness, through the sound of her voice as she assumes the obligations of the

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> Moten, *Stolen Life*, p. 131.

<sup>16</sup> Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 74, 226, 244-46.

reproductive labour practice of voter recruitment and protection, the relationship between the production of a populist electorate and the reproduction of a belief in a progressive Georgia, and the mourning of a populist opportunity lost.

In her non-concession speech, Abrams's amplified voice is the only sound. Speaking over a microphone, there is a hollow, lonely, and reverberant note attached to each phrase she utters. Auslander specifically considers that the experience of liveness is brought about through the acoustic sound, recording, and reverberant properties of a room or enclosure as being characteristic of the quality or state of being live, especially in terms of performance before a live audience broadcast while happening or being performed. Additionally, Auslander, like Moten, holds that the machinery of transmission connects the object of transmission to the aesthetic of the live performance—as in Abrams's connection to her constituent ensemble.<sup>17, 18</sup> In this way Moten's definition for 'blur' finds agreement with Auslander's contention that the intuitive work of resistance is found in the temporal fugitivity of the object.

Temporality is important for the delivery of this speech; that the speech is made in Atlanta is also important. For an educated woman with a legal background, the impact of Black history, the civil rights movement, and the role of Atlanta as a battleground for civil rights and state capitol cannot be gainsaid. As a political functionary, Abrams's object status depends on the anaconceptual shades of abstract meaning found both inside and outside of her action and stillness as she allows herself to be examined even as she refuses to allow or encourage definition. Her object status further depends upon her hypervisible connection to the Black fantastic because of the nonconsensual scrutiny she is subjected to, based on perceived difference frequently misinterpreted as the deviance of Blackness.

Defining politics as a culture product originating from the creative-electoral artistic activities of its creators and their output, Richard Iton conceptualises the Black fantastic as a generic category of underdeveloped possibilities and the particular 'always there interpretations of alterity'.<sup>19</sup> Iton also holds that the Black fantastic is a 'genre that destabilises, at least momentarily, our understanding of the distinctions between the [...] proper and improper, and propriety itself, by bringing into the field of play those potentials we have forgotten, or did not believe accessible or feasible'; ultimately, 'its effects are not all that dissimilar from those of [B]lackness'.<sup>20</sup> As a function of the Black fantastic, Iton theorises the role of 'informal politics' in engaging the apparent dominant order as movement of the Black aesthetic through an animateriality that both erases and challenges race and gender in favour of political message and meaning.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Auslander, *Liveness*, pp. 59-62.

<sup>18</sup> See Moten, *Black and Blur*, pp. 45-46, 62-63, 257.

<sup>19</sup> Iton, pp. 89-92.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 289-90.

<sup>21</sup> Moten's notion of animaterial status considers all humans to be simultaneously composed of both soul and the physical brain and body that rely on social consciousness for understanding encounters with race, gender, class, and social hardship. In social negotiations, Moten further considers the animateriality of an individual or group as a dynamic aesthetic force used in making community meaning. See Moten, *Black and Blur*, pp. vii, 64, 239.



Iton maintains that Blacks in the United States and elsewhere have always had to negotiate the outside/inside dynamic of representation that has often been experienced asymmetrically: as political disfranchisement on the one hand and over-employment in the arenas of popular culture on the other—necessitating performance.<sup>22</sup> Essential to this claim and the resistant fugitivity engaged by Abrams's refusal to surrender her candidacy to race, gender, and political culture, are the preposterous lengths that the White dominant majority will go to within the formal space of political power. As bearer of the Democratic political message and meaning, the Black fantastic measures Abrams as a social and aesthetic object, over which partisan ownership rights can be established, though she cannot be traded separately from the production or use of those rights.

Moten's consideration of aesthetics as an always social construction, extending beyond art alone, considers the constantly changing social context in which aesthetic judgments are made, arguing that aesthetic object function is not fixed, but works constantly in response to situation, by changing subjective responses.<sup>23</sup> For this reason, the aesthetic impact of phonic substances, gesture, and body language, as found in Abrams' non-concession speech, are understood to continuously occur in response to sociality. Building from Moten's notion that aesthetics are always social, Abrams claims and trades herself through both fugitivity and subjective resistance by refusing to surrender to aesthetic stereotypes of Blackness and Black female fetishisation.

In reading Abrams as an object through her closing campaign speech, the framework provided by Moten's consideration of Black radical aesthetics, suggests that her objecthood is more significant in the delivery of her message than the meaning and social value that reside in the state of existing solely as a "thing".<sup>24</sup> Situated in the object condition, Abrams exists as a watched "thing" in that she has been attentively observed and assessed over the period of her political campaign and non-concession. Within the context of her speech, she is also an object that is seen through the hypervisible attention of the digital domain and transmission of her televised words. Considering hypervisibility as the degree to which a "thing" attracts attention and demands prominence opens a space to understand how Abrams is distinguished from other "things" through the observation and understanding of her recorded performance in the context of perceived racial and cultural differences.

This understanding of Abrams's objecthood suggests her hypervisible connection in line with Iton's view of the central connection between Black popular culture and activism, which works to connect and situate Abrams's objecthood in the space of social resistance.<sup>25</sup> Abrams's social resistance embraces the hypervisible scrutiny generated through her campaign and inherent to the Black fantastic to transgress and defy the object condition, based on perceived differences that

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<sup>22</sup> See Iton, pp. 83-90.

<sup>23</sup> See Moten, *Stolen Life*, pp. 13-14, 38, 103, 112.

<sup>24</sup> See, in particular, Moten, *In The Break*, pp. 31-40; Moten, *Black and Blur*, pp. 72-76; Moten, *The Universal Machine*, p. 131, Moten, *Stolen Life*, pp. xii, 10-11, 214.

<sup>25</sup> See Iton, pp. 83-94.

interpolate the Black fantastic through underdeveloped possibilities and the ever-present interpretation of known and unknown related to the active presence of her Blackness and gender.

When viewing Abrams and her non-concession speech through the broad, potentially subversive, sociopolitical ideas of Moten's *Stolen Life*, she is readily identified as a Black object.<sup>26</sup> However, her performance in delivering her non-concession speech pushes against Moten's consideration of the object as essentially confrontational, but not necessarily possessing agency in the execution of its resistance. Abrams's object status is defined by her connections to sociality, which depends on the lived experience of the collective. As a part of the collective, she stands as 'the thing and the case [which stands] in the interest of the ones who are without interests but who are, nevertheless, a concern precisely because they gather'.<sup>27</sup>

Over and above being a Black object, Abrams's subtly elusive performance of self delimits an ontological distinction between her being Black and the Blackness of her presentation of self. In performing as a resisting object, Moten holds that performance is 'an internal complication of the object [Abrams] that is, at the same time, her withdrawal into the external world,' and being fugitive implies that borders are constructed around the external world and that the borders have been or still need to be overcome.<sup>28</sup> In being Black, Abrams uses public performance to not only *not* consent to be a single being, but to refuse to give flesh to stereotypes that respond to the borders that her speech and presence address. In refusing to accede to the external borders surrounding the election, she does not offer an explanation or apology for class, style, tone, or audacity. In her non-concession speech, Abrams follows the resistant nature of the object in the interest of imagining and refusing what exists within the borders of concession by favouring an image that will speak for her fugitivity.

Residing in the fact of her standing in an ontological condition that both Moten and Iton suggest is irrevocably Black, Abrams's speech is a consenting deliberate confrontation and affront to the Whiteness of politics and patriarchy in general, and Georgia politics in particular. For Abrams, the "thingliness" of her Blackness is political, socially generative, and a defining qualitative function of her being a Black person. The Blackness of Abrams's presentation of self in her performance of non-concession is resistant to White hegemony, and this resistance occurs when the lens of Blackness, working to facilitate and influence perception, is focused on a Black/White race and class binary that is capable only of understanding 'Blackness as that which cannot be understood'.<sup>29</sup> As Jared Sexton suggests, when this resistant binary is made visible, a structurally antagonistic relationship results, one not unlike the contained tension found in Abrams's non-concession speech.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Moten, *Stolen Life*, pp. 241-255.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 146.

<sup>28</sup> Moten, *In The Break*, p. 253.

<sup>29</sup> Moten, *The Universal Machine*, p. 131.

<sup>30</sup> See Jared Sexton, 'The Social Life of Social Death', *InTensions Journal*, 5 (2011), 1-47 (pp. 36-37).

Positioned at the other end of the fine arts spectrum, Moten outlines a broad anthropological approach which characterises objecthood as including most creative human activity, including language and politics, and the social identity bound by an individual object's understanding of themselves in relation to others.<sup>31</sup> In assessing Abrams's public persona—the only one available through the recording of her non-concession speech—her objecthood emerges as bound by her own understanding and ritual service of herself as a member of a social group through history, gender, class, and the fugitivity of the inventive work of liveness through artistic production and consumption.

Aesthetically, Abrams's Black alterity is found in both her resistant state of being other and her fugitive difference to the otherness generated by her allegedly radical partisan population support. Iton's theorisation of the Black fantastic is useful in looking at Abrams as a Black aesthetic object working to preserve, exhibit, or interpret human or natural heritage, while having the potential for being "claimed" politically. Here, Abrams's resistance pushes heavily against the use of aesthetic experience in her formation as a subject. Working in the background of Abrams's political stance, the Black fantastic strives to entangle her in a web of erotic performance because of her flesh—significantly viewed through her hypervisibility as a Black body in motion and as a socially available, politically assailable object of a political and patriarchal masculine gaze. This is an important area for her resistance when the political and social backgrounds for her nonperformance are construed as the area or scenery behind the main object of contemplation and the framework of Abrams's subjectivity. The fact that her resistance and fugitivity are both racialised and gendered marks Abrams as a subject, occupying space and historico-political agency in multiple ensembles.

Moten's concept of the ensemble suggests that the notion of an ensemble as consisting of a group of objects, judged to have a specific 'thingly' relationship when subjected to a predominant collective view rather than as individual subjects, is limited through its relationship to race, class, and gender. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben is useful for deeper interpretation of the ensemble, which he envisions as humanity in both state and non-state configurations. Agamben's term for this aesthetic exception is the 'coming community', and it works to establish a 'thingly' relationship through a collective view of the example. Agamben's theoretical definition of the example works to amplify Moten's notion of the ensemble as it considers that '[i]n any context where it exerts its force, the example is characterised by the fact that it holds for all classes of the same type' while, simultaneous, '[i]t is one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all. [O]n the other hand, it remains understood that it cannot serve [alone] in its particularity'.<sup>32</sup>

Moten views the object as a thing that possesses a mere physical presence, while the 'thing', on its own, is considered to exist as a separate entity, bearing its own unique qualities, though both or either of these can operate within the ensemble. Similarly, Agamben considers that the 'thing' can

<sup>31</sup> See Moten, *Stolen Life*, pp. 42-44.

<sup>32</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 2.

be found to possess a ‘whatever singularity, [characterised by] an inessential commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence’.<sup>33</sup> In realising this similarity, it is important to note that the use of “whatever” is not a matter of casual indifference, but is instead translated as a “being such that it always matters”, not unlike the ‘thingly’ relationship lodged in the defining qualities of things. Moten’s theory of the ensemble further considers that, as a social unit whose members bear a ‘thingly’ relationship, the assemblage manifests itself ‘through calls either for its dissolution or continuance [...] prompted by the incommensurable conjunction of community and difference’.<sup>34</sup> To expand the notion, Moten suggests that imagination of a reality based in perceived objects and events exposes ‘a phenomenology of totality and singularity that [reveals] political agency [...] unopposed to freedom’.<sup>35</sup> In her non-concession, making a call for continuance of the move toward political integrity and equality, Abrams is both the object and the subject of the “phenomenology of totality” and its revealed political agency.

In the action of looking directly into the camera, Abrams’s speech takes its cues from the oppositional gaze described by theorist Bell Hooks.<sup>36</sup> In framing her argument, Hooks considers the power of the female object as it dares to look back at the thing that looks at it. Taking ownership of the gaze, the act of looking back becomes a form of resistance that establishes social, racial, and political agency. While Hooks based her theory in the looking relationships of cinema, her primary argument is based in stolen agency, constituent misrepresentation, and a lack of representation, all issues addressed by Abrams and her refusal to concede. In refusing to move into a position of mere observation and subverted performance, rather than critical engagement, Abrams refused to take the space that Hooks contends has been traditionally reserved for the Black female.

For Abrams and the space of her televised non-concession speech, the oppositional gaze works as a mechanism of resistance, allowing her to position herself as a Black female, a citizen, and as a politician, all while interrogating the integrity of traditional white male-centered politics. Without identifying with the hegemonic male gaze, permeated by notions of race, possession and patriarchal order, or white womanhood, Abrams actively resists authority and institutionally imposed silence. Abrams’s oppositional gaze, delivered in the 11:41-minute non-concession speech, offers the viewer an opportunity to rethink images and ideas neutralised through the quotidian powers of race and patriarchy. In making the decision to use the sociality and critique of the oppositional gaze, Abrams’ non-concession wields a sense of authority against the dominion of state and national politics. The gaze also offers a resistant ‘look back’ to the unspoken historical actions and policies of America’s racial past, allowing Abrams to translate the political and social message of her non-concession into an interventionist form of resistance through fugitive sound. Couching her demand for critical change within the resistant language of her non-concession, Abrams made the ensemble’s call for dissolution of a patriarchal government capable of stealing

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<sup>33</sup> Agamben, p. 7

<sup>34</sup> Moten, *Stolen Life*, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See Bell Hooks, ‘The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators’, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), pp. 115-31.

an election. In publicly aligning herself with her constituent ensemble, political agency was assumed through her use of an oppositional gaze that dared to critique traditional Georgia politics.

Beyond her connection to the sociality of the electoral collective, Abrams is a member of an intellectual, emotional, and historical ensemble. Composed of Black female politicians, intellectuals, and social actors like Barbara Jordan, Patricia Harris, Shirley Chisholm, Anna Julia Cooper, Sylvia Wynter, Sojourner Truth, and many others, this ensemble signifies the strength and usefulness of the aggressive stillness of the object, in the work of pushing back against oppression, as a way of moving forward. Like the women of her ensemble, a significant part of Abrams's ownership of her objecthood is fortified by her use of the oppositional gaze as an act of political resistance and rebellion, in daring to confront race, hegemony and politics. In Abrams's non-concession, the resistance of the object establishes a set of provocations drawn from her ensemble, around the moment of her captured image and voice, and the crisis of irrepressible phonic substances, read most often as verbal codes borne by tone, inflection, and machine-produced vibration. These phonic substances, irreducible to meaning and language, constitute a history of Black experience, performance, and resistance.

Abrams's speech stands as a moment of resistance to the hegemonic power of race, class, and gender. Like the women of her historical ensemble, Abrams understands that motion and movement are not sole indicators of agency. For her, resistance and fugitive Blackness, enacted through her public political face and the Black fantastic, are survival responses to the evolutionary pressures of being a Black woman in America. Being able to engage fugitivity to open conversations and challenges that move beyond the racialised and gendered object state reads as a form of resistance—albeit a resistance that Abrams, as a soloist, shares with her ensemble cast of strong Black women in favour of a populist electorate. Abrams's visual and aural confrontation of popular and hegemonic domains redirects 21<sup>st</sup> century American political engagement of electoral and historical ensembles through aesthetic disruption of public performance. In the context of her non-concession speech, the sound of her voice and the fact that she is a constantly resistant moving image clearly places Abrams in the matrilineal line drawn forward from enslavement to the present, and predicts an extension of response and resilience that are key to understanding the work of Stacey Abrams as a fugitive and resistant object both inside and outside of American politics.

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