

On Cuddling

“Antwi invites us to look more closely at the associations between the cuddle, the choke, the hold, and the coifle for Black people. But, beyond the violence of the racial embrace, he also finds a place for fugitive cuddling, the comfort that arcs back and forth between those who flee, those who escape, and even those who remain held back. This book will take its place among others by Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman, and Hazel Carby that have investigated the violence of intimacy and the intimacy of violence.”

—Jack Halberstam, author of
Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire

“A necessary book about holding, being held, and the hold(s) of the past. Playful, vulnerable, ever acute—Antwi gets down with the funk of language, history, and bodies to make fugitive sense of modernity as anti-Black grammar and embrace.”

—Nadine Attewell, scholar of intimacy,
empire, and diasporic life

“An urgent and elegant text ... excavating the many meanings of cuddling under racial capitalism. Antwi’s writing is lyrical and powerful; the way he harnesses epistemology and polysemy to build both dancing prose and crucial political analysis is revelatory.”

—Sophie K Rosa, author of *Radical Intimacy*

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On Cuddling

Loved to Death in
the Racial Embrace

Phanuel Antwi

PLUTO  PRESS

First published 2024 by Pluto Press
New Wing, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 1LA
and Pluto Press, Inc.
1930 Village Center Circle, 3-834, Las Vegas, NV 89134

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 4611 3 Paperback

ISBN 978 0 7453 4615 1 PDF

ISBN 978 0 7453 4613 7 EPUB

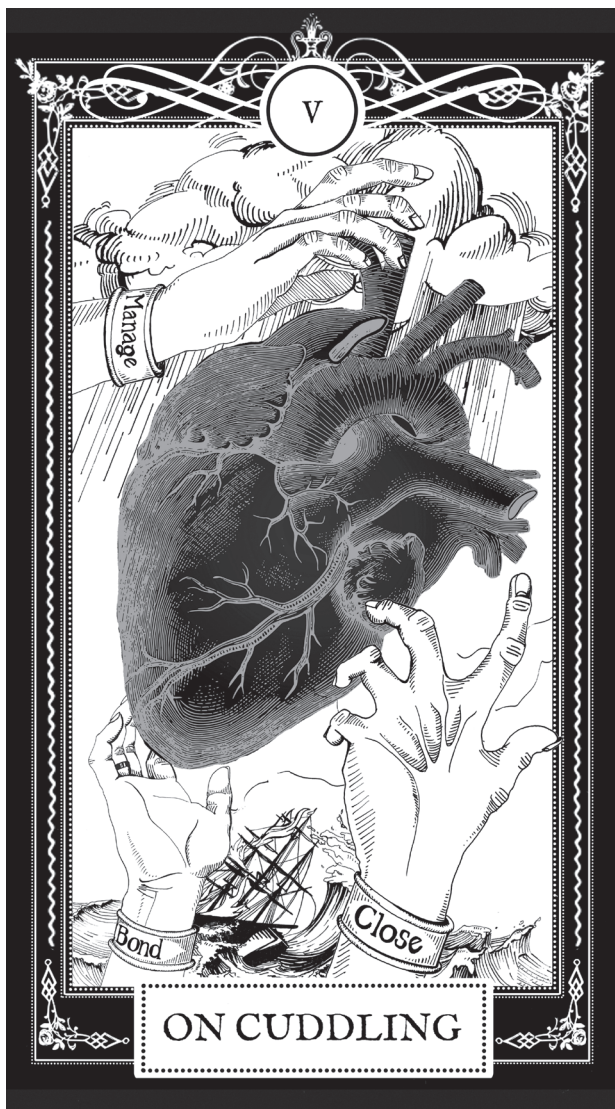
This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and
made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.
Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are
expected to conform to the environmental standards of
the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton,
England



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Artist: Amanda Priebe

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Dedication

To my parents (my maternal grandmama and grandpapa, and my mom and dad), for everything you did to safeguard my life.

To my sisters, for years of tickles and massages and pinches, all my love.

To those who return, may there be rest in the journey.

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Be Held

In which the author informs us of the ways in which cuddling is not only life-giving but death-giving for Black people.

This book on cuddling was written in the uneasy air of pandemic times when, as a grown man, witnessing again and again Black men having the life crushed out of them, I found myself wanting to be cuddled by my maternal grandmama.

It was written from the labyrinth isolation of my apartment in Vancouver. I had moved to the allegedly calm, multicultural Canadian city with a broken heart and broken bones six years prior, in 2014, in a time of uprisings. This moment of brokenness marked the changing conditions of my work and life. Here I was, alone in a new city, working to hold myself together after practicing the art of surrendering the weight of my body into the sensuous folds of another. In the absence of this shelter, without the arms I have learned to surrender myself into, I became vulnerable to two arms of institutional cuddling: the medical profession and the university system, with their “conditional hospitality.”¹ Away from familiars and familiar surroundings, not only was I vulnerable to these two arms, I also had to

confront the non-neutrality of the racist weather in this new city.

In their suffocating embrace, I imagined myself curled up on my grandmama's lap, or, as she liked to tease me, under her armpit, where the chambers of her body offered passageways to another world, and nightly, even when briefly, she'd teasingly wrapped me in the vestibule of another world. Her lap and armpits, where I was guest and host, gave me a home as big as some of the questions I want to ask about cuddling. Why, for example? And how? And when? Why and how and when does cuddling become murderous? The racial embrace . . . Why and how and when does news of another killing pass over us like an unquestioned weather system, imagined to be inevitable, unremarkable . . .

Christina Sharpe has called the whole, invisibilized climate created from and for anti-Blackness "the weather," and it engulfs Vancouver, a mountainous coastal city often associated with its low cloud ceiling that mutes the sunlight most days of the year. This was no less the case in 2014, the year that North America swelled with waves of protests against racial violence at the hands of the police. This was a key date, one freighted with "evaluative space to pay attention to the meaning and impact of different scales of action in the process."² It was a lively summer of protests. The videotaped evidence of Eric Garner having the life squeezed from him in the devastating embrace of New York Police Department Officer Daniel Pantaleo was everywhere, and protesters everywhere were chanting "I can't breathe,"

echoing Garner's inaudible last words, into the air. The media loop on Ferguson showed protesters burning down structures of the repressive state, paradoxically broadcasting the strength and fragility of those who cared more for Black lives. On the university campus where I had begun to work, students supporting the #BlackLivesMatter movement were also in solidarity with protesters across the water, in Hong Kong, the Umbrella Movement. Rebellious noise that flowed through Vancouver, where Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh defended their unceded lands, changed the vibratory skin of the city.

I was far from home in a city whose weather wrapped me too tightly and not tightly enough. When I think about the non-neutrality of the weather, I am also thinking about the concrete features and assertion of the city and my vulnerability to the spiral entanglements in the elemental forces of place: ways that once-familiar winds that caressed my face now tingled my skin, causing me to distrust the profound necessity of my body's sensations. Even though students and activists took to the streets to protest the murders, the general agreement of most Vancouverites was that *this could not happen here*, that these lethal embraces were the exotica of America's exceptional history. And yet the everyday, normalized, embodied experiences of anti-Blackness afforded me no such comfort. I was being told, in a million tiny ways, that this city would never be my home. And yet, at the same time, my university and other institutions in the city turned to me and my Black colleagues, exhausting us with requests to perform

4 a racial meteorology, to explain the anti-Black weather that they, only now, were discovering. Loved to death in this suffocating institutional embrace that demanded answers and that left my bones and my body exhausted, my thoughts returned, again and again, to my grandmama's cuddles and the home it created for my questions.

For many of us, home is a touchstone question, in terms of who we are. For others, cuddling is a touchy question, in terms of boundaries, exclusion, forming a space of interaction and shared subjectivity. Domesticated into a familiar activity, cuddling rarely gets treated as a serious concept that can carry the heavy philosophical and theoretical questions of our time. Aside from a few artists (the arresting cover of Claudia Rankin's *Citizen: An American Lyric* and Adrian Howell's ethical-negotiation performance work, *Held*) and psychologists (who tend to focus on the relational interactions of cuddling in the romantic domain),³ it is imagined as a passing comfort among animals, or between humans and animals, or experienced as an activity that occurs between mothers and children, or between lovers in the private space of home. And yet, when cuddling offers home, it grows full with questions. What happens when we move cuddling from the private space of the home into the public space of culture and politics, and even economics?

On Cuddling is an invitation to meditate on the practices that go into finding home in each other when there's no boundary that's real, no exclusion that's given, and all of us are part of the same great huddle, past and present and future as

entangled possibilities, the overall phenomenon of humanity, messy, violent, loving. Particularly, it invites us to think with the conventional graphics of cuddling but unties its social contracts—its “instituted trace”⁴ to comfort and to romance—in order to help us think through the kinds of intimacies that we not only learn but also conform to, or discipline others to conform to, when it comes to (mis)managing Black lives. In other words, I am resisting the object performance of cuddling as a way to insist that the movements of care and vulnerability that some experience as intimacy in cuddling can, for bodies that are exiled by fences of rule, become calculated choreographies that get used as weapons to kill. The theatrical acceleration of intimacy that led to the suffocation of Eric Garner and George Floyd, of them being held to death in public by agents of the state invites us to look again at how cuddling, a practice *with a long historical arc and a continuous (hidden) deep structure of danger*, can offer a space to exercise state-sponsored violence.

Initially, I blamed my distrust of the city on which I had to depend but to which I had no relation on its elemental materials: air, land, and water. I was sure the changes to my diet accounted for the shifting morphology in my body sensations. My body was not surrendering to this new place, nor was it positively correlating to the theater of diagnosis through which the medical system was channelling my body and its sensations. In fact, the weekly appointments and revolving blood tests were beginning to induce in me doubt about what I was sensing; my capacity to hold on to the

6 ecological-political forms of violence I believed to be affecting my body was slipping. The structures of care were failing me; they were draining my energies, too. I wanted to escape everything that was happening and, at the same time, I wanted to surrender the weight of everything, including my own weight, into the repeated movements that had once offered me shelter. Choreography is a set of planned movements, intended to be performed over and over again, and cuddling, I will argue, is a choreography. But in this moment, no cuddling choreography could be executed. As a result, I began to refract my interactions with the medical system, the university, and the world around me through questions of cuddling. The result is this book.

Here is some of what I learned: Understood both as a curative and lethal practice, cuddling marks a contradictory site, making it a difficult political art worth engaging. I have, for example, sought to draw a line that connects the infatuation of commercial television with “cuddly” large Black women to what I am calling “state cuddling”: the punishing use of seemingly neutral bureaucracy to render a killing form of care. I have sought to link the murderous public strangulation of Black men in the police choke hold to the hold of slave ships. And throughout, I have held tight to how, through queer intimacy, poetics, funk, and fugitive solidarities, we who are embraced by anti-Black violence refuse, and cuddle other possibilities. We are, all of us, locked in the racial embrace, but it does not cuddle us all in the same way.

Readers who wish for the comforts of a declarative politics must, in this book's embrace, prepare themselves for disappointment. Of course, I am committed to refusal, resistance, collective liberation, abolition, rebellion, riot, and mobilization. Our moment requires it. But in this text, I am seeking something more subtle. It is an attempt to grapple with questions: how is/was an anti-Black world being made, past and present? How is that world making all of us? And what can yet still be made of that world? As a poet and a literary theorist who is dedicated to attending to the traces of Blackness where we don't expect to find them, in this book it is my duty to try and unfold these questions as they might be found in the nuance of language, that shared archive. Here, I exercise my literary imagination and apply the tools of literary criticism to economics, social institutions, popular culture and, more generally, to the weather systems of anti-Black violence. Hence the reader should expect the unexpected and also recognize the care with which the words operate in both poetry and prose.

In writing this book, I have had to confront what it means to cuddle death, an idea, a person, and concept, and, in doing so, I have written a book that feels out of line with the way I have come to understand what makes a book a book. Just as the curative practice of cuddling requires a consenting other, *On Cuddling's* express desire is for its readers to regard the work of reading as a conscious activity of making, one that gets lighter if we read not simply to see ourselves as only we can, but also to open up in each other surprising

conversations about dignity; we can have a chance at this conversation if we allow ourselves to see the pages formed as forms still forming. This poetic exercise in reading also marks my writing. To be with an other, compositionally, recalls the montage, so as not to feel trapped in the fragmentary loop from and within which I try to understand a world that keeps chattering.

The loop of murders that work to interrupt my writing informs my formal choices; the fragments of poetics and criticism, of autobiography, philosophical musings, therefore, are not coincidental. It is my vanity to disown the command for integration and acknowledge this conscious craft on behalf of you. I am displaying ways these deaths affect my process, showing their effect on my imagining and thinking. These deaths are not distracting me from the project. These deaths are refractions from the world; these worldly events that keep crashing into me, and my worldly experiences of them as a nightmare mired in the trying presence of now, interrupt my words and my world, informing the controlled uncontrolled experiences that inform this book.

This looping, crashing force (a tidal force that recalls Kamau Brathwaite's insistence we forgo traditional Eurocentric dialectics for *tidalectics* of the Black Atlantic) might also be recognizable in the poetry and prose of this book. When one is forced, as Black bodies are, to live in the *continuous present*, one is asked to embrace grammar differently.

Given the scant conceptual weight typically ascribed to cuddling, and given the amount of

baggage that this familiar practice holds for some of us, I have elected to gather familiar objects and events and practices that equally tend to receive less conceptual attention as a way to examine ways that the multiple aspects of our material and desiring lives condition the mismanagements of Black life. These include the making of the teddy bear, a popular image of the slave ship, *Brookes*, a scene from an American reality TV show, *X-Factor*, US economic policy, as well as what might at first appear to be the most trivial details of a number of police murders. I want to stress that just because these extrajudicial killings happen in the United States does not mean the ramifications stay there: the US weather system of anti-Blackness (wrapped around a form of unforgiving capitalism) emerges from the same field of forces that animate the wind and waves around the world. I have chosen, for the most part, to focus on the United States because, for reasons of its empire, all of us global subjects are compelled to become literate in its operations.

Fundamentally, this book on cuddling is also a book about intimacy: intimacy as a way of un/ knowing, cuddling as a fleshy epistemology. I long for more ways for all of us to be close, to hold one another, and for a longer period of time, without quieting or rearranging the arc of each other's line. But this book, does not concern itself with the oxytocin many of our bodies release in a cuddle and the ways we might harness it for pleasure, profit or politics. I *do* preoccupy myself with the roles associated with oxytocin: social bonding and reproduction, and the tug of longing their

release elicits in relational intimacy (attachments, belonging and home). And what of cuddling and sex (before, during, after, instead of)? Indeed. Let's hold the question tightly even while we do not look at it directly: in this book, it's close at hand.

Yet the association of cuddling with comfort is not the whole story. The perception of cuddling as romantic and friendly gives us only part of the picture. This book explores more coercive and catastrophic cuddles as they subtend Black life and death. As much as we want to think of cuddling as a practice of care, intimacy, and tenderness, we also need to account for ways that care, intimacy, and tenderness are also media of violence. Relationship counsellors, novelists, and theorists will tell us: It is not so uncommon to feel smothered, held down or suffocated by one or ones who claim to love us. However, this book explores what it means to be loved to death by systems, and what emerges, shimmering, squiggling, from killing care.

While I remain interested in intimacy's epistemologies of the cuddle, this book is more interested in the collective fantasies and histories we draw inspirations from when society holds Black people and makes vestibules with and out of our bodies. "Vestibule," another name for porch or entrance depending on whether one favors the seventeenth- or eighteenth-century etymology, is derived from the vestibular system, a major sensory organ we rarely notice until we experience motion sickness or dizziness related to infections of the inner ear and lose our sense of equilibrium and balance. Vestibule's relationship to the portion of the inner

ear that controls equilibrium and balance suggests how a vestibule's primary use is to orient us into our position in the world. For many, being held in a cuddle restores balance to our position in the world. It is related to listening, and the listening we do here opens (and I mean to hold open and not foreclose) cuddling's meaning.

Let us dwell with the cultural resonance of "porch," that space of intimacy that sits in your house and in the world at the same time, where people sit, eavesdrop, gossip, watch, and talk. Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, rooted in folklore and oral storytelling, understands the significance of the porch as a gathering space for banter, soaking up histories and listening to stories. Here, porch-sitters' ears watch, eyes listen, at times even touch beneath the floors of the porch to encourage and welcome home a storyteller. If we think of cuddling along the sensorial lines of a porch, cuddling as a practice, is an interface of sorts—a tactile mutuality, a non-mirroring tactility, creating a common tactile surface by rhyming shapes and positions, at times mirroring each other's shapes, and through it all retaining an opaqueness to intersubjectivity. The porch is a threshold, an interior-exterior holding. If we think of the porch in terms of cuddling positions, and consider one body as a vestibule for another, cuddling becomes an exterior exteriority that creates interiority, a tactile inbetweeness that is also a mutual inbetweeness rather than the creation of an interior, a place. *On Cuddling* plays with this cultural vestibule and the controlling perception of cuddling as a comforting and relaxing activ-

ity rather than also experiencing cuddling as an activity, with concrete opacity. This book will keep beckoning readers into this sense of the porch/ vestibule as a place of convening to suggest that the Black body is itself a porch and vestibule for the Other's body—a community-gathering and equilibrium-restoring place.

And from this vestibule, this place we pause to embrace guests or hosts as we arrive or before we leave, we will be listening to the intricacies of misunderstanding that envelope the cuddle that (mis)manages Black lives. Following the associative compositions and coordination in practices of cuddling, my thinking in this book weaves words to worlds by rematerializing, via defamiliarizing, the referential surfaces in the language of cuddling's many optima (its connotations, associations, and etymologies). This at-times uncomfortable or discomforting approach will allow me to sketch/stretch out the various registers of "cuddle" I am working with, as well as the adjacent terms it evokes (care, embrace, intimacy), which helps create the condition to hear and feel the dumpy trajectories of the cuddlepoetics that this book aspires to map.

Through citations, I have credited the community of writers whose work, during the isolation of lockdowns, offered shelter and companionship. They were, on some days, the only companions I trusted to hold me without agenda; I held on ambivalently. The lack of movement, or the shrinking of spaces of separation between us as a result of the pandemic, influenced my circulation between genres, making *On Cuddling* a book that

embraces open exchange and celebrates collaborative participation. Feeling singular and alone in my apartment in the pandemic, my thinking and writing became highly citational at some points, gesturing to an embrace of sociality.

What, then, has my broken heart got to do with my broken bones, and what does the pain from both have to do with cuddling? While I hesitate to claim brokenness as the surrogacy that gave birth to *On Cuddling*, I will acknowledge that the accumulated pain from both reoriented me to the benefits of lying in a fetal position. I've always figured out how to be grown, however, on those curl-myself-up-into-question-mark days, on days when my search for a place to rest heart and bones yielded no results, the absence of sheltering eyes and hands made me plead with this hang-around pain to allow my body to receive the needle piercing my skin to draw blood as companion. Soon, the harmony of the rhythm beneath the rhythm of this cyclical drama, which is to say, the eye of the needle and the shoulder pat from the lab technicians, became more important than the results the blood work would yield. I embraced these small intimacies. And because I was spending as much energy going to the doctors as I was living with pain, I began to think about Christina Miserandino's theory which uses the spoon as a metaphor to describe the impact that chronic pain has on the daily lives of people.⁵ Spooners, Miserandino points out, begin their days with a limited number of spoons, and because every task requires a certain amount of energy, meticulously planning and making difficult choices

about how you use units of energy is necessary or else one runs the risk of using too many spoons and likely using up all of their energy and risking crashing. This dispensation of energy started me considering the relationship between spooner and spooning and thinking about the choreographed energies in the cuddle.

Having undertaken this project on cuddling, with its syncopated trajectories, has taught me ways that the aftermath of a loss can spark the genesis of a project. I have grown surer that the work some of us dedicate our lives doing return us to ourselves; or rather, the mundane devotions of our daily lives help us listen to matters of the world. I remain a cuddler committed to pointing out that all of us interested in cuddling are not all cuddled in the same way, by the same arms, by the same institutions.