

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

BLACK VERTIGO:

ATTUNEMENT, APHASIA, NAUSEA, AND BODILY NOISE, 1970 TO THE PRESENT

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And talking about dark! You think dark is just one color, but it ain't. There're five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some wooly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another. Saying something is pitch black is like saying something is green. What kind of green? Green like my bottles? Green like a grasshopper? Green like a cucumber, lettuce, or green like the sky is just before it breaks loose to storm? Well, night black is the same way. May as well be a rainbow.

—Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977)

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	v
Abstract.....	vii
Introduction: Blackness in Flux.....	1
<i>Chapter 1</i>	
<i>Attunement in Toni Cade Bambara's Post-Cool Blues Scenes</i> .....	8
I.    That 70's Feeling.....	8
II.   The New Blues.....	17
III.  The New Old Blues.....	22
IV.  Attuned to the '70s .....	26
<i>Chapter 2</i>	
<i>Aphasia, Logorrhea, and Language (Dis)order in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye</i> .....	40
I.    Introducing White Aphasiology .....	40
II.   Weathering the Weather.....	47
III.  Logorrhea and the Curse of Grown Folks Business .....	60
<i>Chapter 3</i>	
<i>A Nauséaste Noir in Hilton Als' White Girls</i> .....	69
I.    Blackness Before Eyes.....	69
II.   You and Whose Army? .....	89
<i>Chapter 4</i>	
<i>A Noisy, Black Phatic with Two Ellisons, Kanye West, and Nicki Minaj</i> .....	99
I.    Nausea to Vomit.....	99
II.   Phatic Noise .....	110
III.  The Laughter of the Rapper .....	115
<i>The Bravado Laugh</i> .....	116
<i>The Rapper's Sacrifice</i> .....	125
<i>Bodily Noise</i> .....	129
<i>Coda</i> .....	137
Bibliography .....	141

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## Abstract

Black being is vertiginous. Dizziness, loss of balance, nausea, double vision, altered speech—the medical symptomatology of vertigo resembles black aesthetics in contemporary literature and art. Octavia Butler's Dana is “dizzy, nauseated” when she becomes a human conduit for the present afterlife of slavery; “I was going to throw up,” says Percival Everett's Monk in the middle of the African American section of the bookstore. Beyoncé's “Déjà Vu,” staged at the scene of the Big House, incited fans to petition her record label for a reshoot, listing problems with her “erratic, confusing and alarming” dancing body. Black being, from within and outside, feels unstable. But, as the medical and aesthetical shows, it's more than just a feeling.

“Black Vertigo: Attunement, Aphasia, Nausea, and Bodily Noise, 1970 to the Present” argues that vertigo arises as a dominant aesthetic through line to feel, think, write, and sound blackness from the late-1960s onward. Across various genres, disciplines, and aesthetic commitments, the blackness of black being—the black idiom—is gathered by disorganization and sickly ambiguity registered between local and global scales. Vertigo is produced and experienced, resisted and harnessed. It is the masterwork of white supremacist violence and advanced technologies of surveillance that subject black lives to routine disruption and upheaval by the state. It is also a matter of migration, of new ecologies and overlapping histories incompatible with linearity; it is, therefore, also a matter of culture, the indeterminacy of the “black” in black aesthetics in a landscape where black aesthetics are liable to go viral. Vertigo is also a matter of methodology, responsible for forms of black expression nimbly attuned to cultural, political, and social dizziness as an everyday state of affairs.

The affective categories I examine emerge at one historical moment when the idiom for blackness is in flux. Vertigo may be found on either side of the Thirteenth Amendment, however this study takes the contemporary as its special focus. Bound by national movements of the 1950s

and 1960s, the socio-political accord of what blackness does and how blackness feels had frayed by the start of the 1970s, ushering forth the period canonically known for fragmented politics and wayward cultural expression. I recover this moment as intensifying the sense of disorganization that would guide black aesthetics for the rest of the century and into the next. Nascent in earlier periods, the sensations I associate with vertigo come to the fore to make sense of a black being freed of the mandate to achieve equilibrium.

In the '70s, stories about black folks by black women attend to displacement by advocating new methods of listening while also reckoning with failures of speech. By the 2000s, a new generation with new genres ingests a new state of the world, and it makes them *ill*, in positive and negative connotations of the word. "Black Vertigo" envelopes both Afro-pessimist and -optimist visions of black presents and futures. It develops a framework for apprehending blackness that adheres to the ebbs of experience that unite a wide range of black lives. This project inherits its critical sensibilities from such diverse fields as gender studies, musicology, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, disability studies, and other ethnic traditions.

Each chapter investigates a feeling or state of disorder. Chapter One, "Attunement in Toni Cade Bambara's Post-Cool Blues Scenes," argues for an earlier consideration of "that 70's feeling," supported by black musical acts and writers who were already tuned into the decade's famed confusion and malaise by the start of 1970. In her early decade essays, Bambara identifies an idiomatic shift in the blues, a sensibility in contrast to the blues of old, by then appropriated by white American cool culture. The new blues, I observe, reconfigures blackness in anticipation of a new era. Along with her non-fiction, Bambara's 1977 *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* models a revolutionary stance poised to interact with multiple intensities of power, be they white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, imperialist, or something else as-yet unnamed for which Bambara leaves room.

Chapter Two, “Aphasia, Logorrhea, and Language (Dis)order in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*,” recuperates an expression of illness and disability in black language that I call aphasia. Aphasia enunciates the acute and chronic physiological stresses of black living in Lorain, Ohio, in America, in the world. I utilize medical research on the aging effects of racism, what’s called “weathering,” and Afro-pessimist theory on the condition of the world to understand aphasia as a vernacular patterned by regular exposure to antiblackness. I focus on black women, who remain overlooked by medical discourses of neurolinguistic trauma. As Morrison’s 1970 novel demonstrates, aphasia is a strategy of a kind, a language for moving through the hostile atmosphere.

Chapter Three, “Nausea in Percival Everett’s *Erasure* and Hilton Als’ *White Girls*,” focuses on the affective byproduct of operative glitches in appropriation. Here the body is a Geiger counter, registering the slipperiness of blackness as signification with nausea and almost-vomit. “A Pryor Love” and “You and Whose Army?”, two essays that could not exist without the mechanics of apostrophe, inquire into the viability of black aesthetics without black people. Thrown voices and disembodied animation induce the feeling of illness without release, leaving subjects in the gross limbo of the American racial imagination.

Chapter four, “A Noisy, Black Phatic with Two Ellisons, Kanye West, and Nicki Minaj” transitions from nausea to vomit. *Erasure* by Percival Everett follows the nauseous livelihood of its protagonist, whose revulsion is so great it spills out onto the pages of novel that is little better than noise and contagious laughter. I bring this novel-within-a-novel in conversation with Ralph Ellison narration of black laughter as contagion, which bridges philosophical and musical conceptions of noise with the linguistic component called phatic expression. I finally turn to contemporary rap music and its vast catalog of laughs, sighs, hiccups, and gibberish in order to amplify the range of expression that are vernacular and active in excess of meaning.

*Introduction:*  
*Blackness in Flux*

In Octavia Butler's 1979 science fiction novel *Kindred*, vertigo both disorients and fuses Dana to the crucial facts of her existence. On her twenty-sixth birthday—June 9, 1976—the day after moving with her white spouse into “a house of our own” in Altadena, California, Dana “began to feel dizzy, nauseated.”<sup>1</sup> Dizziness and nausea—“the sick dizziness”—transport her to the antebellum past of her red-haired ancestor, now vividly her past, present, and probable future.<sup>2</sup> Dizziness and nausea also bring her back to the California home and mid-'70s life that feel newly discontinuous. As the novel continues and Dana oscillates between past and present with only this physiological warning—but no warning for the warning—she grows mournfully accustomed to the notion that living means vertigo arrives at any time. She applies sunburn ointment to whip wounds; she grows reclusive; she mistakes a memory for the dizziness of time travel, anticipating the next time she will be pulled again. Vertigo is a curse and also her only hope of return; brought to the antebellum side of Emancipation, she is “desperately willing the dizziness to intensify, the transferal” back to the 1970s “to come...”<sup>3</sup> In the 2017 graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred*, wobbly thought bubbles, distorted facial features, and turned over chairs visually represent the transhistorical slide of being the human conduit for the present afterlife of slavery.

Black life is vertiginous. The following pages argue that the medical symptomology of vertigo—dizziness, loss of balance, nausea, double-vision, altered speech, vomiting—not only resembles but conjoins aesthetic representations of blackness in contemporary American literature

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<sup>1</sup> Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 13. Nearly a century earlier, Altadena provided a haven for John Brown's third son Owen Brown, who evaded capture after taking part in the 1859 revolt in Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

<sup>2</sup> Butler, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, 34. Explaining her experience to her husband, Kevin, Dana says, “Going home does take awhile, you know. I have to get through the dizziness.” (Butler, 51)

and music.<sup>4</sup> This dissertation is an exploration of the range of vertiginous affects that compose the dominant through line to feel, think, write, and sound blackness in black works from the late-1960s onward. Across various genres, disciplines, and aesthetic commitments, the blackness of black being—the black idiom—is gathered by disorganization and sickly ambiguity registered between local and global scales. Vertigo is produced and experienced, resisted and harnessed. It is the master work of white supremacist violence and advanced technologies of surveillance that subject black lives to routine disruption and upheaval by the state. It is also a matter of migration, of new ecologies and overlapping histories incompatible with linearity; it is, therefore, also a matter of culture, the indeterminacy of the disagreed upon “black” in black aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> Vertigo is also a matter of methodology, responsible for forms of black expression nimbly attuned to cultural, political, and social dizziness as an everyday state of affairs.

The affects this dissertation examine emerge at a historical moment when the idiom for blackness in America is in flux. There is a timeliness to vertigo. Bound by national movements of the '50s and '60s, the socio-political accord of what blackness does and how blackness feels had frayed by the start of the '70s, ushering forth the period memorialized, unheroically, for fragmented politics and wayward cultural expression. My analysis begins at the temporal convergence of psychedelic soul sounds in popular music and politically-attuned Black Arts practitioners, recovering this moment as intensifying the sense of disorganization that would guide black aesthetics for the rest of the century and into the next. Nascent in earlier periods, the vertiginous sensations I identify

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<sup>4</sup> Mayo Clinic lists the following as symptoms of Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV), the most common cause of peripheral vertigo: “dizziness,” “sense that you or your surroundings are spinning or moving (vertigo),” “loss of balance or unsteadiness,” “nausea,” “vomiting.” (“Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV),” Mayo Clinic, last modified June 30, 2010, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/vertigo/symptoms-causes/syc-20370055>)

<sup>5</sup> This is a dissertation about black people, black Americans specifically, however, it is important to note that contested aesthetic and political judgements about what blackness *is* are also often disturbed by the observation and circulation of black aesthetics among non-black individuals.

come to the fore in the late twentieth-century to make sense of black being freed of the mandate to achieve equilibrium. Described and depicted in the many kinds of on-and-again displacements found in black art of this period, the blackness of black aesthetics coincides with uncertainty in the project of representing blackness, namely the doubt—as ecstatic as it is cynical—that such a project exists.

Among few scholarly considerations of blackness and vertigo, this dissertation is interested in vertigo as affect(s) intimate to but not necessarily onset by discernable occasions of violence. Earlier studies have conceptualized vertigo as the traumatic effect of colonialism and antiblackness, as either a literary trope to be overcome through character growth or a political experience denoting encounters with the state. Both of these formulations have crucially instigated the questions that guided this study, which bridges the literary and Afro-pessimistic through the excavation of feeling. If to be black is to be disoriented both locally in your own body against the “perpetually unhinged” backdrop of the world then vertigo must arise not only in the governmental ritual of the courtroom scene, but in and around other rituals as well.<sup>6</sup> If the “aesthetics of vertigo” are possibly never resolved, if the scholar who works on black art of any kind necessarily re-encounters the dizzying discontinuity left in the wake of enslavement and colonialism, then something of vertigo is either adjusted to as the regular state of things or embraced, as Dana willed for vertiginous intensity. Vertigo, in short, is not violence, nor does always feel like violence. “What is the political significance of restoring balance to the inner ear?” Frank B. Wilderson III asks.<sup>7</sup> I ask what it feels like to be off-kilter: what are the affects of recalibration? “Black Vertigo: Attunement, Nausea, Aphasia, and Bodily Noise, 1970 to the Present” intervenes by delaying aspirations of balance, for, as these chapter demonstrates, not everybody wants it. Not everyone wants recovery from vertigo.

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<sup>6</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, “The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents,” *InTensions* 5 (2011), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Wilderson, 36.

My first chapter, “Attunement in Toni Cade Bambara’s Post-Cool Blues Scenes,” argues for an earlier consideration of “that 70’s feeling,” supported by black musical acts and writers who were already tuned into the decade’s confusion and malaise. This chapter begins exactly in the year that saw the release of the Temptations’ hit record “Ball of Confusion (That’s What the World Is Today)” as well as the publication of *The Black Woman* anthology, edited by Toni Cade Bambara. It is 1970 and the ’70s both have and have not yet begun for various reasons on either side of the color line. In her early decade essays, Bambara reconfigures blackness in anticipation of a new era by identifying an idiomatic shift in blues sensibility in contrast to the blues of old, by then already appropriated by white American cool culture. “Attunement” contrasts national news accounts of oncoming crises in the ’70s with Bambara’s black feminist sense of crises that have already been known. Along with her non-fiction, Bambara’s second short story collection, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, published in 1977, models a revolutionary stance poised to interact with multiple intensities of power, be they white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, imperialist, or something else as-yet unnamed for which Bambara leaves room. I recover the ’70s as intensifying the sense of disorganization that would guide black aesthetics for the rest of the century into the next.

If attunement ascribes a manner of virtuosic engagement with competing scales of oppression, aphasia is communication as necessary—a way to keep it pushing. Chapter two, “Aphasia, Logorrhea, and Language (Dis)order in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*,” recuperates expressions of illness and disability in black language that I call *aphasia*. Aphasia enunciates the acute and chronic physiological stresses of black living in Lorain, Ohio, in America, in the world. I utilize medical research on the aging effects of racism called “weathering” and Afro-pessimist theory on the condition of the world to understand aphasia as a vernacular patterned by regular exposure to antiblackness. Defined medically, aphasia is an impairment resulting from an injury to the brain that impacts speech production and comprehension and literacy. I propose both a more expansive and

medically-informed consideration of aphasia in literary criticism as well as the use of literature to supply evidence in cases where medicine fails or refuses to examine further. I focus on black women, who remain overlooked by medical discourses of neurolinguistic trauma. As Morrison's 1970 novel demonstrates, aphasia is a strategy of a kind, a language for moving through the hostile atmosphere.

In chapter three, “A Nauséaste Noir in Hilton Als’ *White Girls*,” the black individual is a Geiger counter, registering the slipperiness of blackness as signification with nausea and almost-vomit. I consider the black voice as a thrown voice in Als’ essays “A Pryor Love” and “You and Whose Army?”, works that could not exist without the mechanics of apostrophe. With a writing practice foregrounded in “becoming,” Als inhabits several critical and narrative voices, meeting the nausea of his subjects with his own embrace of disorientation.<sup>8</sup> *White Girls* asserts and then undermines and then reasserts the viability of black aesthetics without black people. Thrown voices and disembodied animation induce the feeling of illness without release, leaving real and imagined subjects in the gross limbo of the American racial imagination.

Chapter four, “A Noisy, Black Phatic with Two Ellisons, Kanye West, and Nicki Minaj” transitions from nausea to vomit. In this chapter, I collect the various buzzing, textured ejections leftover when animation (and nausea) has its due. *Erasure* by Percival Everett follows the nauseous livelihood of its protagonist, whose revulsion is so great it spills out onto the pages of a novel that is little better than noise and contagious laughter. I bring this novel-within-a-novel in conversation with Ralph Ellison’s narration of black laughter as contagion, which bridges philosophical and musical conceptions of noise with linguistic concepts of phatic expression. I finally turn to

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<sup>8</sup> Hilton Als, “The Last Interview: A Single-Sentence Performance on the Subject of Polly Jean Harvey,” *The Believer*, July 1, 2009, <https://believermag.com/the-last-interview-a-single-sentence-performance-on-the-subject-of-polly-jean-harvey>.

contemporary rap music and its vast catalog of laughs, sighs, hiccups, and gibberish in order to amplify the range of expressions that are an extravagance of sound in excess of meaning.

For better and for ill, blackness is in flux for those who live it. I say for better and for “ill,” for even that latter half encloses a multitude of affective registers in a black linguistic context. “Ill” can mean *cool, dope, radical, revolutionary, undiscovered, never-before-did* along with all the too-usual meanings: *illness, sick, worn down, uneasy, nauseous, retching*. *Vertigo* offers the means the think about black expression in ways not so quickly attributed to violation or resistance. This work aims to adhere to the ebbs of everyday black life in ways that are affectively true to the range of black lives whose affirmed existence is crucial to the gestures what M. Jacqui Alexander calls the Sacred.<sup>9</sup> In this spirit, this study works with what writers, artists, and scholars eternally call “the blues,” what Baldwin calls “the tone” and “the beat,” “the flow of *is*” on Baraka’s terms, the Black Liberation Movement’s “necessary thing” (Mama Evelyn A. Williams), poetry’s “the word,” and what Ashon T. Crawley has recently called “enfleshment.” Along that groove, this dissertation aims to be an act of Black Study, a product of black thought whose methods follow suit.<sup>10</sup> Necessarily heterogeneous,

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<sup>9</sup> “In practice, the daily living of the Sacred idea in action occurs in the most simple acts of recognition... the cycle of action, reflection and practice as Sacred praxis,” writes Alexander (*Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2005], 307).

<sup>10</sup> My understanding of Black Study follows from Lewis Gordon’s “Theory in Black,” itemized by Jarod Sexton thusly:

1) all thought, insofar as it is genuine thinking, might best be conceived of as black thought and, consequently, 2) all researches, insofar as they are genuinely critical inquiries, aspire to black studies. Blackness is theory itself, anti-blackness the resistance to theory. (Jared Sexton, “Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts,” *Lateral* 1 [2012], <http://csalateral.org/section/theory/ante-anti-blackness-afterthoughts-sexton>)

On the difference between black studies and Black Study, Ashon T. Crawley writes, “The former indexes an historical process in the mid-twentieth-century and the latter indexes a mode of approaching objects, a form of intellectual practice, that resists the stilling and stasis of abstraction through language, and through quantifying. Thus, Black Study—when taken up in institutional form as black studies—has always been concerned with the world, with the destruction of inequity and the imagining and material realizing of otherwise worlds, otherwise possibilities” (Ashon T. Crawley,

this knowing work of scholarship inherits its critical sensibilities from such diverse fields as gender studies, musicology, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, disability studies, and other ethnic traditions. To bring forth Houston A. Baker: ‘If the analyses I provide are successful, the blues matrix will have taken *effect* (and *affect*) through me.’<sup>11</sup> Black life is vertiginous and we must move accordingly.

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*Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* [New York City: Fordham University Press, 2016], 236).

<sup>11</sup> Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 9.

*Chapter 1*  
*Attunement in Toni Cade Bambara's Post-Cool Blues Scenes*

I. That 70's Feeling

"[T]he first time we looked at 'evolution, revolution, birth control, sound of soul, shooting rockets to the moon, kids growing up too soon,' we stopped in our tracks. Fortunately, Dennis had a real fast tongue," writes Otis Williams, founding and long-term member of Motown juggernaut the Temptations.<sup>1</sup> He describes the lyrics to the group's 1970 hit "Ball Of Confusion (That's What the World Is Today)," a song that became, like so much music of the time, shorthand for the social and political turmoil of the day. Decades later, Williams considers the "Top Five hit... a very upfront political statement."<sup>2</sup> And lyrically, the brainchild of songwriters Barrett Strong and Norman Whitfield, indeed, reads like a who's who of bubbling 1960s antagonism turned to strife at the dawn of this new decade, covering everything from housing discrimination to nuclear tensions, the space race, taxes, the Beatles, white flight, and Vietnam:

Segregation, determination, demonstration, integration, aggravation, humiliation, obligation to our nation...

Eve of destruction, tax deduction, city inspectors, bill collectors, mod clothes in demand, population out of hand, suicide, too many bills, hippies moving to the hills, people all over the world are shouting, "End the war."<sup>3</sup>

Though sensational, these lyrics don't initiate the song's erratic mood: instrumentation does that work. Whitfield provides the count-in, a steady one—two—one, two, three, four, punctuated by an

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<sup>1</sup> Otis Williams and Patricia Romanowski Bashe, *Temptations* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 148. "Birth control" doesn't appear in final published version of the song.

<sup>2</sup> Williams and Bashe, 148.

<sup>3</sup> The Temptations, "Ball Of Confusion (That's What the World Is Today)," *The Best of the Temptations, Vol. 2*. Compact disc. Motown 153733, 2000. Originally released on *Psychedelic Shack*, Gordy 947, 1970.

“ow!” as Funk Brother Bob Babbitt enters with the driving and “ominous” fuzz bassline.<sup>4</sup> A wah wah guitar sound enters and echoes away; it does so again before, finally, near the 30-second mark, the song’s first lines begin: “People moving out, people moving in (Why) / Because of the color of their skin.”<sup>5</sup> Surely, the 1970s had arrived.

Contrary to Williams’ assessment, it was the song’s ambivalence that suited it to the Motown Records flagship as an attractive addition to the group’s next era psychedelic soul sound.<sup>6</sup> The Temptations had recorded and released “War!” earlier that year for their twelfth studio album *Psychedelic Shack*.<sup>7</sup> But the anti-Vietnam record that answers on no uncertain terms what war is good for was soon transferred to lower tier labelmate Edwin Starr for the single, as to not alienate the Temptations’ conservative fans.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, “Ball of Confusion,” while verbalizing hotbed issues, including Vietnam (in not so many words), is not inclined to make judgements. The lyrics, which Williams compares to Bob Dylan’s fast-talking “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” nearly escape delineation as members trade-off lines at their hastened pace, layered over and under the several layers of instrumentation: bass, drums, horns, guitar, and harmonica. Tom Waldman likens the song to the “scrawl” as seen “on Fox News and CNN, jumping from topic to topic with no discernible

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Canter, “Misunderstood Lyrics: Ball Of Confusion (That’s What The World Is Today),” *The Jivewired Journal* (blog), May 25, 2011, <http://blog.jivewired.com/2011/05/misunderstood-lyrics-ball-of-confusion.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Temptations, “Ball Of Confusion.”

<sup>6</sup> “Characterized by heavy funk drumming, blasting horns, copious electric guitar, studio effects, and polemical political lyrics,” psychedelic soul emerged in the late-60’s and otherwise commonly associated with acts such as Curtis Mayfield, George Clinton and Parliament, Sly & The Family Stone, Minnie Riperton, and Isaac Hayes (Doyle Green, *The Rock Cover Song: Culture, History, Politics* [Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014], 126).

<sup>7</sup> Also written by Strong and Whitfield.

<sup>8</sup> Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 235; Dick Weissman, *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution: Music and Social Change in America*, (Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, 2010), 99. Starr took “War” to number one, earned a Grammy nomination, and the song is generally regarded as one of the best protest anthems of all time.

frame of reference... The only point of view was that planet earth resembled a ‘ball of confusion.’”<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, “Motown played it safe” by veering into distraction.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as a diagnostic of American modernity, the lyrics are no more attuned to the late- or post-60s moment as any other, let alone a coherent critique of the times.<sup>11</sup> And, after all, it was only 1970 yet. According to experts, the nation’s public transcript was more apprehensive than unstable. At the release of “Ball of Confusion,” America was three to six years away from what historians and economists commonly identify as the start of the ’70s in earnest, the collective moment when the promises of postwar prosperity fissured into disharmony.<sup>12</sup> The world was a ball of confusion to be sure, but the nation had not yet had its “nervous breakdown.”<sup>13</sup>

This diagnosis, replicated by further accounts of the decade that take the mid-’70s as a lower limit, considers black America a mere subplot in the grander historical, economic, and political arc of the nation during the latter half of the twentieth-century.<sup>14</sup> 1973 is the pivot, that oft-cited data point when “real wages stagnated” and then declined, with American morale shortly to follow.<sup>15</sup> These figures, much as they purport an account of the nation, more accurately narrativize the income of

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<sup>9</sup> Tom Waldman, *We All Want to Change the World: Rock and Politics from Elvis to Eminem* (Lanham: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2003), 217.

<sup>10</sup> Waldman, 217.

<sup>11</sup> Versions of the song uploaded to YouTube attest to the broadness of vision; the most-watched version with over 1.5 million views includes comments such as “All that changes is the date on the calendar.....,” “Not outmoded, if anything more relevant in 2016,” “not much changed in the world it’s still a ball of confusion,” “The election brought me here”; a top comment at the time of writing reads, “Give it another 40 years and people in 2055 will still say this song is relevant and related to their current situation.”

<sup>12</sup> This was the result of a post-war period economists Claudia Goldin and Robert Margo call the “Great Compression,” during which the poor made greater income gains (in terms of percentage) than the rich.

<sup>13</sup> After Andreas Killen’s *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America*.

<sup>14</sup> Culture being the one seeming exclusion.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 140.

the white male worker.<sup>16</sup> Pinning the decline of national morale to the mid-decade thus demands the terms of American crisis and disarray align with the movement of wages distributed to nuclear heads of white households, the slowdown or uneven accumulation of white wealth taken as the bill of American emotional health. It requires full faith in those “blue collar blues,” the malaise turned epidemic adhered to a very white, very male working segment of the working class, even as the points of justified discontent—income, hiring, hours—were still expressed and felt by many more, and more intensely, by workers outside that number.<sup>17</sup> Politically, the long ’60s, or abbreviated ’70s, emphasizes a ’76 fracturing of the white electorate as the threshold for nationwide fracturing over a no less tumultuous ’68 race and consequent (perceived) dispersal of black politics. Black politics is rather assumed homogeneous in these accounts, reifying white political sentiment that relied upon an unsophisticated sense of black masses to express fears about white precarity in post-civil rights America. “That 70’s feeling,” the story goes, is a white feeling.<sup>18</sup> I’m not persuaded.

Three months after the release of “Ball of Confusion,” the Penguin Group published an anthology called *The Black Woman*. In its preface, editor Toni Cade Bambara already establishes disorder as the de facto (and de jure) environment for the “we” in her opening line, “We are involved in a struggle for liberation.”<sup>19</sup> The anthology, containing over thirty poems, stories, and essays by writers such as Paule Marshall, Abbey Lincoln, Nikki Giovanni, and an unsung Audre Lorde, predates later critical collections such as *This Bridge Called My Back, But Some of Us Are Brave*,

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<sup>16</sup> Black wages along with those of white women increased during this time.

<sup>17</sup> It requires, for example, overlooking the enthusiasm of a recently recognized workforce of black women who were eager to join unions. See Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> That feeling has been recycled for the aughts and beyond following various economic crises trailing George W. Bush’s presidency. Jefferson Cowie resurrected the blue-collar blues in a twice-titled 2010 op-ed for *The New York Times* (“Return of the Blue-Collar Blues” and “That 70’s Feeling”).

<sup>19</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), 7.

and *Sister Outsider*; but *The Black Woman*, by Bambara's assessment, is belated. The collection "grew out of impatience," she writes. Causes for impatience comprise a large list, including "the whole bibliography of feminist literature" that excludes "us," and biologists, whose neat (racist) laboratorial scaffolding cannot fathom people who "do not live in a static environment."<sup>20</sup> Bambara expresses frustration, most of all, that the canon of American radicalism, from abolition to labor, does not match the dizzying extent of black women's ongoing movement in:

work-study groups, discussion clubs, cooperative nurseries, cooperative businesses, consumer education groups, women's workshops on the campuses, women's caucuses within existing organizations, Afro-American women's magazines... organized seminars... conferences... working papers... correspondence with sisters in Vietnam, Guatemala, Algeria, Ghana...<sup>21</sup>

Black women, the list attests, were *already* contending with the *already* anxious mood of the moment. Reflecting on her editorial duty, Bambara admits to some, perhaps, "overly ambitious" objectives for the *The Black Woman* with a considerable list of her own: "(1) a comparative study of the woman's role as she saw it in all the Third World Nations"; "(3) explore ourselves and set the record straight on the matriarch and the evil Black bitch"; "(7) analyze the Freedom Budget and design ways to implement it"; "(9) thoroughly discuss the whole push for Black studies programs and a Black university"; "(12): "chart the steps necessary for forming a working alliance with all non-white women of the world for the formation of, among other things, a clearing house for the exchange of information. . ."<sup>22</sup> The ellipsis—*and so on and so on*—substitutes priorities that, if unabated, would fill the book themselves, representative of "[a] lifetime's work, to be sure," Bambara adds, multiplied across the many actions and many lives of many women.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bambara, 9, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Bambara, 9-10

<sup>22</sup> Bambara, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Bambara, 11.

This black feminist preface addresses much more than the “two great human revolutions” advertised by Penguin’s copy on the back cover. Bambara’s “we” contends with “white people, whiteness, or racism” and also “men, maleness, or chauvinism; America or imperialism... depending on your viewpoint and your terror.”<sup>24</sup> This ellipsis extends enemy territory into seeming oblivion, suggesting no shortage of places “constrictive norms” may touch, an infinite spiral of violence genres to account for.<sup>25</sup> The observation would feel prescient if not for the *and so on and so on* tone that makes naming the enemy old news. “Our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy,” she writes—it is 1970 and “we” *been* known.<sup>26</sup> The “we,” per the title of the anthology, connotes black women, deemed, by Bambara, most peripheral and therefore most disturbed by the turning planet. In so doing, Bambara also commandeers black radicalism. The preface is another kind of pivot, speaking the vernacular of the Black Liberation struggle, while reordering the terms of the afore masculinized capital-M Movement.<sup>27</sup> That 70s feeling, Bambara insists—*been* here. By the end of the very first paragraph she stakes a revolutionary stance, diagnosing the contemporary through methodology: “Our energies now,” she writes, “seem to be invested and are in turn derived from a determination to touch and to unify. What typifies the current spirit is an embrace, an embrace of the community and a hardheaded attempt to get basic with each other.”<sup>28</sup>

This chapter elaborates what’s meant by “get basic,” an agile listener-like stance advocated by Bambara as the means to navigate the politically and socially vertiginous environment she

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<sup>24</sup> Bambara, 7.

<sup>25</sup> A version of this in the contemporary might go a bit further, including homophobia, ableism, and transphobia, among other bigotry, before trailing off.

<sup>26</sup> Bambara, *The Black Woman*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> A “we” that still never goes outside of the Movement, inclusive of black peoples and other “darker races” across the world.

<sup>28</sup> Bambara, *The Black Woman*, 7.

anticipated at the top of the new decade. “That 70’s feeling” came to black folks early—as Bambara demonstrates, as well as novels such as *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Meridian* and the post-’60s poems of Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, and so, so, many others. By the early ’70s, black America was already figuring vertigo as the prevailing mode of the times—whether interested in combating it, expressing it, or “just” adjusting, living with it. The phenomenon shares features with the classic post-’60s story of black radicalism, described affectively by Nelson George as the transition from “optimism and exalted ideas” to post-soul’s “cynicism, sarcasm, and self-involvement raised to art.”<sup>29</sup>

Richard Iton interrupts this tale. He problematizes Michael C. Dawson’s telling directly, asking, “what does it mean that the black public sphere—to use Dawson’s terminology—is seen as collapsing at the same time that lower-income constituencies, women, lesbians, and gays start to mobilize?”<sup>30</sup> Disarray does not mean decline. For Bambara, the discontinuity of the oncoming decade is generative, constituting the unstable basis for the creation of cultural “waveforms” like “rebellious reparative inventions,” as her project could be framed on Katherine McKittrick’s (and Sylvia Wynter’s) terms.<sup>31</sup> “The ethic is the aesthetic,” indeed, for Bambara, whose sense of seamlessness between activist and artist can be observed in the slide between form in fiction and biographical commitments with the various forms of political organization counted off in *The Black Woman’s* preface.<sup>32</sup> She, like others, was developing a sense of vertigo. And multidisciplinary

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<sup>29</sup> Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 1. “The turning point was the early seventies,” writes George (George, 1). On his account, the Civil Rights Movement was frayed not only by the assassination of Medgar Evers, by the assassination of Malcolm X, by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., by the documented and hidden murders of activists, children, and ordinary folk condoned by the state, but also by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights act of 1965, legislative victories that counterintuitively stymied revolutionary spirit.

<sup>30</sup> Shirley Chisholm announced her historic bid in 1972.

<sup>31</sup> Katherine McKittrick, “Rebellion/Invention/Groove,” *small axe* 49 (2016): 88.

<sup>32</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World,” (unpublished ms., n.d.), 91.

revolutionary that she was, Bambara sought strategy. Her preface serves as the opening half of what Erving Goffman calls “ritual brackets,” plainly certifying a new state of talk and therefore new roles and rules for participants in the Movement’s encounter with the world.<sup>33</sup> Akin to reporter Helen Thomas in Goffman’s memorable example, Bambara sees life—black life—embedded with the understanding that one “must ever be ready to change ground, or, rather, have the ground changed for” them.<sup>34</sup>

Bambara answers vertigo with *footing* of a kind. Despite terms that suggest compression—“getting basic,” “unify,” “embrace,” along with “turning to”—Bambara’s footing requires an acuity no less manifold than the multiplied forces she tasks the Movement with contending.<sup>35</sup> Getting basic restages the terms of encounter. Bambara proposes, in Goffman’s terms, a re-alignment, a shifting stance as to carve an otherwise context with otherwise participants who can use otherwise terms to express black experiences and thus imagine otherwise possibilities.<sup>36</sup> I consider this blackened footing a form of attunement, a radical nimbleness to be tested by activists, artists, and community

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<sup>33</sup> Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 130.

<sup>34</sup> Goffman, 125. Goffman’s example analyzes a reported interaction between then-President Nixon and United Press International reporter Helen Thomas. Set in the Oval Office, Nixon chides the female reporter’s decision to wear pants and compels her to twirl in place in front of their respective colleagues. The scene displays the gender politics at play in the masculine and professional power lorded by Nixon, who at-will has changed the terms of the interaction to which Thomas must adjust.

<sup>35</sup> Speaking of all-white feminist coteries and canon Bambara writes, “I don’t know that our priorities are the same, that our concerns and methods are the same, or even similar enough so that we can afford to depend on this new field of experts (white, female)” (Bambara, *The Black Woman*, 9). She answers herself in a new, two-sentence paragraph: “It is rather obvious that we do not. It is obvious that we are turning to each other” (Bambara, 9).

<sup>36</sup> Margo V. Perkins differently interprets “getting basic” as accountability, stressing a feminist praxis that “involves black people... eliminating the counterrevolutionary sexist impulses that ultimately undermine the collective liberation struggle.” (Margo Perkins, “Getting Basic: Bambara’s Revisioning of the Black Aesthetic,” in *Race and Racism in Theory and Practice*, ed. Berel Lang [Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000], 156). Ashon Crawley, on the insistence of otherwise: “I do not say new. I say otherwise.... Otherwise is a word that names plurality as its core operation, otherwise bespeaks the ongoingness of possibility, of things existing other than what is given, what is known, what is grasped.”

leaders in the intensely vertiginous decade and beyond. And what Bambara asserts in *The Black Woman* she demonstrates in fiction, where attunement—and, at times, lack thereof—communicates the necessary work of black liberation.

Best known by her first story collection *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), Bambara's short fiction is often remembered for its commitment to “giving voice” to the many voices of what's loosely called “community.” In scholarship, Bambara assumes the position of reporter and truth-teller—roles aligned with her non-fictional writing, her teaching and activism—but also ethnographer and stenographer, sharing true stories that retain the orality whence they came. Yet even within such apprehensions of Bambara's work, few studies approach her text on the page and its vernacular with a linguistic interest beyond that diagnostic. Even fewer consider what kind(s) of reader(s) Bambara trains (versus the speakers she transcribes). Even fewer take up her second short story collection, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977).

As Bambara's only book of collected fiction with stories that emerge from the '70s decade, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* does not just a report on the state of things, but requires an attentiveness that does not invite but rather compels readers to become active participants in each story's telling. Already living, working, surviving, conversing within their own vernacular worlds, Bambara's characters aren't code-switching, yet still make constant adjustments in voice, speech, and tone, and in ways not consistently made apparent through narratorial cues. Under Bambara's pedagogy, these “code-switchinglike behavior[s],” as Goffman might call them, are overlooked to a reader's—and the Movement's—extreme detriment. Goffman describes a type of “dexterous speaker” able to keep multiple, different language codes and contexts “in play” at once.<sup>37</sup> Bambara's characters are ever dexterous speakers; they have to be. With *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, she demonstrates the necessity

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<sup>37</sup> Goffman, 156.

of dexterous speakers across the planet, while also creating dexterous *readers* and students of the Movement. These stories require and call for attunement, the prerequisite for moving through the '70s with a revolutionary politics intact.

## II. The New Blues

The US white working class entered the '70s with black folks on its mind. The “blue collar blues,” the very name borrowed from a defiantly black tradition, eyed black advancement like an unwanted spectre while it articulated itself in the sanded down emotional style called “cool,” an additional, doubled appropriation of Victorian emotional culture and radical black politics and survival. “At bottom, the blues of blue-collar workers are the blues of America,” economist Leonard S. Silk determined.<sup>38</sup> His 1970 article in *The New York Times* followed a late-60s study on the blue-collar condition undertaken by the Labor Department under Nixon. But that wasn’t quite true. Despite evidence that those particular “blues” were not unique to any one race, gender, age, or collar color—and in fact rated higher amongst blue-collar wives and white-collar workers—reporters and labor spokespersons alike framed the decade’s blue-collar strife as a very white, very male problem.<sup>39</sup> Silk, curious why Americans should “after three decades of economic growth” feel “poorer, despite higher earnings” immediately finds a focus subject in “the average white married man, employed in a blue-collar job.”<sup>40</sup> Other national coverage followed suit. Meanwhile, even if reporters dared consider it, insight on the blues from a black perspective would have been impossible as matter of base diagnosis: the perceived “faster progress of Negroes” was a commonly cited symptom.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Leonard S. Silk, “The Blue-Collar Blues: Group’s Woes Mirror America’s Trials, But the Solutions Should Be National,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1970, 65.

<sup>39</sup> “Work in America: Blue-collar blues linked to jobs,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 31, 1972.

<sup>40</sup> Silk, “The Blue-Collar Blues.”

<sup>41</sup> Silk, ”The Blue-Collar Blues.”

According to the 1970 Assistant Secretary of Labor, black people accounted for half of the “double squeeze,” afflicting “blue-collar workers”—a “social squeeze” that combined a fear of association with urban blight with feeling “pressed by the blacks or other minority groups coming up from below them.”<sup>42</sup>

The whiteness of the blue collar blues becomes crucial to the character of these blues first as a type of leashed discontent and later an even more controlled—and bourgeois—boredom. Initially reported by Joseph Kraft of *The Washington Post*, the blue collar blues is characterized as “a new wave of folk malevolence,” though Kraft is ultimately sympathetic to the cause of “millions of Americans” who feel “a sense of having worked hard for illusory gains, of having been conned or gyped.”<sup>43</sup> The article advocates “self-restraint,” which “applies even more to the blacks who demand instant access to things others achieved only through years of toil” for they along with “elites,” “are the ones who most inflame Middle America.”<sup>44</sup> When first reported by Silk in the *Times*, “the heart of the blue-collar blues,” sat beneath “the discontent, even anger of blue-collar workers.”<sup>45</sup> Quoted in that article, conservative political theorist Kevin P. Phillips converts that anger into sadness, claiming the blues is “not simply a question of hostility toward blacks,” but rather “*unhappiness* with permissiveness and erosion of traditional values, opposition to the principle of Federal welfareism and social engineering...”<sup>46</sup> Just two years later, in a new report from the office of the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, excerpted in the *Chicago Tribune*, the male

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<sup>42</sup> Silk, “Labor and the Economy: Blue-Collar Workers’ Shifting Status Plays Vital Role in the United States,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1970, 49.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Kraft, “Blue Collar Blues Contain Seed for Political Trouble,” *The Washington Post*, July 7, 1970, A15.

<sup>44</sup> Kraft, A15.

<sup>45</sup> Silk, “Labor and the Economy.”

<sup>46</sup> Silk, “Labor and the Economy.”

worker's "job-generated aggression" is balanced by his colleague who is merely exhausted, who "comes home so fatigued from his day's work that all he can do is collapse and watch television."<sup>47</sup>

By the end of the '72 report, the blue collar blues—still under that name—better resembles a malaised, misunderstood condition with "symptoms" and "causes." Workers aren't angry, or bigoted, but "alienated." Other coverage loses its charge around this time: "economically trapped, socially scorned and just plain bored," says the *Times* the same year, adding the word "ennui," in the article published just months following the strike that spawned an additional blue-collar affliction, "Lordstown syndrome."<sup>48</sup> By '74 their symptoms exclude anything like anger, but rather comprise "unrelatedness, loneliness, boredom, life satisfaction, work satisfaction."<sup>49</sup> Even as the economy began to sputter, national newspapers wondered if the blues weren't in fact a fiction. "It is, perhaps, some small comfort to learn that one national crisis apparently doesn't exist," reporter William Chapman wrote in a December 1973 article in *The Washington Post*.<sup>50</sup> "...[I]n general, not much seems to bother wage-earners that didn't bother them 20 years ago."<sup>51</sup> A March 1974 article, reporting from Chicago and citing a psychiatric study published by the American Medical Association, concludes, the "widespread belief that industrial assembly-line workers are the victims of 'blue collar blues' is largely a myth."<sup>52</sup> Jimmy Carter would place blame strife on "a crisis of confidence" in his 1979 "malaise speech," nicknamed for a word Carter only suggests in his slide between the nation's material and metaphorical energy crises.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> "Work in America."

<sup>48</sup> "On-the-Job Discontent," *New York Times*, December 25, 1972, 16.

<sup>49</sup> "Don't Paint It Blue," *The Washington Post*, March 24, 1974, G8.

<sup>50</sup> William Chapman, "The 'Blue-Collar Blues,'" December 14, 1973, *The Washington Post*, A30.

<sup>51</sup> Chapman, A30.

<sup>52</sup> "Don't Paint It Blue."

<sup>53</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Crisis of Confidence" (speech), July 15, 1979, in "July 15, 1979: 'Crisis of Confidence' Speech," University of Virginia Miller Center of Public Affairs, 33:45, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-15-1979-crisis-confidence-speech>.

As malaise, particularly as malaise over and *instead of* anger, the blue-collar blues resemble the middle-class emotional style du jour, *cool*. This “cool culture,” Peter N. Stearns argues, began as middle-class America’s transition away from their inherited Victorianism, against intense feelings toward a more even outward (non-)display of emotion.<sup>54</sup> “Passion itself was redefined, becoming suspect,” says Stearns; “intense love” and incensed (often masculine) anger, nourished by modes like sentimentality, “became by the 1930s an emotional hazard.”<sup>55</sup> Self-restraint and impulse control were the replacement, evinced by prescriptive literature extended from the home to the workplace which displayed, ironically, an increasing hostility to the passions. By the 1950s, an immense style shift had occurred within the American middle-class (a self-identified 85% of the country) with a new vernacular to match.

Stearns detaches cool culture from anything near black aesthetics and, in fact, considers African Americans and their politics representative of one of the few “subcultural styles” to whom passion remains fashionable. And yet, it would be impossible to interpret such disdain for passion, anger in particular, by the white middle-class apart from the concurrent racialization of emotion across the early twentieth-century.<sup>56</sup> Both cool culture in its white middle-class iteration and the blue-collar blues (limited to whites) defined themselves against proletarian blackness, both the figure in white America’s eye and the literal, actual fact of black people living, making, and sometimes thriving in urban centers across the country. In a crucial ’70-74 period, when blue-collar workers of all races were only just given a glimpse of what the decade would wrought, white blue-collar worries about wages were converted into the language of white bourgeois emotion, demoted from anger to

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<sup>54</sup> Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York City: New York University Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>55</sup> Stearns, 4, 3

<sup>56</sup> He does note: “This divide in emotional cultures can be exacerbated by white assumptions about African American passions,” which, in light of Jonathan Metzl’s *The Protest Psychosis*, feels like an immense understatement.

disgruntlement to outright boredom. And so, it was not only a stance (“cool”) or vernacular (“blues”) that were lifted to give voice to the dominant affective narrative moving into and through the ’70s, but the emotional livelihoods of black people upon which white America blanketed their fears and solutions for the times and times ahead.

Where the regular, traditional, and ritual superexploitation of black labors meets the cultural expropriation of black styles, the blue-collar blues turned middle-class cool exposes socio-economic myths that stabilize America’s white population. Following from Michel-Rolph Trouillot, modernity “requires an alterity” and as the caste constituted by the aspirational qualities of that fiction, white identity tips into crisis at the very suggestion that racial/economic equilibrium has been or will soon be disturbed. I use the word “equilibrium,” in terms of stability but not inactivity, for again, the regular and ritual appropriation and subordination of black labors and aesthetics is required. It was the creeping *stagnation* of white (male) wages that shattered the period of white prosperity. The late ’60s crisis of faith amounted to the removal of modernity’s promise, the afore enjoyed yield of national affluence. White America reached for the blues, an idiom scraped for consumption by popular culture and made into a uniform genre for strife and struggle. But even the vestiges of blackness were too unruly to subsist after the appropriative transfer. The blue-collar blues as *blues* is dangerous because: black; the blue collar blues as ennui is white and safe. Working class whites pivoted to a middle-class sensibility that had already pivoted away from an emotional vernacular deemed hazardous via proximity to a black idiom of a kind. But underneath those working parts, the black idiom was already also in flux.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Returning to the matter of the alleged dissolution of radical black politics at the close of the ’60s (Dawson’s “sundering”), Iton, too, sees fragmentation during this period, but his theorization of the black fantastic identifies a different reason for the felt discontinuity—the illusion of a static black idiom. “To the extent that resistance and transformative ambitions often rely on fixed notions of identity and clear distinctions between the optimal and the problematic,” he writes, “the reality that these conceptions are shifting—contaminated, one might suggest—in the process of making and

### III. The New Old Blues

Thinking about the play *The Great White Hope* in an essay of that name, Bambara senses a new energy in the blues,

The blues idiom now seems to be informed by another spirit: “I wish I knew how it would feel to be free,” sung not in the twine-groan school of the Delta, bent knees and longsuffering, but with the demand and power of a Nina Simone or a Novella Nelson... sung in the blues idiom with the insistence and determination and you-better-believe-it of a Letta Mbulu.<sup>58</sup>

In the 1968 essay, the break between this new spirit and the old blues begins as late as 1964; she mentions another play, James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*, as an example of the idiom that culture and politics in service of the Movement now leaves behind.<sup>59</sup> “The impulse of *Blues* is to enlighten and move the conscience of white America,” Bambara writes.<sup>60</sup> That idiom, its “pitiful-po’-me intimations,” she estimates, “will prove not only sickening, but thoroughly fraudulent as a dramatic thrust.”<sup>61</sup> The blues has not disappeared, rather “we” have chosen for it a new tone, befitting a new audience. It is a new vernacular, “a restatement of survival terms.”<sup>62</sup> The Mississippi Delta, “Tin Pan Alley,” and ‘I got the blues this morning, lawdy lawd,’” shorthand for a regionally specific and heavily appropriated language of the blues—the same blues lifted for blue-collar blues—no longer fulfills its purpose, too concerned with making black struggle palatable to white

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envisioning change pushes temporal and contextual issues to the surface.” (Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 103). Iton describes the contestation as much over ownership of who may create and work and politick under the name “black,” who may be given control over the rhythms of black political and cultural life. An old idiom, public enough to be made useful to the white imagination needed to “recalibrate,” and was being re-envisioned by the very groups who were (and still are) accused of, in part, fracturing the Movement.

<sup>58</sup> Bambara, *The Black Woman*, 238.

<sup>59</sup> Originally published in *Obvidian* magazine.

<sup>60</sup> Bambara, *The Black Woman*, 237-8.

<sup>61</sup> Bambara, 237-8.

<sup>62</sup> Bambara, 238.

America.<sup>63</sup> Like Amiri Baraka, Bambara views the transition as a regular feature of black aesthetic tradition, which is “timely rather than [sic] ‘fixed’.”<sup>64</sup> The time and place for art and politics attenuated to the limited senses of white people is over: “We are somewhere else at the moment.”<sup>65</sup> To Bambara, *The Great White Hope*, for all its faults, turns toward the new blues, suggesting black politics shall no longer attempt call-and-response with a whiteness that does not speak the same language.

The not-as-yet Tony- and Pulitzer-awarded 1967 play about an undefeatable black boxer (in the image of Muhammad Ali) who falls in love with a white woman—is “not,” Bambara makes clear, “a Black play.”<sup>66</sup> She is not sympathetic to critics whose praise figures the play also “The Great Black Hope,” a title “as inevitable, I suppose, as it is stupid,” she writes.<sup>67</sup> She laments the “pasteboard” quality of roles for female characters, particularly black women and particularly Clara, whose “bluntly drawn” impression fail to live up to Marlene Warfield’s capabilities; similarly James Earl Jones’ talent within his role as boxer Jack Jefferson must at-times rescue the audience “from some of the flabby features of the text.”<sup>68</sup> But whereas Clara’s reincarnation of “the Evil Black Bitch” resorts to stereotype, the limits placed on Jones’ Jack induces the play’s greatest strength.<sup>69</sup> Bambara considers the script “remarkably workable,” which in another context might be read as a subtle jab—and earlier she introduces the play overall as merely “a fine production”—but the

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<sup>63</sup> Bambara, 238.

<sup>64</sup> Bambara, 237.

<sup>65</sup> Bambara, 238.

<sup>66</sup> Bambara, 242.

<sup>67</sup> Bambara, 242. However, interestingly, Bambara’s abbreviates the play as *Hope*, eliding the racial dimension.

<sup>68</sup> Bambara admits this is a weakness inherent to drama on the page, exactly “Why we bother to see it done rather than read it.” (Bambara, 240)

<sup>69</sup> Bambara, 241.

comment here instead refers to the “plasticity” seized upon by Jones who imbues his role with transhistorical significance:

... he seems at once several people through several decades—the contemporary Black actor commenting on the way a Negro actor in the forties might have compromised himself in those Tom lines while still trying to goof on the Fetchit character as old Charlie views him... goofing on Charlie and Tom at the same time for survival’s sake and for the sake of a little private irony—all in one beat.<sup>70</sup>

Jones is signifying, or “goofing” as Bambara puts it, a feat possible given this script that, if not in step with the new blues, is at least aware of its existence, “written by someone with a good ear for idiom and a rare sensitivity for the subject.”<sup>71</sup> But though Bambara praises the elements of the play that allow Jones his theater, the actual performance is most striking. “There is always some telepathic, unnamable, supra-human something or other that is brooding, defiant, cunning, gentle, primordial,” she says of Jack, “there is an ambience as well as a person that strikes us; it is familiar to the gut, but we’ve seldom seen it with our eyes. Jones’ man becomes a great deal more than fiction.”<sup>72</sup>

It is “Jones’ man,” Jones’ intensely overfamiliar performance, that provides Bambara the occasion to consider the future of the black Movement several years past its perceived apex. She drastically switches gears within the relatively brief essay, from performance to reception to an anti-interrogation of whom she calls “the loner, the unaffiliated, the go-for-yourself celebrity,” exemplified by Jack.<sup>73</sup> Polarizing as an exemplar of black advancement or treason, Jack becomes the stand-in for the many real-life Jacks on the fringes of Civil Rights activism and only so by virtue of color prejudice, whose opportunities to break away from the Movement increased with each passing legislative victory (achieved by the Movement) and the passing of its leaders. As the ’60s came to a

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<sup>70</sup> Bambara, 240.

<sup>71</sup> Bambara, 242.

<sup>72</sup> Bambara, 240.

<sup>73</sup> Bambara, 243.

close, the contours of the Movement grew looser. What should be done about ambivalence, Bambara asks, “what do you do about the lone wolf, the individual, the ‘noncommitted,’ the uncorrect brother?”<sup>74</sup> She disarms the question just a few lines later. “It is not” the right question.<sup>75</sup>

Bambara rightly predicts “bloody days ahead, wasteful days of brother moving on brother,” that must be traversed “before we really find out how to even pose the question correctly.”<sup>76</sup> Though she does not name any one political figure in particular, she dismisses the hierarchical logic enforced by the Movement, “one of the major stumbling blocks” in its present she would decades later consider symptomatic of its decline.<sup>77</sup> It is a masculine fault to be sure; Bambara adopts the male-centered language of black radicalism to ventriloquize their worries about roles, worries about “the uncorrect brother,” “the super-hustler brother,” and calling insults like “counter-revolutionary” and “renegade” merely the “updated versions of ‘Uncle Toms’.”<sup>78</sup> Bambara includes herself in reproducing these worries—“we” and “us”—voicing the Movement yet also implying the Movement is much larger than a male-base preoccupied with questions of rank. As the brothers compete for the void left over by Malcolm and the door cracked open by white legislators, she cautions, “demonic white America” remains “prepared physically and technically to blow us all away.”<sup>79</sup> She concludes, “If we can get basic and be clear about our priorities, we might be able to get basic and be clear about our possible allies.” “Get basic” like Simone gets basic, like Jones gets basic, like the new blues, a synonym.

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<sup>74</sup> Bambara, 243.

<sup>75</sup> Bambara, 243.

<sup>76</sup> Bambara, 243.

<sup>77</sup> In interviews Bambara has mourned the lack of a truly collective spirit in '60s activism. “We missed a moment in the early sixties... We did not respond in a courageous and principled way. We fell back,” she told Beverly Guy-Sheftall in 1979. “If we learned anything from the fifties and sixties, it is that we need an organized, collective response to our oppression,” she told Zala Chandler in 1990.

<sup>78</sup> Bambara, *The Black Woman*, 243.

<sup>79</sup> Bambara, 243.

As a matter of argument and organization, the essay's two sections don't talk to each other much—perhaps lest the praise of Jones' performance be undermined by a critique of virtuosic black masculinity. That said, both crucially enact the contemporary moment as Bambara saw it, the emergent priorities that would provide the context for the kind of work necessary for art to do, the aim of her short stories. In the context of the anthology, "Thinking About The Great White Hope" reiterates the *been here* vernacular of black feminism and the new blues. She dedicates *The Black Woman* "to the uptown mammas who nudged me to 'just set it down in print so it gets to be a habit to write letters to each other, so maybe that way we don't keep treadmilling the same ole ground.'"<sup>80</sup> As an anthology, the *The Black Woman* exemplifies the mechanics of getting basic, stitching the ongoing work together while preserving breadth and diversity. Short stories are another way to do the same. Bambara's '70s fiction shifts in accordance with necessities of post-Civil Rights politics, the role art ought play within those politics, and the training needed to roll with the times.

#### IV. Attuned to the '70s

The story "Luther on Sweet Auburn" opens into a disorganized mess of time, place, and politics. "Luther is confused," the narrator begins. "Thinks I'm still a youth worker. Thinks he's still a youth. Thinks this is Warren Street, Brooklyn. That is, 1962."<sup>81</sup> It is not 1962. Or, it is and it is not 1962. Within the same moment, the narrator, "preoccupied" with their political work in the present, scales out to the issues of the day, indexed by nations and places—"Cuban influx," "Miami," "the Iranian situation there and here."<sup>82</sup> Those issues come home by the end of the paragraph; the narrator has a new play in rehearsal on the "theme of hostage-keeping in the U.S.—slavery, reservations, ghettos, prisons, internment camps for Japanese, GIs in stockades for organizing, cities

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<sup>80</sup> Bambara, 12.

<sup>81</sup> Bambara, "Luther On Sweet Auburn," *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 78.

<sup>82</sup> Bambara, 78.

hostages of Big Business, the whole country kidnapped by thugs.”<sup>83</sup> By the next she returns to the street. “Luther is not Luther yet. Just a man coming out a barbershop saying something to me,” just a man about to approach, a black man about to approach a black woman on the street in public, the usual for a black woman on the street in public.<sup>84</sup> The man speaks again and the narrator is, indeed, back in “the old days.”<sup>85</sup> Luther “becomes Luther Owens, war counselor of the Sovian Lords.”<sup>86</sup> The narrator is the youth worker on Warren Street in 1960s Brooklyn, New York, USA with an acid tongue: “You illiterate motherfuckers better get in here to my program long enough to learn to spell ‘sovereign,’ shit.”<sup>87</sup>

The narrator, nicknamed Miz Nap once upon a time, is no longer a youth worker; she is a playwright, TV producer, and aspiring filmmaker—an overall documentarian for globalized times. Luther is still Luther, unchanged by the nearly two decades of passed time, stuck in a ’60s context. He seizes upon “Miz Nap” on the historic Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Georgia and fails to adjust. He talks to her as if she is a social worker still, as if it is Brooklyn, as if she, too, remains unchanged from the decade prior. The pair walks and Luther talks. He wants a job. He wants the narrator to make that happen. “Well I don’t social work anymore,” she informs him.<sup>88</sup> Luther is—still—confused, suggests she seek employment at the Y.<sup>89</sup> “I’ve got a job, Luther,” she responds.<sup>90</sup> Luther is *still* confused. The narrator finally loses patience and asks the former gang member point blank: “How old are you, Luther? And how did the sixties manage to pass you by, you who were in hailing

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<sup>83</sup> Bambara, 79.

<sup>84</sup> Bambara, 79.

<sup>85</sup> Bambara, 79.

<sup>86</sup> Bambara, 79.

<sup>87</sup> Bambara, 79.

<sup>88</sup> Bambara, 84.

<sup>89</sup> Bambara, 84.

<sup>90</sup> Bambara, 84.

distance of Brooklyn CORE?”<sup>91</sup> The question, like those voiced by Bambara in nonfiction, is rhetorical. The narrator is not interested in how Luther managed to stay in one place—politically—any more than she is interested in performing the day-to-day duties of social worker. Predictably, Luther answers only the first question: he is thirty-three. “I’m thirty-eight,” the narrator responds, “Can you get to that, Youngblood?”<sup>92</sup> The “that” refers less to the five biological years between them—from thirty-three to thirty-eight years of age—than the political maturity Luther failed to acquire during “the sixties”—an energy more than a matter of years in this case. Again, it is a rhetorical ask; if the sixties could not guide him, the seventies would surely leave him lost.

The precautionary tale makes the moral clear at its end, but the getting there isn’t so easy. “Luther on Sweet Auburn” requires extra attention, lest we readers find ourselves as lost and left behind as ole Luther. In the short distance from beginning to end, the story slides between voices, intersections, vernacular, and tenses as well as decades. The narrator’s interaction with Luther takes place in present tense and her transport to “the old days” begins in past, “back to growing up a girl with two older brothers who *didn’t* know how to throw down... Brothers with no heart and no rep for rumbling *were* as much use to me as my mama’s fox piece with the glass eyes.”<sup>93</sup> As she reminisces further the tense slips from past to present to past again:

We’d move to a new neighborhood when Mama could stand the old one no longer. First thing Mama would do is put gates on the windows and police locks on the door. Second thing she’d do is find a community center. Made more woven looped pot holders, lanyard key chains, and punch-’n’-lace leather purses in those days... First for Harry is to find a park, Second, sit down and bite his fingernails off... First off, I’d check the graffiti and find out whose turf we’re on. Then I’d check out the war counselor and see if he ran to type.<sup>94</sup>

The verbs that locate the narrator—and us—in the past only just barely do so. The narrator prefers “would” statements, often abbreviated by an apostrophe—“Charlie’d,” “I’d,” “They’d.” A past

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<sup>91</sup> Bambara, 84-5.

<sup>92</sup> Bambara, 85.

<sup>93</sup> Bambara, 79-80; emphasis mine.

<sup>94</sup> Bambara, 80.

tense that also may be a conditional, the usage suggests regularity, pattern, that adds a horizontal dimension—*and so on and so on*—to the act of recall, which might be thought of as vertical.<sup>95</sup>

The longer we stay in the narrator’s memory, the text is less inclined to signal itself as past. The narrator elaborates on how she makes a place in a new neighborhood—which one, no telling—and almost loses verbs altogether:

The main thing I’d do was find the girlfriend and drop her. Easy enough, being new, with no she-said-that-you-said-that-I history. Element of surprise. Out of the blue, hands in her face, fists ripping out hair, nails tearing off clothes, a knee in her chest, her back on the sidewalk. Then I’m the war counselor’s lady, not girl, lady they always said.<sup>96</sup>

Within the same paragraph another first-person voice—who? No telling—interjects, set-off by parentheses:

(That ain’t no miscellaneous bitch yawl, that chick got class. Did you see her mama? Lawdy. Whatcha doing hanging round them thugs, you got more class than that. Say, pretty lady, can I see you safely to the subway? These chumps round here liable not to know you... Hey, Big Stockings! Cool it, Shorty. That ain’t no way to talk to that one.)<sup>97</sup>

The vernacular has changed, now akin to an earlier moment, also parenthetical, when Miz Nap was a youth worker yelling about “illiterate motherfuckers” while onlookers wonder, “Who’s the nappy-headed bitch hollering out the window?”<sup>98</sup> In this case, with unspecified subjects, the talk is even harder to identify. Is it one voice, or two, or multiple? One interaction, or many numerous, regular interactions that suggest a ritualized experience of *a* black woman in the hood? And as the narrator continues outside the parentheses, her story further transforms from “[a] deep thing with me” to something that calls to specifically generalizable experience, moving into second person:

War counselors were public tough and secret tender. Not at all like the boys mothers pick out from the choir, the grocer’s song, nephew of some down-home chum. They’d sit on your mama’s sofa and mimic respectability. Jump you on the stairs, mug you in the movies,

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<sup>95</sup> In a Saussarian sense of the difference between synchronic and diachronic apprehension of language. (Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris [Peru: Open Court Publishing Company, 1986])

<sup>96</sup> Bambara, “Luther On Sweet Auburn,” 80.

<sup>97</sup> Bambara, 80.

<sup>98</sup> Bambara, 79.

wrassle with you all the way back home, wanna drag you in the business. Take you to their Uncle Leroy's for fish sammich and Kool Aid... Take you to the back of the barbershop to play whist with men with mustaches... Take you to the roof to feed the pigeons... Take you to their godmother who tells you he writes poetry and use to play the piano 'fore he started running wild in the streets with hoodlums.<sup>99</sup>

The repetition—take, take, take—reinforces the sense of ritual. By the next paragraph “War counselors were” becomes “War counselors give... bring... dance” and “make.”<sup>100</sup> Whatever former sense of the past *was* is overwhelmed. The past of the past is bracketed.

Without signposts, it is up to readers to keep everything in track. The parentheses do not assist except as the thin border between the most casual vernacular and the slightly more formal narratorial voice. The eye dialectal cues known to such fiction are not present. Additionally, marked language is not consistent to one voice or character; Miz Nap does and does not “talk like a social worker.”<sup>101</sup> Other shifts remain unmarked, including the return to the present which arrives at the end of a paragraph with two words: “Luther Owens.” The shifts in tense, in vernacular, in perspective are all changes in footing, the narrator’s realignments within her contexts that demand nimble readers attuned to discern when the stakes of engagement have changed.<sup>102</sup>

On the other side of the digression—that only feels like a digression on its other side—the narrator is annoyed. With Luther, who believes her to be in the present what she once was in the past, but perhaps also herself, for getting wrapped up in the past enough to make it present. Without a career and commitments rooted firmly in the ’70s of things she might stay there (and then)

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<sup>99</sup> Bambara, 79, 80-81.

<sup>100</sup> Bambara, “Luther On Sweet Auburn,” 81-2.

<sup>101</sup> Bambara, 79.

<sup>102</sup> In Goffman’s study, he highlights the transcript from a 1976 study conducted by Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz on “code shifting.” In the transcript, the two researchers segment the difference stances taken up by a children’s class instructor with numbered points. As Goffman remarks that “without access to bodily orientation and tone of voice, it would be easy to run the three segments into a continuous text and miss the fact that significant shifts in alignment of speaker to hearers were occurring” (Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, 127). That, however, is exactly what Bambara’s language demands from readers, reading that does not miss significant (or subtle) shifts within a continuous text.

forever, as Luther has. She is brought back by Luther's "saga," a story filled with drugs, babies, injuries, and jailtime, "All the things you tell a social worker friend," whom the narrator is no longer.<sup>103</sup> Luther is "all about need and you gotta and help me," the spirit of the old blues and the narrator has long moved on. She's occupied by the new blues, watching a group of students and framing her next shot, a "[l]ong shot of stairs cluster—an in-the-flesh refutation of the apathetic myth, the movement-is-over propaganda."<sup>104</sup> Luther, the refutation of that refutation shrugs his shoulders and sets his empty soda bottle away, bringing the story to a close.

Published in 1980, "Luther on Sweet Auburn" rarely appears in criticism and is an unusual Bambara story compared to *Gorilla, My Love*. Voiced by a shifting cast of everyday folk, "Luther on Sweet Auburn" is more demanding about its didacticism, an edge imposed by the demanding '70s. The story is more akin to Bambara's second collection. If *Gorilla, My Love* is regarded as vernacular and cultural, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* is her "political" collection, a gauge on activism and the Movement from ground-level. Likely due to the lack of attention on this volume, critics have yet to discuss how vernacular sensibilities inform and demonstrate the text as a political project. Though earlier than and thus exempt from the baldly placed lesson in "Luther on Sweet Auburn," the stories within *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* require and advocate for the deft same "turning to" that ought be known to a student of the new blues, a form of participation needed for the survival of the Movement, black radicalism.

*The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* is not formally a linked collection. Main characters are not repeated, nor are the various diners, grills, grocers, Miz's, and elders that constitute staples within communities amongst the stories. And yet, much like the essays, poems, and criticism collected under *The Black Woman*, the stories within *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* all carry the sense of being in

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<sup>103</sup> Bambara, "Luther On Sweet Auburn," 83.

<sup>104</sup> Bambara, 85.

conversation with each other not merely for sharing the same volume. The first story, “The Organizer’s Wife” initiates the constellation about which the other stories circle, pivot, and latch onto. It is a fitting beginning, a story about a woman who does not know she is part of a community until she opens her mouth to speak. She is not the only one. Across the collection individuals are tasked with re-learning what it means to *make* community, the shift in stance interchangeable with the new blues, the turning to each other, *tuning in* to each other. In the era of a post-cool blues it is not enough to be in a space, spaces must be created and maintained by participants who must constantly adjust to the changing contours of an unstable moment.

“The Organizer’s Wife” begins opposite “Luther On Sweet Auburn.” Where the latter begins with context—in fact, too much—the former assumes context where none has been given. The story begins with people doing work, but nobody is introduced:

The men from the co-op school were squatting in her garden. Jake, who taught the day students and hassled the town school board, was swiping at the bushy greens with his cap, dislodging slugs, raising dust. The tall gent who ran the graphics workshop was pulling a penknife open with his teeth, scraping rust from the rake she hadn’t touched in weeks. Old Man Boone was up and down. Couldn’t squat too long on account of the ankle broken in last spring’s demonstration when the tobacco weights showed funny. Jack-in-the-box up, Boone snatched at a branch or two and stuffed his pipe—crumblings of dry leaf, bits of twig. Down, he eased string from the seams of his overalls, up again, thrumbling up tobacco from the depths of his pockets.<sup>105</sup>

The men in the garden are not quite anonymous, nor properly designated in time or space. Definite articles, pronouns, and the few details given suggest we should know them already—cognizant that they are “*the men*,” whose “*her*” owns a garden, how “the graphics workshop” and “last spring’s demonstration” might be related, whenever was the town school board “hassled” and for what cause. Every story in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* begins similarly with entries that refuse to accommodate the uninitiated. In “The Apprentice,” we are belated to the characters’ belated arrival on the scene of an ongoing streetside arrest; in “Broken Field Running,” a conversation between

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<sup>105</sup> Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 3.

Jason and the narrator is lost to the wind and unretrieved; in the centerpiece “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive,” the printed contents of newspapers shuffled about in the breeze are concealed by the narrator who insists “it didn’t matter”; “The Long Night” begins with unidentified inanimate object sailing across the room—merely, “It whistled past her.”<sup>106</sup>

Bambara’s tendency to hit the ground running carries over from *Gorilla, My Love*, where stories begin in medias res, if only for arriving amidst the moving parts of an ongoing community. Of this style, Margo V. Perkins surmises that “[h]er audience is assumed to be other blacks to the extent that she makes no apologies or qualifications the comfort level of readers and critics outside her own cultural frame of reference.” It is less a matter of vernacular, period, but the way the vernacular speaks rather than describes key contextual features like who, where, when. While her stories convey “the rhythm, style, texture, color, and humor marking black linguistic expression,” Perkins continues, “Bambara’s artistic sensibility moves beyond these characteristics of black aesthetic...”<sup>107</sup> Observable in *Gorilla, My Love*, the “beyond” intensifies in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, whose stories also sidestep exposition at their onset, and anywhere else for that matter. However, where “readers and critics must do their homework” to locate the contexts and persons in *Gorilla, My Love*, readers must do additional work to keep up with stories found in this second collection. In *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, community is not such a sure thing, threatened by poverty and state violence *as per usual*, but also by the willing and unwilling comings and goings of willing and

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<sup>106</sup> Other first lines: “I could tell the minute I got in the door and dropped my bag, I wasn’t staying” (“Medley”); “The girl was sitting in the booth, one leg wrapped around the other cartoon-like” (“A Tender Man”); “She was afraid to look at herself just yet” (“A Girl’s Story”); “Curtains blew in and wrecked my whole dressing-table arrangement” (“Witchbird”); “I was probably the first the spot them cause I’d been watching the entrance to the store on the lookout for my daddy, knowing that if he didn’t show soon, he wouldn’t be coming at all” (“Christmas Eve At Johnson’s Drugs N Goods”). As in *Gorilla, My Love*, the environments in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* come together through circumstance that raises community knowledge to the public. But in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* the local must contend with the global; the specter of Vietnam haunts nearly every story.

<sup>107</sup> Perkins, “Getting Basic,” 156.

unwilling members. Disillusion follows several characters who wonder about the tenets promised by solidarity and community, concepts that come into question. Characters must reckon with scale, and situate themselves in an overwhelmingly global set of circumstances. But “[i]n Bambara’s fiction, movement for social change never ends; it merely changes its form in an increasingly broad set of issues from environmental racism to xenophobia to nuclear armament.”<sup>108</sup> Readers are left to put together pieces of an ill-fitting puzzle.

The stories are full of speakers’ silences, but are not necessarily quiet. Back to “The Organizer’s Wife”: ambient sound is left over from the myriad of unsaids, thoughts stillborn out of one person’s failure to “speak her speak.”<sup>109</sup> The titular organizer’s wife, Virginia, watches the men in her garden, but “couldn’t hear them. They were silent.”<sup>110</sup> Movement suffices for noise and the men are active, “scraping,” squatting, and stuffing leaf “crumblings”—“But no one spoke.”<sup>111</sup> Even “[t]he baby quiet too”—whose baby?—the narrator adds, but *the* baby also “gurgled” as Virginia bathes them amongst the “crackling, shredding” branches.<sup>112</sup> Virginia continues to watch the men and walks with heavy footfalls, but still: quiet. “Still, no one spoke,” the narrator repeats, “though clearly, farmers all their lives, they surely had some one thing to say about the disarray of her garden.”<sup>113</sup> Every attempt at speech is a misfire. “The young one... had his mouth open and his arm outstretched as though to speak,” another, Jake, “rose suddenly and cleared his throat, but turned away to light Old Man Boone’s pipe, lending a shoulder for the old one to hunch against... his back

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<sup>108</sup> Perkins, 160.

<sup>109</sup> Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, 13.

<sup>110</sup> Bambara, 3.

<sup>111</sup> Bambara, 3-4.

<sup>112</sup> Bambara, 4.

<sup>113</sup> Bambara, 4.

to her.”<sup>114</sup> Clearly, the men are comfortable with each other, working a garden in tandem, leaning on each other, literally. Clearly, Virginia is the problem. Finally, someone speaks:

“Mornin,” she said, stretching out her hand.

The men mumbled quickly, clearing their throats again. Boone offering a hand in greeting, then realizing she was extending not her hand but the small, round tobacco tin in it... Boone drew his hand back quickly as though the red tin was aflame. She curled her hand closed and went out the gate, slowly, deliberately, fixing her tall, heavy image indelibly on their eyes.

“Good-for-nuthin.”<sup>115</sup>

The men do not know but only “thought that’s what they heard drift over her shoulder.”<sup>116</sup> They cannot answer her gesture, or her speech. “Why didn’t you say something?” one asks; “Why didn’t you speak?” says another.<sup>117</sup> “It was clear that no one knew any more how to talk to the bristling girl-woman, if ever any had,” the narrator answers.<sup>118</sup> Nobody is a stranger and yet neither party can read the other. Together they cannot string a single interaction, let alone a conversation. Yet manners get them through it.

The women, however, read Virginia true, though her interactions with the co-op women are about as stunted as with the men.<sup>119</sup> The community women look up well before Virginia passes them by. Their “strained necks had more to do with sound than weather,” a simple knowing—“Someone coming.”<sup>120</sup> Not all women characters within *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* are preternaturally aware, though unsurprisingly women are the stories’ most astute. Naomi, the grey-

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<sup>114</sup> Bambara, 4.

<sup>115</sup> Bambara, 5.

<sup>116</sup> Bambara, 5.

<sup>117</sup> Bambara, 5.

<sup>118</sup> Bambara, 6.

<sup>119</sup> A chorus of “Mornins” and “How do’s” follow Virginia, but when asked “Everything all right?”, she need not answer with words. The look on “Virginia’s face could be read by all.” Though the woman can read her face, attempt at conversation sputters into ellipsis, another instance of “going to say more but didn’t” (Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, 8).

<sup>120</sup> Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, 6.

haired activist in “The Apprentice,” is sharp to the social consequences of her surroundings, more so than the narrator, her younger partner in organizing.<sup>121</sup> The two pull-over when Naomi spots an escalating traffic stop. In contrast to the cop’s violent treatment of man he’d just seized—“The cop had grabbed him under the armpit and hurled him around, slamming him back up against the car hard”—Naomi lays the saccharine thick, “in that voice she’d cultivated special for such occasions,” asking passively if she might be able to inquire if the man caught in pre-custody wanted any calls made on his behalf.<sup>122</sup> Though she includes the necessary honorifics of “Officer” and “sir” and expresses “no intention of interfering,” the implication is as hostile as allowed.<sup>123</sup> The content of the dialogue is not half as important as her attunement to the situation. Naomi is cognizant of participating in a common black American scene that ends one way or another and too rarely without bloodshed, broken bones, and/or a body bag. She knows, and we know she knows, how misinterpretation and failed senses on behalf of the police can change the tenor of any given interaction in a split second. “Naomi stepped to the side,” the narrator notices, “as though to make clear she wasn’t trying to block either his path to his car or his view of ours”; next, “Naomi took a step backward, this time I guess to let him know she wasn’t thinking about going for his gun.”<sup>124</sup> The cop lets the man go and formally ends the interaction, telling all involved, “Get going.”<sup>125</sup> However, Naomi waits and watches, telling the narrator, “He’ll want to get our license plates to maybe fuck with us later.”<sup>126</sup> It’s a ritual for both.

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<sup>121</sup> Other perceptive characters include Lacey in “Broken Field Running,” Sweet Pea in “Medley,” Dada Bib in “A Girl’s Story,” Honey in “Witchbird,” and Candy in “Christmas Eve at Johnson’s Drugs N Goods.”

<sup>122</sup> Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, 24-25.

<sup>123</sup> Bambara, 25.

<sup>124</sup> Bambara, 25.

<sup>125</sup> Bambara, 26.

<sup>126</sup> Bambara, 26.

This exemplary figure of the revolutionary is not, but could easily be interpreted as, the Movement personified. Much like the former Miz Nap, Naomi demonstrates virtuosic fluency in the idioms of black revolution. She anticipates and acts. She thinks about gathering audiences for a screening of *La Luta Continua* (1972) while sitting in the middle of traffic and workers seizing the means of production while devouring a foot-long diner hotdog. She leaves work ready to do *the* work, “ready to make the rounds, keep this committee in touch with that project in touch with thusnsuch organization in touch with the whatchamacallit league.”<sup>127</sup> She travels “to countries where ordinary folk *had* done it... seized power and turned the whole thing around.”<sup>128</sup> She attends town halls with clipboard in hand, bold in the face of “legislators and the housing authority biggies.”<sup>129</sup> She asks questions like, “But how does that free the people?”<sup>130</sup> In the car, in traffic, the narrator’s mind wanders, “thinking about how Naomi don’t never let up, aways teaching.”<sup>131</sup> She is, in short, indefatigable—they’ve been at it all day, canvassing “old folks, Decker’s, the tenant’s meeting, the public housing hearing, fifty-leven visits,” yet “ole Naomi” still speaks in extended vowels and exclamation points, mentioning a “second wind.”<sup>132</sup> Naomi is a doer. “I’m mostly a listener,” the narrator admits. “Ain’t hardly autumn and already I’m falling apart,” her younger partner thinks by contrast. She cannot say as much to Naomi, however. “I ain’t earned the right, to hear her tell it.”<sup>133</sup>

In “The Organizer’s Wife” Virginia’s unsaid is (over)compensated by a charismatic community leader, the organizer to whom she is married. Graham is an orator. In the spirit of the Black Panther Party, he preaches self-sustainability on behalf of the community and community

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<sup>127</sup> Bambara, 28.

<sup>128</sup> Bambara, 33.

<sup>129</sup> Bambara, 36.

<sup>130</sup> Bambara, 28.

<sup>131</sup> Bambara, 36.

<sup>132</sup> Bambara, 37.

<sup>133</sup> Bambara, 28.

distributes his words in the form of a newsletter, church bulletin, even children's pamphlets. He does the right things, says the right things in the right way. His charisma, however, has a dark side, at least from Virginia's perspective. The handsome, laughing man she thought would be a means to leave, to "unhook them both from this place."<sup>134</sup> Instead, Graham became the community's gravitational field as well as hers. Graham is gone before the story begins and only halfway through the story do we learn he has been jailed, leaving Virginia adrift in a community she never wanted to be a part of.

For every dynamic leader in the collection there is someone tired and in need of a break. A similar dynamic exists between Jason and Lacey, the educators in "Broken Field Running." Jason tells Lacey, worn down by the city's neglect made visible by the projects, that she's "gotta keep stepping." But Lacey, too, is tired. Jason loves to speak while Lacey longs for "a long beat between blues notes."<sup>135</sup> In "Witchbird," a songwriter and performer named Honey walks out as a friend begins to lecture her on her own emotional labor. "I can't take in another thing." Women are constantly worried about a thing called "leakage," as if the intake is too much.

Virginia's leakage comes out as incoherence. She recalls past visits to see Graham, "leaking from the breast" and mouth, "[s]tuttering, whining, babbling, hangin on to the mesh with one hand, the other stuffed in her mouth, her fingers ensnarled in the skein of words coming out all tangled, knotted"<sup>136</sup> Silence, withdrawal, is no solution; the narrator must "speak the speak." And it is not until the community approaches dissolution that her speak bursts forth, through that familiar collective pronoun "we." She confronts the church pastor, who has sold the co-op, the land, the hope for an autonomous future.

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<sup>134</sup> Bambara, 7.

<sup>135</sup> Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, 51.

<sup>136</sup> Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, 21.

“Did you sell the land as well?” she heard herself saying, rushing in the doorway much too fast. “You might have waited like folks asked you. You didn’t have to. Enough granite under this schoolhouse alone”—she stamped, frightening him—“to carry both districts for years and years, if we developed it ourselves.” She heard the “we ourselves” explode against her teeth and she fell back.<sup>137</sup>

Virginia chases the pastor off and the talk is loud now as members of the community overhear the outburst and come see to her, offering support she finally accepts. There’s laughter and touch, from and between those who could not so much as pass a tin between them in the story’s opening pages. Virginia will visit Graham again, confident she can tell him what needs to be said. The land is gone, but the people remain, in-touch, attuned to each other. As the story’s conclusion asks, “How else to feed the people?”<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Bambara, 18.

<sup>138</sup> Bambara, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, 23.

*Chapter 2*  
*Aphasia, Logorrhea, and Language (Dis)order in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*

I. Introducing White Aphasiology

The previous chapter ends with tired women, leakage oozing out beneath their commitment to a Movement attuned to differing scales of disaster, from public housing to American occupation abroad. This chapter is about that leakage as the telltale wearing and wearing down of black life lived in antiblack environments—that is, any black life lived. Keeping with an attention to the vernacular of the precipitate late-'60s feeling of the '70s that I've historicized, the current chapter considers the language leftover when revolution changes footing. It is a less nimble language, this language of black contingency, a language that gets individuals through the day when getting through the day is everything. Here I turn from energetic figures to dispirited ones, with no dichotomy implied. Everyone is weary and weary of being weathered and weary of being weary—though exhaustion, too, disperses unequally. Black women, exposed to inter- and intra-communal trauma as a matter of course, feel exhaustion intensely and one recourse is to adjust their language accordingly.

Black women “keep it pushing.”<sup>1</sup> That phrase, like any other grammatical in both black language (Black English) and the white standard (Standard English), requires fluency in what Geneva Smitherman calls “style” in order to be fully understood. Not so removed from contemporary sociolinguistic usage, style is, as defined by her seminal 1977 study, “the way speakers put sounds

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<sup>1</sup> Depression is under-diagnosed among African Americans due to several factors including the inability for a white diagnostic to account for depressive symptoms as *abnormality* among black subjects. If diagnosed, black patients are offered antidepressant medication about half as often as white patients and black women are particularly inclined to delay treatment. “[T]hey feel the need to ‘keep it pushing,’” and everyone else confirms. (Quenette L. Walton and Jennifer Shepard Payne, “Missing the mark: Cultural expressions of depressive symptoms among African-American women and men,” *Social Work in Mental Health* 14, no. 6 [February 2016]: 648.) See also: Anna Mollow, “When Black Women Start Going on Prozac...?: The Politics of Race, Gender, and Emotional Distress in Meri Nana-Ama Danquah’s *Willow Weep for Me*,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 283-300.

and grammatical structure together to communicate meaning in a larger context.”<sup>2</sup> Style is a matter of syntax and also, more. Style communicates the “total expression” of black speech, says Smitherman, and is therefore *in excess of* syntax.<sup>3</sup> Whereas semantics, “black semantics” in this case, contains the idiomatic expressions unique to black vernacular (however long they remain unique), style becomes crucial on the frequent occasion of hybrid lexicon. Style is what allows black language to communicate black being in conditions where non-black observers could assume otherwise—of which “keep it pushing” makes a prime example. Already an odd, if still permissible, directive in SE, “keep it pushing” expresses a methodology borne of the necessities of black living. In BE, “keep it pushing” is not a directive, or if so, only to oneself. “I,” is both the subject implied and the “it” that must keep moving, must move, period. The moving is laborious, hence the push; though where from? Most of all, it “must” or, alternatively, “gotta” happen.<sup>4</sup> Keep it pushing means “keep it moving,” means “gotta keep stepping,” means “on to the next one.” It means continuity, if not necessarily narrative. It is the “must” of black life. But again, whence the push?

Unlike the blues, unlike attunement, the implied push comes from without. I work with Toni Morrison’s 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*, a loving study on vernacular necessity and the kind of language developed by a community that does not want to be one. The people of 1930’s Lorain, Ohio live in vertigo and live vertiginously. They are not there because they want to be, among people they want to be with, nor working in service of an agreed upon greater good. They are together because they

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<sup>2</sup> Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 17. In sociolinguistic scholarship, style is “not a thing but a practice,” defined as “activity in which people create social meaning, as style is the visible manifestation of social meaning,” according to Penelope Eckert. (Eckert, “The meaning of style,” *Texas Linguistic Forum* 47 (2003): 43)

<sup>3</sup> Smitherman, 3.

<sup>4</sup> In his experience of vertigo, Frank B. Wilderson III decides to “press on, even though the vertigo that seizes me is so overwhelming.” (Wilderson, “The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents,” *InTensions Journal* 5 [Fall/Winter 2011]: 6)

have to be, thrown into close quarters by the same forces that pushed millions of black Southerners into industrial townships in the 20th century. They are there to keep going because the Midwest is the place to go to keep going. They are disabled and also ill, and just because *don't nobody* call it suffering doesn't mean it does not feel like suffering. Though social processes—antiblackness and misogynoir—are to blame, the constructed nature of pathology means little to those whose bodies deteriorate at an accelerated rate because the atmosphere is *literally* toxic to black survival.<sup>5</sup> A text that ought to be read with blackness and disability in mind, *The Bluest Eye* troubles persistent conventions of formal disability studies and studies of black expression that still often take for granted that everybody is well. Black vernacular sounds the joys of world-making as well as curbs expressions prohibited by white surveillance and within black enclaves. In *The Bluest Eye*, everybody must keep it pushing, structuring their lives and their language without the benefit of diachronic contemplation. I use the novel to diagram an affective accompaniment to this language that I call aphasia. Though commonly used as a metaphor for silence, aphasia in fact denotes a broad category of impaired language production that as often manifests as an overabundance of speech. In medicine, aphasia is evidence of injury—the result of brain trauma. It is an “acquired” disorder, defined variously as a “disturbance,” “impairment,” or “loss” of language, but not speech or intelligence.<sup>6</sup> For people with aphasia, the initial stress unfolds as a neurological event altering

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<sup>5</sup> Recall that Eric Garner lived with asthma. NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo choked him to death on July 17, 2014. In addition to the chokehold, the New York City Medical Examiner's Office cites “Acute and chronic bronchial asthma; Obesity; Hypertensive cardiovascular disease” as conditions contributing to his death (John del Signore, “Eric Garner’s Death Ruled A Homicide By NYC Medical Examiner,” *Gothamist*, August 1, 2014, [http://gothamist.com/2014/08/01/eric\\_garners\\_death\\_ruled\\_a\\_homicide.php](http://gothamist.com/2014/08/01/eric_garners_death_ruled_a_homicide.php)). “Misogynoir” names the combined “anti-Black racist misogyny” uniquely experienced by black women (Moya Bailey and Trudy, “On misogynoir: citation, erasure, and plagiarism,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 [2018]: 762-768).

<sup>6</sup> Brooke Hallowell, *Aphasia and Other Acquired Neurogenic Language Disorders: A Guide for Clinical Excellence* (San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2017), 3. Harold Goodglass and Edith Kaplan, *Boston Naming Test* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2001), 5. Ilias Papathanasiou et al., *Aphasia*

communicative capabilities. Aphasia may also be considered the linguistic alternative to a path for now or forever inaccessible, a way to make do.

Aphasia is an expression of vertigo. In the case of *The Bluest Eye*, aphasia conceives of continuity for characters moving through physically and psychically injurious environments. More than a trope, aphasia follows from the dense network of study—Black study—evidencing everyday violence and trauma synonymous with the afterlives of slavery and colonialism.<sup>7</sup> I use the word “aphasia,” deliberately, incorporating black lives overlooked by the medical grammar of neurolinguistic trauma. As is common in medicine, the inclusion of black research subjects does not alone account for what it means to be a black subject of circumstance. That disparity may be at its widest in evaluating language disorders, for which experts scan for lack to make their diagnoses. But black language is also delineated by lack, defined by deviance even when celebrated for it.<sup>8</sup> How do we recognize disorder among people for whom disorder is the assumed default? Scientific studies on aphasia are more abundant than ever, yet research on the particular experiences of black persons with aphasia remains dire. Aphasiology leaves a genuine, immense silence on the viability of generalized solutions for black individuals, from diagnosis to recovery to rehabilitation and strategies for living. A handful of researchers—Hanna K. Ulatowka, Jean E. Jones, Martin R. Gitterman, Loraine K. Obler, Gloria Streit Olness—have alone represented studies at the intersection of black language and aphasia since the late-'70s. The field has yet to reckon with its governing methodology that is at every turn hostile to black language.<sup>9</sup> As Jean E. Jones, Martin R. Gitterman, and Loraine

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*and related neurogenic communication disorders* (Burlington: Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2011), 7. Advocacy groups such as the National Aphasia Association promote awareness through the slogan “Aphasia is a loss of language, not intellect.”

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<sup>8</sup> Hypothetically, all black language is aphasic for a failure to faithfully replicate the white standard.

<sup>9</sup> In general, data collection and analysis in studies on aphasia go as follows: Speech samples are elicited from subjects by either/both highly structured and (relatively) unstructured stimuli, ideally recreating a context in which the speaker must produce a certain “morpheme of interest”; the

K. Obler declared plainly in 2012, “research on aphasia in speakers of AAVE [African American Vernacular English] has been virtually nonexistent.”<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, in criticism, the word “aphasia” generally appears as one among many adjectives for muteness. Fredric Jameson differentiates “aphasia” and “amnesia,” diagnosing society with the latter, in prescribing history and narrative; John Guillory argues that New Criticism modeled “the perceived muteness of the literary work... by the gestural aphasia of the teacher”; Michael Awkward calls Hagar’s catatonia in *Song of Solomon* a “grief-inspired aphasia” that ends when she returns to speech; Jamaica Kincaid’s eponymous Lucy “experiences a loss of voice” that is mistaken “for joyful aphasia”; and, in “an aphasia of theory... nothing can be said.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, when expanded to the scope of critical phenomena, aphasia often signifies something unspoken or suppressed that readers and critics need consider. Raymond Malewitz paraphrases Black Arts critic Larry Neal’s charge for

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recorded samples are then transcribed; transcripts are then evaluated based upon successful or failed reproduction of the morpheme of interest, the effects of aphasia considered present in the case of the latter.

<sup>10</sup> Jean E. Jones, Martin R. Gitterman, and Loraine K. Obler, “A Case Study of a Bidialectal (African-American Vernacular English/Standard American English) Speaker with Agrammatism,” *Aspects of Multilingual Aphasia*, eds. Mira Goral and Martin R. Gitterman (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2012). This echoes a statement made in 1997 by Lorraine Cole, then-Executive Director of the National Medical Association: “the scientific arena has been the last bastion yet to be convinced that communication disorders in minority populations merit serious, large scale study.” With significant increases in qualitative research within aphasiology and greater emphasis on so-called real world (that is, social) applications as advocated by a client-centered medicine model, a survey of the field might incline us to believe that methods of analysis borrowed from the greater philosophical (phenomenology) and sociological (ethnography) traditions would mean a more robust attention to possible racial disparities. However, few studies on aphasia even report race as a demographic variable, let alone orient themselves specifically towards special considerations of race and language disorder outside a model of lack.

<sup>11</sup> Fredric R. Jameson, “The Symbolic Inference; Or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis,” *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 523. John Guillory, “The Ideology of Canon-Formation: T. S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks,” *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (September 1983): 188. Jana Evans Braziel, “Daffodils, Rhizomes, Migrations: Narrative Coming of Age in the Disaporic Writings of Edwidge Danticat and Jamaica Kincaid,” *Meridians* 3, no. 2 (2003): 118. Mary Ann Doane, “Aesthetics and Politics,” *Signs* 30, no. 1 (Autumn 2004): 1231.

the destruction of Western values as the demand for “cultural aphasia.”<sup>12</sup> P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods coin the phrase “conceptual aphasia in black” in response to the multiculturalist legacy of Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s racial formation theory and its subsequent “silencing of blackness within contemporary thinking on race.”<sup>13</sup> Before and after Ann Laura Stoler’s somewhat controversial study, aphasia has been a popular metaphor for colonial histories elided for an inability to be put into words.<sup>14</sup> In these examples aphasia is never the affecting condition of interest. Even Barbara Johnson’s inimitable essay on Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* conflates aphasia with “silence” and “the loss of the ability to speak,” more interested in the *healthy* collaboration of metaphor and metonymy implied at the end of Roman Jakobson’s influential 1956 essay on “aphasic disturbances.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Raymond Malewitz, “‘My Newish Voice’: Rethinking Black Power in Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘Whirlwind,’” *Callaloo* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 539.

<sup>13</sup> See *Conceptual Aphasia in Black: Displacing Racial Formation* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France,” *Public Culture* 23, no. 1 (2010): 121-156. Disability studies scholars have understandably disavowed Stoler’s term and others that use the language of disability to convey racism. See Shaun Grech and Karen Soldatic, “Disability and colonialism: (dis)encounters and anxious intersectionalities,” *Social Identities* 21, no. 1 (2015): 1-5; Tanya Titchkowky, “Life with Dead Metaphors: Impairment Rhetoric in Social Justice Praxis,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 9, no. 1 (2015); and Manu Vimalassery, et. al, “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Johnson, “Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Routledge 1984): 212.

I pull out two exceptions among literary considerations of aphasia; both Valorie D. Thomas and Naomi Guttman name aphasia as a disorder of postcolonial significance. Aphasia, like vertigo, Thomas argues, follows from “the effects of colonialism and racism as psychological trauma,” though she describes aphasia as “speechlessness.” (Valorie D. Thomas, “1 + 1 = 3’ and Other Dilemmas: Reading Vertigo in *Invisible Man*, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, and *Song of Solomon*,” *African American Review* 37, no. 1 [2003]: 82) But in *The Bluest Eye*, aphasia looks like more language, not less. Thomas and I conceive of vertigo quite differently; she thinks of vertigo as a narrative trope resolved by characters who successfully “stabilize... by achieving internal equilibrium”; by my definition, vertigo is never resolved, only moved through. (Thomas, 82)

Guttman’s study on M. Nourbese Philip investigates Philip’s evocation of two nineteenth-century pioneers of aphasia research, Paul Broca and Carl Wernicke, in the poem “Discourse on the Logic of Language.” The poem “embodies *damage by and resistance to* the dominant culture,” in what

I embrace a crip theoretical approach within black disability studies that encourages capaciousness in conceptualizing either and both blackness and disability.<sup>16</sup> “[O]ne never has to justify a black disability reading,” writes Therí A. Pickens, who embraces a “degree of scholarly array” that more genuinely follows from black disabled histories than something “linear and tidy.”<sup>17</sup> Metaphor isn’t necessarily the enemy, not when so many black writers, including and especially Morrison, lean on figuration to conjure that which is not allowed to stand in the quote-unquote real world—such as the experiences of black women impaired by manmade, white-made surroundings. Analogies leaning on blackness to articulate the experience of disability are falling out of favor, moved along in part by Chris Bell’s Swiftian proposal for a white disability studies that “by and large focuses on the work of white individuals and is itself largely produced by a corps of white scholars and activists” (the joke, of course: that’s just disability studies by another name).<sup>18</sup> But it is not by

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Guttman calls “aphasic discourse”: “the search for a language that can express the concerns of a displaced people” (57, 64). (Naomi Guttman, “Dream of the Mother Language: Myth and History in She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks,” *MELUS* 21, no. 3 [1996]: 53-68) Guttman’s work is closer to what I theorize here, primarily lacking an interdisciplinarity beyond the reference in Phillip’s poem. While Broca and Wernicke are permanent fixtures in brain diagrams, research on aphasia increasingly weakens their differentiation between nonfluent and fluent aphasia, also broadening the possible sites of neurological distress that can lead to aphasia. (Lynn M. Maher, “Broca’s Aphasia and Grammatical Processing” and Margaret L. Greenwald, “Wernicke’s Aphasia: Auditory Processing and Comprehension,” *The Oxford Handbook of Aphasia and Language Disorders*, eds. Anastasia M. Raymer and Leslie J. Gonzalez Rothi (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018).

<sup>16</sup> From Robert McRuer, a Crip theoretical approach broadens the edges of “that which has been concretized” in disability studies without dematerializing disability identity. (*Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* [New York: New York University Press 2006], 35) Crip theory already implies the incorporation of cultural theory, however, the “crip theory approach to black disability studies,” writes Sami Schalk, “must therefore engage the concept of disability as simultaneously material, historical, relational, and discursive to account for how disability and blackness are both intersectional and mutually constitutive.” (Sami Schalk, “Interpreting Disability Metaphor and Race in Octavia Butler’s ‘The Evening and the Morning and the Night,’” *African American Review* 50, no. 2 [2017]: 142)

<sup>17</sup> Therí A. Pickens, “Blue Blackness, Black Blueness: Making Sense of Blackness and Disability,” *African American Review* 50, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 96.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Bell, “Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 275.

accident that what counts as a disability in the ableist imagination runs the track also maintained by antiblackness. Attempting to retrace inch by inch which put what crosstie where would be futile. Quoting Ellen Samuel, Anna Mollow considers that “rather than attempting to ‘somehow to escape from analogy,’ we might ‘seek to employ it more critically than in the past.’”<sup>19</sup> It is the job of Black study to consider the discomforting confluence of racism and antiblackness and impairment and disability as they arrive together and all the time in the lives of people and characters who would seem regressive from a (white) disability studies perspective. Asks Pickens: “If we call out our dead, how many of them in black studies have had the end of their lives shaped by experiences with disability and chronic illness?”<sup>20</sup> Like so many before me, I reach for literature to fill Western medicine’s archival absences. Disorder often hides in the just facts of black survival.

## II. Weathering the Weather

“*Quiet as it’s kept*,” confides Claudia, “*there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941*.”<sup>21</sup> It is a euphemism, a substitute that runs parallel to the literal act of planting those seeds too deep in the dirt, seeds that would have paid for a new bicycle if not for the “secret, terrible, awful” planting (another euphemism) learned by compiling snatches of adult gossip one summer—because word in Lorain, Ohio is kept quiet only as a figure of speech.<sup>22</sup> “[T]here were no marigolds” just like there is a pregnancy without a living baby after Cholly Breedlove rapes his daughter. Pecola is eleven years old when her father violates her and “twelve or so” during pregnancy, years younger than 15, the lowest age considered in the racially-divided data sets on neonatal mortality that led public health researcher Arline T. Geronimus to theorize the health implications of blackness via the term

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<sup>19</sup> Mollow, 284.

<sup>20</sup> Mollow, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage Books 2007), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Morrison, 188.

“weathering.”<sup>23</sup> (On the limit, which caps at age thirty-four, she says, “First-time mothers younger than 15 or older than 34 years represent very highly selected groups of women or mothers, *yet the ways in which they are so select are not fully understood.*”)<sup>24</sup> The significant physiological, sociological, and eventually neurobiological body of evidence that black being predicts aggressive lapses in health began as a study on the statistical oddities of black motherhood.<sup>25</sup> Among black girls and women Geronimus identifies an “excess infant mortality” that haunts their pregnancies in opposition to age-based trends derived from birth outcomes among white women.<sup>26</sup> Years that ought to be “prime” of life” and “prime childbearing ages,” and are that, indeed, for white subjects look dramatically dire for black women by comparison.<sup>27</sup> The weathering hypothesis introduces social inequality as the keenest predictor of health outcomes.<sup>28</sup> Age then, acquires an alternative significance—the intensity

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<sup>23</sup> Morrison, 173, 189. Arline T. Geronimus, “The Weathering Hypothesis and the Health of African-American Women and Infants: Evidence and Speculations,” *Ethnicity & Disease* 2, no. 3: 207-21.

<sup>24</sup> Geronimus, “The Weathering Hypothesis,” 209; emphasis mine.

<sup>25</sup> Black men and women have a higher probability than their white counterparts at any age of having a high scoring allostatic load, a measurement of “the cumulative wear and tear on the body’s systems owing to repeated adaptation to stressors.” (Geronimus et al., “‘Weathering’ and Age Patterns of Allostatic Load Scores Among Blacks and Whites in the United States,” *American Journal of Public Health* 96, no. 5 [May 2006]: 826). On a cellular level, racial discrimination has also associated with faster rates of telomere degeneration compared to whites, a bio-indicator of accelerated aging. See Daniel B. Lee et al., “The Link Between Discrimination and Telomere Length in African American Adults,” *Health Psychology* 36, no. 5 (May 2017): 458-467.

<sup>26</sup> Geronimus, “The Weathering Hypothesis,” 208.

<sup>27</sup> Geronimus, 215. The disparity persists over three decades since Geronimus’ initial 1983 data source. “There is something about being black in America over time, perhaps generations, that leads to worse birth outcomes for black infants,” deduce Heather H. Burris and Michele R. Hacker. (Heather H. Burris and Michele R. Hacker, “Birth outcome racial disparities: A result of intersecting social and environmental factors,” ed. Scott A. Lorch, special issue on perinatal epidemiology, *Seminars in Perinatology* 41, no. 6 [2017]: 360-366). See also: Nana Matoba and James W. Collings, Jr., “Racial disparity in infant mortality” from the same issue.

<sup>28</sup> Recent research challenges the emphasis on socioeconomic position (SEP) instead of race. Among African Americans, regardless of how SEP is estimated (education, income, wealth), higher SEP does not much decrease morbidity risk in terms of either allostatic load or number of chronic health conditions. By contrast, “whites tend to translate increasing levels of SEP into better health a substantially higher rate.” (R. Jay Turner et al., “Race, Socioeconomic Position, and Physical Health: A Descriptive Analysis.” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 58, no. 1 [2017]: 32).

of health risks increases under duration, as long as a person is susceptible to racism, therefore, so long as they live.<sup>29</sup> Weathering is accumulative.

One pregnancy followed by another. When Pauline and Cholly Breedlove made a baby the second time, the only time Pauline “actually tried to get pregnant,” and narratively the third pregnancy in the novel, Pauline wasn’t scared.<sup>30</sup> “*I felt good, and wasn’t thinking on the carrying, just the baby itself,*” she confides. “*I used to talk to it whilst it be still in the womb. Like good friends we was... On up till the end I felted good about that baby.*” When the time came, Pauline went to the hospital: “*So I could be easeful.*” The hospital—“*They*”—put Pauline “*in a big room with a whole mess of women.*” She is examined: first, by a doctor who rummages around her cervix with a jelly-covered glove; next by the teaching physician and his pupils. “*now these here women you don’t have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses,*” says the physician. “*The young ones smiled a little,*” but do not speak to Pauline, nor does their gaze venture higher than her stomach and splayed legs. It is a clinical setting, but their distance contrasts more painfully than childbirth with the bedside manner employed in service of the white women in the room.

*I seed them talking to them white women: “How you feel? Gonna have twins?” Just shucking them, of course, but nice talk. Nice friendly talk. I got edgy, and when them pains got harder, I was glad. Glad to have something else to think about. I moaned something awful. The pains wasn’t as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women. Just ‘cause I wasn’t hooping and hollering before didn’t mean I wasn’t feeling pain. What’d they think?*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “The prevalence of high blood pressure in African-Americans is the highest in the world.” (“African Americans and Heart Disease, Stroke,” American Heart Association, last modified July 31, 2015, <http://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/consumer-healthcare/what-is-cardiovascular-disease/african-americans-and-heart-disease-stroke>).

<sup>30</sup> Morrison, 124. Pecola is first; whether Pauline’s first pregnancy carrying Pecola’s older brother was the result of sexual assault Pauline leaves ambiguous, but, speaking of the present, she says, “*Most times he’s thrashing away inside me before I’m woke, and through when I am.*” (Morrison, 131).

<sup>31</sup> Morrison, 125.

From labor to delivery to baby only one doctor really looks at Pauline. “*Looked at my face, I mean. I looked right back at him. He dropped his eyes and turned red. He knewed, I reckon, that maybe I weren’t no horse foaling.*”<sup>32</sup> An accident. “*But them others. They didn’t know. They went on.*”<sup>33</sup> This is the Weather.

“[T]he weather is the totality of our environments,” as defined by Christina Sharpe. “In what I am calling the weather, antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate.”<sup>34</sup> The weather fills the world, its container, and, possibly, beyond.<sup>35</sup> This includes the (post)colonial, (post)slavery Americas, includes the South, includes the Midwest, includes the ’30s and ’40s Lorain, Ohio that anchors the occasional regional and temporal deviations in *The Bluest Eye*. Just as Toni Cade Bambara’s stories assume context and expect attunement, Morrison’s Pauline does not elaborate a situation already known to black women giving birth and being (un)seen under such conditions as Western medicine, de facto Jim Crow, and all else that follows the persistence of planter relations post-Emancipation.<sup>36</sup> And nor does the narrator implicate these conditions in Pauline’s inevitable decline from a “particular” Southern brown girl with talent and fondness for all things domestic to the abusive, depressed

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<sup>32</sup> Morrison, 125.

<sup>33</sup> Morrison, 125.

<sup>34</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 104, 106.

<sup>35</sup> As cinematic science fiction epics such as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* dazzlingly attest, antiblackness can travel. See Gregory E. Rutledge, “Futurist Fiction & Fantasy: The ‘Racial’ Establishment,” *Callaloo* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 236-252.

<sup>36</sup> The enslavement of black women enabled many Western medical advancements in service of white bodies, particularly the fields of obstetrics and gynecology. The celebrated “Father of Gynecology,” J. Marion Sims, regularly performed surgeries on enslaved women without administering amnesia. See Deirdre Cooper Owens, “The Birth of American Gynecology,” *Medical Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017). Only recently has public opinion on Sims begun to shift, though physicians continue to defend his legacy. See Sara Spettel and Mark Donald White, “The Portrayal of J. Marion Sims’ Controversial Surgical Legacy,” *The Journal of Urology* 185, no. 6 (June 2011): 2424-2427. In 2018, the New York City’s Public Design Commission voted unanimously to remove a commemorative statue of Sims from Central Park to his burial site in Brooklyn. Scholar Amrit Trewn, among others, have called for the monument’s destruction. (William Neuman, “City Orders Sims Statue Removed From Central Park,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/nyregion/nyc-sims-statue-central-park-monument.html>)

(words nobody in her context would use) mother who outsources every bit of pleasure to a white family and their “little pink-and-yellow girl.”<sup>37</sup> But then again, lest Pauline’s trajectory imply a prelapsarian past, we ought recall that well before she met Cholly Breedlove, Pauline *Williams* was the ninth out of eleven children, yet deprived a name and place in the family structure; that a nail “punched clear through” her bare, toddler foot, which forevermore “flopped”; that World War I displaced her family in the name of opportunity, moved them about “[i]n shifts, lots, batches” across “six months and four journeys” before they settled in Kentucky miner country; that a sister died.<sup>38</sup> This, too, is the weather and weathering.

Weather is the climate (“the total climate; and that climate is antiblack”); weathering is the verb.<sup>39</sup> Weather is the middle-aged white immigrant owner of Yacobowski’s Fresh Veg who “does not see” Pecola, “because for him there is nothing to see.”<sup>40</sup> Mr. Yacobowki takes Pecola’s money, but won’t touch her hand. “His nails graze her damp palm”—another accident.<sup>41</sup> Pecola is left with “the dredges of her shame” and an anger that “will not hold” and tears and the candy surrogate for the little blond-haired, blue-eyed girl she would, if possible, eat to become and “[b]e Mary Jane”—weathering.<sup>42</sup> The weather introduces Mary Jane and the analogous white baby dolls and Shirley Temple into the girls’ lives, smothers them with blue, yellow, pink. The weather “had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured”; weathering is what

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<sup>37</sup> Morrison 82, 109.

<sup>38</sup> Critics have posited that Pauline’s migration from rural Alabama to the Midwest is symbolic of her descent into whiteness, moving “away from the values of the black, poor, rural South and toward values that serve the interests of a privileged, white upper-middle class and of capitalism itself,” says Cat Moses. (Cat Moses, “The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*,” *African American Review* 33, no. 4 [Winter 1999]: 628). This reading neglects the fact that Pauline’s experience of the South is far from idyllic and that she moves up North not in search of whiteness but because of economic scarcity.

<sup>39</sup> Sharpe, 104.

<sup>40</sup> Morrison, 48.

<sup>41</sup> Morrison, 50.

<sup>42</sup> Morrison, 50.

happens to a digestive tract when a girl gorges on the near gallon of milk that brings her closer to pink-skinned Shirley Temple.<sup>43</sup> Weathering evolves Claudia's "pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love."<sup>44</sup> Weathering is that "change," defined as "adjustment without improvement."<sup>45</sup> Weathering takes the "self" out of "self-esteem," intaking and redistributing contempt like a corrosive substance to anyone whose genealogy wasn't "brighter," who isn't light enough to pass for "colored" instead of n——r.<sup>46</sup>

Decades of research on *The Bluest Eye* have explicated the novel as an indictment of beauty qua whiteness primarily fastened to Pecola, whose transformation, most often cast as psychosis, simulates the priorities of the beauty economy responsible. This "concern with a metaphorical poisoning which works through the American culture industry's projection—from the movie screen, from Mary Jane candy wrappers, and from Shirley Temple mugs—of a single image of ideal beauty," as Shelley Wong describes, is one demonstration of the weather—the accompanied psychological effects rightly ascribed to weathering.<sup>47</sup> Yet the weather importantly conceived as an atmosphere—*the atmosphere*—by Sharpe and reenacted by Morrison exceeds even commercial beauty's omnipresence. The wear and undiagnosed and undiagnosable ailments that adhere to black characters are not uniquely the result of encounters with Shirley Temple so much as an environment where *every* white girl is Shirley Temple at the expense of everyone else.

For it is also the weather that sends Mr. Henry to rent with the MacTeers (weathering finds his prior landlord Miss Della "too addled now to keep up").<sup>48</sup> In *The Bluest Eye*, renting is understood

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<sup>43</sup> Morrison, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Morrison, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Morrison, 23.

<sup>46</sup> Morrison, 74, 87.

<sup>47</sup> Shelley Wong, "Transgression as Poesis in *The Bluest Eye*," *Callaloo* 13, no. 3 (1990): 479.

<sup>48</sup> "Well, that old crazy nigger she married up with didn't help her head none." "Is that what give her them strokes?" (Morrison, 13). The prevalence of hypertension among African Americans is 41% compared to 28% for whites. Hypertension increases risk of dementia and is the single greatest risk

as proximity to—while ownership is mitigation from—the weather, figured as “outdoors.” Mr. Henry moves into the MacTeer home so that he won’t be outdoors; Pecola moves into the MacTeer home because “that old Dog Breedlove had burned up his house, gone upside his wife’s head, and everybody, as a result, was outdoors,” Claudia narrates, picking up language from her mother.<sup>49</sup> The metaphor works literally, yet the “threat of being outdoors” intimidates because the physical elements—rain, heat, wind, snow—are not the sum of the danger.<sup>50</sup> Outdoors is “the end of something,” the most marginal of any marginalized condition.<sup>51</sup> But Claudia also wants to resist minoritarian clichés of “caste and class” in translating a common sense of outdoors.<sup>52</sup> Outdoors is “an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition,” she says, while “peripheral existence” stated as such remains “abstract”—“the concreteness of being outdoors was another matter.”<sup>53</sup> Outdoors is as real and certain and physical as “dead,” the blackened complement to philosophical musing on “the concept of death and being.”<sup>54</sup> Outdoors is the dying and black dead. Renters can be put outdoors at any time, making renting precarious indeed. Ownership, coherent to the proprietary language of white (American) imperialism allegedly alleviates this concern. Renters, meanwhile, observes Claudia, “saved and scratched, and piled away what they could in rented hovels, looking forward to the day of property” and thus, finally, shelter from the weather once and for all.<sup>55</sup>

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factor for strokes. See Michael D. Murray et al., “Antihypertensive Medication and Dementia Risk in Older Adult African Americans with Hypertension: A Prospective Cohort Study,” *Journal of Internal Medicine* 33, no. 4 (April 2018): 455-462. The most common cause of aphasia is a stroke.

<sup>49</sup> Morrison, 18-19.

<sup>50</sup> Morrison, 17. They are not the least of danger either. As I write this, Hurricane Michael, the second Category 4 hurricane within the month, is about to make landfall along the Gulf of Mexico.

<sup>51</sup> Morrison, 17.

<sup>52</sup> Morrison, 17.

<sup>53</sup> Morrison, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Morrison, 17.

<sup>55</sup> Morrison, 18.

The Breedloves are renters in every sense of the word.<sup>56</sup> The weather displaces Cholly and keeps Cholly displaced—he is incarcerated when Pecola goes to stay with the MacTeers, run off at the end of the novel and dead at its start. In-between he wanders in his father’s faint footsteps—“That Fuller boy, I believe it was... I think he gone to Macon. Him or his brother,” says the Great Aunt Jimmy what saved him from certain death by the side of the railroad where he was left four days into life.<sup>57</sup> Aunt Jimmy gets sick when Cholly is little older than ten, an imprecise illness but known to M’Dear, a “decisive diagnostician” and the community’s own emergency room technician. “In any illness that could not be handled by ordinary means—known cures, intuition, or endurance—the word was always, ‘Fetch M’Dear.’”<sup>58</sup> Her manner at Aunt Jimmy’s bedside shares nothing in common with Pauline’s medical encounter in the chapter beforehand; M’Dear’s examination begins “at Aunt Jimmy’s wrinkled face.”<sup>59</sup> Cholly watches her work in awe, this very tall, very old white-haired, black woman who “seemed to need her hickory stick not for support but for communication.”<sup>60</sup> M’Dear rubs her cane while she sifts through the other black woman’s hair, studies her skin, listens to her abdomen, inspects her stool. It is an exchange borne of a certain kind of community, what Morrison prefers to call “the neighborhood”:

...there was this life-giving, very, very strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood. One lives, really, not so much in your house as you do outside of it... And legal responsibilities, all the responsibilities that agencies now have, were the responsibilities of the neighborhood. So that people were taken care of, or locked up or whatever. If they were sick, other people took care of them; if they needed something to eat, other people took care of them; if they were old, other people took

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<sup>56</sup> The weather is a landlord—another immigrant from Europe, who owns what the descendants of the enslaved can barely afford to lease. Morrison writes: “The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black.” (Morrison, 38).

<sup>57</sup> Morrison, 132.

<sup>58</sup> Morrison, 127.

<sup>59</sup> Morrison, 136.

<sup>60</sup> Morrison, 136.

care of them; if they were mad, other people provided a small space for them, or related to their madness or tried to find out the limits of their madness.<sup>61</sup>

I am reminded of an affirmation spoken by Saidiya Hartman: “care is the antidote to violence.”<sup>62</sup>

Care insulates against the harsh environment.

While Aunt Jimmy recovers, she and Miss Alice and Mrs. Gains trade in bouts of sickness that matter-of-factly compile to the tell the story of an old black woman’s life.

Rising and falling, complex in harmony, uncertain in pitch, but constant in the recitative of pain. They hugged the memories of illness to their bosoms. They licked their lips and clucked their tongues in fond remembrance of pains they had endured—childbirth, rheumatism, croup, sprains, backaches, piles. All of the bruises they had collected from moving about the earth—harvesting, cleaning, hoisting, pitching, stooping, kneeling, picking—always with young ones underfoot.<sup>63</sup>

The women exhibit weathering at its most accumulative, living long enough to endure such “insults to health” that multiply with age and increased exposure to fatal forces—patriarchy (overseen by white and black men), abuse (from white women employers and black partners), childbirth, and poverty.<sup>64</sup> They have spent a lifetime in the weather, but there is still time for care and contiguity, love without repair. It’s a different sort of talking cure. But this time, like and unlike so many others, the patient only keeps on long enough to die without warning.<sup>65</sup> Cholly finds her frozen body and is

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<sup>61</sup> Morrison and Robert Stepto, “Intimate Things in Place”: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” *The Massachusetts Review* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1977): 474. In a slightly later 1981 interview, Morrison identifies her writing as “village literature, fiction that is realty for the village, for the tribe.” (Thomas LeClair, “The Language Must Not Sweat,” *The New Republic*, March 20, 1981, <https://newrepublic.com/article/95923/the-language-must-not-sweat>)

<sup>62</sup> “In the Wake: A Salon in Honor of Christina Sharpe,” February 2, 2017, New York City, NY, <https://vimeo.com/203012536>.

<sup>63</sup> Morrison, 137-138.

<sup>64</sup> Geronimus, “The Weathering Hypothesis,” 211.

<sup>65</sup> Aunt Jimmy’s death is ultimately announced in the genre of tragicomedy; “Aunt Jimmy died of peach cobbler,” just like that. (Morrison, 135). Soul food is often chastised as the source of the disproportionately high numbers of black Americans with high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, and other “preventable” health conditions.

ushered into his first conscious experience of the wake via *a* wake; soon thereafter he learns his place according to the weather at the other end of a flashlight. And then he is “free.”

Cholly Breedlove is free in the way black men are free, especially Georgia boys in coveralls in the age of Jim Crow and migration—the benevolent extension of that initial displacement of black life—which is better described as the freedom to *feel free* while nudged hither and thither by the whims of the weather.<sup>66</sup> “Dangerously free,” per the narrator.<sup>67</sup> “The pieces of Cholly’s life could become coherent only in the head of a musician,” or anyone otherwise attuned to the old blues, the making sense of a life made discontinuous by “racial calculus and political arithmetic.”<sup>68</sup> Men, too, experience weathering, though Morrison is more often interested in “all those peripheral little girls,” she says, who organize *The Bluest Eye* as they are permitted to do seldom elsewhere.<sup>69</sup> Jane Kuenz considers Cholly’s freedom a form of “disinterested violence,” the words Claudia uses to censure her own desire to dismember white girls.<sup>70</sup> The “increase of acid irritation in the upper intestinal tract” and “light flush of perspiration” inspired by reminders of his economic impotence are not unlike the appearance of “high-yellow dream” Maureen Peal’s white-like wealth which, Claudia admits, “threatened to derange Frieda and me.”<sup>71</sup> Unlike Claudia, whose vitriol ends at insults and fantasy, Cholly wields the power to distort the lives around him, and that he does.

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<sup>66</sup> Sharpe: “Living in the wake on a global level means living the disastrous time and effects of continued marked migrations...” (Sharpe, 15).

<sup>67</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 156. Cholly, says Morrison, “is the thing I keep calling a ‘free man,’ not free in the legal sense, but free in his head... This is a man who is stretching, you know, he’s stretching, he’s going all the way within his own mind and within whatever his outline might be. Now that’s the tremendous possibility for masculinity among black men” (Morrison and Stepto, 480-1)

<sup>68</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 6.

<sup>69</sup> Qtd. in John Noel Duvall, *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 31.

<sup>70</sup> Jane Kuenz, “*The Bluest Eye*: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity,” *African American Review* 27, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 421-431.

<sup>71</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 62.

When I say Cholly learns his place in the weather at the other end of the flashlight, I concur with early and recent analyses of *The Bluest Eye* that the incident with the white men in the woods proves memorable and even formative to Cholly's barely adolescent psyche. The "promise of sweetness," her tickles, his laughter, moans, sighs, the youthful wandering respite from the funeral of an old woman—all is painfully restaged into something like assault for both involved under the knowing watch of two white men and their gun.<sup>72</sup> Over the decades, critics have struggled in contextualizing Cholly as both a recipient and agent of violence. Regarding his repeated sexual assaults—of Pauline, of Pecola, and an untold number of unnamed women—many resort to causation, implicating the flashlight scene for itself or as representative of the ridicule found everywhere living as a black man. "He rapes their daughter to help assuage the loneliness he feels from having been abandoned as a child," says D. Scot Hinson; "The anger and aggression of the black man that finds its major expression in the rape of his daughter comes from a past of being abandoned and mistreated," writes Kathleen Kelly Marks.<sup>73</sup> The chapter headed by "SEEFATHERHEISBIGANDSTRONG..." contains most of Cholly's life and ends with Pecola on the floor, incriminating that life as a matter of sequence. The event in the woods even lays

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<sup>72</sup> Morrison, 145.

<sup>73</sup> D. Scot Hinson, "Narrative and Community Crisis in *Beloved*," MELUS 26, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 163. Kathleen Kelly Marks, "Melancholy and the Unyielding Earth in *The Bluest Eye*," *Toni Morrison: Forty Years in The Clearing*, ed. Carmen Gillespie (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012): 151. Felicia Beckman: "Cholly's alcoholism and the rape of his daughter are deplorable acts; however, we are saddened at the tragedy of his life and wonder what he would have been like if things had been different..." (Beckman, "The Portrayal of Africana Males in Achebe, Marshall, Morrison and Wideman, *Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 4 [2002]: 405-421). Andrew Sargent offers a "continuum" connecting Bigger Thomas, "who is brutally violent toward both a white woman and his black girlfriend but is also a victim of racial oppression," and Cholly, "who in *The Bluest Eye* rapes his own daughter but also elicits our sympathy as a victim of child abandonment and white sexual terror." (Andrew Sargent, "Representing Prison Rape: Race, Masculinity, and Incarceration in Donald Goines's 'White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief,'" *MELUS* 35, no. 3 [Fall 2010]: 151).

groundwork for the version of Cholly that “is known for misplacing his anger.”<sup>74</sup> Miming the movements of sex with his naked pelvis against hers, Cholly stares at Darlene, sublimating his humiliation and anger into enough hatred to wish it were rape—“foreshadowing the domestic tragedy to come.”<sup>75</sup> He carries this anger with him back to Aunt Jimmy’s home, over the days following her funeral, and the rest of his life.

But not only does it feel irresponsible to add credence to a causal relationship between racism and rape—and therefore blackness and rape; also, *as if* absent racial violence black women would be fully liberated—Morrison, with her scenic asides, again seems particularly invested in disorganizing what would otherwise be interpreted as a descent from Southern innocence. Concluding the genesis for such horror relies on a reader to make a narrative out of pieces, reason enough for us to question the efficacy of the enterprise.<sup>76</sup> That abuse is not rare or nearly as mysterious as these psychological readings imply is precisely the point, back to “those peripheral little girls.” It is enough to know it happens/is happening/happened.

As I’ve begun to suggest, traditional and persistent psychoanalytic shorthand in *The Bluest Eye* becomes antiquated in full view of the billowy cloak that is the afterlife of slavery, that wreaks

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<sup>74</sup> George Yancy, “The Black Self Within a Semiotic Space of Whiteness: Reflections on the Racial Deformation of Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*,” *CLA Journal* 43, no. 3 (March 2000): 299-319.

<sup>75</sup> Andrea Levine, “In His Own Home”: Gendering the African American Domestic Sphere in Contemporary Culture,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1/2 (2011): 173. Kathleen Woodward uses the term “rape” to name what happens to Darlene in the woods. (Kathleen Woodward, “Traumatic Shame: Toni Morrison, Televisual Culture, and the Cultural Politics of the Emotions,” *Cultural Critique* no. 46 (2000): 210-240).

<sup>76</sup> I’m reminded of that recursive, Instagrammable adage “hurt people hurt people,” which resonates and rings hollow at once. It is honest and true to experience and study that people who bully or abuse others often learned that behavior as a recipient of it; yet, to the abused, the rhyme is inadequate, offering no blame, no restitution, no comfort except for the anticipation that adjective will become verb, the hurt people doing the hurting soon enough. “Hurt people hurt people,” does still make sense and is not anymore paradoxical than an abused man who abuses his daughter.

havoc on black folks' minds *and* bodies—their bodyminds.<sup>77</sup> This consideration brings exemplary characters like Cholly—or, alternatively, Claudia—back to Earth. Cholly is one character, one case out of several, whose development under inhospitable conditions we are asked to observe. Same conditions felt unequally produce divergent results. Cholly's blackness that is also maleness feels free by virtue of “the inability to place people and events into contexts that would flesh out experience,” Kuenz writes.<sup>78</sup> His freedom is not disorder, he rather finds freedom *in* disorder, in unstructured passion beholden to nobody except white men in public.<sup>79</sup> “He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites” which leads him to violence (“Free even to knock her in the head”) as often as drinking, dancing, and fucking consensually.<sup>80</sup> It is a way, not the best or humane way, but a way to deal with the weather, to live with it. On this he is not so unique except, again, for his ability to act upon it, which can be all the difference—in instances of violence—but isn't always. Cholly and by extension the entire Breedlove family are commonly interpreted as *the* harbingers of antiblackness, obsessed with whiteness to the point of self-combustion, “run together” like the Dick and Jane reader that anchors their stories in the novel. The MacTeers by contrast have “integrity.”<sup>81</sup> But only overinvestment in the dream of a nuclear family structure à la Moynihan could suppose the MacTeers unaffected by the “the corrosive effects of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Margaret Price defines “bodymind” as “the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called ‘body’ and ‘mind’” (Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 270).

<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Wong identifies Cholly's problem as “the inability to articulate the disparate moments of a life” and “[h]aving lost all measures of relatedness to others, he was free to remake, or free to not make at all, his own ties to the world” (Wong, 476).

<sup>79</sup> Cholly's freedom is not without intervention from the state, even if he doesn't perceive it so: “He could go to jail and not feel imprisoned, for he had already seen the furtiveness in the eyes of his jailer, free to say, ‘No, suh,’ and smile, for he had already killed three white men” (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 159).

<sup>80</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 159.

<sup>81</sup> Deanna M. Garabedian, “Toni Morrison and the Language of Music,” *CL4 Journal* 41, no. 3 (March 1998): 304.

<sup>82</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, “On Dolls, Presidents, and Little Black Girls,” *Signs* 35, no. 4 (2010): 799.

The question isn't "Why are the Breedloves dysfunctional?" Morrison has a better question, "[W]ho survived under what circumstances and why"?<sup>83</sup> How does *anyone* keep on? How does anyone *keep it pushing?*<sup>2</sup>

The weather orders life on Earth as it unquestionably gives order to everyone in the world of *The Bluest Eye*.<sup>84</sup> The difference between the Breedloves and the MacTeers is but a measure of amplitude. Nobody in *The Bluest Eye* is healthy, however much we might want to problematize the term, because nobody is white. The Breedloves rent and the MacTeers own and yet, Claudia's sister Frieda is sexually assaulted in her own home, the home they own, by a man who rents. The MacTeers own and yet, Claudia is not all the way sure of her mother's love; and yet, the girls live in fear of outdoors, despite their inheritance of a home with two parents who own instead of rent. Sarah Jane Cervenak and J. Kameron Carter restate outdoors as "[t]he un/homed and unfenced ground of a trespassive imperial desire and its attendant scenes of anti-black subjection."<sup>85</sup> Blackness is inclined towards outdoors, an inertia per the rule of law. Therefore, they argue, following from Hartman, "under the postbellum terms of freedom, blackness remains outdoors even when brought indoors, even when brought into the (settler) home ownership, into self-possession."<sup>86</sup> Shelter is no protection from the weather, because blackness is the outdoors.

### III. Logorrhea and the Curse of Grown Folks Business

Weather is the climate; weathering is the verb; aphasia is a language disordered. *The Bluest Eye* opens on a primal linguistic scene:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes

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<sup>83</sup> LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat."

<sup>84</sup> *Autumn, Winter, Spring, and Summer.*

<sup>85</sup> Sarah Jane Cervenak and J. Kameron Carter, "Untitled and Outdoors: Thinking with Saidiya Hartman," *Women & Performance* 27, no. 1 (2017): 46.

<sup>86</sup> Cervenak and Carter, 45.

meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play.<sup>87</sup>

The recitation recalls a past and persistent American literacy curriculum inaugurated by brief, accessible language and pleasant, aspirational white people. Created by educators Zerna Sharp and Williams S. Gray, the *Read with Dick and Jane* series of primers were a staple of elementary education by the 1940s, read by an estimated 80 percent of the nation's first graders during 1950s. Millions of children across decades acquired their verbal and written lexicon filtered through the orderly lives of those two golden siblings, their baby sister Sally, two parents and a dog named Spot, including black students who wouldn't be seen by the series until 1965.<sup>88</sup> "The world created for Dick and Jane was very bland," mostly because they are not given one.<sup>89</sup> They are their own context. The illustrations splash onto the page and the ground spreads little past Dick's or Jane's or Mother's or Father's or Spot's feet, while the background circles their bodies, leaving white space in between. The illustrations echo the series' "whole-word" or "look-say" pedagogy which encourages readers to recognize each word as an indivisible unit of language—each word a coherent world unto itself.

Morrison's unplagiarized version accentuates the generic that is really bourgeois whiteness underwriting Dick and Jane's existence. The seminal passage famously repeats itself, once with punctuation and capitalization removed, and then once more:

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisverypretty  
hereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandw  
hitehousetheyareveryhappyseejanesheshasareddressshewants  
toplaywhowillplaywithjaneseethecatitgoesmeowmeowcomea

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<sup>87</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 1.

<sup>88</sup> See Jervette R. Ward, "In Search of Diversity: Dick and Jane and Their Black Playmates," *Making Connections: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity* 13, no. 2 (March 2012): 17-26.

<sup>89</sup> "Dick and Jane: Story of These Early Readers," America Comes Alive!, last modified June 2, 2017, <https://americancomesalive.com/2017/06/02/dick-and-jane-story-of-these-early-readers>.

ndplaycomeplaywithjanethekittenwillnotplayseemothermoth  
erisverynicemotherwillyouplaywithjanemotherlaughslaughm  
otherlaughseefatherheisbigandstrongfatherwillyouplaywithja  
nefatherissmilingsmilefathersmileseethedogbowwowgoesthe  
dogdoyouwanttoplaydoyouwanttoplaywithjaneseethedogrun  
rundogrunklooklookhercomesafriendthefriendwillplaywithja  
netheywillplayagoodgameplayjaneplay<sup>90</sup>

Usually described as some form of breakdown in keeping with the progressive (or regressive) grammatical omissions, the third iteration of the Dick and Jane story has been considered representative of either/both the destruction of norms or/and their effect on black mental health and wellbeing. “Morrison’s deconstructive intention is manifested in her destruction of a paragraph from the Dick and Jane primer, gradually breaking down its grammar and with it the symbolic order,” writes Aoi Mori.<sup>91</sup> The paragraph most readily symbolizes the Breedloves, she argues, who are “gradually dismembered and dissimilated from the community”; the text is accordingly “incomprehensible and meaningless.”<sup>92</sup> That may be true for early readers of English, however, once properly initiated to the syntax of Dick and Jane—and as literate subjects experiencing the story for the third time—the run-on text is far from formless. The repetition yields rhythm and identification—we recognize the story, can pull out key players “motherfatherdickandjane” at a glance. And so, Dick and Jane is not only pernicious but durable—not “signify[ing] nothing,” but

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<sup>90</sup> I’ve replicated the breaks that appear according to the physical Vintage Books edition for reasons that will soon be apparent.

<sup>91</sup> Aoi Mori, “Rethinking Race Matters,” *Living Language, Living Memory: Essays on the Works of Toni Morrison*, eds. Kerstin W Shands and Giulia Rillo Mikrut (Flemingsberg: Södertörns högskola, 2014): 129.

<sup>92</sup> Mori, 129, 130.

signifying more efficiently sans spaces and stops.<sup>93</sup> By the third reading, a precocious learner with a keen memory might not even need look to know the words.<sup>94</sup>

And yet, not all is right with Dick and Jane. The longer one looks, the more coherence frays. Inherited players and patterns remain while a new terminology emerges and overlaps with what came before. As in a freehand word search, little linguistic illusions reconfigure the implied space between morphemes. Freed of hyphenation, “whitehouse” becomes conspicuous; there’s “everyhappy,” “red[d]ress,” “mothermoth,” and “itgoes.”<sup>95</sup> Noticeable is the “he” living in all of Jane’s “she” statements—“[s]hehas” and “[s]hewants”—and the volatile “seethe,” which appears three times. A returning reader might also see the discomforting proximity of Father and daughter, see Jane trapped in her father’s smile—

“seefatherheisbigandstrongfatherwillyouplaywithjanefatherissmilingsmilefathersmile.”<sup>96</sup> It’s clear why Dick and certainly Jane would benefit from some punctuation. Of note, these excesses may only be

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<sup>93</sup> For more on the hegemony of the white logos conveyed through the Dick and Jane reader in the novel, see Timothy B. Powell, “Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page,” *Black American Literature Forum* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 747-760.

<sup>94</sup> The passage has posed a problem for translators of Morrison’s work. It “is not necessarily much of a linguistic challenge,” writes Lynn Penrod, “but that arguably it stands as a Mount Everest of cultural translation challenge that I believe has proved impossible to conquer for any translator to date.” (Penrod, “Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*: Lost and Found in Translation,” *Living Language, Living Memory: Essays on the Works of Toni Morrison*, 40).

<sup>95</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 4. “It goes” also sounds like “keep it pushing” as in the closing line of a poem by Eve L. Ewing about seeing an elderly Emmett Till at the grocery store:

...he smiled. *well*  
*hello young lady*  
*hello, so chilly today*  
*should have worn my warm coat like you*  
*yes so cool for August in Chicago*  
*how are things going for you*  
*oh* he sighed and put the candy on the belt  
*it goes, it goes.* (Eve L. Ewing, “I saw Emmett Till this week at the grocery store,” *Tin House* 29, no. 3 [Spring 2018])

<sup>96</sup> Morrison, 4.

found horizontally across the continuity of the story whose characters are too compressed and irregularly spaced for diachronic affiliation.<sup>97</sup> It's a reader under duress, weathered to be sure, losing across its actual and implied repetitions those components of standard language that keep everyone in their proper place. It is the transition, the movement, between paragraphs, more so than any one isolated paragraph, that correlates to the grammar of life in Lorain—the lesson is less symbolic than syntactical. Per both Hortense Spillers and Sharpe, the weather not only ensures exclusion from the domestic grammar compatible with the premier linguistic terms of humanism ("See Mother," "See Father"), but also inadvertently provides the site for new ecologies, new arrangements and attachments.<sup>98</sup> The language does not always work and new is not always triumphant—only one person in *The Bluest Eye* feels like she's overcome circumstance, much as neither we, nor Claudia and Frieda, nor Morrison herself are inclined to believe her.<sup>99</sup> This otherwise syntax in most cases fails to keep up with the shifts integral to the revolutionary spirit of the blues, its speakers concerned with moving forward as necessary with something like their selves intact. It is a logorrhea of the oppressed: aphasia.

In *The Bluest Eye*, we are seldom privy to contents of the girls' formal education, only that they attend an integrated—and perhaps desegregated—school with lockers and gym class and teachers with smiles for the lightskinned girl. If we can only imagine the language acquired there—something like a Dick and Jane primer in every hand—we don't have to imagine what happens at

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<sup>97</sup> As Marks notes, even the normative rendering of Dick and Jane "is without history; it is merely prescribed and flat... there is no antecedent to this demonstrative sentence" (Marks, 150). Though Marks finds the Breedloves singularly pathological, she draws an affinity between "the green-and-white house" and the storefront residence as two houses of nonmemory.

<sup>98</sup> I would be remiss in not also including Monique Allewaert's *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>99</sup> Morrison is unwavering in confirming Pecola's assured decline. In the foreword, she uses the phrase "psychological murder," admitting she "chose a unique situation, not a representative one" (Morrison, x, xi). But also, she adds, "singular as Pecola's life was, I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls" (Morrison, xii).

home. “Autumn” opens on an illness, Claudia’s, despite the cod-liver oil. Autumn also opens on the daily comings and goings of the MacTeer girls. The two overlap, entwined in an introduction that cannot tell one thing without the other. “School has started” to take up the days; in the evening, the adults bring the girls “to the railroad tracks where we fill burlap sacks with tiny pieces of coal lying about.”<sup>100</sup> As they return home, they are “glancing back to see” the grim industrial landscape, “the great carloads of slag being dumped, red hot and smoking, into the ravine,” painting “the sky with a dull orange glow.”<sup>101</sup> The grass beneath their feet is dead. It is after one of these days Claudia takes sick: “When, on a day after a trip to collect coal, I cough once, loudly, through bronchial tubes already packed tight with phlegm, my mother frowns.”<sup>102</sup> The first prepositional phrase interjects ominously, but it is, grammatically, beside the point—so, too, is the illness. What remains is crucial—“my mother frowns.” Her mother does more than frown, she raves while Frieda seals cracks in the window and Claudia warms up in bed; a mother rubs salve on her daughter’s chest, a daughter throws up, a mother “drones on,” a daughter cries and vows to herself “I will not get sick,” but, of course, she will.<sup>103</sup> This is present tense, it is a routine to be told again and again and again. The love is routine, too, as much a part of the fall season as school and coal and puke. Here Claudia turns to memory, recalling the “Love” that “eased up into that cracked window.”<sup>104</sup> In a home with rooms—plural—a mother “readjusted” everything just so, “So when I think of autumn,” says Claudia, “I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die.”<sup>105</sup>

Claudia and Frieda are given more of a neighborhood than Pecola. They know their neighbors—they *have* neighbors—and are regularly spoken out of sight the way anyone who grew up

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<sup>100</sup> Morrison, 9-10.

<sup>101</sup> Morrison, 10.

<sup>102</sup> Morrison, 10.

<sup>103</sup> Morrison, 11-12.

<sup>104</sup> Morrison, 12.

<sup>105</sup> Morrison, 12.

excluded from “grown folks business” can recognize. “Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions,” narrates Claudia.<sup>106</sup> “No one speaks to me or asks how I feel” when she is ill; after she vomits, her mother directs the lecture to the stain instead of her daughter.<sup>107</sup> Everything the girls learn is happenstance. The girls are never there when adults are speaking, not there for being unacknowledged by the terms of the conversation. Words “ballooned from the lips and hovered about our heads—silent, separate, and pleasantly mysterious,” which is how Claudia and Frieda learn of Mr. Henry’s coming.<sup>108</sup> “We didn’t initiate talk with grown-ups; we answered their questions,” Claudia repeats.<sup>109</sup> The adults have their reasons, it is no less grown folks business even feeling, keenly, the girls’ exclusion. Adult “conversation is like a gently wicked dance” and the girls have not lived enough to parse out everything, only “the thrust of their emotions...” is known.<sup>110</sup> “So we watch...” Mr. Henry is the first adult in the novel to court the girls in conversation: “To our surprise, he spoke to us.”<sup>111</sup> He continues to do so throughout the novel.

This is the way of the neighborhood for black girls. Morrison talks about the non-communicative relationship between adults and children as a love of sorts, like the vapor rub on Claudia’s chest:

And every woman on the street could raise everybody’s child, and tell you exactly what to do and you felt that connection with those people and they felt it with you. And when they punished us or hollered at us, it was, at the time, we thought, so inhibiting and so cruel, and it’s only much later that you realize that they were interested in you... they cared about your behavior.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 11.

<sup>108</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 12.

<sup>109</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 23.

<sup>110</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 15.

<sup>111</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 15.

<sup>112</sup> Morrison and Stepto, “A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” 474.

In the novel, the perceived cruelty might also be concern, but from a girl's perspective feels only like cruelty. Their mother's "fussing soliloquies always irritated and depressed us," Claudia says.<sup>113</sup> "They were interminable, insulting, and although indirect (Mama never named anybody—just talked about folks and *some* people), extremely painful in their thrust."<sup>114</sup> These soliloquies, as regular as Saturday housework, last for hours, "connecting one offense to another until all of things that chagrined her were spewing out."<sup>115</sup> Their mother, too, lives in the weather, serving up the syntax of her experience the only way she can. The words find their direction though, becoming another kind of primer for the children.

It is evident why Pecola is largely nonverbal, disappearing in sound as she cannot disappear from the sight of the abandoned storefront on Broadway and 35th with its screaming mother, angry brother, drunk father, and sofa with a split across the back. Pecola is always seen and never heard in the worst way. She eventually finds language, only after "[t]he damage done was total."<sup>116</sup> But it is also little wonder that Claudia and Frieda are unable to imagine a community besides themselves, even in hindsight, even in regret. "And the years folded up like pocket handkerchiefs" during which time Claudia has developed a deceptively sophisticated account of the case of Pecola.<sup>117</sup> She describes an ideology of exile, the community-wide maintenance of a human dumping ground. "We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness... Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent."<sup>118</sup> Claudia indicts herself along with the fiction: "And fantasy it was," she concludes, "for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved... We substituted good grammar for

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<sup>113</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 24.

<sup>114</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 24.

<sup>115</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 24.

<sup>116</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 204.

<sup>117</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 205.

<sup>118</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 205.

intellect..."<sup>119</sup> Claudia has found her own soliloquy while Pecola is at the edge of town, under watch, a metaphor, once again irretrievable. "So it was."<sup>120</sup> The wrongness of it is not enough to stop the world and start a conversation, to only wonder and move on. So it was.

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<sup>119</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 205

<sup>120</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 204.

## Chapter 3

### *A Nauséaste Noir in Hilton Als' White Girls*

#### I. Blackness Before Eyes

Nausea onsets “with blackness before the eyes.” The symptom is barely elaborated upon in a document all but lost to the sands of the stacks, the 1892 homeopathic repertory *A Compendium of Materia Medica, Therapeutics and Repertory of the Digestive System*, urged to relevance by the inner workings of a digital database. In April 2019, it was top search result I received for the concurrence of “blackness” and “nausea” in the engine of Google Books, which contains over 25 million books, magazines, and newspapers. “Google’s secret effort to scan every book in the world” began “in earnest in 2002,” under the colonial codename “Project Ocean.”<sup>1</sup> The goal wasn’t readability, but searchability, the ability for a user to do exactly what lead me to Arkell Roger McMichael’s particular *Compendium*—think a term and find any and all instances of that term in any and every published volume of reading material in the entire world. It is a version of what’s meant by the verbified “Google”: to “ingest documents and rank them for relevance against a user’s query.”<sup>2</sup> The University of Michigan was an early partner in Project Ocean and the deal between the University and what would become Google Books enabled my happening upon *Compendium*.<sup>3</sup> On the second page appears the high contrast, scanned version of its seal, inscribed with University and state mottos: “*Artes, Scientia, Veritas*” (“Arts, Knowledge, Truth”); “*Si quaeris peninsulae amoenam, circumspice*” (“If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you”).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Somers, “Torching the Modern-Day Library of Alexandria,” *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/the-tragedy-of-google-books/523320>.

<sup>2</sup> Somers, “Torching the Modern-Day Library of Alexandria.”

<sup>3</sup> A physical copy of McMichael’s *Compendium* is available at the more easily accessible University of Chicago library; however, it is unlikely I would have happened upon it without this initial coercion from Google.

<sup>4</sup> “Facts & Symbols: State Motto,” State of Michigan, accessed April 14, 2019, [https://www.michigan.gov/som/0,4669,7-192-29938\\_30245-2606--,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/som/0,4669,7-192-29938_30245-2606--,00.html).

“The ideal study of drugs is without question the comparative one,” McMichael begins the preface, going on to promise an imperfect but “simplif[ied],” “practical,” reference for the “busy physician,” one they (no pronoun specified) will “no doubt” consider a “decided improvement” over earlier reference methods.<sup>5</sup> *A Compendium of Materia Medica, Therapeutics and Repertory* combines, it tells me, what would otherwise require three separate volumes before treatment, “remedy,” may be prescribed.<sup>6</sup> The *Compendium* combines its record of drugs (from *abies nigra* to *zinc*) with the symptoms they treat, unfurling into an alphabetical listing of keywords culled from symptoms themselves.<sup>7</sup> (“For instance,” the preface suggests, “the symptoms 'Rumbling in the abdomen with emission of much offensive flatus,' may be found by turning to the words Rumbling, Abdomen, Emission, Offensive or Flatul.”<sup>8</sup>) It is another kind of database; McMichael instructs a reader to “find the symptoms desired by turning to any word under which we think it may be found.”<sup>9</sup> The *Compendium* warns its reader of repetitions among symptoms, which may seem like, but are not, ultimately, repetitions *of* symptoms—patients do not experience, nor will they describe their bodies in the same way.<sup>10</sup> “Were it possible for a patient at the bedside always to express himself in the same phraseology as the one under the influence of a drug, there would be less occasion for clinical material here,” writes McMichael.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Arkell Roger McMichael, preface to *A Compendium of Materia Medica, Therapeutics and Repertory of the Digestive System* (Philadelphia: Boericke & Tafel, 1892).

<sup>6</sup> McMichael, preface to *A Compendium of Materia Medica*.

<sup>7</sup> *Abies nigra*: also known as black spruce.

<sup>8</sup> McMichael, preface to *A Compendium of Materia Medica*.

<sup>9</sup> McMichael, preface to *A Compendium of Materia Medica*.

<sup>10</sup> Eventually the vernacular of medical symptomology would be inoculated across patients who all speak on their bodies in similar turns of phrase: “sore” throat, “shortness of breath,” “viselike” headache, etc.

<sup>11</sup> McMichael, preface to *A Compendium of Materia Medica*; McMichael, “Repertory of Stool, Rectum, Anus, Abdomen, Hypochondria, Umbilicus, and Hypogastrium, Etc.” in *Compendium*, 55.

“The diction of the clinical” finds blackness associated with the following symptoms, garnering its own entry in the repertory:

Morning nausea; amelioration after eating; on waking, towards evening, and at night; on washing mouth before breakfast; on waking with blackness before the eyes in evening; weakness even to faintness, with melancholy; easily startled; then vomiting of food, then retching.... Nausea in morning; fasting, with shuddering in pit of stomach; with blackness before eyes so that he must sit down.

There is much repetition to observe among all the associated keywords: “with blackness before eyes in evening” (under “After,” “Eating,” “Melancholy,” “Waking,” “Weakness”); “blackness before eyes” (under “Amelioration”); “on waking, with blackness before eyes in evening” (under “Breakfast,” “Evening,” “Eyes,” “Faintness,” “Mouth,” “Night”); “in pit of stomach, with blackness before eyes so that he must sit down” (under “Fasting,” “Nausea in morning,” “Pit,” “Stomach”); “blackness before eyes in evening” (under “Morning”); “blackness before eyes so that he must sit down” (under “Nausea,” “Shuddering,” and “Sit”); “on waking, with blackness before eyes” (under “Retching” and “Vomiting”); “blackness before the eyes in evening” (under “Walking”). These “pathogenetic symptoms” may be remedied with applications of “Calc. Carb.” (calcarea carbonica), “Puls. Nig.” (pulsatilla nigricans), or “Sepia” (sepia officinalis).<sup>12</sup>

In the words of RuPaul, “why it gotta be black?” The symptom—or *symptoms*, plural, the preface asserts—related in its various phrases gives me pause. For the sureness of the repetition, outside of this particular *Compendium*, “with blackness before eyes” appears limited to homeopathic vernacular. In another 1892 repertory from another publisher, *The Concordance Repertory of the More Characteristic Symptoms of the Materia Medica* (1892), by the physician William D. Gentry, blackness denotes vertigo with similar language: “Blackness.—Vertigo: b. before eyes”; “Vertigo: blackness

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<sup>12</sup>“nigricans” from Latin for “blackish, swarthy”; nigricant is a botanic adjective meaning “black” or “turning black with age” (OED Online, “nigricant, adj,” accessed April 14, 2019,

before”; “Blackness.—Momentary b. before eyes.”<sup>13</sup> Above one entry for vertigo, the listing “Nausea” is described as follows: “everything becomes b. or dark before eyes when patient looks down, with pressure in throat.”<sup>14</sup> Blackness, over and over: nausea known for *blackness before the eyes*. “Blackness,” so often, even when other words are available—“dimness,” “darkness,” (though this second is no more delays resonance with a certain racialized corporeal schema). Even if the albeit limited preponderance is a random occurrence, for lack of a better phrase, as random as a two-word keyword search through over 25 million library holdings, as random as any other “symbolic figurations of blackness” put to page by publishers in America and abroad in the nineteenth-century, as random as blackness as “dimness,” blackness as “darkness,” blackness as “nothing,” blackness as, here, “nausea,” I am stuck by curiosity and a question: How often is an encounter with blackness one that “turns on a feeling of sickness”?<sup>15</sup>

“Tiens, un nègre!” The frequently rehearsed colonial encounter put forth by Frantz Fanon in *Peau noire masques blancs* (1952) not only incorporates and revises the withering look of the Other in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943), but, David Trotter argues, “turns on a feeling of sickness” incongruous to the viscosity attaching body to consciousness by nausea in *Nausea* (1938).<sup>16</sup> In *Nausea*, Roquentin is “sick with sickness,” the due consequence of being in the world full of things that are not himself.<sup>17</sup> *Le visqueux* is “the ultimate glue” and Roquentin is stuck, as are all we who exist.<sup>18</sup> Sartre’s nausea is not a metaphor; the physiological sickness borrows from ontology, not the other way around. In *Peau noire masques blancs*, specifically “L’expérience vécue du Noir,” nausea

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<sup>13</sup> William Daniel Gentry, *The Concordance Repertory of the More Characteristic Symptoms of the Materia Medica* (New York: A. L. Chatterton & Co., 1892), 368, 457, 840.

<sup>14</sup> Gentry, *The Concordance Repertory*, 840.

<sup>15</sup> David Trotter, “Fanon’s Nausea,” *Parallax* 5, no. 2 (1999): 37.

<sup>16</sup> Trotter, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Trotter, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Trotter, 32.

arrives while Fanon is already in motion, on the train, the delayed affect of being identified (im)properly against not only “le monde” in which “j’arrivais,” but additionally “des légendes, des histoires, l’histoire”—says Fanon, “J’étais tout à la fois I de mon corps, I de ma race, de mes ancêtres.”<sup>19</sup> If the world disorientates, his encounter is further disorienting still. In this moment, Fanon does not even need the world to make him sick, only a word: *nègre*. Every *nègre* is a “*nauséaste*”; *nègres* *been* stuck, we might say, an always already that precedes and in fact enables the existentialism of someone like Roquentin.<sup>20</sup> We should start here, with the colonial ID that disorientates, which is one kind of orientation, “the point from which the world unfolds: the ‘here’ of the body, and the ‘where’ of its dwelling,” as posited by Sara Ahmed.<sup>21</sup> Sickness at another order of magnitude. Roquentin still provides a useful novelist’s demonstration of a *nauséaste*. “It would be more accurate to say that nausea fills Roquentin,” as well as Fanon; they are both caught, like a frog in the throat.<sup>22</sup> Differently, however, following from Ahmed, “We might say that Frantz Fanon begins with a body that loses its chair as a loss that precedes a relationship of having (being chaired).”<sup>23</sup>

The title of Hilton Als’ second book names what the form of the collection coheres, white girls, akin not by race or gender but orientation (“likeness is an *effect* of proximity or contact,” says Ahmed).<sup>24</sup> Reviewers of *White Girls* (2013) got this well enough: “As it turns out, ‘white girl’ is less a demographic than a slippery cultural distinction,” said one review in *The Boston Globe*; or, “not of mere flesh and blood, but in spirit,” said another in the *Boston Review*. The celebrities turned characters and personas—not such a remarkable transformation—live infamously in different genres

<sup>19</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 118-121.

<sup>20</sup> Trotter, “Fanon’s Nausea,” 32; “*nauséaste*: someone whose horizon is constituted by nausea” (Trotter, “Modernity and Its Discontents: Manet, Flaubert, Cézanne, Zola,” *Paragraph* 19, no. 3 [November 1996]: 257).

<sup>21</sup> Sara Ahmed, “A phenomenology of whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (August 2007): 151.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmed, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ahmed, 160.

<sup>24</sup> Ahmed, 155.

of American lore: Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, Michael Jackson, Eminem, and André Leon Talley, among others. All come together in Als' volume under the signature of the white girl, “slippery” and “in spirit,” indeed, a set of remarkably mobile types. We could call the whole thing a conceit, given the collection’s reliance on its form as a collection—none of the essays factor themselves part of a unified theory of white girldom and few even name their subject so plainly. “Truman Capote became a woman in 1947,” Als claims, with the photograph that became backside image on the dust jacket for Capote’s debut novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948); his “reversion to manhood” came with the 1965 publication of *In Cold Blood*.<sup>25</sup> In “Philosopher or Dog?” Als repeats the words put down by Malcolm X in his *Autobiography* (1965)—“Louise Little, my mother... looked like a white woman”; Michael Jackson is christened “she” and, eventually, ‘a white woman’ by black gay men, coincidentally, says Als, the moment he became the best version of “the ultimate fag hag” Diana Ross.<sup>26</sup> White girls of a kind, the kind to actually mark “Female” and “White” in a U.S. Census form, roam among the essays, too, but are rarely the stars of the show: they are married, they are used, they are despised, they are envied, they are emulated by and allies to the true white girls, who are orbited by whiteness and femininity like particles around a neutron star. It may be Als’ conceit, but for the sake of proximity and, returning to Ahmed, the movement of these bodies, we should take his word for it. Together they are white girls; they are white girls together, including the person who, as Als conceives him, must be the blackest man to walk the Earth—Richard Pryor.

“A Pryor Love” assumes the genre Als knows well, that of the magazine profile, and the essay was, in fact, first published in the September 13, 1999 issue of *The New Yorker* as just that under the same name. The essay goes nearly unchanged in the between time, the only difference a subtle matter of certain tense changes denoting Pryor’s passing in 2005—from “has” to “had,”

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<sup>25</sup> Hilton Als, *White Girls* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2013), 95, 108.

<sup>26</sup> Als, 179-180.

“probably realizes” to “probably realized,” from “he can speak well when he wants to, but he doesn’t often want to” to “could,” “wanted,” and “didn’t.” These edits aren’t just small, but minor: neither before nor after death does the author anticipate room, or need, for addendum. Unlike the conventional contemporary celebrity profile, which knows its role as an arc-making device while also keeping space for whatever eccentricities may be folded into common knowledge about the persona post-publication, this profile is certain about its conclusion—an obituary is more like it. As it so happens, by the end, present or past tense, Pryor is a man frozen, catatonic and aphasic, and not for being captured in text. Both works (before and after death; in *The New Yorker* and *White Girls*) tell the life of Pryor, what he was, how he became what he is/was. The doppelgänger *do* differ for their respective contexts: in the first, Pryor succumbs to the near-lethal dose of fame, the tragic hero in a now-classic case of blackness overexposed—too much whiteness at work in the frame; in the second, Pryor, the white girl, is too sick to function in the role he made of himself, one that required enough pliancy and energy to take the entire world inside his body—in this case, too much *blackness* at work.

According to the essay, only the blackest man alive could pull off the white girl trick of turning everyone (else) into niggers. In contrast to other runners up, “James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison,” also the authors “behind the collective modern ur-text of blackness,” Pryor, according to Als, did not slip, or attempt to slip, into the bodies of the white audiences that would adore him, voraciously.<sup>27</sup> “Instead of adapting to the white perspective, he forced white audiences to follow him into his own experience... If he played the race card, it was only to show how funny he looked when he tried to shuffle the deck.”<sup>28</sup> Pryor may have inherited a body oriented towards certain “dwelling places” (poverty, precarity, shame), same as Bill Cosby’s body, same as

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<sup>27</sup> Als, 226.

<sup>28</sup> Als, 226-7.

Moms Mabley's body, same as the metaphorical body of black American canon represented by Baldwin, Wright, and Ellison—attested by the biography Als relates twice in the essay, as reporter and then as the critic with Pryor's memoir in hand.<sup>29</sup> But he rejected embodiment, Als claims: Pryor instead became “Richard Pryor,” a character, a type. His “isolat[ed]” upbringing—Als’ formulation—in “hell”—Pryor’s—provided characters but is not characteristic of Pryor’s comedy, at least, not when Pryor, in Als’ terms, was at his best. And Pryor, in Als’ terms, was at his best when he made slick the very idea of a black man becoming anything.

Pryor is one-of-a-kind from Als’ pen, but the radicalism Als sees is comparable to what David Marriott sees in Fanon, whose appropriation of the language of theater (Hamlet’s “that within”) in a phenomenology of race offers insight on roleplay, also called social life. The “persona or masks” of *Peau noire masques blancs* metaphorize the “imaginary misrecognitions” during “which whites convince themselves of their whiteness by becoming unwittingly black and blacks learn to perform themselves as white through an unconscious fear of their blackness.”<sup>30</sup> Emphasis on “imaginary misrecognitions” for Marriott—contrary to critical platitudes anchored by notions of (in)authenticity that accordingly bolster faith in the very essence Fanon, among other gestures, disavows, “le *that within*” crucially appears in “L’homme de couleur et la Blanche,” the same chapter that Fanon assumes whiteness (“Je suis un Blanc,” he states).<sup>31</sup> Contrary to Sartre, and Sartre’s interpretive precedent, to whom blackness is winningly self-effacing, Marriott argues, Fanon’s “*that within*” expresses neither *dead* nor *not-dead*, neither *surfaced* nor *buried*, “neither the coming of a plenitude nor a posthumous self-erasure,” that would allow reprieve from the interrogation of roles that blackness provokes. “Sartre’s discussion of negritude effectively obscures the *affect* of ‘that

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<sup>29</sup> Ahmed, “A phenomenology of whiteness,” 151.

<sup>30</sup> Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 58.

<sup>31</sup> David Marriott, “Corpsing; or, The Matter of Black Life,” *Cultural Critique* 94 (Fall 2016): 57.

within,” thereby obscuring the lagging accompaniment to a role not fit for serious performance.<sup>32</sup>

Reading Fanon against Sartre in this case enables Marriott to in turn appropriate from theater the term he argues has already been appropriated from black social death: corpsing.

In theater, “corpsing” means to “confuse or ‘put out’ (an actor) in the performance of his part” or “to spoil (a scene or piece of acting) by some blunder.”<sup>33</sup> Theoretically, there are as many ways to “break” (the U.S. equivalent of the term) as there are contrary emotions, but the agreed upon calling card of corpsing is laughter, often described as “uncontrollable,” “infectious,” and “contagious.” In life, the actor is the subject and the role is their inheritance—the blunder is a loss of sovereignty that reveals the social role as not only *a role*, but a role that is liable to be corpsed at any moment for whatever reason at all. The laughter is still laughter, per the refrain from Henri Bergson on what happens when we perceive “something mechanical encrusted on the living.”<sup>34</sup> Black life, on the other hand, corpses not only itself, but everyone else, a truly infectious trigger. Black life, defined by *not*, casts doubt on efficacy of any role to be *a role*, especially that all-determining role called human. The blunder is a failure to be fully dead, for social death is exactly the condition of not-dead death, and the revelation casts humanism as an impossible performance. Even Bergson needed some sort of outsider in his essay on laughter: he asks, “Why does one laugh at the Negro?”<sup>35</sup> (Because he is a failed human. And yet, he lives.) Als stages Pryor as the comic who put corpsing on stage, resetting the failure of race over and over again. (And how does that feel?)

“A Pryor Love” introduces Pryor via the scenic route, in a reenactment of “Juke and Opal,” a 1973 comedy sketch. “Young black guy, looks like the comedian Richard Pryor”—Juke—“walks

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<sup>32</sup> Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 56.

<sup>33</sup> OED Online, “corpse, v.,” accessed April 10, 2019, <http://www.oed.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/41861?redirectedFrom=corpsing>.

<sup>34</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 57.

<sup>35</sup> Bergson, 40.

into one of his hangouts, Opal's Silver Spoon Café... [a] greasy dive with an R&B jukebox" that "could be in Detroit or in New York, could be anywhere."<sup>36</sup> Opal's "proprietor" is Opal, "a young and wise black woman who looks like the comedian Lily Tomlin."<sup>37</sup> Juke and Opal are as comfortable with each other as the singsongy rhythm of their joined names suggests: Juke, the "black guy," is "Opal's baby," "raggedy Afro" and all.<sup>38</sup> The two "express their feelings for each other, their shared view of the world, in a lyrical language, a colored people's language, which tries to atomize their anger and their depression," writes Als.<sup>39</sup> As he describes their language, Als tests out a bit of their speech himself—Juke is "flopping about in all them narcotics he's trying to get off of"; he takes methadone, the opioid prescribed to ease addicts off opioids, "which Juke and Opal pronounce 'methadon'—the way two old-timey Southerners would, the way Juke and Opal's elders might have, if they knew what that shit was, or was for."<sup>40</sup> They are "tired," but not tired of each other, well, maybe a little bit, but the outside world, for two black people, is infinitely more wearying.<sup>41</sup> Juke wants to change the mood, "he'll play the jukebox, they'll get down... do a little finger-snapping, a little jive."<sup>42</sup> Then the mood really changes. A man and woman, both white, enter the scene. "And the minute the white people enter, something terrible happens, from an aesthetic point of view."<sup>43</sup>

Their entrance is scripted and their entrance, in fact, breaks the spell that supposes the whole thing is anything but show, a television show, to be exact. Television, says Als, becomes TV only when those white people, who are social workers, start hassling our Juke, our Opal, equal halves of the same resilient black body. When we see those white people, we

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<sup>36</sup> Als, *White Girls*, 221.

<sup>37</sup> Als, 221.

<sup>38</sup> Als, 222.

<sup>39</sup> Als, 222.

<sup>40</sup> Als, 222.

<sup>41</sup> Als, 222.

<sup>42</sup> Als, 223.

<sup>43</sup> Als, 223.

start thinking about things like credits, and remember that this is a television play, after all, written by the brilliant Jane Wagner, and played with astonishing alacrity and compassion by Richard Pryor and Lily Tomlin on *Lily*, Tomlin's second variety special, which aired on CBS in 1973, and which remains, around forty years later, the most profound meditation on race and class that I have ever seen on a major network.<sup>44</sup>

The scene is not over, but Als leaves the vernacular world of Juke and Opal and returns to that of the critic which demands television be television, with all due credits and qualifications like “[this is] the most profound meditation on race and class that I have ever seen on a major network.”<sup>45</sup> The white characters return Als to the role of critic just as they return Juke and Opal to familiar identities surveilled from the social workers’ clipboard in the name of “community research.”<sup>46</sup> They “are more than familiar with this line of inquiry,” says Als, “which presumes that people like them are always available for questioning—servants of the liberal cause.”<sup>47</sup> The scene continues with some missing alchemy: Juke becomes “Pryor-as-Juke,” brilliant, but much more legible as the wise-cracking maybe-former addict sparring with benevolent whiteness.<sup>48</sup> The scene “lasts all of nine minutes and twenty-five seconds,” but only about half of that screen time makes it into Als’ vignette, the before and after of what’s interrupted by the intrusion of two white bodies.<sup>49</sup> He wants Pryor-as-Juke and “Tomlin-as-Opal,” Juke and Opal, Pryor and Tomlin.<sup>50</sup> “Juke and Opal” was destined to be

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<sup>44</sup> Als, 223.

<sup>45</sup> Als, 223. During his speech for Kennedy Center honoree Lily Tomlin in 2014, President Barack Obama cracked wise on Als’ praise of “Juke and Opal,” saying, “One reviewer called it ‘the most profound meditation on race and class that I have ever seen on a major network’ — which says something both about Lily and the major networks” (“Remarks by the President at Kennedy Center Honors Reception,” Obama White House Archives, December 7, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/07/remarks-president-kennedy-center-honors-reception>).

<sup>46</sup> Russell Jones, “Juke and Opal,” YouTube, September 9, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Als, *White Girls*, 223-4.

<sup>48</sup> Als, 224.

<sup>49</sup> Als, 225.

<sup>50</sup> Als, 225.

messy, a “comedy that littered that stage with the trash of quotidian”; the white characters are inert and take everyone with them, stalling.<sup>51</sup> “They alienate everything,” says Als.<sup>52</sup>

This would seem contrary to the “mode... of corpsing, endlessly and ironically, the racism of representation,” the negritude that for Marriott is blackness expressed as a “non-epitaphic discourse.”<sup>53</sup> For being unwanted, the distraction of the white social workers suggests that what Als appreciates about the sketch, what puts both the “profound” and the “meditation” in its representation of race and class, is some sense of harmony that presses pause on the racial question (all of them). And Als encourages some amalgamative fantasy where Pryor-as-Juke and Tomlin-as-Opal are concerned. “They fracture our suspended disbelief,” he says of the whites, our faith in the scene as something other than a scene, the possibility that we are privy to some slice of life that “could be in Detroit or in New York” or “anywhere.”<sup>54</sup> In one reading, Juke and Opal are the illusion, a misrecognition of the way things are *broken* by the white people who remind Als (and us) *of the way things really are*. (Suspended, too, is the incredulity that CBS that would actually air this—and the network almost did not.) Als-as-critic makes known his approval of Pryor and Tomlin, as actors, as collaborators, as possible lovers. (Tomlin appears, as herself, later in the essay in statements from a face-to-face interview with Als.) Als is not *not* invested in the romance of miscegenation (but then again, neither was Fanon).

And yet, as Als tells it, the entrance of two white social workers is not the moment when things fall apart, but is where they come together. “We’re doing some community research and we’d like to ask you a few questions,” their first line, starts the ritual and everyone assumes their posts.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Als, 226.

<sup>52</sup> Als, 223.

<sup>53</sup> Marriott, “Corpsing,” 53.

<sup>54</sup> Als, *White Girls*, 223, 221.

<sup>55</sup> Jones, “Juke and Opal.”

Black becomes black and white becomes white in an orderly fashion. The “trash of the quotidian” is transformed into the illusory orderliness of social roles, by which Pryor-as-Juke’s fidgety, tightly leashed hostility against The Man performs as scripted. That reminder *of the way things really are* is insistent about its naturalism. Pryor’s performance is exactly the kind of showmanship overrepresented, Als laments, in the collective memory of his comedy. In the Paramount documentary *I Am Richard Pryor* (2019), Scott Saul says the following on Pryor’s performance in “Juke and Opal”:

He's taking people who are in the throes of addiction, but cannot be reduced, that they are not one-dimensional, they have all this emotional capacity and sensitivity. It packs such a incredible portrait of interracial intimacy, affection, ambivalence, into that ten minutes of TV drama.<sup>56</sup>

I am lost in the plenitude. *They*: “cannot be reduced”; “are not one-dimensional”; “have all this emotional capacity.” Who is “they”—drug addicts or black people? Does the praise know the difference, could we delaminate the statement if we wanted to? Both Als and Marriott might note that the interracial portrait—“intimacy, affection, ambivalence”—excludes, conspicuously, *love*. Even the transgressive interracial affair has its proper role to play.

The white people have not ruined the fantasy, they’ve initiated it. It is not that race does not happen prior—how could it not with two black people getting down to Al Green in a soul food kitchen? The female social worker, who enters first, is not the first white person, nor the first white character to enter the scene. The former would be Tomlin, whose black Opal she “plays... in whiteface”; the latter is the delivery man, included in the “they” of “they’ll get down” when Juke approaches the jukebox.<sup>57</sup> He is returned to his role, too, once the social workers come in, interrupted in his snapping groove. (“I gotta go,” he says, and lets out one last clap before exiting

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<sup>56</sup> Jessie James Miller, *I Am Richard Pryor* (Hollywood: Paramount Network, 2019).

<sup>57</sup> Als, *White Girls*, 223.

camera right.)<sup>58</sup> The possibilities were never endless, on Als account; even the “tink-a-link” of the shopkeeper’s bell sounds “all the handouts and gimmes who come to sit at Opal’s counter and talk about how needy their respective asses are.”<sup>59</sup> (Pryor-as-Juke is undoubtedly one of said needy asses.) But whiteness expressed this way changes the shape of the place, foreclosing the interrogative with a survey. For Als, it brings recursive corpsing to a halt and solves the program. Without *those* white people, we might imagine Juke and Opal in the café forever, snapping at each other into eternity.

Als locates “Juke and Opal” at the artistic height of Pryor’s life and career. Early, pre-’71 Pryor was an actor committed to going inside without breaking, fitting into “the cadence of the time” and making it big, *Ed Sullivan* and *Starring Johnny Carson* big, “within that form.”<sup>60</sup> The method was successful, but not sustainable—spiritually, bodily. “[H]is jokes were like placards that read ‘Joke,’” says Als, validating his observation with selections from a 1974 interview in *Rolling Stone*; of that period in his career Pryor recalls, “The life I was leading, it wasn’t me. I was a robot. Beep. Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Sands Hotel.”<sup>61</sup> Narratively, the period also coincides with drug use—“A drug habit kicked it,” Als writes.<sup>62</sup> “Then,” the paragraph continues, “...he broke down.”<sup>63</sup> Pryor was in Las Vegas, in front of a crowd that included Dean Martin, when he walked out on a question, “What the fuck am I doing here?” In Pryor’s words, “I made four or five hundred thousand dollars being like they said—then went crazy one day.”<sup>64</sup> *Rolling Stone*’s David

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<sup>58</sup> Jones, “Juke and Opal.”

<sup>59</sup> Als, *White Girls*, 221.

<sup>60</sup> Als, 236.

<sup>61</sup> Als, 237; David Felton, “Richard Pryor, Lily Tomlin & the Theatre of the Routine,” *Rolling Stone*, October 10, 1974.

<sup>62</sup> Als, *White Girls*, 238.

<sup>63</sup> Als, 238.

<sup>64</sup> Felton, “Richard Pryor.”

Felton clarifies: “Richard was referring, of course, to the Las Vegas incident, the time he *cracked up* onstage.”<sup>65</sup> As Als story goes, comic genius begins with a break.

“*And suddenly the voice didn’t go with the hand.*”<sup>66</sup> Speaking of racialized bodies in motion: a pirouette—or piqué manège, rather—in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) provides one demonstration of the dyssynchronous affect of the racialized body—always, ever—in motion. The scene regards the Sambo doll shilled by former Brotherhood leader Tod Clifton. The narrator joins the midtown Manhattan crowd Clifton has gathered to observe the cardboard-and-tissue-paper trick, “the doll throwing itself about with the fierce defiance of someone performing a degrading act in public, dancing as though it received a perverse pleasure from its motions,” he says.<sup>67</sup> Below the crowd’s laughter, the narrator hears the “spiele words” of an “out-of-the-corner-of-the-mouth voice,” orders to, among other things, “*Shake it up! Shake it up!*”<sup>68</sup> Sambo, “*the dancing... the prancing... the entrancing*,” is “more than a toy,” the voice beckons:

*he’s Sambo, the dancing doll, the twentieth century miracle...*  
*Sambo-Woogie, you don’t have to feed him, he sleeps collapsed, he’ll kill your depression*  
*And your dispossession, he lives upon the sunshine of your lordly smile*  
*And only twenty-five cents, the brotherly two bits of a dollar because he wants to me to eat.*<sup>69</sup>

The narrator is “held” by the spectacle, *stuck* by ambivalence, Sianne Ngai notes—“simultaneously attracted and repelled by the sight of the doll being animated”—however, of interest here for Ngai is ex-Brother Clifton and the “surplus movement” like a form of “unsuspected autonomy” his ventriloquist act exposes.<sup>70</sup> But what he expresses is not freedom; freedom would more resemble the unrestrained motions of the doll. And yet, erratic motion, in fact, emphasizes the doll’s objecthood.

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<sup>65</sup> Felton, “Richard Pryor.”

<sup>66</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 432; italicized by Sianne Ngai in *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 112.

<sup>67</sup> Ellison, 431.

<sup>68</sup> Ellison, 431.

<sup>69</sup> Ellison, 433.

<sup>70</sup> Ellison, 432; Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 112.

Clifton delegates the expected dancing, prancingness of blackened subjects to the blackened, undead thing he spieles—shilling blackness, but corpsing, too. The affect, what Ngai calls “animatedness,” has recoil. “And suddenly the voice didn’t go with the hand” introduces doubt on the sovereignty of the spieeling subject, making apparent “the gap that opens between the human speaker and his own voice and body.”<sup>71</sup> For it is not only that the voice and doll fail to move as one—and how could any voice keep up with a tissue-paper creature moving so—but that Clifton is thrown from the workings of his own body, the “hand” that works the doll. Animatedness “boomerangs back onto its human agent,” back onto Clifton who is himself spieled.<sup>72</sup>

The affect has a side affect. I continue where Ngai leaves off, in the wake, in the recoil of the disembodied voice. The narrator is not only ambivalent, he is disoriented: “And suddenly the voice didn’t go with the hand. It was as though I had waded out into a shallow pool only to have the bottom drop out and the water close over my head.”<sup>73</sup> Clifton and the narrator lock eyes and the mutual recognition intensifies the physiological sensations. “For a second our eyes met and he gave me a contemptuous smile, and then he spieled again. I looked at the doll and felt my throat constrict. The rage welled behind the phlegm as I rocked back on my heels and crouched forward.”<sup>74</sup> He is nauseous. The encounter induces this, localized nausea, yes, but better to say that nausea waits in the recoiling excess of the animated black body, the blackness of the black body. The animation that exceeds expectations has consequences, too. First person makes us privy to what the narrator feels, the sick that bubbles up at the sight of limbs and voice akimbo. We do not know what Clifton feels, can only imagine the greater still intensity of what the narrator catches crosswise, blackness spieled back on itself. We do not know what Clifton feels, but we do know his end, the pas de deux

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<sup>71</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 124.

<sup>72</sup> Ngai, 113.

<sup>73</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 432.

<sup>74</sup> Ellison, 433.

with the police state that brings his death.<sup>75</sup> The narrator observes this also. (“My stomach surged. To die for such a thing!”<sup>76</sup>) He descends to the subway platform, still sunk in deep water—“like wild jacks-in-the-box broken loose from our springs—our gait becomes like that of deep-sea divers suffering from the bends,” he says of fellow Southern transplant Negroes like himself, “they seemed to move like dancers in some kind of funeral ceremony, swaying, going forward.”<sup>77</sup> He is preoccupied with bodies in motion—to be black is to be in motion, not buoyant but submerged, he realizes for the first time.

It was as though I'd never seen their like before: Walking slowly, their shoulders swaying, their legs swinging from their hips... These fellows whose bodies seemed—what had one of my teachers said of me?—'You're like one of these African sculptures, distorted in the interest of a design.' Well, what design and whose?<sup>78</sup>

*What design and whose?* is the primordial question, answered variously by black theoreticians since ever: God; Christianity; Europe; capitalism; Democrats; colonialism; Republicans, antiblackness; heteropatriarchy; white supremacy. The narrator lands on history. “...Clifton had chosen to *plunge* out of history and, except for the picture it made in my mind's eye, only the plunge was recorded, and that was the only important thing.”<sup>79</sup> “Plunge” like the motion of the train shunting Negroes from place of unhomeliness to another place of unhomeliness, disoriented states pocked by sick feeling. Nausea is the affect of excess motion.

Like Clifton, Als’ Pryor is also a spieler. Like Clifton, he comes into his own out of an allegiance to a kind of brothahood. He tours through the “looser, more politicized environs of Berkeley” with Paul Mooney, meets writers Cecil Brown and Ishmael Reed, has revelatory experiences with the rhetoric of Malcolm X and *What’s Going On* (1971). Altogether, he learned how

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<sup>75</sup> Als, *White Girls*, 458.

<sup>76</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 446.

<sup>77</sup> Ellison, 433.

<sup>78</sup> Ellison, 440.

<sup>79</sup> Ellison, 447.

“to see his own negroism” and “how to treat himself as just another character in a story being told.”<sup>80</sup> He created “Richard Pryor.” Then, “he began... to create his body before his audience.”<sup>81</sup> Als pays special attention to Pryor’s “gestures,” his sounds.<sup>82</sup> “His routines from this time regularly involved gurgles, air blown through pursed lips, beeps,” says Als, who annotates extended selections from Pryor’s routine with description akin to stage directions such as, “[*Voice becoming more high-pitched*],” “[*High-pitched, fake-jovial voice*],” and “[*Pause*].” Another note on later work, “Old Negro Man’s Voice,” written without brackets, is more judgmental, coinciding with the one character of Pryor’s Als considers “too well drawn”: Mudbone.<sup>83</sup> Mudbone, “a safe woolly-headed Negro,” was “too much of a crossover tool,” too easily mapped onto Pryor-as-Pryor from an audience perspective. In a review of *Live on the Sunset Strip* by Pauline Kael, which Als includes, Pryor responds to an order to summon Mudbone from an unseen audience member like a deflated puppet: “rather wearily, saying that it will be for the last time, Pryor sits on a stool and does the ancient storyteller... Pryor looks defeated.”<sup>84</sup> Als adds, “And he should.”<sup>85</sup>

For Als, the trick of Richard Pryor was not playing roles or creating them, but doling them out to others for his inability, or feigned inability, to inhabit them fully. “[I]t is arresting to see how at times his blackness seemed to feel like an ill-fitting suit...he carved out an identity for himself that was not only ‘nigger’ but ‘sub-nigger.’”<sup>86</sup> His audiences were spurred, *spieled*, into picking up the slack. Magazines could not resist the “imitation-colloquial language meant to approximate Pryor’s voice” in headlines; Pryor coaxed Barbara Walters to say “niggers” on prime-time television.<sup>87</sup> Pryor

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<sup>80</sup> Als, *White Girls*, 238, 239.

<sup>81</sup> Als, 239.

<sup>82</sup> Als, 228.

<sup>83</sup> Als, 240.

<sup>84</sup> Als, 237.

<sup>85</sup> Als, 241.

<sup>86</sup> Als, 231-2

<sup>87</sup> Als, 231.

takes on the characteristics of a ventriloquist, working the crowd from behind. White people and white women especially “saw themselves in him, in his not fitting in, the solitude of it all, and his willingness to be vulnerable as women are” Jennifer Lee, Pryor’s ex-wife, told Als.<sup>88</sup> Pryor the puppetmaster, corpsing everyone by corpsing himself was, of course, not any more sustainable than playing it straight. The recoil came for Pryor in 1980 with another “break”—when he tried to kill himself. After that, “in a sense, Pryor never recovered” and “people didn’t want the truth,” which is to say, “a forty-year-old burned up nigger” was not somebody they wanted to inhabit.<sup>89</sup> “They wanted Richard Pryor—‘sick,’ but not ill.”<sup>90</sup>

Though Als emphasizes the ’68-71 years as key to the formation of Pryor’s “Richard Pryor,” the genesis of Pryor’s comic sensibility, how and where he “discovered humor,” follows from an origin story of Pryor’s telling, narrated in his 1995 memoir *Pryor Convictions, and Other Life Sentences*:

I sat on a railing of bricks and found that when I fell off on purpose everyone laughed, including my grandmother, who made it her job to scare the shit out of people... After a few more minutes of falling, a little dog wandered by and poo-pooed in our yard. I got up, ran to my grandmother, and slipped in the dog poop. It made Mama and the rest laugh again. Shit, I was really onto something then. So I did it a second time. “Look at that boy! He’s crazy!” That was my first joke all in shit.<sup>91</sup>

Little wonder why Als takes Pryor’s word for it, the visual and its repetition matches Als’ own approximation of the rise and decline of Pryor’s career—Pryor, slipping in shit, over and over. The shit never becomes metaphor. Pryor, *nauséaste noir*, the slipping in shit until his body is exhausted. Tired out, he just lies down in it.

There is an additional animative dimension, instigated by the additional spieler that is Als himself. Criticism is inherently apostrophic—one role of the critic is to reanimate the inanimate

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<sup>88</sup> Als, 250.

<sup>89</sup> Als, 247.

<sup>90</sup> Als, 247.

<sup>91</sup> Als, 234.

(dead or undead) thing and in this role Als reanimates the not-dead thing, the “forty-year-old burned up nigger,” as it were. It would be folly to neglect the specifics of Als’ critical position—he is a Theater Critic and not only by masthead designation or the prevailing cultural artifacts beneath his byline, but a methodology rooted out of acting and performance. In a keynote address to the University of Southern California Annenberg School in 2010, Als defined the role of the critic in theatrical terms. Speaking of “how performance has shaped my sensibility,” Als describes his writing practice that is really an acting practice:

My feeling always about doing journalistic work is how can we meet the subject halfway and how can we use our language as writers to describe not only the experience we're having in the world as writers but with the subject... I call it the Stanislavski school of writing, which is to say, you become the subject.<sup>92</sup>

Als has become many kinds of subjects in his career, transgressing his own black, male, queer experience. But he is drawn to Pryor, it seems, for what the two have in common—blackness, maleness, queerness and the white girlishness that brings them all together.<sup>93</sup> “He’s definitely a big

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<sup>92</sup> Hilton Als, “The Role of the Critic,” keynote address, University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, May 17, 2010, Los Angeles, CA, YouTube video, 1:19:57, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKq\\_pk7n-QA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKq_pk7n-QA). In Als’ terms, “becoming” is more of an aspiration or trajectory than an achievement or end. As he describes it, his inability to apply his method begins precisely when he cannot distinguish his part as “a journalistic audience” (Als, “The Last Interview: A Single-Sentence Performance on the Subject of Polly Jean Harvey,” *The Believer*, July 1, 2009, <https://believermag.com/the-last-interview-a-single-sentence-performance-on-the-subject-of-polly-jean-harvey>). In a one-sentence “performance” Als narrates the death of his critical relationship with Polly Jean Harvey:

I knew I couldn’t do it anymore... typing up notes about the interview, transcribing the tapes, not being present to myself in relation to the subject not to mention the situation... then it was time to go in, and see Polly in a black dress holding her mic pack or whatever it’s called in a little black bag, dancing barefoot, as John Parish played behind her, my breath of love meeting their singing, playing breath as I said good-bye all over them, knowing I could never ask them questions I was supposed to ask them ever again as I felt my own breath filling the stage, too. (Als, “The Last Interview”)

<sup>93</sup> In the address, Als says, “I think I was able to write about Richard Pryor because I was able to write about him through Lily Tomlin.” (Als, “The Role of the Critic.”)

figure in my life,” he said of Pryor in a 2013 interview.<sup>94</sup> His interviewer, Christopher Bollen, calls Pryor “something of the silent main character of [*White Girls*]—like Hamlet’s father or something.”<sup>95</sup> Pryor looms large for Als “because there were so few black men who were successful and who successfully conveyed black male fear—how America can make you feel crazy, and how America can create interesting levels of contradiction.”<sup>96</sup> When he began to write what would become “A Pryor Love” in the late-90s, Als says, “I felt my resistance to fiction begin to melt away.”<sup>97</sup> He told New Yorker editor David Remnick he “wanted to risk not talking to Pryor, not interviewing him and to make him up out of hearsay and ephemera and gossip and history” in order “to create a portrait out of the elements that his person had left behind… a fictional piece about a real person.” He wanted to do it the Stanislavski way, let “Richard became the narrator’s double.”<sup>98</sup> It would be an imperfect performance, there would be gaps, of course, the discontinuity of black performance of blackness. To hear Als tell it, writing means a certain willing nausea; Writing as an actor, ventriloquizing a persona, he tells the USC audience, “is exhausting.”<sup>99</sup>

## II. You and Whose Army?

Als’ (re)animation of a racialized being, Richard Pryor, yields a surplus, spilling over into a subsequent essay called “You and Whose Army?” The novella-length “You and Whose Army?” (over twice the length of “A Pryor Love”) is all the extravagance its preceding essay, even for all its allowances, isn’t permitted. Unpublished prior to *White Girls*, “You and Whose Army?” is Als’ most overt becoming in the collection and therefore also an unraveling, a corpsing of spectacular

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<sup>94</sup> Christopher Bollen, “Hilton Als, Constructing Genre,” *Interview*, November 5, 2013, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/hilton-als-white-girls>.

<sup>95</sup> Bollen, “Hilton Als, Constructing Genre.”

<sup>96</sup> Bollen, “Hilton Als, Constructing Genre.”

<sup>97</sup> Als, “The Role of the Critic.”

<sup>98</sup> Als, “The Role of the Critic.”

<sup>99</sup> Als, “The Role of the Critic.”

proportion. Reviewers found it unbecoming: “The essay in which Als impersonates... degenerates into a mess” per the *New York Times*, crying “exhausted”; another review multiplies first-person “I” in an interpretation in which Als “becomes” not one person but several during the essay, symptomatic of Als’ “fraught,” “Faulknerian tendency” of moving between perspectives “with seemingly no indication of an impending transition.”<sup>100</sup> The assessments call to the mind the racial confusion Als admires about “Juke and Opal.”

“You and Whose Army?” is told by the unnamed sister of Richard Pryor whose acting aspirations were sidelined by her younger brother—“Having Richard’s face—or his having mine; remember, I’m older—has been a hindrance in my career; people see his fame in me long before they see what I can do as an actress.”<sup>101</sup> Instead, she became “a Foley artist for rock-and-cock movies,” a voice actress for porn. She’s never stopped thinking about acting, is obsessed with acting: on stage, on television and film, on set, in casting, behind the mic, in Richard’s life, in her life and others’, in voice and body. “You and Whose Army?” is the Sister’s manifesto of sorts on acting, delivered in sectional bursts of only sometimes-sequential narration, like asides to a master story never returned to, or one we’ve already just read. She’s preoccupied with femme acting of women and queer queens alike and femme is not a qualifier, but a distillation, the purest performance there is. Her thesis is as follows: “An actress will believe in anything, including herself. They convince their bodies of something and then it exists.”<sup>102</sup> She follows the Stanislavski way.

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<sup>100</sup> Rich Benjamin, “Shades of Influence,” *New York Times*, November 8, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/books/review/white-girls-by-hilton-als.html>; Shyam K. Sriram, “‘White Girls’ Is a Critical Analysis of How Black Men and Women Have Confronted White Privilege,” *Pop Matters*, December 25, 2013, <https://www.popmatters.com/177177-white-girls-by-hilton-als-2495702924.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Als, *White Girls*, 286.

<sup>102</sup> Als, 291.

“You and Whose Army?” is also an interview. Several asides in and the “you” she addresses is disclosed to be “a reporter”; several asides later and the reader (also “you”) is abruptly transported to the third-person insight of the reporter’s perspective.<sup>103</sup> The Sister is not done talking, but the reporter has already begun his draft,

*As Richard Pryor’s sister spoke, the reporter was aware of a peculiar sensation rising up in him. When Richard Pryor’s sister said ‘Peoria,’ ‘house,’ or ‘when Richard and I were children,’ he stopped listening. He stopped doing the work of the reporter and instead ran with his preferred translation of Peoria... Thank God for the tape recorder. Otherwise, the reporter would have had no idea, after a while, what Richard Pryor’s sister had to say.*<sup>104</sup>

The reporter-on-assignment sounds familiar, a role very much like the one assumed by Als that led to the essay prefacing this one. Like Als, the reporter is distracted from the given facts by a fictional portrait in his mind’s eye. (As “resistance to fiction... melt[ed] away” from Als, “*the reporter was aware of a peculiar sensation rising up in him.*”)<sup>105</sup> Like Als, the reporter is shrewdly judgmental about the constellation of acquaintances about his main subject: “*They showed up for their interviews with eyes narrowed against the past, but dressed well enough for the mirror and an expense-account lunch.*”<sup>106</sup> Richard is alive here, as he was when Als began and first published “A Pryor Love.” Unlike Als, the reporter “approached” subjects, but keeps his distance.<sup>107</sup> He is no student of Stanislavski’s. We learn that, unlike Als, the reporter had sought and obtained access to the man in question, “been with Richard for... two years or more.”<sup>108</sup> This interview, then, is not orchestrated by the journalist putting his being on the line. He does not want to disclose the gaps in performances of writing but is bent on closure. The Sister, along with other family members, is approached as one of the many hole-fillers

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<sup>103</sup> Als, 268.

<sup>104</sup> Als, 276.

<sup>105</sup> Als, “The Role of the Critic”; Als, *White Girls*, 275.

<sup>106</sup> Als, *White Girls*, 276.

<sup>107</sup> Als, 276.

<sup>108</sup> Als, 276.

the feature in “You and Whose Army?” She fills in the silence. For, “Richard Pryor had all but stopped speaking.”<sup>109</sup>

Yet it is tempting to interpret the reporter as some sort of surrogate for, if not Als himself, then the difficult ventriloquism of reporting. “You and Whose Army?” then would not evince superfluous activity but suffice as caulking for the story Richard cannot or will not confirm—Pryor’s surrogate Pryor. Jeff Fallis, in his review of *White Girls*, suggests as much: “This is not Richard Pryor’s voice, but it’s perhaps a voice he could have found if he had taken his vulnerability even further... it keeps his voice alive and dangerous by interrogating and extending it.”<sup>110</sup> The Sister speaks crudely, *bitches, fucks, dicks, pussys* and *shits* galore. Each digression is its own standalone bit in this one man-or-woman-both show of an essay—“My voice goes both ways—male and female,” says the Sister, “My mind goes both ways, too... he [Richard] and I are in the same business: talking dirty”—closing with flourishes that also might be punchlines, such as:<sup>111</sup>

... I haven’t seen him in more than thirty years. When we were kids, it was like we were married. Now I call him my wuzband.

... I say, is this a woman? Diana couldn’t act any of this, but I can.

... And when she saw me—I had come to visit her—Cancer Bitch pulled the white sheet away from herself, exposing all those tubes, the liquid Daddy in her ass, and said: “Ain’t this some shit?”

... I define that as the sound of love. It’s also the sound of me loving and being abandoned by Richard.

... Biography explains nothing, but it’s fun to tell these stories.

... So I’d look up from the script and start cursing the room out. Then I’d throw the script down and walk out the door. That got me a few laughs, but fewer jobs.”

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<sup>109</sup> Als, 276.

<sup>110</sup> Jeff Fallis, “On Richard Pryor: Hilton Als, *White Girls* and the Greatest American Comedian,” *Paste*, January 27, 2015, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2015/01/richard-pryor-on-hilton-als-white-girls-and-the-gr.html>.

<sup>111</sup> Als, *White Girls*, 259.

... Then Fran did this: she pulled a leaf of collard greens out of Mrs. McCullough's big stew pot, ate it, and said, a star fully aware of her audience: "Needs more salt."

... Actresses are themselves, if only they had one. Women are themselves, if only they could stop acting.<sup>112</sup>

She is frank about biographical details in a way that resembles Richard's autobiography. "You know the facts," says the Sister: "Peoria," the "whorehouse," the madam, their "Mama" but not their mother.<sup>113</sup> Anecdotes reoccur intensified, as though the unfettered version of the "facts" disclosed in the profile version of Richard's life. In "A Pryor Love," Als calls Richard "the first image we'd ever had of black male fear... filled with dread and panic."<sup>114</sup> In "You and Whose Army," Richard's dread, "his thing—a kind of Negro nervousness," is Kafkaesque.<sup>115</sup> "Imagine Richard as Kafka or his roach," the Sister bids. "Those are the parts he could play. Richard and Franz had the same nose and fears—the Jew and the Negro. I could play that sister, if I had a brother who would play Kafka."<sup>116</sup> Richard slips not on "shit" but onto the grandmother who might as well be "a pile of buffalo dung"; he "attached love to that pile; he kept throwing himself onto it, never mind the filth."<sup>117</sup> Additionally, "Richard was never an actor," the Sister asserts, corroborating in plainer terms what's left to interpretation in the previous essay. "All he did was put his being out there."<sup>118</sup> Onstage, "[h]e was our id," adjusting the terms of everyone else's identity accordingly.<sup>119</sup>

And yet, apart from these continuities, "You and Whose Army?" pointedly does not indulge certain hypotheses on interracial love attributed to Richard in "A Pryor Love" and ultimately interrogates the rest of the collection's conflation between black men and white women. (The book

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<sup>112</sup> Als, 274, 290, 294, 278, 284, 286, 327, 332.

<sup>113</sup> Als, 234.

<sup>114</sup> Als, 230.

<sup>115</sup> Als, 292.

<sup>116</sup> Als, 306.

<sup>117</sup> Als, 302.

<sup>118</sup> Als, 295.

<sup>119</sup> Als, 327.

that began in draft as an exploration of “black masculinity” ended up with the name *White Girls*.<sup>120</sup>)

The Sister is sick of history’s grand identitarian love affair, sick of and made sick by the love between black men and white women, the roles they play. Nausea on *another* order of magnitude. Her nausea enables their roles. “You and Whose Army?” signifies on the preceding essay in a manner of corpsing, corpsing on *its* performance of black masculinity, corpsing on black masculinity as performance, revealing it as nothing more than such and not even a *good* one, besides. The best white girl, the Sister argues, is a black woman.

Pryor is no actor, while the Sister has never thought herself to be anything but. Even as she rehearses details from childhood, when she still had Richard, she swerves and shows her inverse sensibilities. A complement to the castration scene Als plucks from *Pryor Convictions* for “A Pryor Love,” the Sister pivots from past to pussy (instead of phallus) to performance:

... Pussy was the family business. There was so much pussy around I used to wonder: Do I have a pussy, too? And: If I have a pussy, will that make me a whore? I used to sit in the corner of our grandmama’s living room, playing with my titty and eating a honeybun, waiting for somebody to love me the right way, like anybody knew what that was.

I’m reluctant to talk to people like you, a reporter, because Richard talked to you all the time. And the shit he didn’t tell you he talked about in his act. Maybe that’s one reason I became an actress: to be free in a different way than my brother was free, spewing his guts that way. My freedom comes when I have another name, a different voice. Same as when I was a kid. Everybody was involved in the real-life drama of living in that house... Living there, I could barely hear myself feel. Books were my release.

... after I was in the world, white people didn’t believe how much I’d read; that’s not what the black bitch is supposed to do. Heh. The stories, the characters I found when I was a little girl—they told me how I could live if I busted out of all that pussy and death.<sup>121</sup>

In “A Pryor Love,” being raised in a brothel isolated and alienated Richard, gave him something worth running from, even as he culled the criminals of his past for comedic material. For the Sister, there was no running from this scene of sexual apperception. Being a girl who would become a woman made all the difference from the very start.

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<sup>120</sup> Als, “The Role of the Critic.”

<sup>121</sup> Als, 268.

Growing up black makes all the difference. The Sister has a good laugh at the expense of a pairing that can only make sense in *White Girls*: Richard and Virginia Woolf, the latter who takes the nickname “Suicide Bitch.” They are similar, says the Sister, maybe “too much alike: one big ‘I’ insisting on their reality.”<sup>122</sup> The Sister lost herself in books growing up and speaks familiarly of Woolf. She is mainly preoccupied with *A Room of One’s Own*, the 1929 essay in which a fictional Shakespeare sister is destroyed for the genius that made her brother legendary. Als’ own fictional sister sneers at rather than sympathize with Judith, the product of “a kind of fairy tale” borne of Woolf’s ego.<sup>123</sup> “I’ve tasted nothing but what she thinks she’s talking about,” says the Sister. “I am the contemporary Shakespeare’s sister.”<sup>124</sup> And unlike Judith, the Sister is very much alive, threatening the closure Woolf seeks, not that Woolf would see her. Woolf instigates disgust in the Sister—“her life and work taste as insulting as the toe jam not looked after before the foot is shoved in some unsuspecting lover’s mouth”—giving her words a bitter flavor in turn.<sup>125</sup> So often women writers who are white are lauded as credits to their gender for self-interested work, but Woolf’s negligence isn’t under censure here. Blackness isn’t forgotten. In *A Room of One’s Own*, a wild Negress appears, the Sister helpfully points out: “Buried in *A Room of One’s Own* is this line: ‘It is one of the great advantages of being a woman that one can pass even a very fine Negress without wishing to make an Englishwoman of her.’”<sup>126</sup> Not negligence or ignorance, but dependence. “[W]hy does Suicide Bitch need to drag a Negress into it?”<sup>127</sup> Why does Sartre? “Because that black bitch by definition tells a white bitch who she is.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Als, 271.

<sup>123</sup> Als, 269.

<sup>124</sup> Als, 269.

<sup>125</sup> Als, 269.

<sup>126</sup> Als, 270.

<sup>127</sup> Als, 270.

<sup>128</sup> Als, 270.

I return to acting, without which “You and Whose Army?” would not exist. Once Richard became famous, the Sister’s days on camera were surely doomed, but they might have been doomed anyway. The Sister shares several anecdotes from showbiz encounters, not only the casting calls that urged her “to put a ‘Pryor spin’” on her performance, but the roles she refuses, the slave parts, the directors who “used to hurt me.”<sup>129</sup> A black woman acting, she learned, is something of a paradox. There was always “some white boy saying that the distribution of my weight on a given mark is wrong.”<sup>130</sup> The notes, the “interpretations,” wanted less of her.<sup>131</sup> “It wasn’t until many years later that I realized my being colored had something to do with my being off the mark; that is, the colored body is a kind of joke...”<sup>132</sup> A black woman actress is paid to not be seen. “I know, I know, being colored, I’m not supposed to exist in the realm of ideas,” the Sister says.<sup>133</sup> Thus, black actresses aren’t really actresses, only “living molds” like “perky-looking chocolate drops that taste like shit.”<sup>134</sup> As evidence, the Sister includes an excerpt from the film critic cited in the previous essay about Richard, Pauline Kael, who considers “a lot of black movies” to feature no better than “dark-tanned Anglo-Saxons... to lure blacks whose ideas of beauty are based on white stereotypes.”<sup>135</sup> According to the Sister, black women are worse than invisible. They are white for being seen. Ironically, this makes them the best actresses of all. “We empathize with all bodies, not having one ourselves.”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Als, 298.

<sup>130</sup> Als, 298.

<sup>131</sup> Als, 298.

<sup>132</sup> Als, 298.

<sup>133</sup> Als, 295.

<sup>134</sup> Als, 285.

<sup>135</sup> Als, 284.

<sup>136</sup> Als, 299.

The Sister leans into the paradox, the way she's found to stave off the nausea of being in a body that exists for others. In the booth, in porn, she is invisible but never absent. She gets to be gross, but is no longer disgusted. She turns white girls black. She offers a sample of her process:

Just recently I did a scene where the woman—a skinny white girl who looked like she'd just been shipped in from Estonia—was getting spanked and rimmed by a trannie who may or may not have also (at least in the movie) been her uncle. The director couldn't get the money shot right. Not the close-up or the cum, but the sound of joy and pain that the girl onscreen needed to make while her uncle ate her ass, her face buried in a pillow, a few sparkles from out of nowhere on the small of her back.

So I searched what I had been once and when I could have made a sound like that, just to add a little reality to the scene. Background.

She searches without a plan until she finds "a little memory of pain and confusion, the high drama of it."<sup>137</sup> She's in the kitchen with her mother and her mother's friends in late '40s.

I may have been four or five, I can't remember. I may have been standing in between my mother's legs. If I am, she has just washed my hair and is greasing it. She had to be doing something. She didn't just sit down and hold you. This was back in the day when grooming a child was as sincere a form of attention as a black mother could muster, mammy myths to the contrary. I am bearing the weight and sound of her circling hands working and working the grease into my scalp, the warmth, the grease, the murmur of voices rising and falling, fighting the need for sleep. The two or three other women in the kitchen are doing what women do: creating an atmosphere of domesticity that could shift, at any moment, into an atmosphere of violence. Snapping peas and then threatening to break some child's neck. The story they tell—it sounds like a round—is a story they like telling and elaborating on, when they can...<sup>138</sup>

The story is about a girl whose handsome young beau was returned from World War II. "To impress his love, the young man showed her a gun, something called a Luger... The young man had assumed the safety was one, but it wasn't."<sup>139</sup> The Sister recalls the thoughts that intermingled "love" and "happiness" and a "burning" stove, "while a section of the dead girl's flesh is smoked," while her scalp is greased in preparation for singed and relaxes follicles (and likely a bit of scalp).<sup>140</sup> The

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<sup>137</sup> Als, 260.

<sup>138</sup> Als, 260.

<sup>139</sup> Als, 261.

<sup>140</sup> Als, 261.

women “provided the voice-over and the laugh track” to her imagination gone wild, thinking about the imprisoned lover, the women who visited him “out of envy” not for his love, but for the gift of death. “I thought about all that,” the Sister says. “And then I went into the booth and did my part. And I nailed it.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Als, 261.

*Chapter 4*  
*A Noisy, Black Phatic with Two Ellisons, Kanye West, and Nicki Minaj*

I. Nausea to Vomit

Thelonious “Monk” Ellison knows nausea well. Like Ralph Ellison’s narrator and the sister of Hilton Als’ creation, Monk’s nauseous condition coheres the casual fact of discontinuity. Blackness is a problem for the protagonist of Percival Everett’s novel *Erasure*: Monk is black and knows it, which would not *be* a problem if not for the very world without which he would not be black. “I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race,” he relates in the opening pages of what’s premised to be his journal, read posthumously.<sup>1</sup> A perhaps unwilling student of negritude, Monk approximates his blackness in a series of *nots*: he is “no good at basketball”; he “did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south”; he “could never talk the talk,” “never sounded comfortable, never sounded real.”<sup>2</sup> He is above all “not black enough” according to either side of the color line, yet, as he claims to have told one repugnant book agent, “I was living a black life, far blacker than he could ever know, that I had lived one, that I would be living one.”<sup>3</sup> The interaction is one of many collisions that occur or are recalled in the novel. They are unavoidable for someone like Monk, whose blackness is *not* in the version of the world exhibited by Everett, one predicated upon bets on what blackness *is*. These collisions, very usual, are what happens when a mobile idiom meets expectations that are static by design. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, common belief in blackness as known feels like stuckness, even if the subject at hand, *in hand*, looks quite lively. Monk, the *nauséaste*, neither embraces the faith nor *strives* to overcome it, only tries move through it. He

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<sup>1</sup> Percival Everett, *Erasure* (Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Everett, 1, 166, 167.

<sup>3</sup> Everett, 2.

believes in the belief and believes their belief has consequences. “But that’s just the way it is.”<sup>4</sup> His passive faith gives way to motion. There is spillover.

In the previous chapter, I discussed nausea in terms of recoil, as the sickness accompanying the body unchained by definition, the experience left over when racialization has its due. This chapter elaborates and elaborates upon the consistency of that excess by way of *Erasure*, Ralph Ellison’s 1985 essay “An Extravagance of Laughter,” and contemporary rap music, illustrations of that surfeit liveliness that I am calling *bodily noise*. Bodily noise is a kind of blackened phatic, the sour extravagance of black being rendered as textual, sonic, and visual noise. Both Everett and Ellison find that expression in laughter, which has long been the site for reads of (and restrictions on) racial and gender difference. Today’s rappers laugh plenty, too, as I will demonstrate, but hip hop’s most contemporary sound additionally offers a more expansive consideration of the forms and textures the black phatic may take to communicate, if nothing else, the requisite vertiginous condition.

*Erasure* follows not only a *nauséaste noir* in Monk, but one who ejects—*givéaste*, perhaps, “someone whose horizon is constituted by” ejection, discharge’s most propulsive relative.<sup>5</sup> Monk is an author and English professor. He writes books signifying on Greek tragedies that don’t sell well and parodies French poststructuralism for members of an organization he has no love for, that has no love for him. He attends the flagship conference under the guise of a familial visit with his mother and sister, the first in three years, but there is no grand homecoming when he arrives. “So you’re here,” his sister Lisa says over the phone and already, at the point of greeting, Monk yearns for an alternative, something more like “*So, you made it.*”<sup>6</sup> They make their plans and she hangs up before he can fit in a “*Goodbye*” (“or *I’ll be ready or Don’t bother, just go to hell*”). Like Richard Pryor’s

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<sup>4</sup> Everett, 2.

<sup>5</sup> David Trotter, “Modernity and Its Discontents: Manet, Flaubert, Cézanne, Zola,” *Paragraph* 19, no. 3 (November 1996): 257.

<sup>6</sup> Everett, 4.

unnamed sister, Monk is bitter, only he is the brother; he wears the role of the doted upon youngest son badly, but not badly enough. Acid accumulates as it tends to do in all bodies in America, but especially those belonging to black people; calamities small and large, yet weighed the same in Monk's melancholic prose, pile up as they tend to do in life, but especially black life—his latest novel is rejected, deemed inconsumable, “too difficult for the market”; his sister is murdered; his brother comes out; his mother's dementia advances; he must change coasts; he needs (another) job; he needs money; she needs care. All the while a black female author named Juanita Mae Jenkins is suddenly everywhere, shilling the Sambo doll of this novel, the “runaway-bestseller-soon-to-be-a-major-motion-picture” *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*.<sup>7</sup>

The bouts of nausea setting off Monk's nauseous condition follow behind his encounters with Jenkins and her novel. *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* is first introduced while Monk and Lisa peruse a Border's bookstore: her, to find a gift for a coworker; he, to see if any of his books are in stock. “I went to Literature and did not see me,” Monk says, merging himself with his work in a manner suspiciously reminiscent of the commercialized insistence behind rhetoric such as “representation matters,” whereby popular media is measured by the number of recognized demographics that can “see” themselves “in” a given production.<sup>8</sup> Monk does not “find” himself in “Contemporary Fiction” either, “but when I fell back a couple of steps I found a section called African American Studies and there, arranged alphabetically and neatly, read *undisturbed*, were four of my books including my *Persians* of which the only thing ostensibly African American was my jacket photograph.”<sup>9</sup> It is upon stumbling upon the “black” section of the store that Monk detaches from

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<sup>7</sup> On Everett's honorific and ironic signifying on *Invisible Man*, see Robert J. Butler, “Percival Everett's Signifying on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in erasure,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 45, no. 1 (2018): 141-152.

<sup>8</sup> Everett, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Everett, 28.

his works, no longer “me” but “my books.”<sup>10</sup> It’s the semiotic reenactment of what’s already been put into motion by the unseen hand—figurative and literal—that placed the books there. For, as Monk continues,

Someone interested in African American Studies would have little interest in my books and would be confused by neither presence in the section. Someone looking for an obscure reworking of Greek tragedy would not consider looking in that section any more than the gardening section.<sup>11</sup>

A blackness in motion, made of *nots*, a void that is a question—can a black man make non-black art?—is cruelly frozen by an answer. A body in motion collides with stereotype. It is enough to raise Monk’s blood pressure. “I became quickly irate, my pulse speeding up, my brow furrowing,” but Monk must swallow it down and say nothing to the “poor clone of a manager” who is only the agent of a greater power—“I resigned to keep quiet.”<sup>12</sup> He turns and sees a promotional display what will become the novel’s reoccurring nightmare. He picks up a copy of *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* and reads a paragraph filled with clumsy eye dialect.<sup>13</sup> He is nauseous. “I closed the book and thought I was going to throw up.”<sup>14</sup>

*We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* is *Erasure*’s touchstone for the abounding follies about faith in black essence. The x and x characteristic of animatedness, derived from x, supposes a certain stasis of black being, after all. *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* is Everett’s synecdoche for the multicultural yield borne of liberal victories in the culture wars of the ’80s and ’90s. *Erasure* parodies—but only just barely—mass market publishing along with other mass cultural entities that corroborate and are corroborated by its minstrel antics: talk shows, Hollywood films, papers of record, literary awards.<sup>15</sup> A review of

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<sup>10</sup> Everett, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Everett, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Everett, 28.

<sup>13</sup> As many have noted, *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* is conspicuously similar to the novel *Push* by Sapphire.

<sup>14</sup> Everett, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Their difference between low-, middle-, and high-brow evaporates by the end of the novel.

*We's Lives In Da Ghetto* “in the *Atlantic Monthly* or *Harpers*” reads like Mad Libs for the obediently wrenching black subject:

*Juanita Mae Jenkins has written a masterpiece of African American literature. One can actually hear the voices of her people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America.*

*The story begins with Sharonda Fr'inda Johnson who lives the typical Black life in some unnamed ghetto in America...*

*The twists and turns of the novel are fascinating, but the real strength of the work is its haunting verisimilitude. The ghetto is painted in all its exotic wonder... Sharonda, finally, is the epitome of the black matriarchal symbol of strength.<sup>16</sup>*

Monk reads the review on the plane, another vehicle in motion, and feels another wave of nausea.

*We's Lives In Da Ghetto* stands in for the many, but is special if only for staging the affect of black-on-black collision. “The reality of popular culture was nothing new,” Monk insists, yet “this book was a real slap in the face.”<sup>17</sup> There’s no given reason that *this* book should be the trigger, except that our invitation into Monk’s life coincides with the commercial success of this particular “runaway bestseller” and not the next one, or the one before. We also might speculate the considerable formal difficulty in recreating the in fact frequent onslaught of “the world landing on me daily, or hourly.”<sup>18</sup>

His fifth encounter with Jenkins’ novel does the trick. Shortly after Monk takes leave of his tenured position, shortly after the Oprah stand-in, Kenya Dunston, offers *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* a coveted place on her *Book Club*, after Monk assesses his late sister’s debt and accepts an adjunct, “four thousand, thirty-nine hundred and something” per semester position at American University, after his novel is rejected (thrice, again), Monk retreats to his dead father’s study, now his place of work, and there, too, he sees “Juanita Mae Jenkins’ face.”<sup>19</sup> Immediately his body quakes in the onset of a neurological episode:

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<sup>16</sup> Everett, 39-40; emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> Everett, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Everett, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Everett, 61.

The pain started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake, the world opening around me, tree roots trembling on the ground outside, people in the street shouting *dint, ax, fo, screet* and *fahvre!* and I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn't sound like that, that my mother didn't sound like that, that my father didn't sound like that and I imagined myself sitting on a park bench counting the knives in my switchblade collection and a man came up to me and he asked me what I was doing and my mouth opened and I couldn't help what came out, "Why fo you be axin?"<sup>20</sup>

Nightmarish possession for Monk is to be possessed *as black*, with visions of sociological types (like Bigger) and so-called vernacular literature (like *The Color Purple*), ventriloquized by static representations of a language he does not even claim, but in this moment claims him. Still possessed, Monk sits at his father's typewriter and out pours a novel.

*My Pafology*, later published as *Fuck* under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh, is made available in its entirety, a novella constituting the second quarter of *Erasure*. The first chapter, chapter "Won," begins in a dream: first-person protagonist Van Go Jenkins stabs his mother then wakes up "stinkin."<sup>21</sup> By chapter "Tin," Van Go is on the run from the police, accused of raping the daughter of his wealthy employer. As per the chapters' numbering, *My Pafology* is written in the dialect of possession; it is an imitation of the imitating language that in mass culture is as good as real. There is eye dialect ("wif," "fo," "ax," "yo[u]," "nuffin") and dropped gs, both marked ("doin'") and unmarked ("payin," "starin," "thinkin," "pokin")—inside denoted speech and outside, native to Van Go's narration. There's the habitual be, the identified totem of Black English, along with other odd grammar; I say "odd" because there is not a block in America where you will find people speaking some as-yet un-transcribed rendition of what Monk writes here. One example:

Time just keep movin, them hands keep sweepin and that make me think about work. I work there two weeks and I'm gone have enough for my gun. And then watch out, Van Go gone be gone and went.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Everett, 61-2.

<sup>21</sup> Everett, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Everett, 97.

The plot is just about irrelevant for reasons I shall address further on, but in service of light context—all that may be found anywhere in *My Pafology*—Van Go has been working (and “sweepin”) in and around the home of the wealthy Mr. Dalton, putting in time for the immediate gratification of robbing the Korean man (“the K’rean”) behind the counter of what must be taken for a convenience store (“the K’rean muthafucka’s sto”).<sup>23</sup> The sample above has all the makings of a passing black vernacular. In addition to the aforementioned g-dropping, the demonstrative *them* appears along with two instances of the future anterior (or future perfect), carried/conveyed by the verbal “gone.”<sup>24</sup> In the pose of the future anterior we can put his narration another way: *After working there for two weeks, I will have made enough money for my gun. And then watch out, Van Go will have already went/gone.* And yet, even in this translation of sorts, something curious, inherited from the source, sticks out. Given the benefit of narrative control, Van Go is not prone to addressing himself in the third person and this instance here, in the first paragraph of chapter “Sex,” is the only time he does so. (I could well imagine Van Go calling himself the *illest*, but he’s no illeist.) Under scrutiny, other aspects of the passage fall apart. The rhythm is wrong. “Time just keep movin” should expect a parallel “them hands [just] keep sweepin” to follow; “and that” seems slightly superfluous, like the clarifying touch of a copyeditor, though the *My Pafology* we’re privy to is implied to be a unedited draft, whether completed in a marathonic haze in one sitting or finished in a week as Monk as Stagg R. Leigh tells their editor. In the next sentence, “I work” is also superfluous to the flow of speech that has already established the context of work by the end of the preceding sentence. For language emblematic of a perceived racialized cutting of linguistic corners, *My Pafology* is rather chatty. The alliterative “Van Go gone be gone and went” seems orchestrated for the purpose of signifying on the stock phrase “came-and-went”—in terms of recognizably black vernacular, “Van Go been

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<sup>23</sup> Everett, 122.

<sup>24</sup> Everett, 97.

gone” could suffice. These extras create a stumbling speech loyal to no tense or rhythm and therefore no language, multiplied across the novel-within, leaving the whole thing buzzing.<sup>25</sup>

The *scrutiny* is superfluous. It matters not that the language in *My Pafology* does not sound like any living person any more than that found in any other novel. Nor, as Everett underscores, does the question of realism remain a question once relegated to the parlance of “African American Studies” or African American fiction or urban fiction or black literature or literature by a writer who is black—effectively, if mournfully, synonyms, *Erasure* offers. In the pages of John Grisham or Tom Clancy, Monk “did not find any depth of artistic expression or any abundance of irony or play with language or ideas”; they write “well enough,” that is, it’s suggested, are no better storytellers than Jenkins, yet Jenkins is the one to “send [Monk] running for the toilet[.]”<sup>26</sup> The difference, again, is that neither Grisham nor Clancy nor, I’ll add, King nor Gaiman nor Green must qualify as raced writers of raced experiences—“*however fitting a metaphor*” for the commercial literary landscape dominated by a certain white guy. “If you didn’t like Clancy’s white people, you could go out and read about some others.”<sup>27</sup> This difference is the “it” that sickens Monk enough to *be sick*, all over his manuscript. “This,” *My Pafology*, “is an expression of my being sick of it,” Monk tells his agent.<sup>28</sup>

The material of *My Pafology* signifies on Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, a novel whose sociological interests and modernist aesthetics have become secondary to the predominance of its protagonist, Bigger, taken up as America’s definitive black boy-man in the most evangelical adherence to Bigger’s genesis. “The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect,”

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<sup>25</sup> The grammatical confusion accumulates with phrases in the manuscript that sound out of time, or the belated appropriation of vernacular decades past. “I’m sho ‘nuff funky,” Van Go thinks, or “he ain’t no whitey,” he says, as if from made-for-television movie set in the ’70s (Everett, 88, 89).

<sup>26</sup> Everett, 214.

<sup>27</sup> Everett, 214.

<sup>28</sup> Everett, 132.

Wright writes in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born.”<sup>29</sup> In the middle of one calamity—the melodramatic wedding of Monk’s family’s long-term housekeeper turned caretaker—Monk jots down (or dreams up) a brief exchange between Wright and D. W. Griffith:

*D. W. Griffith: I like your book very much.*

*Richard Wright: Thank you.*<sup>30</sup>

One way into the joke would be the ideological implications of Bigger’s pathos and popularity, whose heartstrings are pulled, whose prejudices are better armed. But that isn’t really a joke, not when that line of thinking barely exaggerates prevalent fears about the novel, including those expressed in a collection of essays as canonical as the novel itself, James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*. The joke’s bite rather comes from politeness, the ritual that tames, and that Wright thanks the white supremacist in spite of himself. Instead of “a deadly, timeless battle” between “the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman,” Monk, the contemporary Negro novelist, has “locked together” the dead Negro novelist and the dead white filmmaker and found they get along quite well after all.<sup>31</sup> The fictional Griffith, to his credit, knows *Native Son* is a book and praises it as such, contrasting the effusive responses to *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* and *My Pafology/Fuck* that consider these books unmediated portals to a “gritty,” “so honest, so raw, so down-and-dirty-gritty, so real,” “vivid,” “gripping and truly realistic tale.”<sup>32</sup> Both Wright’s suggestion and Baldwin’s rejection about the worst of Bigger has come true, figurally speaking. After Griffith

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Wright, “How Bigger Was Born,” *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 434. Per that essay, Bigger is actually a composite.

<sup>30</sup> Everett, 193. Griffith died eight years after *native son* was published. A review in *The Chicago Defender* compared the 1951 film adaptation of *Native Son*, filmed in Buenos Aires, to *Birth of a Nation*: “[T]he picture shows you what happens and leaves all decisions to the audience. ‘Birth of A Nation’ carries no more propaganda than does this ‘Native Son’” (Rob Roy, “‘Native Son’ Makes Bow On Screen In Picture Form: Critics Ask Why—Calls Pix A ‘Birth Of Nation,’” *The Chicago Defender*, June 30, 1951, 22).

<sup>31</sup> James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 22.

<sup>32</sup> Everett, 2, 260, 248.

and Wright finish their conversation, someone “[s]omewhere in Hollywood” contemplates the “commercial value” of *My Pafology*. Gritty insight into a black world of a kind is worth a lot. Monk tells his agent to send the manuscript “straight,” adding, “If they can’t see it’s a parody, fuck them.”<sup>33</sup> Nobody gets it. Everybody is fucked.

*My Pafology* calls the bluff on liberal anxieties about black representation. Its characters aren’t human, not even characters, but caricatures of types, buzzing within the confines of Monk’s parodic ghetto thriller. Van Go has four—“fo”—children, daughters named Aspireene, Tylenola, and Dexatrina, and a son named Rexall, mostly gendered ridicule of what are considered distinctly African American naming patterns.<sup>34</sup> It’s not an exaggeration to say nearly every statement contains the threat of violence, nearly every gesture laced with it, from the dream that opens the novel to waking assaults Van Go sequences through until novel’s end. Van Go and his associates communicate with “Fuck you”s, an unadorned reproduction of the hypermasculine posturing under critique in bell hooks’ *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* or the post-Erasure social internet. Both the threats and the violence are cartoonish, yet disturbing, like the virtual reality of a first-person shooter video game. Van Go’s narration mostly moves rapidly, concerned with its dialectal verbs, but dilates enough to follow the blood “drip drip drippin down” his mother’s legs, the cries and screams of the women whose consent is left up to interpretation, the silent “stabs” that denote penetration in the rape of Penelope Dalton, the “neat” “hole” left when Van Go shoots the Korean man behind the counter, the “lake of blood” left after Van Go shoots him “three mo’ times.”<sup>35</sup> It is

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<sup>33</sup> Everett, 133.

<sup>34</sup> Aspirin and acetaminophen (the primary active ingredient in the suite of brandname Tylenol drugs) are over-the-counter medications used to treat pain and fever; daily aspirin consumption (“daily aspirin therapy”) can also be prescribed to lower the risk of heart attack or stroke. Dexatrim is an over-the-counter dieting supplement consisting of caffeine, green tea extract, ginseng, and dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA). Rexall was the name of an American drugstore chain operating throughout most of the twentieth-century; Rx (or Rx) is an abbreviation for prescriptions.

<sup>35</sup> Everett, 65, 108, 123.

gross, disgusting, this figment of a figment of someone's world. It is all Monk's vomit, the expression of him being sick.

Amid the viscous blood there is laughter. Lots and lots of laughter. *My Pafology* contains forty-seven instances of laughter, almost all indexed by the word "laugh" and its various derivatives.<sup>36</sup> Laughter is happening all the time. Where there is not violence, there is laughter and vice-versa. An example:

"Is there a problem, Mr. Jenkins?" he ax.

I'm just kicked back, chillin, talkin to Yellow. I look at Yellow like what this fool think he is and what he be saying, like what language he be talking and we bust out laughin. Then that muthafucka laugh too, like he makin fun of me. I get real quiet and cut a stare at him.

"What you laughin at, cracker?" I say.

"You, my man," he say. "I'm laughin at you...."

... I hear a couple people laugh and I just lose it. Shit... I jump up and knee the fucka in his balls. He slump over... I just hit him again, wif my fist this time... I cut my knuckle on his tooth and then I gets madder...<sup>37</sup>

This past event, the loosely framed reason Van Go is kicked out of school, is rendered as present as everything else in *My Pafology*. Immediately following his recall of the assault sequenced by laughter, Van Go is approached by a drug addict, whose "swayin" movement instigates more laughter: "I laugh thinkin that if you gets really fucked up then you fall down, up, down, up down."<sup>38</sup> Threats of violence return when the drug addict "laughs and points" at Van Go; then Cleona, Rexall's mother, laughs at Van Go; "She laugh" again when Van Go invites himself to her house. Cleona involuntarily "let out a giggle," Van Go reports, when he touches her breasts. He penetrates, ejaculates, and "laughs" out the door:

I laughs and walk over to the door real slow. "You a fat ho," I say....

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<sup>36</sup> Laughter as "laugh," "laughs," or "laughin" appears in *My Pafology* on the following pages: 66, 67 (two times), 68, 69, 72, 73, 74 (four times), 75, 76, 79, 81, 83, 85, 88, 90, 91 (two times), 92, 93, 95, 98 (three times), 99 (three times), 101, 102, 103, 105, 109, 112, 114 (two times), 115, 116 (four times), 117 (three times), 120. Laughter as "giggle," only expressed by female characters, appears on the following pages: 71, 92, 106.

<sup>37</sup> Everett, *Erasure*, 66-67.

<sup>38</sup> Everett, 67.

“You rape me!” she scream.  
“I laughs and walk out.

It is laughter without jokes, laughter without mirth, even for the characters filled up and animated by it. Margaret Russett describes *My Pafology* as “fast, mean, and very funny,” but while the comic is present, the novel-within-a-novel is not exactly *funny*.<sup>39</sup> Funniness would have to rely, somewhat counterintuitively, on the same hinge that interprets “gritty” realism in *My Pafology/Fuck or We’s Lives In Da Ghetto*—a relationship to the presumed real thing. Hysteria sounds closer to the mark. In the least, laughter read as the sign of comic activity is no guide. Why does laughter happen here, giving texture to the eruption that is an expression of being made ill, that is hollow as much as it is a symptom of fullness? *How* does laughter happen like this here, as it does in elsewhere occasions of excess and ejection? In *Erasure*, neither laughter nor ejection, nor laughter as ejection, provides relief. Laughter is the “Nothing” spoken in response to the rhetorical “What’s wrong?” or “Is something wrong?” that follows Monk’s bouts of nausea. An expression of blackness that is not.

## II. Phatic Noise

Noise denotes difference. Noise is the named exclusion—that which does not fit appropriately into another genre of sound and voice is relegated to so much noise. Noise, therefore, exposes tastes that are also prejudices. What is noisy is unpleasant, distasteful and better off as less of itself as so to possibly become not noise. Prejudices of race, gender, ability, sexuality, age, and nation may be revealed in an individual’s judgement.<sup>40</sup> In America, the sonic phenomenon of race has long bound blackness and noise together. Regardless of the decibels at hand or the silence of the page, the default impropriety of black existence inclines the perception of causing a disturbance. The

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<sup>39</sup> Margaret Russett, “Race under *Erasure* for Percival Everett, ‘A Piece of Fiction,’” *Callaloo* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 364.

<sup>40</sup> Who among us has not been told to “turn off that racket” by someone elder?

“sonic color line,” what Jennifer Lynn Stoever calls the racialized border renders “the ambient sound of everyday living” among black persons into a bother that must be surveilled and policed, often lethally, and disciplined, even if by definition black people cannot for long remain incorporated into the appropriate sonic genres.<sup>41</sup> Anyway molecules can be moved is liable to be interpreted as noise.

Formally defined, noise is not phatic expression, it is nearly the opposite. While his introduction of this category of linguistic utterance neatly isolates “phatic communion” from more meaningful forms of language, Bronislaw Malinowski still considers it a form of purposeful talk, “serving the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker.”<sup>42</sup> Phatic communion is a form of expression that makes meaning irrelevant; it is so much “talk passing between people” that at best affirms the existence of everyone involved, “language used in free, aimless, social intercourse”—the *How do you dos* and weather commentary of polite conversation.<sup>43</sup> Roman Jakobson bolsters this assertion in his adoption of the phatic as one of six functional components of language. Jakobson describes the phatic function of language in terms of communicative channels. The phatic is a missive “primarily to serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue” contact, he writes, and “CONTACT” and “PHATIC” are interchangeable in his linguistic diagram.<sup>44</sup> Similar to Malinowski’s, the phatic in Jakobson’s terms is informational (and, he adds, poetic) but not “cognitive.”<sup>45</sup> “Well, here we are” says the young groom in the short story by Dorothy Parker; “Here we are, aren’t we?” the bride

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<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 12.

<sup>42</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages,” in *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1923), 315.

<sup>43</sup> Malinowski, 310, 313.

<sup>44</sup> Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 355.

<sup>45</sup> Jakobson, 354.

responds.<sup>46</sup> From holding everyone together—communion—to maintaining connection—communication—the phatic is the ritual confirmation that everything is intact, linguistically speaking.

And yet, it bears repeating that Malinowski derives his concept from a colonial encounter, apparent by the title of his frequently circulated contribution to *The Meaning of Meaning*, “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages.” According to Malinowski, phatic communion is not only deprived of meaning, placing it of a lower order compared to exchanges evincing “intellectual reflection” (or “radical meaning”), it is the only domain of language deemed available to his object of study, the Melanesian peoples of eastern New Guinea.<sup>47</sup> In “The Problem of Meaning,” Malinowski describes his failure to arrive on time to meet a group of returning fisherman on the beach, abandoning his data collection to rush to the beach only to find them still far away. The interpretative failure on his part foments his definitive account of the spatial, temporal, and psychological capabilities of the language. In “a primitive tongue, never used in writing” he avers, “all the material lives only in winged words, passing from man to man.”<sup>48</sup> It is a “native utterance” and “savage utterance,” that cannot contain abstraction, only forge connections of immediate relevance. It is also where the European and the savage meet—“the non-articulate sounds emitted by an infant, such as gurgling, wailing, squealing, crowing and weeping” are phatic, as well, correlated with desired action and attention, “not involving any act of thought.”<sup>49</sup> Later, he returns to the *primitive* utterance in moments of polite conversation. Jakobson picks up this cue, identifying the phatic as the domain of both the infantile and inhuman (birds). In this way, the phatic is a

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<sup>46</sup> Dorothy Parker, “Here We Are,” *Complete Stories*, ed. Colleen Breese (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> Malinowski, 315.

<sup>48</sup> Malinowski, 307.

<sup>49</sup> Malinowski, 323.

devolution infecting civilized men, implicating others by association. The phatic is noisy and it is catching.

I turn now to the second of the “two Ellisons.” Ralph Ellison’s “An Extravagance of Laughter,” exhibits the entwinement of noise and the phatic when it comes to black bodies and errant sound. Ellison’s “An Extravagance of Laughter” dilates his experience of uncontrollable laughter at the theater with other stories of laughter. Laughter is no more reparative here than in *Erasure*. Ellison tells of an incident between a group Tuskegee students and two police officers, where laughter cannot “cancel out the unpleasantness or humiliation” of search and seizure. Laughter may be only a momentary buffer against the “mad, surreal” facts of black life in the South. The nested joke revolves around an unspecified small Southern community where Black laughter in public is considered so illicit as to be necessarily banned. “[A]ny Negro who felt a laugh coming on was forced, *pro bono public*, to thrust his boisterous head” into any one of “a series of huge whitewashed barrels labeled FOR COLORED.” And as Ellison tells it, the laughing barrels came to constitute the nexus of political life for the entire community. “Certain citizens had assumed their democratic right of dissent to oppose the barrels” for they saw the laughing barrels not as “protecting the sensibilities of whites” but rather as government-funded accommodation for black residents; “Why not, they argued, force Negroes to control themselves at their own expense.”<sup>50</sup> These laughing barrels were, after all, instituted for the purpose of containment based on the premise that nothing about black life in the South could inspire laughter from a source other than pure insanity, and to conceal the insanity of black laughter was to cloak the inherently disordered nature of blackness.

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<sup>50</sup> Ralph Ellison, “An Extravagance of Laughter,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 635-7, 658, 649, 651.

Hence the problem with the laughing barrels. They don't contain but instead amplify laughter, catalyzing a contagion-like quality.

After all, having to observe the posture of a Negro stuck halfway into a laughing barrel... was far from an aesthetic experience—quickly turned into a disruption of Southern tradition, social segregation, and civic order. The more populated, and therefore more *public*, the public square more evident the crisis became. During town holidays “the uproar from the laughing barrels could become so... irresistible that any whites... caught near the explosions of laughter would find themselves compelled to join in.” And though “[a]ll agreed that the laughing barrels were an economic burden,” for the laughter magnified to the point of “bursting barrels” they were thus “faced with a Hobson’s choice between getting rid of Negroes and suffering the economic loss of their labor, or living with the commotion in the laughing barrels.”<sup>51</sup>

The whites of this mythical town have been civically torn asunder by the distaste, fear, and actuality of black laughter and their own tactics to hide unmanageable black subjects. Ellison leaves us then with the excess of black laughter, through the frenzied need to control it on behalf of whites with the understanding that the laughter itself “*in*-verted (and thus *sub*-verted) tradition”—“even if only momentarily,” Glenda Carpio argues.<sup>52</sup>

The visceral experience of laughter is an unpleasant one:

I was reduced to such helpless laughter that I distracted the entire balcony and embarrassed both myself and my host. It was a terrible moment...

Then it was though I had been stripped naked, kicked out of a low-flying plane onto an Alabama road, and ordered to laugh for my life. I laughed and laughed, bending and straightening in a virtual uncontrollable cloud-and-dam-burst of laughter, a self-immolation of laughter over which I had no control.

Much as in one’s being tickled, the act of laughter is its own embarrassment, made all the more tortuous for being read as a sign of mirth and self-enjoyment rather than an inability for an individual to organize their affects. And all the while, there is the feeling of laughing in the verb form—the tortured body—what Ellison describes as “a self-immolation” and later “agony” of

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<sup>51</sup> Ellison, 652, 654.

<sup>52</sup> Ellison, 644; Glenda R. Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 148.

laughter.<sup>53</sup> His “lucid self,” the part at least observant of the runaway train of behavior, is “disgusted” as his body “wheezed and choked with laughter.”<sup>54</sup> Ellison receives his illuminating moment, “[y]es, but at the expense of undergoing a humiliating, body-wracking conflict of emotions!”<sup>55</sup>

The more aware he is of his predicament, the further his disgust; the more his laughter multiplies, the further out of reach is his control. Similar to townspeople in Ellison’s joke, “the entire audience was being torn in twain” in response to his laughter, some reading the outburst as disturbance, and others seeing it as testament to the “impromptu broadening” of comedic genre.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, Ellison himself is split, continuing to maintain a difference between his “lucid” and “sober self,” and the bodily self overcome with motion. In the case of the laughing barrels, Ellison describes the self-amplifying nature of the laughing barrels where, besides affecting others to a bout of laughter, “[t]he Negro was apt to double up with a second gale of laughter, triggered, apparently, by his own mental image of himself laughing at himself laughing upside down.” In a similar fashion, the periodic intrusion of Ellison’s lucid/sober self (self-disgust) seems as much the catalyst to further onslaughts of laughter as “the scene of virtual orgy of disgraceful conduct” (public distaste) he has created.<sup>57</sup>

### III. The Laughter of the Rapper

It starts with the laugh. A disembodied *ha* enters the auditory scene to precede all—or any other—musical content. Or the laugh, in sync with its musical surroundings, arrives with the music, giving voice but not yet meaning where we might expect it.<sup>58</sup> Sometimes the laugh imposes midway

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<sup>53</sup> Ellison, “An Extravagance of Laughter,” 650, 649.

<sup>54</sup> Ellison, 650.

<sup>55</sup> Ellison, 648-9, 655.

<sup>56</sup> Ellison, 651.

<sup>57</sup> Ellison, “Extravagance,” 650, 652.

<sup>58</sup> Such as in the 1984 song “Jam On It” by Nucleus.

through the music, with or without provocation, with or without regard to the in-progress rhythmic milieu into which it is interjected—which is not to say the mid-, part-, or halfway place of the laugh in song always feels like an imposition. The tone and quality (humanness) of the laugh, and orientation of the laugh to its object all matter mightily in our affective experience of it and our evaluative reaction to it: whether we are compelled into camaraderie, jarred into distaste or surprised pleasure, whether our felt proximity gains ground on or loses traction with the artist relies on what the laugh sounds like, or better yet, *feels like*.

### *The Bravado Laugh*

Fresh. Fly. Cool. Cold. Dope. Legit. Gangsta. Def. Live. Boss. Trill. Pimpin'. The adjectives rappers use that in noun-fashion assert themselves in the hip hop arena constantly churn as new terms emerge, antiquated ones return to the surface, and vernacular of all ages suffocates or succeeds amidst the squeeze of a genre whose generative circulation of relevant words and phrases is its life source.<sup>59</sup> But while the purchase of the utterance of a particular “I am” statement might vary by decade, by year, by artist, all are iterative of the same essence—swagger, hip hop’s definitive bravado. It is what drives a song like Doug E. Fresh’s “The Show” (1985)<sup>60</sup> and oozes from Ice Cube’s “Check Yo Self” (1992), T.I.’s appropriately titled “Swagga Like Us” (2008), Missy Elliot’s “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” (1997), Childish Gambino’s “IV. sweatpants” (2014) and countless others. It’s spawned a sea of monikers: the Mastas, the Killas, the Gs, the Bigs and B.I.G.s, the Macks, the Drs., Messrs., and MCs. Bravado catalyzes and inflames every “beef” and undergirds every “diss” track, from Boogie Down Productions’ seminal “South Bronx” (1987) to Jay-Z’s

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<sup>59</sup> What Candice M. Jenkins calls “rap’s literariness,” wherein the “genre itself” figures “as a particular verbal artifact, one driven as much by the aestheticized oral communication as by musical expression” (Jenkins, “Introduction: ‘Reading’ Hip-Hop Discourse in the Twenty-First Century,” *African American Review* 46, no. 1 [Spring 2013]: 1).

<sup>60</sup> Along with Salt-N-Pepa’s debut reply, the answer record entitled “The Showstopper” (1985).

“Takeover” (2001) to Nicki Minaj’s “Roman’s Revenge” (2011).<sup>61</sup> It is, as Drake calls it, the rapper’s “worst behavior,” composite of claims of verbal skill, signifiers of wealth and sexual prowess.<sup>62</sup> It is hypermasculine, but by no means a male rapper’s game.<sup>63</sup> Hip hop bravado—this is the first rappers’ laugh.

Credited as one of rap’s first forays into social commentary, “The Message” (1982) by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five narrates the bleak imminence in life lived in the ghetto. Following an instrumental intro, not long so much as having the quality of being stretched (a hint at the unbearable content to follow), described by Dan Cairns as a “nightmarish slow-funk,” MC Melle Mel enters with the opening lyrics:<sup>64</sup>

It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder  
How I keep from going under.  
It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder  
How I keep from going under.

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<sup>61</sup> Kendrick Lamar’s verse on “Control” is the lyrical bravado sublime (2013):

I heard the barbershops be in great debates all the time,  
Who's the best MC?  
Kendrick, Jigga, and Nas,  
Eminem, Andre 3000, the rest of ya'll,  
New niggas just new niggas, don't get involved...  
But this is hip hop and them niggas should know what time it is,  
And that goes for Jermaine Cole, Big KRIT, Wale  
Pusha T, Meek Mill, A\$AP Rocky, Drake,  
Big Sean, Jay electron', Tyler, Mac Miller.  
I got love for you all but I'm tryna murder you niggas.  
Tryna make sure your core fans never heard of you niggas.  
They don't wanna hear not one more noun or verb from you niggas.  
What is competition?  
I'm tryna raise the bar high  
Who tryna jump and get it?

<sup>62</sup> Known as “flossing” or “flexing.”

<sup>63</sup> Nor limited to the rapper. Nelson George’s *Hip Hop America*, as much a study of hip hop’s influence on America as a narrative of the culture’s emergence within America, looks at the rise of dunking and dramatics as an extension of the “gang bang glory” and “us-against-the-world bravado” of “hip hop’s ethos” (George, *Hip Hop America* [New York: Penguin Books, 1998], 140).

<sup>64</sup> Dan Cairns, “1982: Grandmaster Flash: ‘The Message,’” *Sunday Times*, September 28, 2008, 25.

Relayed and repeated over the “noirish,” “stifling and claustrophobic” beat, “jungle” indexes much, not least of all a literal tropical thicket, the base primitivism the space recalls, its wilderness and wildness, and necessary inhumanity amidst an “eat or be eaten” rubric for survival—all also encapsulate by the more contemporary (and genre-resonant) metaphoric of the “concrete jungle.” And in the verses that follow it becomes clear that the “jungle” is indeed made up of the pitfalls and navigational demands of low-income city life, of Black life in the city. Not only a narrative of a life of gross impoverishment—and a grossly impoverished life—the speaker details a life lived in precarity (“livin’ on a seesaw”), of always ever hovering just short of one’s breaking point. And as the hook goes:

Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge.  
I'm trying not to lose my head.<sup>65</sup>

In the deep, resonant authority of Melle Mel’s voice, the refrain sounds less like begging and rather takes the tone of a dare, an entreat to whomever (the environment, the damned souls around him, us the audience) to just do it, make the small motion necessary to send him over the ambiguous “edge” into unchecked violence, suicide, madness—“Sometimes I think I’m going insane, I swear I might hijack a plane,” concludes the third verse.<sup>66</sup>

Though the song includes narrative snippets of the lives of various unnamed characters from the “Crazy lady livin’ in a bag” whose dancing career descended into prostitution and homelessness, to the speaker’s thieving brother and freeloading mother, these are all but fixtures of an

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<sup>65</sup> These lines are undoubtedly the most recognizable from the track and have had enjoyed a strange resonance in popular culture. The 2006 animated film “Happy Feet” includes a scene where a young penguin raps the well-known lines for his teacher and classmates.

<sup>66</sup> Melle Mel is popularly considered to be the first to command the title “MC.” *The Original Kings of Comedy* includes a bit by comedian Cedric the Entertainer where he describes “a whole different creed that [Black people] live by,” the “more confrontational... wish factor.” “Black people don’t hope, we... ‘wish a muthafucka would,’” Cedric ventriloquizes, attributing a nuance of Black vernacular that articulates aggression through words that themselves imply passivity.

environment detailed from the authoritative “I” voice and perspective to match the fed up “I” of the chorus. That is, until the fifth and final verse, where first-person departs in favor of the second-person point of view:

A child is born with no state of mind,  
Blind to the ways of mankind...  
You'll grow in the ghetto, living second rate,  
And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate.  
The places you play and where you stay  
Looks like one great big alley way.

With the first two phrases as a present-tense transition from the song’s erstwhile past-tense free verse, narrative transforms into premonition, and the new future-tense in conjunction with the strong “you” directive sends us there.

You'll admire  
All the number book takers...  
Driving big cars, spending twenties and tens...  
Smugglers, scramblers, burglars, gamblers,  
Pickpockets, peddlers, even panhandlers...  
But then you wind up dropping out of high school.  
Now you're unemployed, all non-void...

It’s a partial echo of the speaker’s earlier related experiences, his own “bum education” and decree that “[y]ou got to have a con in this land of milk and honey.” With this latter phrase as its own inner-song foreboding, “(y)our” fate in this last verse ends in an “eight year bid” in prison, a sentence never completed.

...being used and abused and served like hell,  
'Til one day you was found hung dead in your cell.  
It was plain to see that your life was lost.  
You was cold and your body swung back and forth.  
But now your eyes sing the sad, sad song  
Of how you lived so fast and died so young.

As the speaker says, “ain’t a damn thing funny” about this descent from poverty and envy, to crime and punishment, and finally rape and suicide, which the song foretells as the binding contract

forged by birth in the ghetto.<sup>67</sup> Yet, amidst the onslaught of desolate urban imagery there is laughter, which after over twenty years of release and rerelease and rerecording and remastering remains an integral component to the song. Instances of the hook from Melle Melle are followed by what Joseph Winters describes as a “chant”-like laughter, “uh huh huh huh.”<sup>68</sup> And from the second chorus onward, the refrain “It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder / How I keep from going under” is also followed by the staccato sounds, though I note these are shaped more identifiably like laughter—“ha huh uh ha ha ha”—with subsequent repetition.<sup>69</sup> Like many, Winters reads “The Message” as a rumination over the literal and figurative destruction, ruin, neglect, and continuous mourning that permeates Black life, urban black life in particular; he treats the laughter

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<sup>67</sup> Michael S. Collins considers “the elaboration of the mechanics of envy and jealousy” one of “rap music’s greatest contribution” with envy functioning as unfortunate the Sword of Damocles driving so much of gangsta rap’s literal violence as well as violent imagery. Though Collins focuses exclusively on Christopher Wallace (The Notorious B.I.G., Biggie Smalls) and gangsta rap of the ’90s, I wonder if envy is a useful hinge for considering a transition into rap of the 2000s, where envy remains very much the currency, but the “gang banging” cred—at least with any actuated violence to back it up—has declined amongst hip hop’s most prominent figures. We are at a point where the rapper’s livelihood is no longer a sacrificial option to settle slights; as in Dr. Dre’s “The Watcher”:

I ain't a thug, how much Tupac in you, you got...  
It's either my life or your life,  
And I ain't leaving, I like breathing...  
Nigga if you really want to take it there we can,  
Just remember that you fucking with a family man.  
I got a lot more to lose than you, remember that,  
When you wanna come and fill these shoes.

On Jay-Z’s “The Watcher 2”: “Things just ain’t the same for gangsters / But I’m a little too famous to shoot these pranksters.” Though by 1988 we have Slick Rick’s “Children’s Story,” a song whose rhyme, bouncy wordplay, and exaggerated character voices inject humor in its otherwise humorless deadpan delivery, despite “Uncle Ricky’s” warning that his story, a similar tale of street youth turned criminal ending in death (this time at the hands of cop bullets; “just another case about the wrong path”), “ain’t funny, so don’t you dare laugh.”

<sup>68</sup> Joseph Winters, “Contemporary Sorrow Songs: Traces of Mourning, Lament, and Vulnerability,” *African American Review* 46 (2013): 15.

<sup>69</sup> Phil Collins cites the song as influence for Genesis’s 1983 single “Mama,” and the breathy cackles that occur throughout, over the track’s own funky, haunting beat, parallel Melle Mel’s.

seriously, and it figures as crucial for slotting the track into a lineage of sorrow songs in Du Boisian terms.

For Winters, the laugh in “The Message” is the exhale that allows the speaker to continue being in life while still soliciting to God for relief, the at once “sorrow and hope” that marks the “faith in the ultimate justice of things” of the songs. Especially positioned as the cathartic flipside to Ghostface Killah’s soulful moans in “The Prayer,” the reading of Melle Mel’s laughs as inhabiting the tragicomic is a compelling one, though the necessary genealogical work in some sense robs the actual in-song event of laughter in “The Message” its fullness. Laughter is a matter of voice instead of lyrics.

As mentioned earlier, what may otherwise be a lyrical moment of weakness, the speaker acknowledging their subordination to an audience in pleading that we not send him over the edge is turned into provocation by Melle Mel’s baritone presence and command of lyric. Even as he asks that we not “push [him],” the fullness of that voice, the sound space allotted, suggests we could not even get close enough to try. If exposure to this malaise hasn’t broken me yet, the chorus snickers, what makes you think you can? The track literally chuckles at the prospect.

Not only can we not make the speaker “lose [his] head,” we are, he asserts, wholly unprepared to survive in the urban jungle of “The Message.” The final verse does in tense what the chorus does with laughter; it quite literally flips the script. From the speaker’s personal woes we get (y)our own fortune, which follows not with the possibility of descent, but its actual course. The speaker taunts us: “Thugs, pimps, pushers and the big money makers... / And you wanna grow up to be just like them” he says, punctuating the end of this phrase with a “ha.” He ventriloquizes: “You say: I’m cool, ha, I’m no fool.” Though towards the end of the fourth verse the speaker says, “I *feel* like a outlaw,” in the fifth verse we become one (emphasis mine). The speaker’s repeated supposition of suicide ends in (y)ours.

The last laugh, of course, belongs to the rapper, in two-fold form. The resonance of the “you” who has perished affects the last refrain and enhances its ribbing in conjunction with the actual laugh. The hierarchical transposition is complete; the lyrics “It’s like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder / how I keep from going under” reminds us that while we “lived so fast and died so young,” the speaker’s “I” lives on to survey the very terrain we fell prey to. His survival is not quite triumphant, but does delineate the rapper apart from the scene laid out by the narrative. The only element the rapper has subsumed themselves to by the end is the music, which continues for a few measures on after the laughter fades.

The laugh in “The Message” is the precursor to the bravado laugh, a laugh defined by the supremacy of the rapper’s “I,” in an either named (such as in a diss track) or more nebulous hierarchical relation within the hip hop jungle from which the rap “game”—a metaphor that indexes the competitive atmosphere entire of hip hop—emerges.<sup>70</sup> It’s a positional power more attributed to theories on poetic voice than sociological or cultural studies of hip hop, which tend to focus more on rap’s political speech to power as a genre defined by the marginalized experience of black existence under white supremacy (or patriarchy, in the case of discourse on female rappers). While this instrumentalization of the rapper’s voice certainly figures in rap laughter, the bravado-laden laugh may be unabashedly participant in the strident logic of capitalist dominance and violence, and often maintains fidelity its markers of success and the good life.

As Katja Lee explains, “[t]he ‘I’ of rap is grounded in both reality and myth... inherently a marker of at least two subjectivities.”<sup>71</sup> Through the multiplicity of personas and voices it carries

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<sup>70</sup> Ice Cube’s “Check Ya Self” is an example of the latter, a “diss track” without a named object, a track which has also been mixed and then rereleased with the beat from “The Message” (from where it also pulls its title).

<sup>71</sup> Katja Lee, “Reconsidering Rap’s ‘I’: Eminem’s Autobiographical Postures and the Construction of Identity Authenticity,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38 (2008): 355.

even just within a single song, the “I” “offers itself as a site of potential creative friction” and “allows identity to remain in flux.”<sup>72</sup> Lee defines the dual subjectivity of the rapper’s “I” by perspective and exclusion; but where Lee characterizes this duality by the contrast between a “Gangsta rapper[‘s]” inclusive space within “his own rap culture” and his rejection from or of “the dominant cultural order,” a more precise differentiation for the purposes of my subject lies between the rapper’s assertion of themselves as supreme and a forcibly acknowledged reality or doubt that must entertain the possibility that this might be a fiction.<sup>73</sup> And while Du Bois remains ever useful for parsing contemporary articulations of black identity across many forms of cultural production, including rap, the double consciousness—“doubling of identity”—at work in the bravado laugh is not quite his conception of such.<sup>74</sup>

Not quite as conclusive as myth against reality, the rapper “I” that predicates the laugh can better be described as the persona alongside the potential of its breakdown. The rapper’s bravado “I” is an assertion of grandeur, as is the laugh where it occurs. Such as in “Can’t Tell Me Nothing” (2007), where the refrain “La, la, la la / Wait till I get my money right... Excuse me, / Is you saying something? / Uh, uh, / You can’t tell me nothing” is followed by the derisive, echoing “Ha ha” in the background. The song itself inhabits multiple fictions, multiple myths, multiple realities. There is the “I” marked by aspiration (“Wait till I get my money right”), a container for the pre-fame Kanye who was at one time unknown and still on the come up, but false in its present-tense telling—by *Graduation* (2007) West had already two double-platinum albums (which would each go on to be triple-platinum) and numerous other commercial and artistic accolades. And then there is the “I”

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<sup>72</sup> Lee, 355.

<sup>73</sup> Lee, 355.

<sup>74</sup> Lee, 355. For an example of Du Boisian double-consciousness used well to assess contemporary rap music, see George Ciccarello-Maher’s “A Critique of Du Boisian Reason: Kanye West and the Fruitfulness of Double-Consciousness,” *Journal of Black Studies* 39, no. 3 (January 2009): 371-401.

who has “made it” (“But homey this is my day.../ You know I already graduated”), also present-tense, adding to the “creative friction” of an already fractured “I” made seemingly singular through its delivery by one voice. And, if not reconciled, the disparate nature of the “I” is suppressed at the moment of the laugh, where the rapper’s vocal authority has its fullest, non-lyrical presence, under which we, the listeners are subsumed.

“We laugh,” Georges Bataille explains, “on condition that our position of dominance not be at the mercy of laughter, the object of laughter. To laugh, it is necessary that one not risk losing one’s position of dominance.”<sup>75</sup> I have already discussed the positionality expertly wielded by the rapper’s bravado as well as its ever present duality—its assertion of dominance that must ever share a space with an acknowledgement of its possible falseness. The bravado laugh then in Bataillean terms is the attempted safe space within song, where the rapper most fully maintain his dominance via suppression of the precarity of persona; where “he who laughs does not... abandon his knowledge” that threatens his mastery, “but he refuses, for a time—a limited time—to accept it.”<sup>76</sup>

If Thomas Hobbes provides the bluntest reason for the desire behind the bravado laugh from the persona’s perspective and the resultant pleasure found in its glory, Bataille explains the compulsion that undergirds it along with the mechanism necessary for it to occur (which also compels its necessary occurrence). The known/un-known through which this later Bataille works through the workings of laughter better allows for the precarity of persona, without also reducing the laugh itself to nothing more than hot air contained by the thin veneer of mythology. It is not enough that the rapper places himself in a superior position (*à la* Hobbes); they must not only deflate the competition, but suppress the very possibility of any other’s transcendence—a feat

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<sup>75</sup> Georges Bataille and Annette Michelson, “Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears,” *October* 36 (1986): 97.

<sup>76</sup> Bataille and Michelson, 97.

accomplished albeit only “artificially” and temporarily. Bravado requires in its performance the deliberate unknowing of the possibility of being de-throned, of mediocrity, of inadequacy: this is the bravado laugh.

### *The Rapper’s Sacrifice*

The second laugh is a laugh in the crisis of collaboration. In his autobiography, *Decoded* (2010) Jay-Z relates how at nine-years old he stumbled upon his first cipher—though “I wouldn’t have called it that, no one would’ve” in 1978.<sup>77</sup> In the middle of a circle of “ashy, skinny Brooklyn kids” stood Slate, a peer who otherwise “barely made an impression” but now in his “gravity” commanded the attention of an audience, and was “transformed, like church ladies touched by the spirit” through rhyme.<sup>78</sup> “He was rhyming... for... thirty minutes... never losing the beat, riding the hand claps,” Jay-Z recalls:

He rhymed about nothing... or he’d go in on the kids who were standing around listening to him, call out someone’s leaning sneakers or dirty Lee jeans. And then he’d go in on how clean he was... Then he’d just start rhyming about the rhymes themselves, how good they were, how much better they were than yours, how he was the best that ever did it, in all five boroughs and beyond... It was like watching some kind of combat... but he was alone in the center. All he had were his eyes, taking in everything, and the words inside him.<sup>79</sup>

What Jay-Z describes is the positional power of rapping, where lyrical and vocal authority can literally “transform” a nondescript person into a commanding persona.<sup>80</sup> He also describes the bravado within rap, where the very audience entranced becomes prey for ridicule and “rhym[ing] about nothing” turns into the dozens-like “call[ing] out” of others and finally the self-

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<sup>77</sup> Jay-Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 4.

<sup>78</sup> Jay-Z, 4.

<sup>79</sup> Jay-Z, 4-5.

<sup>80</sup> Jay-Z, 4.

pronouncement of greatness.<sup>81</sup> Jay-Z likens the scene to “combat,” even though Slate is, in actuality, “alone in the center.”<sup>82</sup>

Much like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “jungle,” “combat” brings to mind the inherent competitiveness of rap. The ceremony of the cipher observes a competition of one, or one-at-a-time, as does the bravado laugh in the previous section of this essay. What happens when one becomes two, or more? When two separately established bodies are in the room, contained not by a circle, with vague and shifting contours, but a single track? Two personas, two dualities, multiple dualities, each person engaged with their own individual combat as dictated by the game, but also managing the real “threat” (even in amicable collaboration) posed by a literal sharing of vocal space?

Though I mark this laugh by such words as “crisis” and “threat,” out of the types of laughter I discuss, this second laugh—the rapper’s sacrifice—is in fact what allows space for camaraderie, collaboration, and persona-to-persona intimacy in a lyrical space whose narrative proclaims singularity in voice, if not in presence. And in form, the rapper collaboration bears much in common with a Bergsonian comic scene, particularly as he explains the effect produced by “reciprocal interference of series.”<sup>83</sup> “[E]ach of the characters in every stage-made misunderstanding,” whom I label here as the two individually established personas brought together in the vein of producing a single, cohesive rap record, “has his setting in an appropriate series of events which he correctly interprets as far as he is concerned, and which give the key-note to his words and actions.”<sup>84</sup> Out of their volition, rapper A and rapper B have come presumably to *merge* their best of worlds; however, the very thing that makes rapper A “rapper A” (and ditto for “B”) is

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<sup>81</sup> Jay-Z, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Jay-Z, 5.

<sup>83</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 47.

<sup>84</sup> Bergson, 48.

predicated on the suppression of the possibility of another persona intruding upon their vocal authority. But here is rapper B, a physical, literal, insuppressible presence—either in body, but most importantly in voice, which is a constant regardless of how much of the track is actually recorded together in-studio. “At a certain moment they,” the personas themselves and/or the vocal extension of such, “meet under such conditions that the actions and words that belong to one might just as well belong to another,” to the extent there can, in the logic of the game, only be *one*.<sup>85</sup> This is the crisis.

In a footnote on reciprocal interference, Bergson clarifies his usage of “interference” as belonging to the tradition of Optics, pertaining specifically to “the partial superposition and neutralization, by each other, of two series.”<sup>86</sup> This is exactly what occurs at the moment of the rapper’s sacrificial laughter. The equivocal situation “permits of two different meanings at the same time, the one merely plausible,” the bravado positioning and persona put forth “by [both] the actors” and “the other a real one, which is given by the public,” or, using language from earlier, the precarity of the performer’s put forth assertion of themselves—which at the moment of a collaborative track resides within each performer individually and shared in a combined evaluation.<sup>87</sup> The laugh moment comes out of the pressure generated by the necessity that both participants hold themselves up and keep doubt down amidst the reality of each other. As in some sense the “authors” of the track (by vocal ownership in language; irrespective of whether they wrote the words), they are “constantly renewing the vain threat of dissolving partnership between” their multiple mutual competing presences; “[e]very moment the whole thing threatens to break down, but manages to get patched up again” through the fraternity of laughter.<sup>88</sup> Or, as Zupančič suggests

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<sup>85</sup> Bergson, 48.

<sup>86</sup> Bergson, 48, note 6.

<sup>87</sup> Bergson, 48.

<sup>88</sup> Bergson, 49. Rap’s “reliance upon and respect for language,” is for Jenkins “a rhetorical move that

in her renovation of Bergson, “The real comedy begins only when the limit the two elements represent to each other starts to function as their most intimate bond and the very territory of their encounter.”<sup>89</sup>

I do not want to insert the scene of collaboration too forcibly into the genre of comedy; there are many collaborations in hip hop that are intentionally humorous such that there’s no need to force the fact of collaboration as inherently so. But theories of the comic still seem useful here in that rapper personas operate more like constellations than characters, whose shifting, simultaneity in a fictive, performative space can be illuminated by the similarly complex movements made by comic objects and situations; and returning to Zupančič’s statement, their usage keeps the role of play in play, not just as a competitive arena or method of usurpation (i.e., part of hip hop’s bravado), but as a real mode of community, connection, and fun.

The game requires in Bataille’s words, “the boldness of play in which nothing is ever given, in which we have no guarantee of any kind.”<sup>90</sup> There is risk in every collaboration—within any genre, but in hip hop, on a rap record especially. Without being too irresponsibly glib with the term, collaboration provokes a certain kind of anguish, to cross into Bataille’s earlier text on laughter. Not that collaboration is an anathema to hip hop—the culture would not, of course, exist without it—but it is in some sense contrary to the fiction of the rap game it contains. Collaboration spawns anguish by undermining this fiction, which in turn heightens anxiety as the possible shattering of the rapper’s persona is harder to suppress. The rapper’s sacrifice is evident at the event of the risible,

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privileges the rapper as a kind of author and the rap lyric as the ur-text of hip-hop culture writ large.” Moya Bailey’s concept of “homolatent[cy]” in hip hop culture addresses what else may be “patched up” or suppressed within hip hop’s homosocial fraternal moments, namely the very suggestion of queerness.

<sup>89</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2008), 122.

<sup>90</sup> Bataille and Michelson, 100.

“the communication of... dispersion” of the anguish created by the convergence of bravado. The sacrifice laugh allows personas to meet and match on a plane in shared “glory... radiance.”<sup>91</sup> I substitute Bataille’s fall of the passerby with the necessary (and possibly imagined) figurative fall of the fellow collaborator, an other’s subordination, that occurs with each vocal handoff—rapper B stops or quiets as rapper A replaces them at the forefront, and vice-versa. Sometimes this is enough. At other times, there is laughter, “a movement of communion so sudden that they stand abashed.”<sup>92</sup> As do we.

#### *Bodily Noise*

Comedian Chris D’Elia wants to know why rappers laugh. “Why do gangstas laugh at nothing, right?” he asks, before giving a not-quite-exaggerated (and almost muted, if compared to say, a performer like Jadakiss) impression of laughter on a rap record—a punctuated, “Ha HA!” mouth open, tongue halfway out. “Like, did I miss a punch line?” he wonders, “What are you laughing at?” And in the bit he mimics the two laughs I have already discussed, the bravado laugh (“...[h]ow about when they blame it on you, a lot of rappers... they’ll just start the song and be like, ‘Ha ha ha, oh yeah, y’all ain’t ready for this one’”; “you ain’t gon make it, ha!”) and the sacrifice laugh (“Sometimes they’ll start the song and they’ll already be talking... ‘Ha ha! Oh no, not another one’”), along with a third laugh, where the rapper “just starts laughing for no reason.”<sup>93</sup> It’s this third laugh, the phatic, that I discuss last.

I have thus far in this essay created a pattern wherein the laugh I explicate apparently exists to corroborate self-evident formal elements of rap, in contrast to affording the laugh a unique

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<sup>91</sup> Georges Bataille and Annette Michelson, “Sacrifice,” *October* 36 (1986): 68.

<sup>92</sup> Bataille and Michelson, 69.

<sup>93</sup> By this point D’Elia has transitioned to an impression of Jay-Z, the phrase not being limited to the rapper’s collaborations, but when uttered at least bears the sense of communication behind-the-scenes that we’re not entirely privy to.

critical space all its own. I turn to the final laugh out of a list that is by no means exhaustive of laughter in hip hop. In fact, it's entirely possible that this last laugh, the one I find harder to grasp—whose ungraspable features are its primeval component—might upon further study reveal itself to be a container of many. An akin illegibility might not be enough to hold up a taxonomical category, especially since the audio range of these sounds vary the most of the three.

Unlike the bravado laugh and sacrificial laugh, whose textual examples can be derived from any given decade across hip hop's lifetime, phatic noise is located distinctly post-gangsta rap's prime, which might account for its as yet lack of attention. And this laugh does seem rather incompatible with a gangsta rap tradition concerned with lyric (and vitriol, violence) directed at an identifiable object (the police, a rival, the "you"). The ever-increasing accessibility of digital recording technology from early-2000s onward and popularity of harnessing autotune as more than an aid, for the deployment of particular audio aesthetic effects has I believe contributed to the post-2000s moment of this laugh as well.

Kanye West and Nicki Minaj are two figures one might understand to be emblematic of the post-2000s hip hop moment, who have also both crafted this laugh well-enough to be its most famed virtuosos.<sup>94</sup> West is a rare figure whose production credits and rapper persona not only incorporate various features on the comic spectrum commonly studied under the subject of hip hop humor, but over his career progressively index the more liminal defined space punctuated by the rapper's laugh as phatic noise. His discography showcases experiments in humor: from *College Dropout* and *Late Registration*, which both open with monologues from Chicago comedian DeRay Davis in the stuttering, syncopated impression of Bernie Mac as a college educator and feature numerous skits incorporating a variety of characters and voices; to *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*,

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<sup>94</sup> Which is not to say they are alone in its usage; Jadakiss, Meek Mill, Talib Kweli, all also use it well.

where Nicki Minaj, as her posh English alter ego Martha, opens the first song and begs that we “gather ‘round, children, zip it, listen!” and Chris Rock closes “Blame Game” with a monologue two minutes and thirty seconds long; to *Watch The Throne*, which includes audio clips from Will Ferrell and Jon Heder’s 2007 comedy *Blades of Glory*. Among these and the decidedly humorless (and less popularly received) *808s & Heartbreak*, West declares himself a jokester, as well as someone not to be joked with off his terms.<sup>95</sup> He revels and laughs in his own bravado such as in “Barry Bonds” or the aforementioned “Can’t Tell Me Nothing,” and in camaraderie with his “big brother” Jay-Z in “Last Call,” “Ni\*\*as in Paris” and all across their collaborative album.

In *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* West begins incorporating his distinct, if not now-iconic sound, best written here as “Heah?!” It is at once questioning and assertive; both for having enough of a short “u” sound to resemble the puzzled “huh,” before finishing off just short of a long “a” sound more appropriative of “ha,” and at its moment, so guttural and forceful as to counteract any idea that its speaker harbors doubt of anything at all. It’s an eruption and interruption, but not entirely unprecedented. Not just an auditory kin to a laugh, West’s “Heah?!” at times takes the logical laugh position where it emerges, such as in “H•A•M,” where it occupies that space of the would-be bravado laugh, though the sound itself undermines such decisive categorization. But mostly the sound points to its own illegibility, such as in “Ni\*\*as in Paris,” where it precedes the *Blades of Glory* interlude:

[Kanye / West]  
Doctors say I’m the illest,  
'Cause I'm suffering from realness.  
Got my niggas in Paris,  
And they going gorillas, heah?!

[Jimmy / Heder]  
I don't even know what that means.

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<sup>95</sup> In “Gorgeous” and “POWER” West fires back at Matt Stone and Trey Parker (“Choke a South Park writer with a fishstick”) and Saturday Night Live (“Fuck SNL and the whole cast”) for their mockery of him.

[Chazz / Ferrell]

No one knows what it means, but it's provocative.

Listening to this song during its radio hey-day, I interpreted the *Blades of Glory* clip as West's acknowledgement of his own poor imagery in likening his clique of partying black folks to "going gorillas"; that reading still holds, however a more precise location of the referent would seem to be in the sound that comes directly before, the "heah?!" The exchange between Heder's and Ferrell's characters well represents the futile attempt to represent the sound by anything other than its own presence.

West's "heah?!" is closer than any other laughs in his repertoire, those more identifiable as laughs, to what Jean-Luc Nancy identifies in Nietzsche's and Bataille's conceptions laughter as "the art of pure presentation."<sup>96</sup> And since "[p]resentation desires to be presented in its very disappearance," Nancy explains, laughter "is presence as it is present"<sup>97</sup> So unlike the comic and at-times tragicomic humor in his earliest albums, almost always interpreted as instrumental to the purposes of West's politics and social commentary, West's laugh resists inclusion in these projects, and rather rejects the very idea of any project outside the realm of art and aesthetics. Its sound escapes the Rap Genius', Urbandictionarys, and category of thought that drives them, the market for definitive lyrical analysis of rap lyrics whether to legitimize or decipher the genre.<sup>98</sup> It is a laugh that "simply comes."<sup>99</sup>

Much like West, Minaj came onto the mainstream rap scene at the scene of the comic. In addition to being the first voice heard on *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* in "Dark Fantasy," she

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<sup>96</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death," *MLN* 102 (1978): 725.

<sup>97</sup> Nancy, 728. And in the infamous words of West: "My presence is a present / Kiss my ass."

<sup>98</sup> Lyrics websites are not even in accord on what textual representation of the sound should look like, and interpretations vary from "huh?" to "huh!" to "heh," or otherwise left unwritten.

<sup>99</sup> Nancy, 734. I believe this has something to do with the appreciable decline of West's consideration as a "conscious" rapper by much of hip hop's listening community, the resounding nostalgia for "the old Kanye."

appears once more as the closing feature on “Monster,” which *Complex* magazine named the best rap verse of the last five years in 2013.<sup>100</sup> On “Monster” Minaj assumes another alter ego, this time Roman, Martha’s son and playmate of Eminem’s troublemaking alter ego, Slim Shady. The verse, a hit-and-run lyrical stream overflowing of bravado and bombast, promises what Minaj herself, as rapper, delivers. Though it’s without laughter, Minaj already engages with other kinds of phatic sounds, growls and guttural phrases with the memorable distorted scream at the end, followed by her shout, “I’m a muthafucking monster!”

Different from West’s phatic, which arrives as a brief eruption, Minaj’s sound more readily plays with duration and distortion, unafraid to let the disturbance linger to uncomfortable and in some cases, nearly unbearable lengths. This in many ways matches her hip hop persona, as well as explains an industry that remains unsure of how to digest her bombastic presence, lyrical quirks, and giddy laughter. Returning to the convergence of rapper bravado as generating a certain anguish, I wonder if part of the disconcertion (but also fascination) with Minaj is her self-exemption from the sacrificial customs of hip hop hypermasculinity, “the struggle for mastery which can end only in at least one death” as Helene Cixous describes the logic of masculine orality.<sup>101</sup> The convulsive, extravagant quality of her laughter should allude to its lack of control, but really only bolsters the overall extravagance of her presence—enhanced by her afro-futuristic style and palettes, but also the matter-of-fact assumption of her superfluity as a woman in hip hop.

Mumbling or not, the term attached the most contemporary genre of contemporary rap encases a far more interesting anxiety about the diffusion of black aesthetics. While some critics

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<sup>100</sup> Lauren Nostro, et. al., “The 25 Best Rap Verses of the Last 5 Years,” *Complex*, May 29, 2013, accessed March 18, 2015, <http://www.complex.com/music/2013/05/best-rap-verses-of-the-last-5-years>.

<sup>101</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1 (1976): 881.

such as Salamishah Tillet have anchored the return of the steady thrum of the protest song to hits like Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” or the Oscar-winning *Selma* theme “Glory,” the great volume of popular music continues to move to a different beat with more ambiguous purpose, *if* it can be said to have a purpose at all. I consider it no coincidence that our present era of mumble rap coincides with an invigorated adlib. From the Latin *ad libitum* for “at one’s pleasure,” the adlib, though restricted to the terminal beat at the end of line, is unmoored as a matter of content. Adlibs can sound like almost anything, sometimes a word but more often a sound effect made with tongue, lungs, and/or diaphragm. And in terms of the adlib, nobody surfs the zeitgeist like Migos. The Atlanta-based trio have made frequent adlibs an inseparable component of their triplet-heavy flow. While you can find numerous examples of triplets throughout rap going back to the 80s, Migos’ combination of cadence and adlib is timely, marked, and easily duplicated. In collaboration with social media, which is now integral to understanding anything about contemporary popular music, the contemporary rap flow takes on all the qualities of a meme in the digital sense.

Taking these sounds seriously—but not too seriously—illuminates not only the evolution of the most popular artform in American culture today, but a black aesthetic that dives headfirst into the disorganized fray of expressing blackness in the contemporary. Bodily noise, collaborating with sound and recording technologies, is a prime case for what Alexander Weheliye calls “sonic Afro-modernity,” enabling “condition[s] of (im)possibility for… the formation of (black) subjectivities.” Like Ralph Ellison’s extravagant or “blues-toned laughter,” bodily noise is far from exhibiting anything so specific or neoliberal as happiness, but can make for familial instances and is attuned to its moment in a way that makes way for more such moments.

In her first canonical study on rap music, Tricia Rose describes a practice of rap production invested in pushing sounds “in the red.” Red, meaning, literally, the upper reaches on a sound meter, a place that exhausts the limits of reproduction technology, a place where distortion—or

manipulation, rather—is inevitable. Pushing sounds “in the red,” while it involves loudness as a means, however, does not necessarily mean the final product will be loud. The end result is more likely to be the rumble or boom of a bass, a sound felt as much as heard. Other and especially feminist analyses of hip hop have also used volume and frequency to discuss sonic impressions. Brittany Cooper theorizes “crunk” as an aesthetic at the apotheosis of the turn up. “Crunk feminism,” she describes, “puts the bass in your voice and the boom in your system,” it “is feminism all the way turnt up... off the charts.” Crunk feminism, a name and practice naturally derived out of the South’s ATL sounds, extends into a lived practice that joins with other feminist and womanist recuperations of amplified presence. The bass, the boom, the turn up—even when loud—also means to groove—in Katherine McKittrick’s terms—to inhabit a sonic wave in this case, entering and receding from the upper and lower limits of perception. This is a communal moment predicated on living headfirst “in/*to* the red.”

What, I ask, would it mean to combine a sonic amplitude “in(to) the red” with temporal ethics diving into blue? Time, as described by John Murillo III, is fundamentally a “force and a problem for thought in relation to Blackness” for blackness itself is “untimely.” The mechanics of time particularly through the metric under the name “duration” forcefully attaches black life/death to linearity, a chronology, that sees black subjectivity made flesh again and again and again. To understand “the Black position in its untimeliness,” necessitates that our attention to black femme sounds in space not only considers distortion in terms of decibel, but a “distortion zone” of (un)time’s making. If attuning to “red” understands black sound as producing bodily reverberations beyond the reach of standard senses, attuning to “blue” means reading these sounds also as produced out of an inherited “warped” relation these bodies have to gravity and time.

What is the result of a crunk that “makes you say it with your chest” that is, “indexes a fundamental relationship to one’s body and one’s embodiment” (Cooper) and also “recode[s]

normative time” (McKittrick)? Bodily noise may be read as pleasure but is also *something else*—it amplifies and torques. It is Nicki Minaj’s veritable grab bag of trills, tongue rolls, fried vowels, grunts, growls, giggles, hiccups, and cackles, the fun femme arsenal necessitated amidst the multiple ongoing narratives that cut across her bombastic frame. The phatic on Nicki’s terms makes duration its menace. She refuses to let go. Nicki Minaj laughs in the face of finitude. On 2014’s “Anaconda,” her laugh is convulsive, extravagant. It fluctuates and aches—there’s a moment there that feels like vocal fry taken to the nth level and it almost hurts—it does all this though its space in “real time” is quite brief. The laugh is frictional, indicative of a shared bloody bubblegum-matted ultra femme world where the bass is an ebullient body. A black world. Infinitely vertiginous, forevermore.

*Coda*  
*Held*

She sings the blues but she's no star. There's no records on her person, no name in lights, not even a proper stage. Gayl Jones goes easy on the scenery, so we have to imagine the little better than two-bit club called Happy's Café that memory can't recall "anybody named Happy that owned it" and its stage "more like a reserved space in the floor, with a piano."<sup>1</sup> Stage directions, then, are euphemisms: "off the stage" as in "he went and tried to grab me *off the stage*," or, "up to the stage," as in "I saw people's eyes following me like they thought I was going *up to the stage* at first, and when they discovered I wasn't they just kept watching me."<sup>2</sup> The real theater comes from the people. The customers, only men it seems, who are quick with a shout or lewd whisper, who know just how far they can go to remain on the right side of the threshold—the ones who don't stand sentinel in the shadows and watch "the back way."<sup>3</sup> The owner acts little better, professional until he isn't, swerving across the dimly illuminated line between protective and possessive (much like a certain ex-husband). She—Ursa—is from Bracktown, the small community-town where everybody lives in everybody's business, but stays near her place of work in "the city"—and not "one of them big cities up North" but somewhere much sleepier, a busier town caught, much like Kentucky itself, between country values and Northern disregard.<sup>4</sup> Ursa sings and writes, too: songs about trains crushed in infinitely long tunnels, about a "bird woman" with "deep wells" for eyes to takes a man on an infinitely long odyssey. She also plays the hits, "Ella Fitzgerald's songs" and the like, and she soon

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<sup>1</sup> Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 2, 151.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, 150, 157 (emphasis mine). Or,

I walked by one of the tables *on my way to the stage*.

"I wont you to put me in the alley tonight, sister," one of the men said. He was drunk.

"Will do."

"Next best thang to the blues is a good screw." (Jones, 153; emphasis mine)

<sup>3</sup> Jones, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, 140, 166.

too—like Delia Reese, like “Ella,” like “Lady Billie”—becomes one of his women. Then again, she’s always been one of *his* women.

Back to the 1970s. This dissertation began with Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and ends with Jones’ *Corregidora*, another ’70s novel whose protagonist clings to the frequent temporal interruptions that give them life. *Corregidora*, set between the mid-to-late 1940s and 1960s, follows Ursula, a blues singer who shares the titular surname with the Portuguese slave trader who was the master and pimp to her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother and biological father to (at least) these latter two generations of women. The novel begins with a fall. In April 1948, Ursula’s husband is kicked out of Happy’s Café and waits out back for Ursula to finish her set. He surprises her; they argue; she “fell” down the stairs.<sup>5</sup> The (maybe) accident causes a miscarriage as well as the medical need for a hysterectomy. The procedure thus excises Ursula from the Corregidora women’s maternal mandate to “make generations.”<sup>6</sup> Ursula has known this mandate since the age of five, known that future generations are as good as witnesses; birthing is as good as “leaving evidence” of the monstrous intimacies that make their line—their lives—possible.<sup>7</sup>

*Corregidora* is not a science fiction novel and Ursula’s transhistorical disturbances do not involve time travel. Instead, the past flows from italicized interludes that rehearse the past through the voices of Corregidora(‘s) women. It is testimony—explicit, horror-filled testimony. The storyteller seldom announces herself and who tells what is hard to parse amid a shared history of abuse (and a shared abuser). Ursula, the only woman whom Corregidora neither fathered nor touched, knows these stories well and returns to them often, shares them with her husbands by way of a

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<sup>5</sup> Jones, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Christina Sharpe puts forth “something like a Corregidora complex” involving “the transgenerational racial hatred, sexual violence, and incestuous violation” constitutive of all relationships in the New World (*Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2010], 29, 56).

personal history. She doesn't know everything, but can give testimony; she is evidence, but the evidence now will die with her.

Ursa shares much in common in the women of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, by way of the tired women who struggle to keep up with the times, whose symbolic leakage follows from their dripping bodies—mucus and blood; shit and semen. That is to say she also shares vernacular with the residents of Toni Morrison's Lorain, Ohio in *The Bluest Eye*. Conversation in *Corregidora* begins and ends with misunderstanding and nobody bothers to follow up; conversation does not go anywhere unless returning to the past—an aphasia that is vertical this time, “keep it pushing” with a diachronic, instead of synchronic, approach. Ursa's surgical procedure induces nausea in more ways than one: her perceived emptiness—“No seeds”—sucks at her innards like a black hole; her voice vibrates differently.<sup>8</sup> “I'd still be moved,” Cat reassures Ursa. “Maybe even moved more, because it sounds like you been through something.”<sup>9</sup>

“Black Vertigo: Attunement, Aphasia, Nausea, and Bodily Noise, 1970 to the Present” has argued that vertiginous feeling is a black feeling and blackness expresses vertigo. I end with *Corregidora* to reiterate the ambivalence of vertigo, whose affects are not always all that revelatory, nor offer repair, cure, or transcendence in any sustained sense. *Corregidora* ends neither in triumph nor in struggle nor in balance, which for Ursa would look something like (re)birth—a physically forestalled possibility. She reunites with her ex-husband Mutt twenty-two years later in a different room of their former homestead, the Drake Hotel. They are them but different and the sex act is different. What she realizes then, centered between his knees, only muddles things further. “It was

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<sup>8</sup> Jones, *Corregidora*, 42.

<sup>9</sup> Jones, 41.

like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora.”<sup>10</sup>

She thinks some questions, but he comes before an answer does.

We could feel *for* Ursula: pity, shame, disappointment, frustration. Or we can feel *with* her, the forty-seven-year-old woman who experiences an uneven return. She is not better. She is not healed. She is not safe. She is not, in this moment, loved. She is “held”: “held... tight.”

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<sup>10</sup> Jones, 176.

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