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Dedication

For Dwane Rhone

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## Introduction

This dissertation offers an account of African American literary production since the mid-twentieth century. It asks how black American writers have contended with, borrowed from, mimicked, and disavowed disciplinary approaches to racial knowledge production and institutional commitments to the management of racial difference from the Cold War onward. By naming these latter two imperatives this way, I aim to specify distinctive phenomena that are often grouped within the long career of “racial liberalism,” a regime of official anti-racism understood by scholars such as Jodi Melamed, Rod Ferguson, Nikhil Pal Singh, and Andy Hines to perpetuate capital accumulation and dispossession as people of color are absorbed into labor forces, university departments, state offices, and arts industries. This “institutional-intellectual complex of midcentury race-relations philanthropy and university-based social sciences,” as Melamed has termed it, has served as “the key institutional base of racial liberalism.”<sup>1</sup>

The work of this institutional regime is made particularly visible in landmark state dossiers that have operationalized social-scientific knowledge production in the service of narrating American racial inequality on non-redistributive terms. The first and most formative for this dissertation is Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), which has remained a watershed document in recent Cold War scholarship. Rasberry and Sing have stressed *An American Dilemma*’s ideological achievements, illuminating its role in linking the reorientation of state power to the matter of racial inequality in the context of postwar decolonization. As Rasberry has it in *Race and the Totalitarian Century* (2016), “The onset of the Cold War witnessed the contemporaneous rise of the Third World and the

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<sup>1</sup>Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 11.

nonalignment movement, with onlookers from Asia and Africa paying close attention to discrimination against black Americans while adjudicating competing appeals from the communist and democratic spheres.”<sup>2</sup> And according to Singh, “[W]hat made *An American Dilemma* such an influential document was its presentation of ‘The Negro problem’ as the symbolic pivot on which future claims to US global mission [sic] rested.” “The very act of making race relations an object of study,” Singh claims, “was offered as a vindication of the thesis that the United States, despite its failings, was equipped to mediate intranational and supranational claims for social justice and civility.”<sup>3</sup> As important as these discursive consequences, though, was the cross-coordination of institutional power that positioned *An American Dilemma* to carry out its ideological work. For as Melamed has argued, it required a transfer of academic labor and resources from—and indeed, nothing short of a full-scale replacement of—W.E.B. Du Bois’ prospective *Encyclopedia of the Negro*:

After an initial planning period, during which Du Bois gathered endorsements from some eighty scholars on three continents, the Rockefeller Foundation, the General Education Board, and the Carnegie Corporation declined to go further, with Du Bois anyway. Instead, the Carnegie Corporation recognizing the importance and the potential influence of such a comprehensive study, appropriated much of Du Bois’s research and design and many members of his projected team of scholars and put them under the direction of Myrdal. With this, philanthropy threw its weight behind a broad reorganization of racial thinking, which the contrast between Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* and Du Bois’s projected *Encyclopedia of the Negro* illuminates...A sociological focus on psychological factors as the basis for social unevennesses substitutes for Du Bois’s account of race as a material force and historical agent of Western society. And finally, considering race as an American issue only, rather than studying racial conditions in Africa, the West Indies, and the United States as Du Bois planned to do, makes it possible to disconnect US history from global histories of white

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<sup>2</sup> Vaughn Rasberry, *Race and the Totalitarian Century: Geopolitics in the African American Literary Imagination*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2016), 64.

<sup>3</sup> Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), 148.

supremacy, preparing the way for the nationalist antiracism that grounded post-World War II American expansionism.<sup>4</sup>

I want to mark this moment as one example of the degree to which cooperate, governmental, and knowledge-making institutions at mid-century took immense interest in how race was represented and how racial knowledge was produced; and to emphasize that the coordination of these interests did in fact have material consequences for African American writers and cultural workers. And yet, I also want to acknowledge the limits of how determinant these institutional conditions were for African American writers in the late twentieth century, especially those I've chosen as the subject of this dissertation. Not all African American writers who interfaced with liberal literary, state, and academic institutions experienced them as antagonist entities. As I'll show in chapter one, we'd be hard-pressed to argue that James Baldwin circulated his early essays through publications such as *Commentary* and *Partisan Review* against his will; or that he feigned his dismay at Du Bois's telegram to the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists, an incident I take up in my discussion of Baldwin's 1956 essay "Of Princes and Powers." And similarly, chapter two will show that whereas Ernest Gaines countered the *Moynihan Report's* claims about the pathologies black Americans inherited from the enslaved by mimicking Federal Writers' Projects archives in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane*, Toni Morrison dispenses with these social scientific logics altogether in her 1987 novel *Beloved*. If *Disciplinary Aesthetics* appears sprawling in the construction of its archives, it is in large part because the structure and composition of the institutions through which racial liberalism have taken material shape has remained dynamic. For example, whereas universities, publishers, and philanthropic organizations adopted the state's posture toward the management of racial difference at the start

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<sup>4</sup> Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 74.



of the Cold War, universities' adoption of ethnic and women's studies departments—alongside myriad other diversity and inclusion measures—came to instruct the state's responses to the demands of leftist movements during the 1970s.

Published in 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* factors into my dissertation as the other state document that textured the terrain for African American literary production for writers of slave narrative fiction and its adjacent literatures in the post-civil rights period. As Rod Ferguson understands it, the *Moynihan Report* has been especially crucial to establishing Black Americans' capitulation to respectability norms along the lines of sexual orientation, sexual reproduction, and gender performance as a condition of their incorporation into corporate, civic, and university cultures. Ferguson understands the *Report* to have authorized a "discourse about black matriarchy" that "justified and promoted the regulatory practices of the state and the exploitative practices of global capital as the US nation-state began to absorb women of color labor from the United States and the third world as part of capital's new regimes of exploitation."<sup>5</sup> With some hesitance about the stability and coherence of "global capital" as a surefire way of figuring the coterie of institutions Ferguson has in mind, I do take his conception of interdisciplinary formations in the post-civil rights years as *disciplinary*, administrative responses to the demands of disparate rights groups seriously. And still, I depart from Ferguson's account of these formations by emphasizing the uneven ways in which black writers interfaced with newly established Black Studies departments—such as in August Wilson's case—and the new modes of literary and historical representation Black Feminist Criticism afforded figures such as Hortense Spillers and Toni Morrison. As I

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<sup>5</sup> Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward A Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 111.

demonstrate in chapter three, Black Studies students and faculty played a major part in supplying Black Arts Movement theater houses—which served as the movement’s core institutional infrastructure—with funds and other resources that extended their short lifespans and supplied figures like Wilson with theatrical experience they might not have otherwise secured, not to mention the multidisciplinary approaches to black vernacular cultures—more specifically, the blues—that Wilson claimed as the aesthetic anchor of his drama. But as I will show in chapter three, Wilson’s eventual reliance on the Yale Repertory Theater and the National Playwright’s Conference at the Eugene O’Neil Center thoroughly complicates critical conceptions of the university as an obstacle to black world-building.

What carries across the work of the writers in this study—James Baldwin, Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, August Wilson, Percival Everett—is a concern with the conscription of African American writing to *use* in general; to archiving racial difference and producing knowledge about in particular. What James Baldwin’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel” shares with the protagonist in Percival Everett’s *Erasure* (2001), for instance, is that both grapple with the expectation that African American writing will produce racial knowledge of some kind. But whereas Baldwin’s objective is to optimize literary representations of race in a way that will be advantageous to the national welfare—this is why he wants to disentangle black writing from sociological representation—Everett’s *Monk* takes issue with how the literary market rewards writers who capitulate to this epistemological expectation, holding fast to aesthetic theories that privilege the potential for literary objects to answer only to their own internal logics. This approach to late twentieth-century African American literary production builds on those taken by literary historians Kenneth Warren and Mark McGurl, in the eyes of whom minority difference—and racial identity in particular—have remained dominant preoccupations for

establishment writers in the last few decades. During Reconstruction and through the first half of the twentieth century—as Warren argues in *What Was African American Literature* (2011)—African American writers did in fact maintain a clear objective for their writing: the dismantling of state-sanctioned Jim Crow regimes. In their absence, African American writers in the late twentieth century have appealed to racial collectivity in ways that often misconstrue the nature of contemporary economic inequality as continuous with these older racial orders. McGurl’s work demonstrates the degree to which the postwar university has contributed to this phenomenon. Situated in rapidly diversifying universities in the postwar period, creative writing programs not only primed writers like Gaines and Morrison to channel racial collectivity into singular literary voices, but also to anticipate the ways that their novels might be deployed toward pedagogical ends. *Disciplinary Aesthetics* contributes to this literary history first by excavating the Cold War imperatives through which African American literary production became a primary vehicle for aestheticizing the state’s aims in the language of black particularity; and second, by constellating the university’s uptake of minority difference in a broader ecology of institutional commitments to managing racial difference via literary representation and myriad other mechanisms.

In chapter one I discuss the circulation of James Baldwin’s early essays among the New York intellectual magazines in connection with his disavowal of the protest novel and its embeddedness in sociological discourses and methodologies. Although magazine editors, publishing executives, and members of Congress shared the assumption that reviving American culture would be a major step toward defeating the Soviets, it was the State that saw racial representation as an untapped resource for this revival. I show in this chapter that Baldwin’s early essays speak to these ideological stakes by bringing the magazines’ commitments to cultural distinction together with the state’s ambition to shore up its claims to global sovereignty.

My second chapter situates slave narrative fiction in a slavery studies field that was dominated by social-scientific empiricism in the 1970s before black feminist thinkers introduced new forms of historical and literary representation to it in the 1980s. I discuss Ernest Gaines's use of Federal Writers' Project interviews with former slaves in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) to demonstrate the degree to which early writers of slave narrative fiction mimicked many of the methodological conceits used to study slavery in the social sciences. I also show that whereas writers such as Gaines, Alex Haley, and Angela Davis contested the anthropological and sociological claims about black cultural pathology that surfaced in *The Moynihan Report*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) departs from this documentary conceit altogether in order to imagine the aspects of black female subjectivity that the social sciences had disallowed. I take this reorientation to the archive at work in Morrison's novel to be representative of a black feminist intervention in the field of slavery studies, showing how the burgeoning discipline of Black Feminist Criticism moved slavery studies past the discourses of black pathology and national teleology that had been driven by the social sciences in prior decades.

Chapter three takes up the production history of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), the first play of August Wilson's to be accepted by the National Playwright's Conference, and the first he staged at Yale Repertory Theater and on Broadway. Here, I show how the play distills Black Arts Movement polemics over whether the blues could maintain its utility as a figure for black vernacular performance after the genre's commercial revival by white consumers, festival promoters, and music executives. My central claim in this chapter is that *Ma Rainey* illuminates Wilson's conflicting commitments to black institutional autonomy on the one hand, and the aesthetic potential that lied outside black theater institutions on the other. I conclude the chapter

by making sense of how Wilson negotiates these conflicts in “The Ground on Which I Stand,” his address to the Theater Communications Group at Princeton University in 1996.

I conclude by discussing the fictions of aesthetic autonomy in *Erasure*, Percival Everett’s 2001 novel. In this final chapter, I claim that Everett satirizes the responses of writers such as Phillip

Roth, David Foster Wallace, and Jonathan Franzen to what Madhu Dubey has termed “the postmodern politics of difference” at the turn of the century. I pay special attention to the novel’s haunting specter of the televisual, showing how it reproduces the racial epistemologies imposed on African American literary production throughout the late twentieth century. But ultimately, I argue that Everett privileges the aesthetic judgment of black women lay readers by ironizing the cultivation of their literary tastes by day-time TV.

## Representation Matters: James Baldwin and the Origins of High Cultural Pluralism

In the essays he published before 1960, James Baldwin leverages the literary in order to flesh out problems of race, culture, and country. His first string of public writings, circulated by magazines like *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*, included a short story,<sup>1</sup> a review essay,<sup>2</sup> and what many still hold as his most famous piece of literary criticism, “Everybody’s Protest Novel”.<sup>3</sup> In this last, Baldwin takes issue with the American protest tradition and its air of sentimentality, denouncing Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and lambasting Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940). For Baldwin, it was these two texts that had embodied the pathos of protest fiction and bastardized the “image of the Negro.”<sup>4</sup> Baldwin would return to both Stowe and Wright in several subsequent essays, nesting his meditations on US race relations in tirades against the force of sentimentality in American letters.

Baldwin registers many of his qualms with *Native Son* as novelistic shortcomings with significant social consequences. He identifies several aspects of epistemic superficiality that not only add up to a poorly written novel but also contribute to a generic body of literature—the protest novel—that dehumanizes “the Negro,” rendering him cultureless and without personhood. In many instances, it even becomes difficult to discern whether Baldwin is taking issue with an aspect of the novel’s literary deficiency, its failure to adequately represent the

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1 “Previous Condition” in *Commentary*, 1948.

2 “The Image of the Negro” in *Commentary*, 1948.

3 Reprinted in *Partisan Review* from *Zero*, 1949.

4 From the titular review essay Baldwin wrote for *Commentary* in April 1948, “The Image of the Negro.” Discussing Millen Brand’s *Albert Sears* (1947); Sinclair Lewis’ *Kingsblood Royal* (1947); Peter Abraham’s *The Path of Thunder* (1948); Will Thomas’ *God is for White Folks* (1947); and Cid Ricketts Sumner’s *Quality* (1946), Baldwin issues his first critique of the protest novel by emphasizing its over-standardization of raced experience. See Adrienne Brown’s brief discussion of it in “Appraisal Narratives: Reading Race on the Midcentury Block” (*American Quarterly* 70, no.2, June 2018).

social reality, or both problems at the same time. But what is at least somewhat clear is Baldwin's hostility toward the representation of African American sociality through sociological study. Baldwin's general orientation toward the status and stakes of literary production is that it should plumb the social and psychological depths beneath the sociological surface. His most clear complaint about Wright's novel is that it fails to penetrate this upper, outer layer of sociological knowledge.

Much of how and why Bigger Thomas—the protagonist of Wright's novel—is of such interest to Baldwin has to do with the assumed dynamics of metonymic representation through which Bigger becomes an avatar for “the Negro.” Baldwin seems to conceive of an isometric relation between the lack of characterological depth that the novel affords and widespread cultural assumptions about the Negro's lack of humanity. In “Many Thousands Gone” (1951), the essay where he fleshes out his critique of Wright even further, Baldwin finds that “though we follow [Bigger] step by step from the tenement room to the death cell, we know as little about him when his journey is ended as we did when it began; and, what is even more remarkable, we know almost as little about the social dynamic which we are to believe created him.”<sup>5</sup> He then follows this observation by linking up the novel's narratological limitedness to the larger social consequences for which the novel and its genre are responsible:

We are limited to Bigger's view of the problem, part of a deliberate plan which might not have been disastrous if we were not also limited to Bigger's perceptions. What this means for the novel is that a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life. What the novel reflects—and at no point interprets—is the isolation of the Negro within his own group and the resulting fury of impatient scorn. It is this which creates its climate of anarchy and

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<sup>5</sup> James Baldwin, “So Many Thousands Gone,” in *Notes of a Native Son*, ed. Sol Stein (New York: Beacon Press, 1955), 72.

unmotivated and unapprehended disaster; and it is this climate, common to most Negro protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in Negro life exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse, such as may, for example, sustain the Jew even after he has left his father's house.<sup>6</sup>

The drastic leaps of scale that Baldwin takes here raise a number of questions about the nature of his critical commitments and rationale: In what way is the “necessariness” of the intra-racial relationships missing from the novel germane to its aesthetic integrity? How tenable is the chain of causality by which Baldwin links the novel’s incomplete picture of *real* African American sociality to the erasure of African American folklife from public consciousness? We might also stop here and ask who Baldwin calls upon in speaking on behalf of “us all.” How can he include himself in this number while claiming a knowledge of that which he and others have been led to overlook?

What can be said definitively about Baldwin’s charge is that he fixates on Wright’s failure to penetrate surface reality—to move past reflection of reality to its interpretation—towards the excavation of the social and cultural processes concealed in its depths. This is a failure of representation that also amounts to an epistemic failure, insofar as the lack of narratological attention to the cultural life of *Native Son*’s black characters necessarily amounts to an inadequate, because superficial, representation of African American cultural life. Baldwin doesn’t disagree with the fact of “the isolation of the Negro within his own group,” nor that of the “resulting fury of impatient scorn.” The problem is that Wright’s novel goes no further than reflecting these facts, and the very significant consequence—attributable to the representational failure of the protest novel at large—is that it presents an image of “the Negro” lacking in depth and dimensionality.

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<sup>6</sup> Baldwin, “So Many Thousands Gone,” 72-73.



It's no secret that sounding off on protest literature's surface-level depictions of racial difference was standard practice for James Baldwin in his early review essays. For some, his attacks on *Native Son* were part of a plan to supplant Wright in his role as the preeminent African American author of the postwar period. In light of Wright's relationship to Baldwin as both a mentor and recommender for fellowship funding, the fallout between the two has preoccupied several different accounts of Baldwin's rise to literary stardom due to its scandal alone.<sup>7</sup> Yet as Geraldine Murphy, Vaughn Rasberry, and Doug Field have pointed out, Baldwin's reviews of Wright, Chester Himes, and other protest novelists help us to see the indebtedness of his early career to the postwar anti-Stalinism and Cold War liberalism characteristic of the magazines that circulated his earliest work. According to Field, the ostensibly anti-Stalinist concerns over mass culture and ideology at work in Baldwin's reviews are something of a starting point for a non-fictional oeuvre that deals more narrowly with racial identity the longer Baldwin remains in Paris after in 1948.<sup>8</sup> It's this internationalist, subversive Baldwin that Nadia Ellis and the late Cheryl Wall have situated in their archives of black diasporic exchange and the black American essay tradition respectively, with Ellis highlighting the commonplace of nationalistic appeals to particularity during the mid-century decolonization period and Wall honing in on the "strategic

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7 See Alice Mikal Craven's essay, "Responding to Richard Wright," collected in *James Baldwin in Context* (2019), and Laurence P. Jackson on the "Oedipal terms" (289) of Baldwin and Wright's "battle" in *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960*. Also Karsten Junker's *Frames of Friction: Black Genealogies, White Hegemony, and the Essay as Critical Intervention*, in which Junker explains Baldwin's several returns to Wright's novel this way: "the symbolic figuration of *Native Son* provided an opportunity for Baldwin to establish for himself a central position in public discussions on questions of racist and classist practices of differentiation. The trope helped him to claim prominence as a writer and public intellectual on national scale and reconcile notions of blackness and US American citizenship" (104).

8 Douglass Field, "James Baldwin's Life on the Left: A Portrait of the Artist as a New York Intellectual," *English Literary History* 78, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 857.

exceptionalism” Baldwin deployed from abroad in order to “advance the scrupulously visible interest of African Americans.”<sup>9</sup>

Different from these prevailing critical tendencies to emphasize the significance of expatriation and anti-racist subversion in Baldwin’s essays, I claim in this chapter that the ones he published before 1960 were centrally connected to the representational paradigms that were taking shape in the US at the start of the Cold War. One of these was the anti-Stalinist reorientation of the New York intellectual magazines that had served as organs of the Communist Party during the 1930s. These publications broke from the Party’s commitment to social realist writing before the Cold War began and then invoked early American modernists in their campaigns against Soviet-inspired social realism following the Moscow trials. Another was the explosion of the state’s simultaneous and interconnected interests in managing the representation of American racial inequality and sponsoring what its officials thought of as “modernist” art forms. As Penny Von Eschen, Nikhil Pal Singh, Vaughn Raspberry, and Jodi Melamed have shown, American state power came under tremendous pressure to rationalize its geopolitical legitimacy after the Soviets began circulating evidence of Jim Crow totalitarianism throughout the Third World. In response, the State Department made musical and theatrical performances by black Americans central to its projected commitments to racial inclusivity and to the sponsorship of American cultural innovation at large. It also attempted to limit the possibilities for intellectual exchange between black American leftists and their pan-Africanist peers as former colonies gained independence across the eastern hemisphere in the 1950s. Finally, and what benefitted Baldwin most, was publishers’ new willingness to publish essay

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<sup>9</sup> Cheryl Wall, *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: The Art of the African American Essay* (Durham: UNC Press 2018), 120.

collections by contemporary writers and commit to publishing new titles in paperback. The shaping influences on Baldwin's aesthetic and ideological commitments come through mightily in the correspondences, American writers' residencies, and promotional ventures that these publication processes entailed. Of particular interest here are Baldwin's exchanges with Sol Stein, the editor who virtually pioneered the paperback revolution among New York's major publishers and an executive editor for the American Committee for Cultural Freedom<sup>10</sup>. As I will show, they help us make sense of the commitments that cohere across Baldwin's critical reviews, cultural criticism, and autobiographical writing up until 1960, all of which are spanned in the collections *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) (which Stein edited) and *Nobody Knows my Name* (1961).

These developments comprise the stakes of Baldwin's pre-1960 essays, aligning his non-fiction with the institutional uptake and management of racial difference during this period. Relaying proto-modernist commitments to distinction, the state's preoccupations with racial representation, and the Cold War implications of decolonization, Baldwin's generically diverse meditations on African American particularity combine an eclectic yet cohesive range of aesthetic and ideological commitments, which we should read against the convergence of institutional interests that they point up. By constellating the relationship Baldwin maintained to what I want to think of as a nexus of state and cultural power up until 1960, I offer an alternative point of departure to those recently taken by many literary historians in their accounts of African American letters and other minority literatures since mid-century.

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<sup>10</sup> As Christopher Winks explains in "Into the Heart of the Great Wilderness: Understanding Baldwin's Quarrel with Négritude," (*CUNY Academic Works* (2013), 605), this was a CIA backed commission that also had branches stationed across Europe. It funded disparate publications and other art projects it saw as in service of liberty, etc.

For scholars such as Kenneth Warren, Madhu Dubey, and Stephen Douglass, the dismantling of Jim Crow segregation has been a pivotal periodization metric. As Warren has argued in *What Was African American Literature* (2011), it was during the Jim Crow period that African American writers operated from the assumption that their work would be unanimously received and interpreted as a collective attempt to represent the interests of the race. Corroborating Warren's claim that African American literature becomes an untenable project to distinguish after the end of Jim Crow, Madhu Dubey has termed the pre-civil rights nostalgia that surfaced in black American fiction in the 1970s as "Black literary postmodernism," and Christopher Douglass, in offering *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (2011), has supplemented Warren's categorization of contemporary minority writing as "literature of identity."<sup>11</sup> But different from the literary break that Warren and others attribute to the end of state-sanctioned Jim Crow regimes, Douglass gives a long view of the literary struggle over cultural assimilation and the inevitability of black cultural erasure. Beginning with Zora Neale Hurston's affiliations with anthropological efforts to preserve minority cultures, and then proceeding to Richard Wright's investment in sociological theories of black cultural pathology, Douglass conceives of a "unified field" of minority writing anchored in African American writers' anxieties over racial integration. Whereas the mid-century moment marks the sociological reorientation of African American literary production, Douglass explains, the late 1960s and 1970s saw a return to Hurston's work among writers such as Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Ishmael Reed. Douglass attributes the cultural nationalism that came to a head in the

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<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011), 107. Warren offers this category for the contemporary writing that others are wont to term "African American literature."

post-civil rights period to this Hurston revival and its renewal of her commitment to preserving cultural identities.

Following a similar timeline, Mark McGurl has traced the increasing purchase that minority subjectivity came to have on American literary production to the development of creative writing programs during the postwar period. For McGurl, the literary phenomenon he terms “high cultural pluralism” is both the result of the rapid diversification of American universities from the late 1940s onward and a kind of culmination of the modernist tradition’s “layering of positively marked differences,” which have historically arisen out of disdain for the mass market, genre fiction, and the perceived homogenization of American culture. He identifies testimony/autopoiesis; individuation in tension with group membership; and politically fraught investments in point of view as some of high cultural pluralism’s most common constitutive elements. Taking Flannery O’Connell, Phillip Roth, Sandra Cisneros, and Toni Morrison as representative examples (among many others), McGurl emphasizes a continuity between southern regionalism, ethnic pluralism, and other literary discourses on difference, all of which proliferated upon contact with universities’ seemingly inherent “logic of expansion and differentiation.” But like many other accounts of how the postwar university became a “difference engine,”<sup>12</sup> many of which have taken up the ways that the university came to instruct state and corporate institutions in their protocols for managing minority difference, McGurl minimizes the role that extra-academic literary institutions played in (re-)establishing

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<sup>12</sup> See Walter Benn Michael’s *The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Hate Inequality* (2006); Rod Ferguson’s *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (2012); Jodi Melamed’s *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence and the New Racial Capitalism* (2012) to see the wide range of stances taken in this spectrum of scholarship. I engage with these a bit more directly at the end of this chapter and dissertation’s introduction.

these protocols at mid-century. He relies heavily on the democratization of the American university for his explanation of where, how, and why certain commitments to difference came into vogue, missing many of the surrounding historical contingencies that should cause us to see the rise of high cultural pluralism at mid-century as significantly less inevitable than he suggests.

Given Baldwin's status as a minority writer who never attended university, let alone any creative writing programs, one might reasonably concede that his career falls outside the purview of the literary phenomenon that McGurl maps. But if we take seriously the ways that many of the textual features that McGurl outlines surface across the essays Baldwin wrote before 1960, we stand to bring many understudied aspects of high cultural pluralism's pre-institutional life into focus. It is significant, for example, that many of Baldwin's claims about African American particularity came out of critical essays about the "image of the Negro" in protest fiction and in Hollywood, which would seem to both echo McGurl's claims about the continuity of modernism's hostility to mass culture at the same time that it evidences the capacity for certain aspects of high cultural pluralism to surface in literary forms outside the novel. That Baldwin cultivated and sustained a self-consciously writerly persona that doubled as a representatively raced voice should also demand our attention, if only because this feat illuminates just how crucial non-academic institutions were to concretizing the representational commitments whose mid-century regeneration McGurl credits mainly to postwar creative programs. Ultimately at stake for me in this chapter is the very contingent nature of the institutional reorientations and aesthetic shifts that McGurl and others have framed within more or less circumspect narratives of institutional democratization in the US

I begin by taking up excerpts from *Partisan Review*, a primary literary organ of the American Communist Party until its anti-Stalinist and anti-communist evolutions in the late

1930s and 1940s. Here, I will show that the vigor of Baldwin's polemical literary and cultural criticism was a product of the aesthetic debates hashed out among the editors of *Partisan Review* and other literary organs of the American Communist Party, which ultimately resulted in a mid-century American modernist revival as well as the demise of social realism in elite literary circles. Then, in order to demonstrate American state power's investment in the production of new American art forms, I will briefly discuss the ways that invocations of modernism gained traction among state institutions, wherein cultural innovation and racial representation became crucial to establishing the legitimacy of American democratic ideals. Finally, in returning to Baldwin's essays in literary and cultural criticism, I will explain how Baldwin bridged the new modernist paradigm to the international stakes of racial representation, which laid the groundwork for the several different iterations of high cultural pluralism that would flourish throughout the rest of the century.

### ***Partisan Review and the State of American Writing***

In August 1948 *Partisan Review* released volume fifteen, number eight. For this issue, *Partisan's* editors solicited responses from Leslie Fiedler, Wallace Stephens, Lionel Trilling, and a host of other accomplished poets, writers, and critics to "The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions." Attempting to register a slew of sea changes in American literature and criticism, the seven questions asked respondents to comment on "the literary atmosphere of this decade" in comparison to "that of the thirties" (question 1); "the meaning of the literary revivals (James, Forster, Fitzgerald, etc.) that have taken place of late" (question 3); "the general opinion that, unlike the twenties, this is not a period of experiment in language and form," and whether "present writing base[s] itself on the earlier experimentation" (question 4); and "the effect of American writing on the growing tension between Soviet Communism and the democratic

countries” (question 7). The limited range of responses, much like the questions themselves, suggest something of a consensus around the new directions that American writing of the late 1940s had taken: the recovery of modernist aesthetics, which had been suffocated by the predominance of Stalinist social realism, was now the tip of the spear in the ideological fight against the Soviets.<sup>13</sup>

What is striking about the position-takings in this issue, though, is that there is little to no acknowledgment of the magazine’s shaping role in the growing domestic campaign against Soviet-inspired social realism. While almost all its contributors look back on the 1930s as something of a literary dark age dominated by the Communist Party’s literary outlets, the utter absence of any mention of the magazine’s historical embeddedness in this decade’s struggle over Marxist aesthetics is quite conspicuous.<sup>14</sup> In many ways, *Partisan* and its editors were majorly responsible for the aesthetic debates that produced the state of the field that they asked

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<sup>13</sup> Lionel Trilling’s response is representative and perhaps most interesting for our purposes here. Responding to questions 6 and 7, he distinguishes the aesthetic struggle between social realism and a greater oppositional movement from that which the national public will inevitably misapprehend: “The tensions between Soviet Communism and the democratic countries can be understood as, among other things, an expression of a tension which exists in our culture between two radically opposed views of man. The newspapers and the State Department will of course pervert the nature of this tension by means of all the gross clichés of current democratism, but we must not let this limit and confuse our understanding of the reality of the opposition between a simple and negative materialism and some other complex and more possibility-creating view which I won’t undertake to give a name to.” He then goes on to name “the *new* criticism” as the “element of resistance” that should “malign materialism pervasive through the world and established in Soviet Russia” (892).

<sup>14</sup> Leslie Fiedler claims to speak on behalf of a whole generation of writers who experienced the John Reed clubs as one a few avenues available to access the literary world in the 1930s: “Our generation is haunted by the memory of the profane mystique which created that drab memorial; when we were kids becoming a writer seemed, if not synonymous with, at least an aspect of becoming a Communist; abandoning oneself to the proletariat and finding oneself as an artist seemed a single act...Our awakening was gradual, though a little faster than our political disenchantment, toward a realization of the enormous *contempt* for art just below the culture-vulturish surface of the John Reed clubs” (871).



contributors to trace in the August 1948 issue. As Alan Wald has explained, Party-affiliated literary institutions, such as New York's John Reed Clubs and the American Writers Congress, had long emphasized a brand of social realist writing that came into tension with the commitments to modernist formalism and supra-ideological literariness embraced by Leon Trotsky and his acolytes.<sup>15</sup> Following Trotsky's idea that artistic radicalism went hand in hand with counter-bourgeois agitation, *Partisan* founders Phillip Rahv and William Phillips initially spearheaded an anti-Stalinist revolutionary communism that looked to modernists like Leo Tolstoy and Henry James for inspiration. It was after the second American Writers Congress (1937), which followed the inaugural 1935 session where Phillips and Rahv presented a paper arguing against the slogan "literature as a weapon," that *Partisan* would abandon its anti-capitalist commitments altogether while maintaining modernist formalism as one of its highest priorities.<sup>16</sup>

By 1948, *Partisan* had succumbed to the anti-communist hegemony that characterized domestic politics at the start of the Cold War. Yet the penchant for polemic that animated the editions it published during this decade was nonetheless a product of an evolution that began with an anti-Stalinist rupture within the Party's larger literary establishment in the early 1930s. Despite its function as the de facto literary organ for the American Communist Party, the magazine had been committed to further developing the modernist achievements of the 1920s in opposition to the social realist paradigm of the proletarian novel from the start. With its origins in the labor movements and socialist parties that preceded the coinage of "socialist realism" at the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress, the "often awkward and un-novelistic" proletarian novel

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left From the 1930s to the 1980s* (Durham: UNC Press, 1987), 92.

<sup>16</sup> Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 81.

grew into a global phenomenon between the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the ascent of communism in China in 1949.<sup>17</sup> Its early iterations included “the reportage of worker correspondents, first-person testimonies of working life,” and “loosely linked sketches of shop floors and tenement neighborhoods.”<sup>18</sup> Though distinct from the proletarian movements that had taken shape in Communist Russia, Fascist Germany and Japan, and the European colonies in African and Asia, proletarian novels in the US were yet of a piece with the burgeoning regional and ethnic fiction of the late 1920s and 1930s. As Michael Denning reminds, even Richard Wright’s “The Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937), an essay interested in bringing the so called tradition of African American writing more in line with Marxist aesthetics, can only be adequately contextualized with the struggle over proletarian forms that touched both the black leftists of the Harlem Renaissance movement and New York’s Jewish intellectual circles alike.

Given the growing instability of the American proletarian movement throughout the 1930s, in addition to the Party’s own efforts to sustain its literary outlets during this period, *Partisan*’s anti-communist reorientation appears to be much more a consequence than a determinant of the rise of liberal intellectualism. Whereas the John Reed Clubs had been founded as a network of anti-capitalist “workers and proletarianized intellectuals” in support of the Soviet Union, most of them had dissolved before the Party liquidated those that remained in 1935.<sup>19</sup> In their stead, the Party initiated the League of American Writers and the American Writers’ Congress in the hopes that they’d garner the support of liberal literary circles, their commercial authors, and their academic critics. In view of new Popular Front initiatives such as a “progressive capitalism” and “literary patriotism,” in addition to the Moscow Trials and the

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17 Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso Books), 60.

18 Ibid, 69.

19 Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 81.

ouster of independent leftist organizations in Spain, *Partisan*'s editors relinquished their political and organizational commitments, ultimately abandoning the assumption of solidarity between writers and the working class.<sup>20</sup>

What I'm trying to show in this account of *Partisan*'s complicated origins is the degree to which the stakes of literary representation remained one of its central preoccupations throughout the evolution of its ideological priorities and commitments. Even though the magazine's anti-communist evolution preceded the start of the Cold War, it was indeed the burgeoning US/Soviet conflict that gave the magazine's literary polemics their world-historical salience after it had made its about face to full-blown anti-communism. By the time *Partisan* acquired and reprinted "Everybody's Protest Novel" from *Zero* magazine in 1949, it had helped consecrate American modernism as the zenith of literary sophistication and the necessary counterpart to social realism and its inadequacies. Baldwin makes no mention of anti-communist or counter-Soviet struggle in his attacks on protest fiction, but the urgency of his denunciation of social realist writing did overlap with that of the positions taken by *Partisan* and its editors. Baldwin's fixation on the need to adequately represent essential difference might look like something of an anomaly relative to the concerns of the magazine's other contributors, but his claims that the fate of the nation was imperiled by the shortcomings of protest fiction matched the magazine's orientation against social realist writing and its communist affiliations.

Even still, Baldwin's critique of the protest novel has much more to do with its proximity to sociological representation than with its ties to Soviet communism. In addition to his claims that the protest novel was compromised by its sentimentality, Baldwin also took issue with its recirculation of the sociological typologies that produced "the Negro" as a categorical problem

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<sup>20</sup> Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 81.

and not as a person whose humanity was worth being understood. Against these epistemic and stylistic failures, Baldwin intervenes to reclaim the project of literary representation from sociological knowledge production. He suggests that it's the conflation of the two that has resulted in the production of poor fictional writing that is well-received despite its lack of aesthetic quality. In "Everybody's Protest Novel" Baldwin writes:

They are forgiven, on the strength of these good intentions, whatever violence they do to language, whatever excessive demands they make of credibility. It is, indeed, considered the sign of frivolity so intense as to approach decadence to suggest that these books are both badly written and wildly improbable. One is told to put first things first, the good of society coming before the niceties of style or characterization. Even if this were incontestable—for what exactly is the "good" of society? —it argues an insuperable confusion, since literature and sociology are not one and the same; it is impossible to discuss them as if they were. Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of our definitions.<sup>21</sup>

Originally writing in 1948—the same year that PR released its issue about the new field of literary production that had emerged from the dark days of communist social realism—Baldwin distresses over the relative success of the protest genre, which he finds indicative of a broader social problem characterized by “confusion” and “chaos.” Whereas contributors to the August 1948 issue claimed that the predominance of social realism had become a thing of the past, Baldwin laments a contemporary state of epistemological peril, which he generalizes here as “a breakdown of meaning” and the “limbo [in which] we whirl.” For Baldwin, the influence of sociological study had not only perverted literary production, but it also resulted in a state of societal disarray. Sociology’s penchant for categorization, conspicuously present in protest

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<sup>21</sup> James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Beacon Press, 1955), 18-19.

fiction, was to blame for the widespread miscomprehension that, in 1948, was presently menacing the social world.

If the Communist Party's perceived stranglehold over the American literary scene had been on the decline in the late 1930's and in the run-up to PR's August 1948 issue, sociologically-inspired protest literature was nearing its peak during this same period. This was due largely in part to the role of philanthropic interest in funding much of the sociological output that would frame the study of racial inequality at mid-century, in addition to the philanthropic sponsorship of African American intellectual production as early as the late 1920s. Foundations such as the Carnegie Corporation were among the institutions that supplied Gunnar Myrdal with resources and personnel to complete *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, the seminal work of the liberal orthodoxy that would frame "the Negro problem" in terms of cultural pathology and the necessity for African American assimilation. It was the Julius Rosenwald Fund that was largely responsible for the symbiosis between the sociological study of race and the production of protest literature.

Between its launch in 1929 and its scheduled demise in 1948, the Fund's initial vision for tackling racial inequality through African American artistic and intellectual achievement gradually evolved into a philosophy of Black writing as a conduit for sociological knowledge and racial progress. The cohort of writers it funded included major figures of the Harlem Renaissance—James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Sterling Brown—as well as early architects of the protest novel, such as Richard Wright and Chester Himes. By the 1940s, "the fund conceived of literature as a helpmate to the social sciences and thought it presented racial experience with the same truth content as social-scientific studies, but with more emotional impact and presumably a greater ability to arouse

sympathy.”<sup>22</sup> The Fund actively pursued academics and editors to populate its conferences and manage its grants, and it also funded the sociology departments that would treat the race novel as an accessory to the kinds of racial knowledge produced in anthropology and sociology.<sup>23</sup> Alongside publishers Doubleday and Harpers, who coined the term “race novel” in their marketing campaigns; and in addition to the Guggenheim Foundation’s distribution of grants to writers committed to the improvement of racial understanding, the Fund was majorly responsible for much of the race novel’s financial and institutional support.<sup>24</sup>

At the University of Chicago, support from the Fund went quite far in supporting the formative sociological paradigms to which Black sociologists and writers of fiction would gravitate. The University housed the work of sociologists Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, whose *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921) not only laid the groundwork for Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*, but also propped up the conceptions of cultural pathology and assimilation that would ultimately rival Franz Boas’s anthropological theories of cultural pluralism.<sup>25</sup> Students of Robert Park included black American sociologists E. Franklin Frazier, Charles Johnson, Horace Cayton, St. Claire Drake, and Bertram Doyle—all names (with the exception of Johnson) Wright credits for bringing works like *Black Boy* (1945) and *Native Son* to fruition in his introduction to Cayton’s and Drake’s *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945).

Wright’s introduction makes abundantly clear just how diametrically opposed he and Baldwin were in their understandings of the relationship of literature to sociology. He

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<sup>22</sup> Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: UMP, 2011), 67.

<sup>23</sup> Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Douglass, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011), 78.

emphatically directs readers to take this study on black urban life in Chicago as evidence of the reality that he represents in *Native Son*. What's even more significant is that, after claiming "this book supplements and endorses the conclusions arrived at by Gunnar Myrdal in his American Dilemma, that monumental study of race relations in the United States," Wright concludes the introduction by gesturing not toward the implications of this brand of sociological study for literary representation, but vice versa:

There is yet another vista now opens for us, a vista which only artists have so far availed themselves: What new values of action or experience can be revealed by looking at Negro life through alien eyes or under the lenses of new concepts? We have the testimony of a Gunnar Myrdal, but we know that is not all. What would life on Chicago's South Side look like when seen through the eyes of a Freud, a Joyce, a Proust, a Pavlov, a Kierkegaard? It should be recalled in this connection that Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, which contained "Melanctha," the first long serious literary treatment of Negro life in the United States, was derived from Stein's preoccupation with Jamesian psychology.<sup>26</sup>

Wright's allusion to this pantheon of modernist thinkers and writers offers an illuminating contrast to the delineation Baldwin makes between sociology-inspired literature and the aesthetic sophistication necessary for adequately representing racial difference. It also calls to mind Wright's essay "How Bigger Was Born," wherein Wright again names Henry James, alongside Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe, as one among many early American writers who, during the mid-century period, would be likely to still complain of what little American culture there would be to draw from were it not for the "dense and heavy" shadow that the oppression of the Negro casts "awthwart our national life."<sup>27</sup> One might speculate that, much like Baldwin, Wright is registering the increasing purchase that invoking modernist writers had begun to have

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), xxxi.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Wright "How Bigger was Born," in *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), 540. Given as a lecture first at Columbia University before it's printing as a pamphlet in March 1941. Included in most subsequent printings of the novel from 1941 onward.

during the postwar period. Indeed, the two seem like-minded in their commitments to establishing literature's epistemic jurisdiction over social reality, with the pairing of fictional aesthetics and sociological study emerging as a major fault line between them.

While we can think of Baldwin's sustained assault on protest fiction as emblematic of the thin appeals to aesthetic sophistication that had enraptured the New York intellectual sphere in the late 1940s, his fixation on the protest novel's sociological bent makes it difficult to reduce his criticism of it to a recapitulation of the anti-communist commitments of the New York intellectual magazines. Minus the manifest anti-communism that flooded the pages of *Partisan Review* during this period, Baldwin's continual disavowal of the protest genre subsists largely on unclear complaints about sentimentality and poor aesthetic quality, and it's the dehumanizing consequences of sociology's representational hegemony that emerges from it as the nation's imminent existential threat. Following up the critique of Wright that he first launched in "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin writes in "Many Thousands Gone" that "the Negro"

is a social and not a personal or human problem; to think of him is to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence; it is to be confronted with an endless cataloging of losses, gains, skirmishes; it is to feel virtuous, outraged, helpless, as though his continuing status among us were somehow analogous to disease—cancer, perhaps, or tuberculosis—which must be checked, even though it cannot be cured. In this arena the black man acquires quite another aspect from that which he has in life. We do not know what to do with him in life; when he breaks our sociological and sentimental image of him we are panic-stricken and we feel ourselves betrayed.<sup>28</sup>

What's curious about this passage is the way that Baldwin invokes the hostility to homogenization that aligned the mid-century consecration of American modernism with the authors that liberal intellectuals attempted to weaponize in their campaigns against social realism. Baldwin is as dogmatic, if not more so, as his New York intellectual counterparts in his

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<sup>28</sup> James Baldwin, "So Many Thousands Gone," in *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Beacon Press, 1955), 66.



critique, but there is little here that suggests anti-communism as a major motivation. At issue for him here is a kind of statistical homogenization that not only flattens African Americans into data points and stigmatized categories, but also (re-)produces the flat and stigmatizing category “The Negro” itself. For Baldwin, the statistics and typographies that sociology disseminates foreclose possibilities for thinking difference in the public imagination, and protest literature, due to its indebtedness to this kind of sociological representation, cripples it even further.

This heuristic reading might help clarify the commitments at work in Baldwin’s critique of the protest novel, but what about his issues with the “image of the negro” in theatre and film? Does this vendetta against the widespread purchase of sociological representation also explain Baldwin’s tendency to return to sentimentality, improbability, and poor aesthetic quality as major touchpoints in his discussion of black theatrical performance?<sup>29</sup> Many of the complaints that Baldwin levels against the representation of Black life both on stage and on screen comes down to directors’ ignorance of black actors’ interior lives as well the failure of certain productions to make the harsh realities of black urban life intelligible. This is precisely the case in his essay “On Catfish Row” (1956), which Baldwin opens by mourning the death of Billie Holiday before discussing the filmic adaption of *Porgy and Bess* (1959). The link between these two subjects is that the titular Catfish Row, the folkish black ghetto that comprises the play’s setting, doesn’t do justice to Baldwin’s idea of “a *real* Catfish Row, real agony, real despair, and real love.”

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<sup>29</sup> Baldwin briefly compares the filmic adaptation of *Gone with the Wind* (directed by Victor Fleming, 1939) to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in his essay “The Crusade of Indignation,” published in *The Nation* on July 7, 1946. He makes similar claims about both works: their sentimental drawing of black characters evidences a kind of ignorance or unfamiliarity on the part of the author/director r.e. the realities of black American life. More in line with Baldwin’s review of *Porgy and Bess*, though, is his essay “Carmen Jones: The Dark is Light Enough.” Here, Baldwin deals with the titular 1954 film (also directed by Otto Preminger, under fire in “On Catfish Row” for his poor direction of the black actors in *Porgy and Bess*), adapted from the Georges Bizet opera and featuring an almost entirely black cast.

Baldwin contends that “out of one Catfish Row or another came the murdered Bessie Smith and the dead Billie Holiday and virtually every Negro performer this country has produced,” even laying claim to “the Catfish Row where I was born.”<sup>30</sup> Baldwin develops this realist metonym over the course of the essay, treating it as a categorical stand-in for black ghetto life, which he frames as a counterpart to the sentimentalized, over-sexualized, “white man’s vision of Negro life” that comprises the Catfish Row of the play. “If the day ever comes,” Baldwin muses, “when the survivors of the place can be fooled into believing that the Hollywood cardboard even faintly resembles, or is intended to resemble, what it was like to be there, all our terrible and beautiful history will have gone for nothing and we will all be doomed to an unimaginable reality.”<sup>31</sup>

Many of the claims that Baldwin makes throughout the essay are out of kilter with the anti-sociological orientation that he articulates elsewhere. In addition to the categorical use of Catfish Row to generalize black ghetto life, the drop-off that Baldwin denotes between the represented and “real” black ghetto not only avers the tenability of categorizing Black urban life in general but also signals a need for the production and dissemination of generalized knowledge about it. It is ignorance, in fact, that Baldwin finds as the root cause of the film’s calamitous failure:

In the case of a white director called upon to direct a Negro cast, the supposition [that the director knows more than his actors know] ceases—with very rare exceptions—to have any validity at all. The director *cannot* know anything about his company if he knows nothing about the life that produced them...Black people still do not, by and large, tell white people the truth and white people still do not want to hear it. By the time the cameras start rolling or rehearsals begin, the director is entirely at the mercy of his ignorance and of whatever system of theories or evasions he has evolved to cover his ignorance. So in his company, which knows very well that, as he has no way of understanding the range of the Negro personality, he cannot assess any given performer’s potential. They know, in short, that in this limited sense, as in so many others, they are

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30 James Baldwin, “On Catfish Row,” in *The Price of the Ticket* (London: Michael Joseph, 1985), 180.

31 Ibid, 181.

going to be ill-used and they resign themselves to it with as much sardonic nature as they can muster...So disaster proceeds and the miracle is that even in so thoroughgoing a disaster as *Porgy and Bess* a couple of very effective moments are achieved. This is partly by virtue of the material. For we have not even mentioned the probable quality of the script on which the Negro performer will be working or the reasons that this script finds itself in production.<sup>32</sup>

Baldwin's discussion of the play doubles as a kind of sociological commentary on the failed state of American race relations, which Baldwin frames here as an epistemological problem. In a fashion similar to that of his reviews of protest fiction, he links the play's creative deficits to larger—though largely interpersonal—race relations phenomena. It isn't enough to denounce the play as a "thoroughgoing disaster" or point down its "probable quality." Baldwin must also give a theory of *why* the play fails in the ways that it does, and he does so by diagnosing the relationship of the play's director to the cast in terms of generalizable and routine dynamics of willful white ignorance and strategic black withholding. And yet, these claims themselves require no further substantiation, no empirical findings, no data. Baldwin is to be taken at his word as a knowing, authoritative, and representative racial subject.

Despite these tensions between Baldwin's manifest and latent position-takings on sociological representation, it's his emphasis on the cataclysmic, though ill-defined, repercussions of mass cultural representations of racial difference that hold his critical essays together. Whether it be protest fiction's recapitulation of sociological categorization, or white film directors' inability to tap into the "range of the Negro personality," Baldwin fixates on these failures of representation, thinking of them as both reflective and productive of the epistemological tumult that threatens the livelihood of the nation. As I'll show in the following pages, Baldwin wasn't alone in theorizing mass culture's occlusion of difference, nor in his thinking of the mass cultural representation of it as a primary cause of the ways that it menaced the social world. His review essays point us to several different yet interrelated institutional investments in the representation of difference that came to a head at the start of the Cold War.

*A True Expatriate?*

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<sup>32</sup> Baldwin, "On Catfish Row," 179.

Up to this point I've tried to specify Baldwin's motivations for writing against the protest novel and to show where they exceeded the anti-communist fervor harbored among his editors at *Partisan Review*. I have claimed that, different from the New York intellectuals' synthesis of the struggle against totalitarianism with matters of literary taste, Baldwin identified the protest novel and its adjacent sources of sociological knowledge as one among many sources of what he saw as a widespread miscomprehension of racial difference. Whereas Wright and other protest novelists attempted to make known the social determinants of racial inequality and black cultural pathology by conjoining sociological study with literary representation, Baldwin identified these forms of representation themselves as primary obstacles to interracial understanding. As a hard reaction to the perceived erasure of essential difference by sociological study and its penchant for racial typologies, Baldwin intervened in this racial discourse by emphasizing the complexities of racial identity and condemning the representational modes and methods that obfuscated them.

Given that the hegemony of the protest novel—produced by black and white novelists alike—was sustained early on by philanthropic sponsorship (r.e. the fellowships awarded to individual writers and their funding of the sociology departments that treated the race novel as an object of study), the marketing campaigns of several different publishing houses, and the genre's incredible sales numbers, it's important for me to clarify in what ways we might classify Baldwin's intervention as a radical gesture versus how it placed Baldwin at the epicenter of the liberal intellectual establishment earlier on his career.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, we could say that

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<sup>33</sup> Carsten Junker and Kimberly S. Drake have given strong historical accounts of how *Native Son* marked an epochal shift in mainstream literary production and reception as it pertained to African American writers, which should cue us to the magnitude of what it meant for Baldwin to disparage the protest genre, which Wright's novel had exponentially popularized. Quoting from Craig H. Werner's "Early Twentieth Century" and Donald B. Gibson's "Wright, Richard" (both in *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, Oxford UP, 2001), Junker claims in *Frames of Friction: Black Genealogies, White Hegemony, and the Essay as Critical*

Baldwin wrote against mainstream literary tastes and against the conventions of race study and racial representation that had become hegemonic at mid-century. This would in many ways corroborate extant critical/biographical characterizations of Baldwin as having made significant literary contributions to the fight against racial injustice, remaining a radical anti-racist voice throughout the duration of his career.<sup>34</sup> But we can also think of Baldwin's early critical essays as part of a burgeoning discourse on literary taste that had been charged with overt political meanings at the start of the Cold War and even in the years leading up to it—in accounts of this variety, Baldwin is joined by Ralph Ellison in privileging racial/cultural difference as a site ripe for aesthetic innovation, which held out the promise of national literary achievement and cultural superiority at a time when intellectual magazines discussed these objectives as if they mattered

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*Intervention* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2010) that “Baldwin was required to tackle *Native Son* head on because it was considered ‘[b]y far the most popular novel published by a black writer’ from its publication in 1940 onward (Werner 2001, 468). The book was a Book-of-the-Month Club recommendation, ‘which signaled for the first time since the nineteenth-century fugitive slave narrative the willingness of a mainstream [that is predominantly white] reading public to give ear to an African American writer (Gibson 2001, 447)’” (103-104). Drake adds in *Subjectivity in the American Protest Novel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) that “Wright’s early fiction, especially *Native Son*, helped make the protest novel the dominant mode of African American literature; subsequent novels were judged by Wright’s Standard” (44).

<sup>34</sup> Geraldine Murphy and Cheryl Wall have both compared Baldwin's essays to the speech and actions of Black American activists. Murphy contends in “Subversive Anti-Stalinism: Race and Sexuality in the Early Essays of James Baldwin” that his “embrace of Cold War liberalism should not be regarded as mere capitulation; it is in itself a political act” that Baldwin corroborated later with his “subsequent involvement in the civil rights movement.” His “efforts to secure the full rights of a complex, contradictory consciousness for the black artist in the early fifties complement the efforts of black leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Thurgood Marshall to secure the full rights of black citizens” (1038). Similarly, in *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn*, Wall places Baldwin's essays in the tradition of African American intellectuals “From David Walker's *Appeal to Frederick Douglass in 'What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?'* to Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South* to Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,’” who have used the oppression of African Americans to indict and shame a nation whose actions contradict its principles (121).

then more than ever.<sup>35</sup> Different from the tendency of literary historians to focus on Ralph Ellison as the figure who took both critical establishments and the literary market by storm with *Invisible Man* (1952),<sup>36</sup> in this section I attend to the ways that Baldwin sustained a much more consistent engagement with both liberal intellectuals and casual consumers of literature via the essay form. My claim is that, with his critical essays—those that circulated among the liberal intellectual magazines—Baldwin brought racial representation into the purview of the critical sphere represented by *Partisan Review* and its peer publications, privileging the subject position of “the Negro” in ways that would corroborate his personal essays from abroad. In view of the exigencies of the Cold War as they pertained to race, expatriation in many ways afforded Baldwin a claim to objectivity and critical perspective, which were crucial to his success in making marginality central to conversations on race among both liberal intellectuals and the lay public.<sup>37</sup>

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35 In addition to Michael Nowlin’s “Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and the Liberal Imagination,” (*Arizona Quarterly* 60, no.2, summer 2014), which I discuss later, see Carsten Junker’s description of *Invisible Man*’s “avant-garde aspects,” which included “the use of a variety of dialects and sociolects in dialogue” and “the incorporation of semantic ambiguity,” in *Frames of Fiction*. Historicizing Ellison’s immediate reception, Junker claims that Ellison was “recognized among critics and literary historians as a protagonist of the formal innovation of the novel” (115).

36 In *The Postwar African American Novel: Protest and Discontent, 1945-1950* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), Stephanie Brown names James C. Hall, Bernard Bell, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. as critics who have described *Invisible Man* as the “exception” in the flood of protest writing initiated by *Native Son* (10-12). See also Kenneth Warren’s *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

37 In *The Indignant Generation* Lawrence P. Jackson explains how subjective protest fiction’s anger and “catharsis” came under fire in the late 1940’s. He uses Lionel Trilling’s remarks on how ‘the full amount of anger that would be appropriate to the social situation alone would surely have the effect of destroying the person who felt it’ as indicator of how the rise of the New York intellectual establishment spelt the decline of protest fiction, at least in part (pp. 271). For our purposes they also highlight the burden of objectivity and aesthetic sophistication that this turn away from polemical fiction placed on Black American writers.

The marginality that Baldwin invoked was symptomatic of his embeddedness in the dogmatic modernist fervor that had been resurfacing in the postwar period.<sup>38</sup> Historians of this return have contended that the re-canonization of figures such as Herman Melville and Henry James had much more to do with an obsession with the novel's capacity to purvey cultural capital than with a legitimate interest in formal innovation and narratological experimentation. They often point to Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) as the seminal work of the New York intellectual establishment's rallying behind late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century writers of fiction in order to strategically conflate American literary classics with the freedom of thought precluded by naturalist fiction. Taking up Baldwin's essay "May Thousands Gone" (*Partisan Review*, 1951) and Ralph Ellison's 1953 National Book Award acceptance speech, Michal Nowlin has found echoes of Trilling's "Reality in America" (collected in *TLI*) in the former; and the latter he links to themes around "critical non-conformism" teased out by Trilling, Howe, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. at *Partisan's* 1952 "Our Country and Our Culture" symposium.<sup>39</sup> Just as Ellison claims to have returned to the classics of the nineteenth century to find an aesthetic "adequate to the task of representing American reality," Nowlin finds that Baldwin, following Trilling, evolved matters of literary taste into issues of national morality and consciousness. What endeared both Baldwin and Ellison to this extra-academic literary establishment, and what distinguished them from authors of protest fiction, was that they conjured an idea of African American "aesthetic perspective developed as much through experience with popular and vernacular modes of expressive culture as through literary and/or

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<sup>38</sup> See Geraldine Murphy's "Subversive Anti-Stalinism: Race and Sexuality in the Early Essays of James Baldwin" on how Baldwin "began his literary career in the bosom of anti-Stalinism" (ELH 63, no. 2, Winter 1996, 1023).

<sup>39</sup> Michael Nowlin, "Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and the Liberal Imagination," 121.

‘high cultural forms.’”<sup>40</sup> Or, to say this another way, they expanded the purview of modernism’s claims to difference and distinction by linking polemical African American fiction to mass cultural ineptitude and the erasure of black American particularity. We might think of invisibility’s many valences in Ellison’s debut novel, also hailed at the time as an American modernist achievement,<sup>41</sup> as demonstrative of this phenomenon, especially given Ellison’s efforts to align himself with the American modernist tradition in subsequent essays and in his National Book Award speech.<sup>42</sup> And of course, Baldwin’s *Go Tell it On the Mountain* (1953) and *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) were held in a similar regard, even if the selection committee refused to grant the NBA to black novelists in consecutive years. What interests me about Baldwin’s essays are the means by which he staged them as direct interventions into the national discussion on racial inequality at the very moment that it began to give shape to how the Cold War was being waged.

What I’m pointing to here is a modernist tendency to convert essential difference into cultural capital or distinction. The fiction of Henry James and William Faulkner might be most instructive for my purposes, because it demonstrates the capacity for distinction to operate in both cosmopolitan and regionalist registers, to name only a couple of its many permutations—Baldwin’s pre-1960 oeuvre was one of them. James levied his complaints against the impoverished state of the American novel through comparisons with what he identified as much richer novelistic traditions on the European continent. As the US population grew increasingly literate at the turn of the twentieth century, and as the mass market for cheap fiction increased,

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<sup>40</sup> Michael Nowlin, “Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and the Liberal Imagination,” 129.

<sup>41</sup> Claire Seiler, “W.H. Auden and the Midcentury Anxiety Concensus.” *Literature and Feeling in the Wake of World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 87. Carsten Junker offers further elaboration in *Frames of Fiction*: “

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 121.



James despaired at what he took as a stark juxtaposition between “‘simple’ American culture” and European sophistication.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Faulkner’s fiction has been taken to be representative of modernism’s “pastoral” relation to mass culture, in many ways serving as the face of a southern regionalism that, unlike those of the Northeast, North Pacific, and Southwest, resisted the vanishing of regional distinctions that resulted from the “steam-roller like homogeneity of the mass market” and its “‘standardization’ of American life.”<sup>44</sup> Like James and Faulkner, Baldwin couched his critiques of the protest genre in terms of the homogeneity, or “indistinguishable mass,” of sociology-inspired typologies that circulated through protest literature and fomented hysteria around “the Negro problem.” Yet Baldwin didn’t shirk off the mass market entirely, and I want to suggest here that he complemented his critical confrontations with the image of the Negro in American mass culture with essays that attempted to make black American particularity legible to middle-brow readers.

Baldwin’s appeal across these two literary spheres, as well as the utility of what I’ve termed his comparative cosmopolitanism, come through in the essays collected in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Nobody Knows my Name* (1961). In both collections, essays first printed in New York intellectual magazines—*Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *New Leader*—appear alongside those published in less polemical publications such as *Harper’s*, *New York Times Book Review*, and *Esquire*. They each also feature locational emphases split between the US and

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43 In essays like “The Art of Fiction” (1884) and “The Future of the Novel” (1899) James campaigned for a kind of novelistic writing that could “esteem the profession of the novelist and be recognized as a fine art comparable to those such as architecture, painting and poetry” (McGurl 15-16). As McGurl has suggested, the success of this campaign is born out in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives* (1910), and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), which he considers the representative progeny of James’ push for novelistic sophistication and disavowal of mass cultural indistinguishability.

44 Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 141-143.

Europe, with “The Harlem Ghetto,” “Journey to Atlanta,” and “Notes of a Native of Son” compiled in part two of the 1955 collection, and “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown,” “Equal in Paris,” and “Stranger in the Village” (an essay set in the Swiss Alps) in part three. In the latter, the vantage points of expatriation and comparative cosmopolitanism open onto a diagnostic register whereby Baldwin can articulate his own marginalized subject position and make authoritative claims about the racial and moral psychology of the nation at the same time. What we find in them is an elucidatory marginality that functions as a kind of analytical insight in and of itself.

These dynamics might be most pronounced in “Stranger in the Village,” which Baldwin first published with *Harper’s Magazine* before its reprinting at the end of *Notes of a Native Son* in 1955. He frames the essay with his retreat to a relatively remote and racially homogenous village in Switzerland, where he has the epiphany that “there could be people anywhere who had never seen a Negro.”<sup>45</sup> Through the essay’s first half he details the quotidian encounters that distinguish the villagers’ seemingly benign responses to his dark skin and wooly hair from what he has experienced as the much more intentionally hostile responses to his phenotype from white Americans. Children address him with “*Neger! Neger!*” despite the fact that “Everyone in the village knows my name;”<sup>46</sup> at the annual *Carnival* they dress in blackface to commemorate the custom of “buying” Africans and converting them; and upon physically examining him, adults Baldwin doesn’t know are “astonished that the color did not come off.”<sup>47</sup> “All of the physical characteristics of the Negro...had caused me, in America, a very different and almost forgotten

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45 James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” in *Notes of a Native Son*, ed. Sol Stein (New York: Beacon, 1955), 163.

46 Ibid, 165.

47 Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” 166.

kind of pain;” but in the Swiss village, “in which it must be conceded there was the charm of genuine wonder in which there was certainly no element of intentional unkindness, there was yet no suggestion that I was human: I was simply a living wonder.”<sup>48</sup> Minus the animosity and assumed threat of physical violence characteristic of the American situation, anonymity is the agent of injury for Baldwin in his interactions with the Swiss villagers. His namelessness is the product of rabid attention to the phenotypic features for which *Neger!* becomes a category necessary for their comprehension. One way of rephrasing him here would be to say that the conspicuousness of racial difference displaces his interior essence, or *who he really is*. The larger point, though, is just how demonstrative the reaction to Baldwin’s presence in the village is of the difference between what the Negro *means* to Europeans versus the significance of this racial category in the American context. His encounters with the villagers are injurious not in their own right but rather in light of the meanings similar acts and utterances have intentionally carried when the perpetrators have been white Americans in the past:

There is a dreadful abyss between the streets of this village and the streets of the city in which I was born, between the children who shout *Neger!* today and those who shouted *Nigger!* yesterday--the abyss is experience, the American experience. The syllable hurled behind me today expresses, above all, wonder: I am a stranger here. But I am not a stranger in America and the same syllable riding on the American air expresses the war my presence has occasioned in the American soul.<sup>49</sup>

With this comparative scaffolding, Baldwin draws out the uniqueness of the US by distinguishing the origins and operations of its normative racist practices from those of the rest of the West. That he is produced as a “stranger” in the village is only a symptom of the assumed exteriority of black difference to the Western concept altogether, whereas the fundamental

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 172.

distinctiveness of the US in this formulation is that the Negro is absolutely integral to its self-concept. The “dreadful abyss” between these two frameworks appears to be structured by what Baldwin sees as the starkly distinct historical consequences of chattel slavery in America relative to those of European colonization. Working up to the claim that he is “not, really, a stranger any longer to any American alive,” and that “One of the things that distinguished Americans from other people is that no other people have been so deeply involved in the lives of black men, and vice versa,” this is the rationale that he teases out:

Europe's black possessions remained--and do remain--in Europe's colonies, at which remove they represented no threat whatever to European identity. If they posed any problem at all for the European conscience, it was a problem which remained comfortingly abstract: in effect, the black man, *as a man*, did not exist for Europe. But in America, even as a slave, he was an inescapable part of the general social fabric and no American could escape having an attitude toward him.<sup>50</sup>

The tenability of this assessment requires the kind of metropole-periphery logic that concerned post-colonial scholars in later decades, most eminently Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). One might also be struck at how Baldwin looks at the enterprises of European colonization and American as having no more than abstract effects on how Europe (also a troublesome metonym) defines itself even up to this mid-century moment. These leaps and elisions, though, point to the prioritization of difference and distinction that aligns Baldwin with his modernist forebears and contemporaries. They also mirror the rhetoric of concurrent diplomatic efforts to disassociate the US from the legacy of Western colonial power, which factored mightily into the Cold War conception of the US as the leader of the free world in

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<sup>50</sup> Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” 178.

its fight against totalitarianism and, as I've suggested earlier, proved to be one of the modernist revival's primary conditions for possibility.

From what he certainly understands as a violent history of exclusion, exploitation, terror, and sexual violation, Baldwin abstracts notions of intimate, cross-racial involvedness that is endemic to the American situation and that produces Black Americans as an integral, "inescapable" part of it. The uniqueness of American race relations in this way qualifies African Americans as distinct from their African and African-descended counterparts in the rest of world, at the same time that it proves the particularity of white Americans too, Baldwin reiterates later in the essay.<sup>51</sup> This is the product of an "interracial drama" that Baldwin positions as instructive precedent for the modern world as he brings the essay to a close:

...it can be seen that the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, it is also something of an achievement. For even when the worst has been said, it must also be added that the perpetual challenge posed by this problem was always, somehow, perpetually met. It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.<sup>52</sup>

Whatever it means for the challenge posed by the "the Negro problem" to have been *perpetually met*, it is clear that the point of this vague historical claim is to posit that the US is uniquely situated to address what must be a changing state of world-wide racial affairs. The rising tide of decolonization in Africa is one possible backdrop against which Baldwin might be setting himself up, with Sudan and Ghana gaining independence in 1956 and 1957 respectively following Kwame Nkrumah's campaign for African liberation at the fifth pan-African Congress in 1945. Baldwin's having immigrated to France in 1948, just three years after the war for Algerian independence began, also factors in as a significant subtext here. Yet the question

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<sup>51</sup> Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 178.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 179.

remains, what about the “Negro problem” produces a mandate for American leadership in this rapidly developing new world order? And why would Baldwin go to such lengths to distance African Americans from their counterparts on the Continent at the very moment that solidarity would seem to be most in order?

Within the context of the Cold War, decolonization both in Africa and throughout the rest of what would become the “third world” threatened the expansion of Soviet influence into the territories where Western colonial power had lost its grip. With the 1947 Truman Doctrine, the US committed itself to securing Western democratic nations against totalitarian expansion, which it did by pledging infrastructural, military, and economic support via the Marshall Plan a year later. But in the newly independent states in Africa, Indochina, and the Middle East, the US took softer measures to contain and counteract the potential for communist commitments, which involved re-representing the totalitarian aspects of Jim Crow and other regimes of racial terror as well as the general dissemination of American culture and democratic ideals. This is precisely why Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* has been regarded as a seminal text for the regimes of racial representation that surfaced during the early Cold War. It not only replaced what W.E.B. Du Bois had proposed as a study of racial capitalism and colonial power in the Western World,<sup>53</sup> but it also reframed racial subordination in America as an opportunity or “alibi,” as Nikhil Pal Singh has described it, to elevate African Americans out of second-class citizenship via the process of transculturation.<sup>54</sup> Within this schema, American culture itself acquires an aura of distinction as well as the capacity for civic and social redress. It is also projected as an

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53 Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 73-74.

54 Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), 150.

antidote of sorts, potent in its ability to surmount extremely violent and defunct customs and practices.

Ironically, Baldwin articulates this very logic despite his outright denunciations of sociological race study in the passages we read in this chapter's first section. But what's more important for us to see here is the overlap between these diplomatic investments in representing race and the ways in which invocations of modernism were deployed to stamp out the totalitarian threat. As Penny Von Eschen has shown, mid-century appeals to modernism circulated not just through New York intellectual and New Critical circles, but also through the halls of Congress and the State Department. There, "modernism" surfaced as a natural counter both to generalized claims about the superficiality of American culture and to particular claims about American racial hypocrisy circulated by the Soviets through newly independent states. The 84<sup>th</sup> Congress' inauguration of the President's Special International Program in 1956 began with an appropriations request from President Eisenhower in 1954. Matching Eisenhower's frustration that "our successes are described in terms of automobiles and not in terms of worthwhile cultural programs," in 1956 Congressman Frank Thompson Jr. quipped in a House Appropriations Hearing that the US was "behind the Communists in our cultural appeal. Throughout the world, they were (and still are) denouncing us as materialistic, uncultured barbarians, soulless." Directed toward the "cultural and artistic fields," the initial funds went toward a four-year tour of *Porgy and Bess*, which Eisenhower lauded as a rebuff to Soviet propaganda about race in America and as "an example of the importance of American culture abroad."<sup>55</sup> After the International Program's formalization, "Good Will Tours" by jazz artists

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<sup>55</sup> Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard Up, 2006), 4.

such as Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington would make it as far as Greece, Iran, and Indochina. Together, the tours would comprise a “counter-offensive,” a proposition that would be fulfilled as “many critics on the selection committees promoted American modernism as an effective counter to Soviet promotion of folk art and classical ballet productions.”<sup>56</sup>

It wasn't long before jazz would come to stand out as a uniquely American art form that bore no relation to the Soviet or European influences at work in ballet, classical music, and theatre. Pioneered by its increasingly famous African American performers, the jazz tours could also be touted as symbolic of an original and inclusive national culture to which artistic innovation by African Americans was integral. “Intended to promote a vision of color-blind American democracy,” Von Eschen explains, “the tours foregrounded the importance of African American culture during the Cold War, with blackness and race operating culturally to project an image of American nationhood that was more inclusive than the reality.”<sup>57</sup> Crucially, sponsorship of artistic innovation and racial representation was facilitated by a coalition of government officials and the representatives of established cultural institutions. Notable members of the State Department's music-selection committee included figures such as *New York Times* jazz reviewer John Wilson and the president of Rutgers University's Institute of Jazz Studies, Marshall Stearns.<sup>58</sup> Against myriad efforts to disabuse jazz performance of its high cultural credentials on the grounds of its improvisatory, vernacular, and—to put it crudely—African American origins, authorities like these did much to maintain the status of jazz as “the

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<sup>56</sup> Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



most original product of American modernism” and vouch for the State’s investment in its international propagation.<sup>59</sup>

Although a similar nexus of political and cultural institutions congealed to produce *Notes of a Native Son*, its publication was much more of a domestic intervention into Cold War representational politics than were the internationalist activities of the jazz tours. We might even say that the two projects worked at domestic and internationalist ends of the spectrum of Cold War cultural politics, with the jazz tours exporting American cultural innovation and Baldwin articulating the international stakes of the Negro problem—as well its instructive value for the rest of the free world—to readers in the US. A mix of previously published and original essays, the contents for *Notes* were selected by Sol Stein, a high school classmate of Baldwin’s who by the 1950s had begun working as an editor at Beacon Press and as an executive editor for the CIA-backed American Congress on Cultural Freedom.<sup>60</sup> Stein added *Notes* to Beacon’s *Contemporary Affairs* series, which also featured titles by staunch anti-communists Sidney Hook, George Orwell, Andre Malraux, and Arthur Koestler. To the extent that Stein himself coordinated the priorities of mainstream publishers with the Cultural Congress’ aims of waging an ideological war against international communism, we should very much see the volume collected in *Notes* as an artifact, if not an explicit product, of the institutionalization of Cold War anti-Communism. Relatedly, we should also take into consideration the degree to which the publication of Baldwin’s collected essays helped expand the mid-century American literary market. In his memoir and collected correspondences with Baldwin, Sol Stein takes credit for facilitating the paperback revolution at Beacon Press, of which *Notes* was both a catalyst and a

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<sup>59</sup> Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Sol Stein, *Native Sons* (London: One World Press, 2005), 27.

beneficiary.<sup>61</sup> Beacon had previously published James Rorty's and Moshe Dectre's *McCarthy and the Communists* for the Committee on Cultural Freedom, after which it remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for thirteen weeks.<sup>62</sup> Stein had never been employed as an editor at an actual publishing house before working on *Notes* in 1953, but after pitching the plan for a paperback series to Beacon director Melvin Arnold, Stein was quickly contracted as "originator and general director" of the "library-size paperbacks" that would come to be known as trade paperbacks. Stein's idea was that, generally, the decreased cost of publishing paperbacks would allow for the profitable republication of "good books." "Worthy unpublished work" could also debut in both paperback and hardcover, the former appealing to students and "others for whom paper covers were then the format of choice" and the latter producing reviews and library sales.<sup>63</sup> Arnold greenlighted the paperback series against the recommendations of Beacon's sales team, and in 1955 *Notes* debuted alongside Leslie Fiedler's *End of Innocence* (1955) as one of the two essay collections in Beacon's first five paperback releases. Though the consensus among publishers up to this point had been that essay collections were too incoherent to sell well,<sup>64</sup> Harper & Row (now HarperCollins) hired Arnold away from Beacon in order to get their paperback publishing off the ground following the success of Baldwin's and Trilling's collections.<sup>65</sup>

These institutional developments shed light on the thematic consistency of African American particularity in Baldwin's pre-1960 oeuvre, giving us a sense of the ideological commitments and institutional affiliations that informed Baldwin's efforts to disarticulate

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<sup>61</sup> Stein, *Native Sons*, 12.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 28-29.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 28-29.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 30.

American racial inequality from anticolonial struggle in the diaspora. They also help explain why and how these attachments developed during Baldwin’s “expatriation.” After emigrating to France in 1948, Baldwin spent at least two extended stints in the US to edit and write new essays. The first was in 1954, when he joined Stein at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire to work on *Notes of a Native Son*, and the second was in 1957,<sup>66</sup> when Baldwin toured the American South and churned out the essays “The Hard Kind of Courage” (“a Fly in Buttermilk” in *Notes of Native Son*) and “A Letter from the South: Nobody Knows my Name” (collected in *Nobody Knows My Name*) for *Harpers’* and *Partisan Review* respectively.<sup>67</sup> From what we have of the correspondences between Baldwin and Stein in the year following MacDowell (and in the months leading up to the release of *Notes*), Stein and other publishers at Beacon went to significant lengths to curate the collected essays and ensure their strong reception. Stein recommended that they “take an ad in the November Harper’s for the book” after the release date had been moved from October to November of 1955—in retrospect, we see that the essay “Notes of a Native Son” debuted in Harper’s as a promotional measure.<sup>68</sup> Beacon publishers also asked for an index to “Notes” in a format similar to Lionel Trilling’s *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture* (1955).<sup>69</sup> And though it was scrapped from the published edition, *Notes’* featured a glowing endorsement from Stein, and of “Stranger in the Village” in particular, as one the best essays ever written by a member of Baldwin’s race.<sup>70</sup>

Baldwin’s embeddedness in the American anti-communist publishing sphere suggests something different from Baldwin scholars’ frequent claims that his disaffiliation from diasporic

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66 Stein, *Native Sons*, 39.

67 David Leeming, *James Baldwin, a Biography* (New York: Arcade, 2015), 39.

68 Stein, *Native Sons*, 45.

69 Ibid, 47.

70 Ibid, 49.

notions of community is actually suggestive of his indebtedness to them. Among the most formidable of Baldwin's critics, Doug Field positions Baldwin as a progenitor of the transatlantic—or *Black Atlantic*—schemas for transnational cultural production and exchange set forth in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and Brent Hayes Edwards' *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003). For Field, that Baldwin failed to build community with African American expatriates and other artists and intellectuals of African descent is demonstrative of Nadia Ellis's suggestion that "cultures of black internationalism are formed only within... 'paradoxes,'" as well as Gilroy's theory of "black modern expression," which he claims been historically cultivated by "the often uneasy encounters of people of African descent with one another."<sup>71</sup> Ellis has corroborated these formulations in her framing of Baldwin's contentious exchanges with George Lamming at the 1956 Congress of Negro and African writers in Paris. Building on Heather Love's formulation of "contentious queer friendship," Ellis locates Baldwin and Lamming within a "genealogical paradigm for black racial belonging in the West," which is centered in their "theorizing the diasporic subject's relationship to the United States and Britain as one of unclaimed sonhood."<sup>72</sup> It's the "failure of community" in this mid-century web of diasporic exchange that is productive of "close intimacy."

My aim here is not to negate Baldwin's intimacy with his interlocutors of African Origin, nor is to contend that his lifelong relationship to decolonization and its pan-Africanist reverberations was entirely structured by his close correspondence with anti-Communist American editors and publishers. A suggestion I might make, however, is that at the very least

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71 Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 121.

72 Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham: Duke UP, 2015), 65.

we should foreground the interrelation of the disparate spheres of influence by which Baldwin's pre-1960 essays were underwritten. There is no question that throughout the editing processes of *Nobody Knows My Name* and *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin's relationship to how the cultural Cold War was being waged by the US very directly shaped his writing at the levels of revision, editing, advertisement and sales. It was in the liberal intellectual sphere and its adjacent publishing circuit that some of Baldwin's most determinant attachments were cultivated.

Interestingly, though, Baldwin's correspondences with Sol Stein over the essay "Princes and Powers" point us to ideological fissures between himself and the liberal intellectual establishment that steadily began to develop in the late 1950s. Before its 1961 reprinting in *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin published the essay with the liberal magazine *Encounter* along with a French translation in *Preuves*, a periodical sponsored by the Congress on Cultural Freedom.<sup>73</sup> Stein was not an editor for "Princes and Powers," but Baldwin did suggest he read it in order to understand why "Letter to my Younger Brother," which Stein solicited for Beacon's Mid-Century Series, wasn't working. The conceit for the essay in progress was that, addressing his brother David upon his return from military service in Japan and Korea, Baldwin would consider "the citizenship of the American Negro" and its incomparability with that of "his far-flung darker brother, whose relationship to the white world is not, whatever they or David may be tempted to believe, analogous to the American Negro's."<sup>74</sup> The letter grew increasingly difficult to write as Baldwin came to realize "my ignorance concerning Africans; an ignorance which I've now decided to utilize, for I will never really understand any more of Africa than the insights afforded my by some of the Africans I meet." He continues,

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73 Christopher Winks, "Into the Heart of the Great Wilderness: Understanding Baldwin's Quarrel with Négritude," *CUNY Academic Works* (2013): 605.

74 Stein, *Native Sons*, 77.

More than that, though, it's suffered from a certain, unsuspected condescension I've got in me towards Africans. This can't be defended, and I'll probably never entirely overcome it. It was a shock. Just the same, I wish you'd have my agent show you *Princes and Powers*, the report I've just done for Encounter, on the Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists which was held in Paris in September. It mirrors my confusion, certainly, but it also mirrors theirs. Letter will begin where this ends, and I hope to have it finally written when I come home—I'm more convinced of its importance than I was before.<sup>75</sup>

As Christopher Winks has explained, the Congress was hailed as “a cultural counterpart, indeed a “sequel” to, the Conference of Non-aligned Nations in Bandung in 1955. Baldwin very famously described the awkward position African American delegates found themselves in when W.E.B. Du Bois sent a telegraph to say that the US had revoked his passport, and that the black Americans in attendance “must either not care about Negroes or simply say what the State Department wishes him to say.”<sup>76</sup> But this became a point of dispute with Sol Stein, who, in addition to thinking that “*Princes Powers*” was far from Baldwin's best writing, chastised Baldwin for suggesting that the denial of Du Bois's passport itself ultimately compromised the much-needed contributions of the conference's African American attendees. As Baldwin understood it, Du Bois's detainment only exacerbated “that gulf which yawns between the American Negro and all other men of color.” This he described as

a very sad and dangerous state of affairs, for the American Negro is possibly the only man of color who can speak of the West with real authority, whose experience, painful as it is, also proves the vitality of the so transgressed Western ideals. The fact that Du Bois was not there and could not, therefore, be engaged in debate, naturally made the more seductive his closing argument: which was that, the future of Africa being socialist, African writers should take the road taken by Russia, Poland, China, etc., and not be ‘betrayed backward by the US into colonialism.’<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Stein, *Native Sons*, 93.

<sup>76</sup> James Baldwin, “*Princes and Powers*,” in *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Dial Press, 1961), 18.

<sup>77</sup> Baldwin, “*Princes and Powers*,” 19.

The engagement with Du Bois here cues us in to just how thoroughly Baldwin grasped the Cold War context that loomed over the Congress. In naming the “seductiveness” of Du Bois’s argument, he demonstrates an awareness of the worry that non-aligned, newly independent nations might teeter toward totalitarianism. He also establishes the representational significance of African American particularity within this anti-totalitarian framework, in that Black Americans possess and embody the “vitality” of Western ideals to which totalitarianism was mounting a significant threat. Without explicitly condemning Du Bois’ characterization of the liberal US foreign policy paradigm as colonialism by another name, Baldwin makes his position clear later in the essay when he claims that the US is the world’s last stronghold for liberty, and that it’s the American Negro’s embodiment of it that distinguishes black Americans from their international counterparts. But if these internationalist claims to black American distinction are only the products of Baldwin’s “confusion” and condescension, as he confesses to Sol Stein, he does stand firmly in his view of the US-Soviet struggle as one between liberty and totalitarianism, and that liberty is the force that should win out. Baldwin defends this view against Stein’s objections that the US is struggling for any kind of dominance at all:

...you say I’m inaccurate in saying that America and Russia are battling for the domination of the world. What, then, I wonder, would be accurate? What else have nations ever battled for? And it’s no answer, you know, to say that nations have battled, for example, for the right to be left alone, or the right to be free; small nations, with no realistic hope for extending their influence, are content (perhaps) with these blessings; large nations never have been. Do you object to the word ‘domination’? But domination is one of the facts of life, particularly in the present case: it is perfectly clear that if America is not dominant, Russia will be. I, personally, prefer to see America dominant ... America is the last stronghold of the Western idea of personal liberty. And I certainly think that this idea should dominate the world.<sup>78</sup>

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78 Stein, *Native Sons*, 48.

What is in dispute between Baldwin and Stein are the appropriate optics for the ideological campaign that, if managed appropriately, will inoculate non-aligned nations from the spread of socialism. For Stein, detaining Du Bois was a necessary step toward determining the kinds of racial politics would be articulated at the conference.<sup>79</sup> But for Baldwin it is a move that reflected poorly on the promise of American liberalism, negating his claims that the American Negro is more qualified than any other to safeguard the ideals of the West.

Baldwin's essayistic and fictional writings would grow increasingly polemical after the publication of *Nobody Knows My Name* in 1961, and though this spelt a decline in the quality of Baldwin's prose style in the eyes of many of his contemporary critics, his visibility as a public intellectual—indeed as a “spokesman” for the Civil Rights Movement—only increased. *Notes* would have no trouble making it onto the *New York Times* Best Seller list, and it also earned Baldwin a slew of speaking engagements, and an interview in *Ebony* magazine and a feature in *Time*.<sup>80</sup> The Chicago stop on the book tour for *Nobody Knows My Name* included a lecture at the University of Chicago, a television appearance and a meeting with the honorable Elijah Muhammed, who had looked smilingly on Baldwin's Radio segment with Malcom X and Princeton professor Eric Goldman in April 1956.<sup>81</sup> In May he would receive a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, which was followed by a grant from *Partisan Review* shortly thereafter. Baldwin's 1962 novel *Another Country* would also achieve best-seller status, and in 1963 it was joined by *The Fire Next Time* as one of Baldwin's two most profitable books.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 94. Stein compares Du Bois to a teenager who embarrasses the family by routinely sneaking out late at night and contracting VD in a fashion conspicuous to the neighbors.

<sup>80</sup> Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography*, 187.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>82</sup> Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography*, 118.



If Baldwin began his career by decrying the woeful state of mass-marketed protest fiction, by the 1960s he would come full circle by producing a protest literature of his own. Literary historians have most often comprehended this about-face of Baldwin's as a primarily ideological one, or as a result of his capitulation not just to the general popularity of Black Power in the 1960s but also to criticism that the movement's leading figures levied against Baldwin for his adjacency to the normatively white liberal establishment. Bringing together the scholarship of Cheryl Clarke, Michelle Wallace, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Stuart Hall, Doug Field has attributed the evolution of Baldwin's political and aesthetic commitments throughout the 1960s to Black Power's conflation of black homoerotic desire with political passivism and placation, which was matched by the movement's inclination toward the idioms of hypermasculinity and patriarchal power.<sup>83</sup> The general impact of this hypermasculine political rhetoric was the exclusion of women and gays from the movement's core constituency, and it also resulted in Eldridge Cleaver's merciless critique of Baldwin in *Soul on Ice* (1968). Though it was Cleaver's criticism of Baldwin that proved to be the most formative for the writing he produced in the last decades of his career, it is also the case that "by the late 1960s, 'Baldwin bashing was almost a rite of initiation.'"<sup>84</sup> Baldwin's increasing age and spotty commitments to radical political change also factored into his dismissal—along with that of Martin Luther King Jr., Bayard Rustin, and other black political and intellectual leaders—as Stokely Carmichael's generation of black radicals aimed to move past the paradigm of non-violent action and a politics planted in love. Though Baldwin himself credited *Soul on Ice* as an illuminating critique that had much to do with the reorientation of his writing in the late 1960s, Field also urges us to keep in mind how

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<sup>83</sup> Field, *All Those Strangers*, 172.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

significant the assassinations of King and Malcom X were in Baldwin's disillusionment with the prospect of improved race relations in the US.<sup>85</sup>

What often escapes these accounts of Baldwin's decline are the contemporaneous literary-institutional phenomena that began to evolve the horizon of expectations for African American writing in the late 1960s. As we'll see in chapter two, the study of historical racial violence in the US gained traction among New Left historians as Southern Civil Rights activism was met with mob and police violence. Comparisons between contemporary racial violence and that which was inflicted on the enslaved abounded within historical, literary, and sociological studies, wherein an interest in "the slave personality of the past" in practice translated into an identification of the African Americans confronted with racial violence at the height of the Civil Rights movement with their enslaved ancestors. Publishers flooded the market with slave narrative anthologies between 1968 and 1972, about the same period during which the genre of the meta-slave narrative was pioneered by *Jubilee* (1966), *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971). The popularity of this new narrative form offers us some supplementary insight into why Baldwin's writing became increasingly less popular over the course of the late 1960s and 1970s. Whereas his capitulation to the rhetoric and aesthetics of Black Power have anchored the explanations offered by Doug Field, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and others—to paraphrase, they claim that Baldwin ended up producing the very kind of protest literature that he condemned at the start of his career, and it was not received well by high cultural critics—we should also attend to the ways that the increasing interest in analogies between American slavery and Civil Rights protest among publishers and academics significantly altered the field of cultural production that Baldwin had been situated in.

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<sup>85</sup> Field, *All Those Strangers*, 73.

## *Conclusion*

A major reason why I've focused on Baldwin's pre-1960 essays in this chapter is because of the determinative and transitional role they played in the development of what Mark McGurl has termed "high cultural pluralism," a broad category for the kind of the minority writing that grew out from American modernism's prioritization of difference and distinction in the postwar period. Although McGurl is thinking mostly with fictional, novelistic writing in this formulation of how Jewish American, African American, Chicano, and eventually women's and queer writing became central to the creative writing paradigms of the postwar university, there are illuminating reasons for why Baldwin's essays could or should be included in this archive even though they are not.

McGurl has joined Werner Sollors, Jeff Karem and Gordon Hutner in looking to regionalism as the supply of essential difference that prefigured the purchase that minority difference would come to have on American literature from the postwar period onward. As I mentioned earlier, Faulkner's early fiction has been taken as representative of the ways that modernism's hostility to mass cultural homogeneity surfaced in what critics have received as a dogmatic commitment to regional difference, which, given Faulkner's Civil-Rights era admonition that the rest of the US "go slow" in introducing racial equality in the South, has been easy to categorize into something of a white minority discourse.<sup>86</sup> As McGurl has emphasized, the logics of "expansion" and "differentiation" that would ultimately turn the multicultural university into a "difference engine" by the end of the twentieth century also conditioned it to be a major facilitator for the institutionalization and expansion of modernism's discourse on

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<sup>86</sup> Jeff Karem, *The Romance of Authenticity: The Cultural Politics of Regional and Ethnic Literatures* (Charlottesville: UVA Press, 2004), 52.

difference. With their recovery of “creative writing” from 1920s progressive pedagogical programs and their emphases on self-expression,<sup>87</sup> creative writing programs in the postwar decades produced a categorical minority subject that could be “called upon to speak from the point of view of one or another hyphenated population, synthesizing the particularity of the ethnic—or analogously marked—voice with the elevated idiom of literary modernism.”<sup>88</sup> The uptake of Baldwin’s Paris essays suggests that the appeal of this new wave of minority writing was not confined to the university.

Baldwin’s pre-1960s essays certainly meet the criteria that McGurl has laid out for high cultural pluralism, but one would be hard-pressed to identify the ways that the postwar university shaped his essayistic work. In this chapter I have shown how the New York intellectual magazines, as well as the shadow of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the paperback revolution at Dial, came to produce Baldwin as both a high cultural critic and an early voice of high cultural pluralism. This has been to show how modernism’s investment in essential difference found new life in Baldwin’s essays, and to explain just how crucial the Cold War was in amplifying the salience of representing difference even before its high prioritization by creative writing programs. Interestingly, McGurl looks to the rise of meta-slave narrative fiction during the 1960s and 1970s as the moment when the salience of the speaking “I,” which had been so fundamental to antebellum slave narratives, resurfaced in the twentieth century.<sup>89</sup> But given that both slave narrative anthologies and meta-slave narratives seem to have arisen when the study of enslavement became a way of mediating anti-racist agitation and counter-revolutionary racist violence toward the end of the 1960s, the significance of representing

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<sup>87</sup> Mark McGurl, *The Program Era*, 84-86.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>89</sup> Mark McGurl, *The Program Era*, 84.

enslaved subjectivity itself seems to have had a net effect on how the dominant modes of African American literary representation evolved across the decade. We might also consider what these analogies between American chattel slavery and violence during the Civil Rights era meant for the isolation of the African American “freedom struggle” from the internationalist struggles with which it was contemporaneous, which is especially significant given how vigorously the Black Panthers and other black radical groups argued for the linkage of the internal colonization that African Americans endured with anticolonial struggle in the diaspora. Baldwin’s internationalization of African American particularity would factor in mightily here, pointing us to the transnational stakes and domestic political consequences of his pre-1960s disidentification from pan-Africanist notions of racial community.

The institutional life of modernist distinction and its web of aesthetic and ideological entanglements also helps us to grasp the contingency of high cultural pluralism’s conditions for possibility. Different from how carpers of identitarianism have thought of cultural pluralism as a major facilitator for neoliberal conspiracies to preserve economic inequality, this chapter’s engagement with the complicated and uneven development of modernist difference points to a collage of aesthetic and ideological commitments that have intermingled and evolved as they have gained traction among many different institutions over the course of the twentieth century. What I have offered with this account is a reworking of the ways that—in incredibly different registers—scholars such as Walter Benn Michaels and Jodi Melamed have insisted upon an antagonism between anti-racist identitarianism and the good faith measures that would be necessary to redress the economic inequality that identitarianism actually helps to maintain. In an alternative to historical narratives of how regionalism anticipated high cultural pluralism, Michaels has claimed that American modernists of the early twentieth century explicitly engaged

with the negotiation of racial and national identities themselves.<sup>90</sup> For Michaels, the transmutation of racial essentialism into cultural essentialism was one of early American modernism's lasting achievements, and its ramifications have been made acutely relevant in the ways that the primacy of difference and diversity has constructed systemic, material inequality as a problem of prejudice and perception.<sup>91</sup> Jodi Melamed has argued something similar in *Represent and Destroy*, where she claims that the state, the university, corporations and cultural institutions have deployed different iterations of postwar liberalism to sustain white supremacy. In the schema that Melamed has drawn, official anti-racism was institutionalized at the start of the Cold War with Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* and has lived on via the cooperate/state/university institutional nexus.<sup>92</sup> What I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, however, are the ways that identitarianism was seeded in modernism's commitment to distinction and was reactivated by demands for high cultural innovation and new forms of representing race during the Cold War. This is not to dismiss the pervasiveness of anti-black racism among these institutions nor to minimize the weight of their complicity in the preservation of racist hierarchies. It's the contingency of these developments that should factor in more heavily in accounting for and historicizing identitarianism as it developed in the late twentieth century.

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<sup>90</sup> The themes of incest and homoeroticism that frequent *The Sound and the Fury*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Sun Also Rises* Michaels reads as demonstrative of nativist anxieties around the ethnic diversification of the American populous during the interwar period.

<sup>91</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Diversity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Holt, 2006), 15.

<sup>92</sup> Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 7.

## The Peculiar Institution: Two Acts

In *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, and Aesthetic Life* (2018), Stephen Best claims that literary production has taken a center position in African American cultural studies since the publication year of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).<sup>1</sup> With Hortense Spiller's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987), Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), and several other major works on enslavement following shortly thereafter, Best finds that the field has been majorly preoccupied with staging an ethical relationship to the past, resulting in approaches to the archive centered on polarities between recovery and unrecoverability, agency and restriction, melancholy and repair.<sup>2</sup> Alongside Sharon Marcus, Best has written elsewhere about the paradigms of "symptomatic reading" that followed what we might describe as an epochal disciplinary turn to the methodologies of Marxist analysis and psychoanalytic theory, after which the discipline of literary studies has been dominated by the demystification of ideological operations ostensibly hidden in plain sight, and so in *None Like Us*, these methodological stakes are also present. But as far as African American writing and black politics are concerned, Best is ultimately interested in finding a way to move past approaches to slavery aimed at the theorization of black collectivity and solidarity.

Best uses the term "metaleptic" to describe what happens when slavery, or any given enslaved subject, becomes a "figure of a figure" when apprehended through the archive.<sup>3</sup> This is how he ties his critique of contemporary slavery studies to larger disciplinary questions about method: interior lives of enslaved subjects will never be available to us because they're always

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1 Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, and Aesthetic Life* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018), 68.

2 Stephen Best, *None Like Us*, 65.

3 Stephen Best, "Unfit for History," Vimeo video (Stephen Best (Gender. Region. Slavery)), 1:36, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/91461686>

already mediated by the traces (e.g., slavers' inventory records, court case files, and so on) of their existence, and this is what identitarian, vindicationist approaches to the study of slavery fail to adequately reckon with. Best derives part of this argument from David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004), which carries out an extended reading of C.L.R. James's *Black Jacobins* in order to emphasize that in valorizing historical instances of black subversions of colonial power—which James does by narrating Toussaint Louverture's slave revolt during the Haitian Revolution—we can only go so far in comparing them to the contemporary given the contingent conditions of possibility (which in Louverture's case would be the beginning of modernity itself) and contextual particularities that render transhistorical comparisons moot.<sup>4</sup>

This is all to give the shape of the questions I want to take up in this chapter, on the historical durability of slavery as a representational figure for various commitments to collectivity and solidarity in African American literary production and literary scholarship. In this chapter, I want to historicize the ways that the study and representation of slavery acquired its critical utility, and I want to tell a different, longer story about what changed after the publication and strong reception of *Beloved*.

I divide the historiography that I want to trace into *first-* and *second-wave* slavery studies. In historicizing slavery's wide-ranging representational utility this way, I map a field of cultural production generally constituted by institutions such as the university, mainstream American publishers, and American state power. I'm most specifically interested, though, in the disciplinary formations that, since the late 1960s, have endowed the study and representation of slavery with its cultural significance and representational power, both of which have seen several

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no.3 (Spring 2012), 456.



evolutions leading up to their contemporary configurations. Best's treatment of *Beloved* as a field-shifting text is representative of the cross-disciplinary attention it has received since it won the Pulitzer prize in 1988, and so what I hope to do in this study is attend to the larger shifts that I think we should look at as the conditions within which Morrison's novel resonated as a significant intervention. I also want to demonstrate the degree to which slavery had already taken a central position in the study of African American culture prior to the 1980s. I argue that we should attend to the disciplinary formation—or *institutionalization*, to put it more crudely—of black feminist scholarship as a major departure from how the study and representation of slavery had been deployed to both valorize African American political agency and to prop up theories of black cultural pathology. If the *first wave* can be characterized by the abjection of black women within both these sometimes counterposed, sometimes interlocking frameworks, then we should read the *second wave* as what came after this black feminist turn away from the hegemony of black familial normativity that, as early as *The Moynihan Report: The Negro Family, The Case For National Action* (1965), had been couched in the sociological terms of black cultural pathology and black matriarchy.

In many ways, what I offer is a literary-historical account of how the vindicationist, memorialist, and identitarian currents that have been conducted through contemporary representations of enslaved subjectivity were produced via the multicultural regime opened up by the mid-century identity turn, the contours of which I map out in chapter one. As I have it there, it was the simultaneity of the mid-century American modernist revival, initiated by the New York intellectual magazines *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*, with the geopolitical salience that had accrued to racial representation during the early Cold War that marked the decline of protest fiction and opened up a new paradigm of African American writing that literary

historians such as Kenneth Warren and Marc McGurl have termed “identity writing”<sup>5</sup> and “high cultural pluralism” respectively.<sup>6</sup> In my discussion of James Baldwin’s early essays, I show that Baldwin anticipated the literary phenomena that McGurl attributes to creative programs in the postwar period and that he confines to the novels they produce. Now, I want to attend less to fictional slave narratives’ formal properties than I do to the social conditions that were auspicious for this new genre. In other words, I read the *first wave* from a bit of a distance, reconstellating much of the scholarship that has been produced on it, in order to distinguish the black feminist turn that I want to be the center point of this chapter. At the risk of posing a *first-wave/second-wave* dichotomy that might be more blurry than I’m currently giving it credit for, I claim that slave narrative fiction of the *first-wave* was of a piece with the disciplinary formations, state and corporate interests whose terms came under significant critique with black feminism’s emphasis on intersectionality and fraught absorption into the American academy.<sup>7</sup> Rather than thinking of this black feminist turn as one of *second wave* slave narrative fiction’s conditions for possibility, I want to show that slave narrative fiction was one among many literary fronts on which black feminism introduced new, but not totally unproblematic, ways of representing slavery and enslaved subjectivity.

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5 Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011), 107. Warren offers this category for the contemporary writing that others are wont to term “African American literature.”

6 Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009), 32.

7 Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018). Nash describes intersectionality as “women’s studies’ primary program building tool and institutional goal,” and in this chapter I want to ask how this aspect of black feminism’s disciplinary formation and institutional life facilitated black feminists’ renegotiation of the terms (e.g. normativity, pathology, etc.) upon which contemporary slavery studies was initially brought into being.

First, I'll want to more adequately situate the slave narratives of the immediate post-civil rights period within the historical and sociological discourses and literary developments that initially introduced the narration and representation of American chattel slavery as a primary means of narrating American racial violence and inequality in the 1960s and 1970s. The disciplinary and institutional shifts that I discuss early on in this chapter I take from Ashraf Rushdy, Stephany Smallwood, Walter Johnson, and James Berger, who have documented the ways that representing slavery became crucial to mediating polemics over black cultural agency, black cultural pathology, and black familial normativity during these decades. These literary scholars and historians credit the rise of New Left social history for making the “personality” and “culture” of the enslaved urgent matters of historical inquiry. They position the wave of neo-slave narratives that populated the 1970s and 1980s—e.g., Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979)—as part and parcel of the commonplace criticism that New Left historical scholarship lacked first-hand accounts from the enslaved, hence the rampant publication of both slave narrative anthologies and neo-slave narratives during this period.<sup>8</sup> Rushdy and Berger provide special insight into the 1965 *Moynihan Report*, both casting light on the genealogy of sociological scholarship on black cultural pathology that led up to and followed from the *Moynihan Report*. They trace something of a black nationalist vein aimed at consecrating the African American cultural and kinship structures that had endured after emancipation and remained crucial to contemporary African American cultural life well into the twentieth century. In parsing these accounts, I want to first demonstrate the degree to which neo-slave narratives

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<sup>8</sup> Ashraf Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 39.

were commensurate with the archival approaches and narrative methods that these disciplinary formations opened up; and secondly, I want to lay out the gendered terms upon which these discourses were established. Ultimately, I show how the subject position of black enslaved women took on an analogical utility for thinking race and gender together in the study of African American culture and how the idiom of intersectionality later facilitated black feminists' re-engagement with these line of inquiry as Black and African American studies, as well as the field of African American literature, took new shape in the academy. I route this black feminist turn through Angela Davis's "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1972) and Hortense Spillers's "'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe': An American Grammar Book" (1987) before repositioning Toni Morrison's *Beloved* within this black feminist literature.

***Experiments in Method: How the Subaltern Learned to Speak***

When William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* debuted in 1967, it was received with adulation unprecedented in scale. The novel's meteoric sales numbers became a bigger story than the Pulitzer Prize *Confessions* won in 1968: in addition to the record-breaking \$150,000 he received from the Book of the Month Club, Styron was paid \$1,000,000 by the New American Library in exchange for paperback rights to the novel three years before its publication. Harper's also spent \$7,500 more than it had paid any other author in its one-hundred seventeen years of business, to print a fifty-thousand-word excerpt.<sup>9</sup> But alongside its rabid promotion by publishers and nearly immediate canonization among literary scholars and historians, *Confessions* also met a wave of backlash from black nationalist intellectuals for whom representing slavery had become crucial to framing Black Power politics and anti-racist activism in the late 1960s. It came as no surprise that Styron painted an emasculating (to use these critics'

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<sup>9</sup> Ashraf Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives*, 18.

phrasing), less than heroic portrait of Turner and a woefully inadequate picture of historic African American cultural tenets—a product of the novel’s fidelity to conventionally racist historiographies—given that Styron was a white author adopting the voice of an enslaved black person.<sup>10</sup>

As Ashraf Rushdy has argued, it was in large part this black intellectual controversy surrounding Styron’s novel that launched the neo-slave narrative boom in the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> Released by Beacon Press in 1968, *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* quickly became an urtext for black intellectuals’ questions on the ethical complications of white authors appropriating the voices of enslaved subjects and on the political purchase of reclaiming what they regarded as the earliest form through which African American political subjectivity was articulated. With contributions such as “The Failure of William Styron,” “Our Nat Turner and William Styron’s Creation,” “The Manipulation of History and of Fact: An Ex-Southerner’s Apologist Tract for Slavery and the Life of Nat Turner; or, William Styron’s Faked Confessions” among its contents, it’s unsurprising that the body of fictional work that followed in the next decade maintained such an ardent preoccupation with the literary-cultural drama of the previous one. As Rushdy puts it, this is one among several explanations for why neo-slave narratives such as Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), to take a highly representative example, is so bogged down with explicit references to the literary and cultural politics of the 1960s.<sup>12</sup>

These fictional representations of slavery were one among several new methodological approaches to making the lives of the enslaved intelligible to scholars and analogous to African American political agitation in the contemporary. With its conception of historical knowledge

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<sup>10</sup> Ashraf Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

production as an avenue through which movements against race, gender and class inequality could be further legitimized, the concretization of New Left historical scholarship within the academy centralized “agency” as a primary thematic in the marginalized histories produced by its adherents.<sup>13</sup> As early as Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution* (1956), historians of slavery worked to establish continuities between enslaved peoples’ acts of “resistance” and midcentury African Americans’ anti-racist activist efforts. By the time Eugene Genovese published *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* in 1974, historical work in this vein had achieved a conception of resistance capacious enough to qualify the most quotidian acts of refusal as substantive blows against the peculiar institution, and in turn, non-spectacular, everyday acts of rebellion sat alongside organized acts of political agitation in the historical analogies they drew.<sup>14</sup>

Stampp’s work was representative of how the New Left’s emphasis on agency and resistance shifted historians’ relationship to the archive. Following the lead of historians such as Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Richard Hodfstadter, who pushed back against historical approaches to slavery that had privileged slave owners’ accounts and dismissed documentary materials that could have helped foreground the lived experiences of the enslaved, *The Peculiar Institution* took what was then regarded as a pioneering interest in “ ‘what slavery meant to the Negro.’ ”<sup>15</sup> Over the next decade and a half, historians of slavery increasingly made more use of slave testimony in their work. They dispensed with the discipline’s long-held consensus around “archival scarcity,” deploying new quantitative methods to study materials

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13 Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no.1 (Autumn 2003): 113.

14 Ibid, 117.

15 Stephanie Smallwood, “The Politics of the Archive and History’s Accountability to the Enslaved,” *History of the Present* 6, no.2 (Fall 2016): 121.

such as the Works Progress Administration's interviews with former slaves, anti-slavery papers collected at disparate university archives, and information such as wills, census data, tax records, and inventories held by state bureaus. This new sense of "archival richness" opened up a "methodological revolution" capable of bridging New Left historians' preoccupations with agency to matters of method.<sup>16</sup>

Much like the literary production generated by the controversy surrounding *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, reception politics went far in informing these methodological shifts in historical scholarship. Whereas Stamp's work signaled a major step toward establishing the disciplinary legitimacy of the New Left, it was the absence of any testimony from the enslaved in Stanley Elkin's *Slavery: A Problem in American Intellectual and Institutional Life* (1959) that triggered much of the cross-disciplinary, multi-institutional interest in slave narratives throughout the 1960s. Among several of the theses that New Left historians took as problematic was Elkin's claim that slavery produced maladaptive characteristics among the enslaved, which explained stereotypes such as the of the "Sambo" and had populated much of the early, pro-slavery historical literature on the institution of slavery. The implications that followed from Elkin's arguments undercut New Left historians' efforts to anchor their studies in terms of agency and resistance, and his failure to incorporate first-person accounts of the lived experience of the enslaved became a major point of critique.<sup>17</sup> And yet, the critical conversations that came in response to these methodological shortcomings did much to establish "the personality of the enslaved" as a major line of scholarly inquiry. Among historians, sociologists, and literary scholars, it prompted comparisons between contemporary urban violence and antebellum slave

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<sup>16</sup> Stephanie Smallwood, "The Politics of the Archive and History's Accountability to the Enslaved," 122-123.

<sup>17</sup> Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives*, 31.

revolts; the Black Power Movement of 1965 and “Black empowerment before 1865;” the communal identity central to black nationalism and “slave personality in the past.”<sup>18</sup>

If new approaches to studying slavery helped New Left historians connect their work to contemporary liberation movements by moving the discipline away from its methodological marginalization of enslaved peoples, they also served sociologists who aimed to counter the consensus that the cultural and kinship structures of the enslaved crippled contemporary African American cultural and family life. Conducted by the sociologist and then-Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Moynihan Report: The Negro Family, The Case for National Action* (1965) foregrounded the effects of slavery on black American social structures in its attempt to identify the determinants of African American poverty. Although it ultimately called for federal funding to address crises in employment, housing, and medical care, the *Report's* characterization of black women as “usurpers” and black men as “emasculated” not only corroborated black nationalist intellectuals’ calls for separatism and self-sufficiency in response to the state’s anti-black antagonisms, but it also triggered an outpouring of scholarship aimed at vindicating the cultural practices they found necessary to surviving slavery.<sup>19</sup> Whereas *The Moynihan Report* fit squarely within a genealogy of sociological work that identified the “matriarchal organization of black families” as a major cause of familial “weakness,” the scholarship intended to counter it very much valorized the cultural customs that they also found integral to sustaining African American life in the contemporary. In works such as Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1976) and Carol Stack’s *All Our Kin, Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (1974), sociological scholarship on the

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<sup>18</sup> Rushdy, 35.

<sup>19</sup> James Berger, “Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison’s *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report,” *PMLA* 111, no.3 (Spring 1996): 412.



African American family intertwined with New Left historians' efforts to foreground agency, resistance, and resilience as the touchstones of African Americans' cultural inheritance.<sup>20</sup>

It was from these disciplinary developments that slavery took on much of its analogical utility in the postwar period. In many ways, the work of demonstrating enslaved peoples' ingenuity, resilience, and subtle practices of subversion was a means toward consecrating black liberation struggles and countering state-backed claims about black cultural pathology, the explanations for which were also rooted in comparisons to the cultures and "personalities" of the enslaved. What we can also see in these debates is how they created a range of methodological and narratological demands that the publication of non-fictional slave narratives was especially suited to fill. In view of the largely evidentiary role that first-hand accounts from former slaves played in this burgeoning, interdisciplinary field of slavery studies, their fictional counterparts were much more akin to the scholarship that made use of documentary materials in order to propagate presentist representations of enslaved subjectivity, culture, kinship, resistance, etc. Whereas fictionality itself has stood out to literary historians as the fundamental point of distinction between antebellum slave narratives—in which fidelity to the "facts" more often than not required attestations from white abolitionists committed to deploying slave testimony in the fight to dismantle the slave trade—the simultaneity of fictional slave narratives being published alongside non-fictional accounts in the late 1960s and 1970s should call our attention to much more illuminating distinctions.<sup>21</sup> The one I'm trying to highlight here is the relative necessity of disciplinary polemics over representing slavery to the production of slave narrative fiction during

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<sup>20</sup> James Berger, "Ghosts of Liberalism," 414.

<sup>21</sup> Mark McGurl, *The Program Era*, 264. McGurl explains that the validity of antebellum slave narratives was fundamental to their political function, marking this feature as the "fundamental difference" between this genre and the fictional slave narratives that would later imitate them.

this period. But more than neo- and meta-slave narratives’ “conditions of possibility,” I argue, sociological and historical accounts of slavery and its continuities with contemporary African American politics and culture were *kinds* of experiments in method of which fictional slave narratives were another, commensurate kind.

Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is an especially representative case given its publication timeline. Between 1968 and 1972, Arno Press, Beacon Press, the United Church Press, Indiana University Press, Greenwood Press, Harper and Row, Holt, Rinehart and Winston all published original slave narrative anthologies—this is roughly the same production period for Gaines’s novel, which he began writing in 1968 before it was finally published in 1971.<sup>22</sup> On the process of putting *The Autobiography* together, Gaines explains in an interview that, although it isn’t imitative of any original slave narrative in particular, he did in fact consult the WPA collection of former slaves’ first-person testimony in order to get the rhythm of the speech and an idea of how the ex-slaves would talk about themselves.<sup>23</sup> Taken together with the novel’s teleological narrativization of masculine, African American cultural agency, *Jane Pittman*’s conceptual reliance on and formal engagement with the testimony of former slaves appears representative of how first-wave slavery studies’ political investment in analogical historicization shaped its relationship to the archive.

*The Autobiography* opens with a foreword by the schoolteacher who’s managed to transcribe Jane’s first-hand account of her life just before her death. On the one hand, he explains, the teacher has an excess of material he must manage, as he “could not possibly put down on paper everything that Miss Jane and the others said on the tape during those eight or

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<sup>22</sup> Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Charles H. Rowell, “‘This Louisiana Thing That Drives Me’: An Interview with Ernest Gaines,” *Callaloo* no. 3, (May 1978): 46-47.

nine months.”<sup>24</sup> On the other, he’s forced to consult these other members of Jane’s household in order to answer questions and fill in gaps in Jane’s memory, because “...during the third week everything slowed up to an almost complete halt. Miss Jane began to forget everything. I don’t know whether she was doing this purposely or not, but suddenly she could not remember anything anymore.”<sup>25</sup> It’s in these ways that the novel tips readers off to the collective history it aims to represent as well as its pedagogical potential. “Miss Jane’s story is all of their stories,” the anonymous editor quips at the end of the prologue, “and their stories are Miss Jane’s.”<sup>26</sup>

The story collected in the novel’s pages may mostly be Miss Jane’s to tell, yet from its beginnings in the throes of the Civil War up until its allusions to the violent attacks that halted the Freedom Riders’ campaigns in the 1960s, Jane in many ways functions as a witness to a tradition of African American martyrdom that’s nearly exclusive to brave and charismatic black men.<sup>27</sup> Jane’s passing references to figures such as Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others provide the novel with an historical periodization metric in which the heroic men Jane encounters step in as the messianic leaders who also could have been. Before they’re cut down by the violent, reactionary forces of racist violence whose methods and tactics evolve throughout

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24 Ernest Gaines, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, (New York: Dial Press, 1971), vii.

25 Ibid, vi.

26 Ibid, viii.

27 Erica Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xv. Edwards argues that “the uncritical investment in charisma as the motor of history ignores its limits as a model for social movements while showing us just how powerful a narrative force it is.” In describing how it has functioned as a “structuring fiction for liberatory politics,” she claims it is founded in “historical”/ “historiographic,” “epistemological,” and “social” violence. I deploy this term in my descriptions of the kind of gendered, political fictions in *The Autobiography* that fall under the rubric of “Great Man leadership” (another one of Edwards’s terms).

Janes' lifetime, these men give speeches, build schools, organize movements, and ultimately embody the collective aspirations of the black political publics that selectively "choose" them.

It takes more than two-hundred pages for Jane to paraphrase this premise. After decades of bearing witness to the assassination of these subversive male political figures, Jane gets word that a woman who's just moved to the "quarters," where most of the black workers in New Orleans live, has just given birth to a child everyone believes to be "the one." Set in New Orleans in the decades leading up to the black Civil Rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, this is how the novel's fourth and final book opens. "The Quarters" (Book 4) starts off with Jane's description of the messianic expectations for revolutionary leadership that older black workers on the Samson Plantation project onto the newborn children in whom they find transcendent political promise. Extending the universal timelessness of the ritual backward to Reconstruction, "the Depression," slavery, and then through to the Old Testament, Jane explains that "Anytime a child is born, the old people look in his face and ask him if he's the one."<sup>28</sup> This is how Gaines introduces Jimmy Aaron, the last of the charismatic black men of action she encounters, into the narrative. Whereas Jane insists that "I don't need to tell you who his daddy was," she places herself in the network of women who see Jimmy through from infancy to adulthood. When it's time for Shirley Aaron to give birth to Jimmy, it's his Great Aunt Lena who sends for Jane to come serve as Shirley's midwife. It then becomes unanimously apparent that Jimmy is "the one" by the time he's "five or six," which is when he stands out from the other boys who might have been "picked": "Why did we pick him? Well, why do you pick anybody? We picked him because we needed somebody. We could 'a picked one of Strut Hawkins's boys or one of Joe

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<sup>28</sup> Gaines, *The Autobiography*, 211.

Simon's boys. We could 'a' picked one of Aunt Lou Bolin's boys—but we picked him.”<sup>29</sup> Jane offers little clarity on the criteria that distinguish “the one” from the all others, but it's abundantly clear that the position of leadership this short list should feed into is completely closed off to women.

The messianic valences of Jimmy's being “chosen” surface in referential analogies ranging from explicitly Christological invocations to suggestive allusions to Martin Luther King, Jr., whose religious credentials Gaines is sure to emphasize. Ultimately, though, Jimmy's disavowal of Jane and others' efforts to ingratiate him into the ranks of the local church's leadership prefigures the confrontation Jimmy has with the quarters' black elders when he returns from “school” and, in place of the proclamations of faith other members of the congregation give on “ ‘Termination Sunday,” Jimmy makes the case that “we knowed what was happening all over the South, and it ought to be happening here too... Reverend King and the Freedom Riders was winning the battle in Alabama and Mi'ssippi, but us here in Luzana hadn't even started the fight.”<sup>30</sup> Shortly after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Jimmy succeeds in bringing the kind of political organization he's seen surface on a national level to his hometown. And yet, this collective victory costs him his life in the end. Jimmy is cut down like the other charismatic black men Jane has helped mother, and this is what brings the novel to its conclusion.

Jane's testimony is itself an archive of the black male agency that, as it was articulated in the *Moynihan Report* and other likeminded assessments of black American cultural pathology that were in line with it, was said to be “usurped” by the masculinity of black women. Given

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<sup>29</sup> Gaines, *The Autobiography*, 212.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

Jane's matriarchal relationship to Jimmy and to Ned, the speech-giving, school-building veteran of the 1898 Cuban war who she raises to adulthood from the time *she's* eleven or twelve years old, we might say that Gaines establishes a complimentary relation between matriarchy and black male agency, thereby subverting the "black matriarchy myth" that Moynihan and other sociologists identified as a maladaptive, cultural holdover from enslavement. But it might be even more important to take note of the fact that Jane is able to narrate this collective history precisely because only men are permitted to take direct action and heroically die for it. Put differently, martyrdom is the marker that makes Jimmy another version of Ned, who is another version of Jane's lover Joe, and so on, because Jane's autobiography is fundamentally less about her than it is about all the black men of action whose world-historical energy and agency couldn't be contained—not by the threat of death, not the by the boundaries of autobiography, and especially not by the "emasculating" nature of black matriarchy. If her account is a collective history of the present, it's ultimately animated and given continuity by the masculine excesses of these great black men.

I offer this reading as an example of how the first-wave project of offering counter-histories of black political agency was in many ways entrenched in the masculinist, ethno-nationalist terms of debate that had been established by historians and sociologists in this interdisciplinary, multi-institutional field of slavery studies. But we should note that so little of *The Autobiography* actually takes place before emancipation—fewer than ten full pages in the 1972 Bantam edition—that we'd be hard-pressed to give more than a razor-thin account of how the novel represents enslavement, if any at all. In the brief snippet of Jane's pre-emancipation life that the novel does manage to capture, we learn that a Union soldier, after running a squadron of confederates off of the plantation where she is enslaved, frees her from the slave

name Ticey and gives her his daughter's name Jane. She's beaten and sent to work in the fields after refusing to answer to Ticey any longer, and then freedom comes a year later in the very next scene.

The brevity and narratological thinness with which these opening moments are rendered is striking indeed—how is it that the lone act of slave resistance in the novel, in addition to the event of re-naming without which the novel would bare its title, could be reported so casually? What should we make of the way that the novel's first-person narrator minimalizes this confrontation with the violences of the Peculiar Institution in an account that goes on to detail the social and political significance of the heroic actions taken by so many great black men? This is where antebellum slave narratives, which have been a core comparative analogue to the neo- and meta-slave narrative categories put forward by Rushdy and McGurl, fail to serve our readings of contemporary slave narrative fiction in the same way that the testimonies of former slaves collected by the Federal Writers' Project's Slave Narrative Project are able to. In fixating on fictionality itself as the dividing line between antebellum slave narratives of the Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs variety and late-twentieth century slave narrative fiction, these and other literary historians have overlooked the recorded and curated testimonies with which novels like *The Autobiography* explicitly draw from. Even if Gaines himself contends that he only consulted them to capture the speech patterns of the former slaves that were interviewed, it's hard to dismiss the conspicuously apparent overlap between the aesthetic and ideological commitments at work in Gaines's novel and those articulated by federal bureaus as they produced the Slave Narrative Project.

As Catherine Stewart has shown in *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project*, FWP officials subordinated the aim of documenting slavery from former

slaves' points of view to the larger priority of corralling regional and ethnic folk cultures into an archive emblematic of the nation's cultural diversity. Under the larger umbrella of the FWP, The Slave Narrative Project—wherein interviews with former slaves were collected by federal agents operating out of outposts in several states across the American South—was only one belated phase of the larger federal effort to document, curate, and catalogue “the folk elements of American life”<sup>31</sup> and to show that “diversity was the defining feature of the American population.”<sup>32</sup> The American Guidebook series, for example, was aimed at distilling a “domestic exoticism” from regional communities in the hopes of stimulating the economy with domestic tourism and replenishing a nationalist fervor that had begun to wane during the Depression. Inspiration for the Slave Narrative Project came from interviews with former slaves carried out for projects like these by federal agents in Florida and from independent projects carried out by black researchers at Fisk University, Southern University in Louisiana, and Kentucky State.<sup>33</sup>

The Slave Narrative Project wouldn't take on a life of its own until 1937, from which point the FWP bureau began taking significant lengths to standardize the accounts collected by its field agents. It conscripted scholars of African American literature and culture—most notably Sterling Allen Brown—to produce a standard code for transcribing and representing the vernacular speech of interviewees. It also produced questionnaires to guide field agents in their interviews. The questionnaires initially targeted fine details about life on the plantation (e.g.,

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31 Norman Yetman, “Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery,” *American Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 182.

32 Lynda M. Hill, “The WPA Federal Writers' Project Reappraised,” *Oral History* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 64.

33 Catherine Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project*. Durham: UNC Press, 2016. Todd Carmody, “Sterling Brown and the Dialect of New Deal Optimism,” *Callaloo* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 820-840.



what enslaved persons ate, what kinds of clothes they wore) and slave-owning families, but sociological and anthropological interests in contemporary African American life increasingly took priority as the project developed. Stewart credits this turn largely to anthropologist John Lomax, who “as the national advisor on folklore and folkways, would become intrigued by the possibilities presented by the Ex-Slave Project for gathering material related to African American folk customs.” As Lomax grew “critical of narratives that concentrated primarily on providing a history of slavery from the ex-slave’s point of view,” FWP guidelines gradually “placed greater emphasis ‘on questions concerning the lives of the individuals since they were freed,’ including the solicitation of ex-slaves opinions on ‘the younger generation of Negroes...and present conditions’”.<sup>34</sup>

Lomax’s efforts to contort the aims of the Slave Narrative Collection so that it could serve the anthropological study of minority cultures was one among several contemporary priorities that overtook the project’s purported ambition to produce first-person, documentary material on the past of African American enslavement. At the same time that field agents’ questionnaires worked much like surveys in the way that they facilitated qualitative data collection, it’s also important to see how they worked in tandem with the project’s editorial measures to produce narratives that read as authentic, representative, reliable, and of high literary merit, all of which would ensure the Slave Narrative Collection’s commercial and ideological success as well it’s strong reception among social scientists.<sup>35</sup>

The balance of priorities that the Slave Narrative Collection set out to strike comes through clearly in the kinds of literary and academic genres after which the project was modeled.

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<sup>34</sup> Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 69.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

On the one hand, ethnography had been established by social scientists and adopted by state entities as “the dominant scholarly approach to the subject of racial character and culture,” and like several of the FWP’s other projects, the Slave Narrative Collection adopted it in order to facilitated the kinds of “thick description” that anthropologists had systemized in their studies of disappearing ethnic and aboriginal cultures.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, SNC officials approached vernacular authenticity as a way of maximizing the Collection’s popular and commercial appeal, which is why they directed agents to consult post-Reconstruction era literatures—by figures such as Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Paige—that relied heavily on the representation of black vernacular forms. In all, the project’s editorial protocols were aimed at producing a range works that spanned historical, sociological, and autobiographical formats.<sup>37</sup>

These pragmatic and logistical aspects of the Slave Narrative Collection illuminate the ways that diversity and inclusion became integral to the maintenance of American liberalism early in the twentieth century, and they’re instructive for comprehending the work that slavery studies and slave narrative fiction would be called upon to do in the post-Civil Rights years. As Todd Carmody has argued, the bureaucratic appropriation of black vernacular speech did more than rejuvenate a cultural mythology of exceptionalism and self-inventiveness that had been thwarted by Depression-era stock market crashes.<sup>38</sup> Against the backdrop of New Deal policies that excluded black domestic and agricultural workers from the benefits provided to white working- and middle-class Americans by the new Welfare State, the aesthetics of inclusion put

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<sup>36</sup> Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 43.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Todd Carmody, “Sterling Brown and the Dialect of New Deal Optimism,” *Callaloo* 33, no .3 (Summer 2010): 821.

forward in the Slave Narrative Collection can also be seen as a means of narrating the nation in terms of multicultural incorporation.

Ironically, though, this Depression-era fetishization with the folk culture of former slaves stands in stark contrast to how black cultural pathology—the result of African American kinship structures having been mangled by the institution slavery, conservative sociologists would later argue—worked to represent the demographic distribution of economic inequality from the 1960s onward. Whereas the Slave Narrative Collection initially signified the state’s recognition of former slaves’ inherited culture as a national asset, the *Moynihan Report* identified the cultures passed down to descendants of the enslaved as a root cause for the unequal distribution of poverty among black Americans. This is one way of explaining the entanglement of black political and cultural struggle with notions of national teleology in the work of Ernest Gaines and other authors of slave narrative fiction in the first-wave period: they not only aimed to vindicate a cultural capacity for agency and resistance, but they also made black masculine charisma central to the narration of American national futurity.

Though Gaines’s novel stands out for its formal resemblances to the transcriptions produced by the Slave Narrative Collection, *The Autobiography* is much more representative of how the field of slavery studies in general—and slave narrative fiction in particular—narrated African American cultural continuity in terms of masculine self-possession and national futurity. The mass appeal and commercial success of Alex Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, which debuted first as a novel in 1976 and then as a television series in 1977 demonstrates even further how much the articulation of African American cultural fortitude—specifically in the gendered idioms of ethnic collectivity and familial cohesion—to the historical invigoration of the nation remained a dominant thematic not just in the study of American

slavery but also in the consumption of its fictional representations. Significantly longer than *Jane Pittman* (more than seven hundred pages in total), Haley's novel traces the lineage of its initial protagonist Kunta Kinte up to Haley himself. It begins in eighteenth-century Gambia before Kinte's eventual capture and travel through the Middle Passage to Maryland, where he's then sold off to a slave owner in Virginia. After several failed attempts to escape slavery—and a partially amputated foot along the way—Kunta survives to marry and produce the progeny of which Haley finds himself a part. After several generations have maintained a formidable lumber business in Tennessee, Haley recovers his family history and cultural heritage from census records, eighteenth-century periodicals, stories passed down from family members, and the Griots he meets in Gambia.

The uproar of *Roots*'s strong reception traveled across both consumer and academic spheres. The National Archives received a forty percent increase in requests to use its research facilities following the debut of the television adaptation in addition to a flood of letters of general interest about its archival holdings. The novel also quickly made its way onto two hundred seventy-six college reading lists, and Haley received funding for the project from *Reader's Digest* even before its publication. Though the novel is heavily preoccupied with notions of African “retentions” and “cultural survivals,” it was the academic and federal concern with the quality and durability of African American kinship norms that created the market for *Roots*'s quick accumulation of cultural value. As literary historians such as Stephanie Athley have suggested, *Roots*'s centering of African American maleness in its documentation of black familial durability is difficult to delink from the contemporaneous questions about pathology and kinship that culminated in the *Moynihan Report*. In creating a “narrative fusion in which the

heroic individual represents family, race, and nation,” *Roots* reiterates the liberal logic of collective survival and self-reliance as a cultural product of durable kinship ties.<sup>39</sup>

Kinship and self-reliance were major points of emphasis in the *Moynihan Report’s* assessment of African American poverty and its root causes. Central to its framing of the correlation between African American poverty and exceptionally high divorce rates, illegitimate births, and families “headed by females” was the *Report’s* finding about the overwhelmingly disproportionate distribution of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) support to non-white American children versus their white American counterparts. But even more to the point was the “worsening of the situation” observed in the *Report* from the founding of the AFDC (an offshoot of the New Deal Mother’s Aid program) up until the *Report’s* publication. The *Report’s* data on the increasing “dissolution” of the non-white, but especially Negro, family are martialed in its argument about the lack of group “progress” that distinguishes the failed assimilation of the African American population into national life from the much more successful assimilation of the “number of immigrant groups” who “have characteristically progressed more rapidly than others” due to their “unusually strong family bonds.”

As the case is made throughout the *Report*, the patriarchal nuclear family isn’t inherently superior to or more beneficial than other kinds of familial organization. “However,” the *Report* asserts,

it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society

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<sup>39</sup> Stephanie Atley, “Poisonous Roots and the New World Blues: Rereading Seventies Narration and Nation in Alex Haley and Gayl Jones,” *Narrative* 7, no.2 (1999): 175.

facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage .40

From this angle, the *Report* frames the maintenance and reproduction of nuclear patriarchy as a matter of ethnonational acculturation and assimilation. With the pluralist caveat (along with many others throughout the *Report*) about the special significance that patri-nuclear kinship bears in the twentieth-century US, the *Report* positions it as the threshold into full participation in national life. This is a reality of national life that has gone unnoticed and that stands to bring clarity to the problem of racial inequality, as the *Report* tries to narrate it. At the time of the *Report*'s publication, "people tend to assume that the nature of family life is about the same throughout American society. The mass media and the development of suburbia have created an image of the American family as a highly standardized phenomenon. It is therefore easy to assume that whatever it is that makes for differences among individuals or groups of individuals, it is not a different family structure." What the *Report* wants the public to understand is that

as with any other nation, Americans are producing a recognizable family system. But that process is not completed by any means. There are still, for example, important differences in family patterns surviving from the age of great European migration to the United States, and these variations account for notable differences in the progress and assimilation of various ethnic and religious groups (9).41

Put this way, a homogenous national kinship ideal is yet to be established; and yet, the *Report* interprets the African American population's failure to realize these ideal kinship forms as a measure of group progress toward full incorporation into the national community over time. Pathology and dependency are indicative of failed assimilation in this framing, whereas the

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40 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for Nation Action* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965), 29.

41 Ibid, 9.

capacity for black families to have achieved middle-class status is indicative of having fully embraced what the *Report* wants to think of as fundamentally American kinship patterns.

The *Report* nests this temporality of assimilation within the historical arch of national time from which it draws its narrative qualities. The title page is followed by an excerpt from Lyndon Johnson's January 4, 1965 State of the Union address, in which he alludes to the historical plot points that have led up to the "unfinished struggle" to establish a "unity of purpose and interests among the many groups that make up the American community."<sup>42</sup> The next page features a summary of the *Report's* findings, which is given in a statement about the worsening of American race relations and the impossibility for equal opportunity to produce equality of results if significant action isn't taken. The chain of argument here is striking: the two reasons given for inequality are 1) the "racist virus in the American blood stream still affects us: Negroes will encounter serious personal prejudice for at least another generation" and 2) "in terms of ability to win out in the competitions of American life, they are not equal to most of the those groups with which they will be competing. Individually, Negro Americans reach the highest peaks of achievement. But collectively, in the spectrum of American ethnic and religious and regional groups...Negroes are among the weakest." "The fundamental problem," following these two obstacles, "is that the Negro family of the urban ghettos is crumbling. A middle-class group has managed to save itself, but for vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly-educated city working class the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated." It's this fundamental problem that federal policy will set in its sights on: "A national effort is required

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<sup>42</sup> Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for Nation Action*, i.

that will give a unity of purpose to the many activities of the Federal government in this area, directed to a new kind of national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure”<sup>43</sup>

This is why the *Report* begins with the “Negro American Revolution” and the state’s response to it. It cites a host of what it terms *political*, *legal*, and *administrative* events that speak to the measures the state has taken to ensure equality of opportunity, whereas equality of “results” is endangered in part by racial discrimination but fundamentally by black familial pathology. After its study of “The Negro Family” in chapter two, the *Report* then brings the understudied event of chattel slavery to the forefront in chapter 3 on “The Root of the Problem,” which is where it cites sociological and historical scholarship on the particular effects of American slavery on the potential for African American males to enact the masculine traits that hold among males in other populations and in even other species. Despite its acknowledgement—and rhetorically thorough emphasis on what it deems a fact—that the capacity for black Americans to consistently and homogeneously reproduce and maintain the male-headed nuclear family has historically been sabotaged by anti-black prejudice, the *Report*’s ultimate conclusion is that it’s best chance at producing “equality of results” will be to stabilize the African American family.

At the same time that the *Report* annexes black civil rights agitation into its narration of the historical unfolding of American democracy, it’s emphasis on black familial pathology ultimately serves as a rebuff to the movement’s current demands on state power to intervene in the current crisis of inequality. State action on black employment and support for single-parent households would be moot, the *Report* contends, given the black American population’s misalignment with the rest of the nation along the axes of its established kinship norms.

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<sup>43</sup> Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for Nation Action*, 5.



These aspects of the *Report* point us to how the study and representation of slavery were bound up with post-civil rights questions of inclusion. That the *Report* established patriarchal power and familial normativity as criteria for minority incorporation into the national community is now a commonplace claim for cultural critics in the twenty-first century. According to Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong, for example, the *Report* gives us the “clearest symptomatic distillation of the shifts in technologies of power” that have distinguished the hegemonic force of neoliberalism in the decades following the *Report*’s publication. Characterizing neoliberalism as racial capital’s response to social movements’ confrontations with their “exclusion from institutions of citizenship and nationalism,” Hong and others have emphasized the propensity for racial capital to exert “deductive or repressive power” over racialized communities while “induct[ing] such communities into affirmative, productive biopower” at the same time. In this schema, incorporation thusly entailed dramatizing black populations’ dependency in terms of their sexual deviance, the result being that “gendered and sexual respectability becomes the dividing line between those who are rendered deviant, immoral, and thus precarious in opposition to those whose value to capital has been secured through a variety of forms.”<sup>44</sup> It’s also important that we understand the Moynihan moment, Ferguson reminds us, as a flashpoint in both the century-long trajectory of sociology’s efforts to regulate black American populations’ “sexual eccentricity” as well as the broader struggle among the social sciences over the assimilation and acculturation of African American populations beginning as early as the late nineteenth century.

At first glance, the *Report*’s assumed regulative or interpellative power and invocation of social-scientific knowledge would seem to support a straightforward explanation for why works

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44 Grace Kyungwon Hong, “Neoliberalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 50, no.1 (Spring 2015): 57.

like *Roots* or the *The Autobiography* were so well-received both in print and in their filmic adaptations. That the *Report* has been embroiled in controversy from the time of its publication even up until the present day has been taken by many as an indicator of how it has given force to culturalist approaches to the study of poverty in the US. But this near-critical consensus on the reach and magnitude of the *Report*'s discursive influence is complicated by the fact that many of its patriarchal and heteronormative tenets—which have been said to comprise the criteria by which the state set out to regulate the incorporation of minority populations into biopower—were also central to Black Power and Black Aesthetic campaigns to begin with. The overlap between many Black Nationalists' investments in patriarchal kinship and those put forward in the *Moynihan Report*, in sum, makes it difficult to attribute the allure of patriarchal power during this period to the social-scientific consensus deployed in the Moynihan Report. Ultimately, it's the convergence of these curiously compatible, fundamentally gendered nationalist conceptions that historians and critics see black feminist thought, activism, and literary production opting out of.

It's the departure from these patriarchal poetics, the veneer of social-scientific veracity that mobilized them, and the black nationalist thought that endorsed them that helps us to distinguish second-wave slave narrative fiction as necessarily a black feminist intervention. To be sure, patriarchal power was not taken up evenly or in the same ways among disparate black nationalist contingents. As Rolland Murray has argued, the Nation of Islam's insistence on bourgeois masculine selfhood was distinct from the kind of masculine performance advocated by Ron Karenga, for example; and even among the Revolutionary Action Movement, Black Panther Party, and other black Marxist groups who rejected conventional masculine selfhood we must

draw distinctions between the kinds of “embodied male resistance” they each took up.<sup>45</sup> These differences notwithstanding, it was indeed bedrock nationalist ideologues such as Eldridge Cleaver and Nathan Hare who weaved Moynihan’s matriarchy myth into the mainline black nationalist discourses that black lesbian feminists would ultimately come to take issue with. For Rod Ferguson, this phenomenon is generalizable to black feminist movements who, like other women of color feminist movements in the Global South, needed to carve out space for critiquing the regulation of gender and sexuality harbored in insurgent nationalist liberation campaigns. But it’s 1970s black women’s fiction in particular wherein Ferguson, Murray, Madhu Dubey and others find some of the earliest distillations of black American feminists’ confrontations with oppressive patriarchal power and with the epistemic limitations of documentary empiricism. Both Ferguson and Dubey take up Toni Morrison’s *Sula* as one of the earliest works in the wave of black women’s fiction through which black feminist thought would gain traction throughout the 1970s. According to Ferguson, *Sula* “offered black lesbian feminists an opportunity to formulate a politics that could negate the gender, racial, and sexual regulations of nationalist formulations.”<sup>46</sup> He finds an instructive capacity in Morrison’s novel given the ways that “*Sula* represented a process of negation in which an apparently non-political literary text about two black women became a resource for epistemological and political practices that could express alternatives to existing social movements.”<sup>47</sup> And in view of the ways that black nationalists emphasized control over aesthetic production in their campaigns—giving life to magazines, theatres, and other institutions meant to institutionalize Black Aesthetic ideology—

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45 Rolland Murray, *Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power, and Masculine Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 99.

46 Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward A Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 111.

47 Ibid, 126.

Dubey insists, alongside Murray, that *Sula* is just one example of how the novel became a primary medium for black feminists to critique Black nationalist and Black Aesthetic ideology given how black nationalist aesthetes privileged “the oral immediacy of drama and poetry” over fiction.<sup>48</sup>

Works like *Sula*, *Correigidora*, and *Meridian*, Dubey claims, do incorporate these oral forms, but they ultimately resist and revise the insistence on the “functional,” ideologically pointed conceits that colored Black Aesthetic drama and poetry. Most significant among these revisions is the denaturalization of the revolutionary subject that black nationalists’ emphases on patriarchy wanted to call into being. Interestingly, Dubey observes that at the same time that black nationalist and Black Aesthetic ideology often attempted to conjure a “useable past” that preceded the violent cycles of oppression and subjection inaugurated with the Atlantic slave trade, it also set its sights on distinguishing its revolutionary politics as a radical rupture from these historical cycles, ultimately struggling to reconcile these two revolutionary temporalities. Black women writers’ straddling of historical repetition on the one hand and the disruption of linear, teleological time on the other, Dubey argues, signals a critical engagement both with these aspects of black nationalist aesthetics and the criteria for “readability” they fashioned among Black Aesthetic readerships. That black women writers challenged the “finality” of documentary material—“newspapers, historical and sociological documents, and other cultural texts that defined the black subject in monological terms”—in other words, speaks not only to their confrontation with Black Aesthetic ideology but also to how they precipitated black feminist

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48 Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the National Aesthetic* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994).

criticism's methodological preoccupation with literariness as a primary avenue for formulating its political and epistemological orientations.

It's precisely these departures in 70s black women's fiction that underscore the confluence of patriarchal power, documentary aesthetics, and nationalist teleology that saturated the field of slavery studies in general and slave narrative fiction in particular throughout the 1970s. Whether or not *Roots* or *The Autobiography* reproduced the ideological commitments at work in the *Moynihan Report* or Black Aesthetic literary paradigms is less important than the fact that the only critical backlash that would trouble the reception of either work were allegations that Haley had fabricated the documentary source material he claimed *Roots* was inspired by (in addition to a lawsuit from Margaret Walker, author the historical novel *Jubilee*, on the grounds that Hailey had plagiarized her 1966 work); whereas Morrison, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shongé—nearly all the black women novelists who were coming to fame during the 1970s—were taken to task for their allegedly unfair portrayals of black men and distorted depictions of the black nuclear family as oppressively patriarchal. While it's true that we see early works of slave narrative fiction by black women that broke the first-wave mold, the critical wing of black feminist thought that would not only consecrate works like *Kindred* and *Corregidora* but also adopt their epistemological conceits was yet in formation when these novels were published. I want to suggest here that black feminist representations of enslavement couldn't be received as well during this period because they were in the process of bringing the interpretive communities that would canonize them into being.

I'll return to Toni Morrison's shaping influence as both an editor and serial novelist at the end of this chapter, but it's worth observing here how extensively she herself helped cultivate the body of black women's fiction that would populate the 1970s as she directly opened up a market

for it at the same. As Richard So points out in *Redlining Culture* (2020), Morrison’s career as an editor at Random House raises a complex set of questions about how her celebrity both limited possibilities for the literary market to embrace other black women writers and allowed her to handpick those who would join her in producing the black women’s fiction that did gain significant attention throughout the decade. What we should also find instructive about this aspect of Morrison’s career, though, are the ways it troubles present-day characterizations of black feminist thought as a mainly reactive or revisionist enterprise. Even the most generous accounts of black feminism’s conceptual origins—such as Ferguson’s claim that black feminism “negated” the regulative power that both state entities and many black nationalists were invested in;<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Nash’s explanation for black feminism’s “defensiveness;”<sup>50</sup> or Dubey’s attempt to directly take on other critical characterizations of black feminism’s reactivity—struggle to dispense with this reading. But as we’ll see in what follows, literary representation garnered the interest of black feminist thinkers because it offered a range of conceptual possibilities that nationalist and social-scientific frameworks made unavailable. In what remains of this chapter I’ll discuss how and why this black feminist preoccupation with literariness predisposed black feminist literary output to write a new agenda for the field of slavery studies.

### ***The Black Feminist Turn***

To mark a black feminist departure from these paradigms of patriarchal power and national temporality isn’t to say that second wave slavery studies and its slave narrative fictions necessarily followed the first wave sequentially. As early as Angela Davis’s “Reflections on the

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<sup>49</sup> Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 111.

<sup>50</sup> Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 3.

Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1976) or Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) we can see a critical engagement with the Moynihan-engendered phenomenon through which "The matriarchal black woman has been repeatedly invoked as one of the fatal by-products of slavery," to use Davis's words.<sup>51</sup> A turning point that is worth observing, though, is the move from a more polemical rejection of the *Report's* "tangle of pathology" thesis and its being routed through the terms of black male emasculation by matriarchal black women to the quite literal *ungendering* of these terms of debate themselves. Writing on *partus sequitur ventrum*, for example, as the *Moynihan Report's* apparent "originary narrative and judicial principle" in her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe, An American Grammar Book" (1987), Hortense Spillers teases out the ways in which the "provisions of patriarchy" entailed with the former "declare mother right, by definition, a negating feature of human community."<sup>52</sup> This follows from her revision on the assertive conflation of gender with motherhood she sees as both endemic to the legal logics of the North American slave trade and as a fallacy still confronted not only by black feminism—in theory and in practice—but also "the actual day-today-living of numberless American women—black and white—[who] have gone far to break the enthrallment of a female subject-position to the theoretical and actual situation of maternity."<sup>53</sup> Two significant interventions emerge here. The first is Spillers' claim about the impossibility for patriarchy and its attendant categories to pertain at all to enslaved black women. She writes:

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51 Angela Davis, "The Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Massachusetts Review* (Spring 1972): 82.

52 Hortense Spillers, "'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe': An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 227.

53 *Ibid.*, 224.

Even though we are not even talking about *any* of the matriarchal features of social production/reproduction—matrifocality, matrilinearity, matriarchy—when we speak of the enslaved person, we perceive that the dominant culture, in a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong; actually *misnames* the power of the female regarding the enslaved community. Such naming is false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false, once again, because motherhood is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate process of cultural inheritance...the African American woman, the mother, the daughter becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from *mimetic* view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the father’s name, the father’s law.<sup>54</sup>

Rather than argue for the good motherhood of enslaved black women, or for enslaved black women’s willingness or capacity to surmount the obstacles to motherhood engendered by the slave codes, Spillers instead thinks of motherhood as a misnomer in the study and representation of enslaved subjectivity to begin with. For Spillers, *partus sequitur ventrum* gives generative force and legitimacy to what surfaces in the *Moynihan Report* as a will to “suppose[e] descent and identity through the female line as comparable to brute animality.” Thinking the anti-blackness and patriarchal power that intersect enslaved women’s subject positions becomes instructive for mapping raced and gendered power in the contemporary, not because enslaved black women and black women in the contemporary inhabit a shared, transhistorical subject position, but because of the continuities of representational power articulated by the state’s legal apparatuses and auxiliary bureaus.

In addition to this debunking of the terms of the matriarchy myth, Spillers also takes up the ways that gendered terms cannot pertain to the project of mapping the subject position of enslaved black women. If the matriarchal lines of descent superimposed on the enslaved also signal a displacement from the categories of human relationality, then they are of a piece with

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54 Hortense Spillers, “‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,’” 228.



the “unprecedented’ and “historic conditions of African-American women,” wherein “we would regard dispossession as the *loss* of gender, or one of the chief elements in an altered reading of gender.”<sup>55</sup> Spillers is eager to center this ungendered, and yet female, subject as an object of study:

This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject.<sup>56</sup>

The prescriptive tenor here should cue us to the dynamics of disciplinary formation with which Spillers’s essay is in dialogue. These revisions on the terms of gender and motherhood are addressed to a field of study wherein “kinship” has taken on an analytic purchase that Spillers finds in need of rethinking. Spillers invokes Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein’s *Women and Slavery in Africa* (1997)—and Claude Meillasoux’s essay on property and kinlessness in West Africa—to stage the ways that contemporary scholars of enslavement have gravitated all too uncritically to the categories of kinship in their thinking about the entanglements of property, cultural inheritance, and lines of descent in slave economies. She also links their project to a “tradition of historiographical and sociological writings” in which E. Franklin Frazier’s *Negro Family in the United States* (1948)—which she identifies as “the closest narrative conception that precedes the Moynihan Report”—figures as one of the foremost social-scientific works that have produced the field of study in which “family” presently “assumes a centrality of focus in our own thinking about the impact and outcome of captivity.”<sup>57</sup> Over the course of the essay, moreover, Spillers takes inventory of the misuses of “family,” “kinship,” “matriarchy,” and

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55 Spillers, “‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,’” 223.

56 Ibid, 228-229.

57 Ibid, 218.

“gender” in an effort to rework the key terms and objects that have gained traction across the disciplines that comprise the field of slavery studies.

With this re-working, Spillers is after the underlying “*representational* possibilities for African Americans” that the field’s currently established terms are inadequate to facilitate. This is why she cites Val Smith’s reading of Harriet Jacobs’s autobiography “as a tale of garreting” as the kind of critical work that “enables our notion that female gender for captive women’s community is the tale writ between the lines and in the not-quite spaces of an American domesticity.”<sup>58</sup> Yet Spillers ventures her own reading of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), bringing a psychoanalytic lens to the moment where Jacobs describes her “jealous mistress’s” habit of hovering over her while she sleeps, asking questions upon Jacobs’s waking, and insisting that Jacobs had been sleep talking, only to ask Jacobs who she had been talking to. She toggles between the interpretative possibilities afforded by reading *Incidents* either as a novel or non-fictional work, finally concluding that in either case, Jacobs makes it possible for us to map, on the one hand, the ways in which “the ungendered female...might be invaded/raided by another woman or man”; and on the other, to “say that African-American women’s community and Anglo-American women’s community, under certain shared cultural conditions, were the twin actants on a common psychic landscape, were subject to the same fabric of dread and humiliation.”<sup>59</sup> Without saying so explicitly, Spillers marshals both the protocols of literary scholarship and the literary objects available to it in order to identify the historical and contemporary convergences of power that would come to be known as “intersectionality” in

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<sup>58</sup> Hortense Spillers, “‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,’” 223.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

black feminist scholarship. Kimberlee Crenshaw wouldn't coin the term "intersectionality" until 1989, two years after the publication of Spillers's essay.

A number of disciplinary preoccupations come into view in Spillers's essay, but this turn to Harriet Jacobs—and to Val Smith's emblematic reading of *Incidents*—is especially suggestive of the new approaches to representing slavery that the concretization of black feminist scholarship in the academy engendered. Since Val Smith introduced her reading of "garreting" in Jacobs in 1985, Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Jenny Sharpe, Katherine McKittrick, and a host other black feminist theorists have also taken to Harriet Jacobs's autobiography in order to complicate the structure/agency antithesis that had become a commonplace in the historiography of slavery in previous decades. Both the literal dimensions of the crawlspace that Jacobs inhabited as a "loophole of retreat," in addition to her navigation—and narrativization—of the plantation economy's sexual violences, familial fractures, and brutalities of ownership, have gone far in figuring the cartographies of domination that black women have historically had to inhabit. The many valences of these figurations have proven as wide-ranging as the historically specific power relations with which they've been made to resonate.

As Grace Hong as shown, spatial analytics for critiquing racial, gendered, cooperate, and epistemological power became a high priority both for black feminists organizers outside the academy and for the black feminist scholars who made their way into it following the reordering of higher education that the former had a significant hand in initiating. Though black feminist organizers were among the 1960s and 1970s social movements that critiqued the role of white supremacist logics in financial globalization and the centering of Western civilization in knowledge-making institutions (e.g., the university) up until that point, these black feminists found themselves impinged between the sexism of their black nationalist co-organizers and the

racism of their white feminist allies. According to Hong, black feminist thought was then absorbed into a university system that, as it served the reordering of a neocolonial political economy, adopted racialized and gendered management paradigms that Jodi Melamed has brought under the banner of “neoliberal multiculturalism.”<sup>60</sup> Hong explains that feminist intellectuals faced tokenistic violences that valorized and fetishized black feminists even as it denigrated black feminist thought.<sup>61</sup> Although the early iterations of black feminism’s intersectional analytic preceded this moment of institutional reorganization with the Combahee River Collective and in the work of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Frances Beal, and Deborah King, Crenshaw’s use of intersectionality as a metaphor that might make black women’s experiences with abjection more visible shifted the terrain of black feminism in the academy, supplying it with an ordering principle that “has become women’s studies’ primary program-building tool and institutional goal” since at least the 1990s.<sup>62</sup>

“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” offers a snapshot of the new representational modes that black feminist scholarship introduced amidst this dynamic institutional milieu. Though Spillers’s primary aim is to cast off the gendered kinship terms that the *Moynihan Report*—and the social sciences more broadly—brought to its representation of slavery in the polemic over black pathology, she also props up the capacity for literary representation and interpretation to facilitate the black feminist project of centering black women’s experiential knowledge in its mapping of disparate axes of power. Whereas previous slavery studies paradigms had relied upon a kind of archival empiricism and discursive refutation, legal and literary representation

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60 Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 32.

61 Grace Kyungwon Hong, “Neoliberalism,” 102.

62 Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 9; 11.

jumps out to Spillers and other black feminists as much more advantageous approaches to their logistical and epistemic projects alike.

Surely a slew of methodological sea changes is also at play in this moment of black feminism's disciplinary formation. The growing purchase of Marxist criticism and Psychoanalysis on the turn to theory in literary studies; the force of the "archive" in the new field of postcolonial studies, which also opened up black and feminist thought to transhistorical questions of race and gender in the diaspora; and new frameworks for thinking transnationally about race, identity and culture—these are but a few of the other disciplinary and methodological developments with which the concretization of black feminism in the academy was contemporaneous. It would also be in order to describe black feminist scholarship's critical milieu as something like the "birth"—or at least the "boom"—of the interdisciplines, as Rod Ferguson has put it. Adding to Jodie Melamed's description of the university's response to 1960s and 70s social movements as emblematic of how institutions would learn to absorb subversive movements under neoliberal multiculturalism, Ferguson observes that "The student movements of the sixties and seventies helped realize interpretative communities that would propose interpretive models that were both disruptive and recuperative of existing institutions," and that thusly, "the interdisciplines connoted a new form of biopower organized around the affirmation, recognition, and legitimacy of minoritized life." Not limited to the literal formation of new disciplines and departments, though, "Interdisciplinarity becomes much more than a matter contained within the academy. It becomes the episteme that organizes the regimes of representation for the academy, state and capital."<sup>63</sup>

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63 Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, 36-38

If, as Ferguson has it, it's the university that drives this evolution of representational regimes—or, in other words, that exerts its epistemic influence over whatever institutions can be said to comprise the “state” and “capital”—then how tenable would it be to claim, as Stephen Best has, that it was Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* that “made literary studies central to black studies?” The relative accuracy of this claim isn't as important as the broader set of relations between literary production and the academic disciplines that it suggests. Although the following might demonstrate that it was in fact disciplinary scholarship that opened up the conditions for possibility that the nearly immediate canonization of Morrison's novel required, it's more important that we attend to the symbiotic particularities of how Morrison's novel was situated within the interdisciplinary field it inhabited and consider what it might mean to apprehend this field as one now potentially legible to us as second-wave slavery studies.

I want to consider the centering of black women in the new modes of studying and representing slavery that Hortense Spillers suggests; as well as the mapping of intersectional power relations that surfaced with the uptake of Val Smith's “garreting,” as a centering of the subject that first-wave slavery studies displaced. I also want to think of this centering as a point of overlap between what Morrison accomplishes in *Beloved* and the black feminist scholarship represented with these first two works. Here, it very much matters which works came first. If it can be said that Morrison also dispenses with normative notions of gender, kinship, agency, and motherhood in her representation of enslaved subjectivity, then how do we account for the fact that Smith and Spillers were already speaking this new language?

I want to venture two observations. The first is that black feminist scholarship and cultural production shared an epistemological commitment to black women's experiential knowledge. The second is that this imperative was very much in dialogue with the polemics over

pathology in which representing slavery and its cultural inheritances served either vindicationist or assimilationist ends. If in early slave narrative fiction we can discern first-wave slavery studies's prioritization of patriarchal power, archival knowledge, and national futurity, I also want to suggest that in later slave narrative fiction we find new epistemologies and temporal frameworks that coincide with black feminism's prioritization black women's experiential knowledge. As early as 1985, black feminist critics had already been able to identify a corpus of fiction by black women that had been received as disruptive of the cultural hegemony of the nuclear family. In her essay "Reading Family Matters," for example, Deborah McDowell takes up a debate—which she claims has been waged "primarily in the popular, white, East Coast literary media" as well as in "academic journals and scholarly collections"—over the ways that writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Ntozake Shange have disrupted notions of racial collectivity with their "negative" portrayals of black men and alternative visions of family formation. McDowell describes this characterization of the literature in question as a misreading of the fact that "if we can claim a center for these for these texts, it is located in the complexities of black female subjectivity and experience. In other words, though black women writers have made black women the subjects of their own family stories, these male readers/critics are attempting to usurp that place for themselves and place it at the center of critical inquiry."<sup>64</sup> McDowell claims that "Much of their work exposes black women's subordination within the nuclear family, rethinks and configures its structures, and places utterances outside the father's preserve and control." Pointing to Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and *the Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970); Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970);

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64 Deborah McDowell, "Reading Family Matters," in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl Wall (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1989), 84.

Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1975); Michelle Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1980) as examples, she makes the point that black women writers' rethinking of kinship is majorly a consequence of this new epistemology centered in black women's experiences.

It's important to note that McDowell first presented this essay in a 1987 conference at Rutgers titled *Changing Our Own Words: A Symposium on Criticism, Theory, and Literature by Black Women*. Accompanying papers included Barbara Christian's "But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My version of a Little Bit of History" and Val Smith's "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other,'" which are also joined by Spillers's " 'The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight' In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers" in the *Changing Our Own Words* essay collection. The archive that McDowell holds up precedes the disciplinary formation that the conference can be said to be emblematic of. As I've mentioned early, we can spot early iterations of the black feminist thought that had finally accrued disciplinary legibility in the 1980s as early as Angela Davis's "The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1971). What we should attend to here, though, is black feminist scholarship's reliance on literary production by black women for articulating its disciplinary aims and objectives early on. We might also point out the general fluidity of exchange between black feminist scholarship and the literary work in which its epistemological commitments take root, especially given the tendency among some literary historians to overstate the field-shifting power of singular works of fiction (e.g., *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in Rushdy's account of the 1960s; Stephen Best's claims about *Beloved* in *None Like Us*). This is another way of saying that when we take a novel like Morrison's *Beloved* and claim that it "set the agenda for an entire generation of scholarship . . .," we should actually say



something like *this novel and its instantaneous consecration were demonstrative of—far more than they could have been responsible for—the ways that black feminist literary representation and criticism facilitated an epistemic reordering of the field of slavery studies.*

I keep coming back to *Beloved* because it points us to the nuances of how black feminism's institutional formation impacted slavery studies from the last two decades of the twentieth century onward. The point I'm trying to make is that we do in fact see new paradigms for representing slavery following *Beloved's* publication year, ones that emanate from the rethinking of slavery's temporalities and its meaning for the construction of gender and normativity as black feminism's intersectional epistemologies take root in the academy. But we're bound to overlook the disciplinary power that initiated this reorientation when we attribute it to a singular work, and with the remainder of this chapter I want to show how and why we should think of Morrison's novel as representative of how black feminism's epistemological commitments and interdisciplinary formation ushered in new ways of representing slavery that moved beyond the national teleology and polemics over pathology that had dominated the field of slavery studies prior to.

To begin, *Beloved* dramatizes the questions of representation and legibility that we see in Spillers's "'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe'" essay. Morrison transposes the contemporary question of kinship and pathology onto her fictional telling of an historical event—how Margaret Garner murdered her infant child in order to keep her from enslavement—and in this way points up the inadequacy of the kinship and gender categories that could only ever dehumanize the enslaved women to whom stable ideas of gender and motherhood were never available. Morrison anchors the novel in the central tension between Sethe's *rememory* of the event as something other than pathological infanticide and its appearance to other characters in the novel as nothing

other than that. In essence, the illegibility of Sethe's killing of her daughter gives force to the novel's overarching preoccupation with the kinds of classification its black women characters may or may not be legible to. Its characters contemplate what Sethe's human and non-human characteristics might be (228); how fucking Sethe might be different from fucking a cow (18); how beating Sethe severely is the same as beating a horse or a dog (176); whether the Sethe they find at 124 is the same Sethe they knew at Sweet Home (93); can the mouth of the woman pictured in the newspaper clipping about the murder really be Sethe's mouth (185) and so on. These attempts to classify Sethe compound over the course of the novel, spanning from the period of time wherein she's enslaved at the Sweet Home plantation through to Stamp Paid and Paul D deeming her insane for trying to stab an abolitionist by the novel's end. The novel privileges the way that Sethe is compelled by *rememory* to rescue her *crawling already* daughter (Beloved) from Sweet Home's dehumanizing violences, which, as Sethe explains to the daughter she wasn't able to murder, are "never going away....So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you."<sup>65</sup> As Sethe thinks of it, there are *rememories* that exist in the world as thought pictures in particular places where events have occurred and not ended and enslavement at Sweet Home is one of them. Whereas Sethe murders one child in order to save her from slave catchers before emancipation, she must keep Denver from returning to Sweet Home, the place where enslavement will always be there even after "the war."

It can be difficult to pin down exactly how *rememory* works throughout novel, how it's distinct from memory in its regular use, or whether one need have experienced an event in order to be able to *remember* it. But one aspect we might point out with a good deal of certainty is the

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<sup>65</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 43.

way that *rememory*, as a general orientation to or negation of time, establishes the unendingness of events or phenomena in the world. The implications that follow from this conception have remained a major preoccupation for critics concerned with how *Beloved* endorses the idea of emancipation as a non-event, but what I want to ask here is what it might mean to think of *rememory* as a black feminist episteme that revises the notions of national teleology and racial collectivity that characterized hegemonic slavery studies paradigms before black feminism's institutional uptake. Much more than just a generalizable prioritization of something like a black/female/enslaved subjective position, I want to argue, *rememory* works as an experiential, cognitive, or phenomenological kind of archive-as-process that refracts the pathologizing and dehumanizing power of the normativity couched in communal consensus. If it can be said that the novel deflates sentimental notions of racial community by dramatizing the capacity for it to pathologize and dehumanize its would-be black women members, then *rememory* is the mechanism through which it does so. What I mean here is that, regardless of what the granular dynamics of *rememory* are or might be, its presence in the novel makes room for Sethe's/Garner's infanticidal act to register as something other than pathological. What characters in the novel apprehend as a pathological act of unmothering becomes legible to readers as the ultimate act of mothering in light of the meaning making made available and legitimate through *rememory*.

By privileging *rememory* as its primary episteme, Morrison establishes a mode of narration that deflates the totalizing capacity of the national time that it dislocates Sweet Home survivors from. Instead of emplotting these characters in a teleological continuum in which world-historical events become legible as a national history, the novel represents the Civil War, the Fugitive Slave Bill, the Trail of Tears, etc. in passing as happenings that come to memory for

characters such as Sethe and Paul D without incorporating these characters into national time. In the wake of her being shunned from her black neighbors after she kills her daughter, for example, Sethe reflects on the conversations she once enjoyed with them:

No more discussions, stormy or quiet, about the true meaning of the Fugitive Bill, the Settlement Fee, God's Ways and Negro Pews; anti-slavery, manumission, skin voting, Republicans, Dred Scott, book learning, Sojourner's high-wheeled buggy, the Colored Ladies of Delaware, Ohio, and the other weighty issues that held them in chairs, scraping the floorboards or pacing them in agony or exhilaration. No anxious wait for the *North Star* or news of a beat-off. No sighing at a new betrayal or handclapping at a small victory.<sup>66</sup>

The conversation topics here range from general political possibilities to political organizations, legislative acts, historical figures, and miscellaneous points of antebellum contention—in this way, they can be said to comprise a history of some kind that Sethe and her interlocutors feel implicated in and responsive to. But they appear here to give an impression of Sethe's recollection of a particular kind of sociality that she will enjoy no longer. This piecemeal listing directs us towards a particular memory of Sethe's that textures her displacement from racial community and un-incorporation into national time.

It's important to note that this kind of temporal dislocation also extends to the novel's indigenous characters. The Buffalo Men Paul D encounters en route to escaping enslavement bear a collective history of their own:

The illness that swept them now was reminiscent of the one that had killed half their numbers two hundred years earlier. In between that calamity and this, they had visited George III in London, published a newspaper, made baskets, led Oglethorpe through forests, helped Andrew Jackson fight Creek, cooked maize, drawn up a constitution, petitioned the King of Spain, been experimented on by Dartmouth, established asylums, wrote their language, resisted settlers, shot bear and translated scripture. All to no avail. The forced move to the Arkansas River, insisted upon by the same president they fought for against Creek, destroyed another quarter of their already shattered number.

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<sup>66</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 204.

That was it, they thought, and removed themselves from those Cherokee who signed the treaty, in order to retire into the forest and await the end of the world.<sup>67</sup>

By narrating this two-hundred-year interval this way, the novel subordinates events that we might otherwise see through a national-historical lens to an indigenous temporality in which cooking maize and making baskets are as worth remembering as engaging heads of state or drawing up a constitution. Physical marronage takes on a temporal valence here in the sense that breaking off from the Cherokee population that would be forced into the Trail of Tears means inhabiting a temporality in which westward expansion and nation-building become legible as the coming of the end of the world. The Buffalo Men refuse to assimilate themselves to an expansionist teleology centered in Western historical time, shoring up the novel's black feminist investment in temporal dislocation.

What I'm gesturing toward here are the ways in which *Beloved* brings a black feminist epistemology to bear on its representation of enslaved subjectivity. A major departure from the *first wave's* commitment to patriarchal power, national futurity, and archival recovery, *Beloved* opens up alternative configurations of temporality by centering *rememory* as its narratological knowledge base. We would be right to see *Beloved* as a black feminist intervention in the field of slavery studies, but given that similar interventions might have been made with novels such as a *Kindred* or *Corregidora*, we're left to ask how and why *Beloved* appears to have moved the field of slavery studies as significantly as it did.

To answer this question, we might start with the fact that by the time of *Beloved's* publication, Morrison exerted such authority in the spheres of trade publishing and academic scholarship that the criteria of judgement that gave shape to the literary landscape she published

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<sup>67</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 131.

the novel in were in large part of her own making. In her simultaneous role as an editor at Random House, a highly acclaimed serial novelist, and a university faculty member, Morrison helped set the stage for *Beloved's* glowing embrace among critics and award foundations. She not only revised the manuscripts of writers such as Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Lucille Clifton, and June Jordan, but she also managed the marketing and publicity for these and other black women writers' works, leveraging her many different university affiliations to do so. Morrison herself worked at the nexus of institutional power that intersected trade publishing, academic knowledge production, and other prestige-granting institutions. And as Richard So has shown, she inhabited a literary marketplace in which her increasing acclaim as a serial novelist directly limited the possibility for other black women novelists to build readerships and accrue prestige for their works. So, we might see Morrison's novel as representative of where black feminist fiction was already going both because of its formal investment in black women's experiential knowledge *and* because of her editorial role in tuning late-twentieth-century literary taste. But even still, when we think of the field of slavery studies as one that has skewed toward mapping slavery's protracted temporalities and palpable affective traces, *Beloved* should call our attention to the interdisciplinary flashpoint from which these preoccupations stemmed.

“You Don’t Have to Be Black to Love the Blues”: *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and the Blues  
Revival

In the years after August Wilson debuted *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* on Broadway in 1984, the Blues foundations of his oeuvre haven’t escaped critical attention. From Doris Davis’s claims about the “Blues voices” of Wilson’s women characters,<sup>1</sup> to Steven Tracy’s reading of the “Blues mode and Blues history” in *Seven Guitars*, the lion’s share of Wilson scholarship has adopted the blues as an interpretive frame for the near entirety of Wilson’s drama, taking the playwright up on his invitations to do so.<sup>2</sup> “[T]he wellspring of art—or what I do—I get from the blues,” Wilson expressed to Bill Moyers in a 1988 interview. “So I listen to the music of a particular period that I’m working on, and I think inside the music is clues [sic] to what is happening with the people.” And then, going on to describe the blues as a container for black Americans’ “cultural response...to the situation that they find themselves in,” Wilson also finds “a philosophical system at work” in it.<sup>3</sup> More than just a musical genre for Wilson, then, the blues extends transhistorically as a deep cultural structure, animating the dramatic performances that he intended to be seen—and *heard*—as thoroughly and quintessentially black.

These blues foundations are conspicuously absent from the address Wilson gave to the Theater Communications Group at Princeton University in 1996. In “The Ground on Which I Stand,” Wilson locates himself in a tradition “pioneered by the Greek dramatists—by Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles—by William Shakespeare, by Shaw, Ibsen, and Chekhov, Eugene

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1 Doris Davis, “ ‘Mouths on Fire’: August Wilson’s Blueswomen,” *Melus* 35, no.4 (Winter 2010): 165.

2 Steven Tracy, “The Holyistic Blues of *Seven Guitars*” in *August Wilson: Completing the Twentieth-Century Cycle*, ed. Alan Nadel, (Iowa City: Iowa Press, 2010), 50-70.

3 “Playwright August Wilson on Blackness and the Blues,” interview by Bill Moyers, *BillMoyers.com*, October 20, 1998. <https://billmoyers.com/content/august-wilson/>.

O’Neil, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams” on the one hand. And on the other, Wilson credits his grandfather, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Martin Delany, Marcus Garvey, and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Here, Wilson affirms that “the Black Power Movement of the 60s was [in fact] a reality; it was the kiln in which I was fired and has much to do with the person I am today and the ideas and attitudes that I carry as part of my consciousness.” Yet apart from his two mentions of the “rhythm and blues” singers who’ve been left to “the dustbin of history,” the blues only comes up for Wilson alongside “black church rituals, or any other contemporary American influence” that ought to be recognized just as easily as Western European traditions are.

It’s possible that by 1996, Wilson was poised to make the calculation that the blues no longer held its appeal as an essentially, indisputably “black” repertoire that he could claim as a source of dramatic inspiration. And while it still made sense for him to remind his audience of his “roots” in the Black Power movement, it’s telling that in his speech Wilson argues the conceptual compatibility of Western aesthetic sensibilities with those he envisions as outside their institutional and archival purviews. What is perhaps most striking about Wilson’s address, though, is his lack of interest in concealing theater’s reliance on “financiers and governors” and the broader superstructure of philanthropic money that Wilson would like to bring black theater back. This is also to say: one wonders if Wilson could have made the same demand in the period of black theater’s centrality to black nationalist political activity and not have met the backlash of his Black Arts movement contemporaries during those years.

This is by no means a rhetorical question. For instance, Amiri Baraka never mentions Wilson in his “The Descent of Charlie Fuller Into Pulitzer Land” essay, but he does seem to anticipate a correlation between black playwrights’ increasing status among prestige-granting



institutions and the demise of black institutions and the nationalist project to which he thought they were so integral. “The creation of such institutions,” Baraka writes, “—of black theaters, periodicals, newspapers, art galleries, concert halls, publishing houses, films—is the only thing that can save black artists from making the descent into Pulitzerland, in the sense that what the Pulitzer people are rewarding is a world outlook that serves their own or is identical with it. They are not rewarding *writing* per se, but ideology!”<sup>4</sup> For Baraka, “

What the creation of institutions has to do with this is that the Black Arts Movement and Black Theater Movement must be criticized for not having created lasting institutions... [I]f they are not strong, [black artists] succumb to the numb sickness of white supremacy which is all around us. Instead of reflecting the will and needs and destiny of the black masses...such artists begin to reflect what the bourgeoisie need, what they demand of us if we are to enter their temples of profit and luxury based on world exploitation.<sup>5</sup>

One could insert Wilson’s name in place of Fuller’s without compromising the truth value of Baraka’s eerily prophetic supposition here. But then, what might we do with Wilson’s own insistence on the need to bring black theater back? How would Wilson account for the simultaneity of black theater’s demise with his own movement into Pulitzerland?

Two other aspects of the speech confused Wilson’s friends and riled up his critics. In response to Wilson’s call for a “black theater”—which he elaborated with the claim that black theater “is alive, it just isn’t funded”—former Yale Repertory Theater director Robert Brustein denounced Wilson as an advocate for “subsidized separatism” in his *New Republic* review column.<sup>6</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. echoed these sentiments in “The Chitlin Circuit,” an essay where he took issue with the apparent contradictions between Wilson’s recycled rhetoric of black

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<sup>4</sup> Amiri Baraka, “The Descent of Charlie Fuller into Pulitzerland and the Need for African-American Institutions,” *Black American Literature Forum* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 54.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Brustein, “Subsidized Separatism,” *New Republic* (Summer 1996): 39-42.

institution building and the “dirty secret” that most radical black theaters had been reliant on Ford Foundation money prior to their widespread financial demise.<sup>7</sup> But interestingly, Wilson also condemns these same funding sources for their part in supporting the “aberrant” practice of colorblind casting:

By making money available to theaters willing to support colorblind casting, the financiers and governors have signaled not only their unwillingness to support black theatre but their willingness to fund dangerous and decisive assaults against it. Colorblind casting is an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialists who view their American culture, rooted in the icons of European culture, as beyond reproach in its perfection.<sup>8</sup>

Overwhelmingly, Wilson’s comments seem to cut against the interests of those black actors for whom colorblind casting was one of very few legitimate pathways to major roles. A primary vehicle for populating mainstream theater with black and other actors of color, colorblind casting in the eyes of Wilson was little more than a capitulation to the Eurocentric dogma of Western cultural supremacy. But however representative Wilson understood this stance to be, it ultimately bespoke either an underestimation of or an indifference to the opportunities colorblind casting made available for actors such as James Earl Jones, Denzel Washington, Whoopi Goldberg, and a host of far less famous players who aspired to perform on Broadway and elsewhere.

Wilson’s address offers some clues as to how he figured his accrual of literary prestige in relation to the Black Arts movement’s failure to sustain its institutions. We might speculate, for example, that while sincere, Wilson’s idea of what counted as an “independent” black institution could not have precluded funding or resources from white patrons or philanthropists. Though this is a somewhat banal observation, it is a significant departure—and still, not quite a clean break

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<sup>7</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., “The Chitlin Circuit,” in *African American Performance and Theater History*, ed. Harry Elam, Jr. and David Krasner (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 137.

<sup>8</sup> August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” 11.

—from Baraka’s insistence that “We must struggle with the black bourgeoisie to be less timid in reinvesting their capital in the black arts so that that capital can continue to circulate within the black community creating more jobs and raising the black national consciousness.” If Baraka’s stance is to be taken as representative of the Black Arts Movement’s, then its conception of a revolutionary cultural politics seems to have been enthralled by a capitalist order in which the racial makeup of the bourgeois class is the distinguishing factor between it and the prevailing one.

A central question I want to consider in this chapter is how—and why—some Black Arts intellectuals saw universities and their black studies departments as something other than exploitative, “white” institutions that threatened to capture and commodify black cultural production; why the disciplinary formalization of black knowledge production functioned for them as something other than a capitulation to “the white thing.”<sup>9</sup> It cannot be forgotten that for the most part, universities’ departmentalization of black studies (as well as other “interdisciplines,” as Rod Ferguson has termed them) necessarily were administrative responses to the political action of black nationalist and myriad other social moments.<sup>10</sup> That is, black studies departments’ horizons of radical potential were fundamentally marked by university and

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<sup>9</sup> Mike Sell, “The Black Arts Movement,” 58. “Attempting to outmaneuver the institutional and technological power of the white thing, Black artists formulated a theory of culture and communication that, in some sense, guaranteed forgetting when their communities were disrupted in the early 70s and 80s.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibram Rogers, “The Black Campus Movement and the Institutionalization of Black Studies, 1965-1970,” *Journal of African American Studies* 16, no. 1 (March 2012): 22. “Students developed and first presented the Black Studies idea to a group of students teaching most of the courses. By the fall of 1969, the discipline had been forcibly institutionalized. In the spring of 1970, the effort to sustain the discipline and its hundreds of units became the primary aim of student activism, ending or more so shifting the mass movement of the previous 5 years to erect the discipline.” We should observe here that with the founding of Pittsburgh’s Black Studies department in 1970, it put Wilson’s work in direct contact both with these student movements and the disciplinary formations it helped engender.

philanthropic endowments as well as pedagogical imperatives to make black difference legible to students and scholars of all kinds. Yet in the work of the blues critics who took the blues—and African American vernacular traditions more broadly—as one of Black Studies’ primary objects, a musical form that by 1970 had been commercially whitewashed could still be claimed as an essentially black matrix, philosophy, or repertoire that animated the whole of black American sociality.<sup>11</sup> Instead of disregarding this logic as a thoughtlessly essentialist one, we should tarry with the irony that the blues became a way of rooting anti-capitalist conceptions of black sociality in a musical category that became unpopular among the majority of young black Americans more than a decade earlier.

In the following pages, I’ll attend to concrete aspects of Wilson’s engagement with the blues that have eluded critical conceptions of it as the Century Cycle’s underlying aesthetic logic. In particular, I aim to show that *Ma Rainey* distills Black Arts Movement polemics over whether the blues could connect the movement to the livelihoods of ordinary black Americans after its popularity among young black listeners waned during the 1960s. Unlike the eight plays that are set in Pittsburgh’s historically, predominantly black Hill District, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is one of two in August Wilson’s Century Cycle that take place elsewhere. Set in a recording studio in Chicago, *Ma Rainey’s* affiliation with the blues isn’t just figurative or metaphorical. It features an historical blues icon whose recording career marked the transition of

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<sup>11</sup> I have critical works such as Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People* (1963) and Houston Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984) in mind as examples here. “Matrix” is Baker’s term, while “philosophy” belongs to Wilson, as I showed earlier. What I’m trying to point out is a tendency for these blues critics to catalog what I’m terming a “repertoire” of black cultural performance. Larry Neal also invokes the long historical quality of the collective to whom the ideology of the blues belongs in “The Ethos of the Blues” (1972): “The blues are the ideology of the field slave—the ideology of a new ‘proletariat’ searching for a means of judging the world. Therefore, even though the blues are cast in highly personal terms, they stand for the collective sensibility of a people at particular stages of cultural, social, and political development” (46).

a fundamentally rural, folk genre to one performed and recorded for commercial distribution across the US. It was precisely this process of commercialization that made the blues a point of contention for Black Arts poets, playwrights, and essayists in the decades leading up to *Ma Rainey*'s 1984 staging. Whereas the blues came to be seen as a conduit for black Americans' resignation to racial subordination in the eyes of figures such as Ron Karenga and even Frantz Fanon in the late 1960s, it remained a source of resistance, resilience, and cultural vitality in the plays of Amiri Baraka and in the essays of Larry Neal.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Wilson's first Broadway play was not only conceived prior to the idea of an entire dramatic cycle; *Ma Rainey* also stands out from it because of how it allegorizes a core dimension of the Black Arts Movement's debates over institutional autonomy and anti-commercial performance.

As we'll see, Wilson was among the majority of Black Arts intellectuals who *did not* dispense with the blues amid its commercial revival by white consumers and executives. Like many other Black Arts-affiliated intellectuals, Wilson in one way or another maintained that the blues comprised a durable repertoire of vernacular practice that animated black aesthetic life before and after its commercialization. More important than the fact of this position-taking, though, is the mesh of conflicting ideological commitments and institutional imperatives it required Wilson to negotiate. On the one hand, the blues offered a way of figuring a collective, transhistorical sensibility that both vernacular performance *and* serious aesthetic production could be said to share. On the other, the Black Arts Movement's call for autonomous black art also entailed an investment in withholding black performance from the whitening influences of the commercial sphere, which is why erecting black institutions—indeed, black theaters—

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<sup>12</sup> Adam Gussow, *Whose Blues? Facing Up to Race and the Future of the Music* (Durham: UNC Press, 2020), 204.

remained such a high priority. Wilson's enduring attachment to the blues, this is to say, points up a larger tension between his efforts to valorize black vernacular performance and his strong attraction to mainstream theater institutions. And given that *Ma Rainey* was the first play Wilson brought to the Eugene O'Neil Center, Yale Rep, and finally Broadway, it provides a glimpse into Wilson's uneasy transition from writing primarily within the Black Arts Movement's sphere of influence to interfacing with those institutions to which the movement was ideologically opposed.

The first section of this chapter will trace *Ma Rainey*'s material and ideological conditions of production. My aim here is to show how the Black Arts Movement's underlying investments in anti-commercial performance and institutional autonomy set the terms for how its affiliates conceived of the blues after its commercial revival in the 1960s. In Pittsburg and in St. Paul, Wilson participated in black neighborhood theater networks intended to support local activist efforts and sustain the production of politically pointed black art. But as they struggled to keep their doors open, these theaters became perpetually reliant on funding and resources from philanthropists, government bureaus, and universities that had established Black Studies departments in response to the demands of black student movements. In short, black arts theaters continuously came up against the limits of their claims to institutional autonomy, with some members conceding the precarity of strong separatist positions, and others—such as Wilson—opting to pursue relationships and resources on the other side of the institutional picket line. Hence the stakes of arguing for the blues as a pre-, or anti-commercial cultural repertoire and Wilson's choice to personify the blues this way in *Ma Rainey*.

The play's commercial challenges will be the subject of this chapter's final two sections. These I take as evidence of Wilson's struggles to adapt his dramatic writing—which had

circulated almost exclusively among Black Arts theaters up until 1983—for the National Playwrights’ Conference and for Broadway. While not all of the play’s difficulties on Broadway are reducible to or indicative of a black nationalist politics, I do speculate about what they might tell us about Wilson’s evolving institutional affiliations.

*Keeping the Blues Alive: The Black Arts Movement and the Making of August Wilson’s Theatre*

Having begun his literary career as a poet thoroughly embedded in Pittsburg’s Black Arts Movement circles, Wilson gained theatrical experience in neighborhood theaters that struggled to sustain themselves. Many of these black-run and black-attended theaters were intended to function both as ideological incubators and as political fundraising engines. They housed the work of poets and playwrights who both saw the commercialization of black performance as a kind of whitewashing and produced politically pointed work that alienated the sources of public funding necessary to pay actors, writers, and managers. Though they in many ways comprised the Black Arts Movement’s brick-and-mortar institutional core,<sup>13</sup> the theaters that Wilson worked in as a playwright, designer, and stagehand—in addition to those he helped found—remained financially precarious throughout his tenure with them.<sup>14</sup> During the years that Wilson subsisted largely on the meager fellowships and residencies these theaters granted him, he also submitted at least five separate scripts to the national playwright’s conference, which finally accepted Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* in 1983.<sup>15</sup>

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13 Mike Sell, “The Black Arts Movement,” 65.

14 Macelle Mahala, *Black Theater, City Life: African American Art Institutions and Urban Cultural Ecologies* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2022), 73.

15 Justin Maxwell, “Reciprocal Relationships: August Wilson and the Playwright’s Center,” *Minnesota History* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 137-138.

Hosted at the Eugene O’Neil Center in New York, the conference furnished its workshops with accomplished actors, producers, designers, and dramaturgs, positioning playwrights to develop and revise the scripts included in their applications. Though Wilson remained a fixture at the conference for the rest of his career, his 1983 debut might be seen as an unusual one. Several of his peers had chosen to wait out the financial precarity that threatened the livelihoods of houses like *Penumbra*, *Kuntu*, and *Black Horizons*, while Wilson made connections with the figures—most importantly Lloyd Richards, head of the Yale Repertory Theater and School of Drama—who helped bring his plays to mainstream venues and offered him access to wider audiences and substantially more commercial opportunity. As Wilson reflected in a June 1964 letter to Richards, Yale afforded him “a group of people who approached my work with the same measured passion and measured respect with which I approach it, and who worked to uncover and invest its possibilities.” He goes on to conclude: “I needn’t tell you how important it is for any playwright to find a ‘home.’ That it is one as comfortable as Yale Rep I count as a bonus.”<sup>16</sup>

Wilson’s regard for Yale Rep jars against the prevailing rhetorical posture one finds in most BAM manifestos. As Larry Neal writes in “The Black Arts Movement” for example, “the decadence and inanity of the contemporary American theater is an accurate reflection of the state of American society... These plays are simply hipper versions of the minstrel show. They present Negroes acting out the hang-ups of middle-class white America. Consequently, the American theatre is a palliative prescribed to bourgeois patients who refuse to see the world as it is.”<sup>17</sup> While this view gives an idea of Black Arts Movement theater’s conception of itself as utterly

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<sup>16</sup> Figure 1. Letter from August Wilson to Lloyd Richards, June 7, 1984. Reproduced by permission of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>17</sup> Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Drama Review* 12, no.4 (Summer 1968), 33.



outside mainstream theater's influence, one wonders how Neal and others made sense of their close contact with the "bourgeois" entities upon which they became so reliant. Financial and institutional support from local universities—and black studies departments in particular—was par for the course in the black theater communities Wilson participated in. After he founded the Black Horizons Theater in 1968 (and this Wilson described as a "decidedly black nationalist endeavor"), for example, it was the University of Pittsburgh's Black Student Action Society that "provided much of the financial support, audience base, and company membership" for the BHT. The University also provided a budget for BHT to host artists in residence, which allowed for figures such as Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and Barbara Ann Taylor to contribute both there and to Pittsburgh's broader black theater community. And when a Black Studies Department was finally established at the University in 1969, it hired multiple BHT members to serve as faculty. This interchange between local black theaters and predominantly white universities was in fact representative of a national trend: "The founding of black theaters and black studies departments during the 1960s and 1970s were linked in that they were both part of a larger effort to create... 'a cultural revolution in art and ideas.'"<sup>18</sup>

This intimate affiliation between black theaters and black studies departments may offer some clues as to why the blues remained an attractive conceptual object for Wilson at the same time that so many other black arts thinkers found it to be unsalvageable. As Adam Gussow has shown, the blues revival of the 1960s saved several celebrity blues singers and musicians from obscurity and destitution. Blues performers who had meagerly profited from their recordings in the 1930s and 1940s found new performance opportunities at the Newport Blues Festival in 1963 and the Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969. And with album titles such as Junior Parker's 1971

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<sup>18</sup> Macelle Mahala, "The Legacy of August Wilson: Black Theater in Pittsburgh," 71-72.

*You Don't Have to be Black to Love the Blues*, some musicians actively courted the growing segment of young white listeners that had helped return giants such as B.B. King, Muddy Waters, and Albert King to pop cultural relevance. Though they were in the minority, it is significant that Black Arts movement figures such as Haki Madhubuti and Ron Karenga opted to abandon the blues to the white cultural workers who aimed to facilitate its institutional rehabilitation. In his 1968 “Black Cultural Nationalism” essay, Karenga declared the blues an “invalid” art form that taught “resignation, in a word acceptance of reality.” And in a 1970 lecture, Stephen Henderson took the blues revival as symbolic as a prolonged “sickness” resultant of “a time-honored tradition of swallowing the nigger whole.” As early as 1965, Gussaow finds, this radical faction had come to consider the blues “an embarrassing residue of an older generation’s helpless passivity, no longer useful in a time of revolutionary transformation and expressive license”.<sup>19</sup> But among the many Black Arts affiliated intellectuals who established themselves in university departments—e.g. ethnomusicologist James Cone, novelist and poet Stanley Crouch, African American literature scholar Houston Baker—the blues remained a cultural touchstone and eminent object of study.

### ***Mute Matter Given Form and Function***

*Ma Rainey* both thematizes the conditions of its production and illuminates the cultural politics that Wilson found represented in the blues. The central tension in the play is a dispute between Ma Rainey, a blues performer from the American South, and Levee, the trumpet player in her band, over which version of the song “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” they will record in the Chicago studio. Having left her tour in the South to come record, Ma’s version is less suitable to

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<sup>19</sup> Adam Gussow, *Whose Blues*, 204-209.

play in dance venues and other commercial settings, purportedly because it is truer to the taste and sensibilities held among the black rural populations that comprise Ma's fan base. But given their interest in recording a version of the song that will cater to a more commercial, ostensibly white audience, the studio's Paramount representatives collude with Levee to coerce Ma into recording a version of the song that will garner greater popularity.

Sturdyvant: Irv, that horn player...the one who gave me those songs...is he gonna be here today? Good, I want to hear more of that sound. Times are changing. This is a tricky business now. We've got to jazz it up...put in something different. You know, something wild...with a lot of rhythm. (*Pause*)

You know what we put out last time, Irv? We put out garbage last time. It was garbage. I don't even know why I bother with this anymore.

Irvin: You did all right last time, Mel. Not as good as you did before, but you did all right.

Sturdyvant: You know how many records we sold in New York? You wanna see the sheet? And you know what's in New York, Irv? Harlem. Harlem's in New York, Irv.

Sturdyvant: Okay, so they didn't sell in New York. But look at Memphis...Birmingham...Atlanta. Christ, you made a bundle. 20

With this opening dialogue, Wilson introduces the play's impending recording session as one intended to compensate for the failures of the previous one. This exchange also raises questions about Ma Rainey's popularity, gesturing toward familiar North-South, rural-urban polarities that make it difficult to determine whether the question of musical quality is in fact a legitimate one. Importantly, Sturdyvant's emphasis on change, speed, "a lot rhythm"—all of which can be

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20 August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 19.

folded into the demand that “We’ve got to Jazz it up” — provides a sense of the qualities Ma’s previous recordings have failed to measure up to. It’s in this way that the play positions the blues as fundamentally resistant to commercialization, grounding what at first glance might appear as a commitment to ethnic authenticity in Ma’s much more nuanced, anti-commercial orientation to the process of recording music.

Indeed, the recording of the music is only a small fraction of the action that takes place on stage. Irvin and Sturdyvant spend most of the play’s first act asking the band members where Ma could possibly be. When Ma does arrive, her nephew and her lover in tow, Ma must contend with a police officer’s telling of how she assaulted a cab driver; how her nephew crashed Ma’s car into another vehicle. Wilson scholars have long acknowledged the logistical reasons for this plot structure: *Ma Rainey* was at one moment two separate plays that Wilson worked to conjoin.<sup>21</sup> What has gone virtually unnoticed about this scene, though, is how Ma tries and fails to appeal to her celebrity status in order to navigate the confrontation with the officer. It isn’t just that the police officer doesn’t know who Ma is; it’s that Ma’s celebrity doesn’t seem to carry in the northern United States. As some of Levee’s complaints about her style suggest, Ma’s performance belongs much more to the juke jam or tent revival than it does to the institution of mainstream music recording and distribution. Alongside Levee’s verbal commitment to a version of “Black Bottom” that the group won’t have to “countrify,” Ma’s refrain at several points of conflict is that she “doesn’t like Chicago anyway; I can just go back south for my tour” are at the very least indicative of how competing, commercially oriented and anti-commercial black

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21 Joan Herrington, “I Ain’t Sorry for Nothin’ I Done”: August Wilson’s Process of Playwriting, (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998): 41-42.

performance orientations map onto Ma's continuous threats to leave Chicago and return to the South.<sup>22</sup>

This pre-Great Migration nostalgia permeates most of the Century Cycle's other plays, but in *Ma Rainey*, it's the dividing line between Wilson's idealization of the blues as a repertoire of fugitive performativity and a vision of its commercialization as a system of exploitative containment measures. Of course, Ma's character directly speaks the blues as the thing that "gets you out of the bed in the morning"; that one might hear as "life's way of talking."<sup>23</sup> And importantly, her insistence that the "Black Bottom" recording feature her nephew's introduction—no matter how much his failed attempts cost in wasted records—gestures towards the blues' political potential with respect to disability and inclusion. It's Levee's multi-pronged antagonism of black southern sensibilities and folkways, though—in addition to his naïve attempts to offer his own musical performance for exploitation—that gives the play its didactic thrust and distinguishes it from the much more pluralistic quality of Wilson's other plays. Levee ultimately loses the day, not just because the band records Ma's version of "Black Bottom"—which he dismisses as a kind of "jug band music"—but also because after Ma fires Levee, Sturdyvant is no longer interested to hear him record the music he's written and handed over to Sturdyvant in advance. Sturdyvant offers to purchase the music for five dollars per song, but he's already decided—after hearing another band of musicians play them—that they "just aren't the songs I'm looking for right now."<sup>24</sup> Whereas Ma makes sure Irvin has given her nephew his wages and gotten her car fixed before signing over the rights to her songs, Levee's prostitution of his work proves to be the much less successful negotiation.

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<sup>22</sup> August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 63.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

We'd be hard-pressed not to take Levee's fate as the play's judgment on his strategies for "dealing with the white man." In fact, Wilson's revisions on Levee's monologue in the play's first act suggest close attention to the sympathies Levee is afforded both from his fellow band members and from the audience on this score. Levee tells a story about how his father took revenge on the white men who raped his mother in Jefferson County, Mississippi when he was a child—instead of immediately confronting the gang, Levee's father sells his land to one of its members, only to return later and die in the attempt to kill as many of his white transgressors as possible. Levee offers this story in response to the band's chiding of his eagerness to record his version of Black Bottom for Sturdyvant—he defends his interactions with Sturdyvant as an act of subservience that conceals artistic autonomy and managerial calculation.<sup>25</sup> In reality, Levee cannot even spell the word "music," which he insists is spelled with a "K" and not a "C."<sup>26</sup> And in the end, his monologue elicits less of an antagonist retort from his fellow band members than it does their superior sympathies.

Levee's monologue remained a revisionary subject through the play's runs at Yale Rep and on Broadway. In his suggestions to Lloyd Richards, for instance, Robert Cole identified it as one of two awkward silences that he thought should be addressed—it either "doesn't work and must be eliminated," Cole wrote to Richards, or "there is a desire to make the moment something else."<sup>27</sup> But Wilson's main priority—as he indicated in his letter to Richards after the playwright's conference in October 1938—was whether Levee's story detracted from his clear characterization as the play's villain:

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<sup>25</sup> August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 66-70.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Figure 2. Letter from Robert Cole to Lloyd Richards, October 9, 1938. Reproduced by permission of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

“I’m not certain Levee’s story...doesn’t make him villainous. He demonstrates his capability of plotting revenge and carrying it out ruthlessly and without contrition, that in the face of his powerlessness, his inability to strike out at the object of his retribution he overcomes his paralysis and intelligently selects a substitute—an idea that exhibits itself in Levee’s transference of aggression from Sturdyvant to Toledo. My question is whether this is too much foreshadowing and would using this story allow the audience to maintain their sympathy for Levee in his hope and aspirations.<sup>28</sup>

As Wilson explains further, what should follow the monologue is “an atmosphere of quiet understanding and sharing of feelings of powerlessness,” an effect that theater minds like Cole must not have looked on flatteringly during performances of the Broadway run. In all, Wilson appears to have subordinated the content and rhetorical mechanics of the monologue to the ultimate end of disciplining the managerial logics that follow from Levee’s enrapture with commercial performance.

It’s in this light that Levee’s shoes appear emblematic of a consumptive impulse that comes into fatally violent conflict with what he denigrates as a backwardly folkish aesthetic sensibility. Even before Toledo steps on them in the play’s final act—ultimately inciting Levee to stab Toledo at the play’s very end—Levee compares his shoes to Toledo’s “Clodhoppers,” which he follows with the taunt “nothing but a sharecropper.”<sup>29</sup> This country vs commercial antagonism accumulates over the course of Levee’s dialogue with the rest of the band, extending to the actual playing of the music they rehearse together. But ultimately, Levee’s commercialist impulse is routinely undercut by the rest of the band’s nostalgia for unincorporated, essentially southern performance venues to which they understand their musical sensibilities to belong. As Slow Drag tells it, these include “juke joints, the whorehouses, the barn dances, city sit-downs,”

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<sup>28</sup> Figure 3. Letter from August Wilson to Lloyd Richards, October 26, 1983. Reproduced by permission of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>29</sup> August Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, 40.

and other venues that would have housed blues performances prior to the genre's cooperate commercialization.<sup>30</sup> The version of "Black Bottom" that Ma wants to record should approximate the performances she has given in spaces like these.

***"Playing in the Wrong Time": A Bad Fit for Broadway***

In many ways, it can be said that Ma Rainey proved to function as an anti-commercial play, but few of them would be easy to align with the Black Arts aesthetic framework or a discernable set of political or aesthetic intentions. In the eyes of theater executives and consultants who corresponded with director Lloyd Richards, for example, it was uncertain whether the play could overcome its structural flaws or even turn a profit once it left the Yale Repertory Theater for Broadway in October 1984. As early as 29 September 1984, Lloyd Richards wrote to the DaSilva and DaSilva company about his "deep concern for the welfare of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom":

I have noticed that once we get to New York, we play for fourteen days without a day off. At present time, Roc Dutton's voice is at about 50% of capacity. He has three major crescendos to reach every day in every performance. Theresa Merritt is at about %70 of her vocal capacity...In the middle of the fourteen day stretch in New York, we have an opening. I am certain that if the voices and bodies do not get rest, our opening will be less than %100. This has nothing to do with spirit or desire.

To schedule fourteen days of performance may be legal and economically smart, but I do not think it is wise or supportive for the production. 31

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30 August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 31.

31 Figure 4. Letter from Lloyd Richards to Ivan Bloch, Robert Cole, and Frederick M. Zollo, September 29, 1984. Reproduced by permission of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.



Letters from Robert Cole seem to have confirmed Richards' worries less than a month later: "I do not have to be a seasoned producer to know that with the problems we have encountered during this process and with the problems yet to come, this 'commercial' endeavor is far healthier one than most."<sup>32</sup> And in addition to his insistence on "respect for the distinction between the producer's and director's territory," Cole offered Richards his suggestions for how he might improve the play. DaSilva and DaSilva manager Jay Kingwill also wrote to Richards three months later: "Because of the terrible business last week, a total gross of \$55,291, we are faced with the always unpleasant task of having to request royalty waivers." Doubtful of Ma Rainey's odds of ever gaining commercial traction, Kingwill added, "At this point, we would like to review the four-week period and, if there is any profit, split it pro-rata among all the royalty recipients."<sup>33</sup> Although some performances do seem to have broken from this pattern of generating a significantly low turnout among New York's theater-goers, the play's commercial struggles were not at all short-lived. Despite its success at the much smaller, Wilson and Richards had much to overcome as they adapted it for Broadway.

The logistical demands for staging the play also posed some acute logistical hurdles. *Ma Rainey* features a recording studio, control room, and a basement-level band room. Each is set up horizontally on stage, such that when 'Ma's Girl' Dussie Mae sneaks away to the band room with Levee, the lights go dim in that part of the stage while they stay up in the other two, converting what would otherwise be a somewhat awkward horizontality into a suggestive temporal parallelism. But even more significant are the play's inherent and interlinked casting

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<sup>32</sup> Figure 2.

<sup>33</sup> Figure 5. Letter from Jay Kingwill to Lloyd Richards, January 30, 1985. Reproduced by permission of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

and audio challenges: because the script includes Ma and the band's performance and recording of real historical music, Wilson (as well as future directors of the play) deliberated over whether to prioritize musical ability before finally privileging acting prowess during the casting process. While he did choose to have the cast mime its rehearsal and performance of the song "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," band members do actually play when the script calls for them to warm up and tune their instruments, adding to the performative burden to be shouldered by the cast.<sup>34</sup>

While these aspects seem far removed from any of Wilson's aesthetic sensibilities or political commitments, Wilson critics have offered some compelling interpretations of them in terms of the blues aesthetic he laid claim to in his speeches and interviews. Here, I do intend to reconcile these readings of the play's plot and scenic structure with the dialogic examples that should get us to attend to the ideological nuance and rhetorical tact that have evaded arguments about the seemingly pre-modern, Africanist essences enacted both in the written text of *Ma Rainey* and brought to life in its dramatic performances. But I also put pressure on these approaches to *Ma Rainey* and the rest of Wilson's oeuvre less on the grounds of naked racial essentialism than on those of what's missed when we confine Wilson's historicism either to decade-by-decade depictions of African American culture or archival enactments of a collective, transhistorical sensibility rooted in African Americans' resilience in the face of oppression.

There is little doubt Wilson's thinking about the blues had been conditioned in part by the 1970s

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34 Eric Bergesen and William Demastes, "The Limits of African American Political Realism: Baraka's *Dutchman* and Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*," in *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition*, ed. William Demastes, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996): 135. "With *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson created a realistic product complicated by various staging demands, not the least of which was trying to find actors who were also accomplished musicians. Most of Wilson's later works have been increasingly marketable scripts of a standardly realist nature, requiring simpler sets and small casts in keeping with the traditional American process of depicting home and family on stage."

debates over the cultural inheritances at issue in the study of slavery that I discussed in chapter two. What I've attempted to recover in this chapter, though, are the ways that *Ma Rainey* points to how and why the blues survived its perceived whitening during the 1970s; how it persisted as a conceptual anchor within the Black Studies field as it took disciplinary shape in the academy. Indeed, the work of Houston Baker in the 1970s and 1980s alone is suggestive of a shared, managerial investment in mobilizing the blues as an ekphrastic black aesthetic framework.<sup>35</sup> Though frustratingly familiar in nature, it's still worth pursuing the question here: what does it mean for cultural custodians such as Baker and Wilson to limn a black cultural essence that they take to be fundamentally antagonistic to racial capitalist systems and the exploitative logics that they entail?

If American realism can be counterposed to a black nationalist aesthetic that envisions characters as ideal political agents—and not ordinary actors who bend to predictable conflicts and romantic desires—then *Ma Rainey*'s resistance to commercial capture in the play certainly reinforces this polarization.<sup>36</sup> Wilson scholars have remarked thoroughly on how *Ma Rainey*'s long absence throughout the play's opening act, combined with the interpersonal and technical obstacles that obstruct the band's multiple attempts at recording the list of songs issued by the play's white executives and studio managers, thematize a performative resistance to commercial exploitation. Jessie Teague, for example, interprets these theatrical dimensions as redolent of a

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<sup>35</sup> Even more than *Blues Ideology*, Baker's *Long Black Song* (1972) can be said to characterize at least one significant thread of early Black Studies scholarship, especially considering its temporal proximity to the birth of the Black Studies field in the late 1960s. Baker emphasizes the continuities among black vernacular forms (e.g. spirituals, ballads, folk tales) in this latter work, connecting to them black literary production in the contemporary.

<sup>36</sup> Brian Richardson, "Introduction: The Struggle for the Real—Interpretive Conflict, Dramatic Method, and the Paradox of Realism," in *Realism and the Dramatic Tradition* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 16.

“liveness” meant to explode the enclosure of mechanical recording.<sup>37</sup> Others have emphasized Ma’s demands for an ice-cold coke before she starts recording; her demand that “Black Bottom” feature an introduction from her stuttering nephew; and other requests of hers should be taken as examples of how Ma anticipates the interpersonal neglect that will soon, follow the extraction of her voice by the studio’s recording devices.<sup>38</sup> If these are accurate interpretations of Wilson’s meanings, then they also point up a conspicuous dissonance between the fundamentally black character of the play’s anti-commercial personification of the blues and its eventual decline in popularity among the demographic of young black listeners who were once beholden to the genre in its commercially formative years.

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37 Jessie Teague, “The Recording Studio on Stage: Liveness in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*,” *American Quarterly* 63, no.3 (Spring 2011): 557.

38 Alan Nadel, “*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*: Cutting the Historical Record, Dramatizing a Blues CD,” in *The Theater of August Wilson* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018): 108.

## Percival Everett and the Fact of Blackness

### *All the Things We Cannot See*

In the third episode of the Netflix series *#blackAf*, Kenya Barris's character offers a defensive interpretation of a painting that his wife, assistant, and nearly every other character immediately takes to be of questionable quality. An image of white specks concentrated toward the top of a jet-black background, the painting might count as an abstract or minimalist one, allowing Barris to pontificate until he arrives at the idea that the painting might be—no, is *definitely*—a metaphor for gentrification and also the “inescapability of blackness.” “Have you seen Inglewood or South Central lately?” Barris asks his wife as he makes his case. And trying to articulate his interpretation to his assistant: “It’s like a black box.” Regardless of what meaning the painting may or may not hold, it’s one among several of the preparations Barris makes in advance of the Juneteenth party he intends to host. With this aim in mind, the painting serves a decorative function. We might even call it a party favor.

A show thematically concerned with the middle- and high-brow frictions that subtend contemporary black art production, *#blackAF* extends this joke in anticipation of the painter (Knowledge Bennett) arriving to explain the painting’s meaning at the very end of the episode. As the Juneteenth party is wrapping up, Bennett sets the record straight. According to him, the painting represents how all the many shades of blackness comprise a totality, which he wants people to appreciate as beautiful. But if the joke is that Barris has been straining to map a meaning onto a painting that doesn’t have one; or that he’s performing a kind of abstract interpretation that is total bullshit but not really up for argument because both it and the painting itself are so abstract, then this resolution would seem to endorse the kind of abstraction it initially pokes fun at. In actuality, the painter offers a meaning that isn’t much more compelling or

precise than Barris's, but it's even harder to argue against—in fact, it isn't argued against at all—because as the creator of the painting, Bennet must be taken at his word. It seems, then, that the only meaning that we're to take seriously is the one the artist intended.

The question of whose interpretations of art matter most has factored in majorly to the periodization of contemporary art production under the banner of “neoliberalism.” A capacious, yet many times allusive, referent for cultural theorists and literary historians, neoliberalism can be grasped as a set of ideological commitments that prioritize profitability and individual responsibility and that have undergirded the privatization of public resources. It is also a disciplinary program, positioning institutions to extract value from the minority populations they selectively absorb as laborers, administrators, and intellectuals. And due to the haziness of the financial instruments and investment calculous through which neoliberalism takes material shape in the world, it has also been apprehended as an epistemological problem for those who lack insider knowledge of its market logics and terminology. A catch-all for the marketization of everything in many instances—a force that reduces everything and everyone to quantities of exchange value—neoliberalism fundamentally threatens the status of art as such because, rather than adhering to an internal, self-legislated aesthetic logic, the would-be work of art under neoliberalism takes on the commodity form by assuming the qualities that assure its exchangeability. To cater to consumer tastes, in other words, is to capitulate to the hegemony of the market and to be commodified in lieu of retaining aesthetic integrity and autonomy.

Although markets have always been around, it was in the late twentieth century, according to Nicholas Brown, that markets take a center position as a social metabolizer, such that whereas art producers previously sold their works as excess goods—meaning the production process was once indifferent to consumer tastes—markets in the neoliberal era take on a much

more determinant role in the production process because of the premiums placed on the means of marketing, distribution, etc. So, even though indifference to consumer taste fundamentally belongs to the modernist project that took shape at the turn of the twentieth century, the capacity for art objects to “suspend the logic of the commodity” takes on even more significance under neoliberalism,<sup>1</sup> an order in which “the claim of the universality of the market is, as it is today, the primary ideological weapon wielded in the class violence that is the redistribution of wealth upwards.”<sup>2</sup> But Brown is ambivalent about what this significance amounts to. On the one hand, he takes this “plausible claim to autonomy” as “the precondition for any politics at all other than the politics of acquiescence to the statutes quo.” On the other, he maintains that the work of art’s “claim to autonomy is neither a politics nor a substitute for a politics. But under current conditions, it has a politics.”<sup>3</sup> If Brown can be taken as a fairly recent and representative example, aesthetic autonomy remains an attractive framework for thinking the relationship of art to politics without overestimating the bearing of one on the other. And Brown is of course prudent to distinguish between the utopian equality aesthetic judgment calls for and the political action we can claim art objects actually enact. One wonders, though, if in purposefully understating the affiliation between the aesthetic suspension of the market and, say, the work of political parties and labor unions, he and others also minimize the historical tendency for outright claims to aesthetic autonomy to consolidate class power and perpetuate hierarchies of class and taste. And relatedly, what other kinds of aesthetic precarity do art objects contend with beyond this threat of subsumption by late-capitalist logics of exchange value?

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1 Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2019), 34.

2 Nicholas Brown, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption Under Capitalism), *Nonsite* (2012): 14.

3 Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy*, 37.

These investments in autonomy and universal judgment come under pressure not just in *#blackAF* but also in the work of other black American art makers of which Barris's is a recent example. I begin with Barris because his mockumentary helps us to envision aspects of the contemporary period of cultural production that are pushed out of the critical framings of the antinomy between aesthetic autonomy and late-capitalist commodification that we've encountered so far. Even more precisely, *#blackAF* comes more than two decades into the post-post-civil rights period that the late Richard Iton characterized with "hyper-visualization" and the emergence of a "black superpublic";<sup>4</sup> one that critics such as Madhu Dubey understand to have been engendered largely by the "postmodern politics of difference" that saturated the field of American literary production in the final decades of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> As Iton understands it, the commercialization of black youth culture in the late 1980s was only the tipping point of markets' increased access to black communities.<sup>6</sup> Along with "the emergence of oligopolies in the radio and television industries and the marked reduction in the number of major film and recording companies with the capacity to distribute product widely," this period also saw a

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4 Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 1st edition (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 125.

5 Madhu Dubey, "Post-Postmodern Realism?," *Twentieth Century Literature* 57, no. 3/4 (2011): 364–71; 365–366.

6 Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 125. Here, Iton quotes broadcast analyst Drew Morris's 2001 observation that "The African-American niche is one of the fastest growing segments in the economy in terms of income and population growth, and this is attractive to advertisers and investors." He also explains that "Associated with the visibility, omniaudibility, and speed addictions of late twentieth-century forms of popular culture was their tendency to arrive and be consumed as commodities. Those cultural practices and performances not engaged or exploited in these ways—or at all—by the market and its related processes would consequently be marginalized to the point of near invisibility" (125). This becomes a specific problem for many African American artists, as Iton explains on page 110: "...in the late twentieth century, music artists who could not afford to make videos, or could not convince their recording companies to fund such productions, were at a competitive disadvantage in an era in which music was increasingly consumed visually."



“visual turn” whereby visual media became a privileged site of performance, consumption, and investment to the extent that compatibility with visual components and adaptations became formative considerations for producing non-visual works. Iton interprets these material changes in terms of “a sign of a return of the colonial gaze—always present as a default setting and energized by the visual turn— as natural and hegemonic and unencumbered by anticolonial resistance.”<sup>7</sup>

The shakiness of this phrasing’s transhistorical assumptions notwithstanding, it does give us a way of figuring what surfaces in *#blackAF* and elsewhere as an anxiety over the forms of affiliation claims to autonomy close off when in the public sphere. Whereas modernist autonomy is marked by indifference to the spectator or consumer, Barris’s relationship to them is both more sensitive and more ambivalent. On the one hand, Barris worries that his real-life hit shows are popular because they are “black” shows and not because they are good shows. The running joke throughout *#blackAF* is that Barris—the writer of the ABC sitcom *black-ish* and its spinoffs *Grownn-ish* and *mixed-ish*—continuously butts heads with family members, creative minds in his writing room, and other television and film writers such as Isa Rae, Ava Duvernay, Lena Waithe, and Tyler Perry over the quality of what passes for popular black television and film in the contemporary as well as what some, but not others, regard as the classics. His biggest crisis arises when, on a video call with Waithe, Duvernay, Rae, Will Packer, and Tim Story, Barris learns that these creators, while “fans” of Barris’s *black-ish*, hesitate to say whether they’d describe the show as a “good” one. His pretensions to high-brow taste are thusly jeopardized, and Barris finds himself again at the butt of the show’s joke about the paradoxes of the high-brow/middle-brow rift that he must straddle.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 128.

*#blackAF* ironizes these anxieties with its form. Its conceptual premise is that Barris's daughter Drea has to make a documentary for her application to film school at NYU, and thus the show's mockumentary conceit. Much like (the American version) of *The Office* or *Abbot Elementary*, most characters in the show provide its viewers intermittent, vestibular commentary, while it also provides omniscient, shot-reverse-shot sequences that cue us to the show's staged and scripted quality. But even more to the point, the show cuts to the camera crews shooting these shots, and it's here where we see Drea in control of how the show is shot and curated. In addition to its more sincere documentary sequences—where Barris's daughter gives voice-over histories of Juneteenth, twerking, etc.—*#blackAF* also compares itself to other black films in side-by-side frames so that characters in it are seen as reenacting scenes from classic black films such *Menace to Society*, for example. The central plotline that pertains throughout this toggling of filmic forms, however, is an artistic crisis that is compounded by an ambivalence over the perceived value of the chains, sports cars, private jets, and other luxury goods that Barris purchases for their spectacular qualities only to be continuously vexed by their inability to deflect the menacing power of the “white gaze.”

While *Black Af* gives you multiple ways to look at it, the more important suggestion I'm making here is that the show claims autonomy over its status as a black show by analogizing itself to films and other television shows that have also been read as quintessentially black. And in addition to its intertextual allusions, the show frequently breaks into what seem like short mini-lectures, beckoning its viewers to take up some of its major preoccupations with racial perception on social-scientific terms. In the episode where Barris' wife catches their youngest daughter in the act making a somewhat sexually suggestive dance video for Tik Tok, the show is interrupted by a spiel on “adultification”—how black girls are overwhelmingly treated as adults

and are vulnerable to violence and promiscuity to a disproportionate degree relative to girls of other ethnic groups—featuring both a voice-over about this socio-historical phenomenon as well as facsimiles of academic articles and research posters that serve as visual aids. And when Barris uses the phrase “peacocking” to connect his embattlement over raced readings of his excessive fashion choices, the show cuts to a side-sequence where anonymous young black people shout out a lexicon of putatively black vernacular terms for fashion sense. This last moment reads as an intertextual nod to Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing* (1989), which includes a similar, paratextual aside where the show’s main characters—of several different races—utter what seems like all the racial epithets one could expect to hear in New York’s multiethnic Brooklyn borough. But in Barris’s rendition of it, he fills the screen with bold, colorful text that spells out these particularly “black” terms in a declarative fashion. In all, the show confronts the social fact of its blackness, manipulating the expectation that it will make some unspecified aspects of the black experience legible. My claim isn’t that Barris subverts or evades these modes of looking or reading; it’s that Barris is proactive in claiming a relative degree of autonomy over the readings of racial difference he expects to be imposed on the work.

It’s in this way that *#blackAF* highlights the racial politics of aesthetic autonomy, which I’m claiming is a distinguishing factor of cultural production in what we’ve now seen termed as the neoliberal, post-postmodern, or plainly contemporary era. What *#blackAF* underscores for us are the multiculturalist logics and racial meanings that both subtend and exceed the commodity status of African American cultural objects, muddying the art object/art commodity antithesis that tends to dominate critical discussions of contemporary cultural production. My central concern in this chapter is with the popularization of autonomy itself as an aesthetic conceit and as a thematic dominant in much African American cultural production in the twenty-first

century. I claim that these representations of autonomy can help us make clearer, and more robust claims about the politics of aesthetic autonomy, which in the contemporary period have been limited to their potential to resist the commodification of everything.

### *Neoliberalism Inside and Out*

No one has foregrounded aesthetic autonomy as thoroughly and consistently as Percival Everett. Writers, painters, scientists, professors, and graduate students have populated the pages of Everett's oeuvre for more than two decades, and with novels such as *Glyph* (1999), *Erasure* (2001), and *So Much Blue* (2017) Everett has branded himself as an experimental novelist who tends to saturate the content of his novels with theoretical pastiche. By and large, though, it's Everett's interest in poststructuralism and language philosophy that has attracted critical attention to his fiction, while the theories of autonomy that he engages in his work have been far less discussed. Across the three works I've mentioned, Everett dramatizes the financial precarity that bears down on the spaces of autonomous production I specified earlier (e.g., writers' guilds, tenure-granting academic departments, art houses). While he describes his mother as a painter deeply absorbed in the world of her artistic work, for example, *Glyph's* baby genius narrator Ralph confronts his English professor father with the taunt "poststructuralist imposter." And in *So Much Blue*, the novel's narrator Kevin Pace hides his "private" painting in a shed, because, unlike the paintings on which he has made a living by selling them to dealers, collectors, and galleries, he wants no one to see the painting in the shed until he's compelled to finally allow his wife to see it at the end of the novel. Everett's *Erasure* also features a more pronounced compromise of aesthetic integrity, as its protagonist Monk Ellison, an experimental novelist whose work ostensibly isn't about race, must write a commercial work of vernacular street

fiction—one that will be received as a black novel—out of financial necessity. But even more striking than the fact of Monk’s capitulation to the popular publishing market are his meditations on aesthetic theory, which appear as transitional blips of diaristic thought between scenes. Though Everett uses a similar novelistic device in several of his other works (including the ones I’ve just glossed), in *Erasure* they mainly feature back-and-forths between Mark Rothko and Alain Resnais; Ernst Barlach and Paul Klee; James Joyce and Oscar Wilde; Ernst Kirchner and Max Klinger; Dietrich Eckart and Hitler. Hegel, Foucault, and Duchamp also make solo appearances in Monk’s daydreams, adding to the cadre of great white men who populate Monk’s passing thoughts on aesthetic life. Everett also populates these meditative blips with absurdist television and game show sequences, putting these twentieth-century visions of high art in tension with the mass-cultural hypervisuality of the early 2000s. As I’ll demonstrate shortly, this is how Everett establishes his concern with autonomy as one of the novel’s central problematics and how he commands attention to the formal construction of *Erasure* itself at the same time.

While at first glance it would appear that *Erasure* replays a familiar tension between high- and middle-brow art forms, my discussion of the novel will show that in actuality, Everett aligns attachments to aesthetic autonomy with anti-black and misogynist pretensions to mass cultural production, ultimately anticipating and pushing against contemporary critical frameworks that privilege the potential for autonomous art to resist the hegemony of the market. For figures such as Nicholas Brown, Walter Benn Michaels, and Lisa Sariganian, for example, autonomous art bears the potential to suspend the market logics that subordinate all others under neoliberalism. But what separates proponents of this approach to the art object from its critics is the question of whether this investment in autonomy—as it has been articulated by Marxist cultural critics, at least—is indeed compatible with the leftist politics it’s meant to advance. As

Sarah Brouillette and Joshua Clover have argued, the “fetish of autonomy” is best understood as “the ceaseless quest for an inevitable discovery of purportedly ‘unsubsumed’ art, characterized as possessing and/or figuring autonomy from the disciplines of the marketplace.” A “bourgeois fetish” at bottom, the assertion of autonomy harbors “the necessary belief of the bourgeoisie that these matters can be disentangled and treated independently, a phantasmatic independence that is treated as common sense.”<sup>8</sup> The autonomy fetish is, in fact, alien from the work of Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams, and other stalwarts of the Marxist critical tradition who have elaborated the fundamental interrelation between art objects’ meanings and phenomena external to them. It’s also worth mentioning the wide swath of contemporary criticism underscoring the ways in which artistic media of all kinds—fiction, film, music, memoir, painting, etc.—have registered the abstractions of financialization by which the neoliberal order is said to be distinguished. One would therefore be hard-pressed to idealize autonomy as a tenable position-taking or aesthetic possibility. And in light of the reality that neoliberalism doesn’t exist in the world as a coherent political or economic program or have any self-identified agents committed to its ideological tenets, the antithesis between autonomous art and neoliberal marketization becomes even more difficult to sustain analytically.

In this chapter, I ask how contemporary African American writers have problematized the autonomy fetish at the turn of the century, a historical conjuncture marked by a crisis of the social novel. Alongside the difficulty of representing the increasingly abstract world of global capitalism, critics have also pointed to the “fragmentation of the social field by the postmodern politics of difference” as one of this crisis’s distinguishing qualities. Elaborating this latter

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<sup>8</sup> Sarah Brouillette and Joshua Clover, “On Artistic Autonomy as a Bourgeois Fetish,” *Totality Inside Out: Rethinking Crisis and Conflict Under Capital*, Ed. Kevin Floyd, Jen Hedler Phillis, Sarika Chandra (New York: Fordham UP, 2022), 197.

phenomenon, literary historian Madhu Dubey has observed a splintering in postmodern American literature (roughly 1970 to 1990) by a proliferation of “more solidly referential and therefore politically oppositional fiction of women writers of color” on the one hand, and the “‘politically neutered...postmodernism’ of white male writers” on the other.<sup>9</sup> The vexed status of American fiction under this postmodern politics of difference materialized in essays by Jonathan Franzen and Phillip Roth—who lamented this new concentration of literary influence among women writers outside the academy—and in novels by Colson Whitehead, Paul Beatty, Trey Ellis, and Percival Everett.<sup>10</sup> Everett’s fiction stands out from these others because of its experimental quality and its sometimes direct, other times oblique engagements with art and academic institutions in novels such as *Glyph*, *Telephone*, *So Much Blue*, and *Erasure*. In what follows, I’ll show how *Erasure* bridges aesthetic autonomy with the problem of postmodern difference, ultimately illuminating aspects of aesthetic precarity that financial overdetermination is inadequate to account for.

### ***Race and Overdetermination in Erasure’s Visual Economy***

Everett stages the problem of aesthetic precarity in ways that scramble the art/commodity form antithesis I introduced earlier. Although financial necessity finally does drive Monk, the novel’s protagonist, to produce the kind of urban street fiction that awards writers with multi-million-dollar bonuses throughout the novel, profit incentives fail to explain—and are often at odds with—the ostensible miscategorization of Monk’s experimental fiction by book merchants. In what might be one of *Erasure*’s most commonly close-read scenes, for example, Monk

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<sup>9</sup> Dubey, “Post-Postmodern Realism?,” 365.

<sup>10</sup> Roth’s “Writing American Fiction” essay, published in *Commentary* in 1961, comes closer to the start of this postmodern period, whereas Franzen’s “Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, A Reason to Write Novels” (published in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1996), is more reflective of an exhaustion with this politics toward this period’s end.)

militates against book vendors who mismanage the sale of his novels by misclassifying them.

Monk goes looking for his experimental fiction at a Borders bookstore only to locate them in the wrong section:

I stood in the middle of Borders thinking of how much I hated the chain and chains like it. I'd talked to too many owners of little, real bookstores who were being driven to the poorhouse by what they called the Walmart of books. I decided to see if the store had any of my books, firm in my belief that even if they did, my opinion about them would be unchanged. I went to Literature and did not see me. I went to Contemporary Fiction and did not find me, 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. I became quickly irate, my pulse speeding up, my brow furrowing. Someone interested in African American studies would have little interest in my books and would be confused by their 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. The result in either case, no sale. That fucking store was taking food from my table.<sup>11</sup>

The logic of Monk's frustration points us to the subordination of profitability to a different set of priorities that we might describe as epistemological in nature. Whereas it's the consequences of chain bookstores' profit-maximizing schemes that bring Monk to despise them prior to entering Borders in this scene, it's the sabotage of his novels' sales potential that provoke his anger once Monk sees where his novels have been placed on the shelf. His commitment to producing "obscure," hardly profitable fiction comes into conflict with the expectation that those same novels should "put food on the table." One way to phrase the state of affairs that Monk is upset with here, then, would be to say that the multiculturalist orthodoxy that manifests in this scene as a kind of race epistemology—hailing readers to read Monk's experimental fiction for ethnic knowledge—fails to synch up with the sovereignty of profit maximization that one would ordinarily expect to obtain in the literary market.

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



The mode of attention that Monk is at odds with here is one that carries across a constellation of taste-making institutions, cultivated not just among booksellers and literary agents, but also televised book clubs, literary societies, book award institutions, and university departments. The claim I want to make about the orientation to ethnic literature that dominates this literary world isn't that it develops independently from market interests and power structures; it's that in calling attention to the aesthetic precarity they impose on the production of art objects produced by black writers, Everett expands extant frameworks for thinking aesthetic autonomy in which a historical antithesis between commercial interest and aesthetic integrity have heretofore remained central. This *multiculturalist look* is prone to misreading and hostile to form. Its gesture is archival and interpretive in its phenomenological relationship to putatively "ethnic" art, producing readings of racial difference in a fashion that overlooks, ignores, and effectively obliterates formal operations regardless of whether they support its readings. Despite the inchoate and frequently unsubstantiated nature of what it tries to extract from black art objects, I posit that this look operationalizes difference by producing knowledge about it, imposing a documentary, knowledge-producing method of interpretation.

To talk about this multiculturalist look on these terms is to risk an abstraction that at first seems depersonalized and apart from human actors in its operations. Yet much of what Everett illuminates for us in *Erasure* are the ways that this look is deeply entrenched in institutional nexuses that negotiate this orientation in uneven and asymmetrical ways, hence our inability to limn a straightforwardly programmatic or consistent rubric for how this look manifests in hermeneutic instances. A quick survey of how critics have tried to represent this look is helpful here:

-For Dorothy Hale, the turn of the twenty-first century is marked by a return to staging ethical encounters with “otherness,” an endeavor that surfaces more as a thematic and less as a technical program, bringing together a specific set of pedagogical commitments rooted in difference.<sup>12</sup> Whereas Hale finds this program to be generative in the way it has come to guide both the reception and production of literary works in the contemporary, art makers like Everett represent it as a constraint to be militated against at a formal level.

-In *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, art historian Darby English takes up the ways that black visual artists such as Kara Walker, Glenn Ligon, and David Hammon have registered and engaged with “an increasingly applicable viewpoint on the nature of the work black artists do.” Pointing up the integral role of “viewer complicity” in furnishing it, English explains that “this viewpoint is often grounded *outside the work of art itself* and beyond the profound intentions of an artist. Unacknowledged, this complicity guarantees the unmodified perpetuation of static icons of black American culture.”<sup>13</sup>

-In theorizing the contours of the affective category she terms “animatedness,” which surfaces in aesthetic encounters where the action of raced agents is stalled and/or co-opted by external forces, Sianne Ngai describes the “ethnographic gaze” as a mode of conscription whereby non-white bodies are animated either as “exaggeratedly expressive” or mechanically stoic.<sup>14</sup> She compares this animation to the kind of ventriloquism at work in lyric poetry’s apostrophe, “in which absent, dead, or inanimate entities are made present, vital, and human-like” when addressed by the poem’s speaker.<sup>15</sup>

It’s important to distinguish the period-specific aspects of this multiculturalist orientation from those that these and other theorists have tended to treat as trans-historical in nature. As Hale understands it, for example, the tradition of other-oriented novel writing in North America begins with Henry James, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf, and then it re-emerges on the other side of postmodernism, where it’s re-written by the likes of Toni Morrison, Zadie Smith, Gish Jen, and a host of other contemporary novelists.<sup>16</sup> Reaching back even further, Ngai looks to the abolitionist writing of William Lloyd Garrison’s mobilization of animatedness in his

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<sup>12</sup> Dorothy J. Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*: (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 93.

<sup>15</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics*, 5.

preface to Frederick Douglass's autobiography: at the heart of Garrison's endorsement are core claims about how the energies at work in Douglass's narrative will move right-minded readers but fail to achieve that movement in the hands of amoral enslavers. Drawing on television and cinema studies, however, Ngai points us to the particular constraints of "liveness" that are imposed on black cultural production in the late twentieth century. From Jane Feuer's observation about the simultaneity of televisual technologies' recording and transmitting live events; to Sasha Torres's claim about how race became central to television's representational practices with events such as Clarence Thomas's confirmation hearings, the O.J. Simpson trial, and the Rodney King tape, Ngai claims that "The category of racial difference has thus come to complicate the meanings of animation on television."<sup>17</sup> Taken together, then, these thinkers all seem to be talking around the ways that literary, televisual, and fine artistic institutions pressurize aesthetic encounters with racial difference, toggling visual, "ethnographic," and knowledge-making pathways to an ethnic "real," both calling difference forward and choreographing the ways it shows up.

In *Erasure*, live televisual space is one of the primary venues where this multiculturalist look is calibrated. This is true both in the sense that the *Kenya Dunston Show* functions as a satirical stand-in for *Oprah's Book Club*, a major purveyor of popular literary taste at the turn of the twenty-first century, and that Everett uses non-diegetic sequences to stage choreographies of ethnographic knowledge making on live TV. Itself a commercial entity in the novel, The Kenya Dunston Show is also a promotional venue for the kinds of urban naturalist fiction that Monk attempts to satirize in *My Pafology*—later *Fuck*—which Everett includes the full text of midway through *Erasure*. Prior to the scene where Juanita May Jenkins, author of the "runaway best

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<sup>17</sup> Ngai, 101.

seller” *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, makes her debut on the Dunston Show, Monk encounters a review of Jenkins’s novel either “in the *Atlantic Monthly* or *Harpers*,” as Monk tries to remember it. Lauding *We’s Lives* as “a masterpiece of African American Literature,” the review also claims that “*One can actually hear the voices of her people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black American.*” The review attributes the strength of the novel to its “haunting verisimilitude,” taking its protagonist to be “the epitome of the black matriarchal symbol of strength.”<sup>18</sup> Lest the irony with which the review is rendered should suggest that it’s patronizing embrace of the novel is imposed antagonistically, Jenkins courts similar kinds of readerly attention in her Dunston Show interview. She not only shores up the novel’s documentary credentials, but she speaks to her own embeddedness in the mainstream publishing sphere in which her novel is said to make an intervention:

“I’m from Ohio originally. Akron. When I was twelve I went to visit some relatives in Harlem for a couple of days and that’s what the novel comes from...And so I got this job at a publishing house. I watched these manuscripts come by and these books come out and I thought, where are the books about our people? Where are our stories? And so I wrote *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*.”

The audience applauded and the camera panned across their adoring faces and smiles.

“You struck a chord,” Kenya said.

“I guess I did.”

“Film rights?” Kenya mugged again to the audience.

Ms. Jenkins nodded.

“Millions?”

Ms. Jenkins shyly put off the question.

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<sup>18</sup> Everett, *Erasure*, 39-40.

“But a lotta money, right, girlfriend?” Kenya slaps her guest’s knee.

“Why shouldn’t *we* get some of that good money, chile,” Ms. Jenkins said.

The audience exploded with applause and cheering.

“Let me read a short piece from the middle of the book,” Kenya said.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the sparing and subtle nature of its specter, the camera work that Everett calls attention to here does much to concretize the interpellative power of televisual sightlines, which in this scene brings the transactive, commercial nature of the collectivist literary politics alluded to here into formal focus. The shot-reverse-shot switches in focalization between the show’s discussants and the audience convert spectatorship into collaboration, establishing an identificatory rhythm in the looks exchanged between both parties. Much like the laugh track one might hear cued in rhythm with the comedic dialogue of a situation comedy, this manufactured looking invests the propositions that the show offers up to its viewers with a coercive immanence. It’s in this way that Everett charges this exchange about the inevitability of the book’s commercial success with collectivist resonances, while he calls attention to its trite tenor at the same time.

At first glance, these and other Dunston show scenes might seem like satirical swipes at the Oprah Winfrey Show and Book Club. I want to dwell with them here, though, in order to draw out the ways that Everett uses them to trouble conventional formulations of autonomous art’s hostility to mass-consuming publics. On the one hand, Oprah’s Book Club can be said to have proliferated the sale of already successful novels primarily by female writers at exponential rates. Nineteen years after its publication, for example, Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977) climbed to the top of the *Publishers Weekly* bestseller list no later than a week after Winfrey announced it as a Club selection. Selling over forty-thousand hardback copies in the following

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<sup>19</sup> Everett, *Erasure*, 52-54.

months, sales for Morrison's novel increased by a factor of ten in the course of a year.<sup>20</sup> With thirty-five of its first forty-two books written by women—and nearly all nine written by men centering a female protagonist or narrator—it must also be acknowledged that the Club also put its middle- and working-class viewership in contact with the likes of Ernest Gaines, Joyce Carol Oates, Bernhard Schlink, and other writers of serious fiction. Even William Faulkner's work—sold in boxed sets for the Club's online *Summer of Faulkner* series—sold half of one million copies before making the top five of *USA Today's* list of bestsellers.<sup>21</sup> But more than just a sales engine for these novels and novelists, the Club made readers out of day-time television watchers, creating televised space for them to make aesthetic judgments on and personal connections to a range of literary works that can't be dismissed as just "teleliterature," as some critics have been inclined to do.<sup>22</sup> And perhaps even more important than making live television a significant component of American literary culture—as the show used television ratings and other network data to time the promotion of the Book Club from a monthly appearance as the last segment of Winfrey's talk show in 1996 to a stand-alone event by the year 2000—the show can be said to have democratized pedagogical encounters with literary works even if it never evolved into more than a "middlebrow book club."<sup>23</sup>

The flattening of the OBC into a commercial force that has been destructive for American literary taste is a commonplace complaint among some critics, and I want to suggest here that the

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20 John Young, "Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Postmodern Popular Audiences," *African American Review* 35, no. 2 (2001): 188.

21 Jay Watson and Jaime Harker, "The Summer of Faulkner: Oprah's Book Club, William Faulkner, and Twenty-First-Century America," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2013): 366.

22 Mark Hall, "Oprah's Book Selections: Teleliterature for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*," in *The Oprah Affect: Critical Essays on Oprah's Book Club*, ed. Cecilia Konchar Farr and Jaime Harker (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 89-118

23 Cecilia Konchar Farr, "Faulkner Novels of Our OWN: Oprah's Middlebrow Book Club Meets the Classics," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2013): 423-434; 425.

caricature of it that Everett holds up with the Kenya Dunston Show—as well as the hostility it prompts from Monk, Everett’s protagonist—actually serves to elaborate the politically problematic ways in which appeals to aesthetic autonomy in this post-postmodern problem space actually harbor hyper-masculine and anti-black investments in cultural gatekeeping. Over the course of the novel, Monk routinely encounters black women who he interprets as subaltern on the basis of single-parenthood, first names that sound especially ethnic, and most significantly, a proclivity for urban street fiction in the style of *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*. Although Monk does narrate these encounters himself, he does so in a fashion that implies a particularly pedagogical character development that readers are to take as instructive of the judgment the novel places on his position-takings. When Monk discovers that his love interest, Marilyn, is in possession of the Jenkins novel, for example, he becomes increasingly hostile, transgressing the bounds of civility that he can’t bring himself to adhere to:

“What did you like about the book?”

“I don’t know. It was a good story, I guess. Lightweight stuff, but it was fun.”

“It didn’t offend you in any way?”

She stared at me for a couple of seconds, then said, with an attitude, no.

“Have you ever known anybody who talks like they do in that book?” I could hear the edge on my voice though I didn’t want it there, I knew that once detected, it could never be erased.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Answer the question.”

“No, but so what? I just read through the dialect shit. I don’t like the way you’re talking to me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling genuinely bad for having sounded like I was attacking.

“It’s just that I find that book an idiotic, exploitive piece of crap and I can’t see how an intelligent person can take it seriously.” So much for changing my tack.

Marilyn pulled the nearest pillow to her chest and rested her chin on it.

“I think you should leave.”

As I left the room and approached the front door I could hear her crying. But there was nothing left to say. 24

Monk’s intermittent commentary on this eruption of interpersonal hostility signals to readers that there is more to this exchange than disinterested aesthetic judgment. That taste becomes an objective marker of intellect for Monk—“I can’t see how an intelligent person can take it seriously”—is suggestive of an animosity that supersedes critical attunement; that manifests brute claims to superiority that lend themselves to social hierarchization. As if to underscore the intensely visceral depth of Monk’s frustration, this scene is set up so that Monk can’t help but lash out in this unprovoked fashion, interrupting what seems like the beginning of a sexual encounter with an interrogation that he is moved to carry out against his own conscious wishes.

We might also look at this moment as the culmination of similar run-ins where Monk effaces his claims to judgment with concessions to high- and middle-brow hierarchies. But whereas Monk feels his disdain for the Jenkins novel extend to its consumers in this instance, he inflicts injury on himself when he encounters seemingly subaltern women readers who in fact *do* share his commitment to rigorous interpretative attention minus his bourgeois baggage. This reversal punctuates an encounter that takes place much earlier in *Erasure*, when Monk visits his sister’s medical clinic and the single mother he sits next to asks Monk if he’s an author:

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24 Everett, *Erasure*, 187-188.



“You write books?” the woman with the child asked.

“Yes.”

“What kind of books you write?”

“I write novels,” I said. “Stories.” Already feeling out of place, I now didn’t know how to sound relaxed.

“My cousin gave me *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She had it in a class. She goes to UDC. I liked that book.”

“That’s a really fine novel,” I said.

“She gave me *Cane*, too,” the young woman said, adjusting her son on her lap.

“That one’s my favorite.”

“Great book.”

“It ain’t a novel though, is it?” she asked. “I mean, it ain’t just one story and it’s got them poems in it. But it seemed like one thing, know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

“I think about that story ‘Box Seat’ and think I’m in that theater all the time, watching them midgets fight.” She shook her head as if to come back around, wiped her child’s nose.

“Have you gone to college?” I asked.

The girl laughed.

“Don’t laugh,” I said. “I think you’re really smart. You should at least try.”

“I didn’t even finish high school.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I scratched my head and looked at the other faces in the room. I felt an inch tall because I had expected this young woman

with the blue fingernails to be a certain way, to be slow and stupid, but she was neither. I was the stupid one. 25

The epiphany awaiting Monk at the end of this exchange bears a didacticism that carries throughout most of Monk's interactions with characters of similar status over the course of the novel. But importantly, it's this character's seemingly disinterested interpretive curiosity in literary form—juxtaposed to Monk's profiling of her as its own kind of misreading—that casts Monk's interpretive credentials in a critical light. More important than Monk's interlocutor's familiarity with canonical African American novels is her attention to their formal operations. Her aesthetic attunement and lack of sentimental attachments highlight the pretensions embedded in Monk's loci of interpretation. Although Monk understands his antipathy toward commercial fiction as a measure of his ideological independence, his encounter with this lay reader subjects this stance to his own scrutiny as well as that of the reader.

Monk's tense relationship with these women readers of color—rooted in his disdain for the poor literary taste he understands to circulate among them via the Kenya Dunston show—bears a striking resemblance to one of the OBC's most conspicuous controversies. When Winfrey selected Franzen's *The Corrections* in August 2001, he accepted the invitation and then publicly insulted the show's tendency for selecting works much different in style, content, and prestige from his. Throughout a number of interviews leading up to his appearance on the show, Franzen quipped that “..it literally never crossed my mind that this might be an Oprah pick, partly because she seldom chooses hardcovers, partly because she does choose a lot of female authors” in one instance; and that “over at The Oprah Show, they have no idea how they're going to arrange the show because they've never done a book like this” in another. Winfrey

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25 Everett, 20-21.

finally disinvented Franzen—although she didn't remove his novel from the Book Club list—leaving Franzen to issue several empty apologies in response.<sup>26</sup>

Crucially, Franzen was among several of the white male novelists who wrote publicly about the social novel's being torn asunder by the "postmodern politics of difference" as literary historian Madhu Dubey has termed it. In a fashion mirrored by David Foster Wallace and Phillip Roth, Franzen lamented the irrelevance that threatened white male writers at the turn of the century in "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, A Reason to Write Novel," claiming that "To the extent that the American novel still has cultural authority—an appeal beyond the academy, a presence in household conversations—it's largely the work of women;" and that "...young writers today feel ghettoized in their ethnic or gender identities—discouraged from speaking across boundaries by a culture that has been conditioned by television to accept only the literary testimony of the Self."<sup>27</sup> Following up these complaints with the string of interviews that lead up his dismissal from the OBC, Franzen presents a staggering correspondence with how Everett links critical qualms with the literary market to interpersonal conflict, with the latter held up as a point of reparative reflection in Everett's novel. While Everett does invest Monk's voice with the authority of narration, his alienation from black women readers compromises the ethical substance of his qualms with the cooperate literary industry. It's in this way that the novel invites readers to think critically about the cultural politics that underwrite his disdain for the Dunston Show.

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<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Rooney, *Reading with Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2008), 42-43.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Franzen, "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, A Reason to Write Novels," *Harpers Magazine*. 1996, 47-48.

The specter of live television in *Erasure* isn't limited to just the Dunston Show, however. In addition to Monk himself making an appearance on it as Stagg R. Leigh after authoring the novel *Fuck!* under this alias, *Fuck!*'s protagonist also appears on the Snookie Crane Show; and then, in one of *Erasure*'s interstitial sketches, Monk thinks up a *Jeopardy*-like game show where racial difference is silently, yet strongly pronounced and antagonized. These latter two instances take place in disparate diegetic universes, and yet they both stage coercive processes of ethnographic knowledge production in seemingly counterposed ways.

The Snookie Crane show provides a violent, carceral ending to the novel *Fuck!*, which loosely follows the plot of Richard Wright's *Native Son* in parodic fashion. Its main character Van Go Jenkins does murder the wealthy heiress for whom he's hired to serve as a chauffeur, but he also fathers multiple children and narrates the novel in first person. When the television station dials him up to make an appearance on the Snookie Crane Show segment "You Gave Me the Baby, Now Where's My Money," Van Go accepts and is greeted on set by the four women who've given birth to his children. And after he's pelted by a series of intrusive questions, Snookie Crane asks whether he works for the Daltons, and he's quickly apprehended by police after giving no response.<sup>28</sup> Unlike the live, televised events claimed by theorists to have made racial difference a central, animating thread of live television in the late twentieth century, the Crane show invokes a seemingly more staged, less serious, and quotidian genre of live recorded television to which only shows such as *Jerry Springer*, *Ricki Lake*, and *Mauri* might serve as adequate points of comparison. During the 1990s, shows like these frequently surprised working-class, non-white characters with appearances by estranged romantic partners and family

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce Robbins, "Everything Is Not Neoliberalism," *American Literary History* 31, no. 4 (November 2019): 842.

members in order to set up performances of ghetto interpersonal chaos. By bringing paternity results, marital affairs, and other scandals out into the open, these shows in many ways provided viewers with access to what they presented as the everyday dramas of the urban underclass, ultimately reproducing a naturalist voyeurism the energies of which were often cathected through a culminating “big reveal.” If the Dunston Show provides a forum for literary representations of real black urban experience, Snookie Crane’s provides seemingly unmediated access to it via the technology of live recording. With this alignment of naturalist, urban street fiction with exploitative daytime television, Everett orients readers to a mass cultural economy that trades in these ethnographic acts of looking.

Unlike these talk show scenes’ being embedded in disparate diegetic contexts, Everett isolates a game show parody titled “Àpropos de Bottes” (apropos of nothing) in a transitional sketch that stands alone as one of Monk’s meditations on aesthetic life. More than the resumé, descriptive list of National Book Award judges, and other facsimiles that complicate the structure of the novel, sketches like this one maintain an ambiguous relation to *Erasure*’s diegetic universe by way of their textual continuity with it. Seen this way, the game show scene jumps out as particularly didactic or pointed: presented as a parable or allegory, everything about it is extreme and on the nose, from its title to its conspicuous contrasts of racial difference. Everett even titles the game show featured in it “Virtute et Armis” (“By valor and arms”), calling up the State of Mississippi’s coat of arms. Bespeaking the racial violence that becomes legible as the show’s implicit theme, the show’s two contestants field questions disproportionate in difficulty—“From Elkhart, Indiana, a social worker and part-time blues musician in area night clubs, father of two and president of the PTA and his neighborhood association,” the contestant Hall Dullard only answers questions such as “...in the Bible, who slew Goliath” and “Please

name the first President of the United States” incorrectly. But the sketch actually centers on Hal’s opponent Tom, who correctly identifies mathematical concepts and matches lines of poetry to the works they’re excerpted from until his ultimate victory is greeted with silence from the blonde and blue-eyed crowd. With at least half the sketch taking place backstage, its production process features the literal manufacture of racial difference. Not only do makeup artists darken Tom’s skin with cosmetics, but he also fills in screening questionnaires with a makeshift first name and a host of other fabricated background information:

He wrote Tom in the appropriate place and then tried to come up with a last name...Finally he wrote, Wahzetepe. He didn’t know why he wrote it, but it came out easily and so he said it softly and to himself, “Wah-ze-te-pe.” If asked, he would say it was an African name, but he knew that it was a Sioux Indian word, though he didn’t know its meaning. He didn’t know how he knew the word, but he was sure of it as his last name...He lied all the way down the page, about his address, about his place of birth, about his education, claiming he had studied at the College of William and Mary, about his hobbies, in which he included making dulcimers and box kites out of garage bags. He took the form back to the receptionist and she accepted it happily. She then handed him a stack of pages.<sup>29</sup>

Unraveling the façade of live television’s unmediated documentation of real people and events, Monk thinks about its staging and production as a process of knowledge-making here. The irony at work in the sketch comes from its contrast of the specialized, academic knowledge it solicits from contestants on the show to the made-up biographical details Tom submits for its pre-screening of them. Even more conspicuous is the involuntary fashion in which this forged information occurs to Tom, as well as his knowledge that an indigenous last name will pass as an “African” one in the eyes of the show’s producers. Were we to deduce a possible theme or “aboutness” from this part of the sketch, we might say that Tom personifies the commodity form’s evacuation of aesthetic integrity and outright capitulation to consumer tastes and market

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<sup>29</sup> Everett, *Erasure*, 169-169.

demands. This characterization distinguishes him from Monk in terms of their orientation to the markets in which they attempt to cultivate value for themselves: Monk betrays his internal commitments in order to produce and extract profit from a mass literary market that he experiences as restrictive and hostile, whereas Tom's enthusiastic participation in a racially violent gameshow is driven by his uncomplicated ambition to seize further financial opportunity from it.

Different from how the camera pans to energetic, responsive crowds in the novel's other live television scenes, in this one the crowd grows increasingly silent; and the game show host grows increasingly perturbed as Tom steadily advances toward victory. With his prompt and thorough responses to questions such as "Tom, what is a serial field distribution" and "with what lines does Ralph Waldo Emerson open his essay *Self Reliance*," Tom draws out a dissonance between the gameshow's manifest object of hailing its contestants to disseminate knowledge and its unspoken script for making it impossible for contestants of color to win the game.<sup>30</sup> It's the host and audience members' responses to Tom's performance that point up the show's intended order of operations. And yet, Tom comes to the game show in the hopes that he can override the show's established commitment to the defeat of its non-white participants. In addition to spotting a black former contestant working as a janitor backstage, he also thinks through how the show has tripped up its players in the past: "They entered and there before them was the set of *Virtute et Armis*. Tom's breath caught in his throat. For the first time, he was nervous. He had to win this game. He just had to win. But he also knew how the game worked. It wasn't up to him. He had to be careful, not to slip up anywhere. He was here in the studio,

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<sup>30</sup> Everett, *Erasure*, 76

standing at the threshold of his future.”<sup>31</sup> Here, Tom disarticulates the show’s unspoken, yet routine forms of racial violence from the artifice of its made-for-live TV trivia game, interpreting the unity of the two in terms of financial upside. Misjudging the facts of “how the game works,” he envisions an outcome that would in fact run counter to its’s established scripts. His ultimate victory undercuts the show’s intended reproduction of racial meanings, as the show’s audience, host, and executive producer are united in their ambition to see Tom perform poorly and lose the game.

Beyond the particulars of how we might interpret this game show sequence, what I want to demonstrate here is how Everett supplements the content of the novel’s plot with something like a extra-diegetic accompaniment; how he uses the content we might see as marginal to the action of the novel to orient readers to its overarching position-takings. As thoroughly as Everett directs readers’ attention to the epistemic violence that we see staged, performed, and transmitted via televisual technology, the haunting specter of the televisual—embedded across three different diegetic layers in *Erasure*: the Dunston show, the Snookie Crane Show in *Fuck!*, and the *Virtute et Armis* game show sketch—also does the work of registering the nuanced constraints on aesthetic autonomy that exceed mere marketization in the contemporary. Everett’s specific allusions to Oprah’s Book Club may very well take precedence over his other references to live television; but taken together, his accretive returns to live televisual space distinguish the modes of ethnographic looking enabled by it as endemic to a sociology of cultural production in the contemporary.

### *Reimagining the Restricted Field*

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<sup>31</sup> Everett, *Erasure*, 174.



Importantly, Everett sets this emphasis on contemporary cultural production against the exchanges Monk imagines between major figures in the history of Western aesthetics. In addition to figuring the content of Monk's aesthetic preoccupations in the parlance of theorists and art makers, these ludic skits serve as a subtext for the distance Monk imagines between himself and the black women readers he encounters in reality. Accenting the antiquated nature of Monk's intellectual pretensions to mass cultural production and its systems of valuation, Everett presents his readers with a plethora of historical instances wherein artistic autonomy has been thought to have come under assault; where hegemonic systems governing art's valuation have proven to be no more frivolous than the high-brow aesthetic sensibilities that condescend to them. Though Monk identifies as an experimental novelist working at the cutting edge of the creative arts, his qualms with the market's impositions on artistic creativity are undercut by the unoriginality of the aesthetic sensibilities he clings to so fervently.

The exchange Monk imagines between Robert Rauschenberg and Willem de Kooning might best represent the nature of the aesthetic polemics Monk obsesses over. Invoking Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* (1953)—a work famously known as the piece of sketch paper Rauschenberg framed after erasing a drawing of de Kooning's from it—the dialogue between the two mid-century visual artists foregrounds the vexed ontology of the art object as a matter of position-takings, or less-than-literal vantage points, from the which the work of art might more or less be recognized as one in the first place.

*Rauschenberg: Well, it took me forty erasers, but I did it.*

*de Kooning: Did what?*

*Rauschenberg: Erased it. The picture you drew for me.*

*de Kooning: You erased my picture?*

*Rauschenberg: Yes.*

*de Kooning: Where is it?*

*Rauschenberg: Your drawing is gone. What remains is my erasing and the paper which was mine to begin with.*

**(Shows de Kooning the Picture)**

*de Kooning: You put your name on it?*

*Rauschenberg: Why not? It's my work?*

*de Kooning: Your work? Look at what you've done to my picture.*

*Rauschenberg: Nice job, eh? It was a lot of work erasing it. My wrist is still sore. I call it "Erased Drawing."*

*de Kooning: That's very clever.*

*Rauschenberg: I've already sold it for ten grand.*

*de Kooning: You sold my picture?*

*Rauschenberg: No, I erased your picture. I sold my erasing.<sup>32</sup>*

Readers might know that on his way to stardom as a pioneer in American pop art, Rauschenberg solicited de Kooning's drawing having made his intentions to produce a work by erasing it explicit. But here, Monk imagines a historical revision where a disagreement on exactly what has been sold—de Kooning's picture or Rauschenberg's erasing?—arises from different ways of comprehending what counts as the "work" that went into producing the "work" titled "Erased Drawing" (*Erased de Kooning Drawing* in real life). Underlying the wordplay of this parodic daydream is an exaggeration of the investment in aesthetic integrity that Monk imagines himself to hold—the artwork in question here is totally contentless, and its sale commands a purely

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<sup>32</sup> Everett, *Erasure* 288.

formal interpretive judgment of what constitutes it. And yet, the art object/commodity form antithesis folds back on itself, undercutting Monk's nostalgia for a historical problem space in which he imagines aesthetic autonomy to have help up much more durably.

This formalist idealism unravels even further when Monk faces multiple threats of violence in the spaces where his aesthetic commitments should be most protected. At the Nouveau Roman Society conference Monk attends early on, his ongoing feud with Davis Gimbel—a white male editor of the journal *Frigid Noir* in the novel—steadily escalates after Monk delivers his “S/Z: A Novel Excerpt” paper. Physical altercations and even a death threat result from this conflict, in addition to a tête-à-tête that falls somewhere between pointed critical polemics and racist microaggression:

He circled me as best he could in the small space and even pounded his chest with a closed fist once or twice. “You don’t think much of postmodern fiction, do you?” he said. “Like all avant-garde movements, we never have time to finish what we set out to accomplish.”

... “What did you set out to accomplish?”

“You know good and well. You and your kind, you interrupted us.”

“My kind?” I let that go. “Interrupted you? By not paying attention?”

“The whole culture. You’re just one of the sheep.<sup>33</sup>

It would be an understatement to say that this confrontation complicates Monk's nostalgia for the high artistic hegemony Gimbel claims he had a hand in diminishing. Giving corporality to the aesthetic sensibilities represented in Monk's imagined dialogues, Gimbel manifests the autonomy fetish that Monk routinely rehearses in the voices of long-dead artists and aesthetes as physical violence in the contemporary. And whereas Monk has been the one to lament the rising

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<sup>33</sup> Everett, *Erasure*, 36-37.

tide of ethnographic literature and the ossification of its epistemologies via live television, he is displaced from his counter-commercial perch by a figure who makes much the same claims, albeit in a more pronounced and hostile register.

The conflicts that come to a head between Monk and his fellow society members provide some crucial indicators about how the novel would have its readers judge Monk's curious career as a professional writer. Cartoonish as they might be, Monk explains that Gimbel's attacks are in fact representative of Monk's standing among his aesthetically committed peers. And they prove to be even more illuminating in light of the biographical details that are uncovered in Monk's interactions with them. Narrating a history of what he characterizes as minor achievements that Society members have speciously recognized as "innovative," Monk distances himself from at least one of the unsuccessful movements his peers have populated in the distant past. He confesses his alienation from them when explaining the details of his prior romantic entanglements with Linda Mallory, who seeks Monk out for sex at the conference hotel.

She liked to fuck, she said, but I believed she liked saying it more than doing it. She could be pushy. And she was completely without literary talent, which was both irritating and, in a weird way, refreshing. Linda had published one volume of predictably strange and stereotypically *innovative* short fictions (as she liked to call them). She'd fallen into a circle of *innovative* writers who had survived the sixties by publishing each other's stories in their periodicals and each others' books collectively, thus amassing publications, so achieving tenure at their various universities, and establishing a semblance of credibility in the so-called real world. Sadly, these people made up a good portion of the membership of the *Nouveau Roman Society*. They all hated me. For a couple of reasons: One was that I had published and had moderate success with a realistic novel some years earlier, and two, I made no secret, in print or radio interviews, what I thought of their work. Finally, however, I was hated because the French, whom they so adored, seemed to hold my work in high regard. To me, a mere strange footnote to my obscure and very quiet literary career. To them, a slap in the face perhaps.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Everett, *Erasure*, 11.

This backstory casts a complicated light on the nature of the aesthetic commitments Monk touts in frustration at the commercial literary market and in condescension to many of his colleagues in this field of restricted production. Monk's suggestion that Linda and her circle in fact overestimate the "innovative" nature of their fictional works—and that they've inflated the merit of their literary achievements by producing insular institutional networks for the dissemination and recognition of their work—raises the question of whether Monk's judgments about aesthetic production are in fact rooted in rigorous aesthetic commitment, or if the violences Monk and Gimbel have normalized among themselves are in fact reflective of less noble claims to bourgeois taste and cultural capital. The network of artistic and academic institutions that Monk dismisses here would appear to be the closest contemporary counterparts to those he internally fixates over, yet with the exception of the anonymous French school he alludes to, he finds himself disenchanted with and alienated from their real-life manifestations everywhere he encounters them in the novel.

This dissonance between real and ideal figurations of the restricted field factor crucially into the novel's ambivalence about the tenability of claims to aesthetic autonomy in the contemporary. In Pierre Bourdieu's constellation of them, universities, intellectual societies, guilds, and other restrictive spaces are so termed because they facilitate logics of production and judgment that are disarticulated from and closed off to the mercuriality of popular taste and bourgeois metrics of value (e.g. tickets or copies, revenue generated, etc.).<sup>35</sup> And as we've seen, this hermeticism—which Bourdieu diagrams on a macro, institutional scale—has had significant purchase among critical champions of the art object's capacity to self-legislate its aesthetic program and flout commercial demand in politically salient ways. Yet if Brown and others voice

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35 Nicholas Brown, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption Under Capital," 11.

an ambivalent optimism about what is actually achieved when a work of art succeeds in executing its aesthetic problem and suspending the hegemony of the market, *Erasure* takes aim at the very institutional structures and interpretive communities to which this achievement should be legible in the first place, coloring the claims to aestheticism furnished in them with vehemently formalist preoccupations that Monk fails to take seriously.

But this isn't to say that Everett is entirely dismissive of formalism's political viability. Far from it. *Erasure* advances its ethical claims on aesthetic judgment by coordinating the meanings at work in its extra-diegetic substrates with the parodies of aesthetic sociality that saturate its plot. This is precisely how Everett dramatizes the conflictual nature of the restricted field's increasingly precarious status at the turn of the twenty first century. What many have taken as the "decline" of the literary, Sarah Brouillette has argued, should be actually be apprehended as the increasing unavailability of "the things that are necessary to the development of the specifically literary disposition, which were always relatively distinguishing and elite."<sup>36</sup> The "broad post 1960s trend of economic stagnation and contraction has meant that fewer people have access to reliable wages; fewer people are positioned to engage in the forms of learning and self-cultivation (such as literary studies) that are at least *apparently* instrumental;...and more people are threatened with superfluity and by the policing, imprisonment, and repression that attend it." What was once an "historically particular" literary sphere is now a residual one, and its "bourgeois sociolect—previously characterized by its 'indirect relationship to economic

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<sup>36</sup> Sarah Brouillette, "Neoliberalism and the Demise of the Literary," *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Cultures*, Eds. Rachel Greenwald Smith and Mitchum Huehls (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP), 281.

rationality’—now vacillates between ‘the mode of wanting more diversity for cultural commerce and the mode of wanting literature and/or the aesthetic to be anticommerce.’”<sup>37</sup>

Of course, Brouillette directs her claims at a school of contemporary criticism whose arguments about aesthetic autonomy follow from a miscomprehension of neoliberalism as an all-consuming economic order to which there is no ideological “outside.”<sup>38</sup> Her argument that “the real economy has an absolutely foundational structuring role in the transformations of the fate of the literary”—though hardly a disagreement with it—is much more a corrective to autonomy’s purchase among the likes of Nicholas Brown and likeminded theorists than it is an effort to historicize writers’ and intellectuals’ investments’ in autonomy as politically problematic. Nonetheless, Brouillette illuminates the material changes that have reshaped the restricted field’s relationship to lay leaders. Her insight that “Diversity is the language of marketing departments and autonomy the language of the intelligentsia” in particular offers a pithy (and still quite generous) way to account for what Franzen, Wallace, Roth, and writers of their ilk lamented as the gravitational pull of ethnic and women’s literature in the commercial literary sphere,<sup>39</sup> as well as what Wallace took as the unprecedented ways in which television series such as the *Sopranos* (1999) and *The Wire* (2002) succeeded in monetizing the cultural capital that had been endemic to literary production up until the early 2000s.<sup>40</sup> Instances like these stand out for these writers’ ennui over commercial literature’s attention to minority difference as a breach of the literary sphere’s formerly “indirect” relationship to “economic rationality.” *Erasure* is a needful reminder that published complaints about the decay of American literary culture often came at

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37 Sarah Brouillette, “Neoliberalism and the Demise of the Literary,” 288.

38 Robbins, “Everything Is Not Neoliberalism,” 842.

39 Sarah Brouillette, “Neoliberalism and the Demise of the Literary,” 288.

40 David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram : Television and Fiction ,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993).

the expense of women writers of color during this period, especially where this cohort was concerned.

The more remarkable insight on offer in *Erasure*, though, is into the imposition of an ethnographic use value—which disallows the deferral of utility that fundamentally distinguishes art objects as such—onto the fact of blackness at sites of aesthetic encounter. This is, after all, what happens with Monk’s novels in *Erasure*. Borders sorts his essentially “raceless” *Persians* into its African American studies section, offering it to consumers not as a work of literature but as a container for racial knowledge. And even though Monk asks his agent Yul to circulate *My Pafology* as an insincere parody, marketing executives and book award judges laud what they assume is a sincere capitulation of a genre that both produces and pre-determines racial knowledge. Even *Erasure* itself, at the granular level of its first-person narration, can be said to anticipate and strain against this conscription to an epistemic usefulness. This is at least one way of interpreting Monk’s measured description of himself as an African American man in the most anti-essentialist, yet eminently “factual” of terms: “I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona, and Georgia so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race.”<sup>41</sup>

Much like we saw in my opening reading of *#blackAF*, Everett appears interested to maintain a degree of agency over the inevitable instrumentalization of the fact of blackness in external determinations of *Erasure*’s meaning. The very allusion to Thelonious Monk, which sits aside another to Ralph Ellison, in the naming of Everett’s protagonist brings the formal deflection of externally imposed racial meanings near to the novel’s ethical and aesthetic

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41 Everett, 1.



commitments. 42 This referentiality hasn't gone unnoticed among Everett's critics, although they have allocated a surprisingly small amount of attention to Everett's ambivalence about aesthetic autonomy and what it might tell us about the aesthetically precarious terrain upon which we encounter African American cultural production. In *#blackAf* alone we not only see direct, audio-visual comparisons between Barris' work and what he takes as canonical works of black film; we also *see* a collage of informational graphics, focalization through social media platforms, vestibular confessionals, and myriad other formal operations by which the show manipulates its status as a "black" show. As their antagonists struggle to reckon with the restricted field's penchant for wielding anti-commercialist sentiment to figure blackness as a contamination of its privileged access to the literary and—more broadly—the aesthetic, Everett and Barris both take to form in order to set the terms on which we encounter their work.

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42 John Brooks, "Antiessentialist Form: The Bebop Effect of Percival Everett's Erasure," *PMLA* 134, no. 5 (October 2019), 1048-1049.

## Appendix

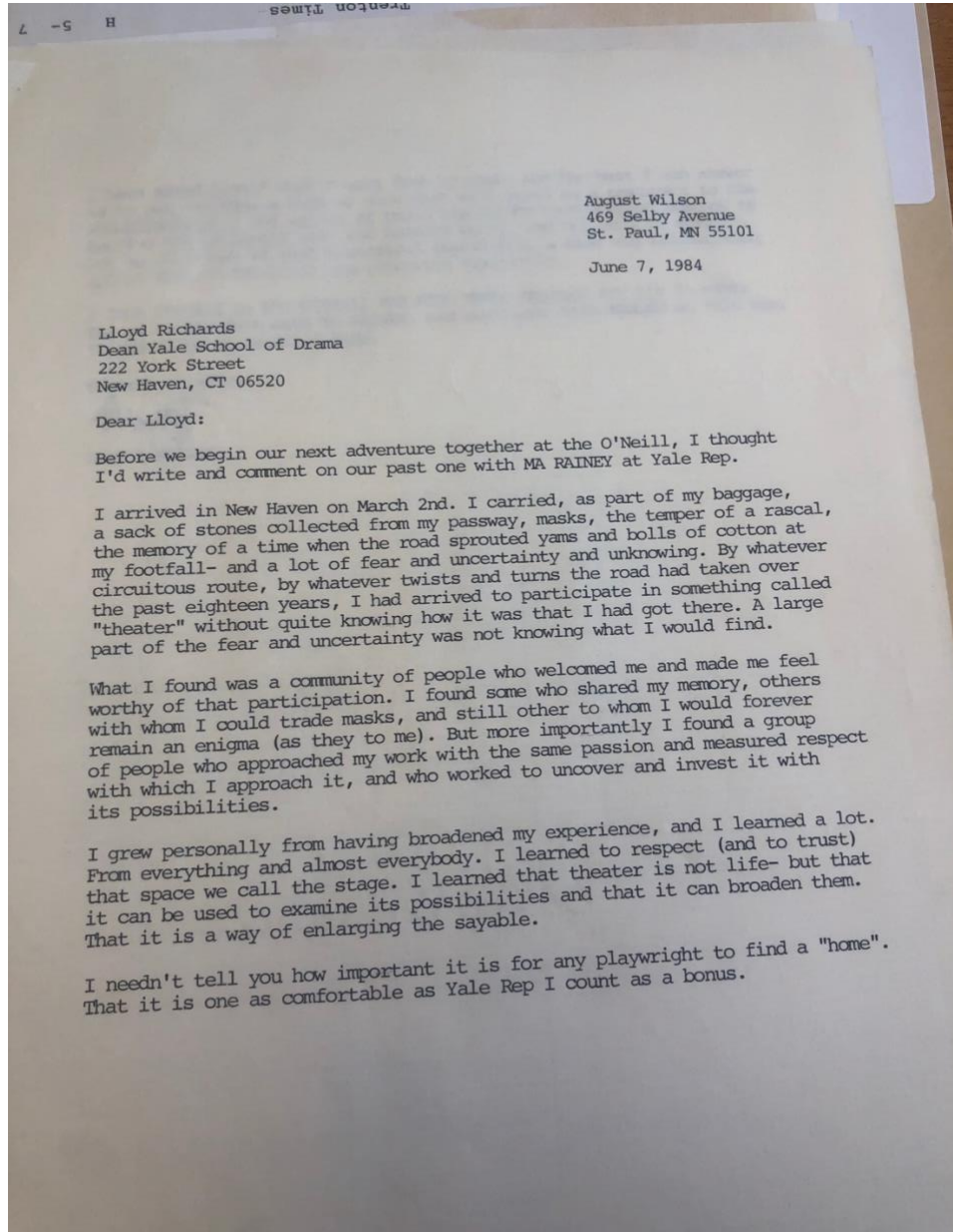


Figure 1. Letter from August Wilson to Lloyd Richards, June 7, 1984.

Lloyd Richards Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

October 9, 1984

Dear Lloyd,

As we approach a major turning point in this endeavor I find myself pleased with many things - the magnificent work of this cast; the ways in which the management has complimented that work; and above all, the great distance that you have taken Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. On a more personal level I am very pleased with the ways in which you have responded to me and in what, I presume, our relationship to be about.

I do not have to be a seasoned producer to know that with the problems we have encountered during this process and with the problems yet to come, this 'commercial' endeavor is a far healthier one than most.

You have been receptive to my ideas and while I am not one to harp on things, there are some aspects of the play which make me uneasy (some recurring and some new). My respect for the distinction between the producer's and director's territory has never wavered. I do know that I will regret it if I do not express these things at this time.

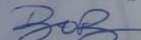
There are two moments of silence during the play which have experienced change. To me, changes occur for one of two reasons. Either the moment doesn't work and must be eliminated, which doesn't seem to be the case here, or there is a desire to make the moment something else. One of these moments occurs immediately at the end of Levee's monologue (end of Act I) and the other, immediately at the end of the 'Reverend Gates' speech. In both cases I sense that in exchange for other objectives, two of the most poignant and full silent moments of the play have been diluted. Slow Drag's cue to tap on the bass gets faster every night (as I understood you, to protect against the audience breaking the scene with applause). Levee now goes directly into "What I want to know...If he a man of God" and this seems to heighten the chances that the audience will laugh and whether this is intended or not, when it occurs, that laughter seems to be more offensive to the majority of the audience. That relief and that dimension of Levee's is always there, regardless, at the end of the monologue when he says, "Your God ain't shit, Cutler".

My feelings about the length of the First Act, punch and curtain call remain the same.

I do not expect any response from you - nor do I expect you to justify anything I've mentioned.

My primary concern is to maintain my rapport with you.

Most Sincerely,



Robert Cole

Figure 2. Letter from Robert Cole to Lloyd Richards, October 9, 1984.

Lloyd Richards Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

October 26, 1983

Lloyd Richards  
Dean Yale School of Drama  
222 York Street  
New Haven, CT 06520

Dear Lloyd:

I am sorry it has taken so long to get this to you. I think I have covered all the points and suggestions that we talked about. I am still undecided about the two Levee stories. I am sending them both along to you unbound so we can arrive at some decision about them.

I rewrote the story about Levee's mother because I thought of all the stories in the play it was the least fresh, the most familiar. Now I'm not certain if that isn't a racial memory that would not only be fresh with the characters in 1927, but part of a racial memory that should be kept alive in 1983.

I'm not certain in Levee's story about the dog doesn't make him villainous. He demonstrates his capability of plotting revenge and carrying it out ruthlessly and without contrition, that in the face of his powerlessness, his inability to strike out at the object of his retribution he overcomes his paralysis and intelligently selects a substitute - an idea that later exhibits itself in Levee's transference of aggression from Sturdyvant to Toledo. My question is whether this is too much foreshadowing and would using this story allow the audience to maintain their sympathy for Levee in his hope and aspirations.

In using the story about the dog, I don't think any of the other characters would question him on why he used a substitute, but rather stand, if reluctantly, in admiration of his boldness. This would maintain the atmosphere of quiet understanding and sharing of feelings of powerlessness as happens in the first story.

Let me know if the rewrites are sufficient to go into rehearsal with or if more work has to be done. I am looking forward to the experience with a certain amount of healthy trepidation, a well-spring of faith and trust in our work, and an eagerness to get on with it.

Best always,

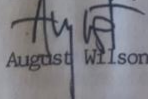
  
August Wilson

Figure 3. Letter from August Wilson to Lloyd Richards, October 26, 1983.

Lloyd Richards Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

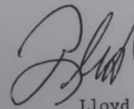
September 29, 1984

Dear Ivan Bloch, Robert Cole, & Frederick M. Zollo:

I am writing you out of a deep concern for the welfare of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. I have noticed that once we get to New York, we play for fourteen days without a day off. At present time, Roc Dutton's voice is at about 50% of capacity. He has three major crescendoes to reach every day in every performance. Theresa Merritt is at about 70% of her vocal capacity. All of this is a result of the circumstances we faced in the Philadelphia engagement. In the middle of the fourteen day stretch in New York, we have an opening. I am certain that if voices and bodies do not get rest, our opening will be less than 100%. This has nothing to do with spirit or desire.

To schedule fourteen days of performance may be legal and economically smart, but I do not think it is wise or supportive for the production.

Sincerely,



Lloyd Richards

cc; I. Bloch, R. Cole, F. Zollo, B. Mordecai

*Met 9/29/84 Park Center Hotel Cole Zollo Richards  
Jay. Approvd cancellation Met. Sun Oct. 6, 1984*

Figure 4. Letter from Lloyd Richards to Ivan Bloch, Robert Cole, and Frederick M. Zollo, September 29, 1984.

Lloyd Richards Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

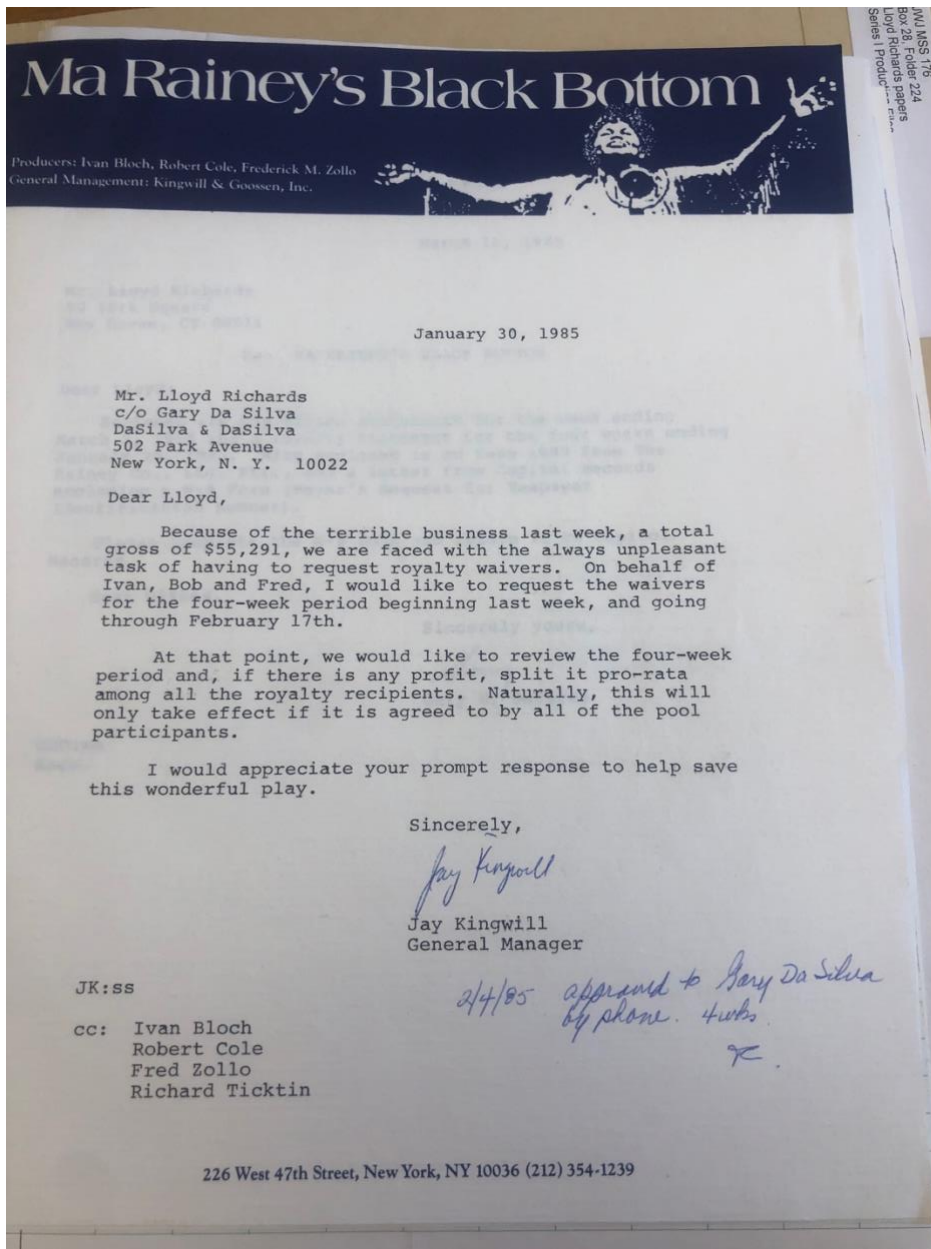


Figure 5. Letter from Jay Kingwill to Lloyd Richards, January 30, 1985.

Lloyd Richards Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

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