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FADING FUTURES: JAMES BALDWIN AND OUR MODERN MALAISE

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Lastly, I have to thank James Baldwin. Darling Jimmy. What can I even say? I just pray *Fading Futures* does justice to your legacy. Amen.

Abstract

Fading Futures figures James Baldwin as a witness to modern malaise. Rather than compose a critical biography of Baldwin, I think with him, working through his oeuvre to trace the racial, temporal, and formal dimensions of a malaise shaped by crisis ordinariness. With Baldwin as my primary interlocutor, I define malaise as a nonpathological and non-individualized affective ecology in which a present situation, often shaped by compounded crises, incites a link between a past understood as unfinished and a future made unintelligible by this sense of an ongoing past. My focus is on malaise governed by the racializing procedures of capitalism—a modern affective ecology where positive and negative feelings coalesce in attempts at navigating the liminality of what remains and what is yet to be.

In my first chapter, "The Future is Going to be Worse than the Past: Towards a Theory of Modern Malaise," I turn to several crises in American (and global) politics and social life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While much of the discourse surrounding these 'crises of confidence' is quite general and generalizing (pointing to various wars, scandals, terrorism, the rise of the nuclear age, climate change, etc.), James Baldwin—who lived from 1924 to 1987—offers a more nuanced account of the twentieth century with regards to race relations and its correspondence to the widespread emergence of national disaffection. Reading across Baldwin's nonfiction, I establish him as my key interlocutor as well as develop a theory of malaise that accounts for race as its critical (dis)organizing principle.

In the second chapter, "The Odor was Still There: Historicist Malaise and the Cinders of Slavery," I argue that for the black diaspora, living the liminality between slave and citizen presents the formal conditions of a malaise that is always already historicist in that it accounts for a relation to history that renders the past as unfinished, an open-endedness that deranges experiences of the present and clouds perceptions of futurity. In addition to analyzing James Baldwin's account of visiting the

Door of No Return, Jesmyn Ward's 2017 southern gothic novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and Toni Morrison's 2008 neo-slave narrative *A Mercy*, I turn to Dawoud Bey's photographic series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* to propose what I call the 'cinders of slavery,' a concept that registers how the material afterlife of slavery can and often does appear wholly different from the historical facts of the slave era while also insisting that the matter of slavery still matters.

In the third chapter, "Despair Among the Loveless: Moral Malaise and the Ruse of Innocence," I take up white southern 'middle of the road' politics and the imperative to 'go slow' even in the face of incessant white supremacist terrorism, arguing that such a moral bind amounts to preserving a myth of innocence while simultaneously managing anxieties around an unknowable future of racial equality. By tracing Baldwin's theory of white innocence, including his response to William Faulkner's controversial remarks on desegregation, I demonstrate how malaise can account for the impasse created when moral sentiment meets an unwillingness to be undone by futures made possible only through moral action.

In the final chapter, "Ever Wished You Were Queer?: Erotic Malaise and the Promise of Ruin," I theorize erotic malaise as the suspension of love between revelation and ruin (à la Baldwin), self-knowledge and chaos (Audre Lorde), as well as optimism and reason (Lauren Berlant). Using *Another Country* by Baldwin, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" by Richard Bruce Nugent, and *Looking for Langston* by Isaac Julien, I think erotic malaise alongside queerness, interracial intimacy, and genre bending as occasions to consider love's potential to reorient and reorder our social (mis)arrangements.

INTRODUCTION

Open Letter to James Baldwin, A Spiritual Historian in Times of Trouble

May 30, 2023

Dearest Jimmy,

Alive. That was her aspiration. It was Tuesday, March 10th, 2020 and I'd been invited to lunch with the First-Year Humanities Fellows from my alma mater. They were in Chicago for the annual immersion program, attending a wide array of cultural events. But, to be teenagers exploring the city, they weren't a particularly spirited party—perhaps because of afternoon hunger, perhaps because of fatigue from a brimming itinerary, or perhaps because of the overcast sky (with only small promises of light) in that awkward span of late winter and early spring, or perhaps I was merely projecting my own uneasiness—either way, I waited until after appetizers to ask the perfunctory, *What do you all want to be when you grow up?* That's when, following a short silence, one student shrugged her shoulders and answered, *Alive.* Her tone was measured but empty. Then her peers leaned into gestures of agreement. Our moral codes required that I provide encouragement, especially when despair of that shade seems so aberrant, even unwarranted, amongst the younger generations. I wanted to be like you—to give them hope. But what could I say? The students offered a litany of compelling reasons: amidst increasing income inequality, an alarming climate crisis, the threat of nuclear warfare, and the rapid global spread of a novel (and deadly) coronavirus—buttressed by an incompetent president who seemed fueled, mostly, by scorn and fame as well as a legislature that seemed more invested in competing along party lines than in fulfilling their duties as public servants (not to mention the consensus that corporations, whose only ambition is profit, hold more political sway than politicians)—amidst all of this, the future can seem altogether menacing and being alive can feel like a lofty ambition.

But you knew this all too well—that shared despondency about the future, even among the youth (however ostensibly peculiar and, thus, unsettling), is not at all unprecedented. Your dear friend and editor Toni Morrison addressed such a phenomenon in her 1996 Jefferson Lecture entitled "The

Future of Time," in which she reflected on how "time no longer seems to be an endless stream through which the human species moves with confidence in its own increasing consequence and value."[1] She notes that while the past, due to scientific advancement, continues to be understood as more and more expansive—from the seventeenth century idea that earth was merely several thousand years old to contemporary theories that earth is, rather, millions of years old—our experience or perception of the future "seems to be narrowing to a vanishing point beyond which humanity neither exists nor wants to."[2] In other words, the human species, poised near the turn of the twenty-first century, could imagine an eternity gone by but seemed ill-equipped to envision an eternity to come—at least not one in which we are alive. The reasons, however, as Morrison presented them, were manifest: imperialism, unequal resource distribution, Cold War, climate change, the nuclear age…a list hauntingly similar to our current litany of disaster—merely the ongoing plight of time's future.

And yet, as I dined with the first-year students from my alma mater (an all too familiar scene in higher education of me being the only black person at the table), I had to curb my impulse to compete in the 'Oppression Olympics.' By the logic set forth above, the conditions of black life in America have almost always been structured, at least in part, by compounded crises and a sense of a diminished future; even post-Emancipation and despite a long history of movements for change and campaigns of hope, collective despair for the present and doubt for the future are not only familiar to black Americans but also quotidian. But I had to reconcile all of this with the fact that the effects and threats of racial capitalism, neoliberalism, climate change, nuclear warfare, and murderous pandemics render visions of an apocalyptic future for us *all*, regardless of our specific constellations of politicized categories of identity.

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[1] Morrison, Toni, "The Future of Time: Literature and Diminished Expectations," *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Knopf, 2019) 113.

[2] Morrison 113.

However, within days of that lunch, entire nations were on lockdown because of the mass outbreak of COVID-19, driving billions of people into their homes to live with actual and imminent mourning, forcing them to postpone plans for the future indefinitely or cancel them altogether. And within weeks, Americans learned that black and brown people (due to ongoing systemic inequality and oppression) experience disproportionately high rates of hospitalization and death—4 to 5 times higher than those of non-Hispanic white Americans.[3] And within months, millions of protestors around the world took to the streets to denounce police brutality, impelled by the publicized deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, three black Americans murdered by active or former police officers during an already deadly outbreak—a new viral pandemic compounded by the old and unending epidemic of police brutality. So just as cities imposed stay-at-home orders and as the CDC urged everyone to practice social distancing, all to reduce the spread of COVID-19, countless people, many of whom are black and poor and, thus, belong to historically vulnerable communities, gathered and marched in massive crowds, risking their lives for the right to stay alive, exposing themselves and their loved ones to COVID-19 while also witnessing a militarized police force resist civil resistance in the name of order. Try as we might, this entanglement of social and political forms does not afford any sustained confidence in the future of racial justice, however immediate or distant.

Regardless, as I bore witness to the despair among those young people, less than a year removed from high school, I was reminded that they're the generation that came of age through a time when strolling down the hall to Algebra 1 could certainly end in tragedy. I was only ten years their senior and I'd never imagined during my years attending small private Christian schools in Chicago—sent there to avoid any potential gang violence at the public schools—that my peers and I could become victims of a *mass* school shooting. But now, just recently, 28-year-old Audrey Hale killed three

[3] "COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 25 June 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html, 12 July 2020.

students and three adults at The Covenant School, a private Presbyterian elementary in Nashville. In that moment, Jimmy, I was scared for those students from my college alma mater, but I couldn't tell them that.

Instead, I asked if they'd seen John Legend's music video for "Preach."[4] I'd given a presentation on in it almost exactly a year prior in Lauren Berlant's course Literature of Trauma, where I'd started to hash out this weird concept that might become the focus of my dissertation—*malaise*. In the video, John Legend lies awake at night in an elegantly appointed bedroom while his wife, fashion model Chrissy Teigen, sleeps soundly beside him. Disturbed by the raucous of muffled voices ringing in his head, Legend rolls out of his plush bed linens and walks toward what?, we cannot know for sure. But suddenly he's in an outdoor nightscape, lit softly by ambient city lights, and we see him walking towards a door hanging in midair. The dream acquires music once he pulls the handle and steps into what looks to be an empty high school gymnasium. From the start, we as viewers are thrown into spatial and temporal disarray before we even hear Legend's raspy voice. And once we do hear it, we're unsettled by the image of terrified teenagers sprinting into the gymnasium. This dreamscape unfolds into three separate storylines woven together: a teenager opening fire at a high school, a young black man being murdered by the police, and an immigrant family being separated at the hands of border patrol. All the while, Legend belts that "heaven knows I'm not helpless, but what can I do?" Concurrent crises of the present situation, at least in the world of the song, are compounded by the weight of the past: "get home every evening and history's repeating," namely that "nothing real is happening because nothing is new." While the situation is tortured by the ordinariness of disparate

[4] "John Legend - Preach (Official Video)." *John Legend*. 15 February 2019. *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0r1AJMK79g.

forms of terror, one's attention and emotional energy are scattered, rendering action next to impossible, because, honestly, what *can* you do in the midst of such profound terror? What does effective action even look like in the face of overwhelming, if not insurmountable, state-sanctioned violence?

Legend's message in the song is that hope, prayer, and preaching just aren't enough. His message beyond the song is to organize: "Preach" is part of a fundraising effort for FREEAMERICA, a campaign Legend founded in 2014 to help end mass incarceration by raising awareness of the issue. But instead of producing a music video about mass incarceration, Legend makes one about mass shootings, police brutality, and border violence, as if to say that they are all, in fact, part and parcel; as if, in their collective devastation, each makes the other possible. Legend's project demonstrates how we can all be affected by terrors that aren't exclusively our own, how the present situation calls upon us all to affectively engage to some degree with crises outside of our, perhaps, more immediate racial and class affiliations. That said, one might reasonably wonder about the utility of cultural and political awareness, especially given the song's presentation of a composite crisis in which we are perhaps *too* aware: "turning off my phone because it's hurting my chest." The issue then becomes, what do you do with awareness once overwhelming terror flattens into malaise?

Because the litany of terror is always manifest: on April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 students and faculty members at Virginia Tech; on January 1, 2009, Oscar Grant (22 years old) was murdered by officer Johannes Mehserle in Oakland, California; on May 16, 2010, Aiyana Stanley-Jones (7 years old) was murdered by officer Joseph Weekley in Detroit, Michigan; on March 21, 2012, Rekia Boyd (22 years old) was murdered by officer Dante Servin in Chicago, Illinois; on August 5, 2012, Wade Michael Page killed six worshippers at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin; on December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza killed 20 elementary school children and 6 adult staff members at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut; on October 20, 2014, Laquan McDonald (17 years old) was murdered by officer Jason Van Dyke in Chicago, Illinois; on November 22, 2014, Tamir

Rice (12 years old) was murdered by officer Timothy Loehmann in Cleveland, Ohio; on April 4, 2015, Walter Scott (50 years old) was murdered by officer Michael Slager in North Charleston, South Carolina; on June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof killed 9 worshippers at Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina; on June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen killed 49 people at Pulse gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida; on October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock killed 58 concertgoers in Las Vegas, Nevada; on February 14, 2018, Nikolas Cruz killed 17 students and staff members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; on October 27, 2018, Robert Bowers killed 11 worshippers at the Tree of Life Congregation, a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; on November 7, 2018, Ian David Long killed 12 people at Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California; on March 15, 2019, Brenton Tarrant killed 50 worshippers at the Linwood and al Noor mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand; on April 10, 2019, Holden Matthews was arrested for setting fire to three black churches in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana; on April 27, 2019, John Earnest opened fire in a Poway, California synagogue on the last day of Passover, killing a 60-year-old woman; on May 12, 2019, an unknown suspect set fire to the Diyanet Mosque in New Haven, Connecticut; on May 31, 2019, Dewayne Craddock killed 12 people at a municipal building in Virginia Beach; on February 23, 2020, Ahmaud Arbery was murdered by Travis McMichael in Glynn County, Georgia; on March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor was murdered by officers Brett Hankison, Jonathan Mattingly, and Myles Cosgrove in Louisville, Kentucky; on May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota; on May 27, 2020, Tony McDade was murdered by an undisclosed officer in Tallahassee, Florida; on January 9, 2021, Jason Nightengale killed 6 people at various locations in Chicago and Evanston, Illinois; on March 16, 2021, Robert Aaron Long killed 8 people at three different spas in Atlanta, Georgia; on March 22, 2021, Ahmad Al Aliwi Al-Issa killed 10 people at a grocery store in Boulder, Colorado; in 2022 alone, more than 800 migrants struggling for a better future died at the US-Mexico border… And this is just a sampling from the first two decades of the 21st century. We

mustn't forget about the Columbine High School massacre of 1999 or the brutal beating of Rodney King by LAPD in 1991 or the UpStairs Lounge arson attack of 1973 or the Orangeburg massacre of 1968 or the 16th Street Church bombing of 1963 or the Rosewood massacre of 1923 or the Tulsa massacre of 1921 or the Ocoee massacre of 1920 or the Elaine massacre of 1919 or the Thibodaux massacre of 1887 or the Opelousas massacre of 1868 or the Zong massacre of 1781 or the numerous other events of terror that constitute our present crisis ordinariness but have yet to accumulate into radical change on a national, let alone global, scale. Legend's "Preach" invites us to imagine how "history's repeating," how our malaise can make the present feel like the past as well as an impression of the future, how being present to the present means being receptive to the affective temporal entanglements of terror and unfreedom…

I tried to help those students put their present concerns into historical perspective, to convince them that (even though the future seems dim) there's still a future to be had, that pessimism will get us nowhere, that malaise offers us some embers of optimism, and that it's our responsibility, using whatever gifts we have, to give shape to the future we desire. I told them I'd use my gifts to be a teacher and an artist because, like you, I believe that "[a]n artist is a sort of emotional or spiritual historian" who must "make you realize the doom and glory of knowing who you are and what you are."[5] Like you, Jimmy, I want to tell "what it is like to be alive."[6] May *Fading Futures* be such a telling.

In my first chapter, "The Future is Going to be Worse than the Past: Towards a Theory of Modern Malaise," I turn to several "crises of confidence" in American politics and social life throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While much of the discourse surrounding these crises of confidence is quite general and generalizing (pointing to various wars, scandals, terrorism, the rise of

[5] Howard, Jane, "Telling Talk From a Negro Writer," *LIFE*, vol. 54, no. 21, 24 May 1963, pp. 89, *Google Books*, https://books.google.com/books?id=mEkEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=may+24+life+magazine&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjInoyev_L9AhUZIkQIHeSWBdYQ6AF6BAgBEAM#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[6] Howard 89.

the nuclear age, climate change, etc.), you—having lived from 1924 to 1987—offer a more nuanced account of the twentieth century with regards to race relations and its correspondence to the widespread emergence of national disaffection. Reading across the full range of your oeuvre, I champion you as my key interlocutor as well as develop a theory of malaise that accounts for race as its critical (dis)organizing principle.

In the second chapter, "The Odor was Still There: Historicist Malaise and the Cinders of Slavery," I argue that for the black diaspora, living the liminality between slave and citizen presents the formal conditions of a malaise that is always already historicist in that it accounts for a relation to history that renders the past as unfinished, an open-endedness that deranges experiences of the present and clouds perceptions of futurity. In addition to analyzing your account of visiting the Door of No Return, Toni Morrison's 2008 neo-slave narrative *A Mercy*, and Jesmyn Ward's 2017 southern gothic novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I turn to Dawoud Bey's photographic series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* to propose what I call the 'cinders of slavery,' a concept that registers how the material afterlife of slavery can and often does appear wholly different from the historical facts of the slave era while also insisting that the matter of slavery still matters.

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All my love,

Korey

'THE FUTURE IS GOING TO BE WORSE THAN THE PAST'

Towards a Theory of Modern Malaise

We're living in our last days. That's how the elders put it, alluding (I'm almost sure) to the Book of Revelation. But we've been living in our last days for an awfully long time. What I mean is that pivotal moments of crisis—prior to our own—present occasions for dwelling on an ebbing future. For instance, by the end of the 1970s—after the onset of a global energy crisis and the rise of international terrorism; after the Vietnam War and the Watergate Scandal; and after the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy—whatever faith Americans had in their nation's progress and future was, undoubtedly, waning. As if that weren't enough, 1973 marked an economic shift in which, as historian Jefferson Cowie asserts, "real earnings began to stagnate and then slide as workers began their slow and painful dismissal from their troubled partnership with postwar liberalism"[7] In other words, the industrial and technological boom following WWII was over and confidence in the future expansion of socioeconomic opportunity was on the decline.

Morale got so low that on July 15th, 1979, in what would be known as the "malaise speech," then president Jimmy Carter outlined what he called the American people's "crisis of confidence."[8] In a cadence that fell just short of sermonizing, he bemoaned "the growing doubt about the meaning of our lives and…the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation."[9] Throughout the address, Carter often swerved into nostalgia, conjuring a past in which all Americans "believed in something called progress"[10] and "had a faith that the days of our children would be better than our own."[11] This constellation of doubt, loss, and nostalgia gave rise, at least in Carter, to a general sense that Americans were "losing that faith, not only in government itself but in the ability as citizens to serve as the ultimate

[7] Cowie, Jefferson, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010) 12.
[8] Carter, James Earl, Jr., "The Crisis of Confidence," *PBS*, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/carter-crisis/, accessed 15 April 2020.
[9] Carter.
[10] Carter.
[11] Carter.

rulers and shapers of our democracy."[12] The manifestations of this crisis included a superficial consumer culture, low voter turnouts, and "a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media, and other institutions."[13] Carter conceded, however, that this emotional and cultural dilemma had its reasons, particularly the ways in which government seemed not only oriented away from the general public but also too consumed by its own internal mechanics to solve the pressing issues of the day. By Carter's estimation, doubt in the efficacy of supposedly democratic institutions whittles away at our visions for tomorrow, and this "erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and political fabric of America."[14] In other words, a lack of confidence not only forecloses the possibility of the development and implementation of effective solutions but also exhibits a kind of moral defect that is decidedly un-American.

Carter, of course, wasn't alone in his sentiments about the emotional state of American politics and culture in the 1970s. In April of 1975, sociologist Joseph Bensman delivered a conference presentation entitled "The Crisis of Confidence in Modern Politics," in which he characterized malaise as a collective "sense of incompetence and drift"[15] that accompanies the inevitable failure of a group's political system to effectively address the problems and demands of its constituents. Like Carter, Bensman points to a lack of unity amongst the general public as well as corruption, namely the 'crisis of credibility' and 'the failure of legitimacy.'[16] The former arises when the public has "perceived too often that they are the objects of lies, deceit, and fraud, of unfulfilled and unfulfillable promises, rip-offs and post-election neglect."[17] In addition to the Watergate Scandal, Bensman notes medical malpractice suits and illegal police activity as just a few of the many causes for this national malaise. The latter, the

[12] Carter.
[13] Carter.
[14] Carter.
[15] Bensman, Joseph, "The Crisis of Confidence in Modern Politics," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1988, pp. 16, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20006884, accessed 7 September 2019.
[16] Bensman 15.
[17] Bensman 15.

"failure of legitimacy," stems from a critique of "our society's inability to develop a system of beliefs that produce confidence in the political and economic systems of society."[18] The disconnect between leaders and politicians and the groups they serve, worsened by the fact that institutions grow evermore burdensome to navigate, produces a state of distrust and disjunction and, thus, a broad sense of ideological disbelief. However, unlike Carter, who ultimately commits himself to a rhetoric of nostalgia to promote hope and collective action and patriotism, Bensman not only details the recent failures of leaders and politicians but also sets aside corruption to elaborate on the structural conditions that make effective leadership nearly impossible.[19] First, due in large part to globalization and its resulting shifts in international economic and political power, the jurisdictions of our leaders don't extend the full scale of the dilemmas they're responsible for solving.[20] Second, addressing these dilemmas requires expertise in numerous fields, including science and technology—expertise that many leaders simply do not have, and even if they rely on the counsel of specialists, opinions vary widely even amongst experts.[21] Lastly, leaders are responsible for long-term planning predicated in part on inferences and predictions, if not outright prophecies, which means that their success is less a matter of ability and more a matter of chance.[22] Taken together, the public is presented with an elected class that, even in the best of times, is capable only of failure: stagnation at best; decline at worst.

The durability of malaise as a structural problem continues into the 21st century, especially after 9/11, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and another economic recession. In his 2012 article entitled "The Democratic Malaise: Globalization and the Threat of the West," Charles A. Kupchan, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), names the "crisis of governability" as a feature of malaise, a crisis in which "globalization is producing a widening gap between what electorates are

[18] Bensman 15.
[19] Bensman 16-18.
[20] Bensman 18.
[21] Bensman 20-21.
[22] Bensman 21-23.

asking of their governments and what those governments are able to deliver"[23]—a figuration that essentially expands Bensman's more national concerns and sets them on the world stage. According to Kupchan, globalization is a double-edged sword: while it necessitates more effective governance in order to mitigate its more dire effects, it simultaneously diminishes the capacity for effective governance. To be more specific, globalization and, by extension, neoliberalism have averse effects on wealth distribution, climate change, immigration, and so forth, all of which electorates rely on their governments to solve, but globalization and its resulting shifts in power (from the deindustrialized West to now industrialized countries once understood as the periphery) means that Western governments no longer have the dominance and leverage they enjoyed in previous generations—their individual fortunes are evermore reliant on the dynamics of the international community.[24] This socioeconomic structure then results in a "popular disaffection" for governing institutions.[25]

Returning to the 70s, curiosity towards malaise as a problem worthy of examination extended beyond immediate political and economic crises into long suspicions about the very environs in which humans find themselves. In his 1973 study "Urban Malaise," sociologist Claude S. Fischer investigates and seeks to potentially dispel the common assumption that "urban life generates a sense of despair or malaise,"[26] a theory we see emerge at the turn of the century with works like Georg Simmel's 1903 sociological study "The Metropolis and Individual Life" (not to mention the extensive medical discourse on nervousness and neurasthenia). For Fischer, *malaise* is a useful matrix through which to

[23] Kupchan, Charles A., "The Democratic Malaise: Globalization and the Threat of the West," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 1, 2012, pp. 62, JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23217148, accessed 7 September 2019.
[24] Kupchan 62.
[25] Kupchan 62.
[26] Fischer, Claude S., "Urban Malaise," *Social Forces*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1973, pp. 221, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2576376, accessed 25 May 2020.

examine "a domain of subjective psychological states encompassing dissatisfaction, unhappiness, despair and melancholy."[27] Although Fischer recognizes that each of these psychological states has distinct characteristics and discourses, he uses malaise to describe "the general state of mind" of urban populations, specifically those in the United States as well as France.[28] Fischer points to well-established concerns regarding population density, migration patterns, overstimulation, and class conflicts, all of which are generally understood to contribute to a sense of alienation and the breakdown of communal attachment, but what Fischer wants to know is "*Does the likelihood of an individual expressing malaise increase with an increase in the urbanism of his place of residence (indexed by size of community)?*"[29] That said, he acknowledges malaise as a "romantic" and "literary"[30] term, rather than scientific, which is to say that whatever this state of mind is, however clustered with negative affects, it eludes empirical capture. Fischer, as a sociologist, announces the inevitable failure of scientific methodologies to explicate this perceived reality that seems to move beyond the purely measurable. In the end, his study is inconclusive, which simultaneously suggests that evaluating malaise on the level of the individual is an onerous task (especially if malaise is meant to encapsulate any combination of dissatisfaction, unhappiness, disappointment, melancholy, deviance, alienation, despair, loneliness, resentment…all of which manifest differently between different people) as well as proves that what there is to see doesn't necessarily amount to what there is to feel or know. Malaise, nonetheless, remains a matter of concern.

In all of these cases, malaise isn't merely a personal response to loss or crisis, though certainly constituted by them. Instead malaise is a culturally structured relation to a social and political ecology whose composition isn't conducive to sustaining visions of futurity, to cultivating convictions of a future worth having. We tremor with economic malaise when our economy veers toward recession;

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[27] Fischer, Claude S., "Urban Malaise," *Social Forces*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1973, pp. 221–222, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2576376, accessed 25 May 2020.
[28] Fischer 221-222.
[29] Fischer 221.
[30] Fischer, Claude S., "Urban Malaise," *Social Forces*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1973, pp. 221, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2576376, accessed 25 May 2020.

we bemoan political malaise when our governmental institutions seem no longer effective and efficient; we denounce moral malaise when populations appear to lose or abandon previously unquestionable codes of conduct and principles of ethics; and we confess spiritual malaise when our faith, however defined, begins to falter. But no matter how disparate, each of these uses of malaise (and numerous others) share several characteristics: each involves some degree of suffering induced by apparent dysfunction, disorder, disturbance, or decline; each throws our convictions of the past, comforts of the present, and confidence in the future all into crisis.

In none of these cases, however, is there a substantive account of the social crises that immediately preceded the sense of decline in the 70s, indexed by various justice movements, particularly the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Cowie tells us that "[t]he years prior to the 1973-74 crisis had been the most economically egalitarian time in U.S. history, the point on the graph where the bounty was shared most equitably, and unemployment was at historic lows."[31] And Fischer's study found "a trend for an urban malaise effect…to be greatest among the well-to-do," and that "blacks and poor whites tended to have a *higher* morale in cities than they did in rural places."[32] But as James Baldwin makes clear in 1978, "[t]he news from all the Northern cities is, to understate it, grim; the state of the union is catastrophic. And when this is true for white Americans, the situation for blacks is all but indescribable."[33] The occasion for Baldwin's declaration is the tenth anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination and his deep disappointment in witnessing that King's famous dream had not been realized: "To look around the United States today is enough to make prophets and angels weep."[34] At a moment when much of the discourse surrounding this national malaise and crisis of confidence in the 70s was quite generalizing, Baldwin sought to draw attention to the racial dimensions

[31] Cowie 12.
[32] Fischer 231.
[33] Baldwin, James, "The News from All the Northern Cities Is, to Understate It, Grim; the State of the Union is Catastrophic," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, Ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2011) 132.
[34] Baldwin 132.

that corresponded to what felt like the imminent demise of patriotism, gesturing towards histories of struggle and crisis that the catastrophe(s) at hand seemed to eclipse. Moreover, rather than look to war or Watergate, recession or corruption, Baldwin turns to a 1977 incident in Boston when "young, white patriots attempted to bayonet a black American citizen with the American flag"[35]—a lawlessness that epitomizes the nation's longstanding and ongoing crisis of patriotism. This incident and many others affirm Baldwin's assertion that "Americans refuse to perceive that theirs is not a white country; they can scarcely avoid suspecting that this is not a white world."[36] This, of course, is hauntingly similar to his conclusion in the 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village" that "[t]his world is white no longer, and it will never be white again."[37] For Baldwin, across several decades of publishing, the continued maintenance of white supremacy is the crux of many national and global disasters. Furthermore, by thinking with Baldwin, I understand the "crisis of confidence" in 1970s American politics and social life as merely a flashpoint in the history of malaise—that malaise as an affective and structural phenomenon names, in fact, *any* present shaped by compounded crises that themselves are the effects of an ongoing past that menaces the future.

I provide this sojourn in the 70s not only to establish Baldwin as my primary interlocutor but also to demonstrate the emergence of 'malaise' in sociopolitical discourse on processes of global capital as well as to parse the collective dimensions of malaise. To be clear, *Fading Futures* is not a project on the 70s nor is it particularly historicist. In fact, while the 70s marked a distinct intensity in the deployment of 'malaise' as a heuristic to better grasp a specific set of crises, I turn to the 70s in order to argue that its malaise is unexceptional. For instance, I might have zeroed in on the rapid moderni-

[35] Baldwin 132.
[36] Baldwin 133.
[37] Baldwin, James, "Stranger in the Village," *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, Ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998) 129.

zation and destruction attendant to the turn of the century and WWI, highlighting transatlantic modernist texts as various as *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) by Rainer Maria Rilke, *Death in Venice* (1912) by Thomas Mann, *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot, *Harmonium* (1923) by Wallace Stevens, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf, *Quicksand* (1928) by Nella Larsen, and *In Search of Lost Time* (1931) by Marcel Proust (whose father helped pen a study on neurasthenia). I might've even gone further back to modernism's precursors, including Charles Baudelaire, Auguste Rodin, Henry James, Kate Chopin, and Oscar Wilde. But since *Fading Futures* is prompted by our current situation of compounded crises, I might've pursued a twenty-first century project, highlighting works like *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America* (2013) by Kiese Laymon, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) by Claudia Rankine, *Lemonade* (2016) by Beyoncé, *Queen Sugar* (2016-2022) produced by Ava DuVernay, and *Moonlight* (2016) directed by Barry Jenkins. But I'm not interested in periodizing malaise, in tracing the contours of its various structures of feeling.

Nevertheless, why James Baldwin? In our contemporary moment of widespread dispossession and socioeconomic malaise, Baldwin has gained much purchase as a kind of prophet. This renewed interest in his life and work is evidenced, in publishing, by the collection *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race* (2016) edited by Jesmyn Ward, the recent illustrated edition of *The Fire Next Time* (2019) featuring photographs by Steve Schapiro, and the re-release of *Nothing Personal* (2021) as a standalone book-length essay. There's also been an uptick in the last decade of biographies and books of criticism on Baldwin, including *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (2015) by Douglas Field, *James Baldwin: Living in Fire* (2019) by Bill Mullen, and *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (2020) by Eddie Glaude, Jr. In film, there's the documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) directed by Raoul Peck, the film adaptation *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) directed by Barry Jenkins, and the upcoming biopic starring Billy Porter. All of these texts position Baldwin as someone whose works speak to our own troubled times, our own compounded crises, our

own malaise—often drawing a link between the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter. If I were an historicist, I might have read Baldwin alongside other midcentury representations of malaise like *Nausea* (1938) by Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Street* (1946) by Ann Petry, *The Age of Anxiety* (1947) by W. H. Auden, *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) by Frantz Fanon, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) by Lorraine Hansberry, *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962) by Robert Hayden, and *A Single Man* (1964) by Christopher Isherwood. But, again, my task isn't to periodize malaise. My focus is on how Baldwin's oeuvre helps us understand the broader temporal and affective structure of malaise in the modern world, specifically as it binds to related questions of historical (dis)orientation (chapter two), moral conduct (chapter three), and desires for better forms of love (chapter four)—all of which are prominent concerns in Baldwin's work. But there are a great many other concerns; *Fading Futures* is merely an opening, an invitation to keep exploring the seemingly endless dimensions and iterations of malaise, whether they arise in/through Baldwin or otherwise.

Moreover, I figure Baldwin as my primary interlocutor not because he provides any explicit theory of malaise (in fact, Baldwin never uses 'malaise'; he instead offers a cluster of feelings and concepts that includes despair, torment, suffering, and the blues) but because his body of work delivers a sustained account of what it means to be a witness to various national and global crises in the twentieth century. Rather than claim the position of spokesperson or theorist or philosopher, Baldwin consistently declared "I am a witness."[38] In his 1984 interview with Julius Lester, Baldwin explains that his confidence in being a witness stems from the fact that "I know what I've seen and what I've seen makes me know I have to say, *I know*. I won't say I believe, because I know that we can be better than we are. That's the sum total of my wisdom in all these years. We can also be infinitely worse, but I know that the world we live in now is not necessarily the best world we can make."[39] As a witness,

[38] Baldwin, James, Interview, Conducted by Julius Lester, 27 May 1984, "James Baldwin – Reflections of a Maverick," *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014) 45.
[39] Baldwin, "Reflections of a Maverick" 45.

Baldwin provides testimony as evidence of things unseen, which is to say that in addition to utilizing wisdom of the past to document the facts and realities of what there is to observe in the immediate present, he's also attuned to "the possibilities that I think I see."[40] We might call Baldwin a witness of revelations. Rather than merely speaking for himself, from a position of solipsistic individuality, or speaking as a kind of savior on behalf of members of a marginalized population who somehow cannot speak for themselves, Baldwin allows himself to be a lens through which any willing person might see beyond the merely sensible, know who've we been (and are), and imagine what we might become. His historical sensibilities and convictions—how the present is a living history that shapes our relation to the future—imbue my theory of malaise as not only an affective but also a temporal structure. It is my task in *Fading Futures* to demonstrate how Baldwin's works of bearing witness to political, historic, and moral catastrophe(s) offer a compelling prism through which to theorize malaise in the modern world.

Crisis Ordinariness

Living from 1924 to 1987, James Baldwin witnessed more than half a century of global crises: born in the aftermath of the First World War, Baldwin became an adolescent during the Great Depression, then came of age during the Second World War. Embittered by the disastrous state of affairs in America, he chose at the age of 24 to live in postwar France as an exile where he eventually witnessed the emergence of the Algerian Revolution. Drawn to the promise of revolution in the United States, he returned home in 1957 to participate in the Civil Rights Movement. All the while, of course, Jim Crow and lynch law administered injustice throughout the country of his birth. During and after

[40] Baldwin, "Reflections of a Maverick" 43.

the Movement, he witnessed the Vietnam War as well as the Arab-Israeli Wars. Then the rise of neoliberalism in the 70s. And the spread of HIV/AIDS in the 80s. This, of course, isn't an exhaustive list (nor will this be a critical biography of Baldwin's life), but is meant to provide a sense of the widespread loss, rage, terror, and malaise that defined so much of the worlds for which Baldwin labored as a witness.

One such act of witnessing was his 1963 essay "We Can Change the Country," written after the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. By then, there had been nearly a decade of widely reported violence and aggression against black children, beginning with the brutal lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955, followed by the acquittal of his white adult murderers. Less than two years later, the Little Rock 9 would attempt to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas but be met with state-sanctioned resistance from the Arkansas National Guard as well as an unsanctioned mob of more than one thousand white supremacist protesters. In 1960, Ruby Bridges, only 6 years old, would have to be escorted by armed federal marshals as she integrated William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, terrorized by a mob of white adults, one of whom brandished a "black baby doll in a coffin."[41] Then, on Sunday, September 15th, 1963, the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson, all 14 years old, as well as Carol Denise McNair, 11 years old. Infuriated, Baldwin addressed white Americans:

> I want you to tell your children, as of this moment and on Christmas Day, that the reason there is no Santa Claus this year is because we have lost the right—by the murder of our brothers and sisters—to be called a Christian nation. And until we regain that right, we cannot celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace. And I am very serious about this for two reasons:

[41] Michals, Debra, "Ruby Bridges," *National Women's History Museum*, https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/ruby-bridges.

> (a) morally, I think this nation should be, for the foreseeable future, in mourning; (b) one must face the fact that this Christian nation may never have read any of the Gospels, but they do understand money.[42]

Baldwin not only articulates the nation's moral hypocrisy—its willful brutality against the youngest and most vulnerable of "our brothers and sisters"—but also points to the ongoing racializing procedures of capitalism as the root of this dilemma. He instructs his readers "to take a very hard look at our economic structure and our political institutions"[43] in order to preserve the lives of children in the future. Merely coming to terms with one's own personal bad feelings towards black people isn't enough to turn the tide of disaster. The problem isn't personal at all—its structural, even constitutional, formalizing the very textures, rhythms, and patterns by which we live.

Baldwin is also clear that by 'children' he means "both black and white children."[44] While this might be read as a rhetorical move to incite sympathy and identification with white readers—how a better regard for their own children might trickle down to the survival of black children—he consistently asserts that the plight of black people signals the demise of white people. For instance, in his 1964 essay *Nothing Personal*, he argues that "if a society permits one portion of its citizenry to be menaced or destroyed, then, very soon, no one in that society is safe."[45] As Baldwin sees it, such violences "can never be held in check, but run their devouring course, destroying the very foundations which it was imagined they would save,"[46] which is to say that if a society maintains the dominance of one group by persecuting another, such persecution is bound to spill over—persecutors eventually perse-

[42] Baldwin, James, "We Can Change the Country," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, Ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2011) 59.
[43] Baldwin, "We Can Change the Country" 61.
[44] Baldwin, "We Can Change the Country" 61.
[45] Baldwin, James, *Nothing Personal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021) 26.
[46] Baldwin, *Nothing Personal* 26-27.

cute each other to lay claim to ever-dwindling sites of power. Put differently, the racialized and racializing work of the past bleeds beyond the boundaries it was intended to keep intact, producing a universally catastrophic state of the union.

But Baldwin had faith in change, mainly that change was predicated on the principle "that we are responsible for our government and the government is responsible to us."[47] He even goes as far as to say that if the government continues to refuse to represent the entirety of its citizenry—black and white, rich and poor, north and south, and everyone in-between—then "the government will be replaced."[48] Baldwin, however, tempers this profound optimism in democratic ideals by predicting that "[t]he future is going to be worse than the past is we do not let the people who represent us know that it is our country."[49] For Baldwin, black political mobilization in the mid-20th century signaled a situation in which compounded crises, shaped by the racializing procedures of capitalism, collided with a revolutionary determination that, if unsuccessful, would wreak greater and more indiscriminate havoc throughout the nation and across the globe. I use 'situation' to indicate an emergent system of relations, one in which, according to Lauren Berlant, "a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules of habitation and genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos."[50] Malaise, then, lingers about situations, which are characterized, chiefly, by indeterminacy. More than just a state of affairs or the locus at which these affairs take shape, a situation "is a state of animated and animating suspension that forces itself on consciousness, that produces a sense of emergence of something in the present that may become an event."[51] So even though a situation, this peculiar "genre of social time and practice,"[52] can have so little if anything to know, the disquiet of waiting for an event (that may never come) makes manifest the conditions of temporal dissonance: a situation collapses

[47] Baldwin, "We Can Change the Country" 62.
[48] Baldwin, "We Can Change the Country" 62.
[49] Baldwin, "We Can Change the Country" 64.
[50] Berlant, Lauren, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011) 6.
[51] Berlant 5.
[52] Berlant 6.

the past into the present as well as presents an impression of the future, bound to impress upon the here and now. But our "haunting question is how much of one's creativity and hypervigilant energy the situation will absorb before it destroys its subjects or finds a way to appear as merely a steady hum of livable crisis ordinariness."[53] This crisis ordinariness is the very domain of malaise for it is a sense that so much (too much?) has already happened and is happening now, rendering the present as simultaneously illegible and manifold; and though one is certain of the future's uncertainty, the past can seem both immediate and untouchable.

But living through crisis ordinariness can produce any number of feelings, not just malaise. Moreover, because of its hazy contours, malaise can easily be mistaken for other negative feelings and affects. Therefore, it's important to distinguish malaise from its others. For starters, malaise isn't pessimism—that peculiar impression of the future being dead and gone, overdetermined and overrun by the past, because *We've been here before and know how this story ends*. As Baldwin once said so eloquently, "I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive. To be a pessimist means that you've agreed that human life is an academic matter. So I'm forced to be an optimist; I'm forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive."[54] So unlike pessimism, malaise troubles one's orientation in time and space, for the present moment can feel eclipsed by haunting impressions of ruin without much content—the hazy past emerging as an even hazier future. Put differently, malaise is like the impression of story without the buoy of plot—the impression of tragedy countered by optimism. Malaise also isn't anxiety, especially since anxiety involves a level of excitation and nervous energy as well as, more

[53] Berlant 196.

[54] "I Am Not Your Negro clip – Future of America," *Magnolia Pictures & Magnet Releasing*, 3 February 2017, *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAmL3F5uylo.

importantly, as Sianne Ngai puts it, "an aversive turn from the very occasions of the subject's aversion."[55] Malaise, on the other hand, is a more flattened affective ecology that necessitates neither turning away nor turning toward. But this flatness mustn't, of course, be mistaken for depression, which Jonathan Flatley defines as "that combination of incommunicable sorrow and isolating grief that results in the loss of interest in other persons, one's own actions, and often life itself."[56] Relatedly, malaise is distinct from ennui, for malaise isn't a feeling of boredom or lack of interest—it compels one to pay attention without designating something to pay attention to and without rousing its subject(s) one way or another. Simply put, malaise is interest without purpose. Lastly, malaise is distinct from melancholy in that it isn't a state of "pathological mourning" (in the Freudian sense). Instead, a present situation of crisis, which very well may include loss, forges an affective link between an ongoing past and a troubling future.

This all, nevertheless, isn't to say that malaise, melancholy, ennui, depression, anxiety, pessimism, and others don't swarm together or impose themselves in rapid succession. My interest, however, is in malaise as a general collective affective ecology that includes but always exceeds the territories of melancholy, depression, and anxiety. I take malaise to be an affective state that gives form to a wide range of affects, emotions, and feelings, all of which have their own trajectories but belong to a general state of affairs. Put differently, my concern is with a more or less comprehensive affective orientation to the world. And while malaise may be accompanied by, say, fatigue, sorrow, despondency, and a host of other unpleasant feelings that might press one toward detachment, I conceive of malaise as a state of deep attention, interest, and awareness, but without much (if any) direction. The disquiet of malaise is prompted by a diffuse sense that one's world is unwell and perhaps getting worse.

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[55] Ngai, Sianne, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005) 247.
[56] Flatley, Jonathan, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008) 1.

All that said, the most crucial distinction between malaise and its others is that it doesn't take up the adjectival position, that is, one might be melancholic, depressed, or anxious, but one is never 'malaised.' Rather than experience an internalized or even personal affective state, there simply *is* malaise and we sense its presence, which makes it inherently shared and depersonalized. So while a great many people might live in or with malaise, they might each feel it as melancholy, depression, anxiety, ennui, jadedness, and so forth. Taking my cue from Ann Cvetkovich, who figures depression as social and political—veering from what she calls the master narratives of therapeutic culture, including unresolved childhood trauma as well as biomedical and genetic explanations for psychological disturbance, all of which render depression as personal and private rather than historical and public[57]—I find malaise to be useful in thinking through various forms of sociality precisely because it hasn't been taken up in medical and psychological discourse to the same degree as depression, anxiety, and melancholy. Malaise hasn't been made clinical, pathological, and diagnosable (in fact, malaise in medical discourse is essentially a placeholder for when there isn't enough evidence to make a diagnosis). In short, malaise doesn't participate in the individuating procedures of what I call the diagnostic and therapeutic imagination. If we return to the social dimensions of malaise, rectification involves a rearrangement of our world. That said, what Cvetkovich makes clear about political depression holds true for malaise, namely how "[s]aying that capitalism (or colonialism or racism) is the problem does not help me get up in the morning."[58] But understanding that malaise isn't one's own and that one doesn't inhabit it alone might be the key to optimism and action. However, what precludes action, at least for Baldwin, is the national failure to reckon with history, a history in which "the relevant truth is that the country was settled by a desperate, divided, and rapacious horde of people who were determined to forget their pasts and determined to make money."[59] The real tragedy is that "[w]e certainly have not

[57] Cvetkovich, Ann, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012) 14-15.
[58] Cvetkovich 15.
[59] Baldwin, *Nothing Personal* 9.

changed in this respect."[60] Baldwin's use of 'money' is a shorthand for the socioeconomic structures inaugurated by European colonialism and the transatlantic African slave trade, structures that shaped the twentieth century crises to which he bore witness as well as threatened to diminish the more equitable futures so many labored to produce. Malaise here, again, is neither individual nor personal, it implicates everyone, making us all more or less responsible for futures we may or may not inhabit, without necessarily making us guilty or, by the same token, innocent.

Modern Malaise

To consider malaise as a distinctly modern phenomenon, we might turn to Charles Taylor who offers a sweeping philosophical account in his 1992 book *The Ethics of Authenticity*, based on his Massey lectures from the previous year. Taylor's concern is with the various "malaises of modernity," namely the widespread sense of decline that permeates not only the post-WWII era (a world reckoning with unparalleled loss) but also perhaps "the whole modern era," beginning as early as the seventeenth century.[61] The first malaise involves secularization and individualism: although modernity arguably brought about greater degrees of freedom, particularly freedom from predetermined and overdetermining sacred orders, "modern freedom came about through the discrediting of such orders."[62] The loss or decline of the sacred resulted in the loss or decline of meaning, what "has been called the 'disenchantment' of the world."[63] The world, in a sense, is lost. Similarly, in his 2008 book *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*, Jonathan Flatley asserts that the word 'modernity' itself imparts "the sense that the past is lost and gone" as well as "the feeling that one's own experience of

[60] Baldwin, *Nothing Personal* 9.
[61] Taylor, Charles, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991) 1, JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvv41887.4.
[62] Taylor 3.
[63] Taylor 3.

the present is contingent, fugitive, and fleeting."[64] By this light, the modern world is merely "an accumulation of losses."[65] A poignant literary articulation of this dynamic comes from Walker Percy's 1961 novel *The Moviegoer* in which the narrator 'Binx,' a Korean War veteran turned stockbroker in a rapidly modernizing New Orleans, thinks to himself, "malaise is the pain of loss," which is to say that "[t]he world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost."[66] Returning to Taylor and the malaises of modernity, it is the human response to such monumental loss that sustains large-scale crises. Without a seemingly cohesive world order to structure consciousness, provide confidence in the future, and imbue human life (regardless of status or position) with meaning and purpose beyond the merely sensible, humanity focused on the individual as the source of meaning. However, "the dark side of individualism is a centering on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society."[67]

Taylor identifies the second malaise as the "primacy of instrumental reason"[68] in which subjects of a disenchanted individualist world privilege efficiency and maximal economic return over all else. In other words, "the ways the demands of economic growth are used to justify very unequal distributions of wealth and income" in addition to "the way these same demands make us insensitive to the needs of the environment, even to the point of potential disaster."[69] Other examples include risk management that quantifies human life as well as a kind of faith in technology to solve most if not all human problems, "even when something very different is called for."[70] Combined, the malaise of individualism and the malaise of instrumental reason create a third—a political malaise in which

[64] Flatley, Jonathan, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008) 28.
[65] Flatley 29.
[66] Percy, Walker, *The Moviegoer* (New York: FSG Classics, 2019) 120.
[67] Taylor 4.
[68] Taylor 5.
[69] Taylor 5-6.
[70] Taylor 6.

subjects are not generally compelled to exercise their rights and freedoms in collective self-governance, specifically democracy, which leaves the government free to impose "a new, specifically modern form of despotism," one that's "mild and paternalistic," democratic in appearance but in fact largely inaccessible and thus uncontrollable, resulting in a widespread loss of freedom. In the end, secularization freed subjects from the dominion of sacred orders but, without any worthy alternative, subjects retreated into private individualist existences guided by an instrumental reason that further disenchanted the world. Under such conditions, collective action to uphold shared freedom is next to impossible.

But what Taylor doesn't say (at least not explicitly) is that modernity and the expansion of freedom (for some) coincided with the rise of capitalism and its racializing procedures as well as the implementation of instrumental reason on the non-western world, which is to say that for newly freed but disenchanted individuals of the west, "once the creatures that surround us lose the significance that accrued to their place in the chain of being, they are open to being treated as raw materials or instruments for our projects."[71] As Lisa Lowe puts it in her 2015 book *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, such accounts of modern liberalism "propose a narrative of freedom overcoming enslavement that at once denies colonial slavery, erases the seizure of lands from native peoples, displaces migrations and connections across continents, and internalizes these processes in a national struggle of history and consciousness."[72] Lowe defines modern liberalism as "the branches of European political philosophy that include the narration of political emancipation through citizenship in the state, the promise of economic freedom in the development of wage labor and exchange markets, and the conferring of civilization to human persons educated in aesthetic and national culture—in each case unifying particularity, difference, or locality through universal concepts of reason and community."[73] Moreover,

[71] Taylor 5.
[72] Lowe, Lisa, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke UP, 2015) 3.
[73] Lowe 3-4.

modern liberalism encompasses "the literary, cultural, and aesthetic genres through which liberal notions of person, civic community, and national society are established and upheld."[74] The results of modern liberalism's dependence on widespread dispossession, as we witness today, are disastrous, for the "social inequalities of our time are a legacy of these processes through which 'the human' is 'freed' by liberal forms, while other subjects, practices, and geographies are placed at a distance from 'the human.'"[75] This, too, belongs to the malaises of modernity, to the diminishment of sociopolitical attachments, to the fading of futures shaped by and for all of humanity.

This is precisely what Baldwin articulates in his 1972 book *No Name in the Street* when he declares, "All the Western nations have been caught in a lie, the lie of their pretended humanism,"[76] which is to say that liberal humanism's celebration of human freedom and transcendent individualism is predicated on the violent suppression and exploitation of much of the world's population. In the case of the United States, specifically, it "prospered—or seemed to prosper: this prosperity cost millions of people their lives."[77] These costs keep piling up because the beneficiaries of this prosperity "cannot, or dare not, assess or imagine the price paid by their victims, or subjects, for this way of life, and so they cannot afford to know why the victims are revolting."[78] To live in truth would mean being undone, but the terror of becoming otherwise produces violent habits of mind that merely perpetuate and augment widespread dispossession. For instance, the persecuted are cast as "barbarians…revolting against all established civilized values."[79] In the end, "in order to preserve these values, however stifling and joyless these values have caused their lives to be, the bulk of the people desperately seek out representatives who are prepared to make up in cruelty what both they and the people lack in

[74] Lowe 4.
[75] Lowe 3.
[76] Baldwin, James, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Vintage, 2007) 85.
[77] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 88.
[78] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 88.
[79] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 88.

conviction."[80] If we think with Baldwin's system of morality, this is where we get Jim and Jane Crow, redlining, gerrymandering, the war on drugs, the militarization of police, the prison-industrial complex, the expansion of neoliberalism, and so much more. For Baldwin, "[t]his is a formula for a nation's or a kingdom's decline, for no kingdom can maintain itself by force alone."[81]

But what seems to also fuel this particular formula of political and economic conservatism, at least in the US, is what Baldwin calls 'the white man's guilt,' that is, the embarrassment of trying to uphold the ideals of freedom and democracy even though the country's "appallingly oppressive and bloody history [is] known all over the world."[82] According to Baldwin, the 'record' of capitalism's racializing procedures and all its attendant violences "might as well be written in the sky,"[83] belonging to the affective ecologies in which we all must live. The 'white man' symbolizes systemic white supremacy as well as those who invest in its maintenance—no one, however, can escape the implications of guilt or the responsibility of dismantling white supremacy. Baldwin concedes that to "bear an inescapable responsibility" such as this must be draining, but he makes it clear that "to deal with such people can be unutterably exhausting."[84] Capitalism leaves everyone depleted; the paradox of liberal humanism being dependent on its racializing procedures cultivates guilt, embarrassment, and denial amongst its beneficiaries, who, according to Baldwin, bear the greatest responsibility in undoing systems of harm; but they are too debilitated by this political and affective conundrum—too afraid of becoming otherwise—to do anything about it. Everyone else is left with rage, mourning, terror, and exhaustion. The paradox simultaneously produces the crises as well as the conditions that make resolution seemingly impossible. This is what it means, as Baldwin famously declares in his 1963 book *The*

[80] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 88.
[81] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 88.
[82] Baldwin, James, "The White Man's Guilt," *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, Ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998) 722.
[83] Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt" 722.
[84] Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt" 722.

Fire Next Time, to be "trapped in history."[85] This is also what it means to inhabit the racialized and racializing crisis ordinariness of modern malaise.

Accordingly, my textual analyses throughout *Fading Futures* are attuned to how authors and artists represent and express racialized situations where the present is compounded by an ongoing past that seems destined to spill into the future. Put differently, I'm interested in representations of malaise, not as a named feeling but as a temporal structure shaped by the racialized crisis ordinariness of modernity. My task then is to re-narrativize these affective ecologies, emphasizing the temporal structure of malaise while also evoking its sensorial unease. Narrative (as well as the question of genre) is crucial because malaise isn't merely a set of discordant circumstances but also the stories we try to tell ourselves to make sense of the situation. In fact, as we see in Baldwin's account of 'the white man's guilt,' malaise can inhabit the disjunct between what is and what we say about what is—the myths and conventions that turn out to be insufficient for grasping our circumstances.

Mapping the Afterlife

Another crucial aspect of Baldwin's practice as a witness is his insistence on the collective, transgenerational 'I.' One of his most poignant uses of it comes from his 1965 debate with William Buckley. In response to the question, "Has the American Dream been achieved at the expense of the American Negro?," Baldwin asserts:

> From a very literal point of view, the harbors and the ports and the railroads are the country. The economy, especially of the southern states, could not conceivably be what it has become if they had not had and do not still have indeed and for so long, for so many generations, cheap labor. I am stating very seriously, and this is not an overstatement, that *I* picked the

[85] Baldwin, James, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993) 8.

> cotton and *I* carried it to market and *I* built the railroads under someone else's whip for nothing—for nothing. The southern oligarchy which has until today so much power in Washington and therefore some power in the world was created by my labor and my sweat and the violation of my women and the murder of my children, this in the land of the free and the home of the brave, and no one can challenge that statement—it is a matter of historical record.[86]

Again, Baldwin makes clear that America has been and continues to be a nation preoccupied with commerce and profit rather than the wellbeing of its entire population. But what's curious here is that rather than simply outlining the ways in which slavery made possible much of America's prosperity, he also identifies with enslaved Africans from generations past, claiming (at least rhetorically) their labor and trauma as his own. And it's this emptying out of the individual self to make room for a kind of cumulative consciousness that's documented by historical record. This, however, can only be achieved by engaging with other facts of history. For instance, during this debate, Baldwin makes the more uneasy transgenerational identification with whiteness, insisting "I have to accept…that my ancestors are both white and black," which means that the US population (if not the world) must accept "that I am not a ward of America, I am not an object of missionary charity—I am one of the people who built the country."[87] For Baldwin, 'white' and 'black' merely obfuscate the ways in which Americans are biochemically (not just socioeconomically) enmeshed; moreover, they're merely placeholders for a future unified identity—one more equitable and more mature—that may never be realized.

In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin asserts, "We have a civil rights bill now. We had an amendment, the 15th amendment, nearly 100 years ago. I hate to sound again like an old testament prophet, but if the amendment wasn't honored then, I don't have any reason to believe that

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[86] "James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley (1965)," *The Riverbends Channel*, 27 October 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFeoS41xe7w&t=2297.

[87] "James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley (1965)."

the civil rights bill will be honored now."[88] Even while declaring the optimism attendant to black political mobilization, Baldwin foresees that the new bill, like the old, won't be enough to realize the ideals of democracy. Nevertheless, it isn't that Baldwin doesn't believe in or witness change across time. In his interview with Julius Lester, he recognizes, for example, that for white Americans in the 80s to build connections with black Americans "is a little less dangerous now" than in the 40s and 50s.[89] The problem is that any semblance of progress isn't evidence of the nation undergoing what Baldwin understands to be a necessary reckoning with history. Without such a reckoning, America remains "locked in the past [which] means, in effect, that one has no past, since one cannot assess it, or use it: and if one cannot use the past, one cannot function in the present, and so one can never be free."[90] Until such a reckoning undoes structural inequality and produces a "new identity in which we need each other," Baldwin warns that "there is scarcely any hope for the American dream because people who are denied participation in it, by their very presence, will wreck it, and if that happens it is a grave moment for the West."[91]

That moment might very well be upon us. The crisis ordinariness of the 21st century as well as increasing income inequality across and even within racial categories structure a present situation in which one could argue that both the afterlife of slavery and specters of the Atlantic have finally (affectively, materially, and near unconditionally) caught up with the rest of America—with the rest of the world. In her 2007 book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman introduces her seminal concept known as the "afterlife of slavery," what she terms the ways in which contemporary "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago."[92] To live in the afterlife of slavery is to live "in the future created

[88] "James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley (1965)."
[89] Baldwin, "Reflections of a Maverick" 46.
[90] Baldwin, *Nothing Personal* 11.
[91] "James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley (1965)."
[92] Hartman, Saidiya, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: FSG, 2007) 6.

by it," a future that is now—more than 150 years since emancipation—an "ongoing crisis of citizenship"[93] for the black diaspora. Similarly, in his 2005 book *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, Ian Baucom turns to the *Zong* ship massacre of 1781 as a flashpoint in the inauguration of what he calls "specters of the Atlantic." Due to overcrowding to maximize profits and the ensuing spread of disease onboard, Zong Captain Luke Collingwood decided to throw overboard more than 130 dying enslaved Africans in order to spare the remaining crew members while also assuming that the ship owners would recoup their loss through the insurance. After a series of trials, the captain, crew, and ship owners were never really brought to justice, and the violence inflicted on enslaved Africans was not classified as murder because the law deemed them as property, not human. For Baucom, "specters of the Atlantic" describes how our current "hyperfinancialized late twentieth century and early twenty-first…accumulates, repeats, intensifies, and reasserts the late eighteenth"[94] century *Zong* tragedy, fueled by economic 'hyperspeculation' for the maximization of profit—a defining pursuit within the 'long twentieth century' that completely disregards human life. To put an even finer point on the matter, as W. E. B. Du Bois put it in 1920, "[t]he world today is trade…history is economic history,"[95] a history that proves time and time again that "whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!"[96] Taken together, the afterlife of slavery and specters of the Atlantic present a modern malaise where the old and ordinary reverence of profit and power produces conditions of inequality, loss, and suffering—conditions that affect and absorb subjects and places beyond their supposed targets.

To further trace the racial dimensions of malaise in modern life, I turn to Christina Sharpe who, in her 2016 book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, asserts that "antiblackness is pervasive *as*

[93] Hartman 133.
[94] Baucom, Ian, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 30.
[95] Du Bois, W. E. B., "The Souls of White Folk," *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (Mineola: Dover, 1999) 21.
[96] Du Bois 18.

climate."[97] Her use of climate corresponds with theories of mood, specifically Heideggerian *Stimmung*, which is often translated into English as climate (and also refers to sound, music, and the tuning of instruments),[98] but differs importantly in that this climate (rather than mood) is socially, historically, and racially specific. Sharpe's use of climate is productively diffuse, drawing our attention not only to the affective and temporal dimensions that attend the afterlife of slavery but also to its material, systemic, cultural, and social manifestations. For instance, this climate of antiblackness, with its terrorizing weather events, "produces new ecologies"[99] for relating to one's world, ecologies in which "the past that is not the past reappears, always, to rupture the present."[100] Or, as Baldwin put it in 1965, "history is literally *present* in all that we do."[101] More concretely, this climate of antiblackness sees "slave law transformed into lynch law, into Jim and Jane Crow, and other administrative logics that remember the brutal conditions of enslavement after the event of slavery has supposedly come to an end."[102] For Sharpe, this climate belongs to what she calls the "wake," which is "a means of understanding how slavery's violences emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance."[103] To be a part of the black diaspora—living in the wake of slavery, struggling in a climate of antiblackness—means to exist "with no state or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to be respected."[104] This form of malaise can make the world feel wayward and unintelligible as well as make us sense that we now experience the world from its margins or, worse, from outside of its contours—stateless, without much (if any) recourse. This, however, isn't defeatist. Sharpe asks "how do we attend to physical,

[97] Sharpe, Christina, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016) 106.
[98] Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, Trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012) 3.
[99] Sharpe 106.
[100] Sharpe 9.
[101] Baldwin, James, "The White Man's Guilt," *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, Ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998) 723.
[102] Sharpe 106.
[103] Sharpe 14.
[104] Sharpe 22.

social, and figurative death" alongside the magnitude of "Black life insisted from death?"[105] She proposes "wake work" as a method and analytic for "inhabiting *and* rupturing"[106] the afterlife of slavery. Wake work allows us to "imagine otherwise from what we know *now* in the wake of slavery,"[107] that is, rather than attempting to get over or (worse) forget the past, wake work seeks to envision and realize alternative ways of living *within* the knowledge of slavery's continued impact. Sharpe's 'wake work' demonstrates how a malaise shaped by a climate of antiblackness can be an animating force, an invitation to practice creative problem solving even when resolution seems impossible.

All in all, my theory of malaise—focalized through Baldwin—builds on Sharpe's 'antiblackness as climate' as well as Hartman's 'afterlife of slavery' and Baucom's 'specters of the Atlantic,' all of which function within what Jonathan Flatley calls "affective mapping," namely "the aesthetic technology…that represents the historicity of one's affective experience."[108] Rather than provide a "stable representation of a more or less unchanging landscape,"[109] an affective map is a more figurative instrument that "gives one a new sense of one's relationship to broad historical forces"[110] as well as "shows one how one's situation is experienced collectively."[111] And while solidarity may not be the end result, the greatest utility of an affective map lies in "providing a feeling of orientation and facilitating mobility."[112] So instead of never getting out of bed or surrendering to a world that's unfit for our survival, we might collectively make a way out of no way, out of malaise, by somehow reordering the environment, the arrangement of things, so as to produce alternative forms of living.

I theorize malaise as a nonpathological and non-individualized affective ecology in which a present situation, often shaped by compounded crises, incites a link between a past understood as

[105] Sharpe 17.
[106] Sharpe 18.
[107] Sharpe 18.
[108] Flatley 4.
[109] Flatley 7.
[110] Flatley 4.
[111] Flatley 4.
[112] Flatley 7.

unfinished and a future made unintelligible by this sense of an ongoing past. My focus is on malaise as a racialized and racializing affective ecology where positive and negative feelings coalesce in attempts at navigating the liminality of what remains and what is yet to be, specifically with regards to the widespread unfreedom by which modern conceptions of individual freedom are sustained. Malaise, then, for my purposes, is always already racial, even when (or perhaps especially when) it doesn't feel like it. I use 'affective ecology' (rather than mood, affect, or structure of feeling) to expand on both Sharpe's figuration of ecologies produced within a climate of antiblackness and Flatley's theory of affective mapping, as well as to gesture towards emotional, political, and historical relations between people, their social arrangements, and their environments—their sense(s) of the world. Malaise, then, is a distinctly modern affective ecology governed by a climate of antiblackness, a climate that involves historically structured and socially produced foreclosures of futurity. So rather than being personal, malaise belongs to a set of circumstances, circumstances that, ideally, somehow can be changed.

In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin wrote that "the West has no moral authority" because its "history has no moral justification."[113] Such moral incoherence menaces the world while also producing the conditions for its decline and inevitable collapse, for "the excluded begin to realize, having endured everything, that they *can* endure everything. They do not know the precise shape of the future, but they know that the future belongs to them. They realize this—paradoxically—by the failure of the moral energy of their oppressors and begin, almost instinctively, to forge a new morality, to create the principles on which a new world will be built."[114] Malaise, then, as a racialized and racializing affective ecology attendant to the crises of modernity, becomes an opportunity to reimagine our social arrangements and disrupt histories that continue to produce the conditions of collective suffering and loss. Malaise calls us, as many struggle for alternative futures, to remain vigilant—and to witness.

[113] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 85.
[114] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* 89-90.

Blue Note

I've outlined above the ways in which malaise is distinct from (but also can encompass) melancholy, depression, anxiety, ennui, and even pessimism, but its closest 'other' might be Baldwin's conception of the blues. For Baldwin, the blues is much more than a musical genre; it's a "state of being"[115]; it's the acceptance, articulation, and expression of the anguish attendant to "the experience of life"[116]—the knowledge that "[t]here is no way not to suffer."[117] However, with that knowledge, one experiences a "passionate detachment"[118] from the turmoil of being in the world, a psychical distancing that generates a strange species of humor and joy within that anguish. The blues, this anguishing joy (which is hauntingly reminiscent of Charles Baudelaire's account of malaise in *Paris Spleen*, namely the way "Voluptuous energy creates uneasiness and positive suffering"[119] ["*L'énergie dans la volupté crée un malaise et une souffrance positive"*[120]]), compels one to carry on living, even when it seems like "you can't do anything about"[121] the disastrous state of being in the world. In the midst of so much suffering, the blues insists on finding joy in the present as well as faith, however shaken, in the future.

My theory of malaise owes a great deal to Baldwin's blues while also differing in crucial ways. First, the blues are racially specific and "rooted in the slave songs."[122] One could argue that the blues, specifically Baldwin's blues, and 'black malaise'[123] are part and parcel if not one and the same. Though

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115 Baldwin, James, "The Uses of the Blues," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, Ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2011) 70.
116 Baldwin, "Uses of the Blues," 70.
117 Baldwin, "Uses of the Blues," 73.
118 Baldwin, "Uses of the Blues," 73.
119 Baudelaire, Charles, "The Artist's Confiteor," *Paris Spleen: Little Poems in Prose*, Trans. Keith Waldrop (Middleton: Wesleyan UP, 2009) 7.
120 Baudelaire, Charles, "Le Confiteor de l'artiste," *Le spleen de Paris: Petits poèmes en prose* (Paris: G. Crès et cie, 1917) 12, HathiTrust, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015000512858.
121 Baldwin, "Uses of the Blues," 73.
122 Baldwin, "Uses of the Blues," 80.
123 For compelling analyses of "black social malaise," "urban malaise," and "masculine malaise" depicted in "Heavy Breathing" (1992) by Essex Hemphill and *Moonlight* (2016) directed by Barry Jenkins, please see Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman's 2018 article "The Black Ecstatic."

Fading Futures takes up predominantly black cultural production to elaborate a theory of modern malaise, my overarching interest is less in a malaise that can be said to belong to a specific racial group and more in malaise as a racialized and racializing affective ecology in which the crisis ordinariness of modernity—the unfinished business of capitalism's racializing procedures—threatens to end the world. Put differently, although the theory I propose figures the afterlife of slavery, antiblackness as climate, and specters of the Atlantic as paradigms for tracing the racial, affective, and formal dimensions of modern malaise, I neither suggest that the black diaspora has a peculiar monopoly on malaise nor argue that the malaise experienced by the black diaspora is just like that of any other. I use modern malaise as opposed to black malaise, racial malaise, or the blues to emphasize temporality as well as the ways in which malaise is omnipresent and indiscriminate in how it lingers about situations. Just as Baldwin was committed to witnessing the broad historical forces that structure our socioeconomic relations, I figure malaise as that which subsumes the mélange of incidents, occasions, and situations that have yet to accumulate into cataclysm but nevertheless continue to throw the experience of now into crisis. That said, the ever-elusive 'way out of no way' might be precisely what malaise intuits as the imminent event emerging in the present out of the past.

Second, as an aesthetic practice and way of being in the world, the blues names an expressive strategy for navigating the intricacies of malaise as an affective ecology. I don't, however, mean to minimize the aesthetic dimensions of malaise, since, for my purposes, the aesthetic and the affective are co-constitutive. For instance, let's turn to "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," in which Susan Buck-Morss seeks to restore the senses to the field of aesthetics, and, in so doing, prove that Benjamin's directive for the politicization of art—i.e. "to *undo* the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to *restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake*

of humanity's self-preservation"[124]—would make humanity far less susceptible to warfare, fascism, and other inhumane social arrangements. She begins with an etymological sketch of the term "aesthetics":

> *Aisthitikos* is the ancient Greek word for that which is "perceptive by feeling." *Aisthisis* is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality—corporeal, material nature… It is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell—the whole corporeal sensorium. The terminae of all of these—nose, eyes, ears, mouth, some of the most sensitive areas of the skin—are located at the surface of the body, the mediating boundary between inner and outer.[125]

Buck-Morss goes on to explain that philosophers, working within the tradition of modernism and wary of the correspondence between aesthetics and carnal instincts (such instincts understood as lowly subject matter and, thus, inappropriate for philosophical inquiry), denatured and depleted aesthetics of the senses, rendering it into the asensual study of art. This field of inquiry is then so *un*feeling that the "moral being is sense-dead"[126] and, consequentially, *an*aesthetic. Therefore, within the modern imagination, the term aesthetic is not only a misnomer but also antiphrastic—it designates precisely what it is not. It is in this way that the aestheticization of politics renders the human as inhuman. Audre Lorde, in her seminal 1977 essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury," offers a similar critique of sensuality's subjugation in modern culture, arguing that "within structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive."[127] Like Buck-Morss, Lorde also seeks to restore the senses to the field of aesthetics, asserting that poetry is "the skeleton architecture of our lives."[128] It's important to note here that Lorde's reflections on poetry are much more

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[124] Buck-Morss, Susan, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October*, vol 62., 1992, pp. 5, http://www.jstor.org/stable/778700. Accessed 24 October 2017.
[125] Buck-Morss 6.
[126] Buck-Morss 9.
[127] Lorde, Audre, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007) 39.
[128] Lorde 38.

expansive than the business of making and publishing poems; her conception of poetry is attuned to aesthetic experience (*aisthitikos*), creation, and circulation more broadly, which is to say that poetry is the "revelatory distillation of experience"[129] as well as the practice of finding "new ways of making [ideas] felt"[130] for present and future audiences.

To reverse the catastrophe attendant to the aestheticization of politics—that is, to instead practice the politicization of aesthetics—would mean not only to restore the senses to the field of aesthetics but also to raze the boundaries of alienation. In her book entitled *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart argues that "the task of aesthetic production and reception in general is to make visible, tangible, and audible the figures of persons,"[131] which is to say that aesthetics allows us to apprehend persons with the entirety of our sensorial capacities, whose terminae, if we return to Buck-Morss, oblige us to be affected by bodies ostensibly outside of ourselves. Similarly, in their essay entitled "An Inventory of Shimmers," Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth detail the mediating work of affect:

> Cast forward by its open-ended in-between-ness, affect is integral to a body's perceptual becoming (always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is), pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundedness by way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter. With affect, a body is as much outside itself as in itself—webbed in its relations—until ultimately such firm distinctions cease to matter.[132]

The restoration of the senses, then, engenders the work of affect—or, as I prefer, *feeling*. Aligning myself, again, with Ann Cvetkovich, I privilege 'feeling' (in addition to sense and sensuality) in order to bridge "the distinctions between emotion and affect central to some theories" as well as to

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[129] Lorde 37.
[130] Lorde 39.
[131] Stewart, Susan, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002) 2.
[132] Seigworth, Gregory J. and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 3.

acknowledge "feelings as something we come to know through experience and popular usage and that indicates, perhaps only intuitively but nonetheless significantly, a conception of mind and body as integrated."[133] In fact, my use of 'affective ecology' also bears this imprint, not only to emphasize the ways in which malaise (and other kinds of feelings) are experienced environmentally and, thus, collectively but also to dwell in the affective and temporal disorientation constitutive of malaise. In addition to the reasons listed above, the aesthetic is central to my theory of malaise because, as an affective ecology swarming with melancholy, depression, ennui, apprehension, and even lethargy, the restoration of the senses not only makes known the affective forces that are always already at work but also makes possible a sensuous and maybe even radical (re)integration of society and (re)envisioning of knowledge production.

This is what it means for malaise as an affective *and* aesthetic phenomenon to simultaneously name the individualizing procedures of modernity (which we learned from Charles Taylor) as well as present a pathway for understanding that this alienation is non-individualized—that although we may be alone, we're indeed alone together. This, I believe, is what Lorde was getting at when she wrote that poetry "forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action."[134] The aesthetic and the affective invite us to be in relation—crucial if we wish to survive. Therefore, since malaise is inherently non-individualized, what ties each chapter together is the matter of intimacy, however dysfunctional or even disastrous. Moreover, the texts I've gathered exemplify a specific category of malaise—historicist, moral, and erotic—resonating with each other across time and space: historicist malaise traces a desire in black diasporic cultural production to articulate intimacy with history, specifically slavery as less of a discreet event gone by and more of a protracted affective and

[133] Cvetkovich 4.
[134] Lorde 37.

material situation that continues to shape inter- and intraracial affiliations in the contemporary; moral malaise explores whiteness as a life genre that simultaneously hails and resists its intimacy with blackness, thus obstructing mutual futurity in its refusal to become otherwise; and erotic malaise proposes love as a practice for undoing life genres unfit for our collective survival. With *Fading Futures*, I offer malaise—an affective temporal structure gleaned through aesthetic experience—as a resonant analytic for evaluating and living through (and beyond!) modernity's incessant situations of crisis ordinariness. What Baldwin writes about the blues is also true of malaise, namely that it "contain[s] the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate."[135]

[135] Baldwin, "Uses of the Blues," 70.

THE ODOR WAS STILL THERE

Historicist Malaise and the Cinders of Slavery

When James Baldwin visited the House of Slaves, he couldn't trust his senses. Apart from likening the House, with its courtyard and double staircase, to the homes he'd seen in New Orleans (the birthplace of his stepfather), Baldwin explains that "[t]his may be my imagination, but it seemed to me that the odor was still there,"[136] that he could still smell the noxious miasma of captivity and abjection, that surely—even after so many years, even in the absence of the many thousands gone who'd crept and languished down in the holding chambers—surely the stench of his ancestors' suffering still lingered as proof of their having been there, as (im)material remains for commemoration. But he couldn't be sure. The smells (the memories) may have all just been his imagination. After all, this was 1962, more than one hundred and fifty years after the African slave trade was abolished in the United States. And though together he and his sister Gloria toured Maison des Esclaves on Senegal's Gorée Island, a site that marks a key moment in the process of transatlantic familial separation, returning as a family, however symbolic, wasn't and couldn't have been anything like consolation, much less atonement. Baldwin admits that he was so disturbed by the House that he nearly assaulted a French tourist, knowing "[t]hey wouldn't have known why."[137] Vengeance, especially when displaced, would achieve nothing; it wouldn't even be vengeance.

Baldwin's account of his visit reads almost entirely as one of failure—failure to sense the present-absence of enslaved Africans, failure to exact revenge on perpetrators who, too, are a present-absence, and failure to imagine the experience of enslavement through the Door of No Return:

> I remember that they couldn't speak to each other, because they didn't come from the same tribe. In this corridor, as I say, there are the cells on either side of you, but straight ahead, as

[136] Baldwin, James, "The White Problem," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, Ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2010) 94.
[137] Baldwin 94.

> you enter the archway, or corridor, is a very much smaller doorway, cut out of the stone, which opens on the sea. You go to the edge of the door, and look down, and at your feet are some black stones and the foam of the Atlantic Ocean, bubbling up against you. The day that we were there, I tried, but it was impossible—the ocean is simply as vast as the horizon—I tried to imagine what it must have felt like to find yourself chained and speechless, speechless in the most total sense of that word, on your way *where*?[138]

The sublimity of the Atlantic seizes Baldwin's imagination such that his experience of the water from the Door of No Return is merely his own, not that of captive Africans from centuries past, unable to speak with one another (or their captors), unable to know what new world and new life awaited them beyond the sea's horizon—caught up in their own experience of the sublime. Baldwin, of course, was with his sister. He also knew and lived in the history of that new world and new life. His purpose at the Door was to somehow embody the enslaved, to know something of the life *before* and *during*, to apprehend the entanglement of subjection and diaspora at the place where it happened. But what he encounters is himself, his own sensorium and rage. It's as if the House of Slaves had absolutely nothing to see, as if the Door offered merely an astonishing view of the water—nothing more and certainly nothing to take back home.

The Door of No Return at Maison des Esclaves is just one of many such doors at former 'slave castles' along the west coast of Africa. Another prominent site for roots tourism—that is, excursions to these doors targeted primarily to black travelers who wish to know their 'roots'—is Ghana's Elmina Castle. In her 2002 essay "The Time of Slavery," Saidiya Hartman details her experience there, describing three local boys (Kwesi, Isaac, and Francis) who approached her outside the castle, asking to be her pen pal and addressing her as 'sister.' But as Hartman makes clear, such a mode of address, however endearing and affirming, belongs to an economy of loss:

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[138] Baldwin 94.

> Longing and loss figure centrally in the strategies of roots tourism—the loss of one's origins, authentic African names, progenitors, and ancestral land all act as impetus to visit, shop, and purchase. Tourism slakes longing, exploits loss, and proffers a cure by enabling cathartic and tearful engagements with the era of the slave trade.[139]

Within the roots tourism enterprise, reconciliation also figures as a crucial moral impetus, seeing as how a yet undetermined number of Africans who made the Middle Passage were sold to European traders by fellow Africans. Also worthy of note is that, according to the Global Slavery Index of 2018, nearly 2.5 million people are currently enslaved throughout sixteen West African countries.[140] Thus, contemporary descendants of slaves in the diaspora, several generations removed from slavery *de jure* and emancipation in the Americas, travel to the West African coast, not as long lost children but often as well-to-do tourists, spending substantial sums of money to visit the castles where their very distant ancestors *may* have been sold, fettered, and confined before making the journey across the Atlantic—all while millions of their 'sisters' and 'brothers' continue to suffer in bondage on the very same soil. So even if 'sister' and 'brother' were indeed genuine statements of attempted redress, their circulation amid contemporary slavery and the necessities of buying and selling renders them, perhaps primarily, as just coins of the realm.

In such an environment, black tourists might feel, at once, manipulated, disappointed, and disturbed—all exacerbated by the belatedness of their so-called 'return.' According to Hartman, one has "come too late to recuperate an authentic identity or to establish one's kinship with a place or people," mostly because such acts of tourism and attempts at return "occur too late, far too long after the event, to be considered a return."[141] In the end, the most devastating blow, after the drama of

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[139] Hartman, Saidiya. "The Time of Slavery." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 101 no. 4, 2002, pp. 760. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/39111.

[140] Akinremi, Rebecca, "Modern slavery: Nigeria ranks highest in Africa," *International Centre for Investigative Reporting*, 23 August 2018, https://www.icirnigeria.org/modern-slavery-nigeria-ranks-highest-in-africa/, 17 March 2019.

[141] Hartman 762.

travel and commerce, is the realization that "returning home is not possible."[142] Though the language of kinship calls forth the commerce of slavery as both the annihilation of a family *before* and the genesis of a family *after*, 'sister' and 'brother' at the Door of No Return are reminders that, across the gulfs that distance us, we have all lost something but arrived too late on the scene to reclaim it. The conditions of Africans on the continent and black people in the diaspora, though inextricably intertwined, are not the same, and forging new familial bonds in the present takes much more than what roots tourism has to offer. Moreover, such failures at affective attachment "illumine the disparate temporalities of unfreedom," which is to say that the inevitable misadventure of returning home by apprehending the era of the slave trade makes clear "the broken promises and violated contracts of the present."[143] Put differently, the Door of No Return—true to its name—comes to represent not only the forced non-belonging of Africans from centuries past who were sold to the new world but also the enforced non-belonging of contemporary black people in the diaspora who (due to ongoing discrimination, injustice, and terror) have yet to experience full equality and freedom.

Hartman and Baldwin's ordeals at former slave castles exemplify Dionne Brand's theory that the Door of No Return, though a physical locale, is more of a "psychic destination" but with "no way in."[144] The Door is a non-place, there and not there, situated and boundless, material and affective. According to Brand, belonging for the black diaspora cannot be found at the Door ("the door does not exist"[145]) but rather in the metaphor the Door makes animate and mobile, as it "signifies the historical moment which colours all moments in the Diaspora."[146] Thus, one cannot go to the Door for the sake of belonging, for the sake of 'return'—there's nothing to return to; the return is to nothing; too much has been lost. Instead one *lives* the Door, poised at its threshold, looking out onto the

[142] Hartman 762.
[143] Hartman 763.
[144] Brand, Dionne, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (Toronto: Vintage, 2001) 1.
[145] Brand 51.
[146] Brand 24.

aftermath of transatlantic slavery, searching for a lost sense of belonging that remains "lodged in a metaphor."[147] In this way, the Door is both a kind of lens and a form of consciousness, accounting for "the ways we observe and are observed as people," for "[e]very gesture our bodies make," and even for "all human effort."[148] The Door is everywhere; the seismic transformation that such loss set across the world means that no one (then, now, or tomorrow) escapes its range.

So perhaps Hartman and Baldwin's visits weren't failures at all. Perhaps the Door revealed precisely what it was bound to make plain: "Loss affixes our gaze to the past, determines the present, and perhaps even eclipses a vision of the future."[149] Rather than uphold fantasies of progress, the Door signifies not only that the past and present bear an undeniable correlation but also that the scale of injury inflicted through the transatlantic slave trade is so great that even the future, however near or distant, remains out of focus, perceptible only as a silhouette. By the same token, the Door of No Return (like any metaphor; like the loss for which it stands in) is felt in its inaccessibility—one's relation to it is forever asymptotic and dispersive. For instance, suppose that Baldwin's time at Maison des Esclaves simply *had* to take him elsewhere, away from the House, away from unknown ancestors, and towards New Orleans. Though Baldwin doesn't mention his (step-)father by name, he remains an unspoken nexus between Baldwin and that Crescent City. Standing at the Door with his (half-)sister, fixed on apprehending the slave past, fixed between Gorée and New Orleans, fixed in silence on the subject of his deceased (step-)father, the Door becomes the non-site of complicated intimacies, converging histories, and inconceivable loss.

Baldwin reflects on his visit to the Door of No Return in the midst of the Birmingham campaign, more specifically the widely reported and televised brutal suppression of their nonviolent freedom demonstrations in May of 1963—the centennial year of Emancipation. Ironically, the occasion

[147] Brand 18.
[148] Brand 24-25.
[149] Hartman 759.

for his essay "The White Problem" is a celebratory collection entitled *100 Years of Emancipation*, edited by Robert A. Goodwin. But rather than revel in a century of supposed freedom, Baldwin calls on his readers to hold together the fact of Emancipation, the truth of ongoing racial terror, and the tragedy of white denial. This denial is fourfold: first, a refusal to take responsibility for the horrors and motivations of colonization and enslavement; second, a repression of the knowledge that the Africans they enslaved were unquestionably human; third, a violent denial of emancipation through the totalizing system of Jim Crow; and fourth, an unwillingness to believe the proof of contemporary state-sanctioned antiblack terrorism.

For Baldwin, the white problem, as it were, too often misconceived and misnamed the 'Negro Problem,' is not the crime itself but "denying what one does."[150] He asserts that white Americans, to escape any trace of culpability, "have set up in themselves a fantastic system of evasions, denials, and justifications, which system is about to destroy their grasp of reality, which is another way of saying their moral sense."[151] The real crime is self-deception, and it threatens to leave the entire nation in ruins:

> Now it is certainly possible that we may all go under. But until that happens, I prefer to believe that since a society is created by men, it can be remade by men. The price for this transformation is high. White people will have to ask themselves precisely why they found it necessary to invent the nigger; for the nigger is a white invention, and white people invented him out of terrible necessities of their own. And every white citizen of this country will have to accept the fact that he is not innocent, because those dogs and those hoses are being turned on American children, on American soil, with the tacit consent of the American Republic; those crimes are being committed in your name.[152]

[150] Baldwin 92.
[151] Baldwin 95.
[152] Baldwin 97.

Baldwin—while implicating the crimes against Africans at the Door of No Return with the crimes against black Americans down in Birmingham—is careful not to equate them. It isn't as simple as declaring the eighteenth-century Maison des Esclaves as the direct cause of the twentieth-century Birmingham crisis. Their relationship is almost (but more than) metaphoric; their likening is constellated in large part, at least for Baldwin, by that "fantastic system" of myths, fiction, and disinformation that governs white innocence, even in the face of undisguised inequity. What is more, this temporal constellation renders the future as conditional: if white people do not renounce their convictions of innocence and reckon with their reinforcement of and complicity with historic and ongoing crimes against humanity, the country may very well perish; if they do, however, America has a chance at survival, but what such a future might look like is unknowable until it happens.

Baldwin's figuration of time and history corresponds with Saidiya Hartman's seminal concept known as the "afterlife of slavery," which she introduces in her 2007 book entitled *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. In its most material sense, the afterlife of slavery seeks to delineate "a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" by the transatlantic slave trade, a calculus that, even after Emancipation, accounts for measurable conditions of contemporary unfreedom that affect the lives of black people in the diaspora: "limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment."[153] In a more abstract sense, however, the afterlife of slavery names a form of affective temporality: the logic of the Birmingham crisis prompting Baldwin to reflect on the Door of No Return gains greater clarity through Hartman's postulation that "[i]f slavery feels proximate rather than remote and freedom seems increasingly elusive, this has everything to do with our own dark times."[154] The afterlife of slavery, as a kind of philosophy of time or a history of the affective present, is predicated on the idea that:

[153] Hartman, Saidiya, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: FSG, 2007) 6.
[154] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 133.

> History doesn't unfold with one era bound to and determining the next in an unbroken chain of causality… So the point isn't the impossibility of escaping the stranglehold of the past, or that history is a succession of uninterrupted defeats, or that the virulence and tenacity of racism is inexorable. But rather that the perilous conditions of the present establish the link between our age and a previous one in which freedom too was yet to be realized.[155]

There's no denying that centuries of the transatlantic slave trade—within the expansion of Enlightenment reason, capitalism, and financialization—had an immense impact, post-Emancipation, on black (and non-black) lives. To suggest otherwise would be preposterous. Hartman's point is that perils of dispossession in the present warrant an affective and material association with the era of slavery, neither as a singular explanation for present-day systemic inequality nor as an argument for the present being a mere replication of slavery, but as a method for orienting oneself within the long durée of unfreedom—bound to the liminality of what remains and what is yet to be.

I offer 'malaise' as an attempt to name the affective ecology that attends the afterlife of slavery—an ecology in which a present situation incites a link between a past understood as ongoing and a future made menacing or unintelligible by this ever-present past. For the black diaspora, specifically, living the liminality between slave and citizen presents the formal conditions of a malaise in which the composition of the world itself isn't conducive to sustaining visions of freedom's future, to offering grounds for confidence in real progress, to cultivating convictions for a liberatory revolution. To experience an affective ecology of malaise means to occupy the no-man's land between after and before, to feel simultaneously a world yet to be, even a world that may never be, while living in the wake of an event whose hold is like that of a ghost grip. Malaise then is historicist in that it always already accounts for a relation to history that renders the past as unfinished, an open-endedness that deranges experiences of the present and clouds perceptions of futurity.

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[155] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 133.

Melancholy's Limits

Malaise constituted by the never-ending loss and interminable grief of the afterlife of slavery might easily be mistaken for melancholy, particularly that of the Freudian variety, which is to say a melancholy of "pathological mourning,"[156] of mourning without end, of lamentation the shape of "an open wound."[157] But it's important to note that even though Hartman frames the afterlife of slavery in terms of loss, grief, and mourning, her work points to intricate emotional states that encompass a vast range of feelings and affects, many of which are bad, negative, and downright ugly, but some of which are not. My interest here is in an affective ecology that can (and often does) include but always exceeds the territories of melancholy, mourning, grief, and loss. I call this affective ecology, this feeling around or alongside melancholy, this mental and social ambivalence organized by the historicity of any given set of predicaments or situations, this cultural and temporal sense of a menacing future emerging out of an ongoing and troubling past (but without devolving into utter desolation)—I call this affective ecology *malaise*. My task then is to map the formal dimensions of malaise through post-bellum cultural artifacts that not only return to but also seek to integrate sites of slavery into contemporary life, rendering a continuum of unfreedom that challenges distinctions between past, present, and future, that insists upon a readjustment to our relation to the so-called past, a readjustment incited by the prospect that our future, arranged by antebellum slavery, will be unlivable if our current social composition goes unamended. To trace malaise's formal dimensions, I will first chart its relationship to melancholy, specifically racial melancholia.

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[156] Freud, Sigmund, "Mourning and Melancholia," *On Freud's Mourning and Melancholia*, By Thierry Bokanowski, Routledge, 2009, 26, *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=366943&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[157] Freud 29.

What's become known as racial melancholia emerges from modern and contemporary critiques of Freudian melancholy that seek to account for the profound and compounded losses that racialized groups experience collectively. For instance, in her seminal work *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, Anne Cheng takes up melancholia to analyze the structure of racialization in America, mapping Freud's theory onto the "institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others."[158] Loss in Cheng's remapping of melancholy is instantiated within a "national topography of centrality and marginality [that] legitimizes itself by retroactively positing the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation."[159] Cheng demonstrates how melancholy, on a national scale, must be considered through "the racial question," which is itself "an issue of *place*," evidenced by "phenomena such as segregation and colonialism."[160] This version of melancholia, however, supposes a before and after which seems incongruent with racial formation in the United States. If the racialized other is always already marginalized, then the production of national identity and the maintenance of exclusion-yet-retention are simultaneous processes, if not one and the same. By this account, marginalized groups perpetually mourn the loss of a position they never had, a position that was never materially available to their will and conviction. Nevertheless, insisting on the before and after of racialized national melancholia suggests that exclusion-yet-retention was not inevitable, gesturing towards what *could have been* and, by the same token, what *could be possible*. The concept of exclusion-yet-retention, then, with its emphasis on place and arrangement (both of which are mutable), is crucial for mapping affective ecologies of dispossession.

While Cheng draws our attention to racial melancholy's formal and formalizing operations, Dagmawi Woubshet, in *The Calendar of Loss : Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS*,

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[158] Cheng, Anne Anlin, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 10.
[159] Cheng 10.
[160] Cheng 12.

insists on de-pathologizing and de-individualizing Freudian melancholia, excavating its theoretical limitations by acknowledging the spectre of premature death. He argues that "[u]nderlying Freud's ideal of mourning in 'Mourning and Melancholia'—and in many subsequent studies of loss that follow Freud's lead—is the mourner's presumed future, which is the unstated but necessary condition of overcoming loss."[161] When faced with premature death (from racial terrorism, police brutality, diseases like HIV/AIDS…) black communities do not necessarily have or get the time to 'properly' mourn. This rapid succession of losses means that one is perpetually in a state of mourning until death itself catches hold—too often too soon. According to Woubshet, "[g]iven the persistence of death in black life, black culture is imbued with an anticipatory sense of loss, recalibrating the calendar of mourning to record past and prospective losses in a single grammar of loss."[162] Living under such conditions of dispossession and terror, denied "an open-ended future,"[163] loss is always present and forthcoming, mourning is forever manifold and unresolvable. Within such an ecology, communities have no choice but to be melancholic.

Stephen Best, however, rather than de-pathologize racial melancholia, draws our attention to history and the archive as sites for melancholic attachment. In his book *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life*, Best names 'melancholy historicism' as "a kind of crime scene investigation in which the forensic imagination is directed *toward the recovery of a 'we' at the point of 'our' violent origin*," pointing to "a broader intellectual matrix within black studies that assumes slavery"[164] as the genesis of black identity. Because blackness as a legal and cultural category is an effect of the transatlantic

[161] Woubshet, Dagmawi, *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2015) 18.
[162] Woubshet 19.
[163] Woubshet 19.
[164] Best, Stephen, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018) 21.

slave trade and, thus, not transhistorical, melancholy historicism derives its sharpest affective dimensions from a sense of "lost black sociality,"[165] slavery as the rupturing event that structures a melancholic relationship to a past in which an African identity was presumably left intact. The rupture (and its resulting collective grief) becomes the very scene of racial selfhood. Melancholy historicism, however, as Best's diagnosis for Black Studies, is primarily an affective relation to the archive of slavery, imagined "as a scene of injury,"[166] for the archive is constructed just as much by what is included as by what isn't. According to this logic, the archive merely reproduces the dehumanizing violence of enslavement, objectifying subjects by redacting the proof of their humanity. We could say then that loss for the black diaspora is two-fold: they have not only lost an assumed sociality but also lost the archival confirmation that this sociality existed—or, more precisely, such confirmations were purposefully never recorded. Recovering the "we" of black sociality, by this account, is utterly impossible, which sustains melancholy historicism's authority within Black Studies.

Best, however, is suspicious and critical of this intellectual formulation, which he understands to be of recent vintage. Just as blackness isn't transhistorical, neither is the now "unassailable truth that the slave past provides a ready prism for apprehending the black political present."[167] Best finds in melancholy historicism a faulty premise of temporal continuity that "provides a framework for conceptions of black collectivity and community across time."[168] Community here is tenuous, at best, for its coherence is derived, essentially, from temporal misrecognition. Moreover, to claim that "slavery's dispossessions…live on into the twenty-first century" is to also deprive "history of movement and change."[169] The melancholy historicist thus perpetuates an inappropriate relation to time and history while also preserving illegitimate claims to solidarity with their enslaved ancestors as well as with

[165] Best 22.
[166] Best 21.
[167] Best 63.
[168] Best 64.
[169] Best 64.

their contemporaries. By this account, melancholy historicism is in fact pathological. In order to "clear some space for a black politics that is not animated by a sense of collective condition or solidarity,"[170] Best ventures to supplant "holding with letting go, clutching with disavowal."[171] Put simply, the task of the melancholy historicist is to *get over it*, to *move on* from the slave past, to *disavow* temporal continuity as the rationale for black sociality, identity, and historicity. Taken to its limits, Best's agenda suggests that to be cured, the melancholy historicist must somehow *let go* of blackness altogether.

Nonetheless, in his attempt to make way for alternatives to melancholy, Best participates in its diagnostic and therapeutic formulations. At the heart of Best's argument, according to Calvin Warren, is a desire for wellness, governed by a "compulsion to get over [which] articulates a metaphysical impulse to objectify slavery, to turn it into a conquerable object."[172] In other words, Best's attempts to clearly distinguish the "slave past" from the "black political present" simply rehearses a violent will to power over slavery's temporalities—diminishing, objectifying, and classifying time itself as a fiction of linearity. The contours and warrants of Best's argument put into stark relief the limitations of melancholy itself, specifically with regards to dispossession and unfreedom: it renders melancholy subjects as failures. Even though de-pathologizing melancholy and delineating its formal dimensions are worthy enterprises, the semantic atmosphere of 'melancholy' makes it too readily available to the diagnostic and therapeutic imagination. What I'm suggesting is that the very impetus to remap melancholia onto processes of racial formation and inequality merely emphasizes the concept's insufficiency to make sense of national and global structures of unfreedom, structures that produce (and are produced by) affective ecologies that, of course, contain loss and sorrow, but are too vast and tempestuous to be subsumed under the procedures of melancholy.

[170] Best 64.
[171] Best 65.
[172] Warren 66.

That said, my theory of malaise is an attempt to think *around* and *alongside*, rather than *against*, melancholy. Informed by Cheng's attention to place, space, and form, I take as axiomatic that malaise attends various social formations—forms imperiled by inherent discord, dysfunction, and disorder. With regards to temporality, my use of malaise is akin to Saidiya Hartman's configuration of the afterlife of slavery as "the ongoing processes of dispossession, accumulation, and extermination" set against black people in the diaspora, such that this afterlife is "not a melancholy relation to the past but a structural one," structural in the sense that "the world in all ways meaningful [is] governed by the racial distinction between captive and free, between slave and Man, between human and object."[173] In other words, the afterlife of slavery is, in part, a structural relation to the past insofar as it registers the durability of varying forms of hierarchy—including centrality/marginality and exclusion-yet-retention—that persist beyond the supposed limits of slavery *de jure*. In my view, an affective return to the era of slavery is not a return at all; it's an attunement to the "multiple durées of unfreedom"[174] that organize and threaten our world. So while melancholy turns its incurable sufferers into failures, I turn to malaise as a way to chart how the arrangement of the world fails its subjects or, more precisely, how subjects and their world fail each other.

Becoming Wilderness

Toni Morrison describes the colonial America of her novel *A Mercy* as an "ad-hoc"[175] world. Setting the novel in the 1680s allows her to explore the predicament of being "a slave without being

[173]Hartman, Saidiya, "The Dead Book Revisited," *History of the Present*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2016, pp. 210. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/historypresent.6.2.0208, accessed 4 Aug. 2020.
[174]Hartman, "The Dead Book Revisited," 210.
[175] "Toni Morrison Discusses 'A Mercy,'" NPR, October 29, 2008, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IZvMhQ2LIU, (June 3, 2021).

raced."[176] In fact, *A Mercy* is all about captivity—its degrees as well as its racial, gender, sexual, economic, religious, and geographic valences. In addition to the main character, an enslaved girl of African descent named Florens, we also follow the narratives of two enslaved women (one indigenous and one of unknown origins), two male indentured servants of European descent, an English widow, and an Anglo-Dutch trader who unintentionally (even unwillingly) becomes a slave master—all of whom are forced to adhere to global systems of exchange, speculation, credit, profit, and oppression. To make matters worse, after the master dies, nearly every character is thrown into an ever more heightened state of precarity. This precarity, however, provides the conditions for one character's freedom—that of Florens.

But before she can be free, she has to be abandoned, time and again, first by her own mother. To save Florens from being raped by their master, 'a minha mãe' bargains with Jacob Vaark, the Anglo-Dutch trader, to take Florens instead of her son as part of their master's debt—a spendthrift Portuguese planter whose only currency now is in human flesh. In her words, "[t]o be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal."[177] In addition to forced labor, enslaved women on this plantation in Catholic Maryland (and numerous other plantations throughout the New World) are subjected to forced sex and coercive breeding practices that bind masters and slaves in the most malignant biochemical intimacies. Intuiting that Jacob isn't the kind of man who would use Florens for his own sexual gratification and reproductive wealth, she gambles with her daughter's future, employing the limited agency available to her, in an effort to (if not free Florens) at least offer her what seems to be a less violent life in captivity.

Then, along her journey to solicit medical care for her ailing mistress, Florens is abandoned by the law. As she seeks shelter for the night at Widow Ealing's house, a group of religious zealots

[176] "Toni Morrison Discusses 'A Mercy.'"
[177] Morrison, Toni, *A Mercy* (New York: Vintage, 2008) 191.

show up, unannounced, and suspect that Florens is one of Satan's minions due entirely to her dark complexion. Even after she shows them her letter of passage signed by her mistress, they subject her to a strip search: "They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition."[178] Still unconvinced, they confiscate her letter and leave to continue their deliberations. Luckily, Widow Ealing's daughter, Jane, helps Florens escape. But, in the end, Florens realizes that her darkness makes her "a thing apart,"[179] that no law, document, or language is bound to protect her: "With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy."[180] Before visiting Widow Ealing's house, Florens is all too familiar with the precarity of being enslaved, but to also, suddenly and without recourse, enter a situation that renders her lawless throws her experience of now into absolute crisis. But rather than be destroyed by this turn of events, she declares "I am not afraid of anything now,"[181] recognizing that even though she and her mother share the 'outside darkness,' the inside dark might be entirely hers alone, that regardless of whatever's done to her, this inner wildness will forever remain intact.

Lastly, Florens is abandoned by her first love, a free African blacksmith. Still hopeful after her bewildering encounter with the religious zealots at Widow Ealing's house, she finds solace in the knowledge that the blacksmith has "the outside dark as well."[182] Even though her complexion, to some, marks her as wicked, it shelters her with the man she desires: "The sun's going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home."[183] Here, Florens imagines something like race (or that

[178] Morrison 133.
[179] Morrison 135.
[180] Morrison 135.
[181] Morrison 136.
[182] Morrison 136.
[183] Morrison 136.

which will become known as race) as that which distinguishes and simultaneously binds together, designating affective attachments and making available the hope for intimacy and solidarity. But all goes sour when she accidentally injures the orphaned boy her lover's been raising as his own—a boy who reminds her of the little brother her mother bargained to keep instead of her. Enraged, the blacksmith tells her "You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind."[184] He even calls her "a slave by choice,"[185] a slave who's given in not only to the physical hold but also to the mental hold of captivity. As she returns to her mistress's farm—heartbroken—an indentured servant named Scully remarks that "she had become untouchable," meaning she was no longer susceptible to rape. And so, we come full circle: her mother is indeed successful in saving her from the horrors of men, not only the lascivious master in Catholic Maryland but also, apparently, all men. The paradox is that this safety, this self-possession, this inside wildering darkness, could only be achieved through utter betrayal.

Florens' loneliness by the novel's end seems to corroborate Stephen Best's observation that "we seem less held together by race here and more held together in our abandonment."[186] This 'we' refers to black people constituted by what Best considers the impossible collective pronoun of melancholic historicism, which "assumes slavery as the point of origin for this we."[187] In his efforts to articulate alternatives to black solidarity, he reads Morrison's *A Mercy*, specifically Florens' abandonment, as a testament to "what it means to be held by the grip of slavery but not race,"[188] which of course coincides with Morrison's stated aspirations for the novel. As Best puts it, colonial America was indeed a time when race was "something of an orphan: present but precarious, unburdened, ungrounded, not yet operating to its maximal potential,"[189] namely a time when "the racial scripts and

[184] Morrison 166.
[185] Morrison 167.
[186] Best 79.
[187] Best 21.
[188] Best 79.
[189] Best 76.

beliefs that are said today to make up slavery's legacy have yet to settle into a lexicon."[190] In this regard, Morrison succeeds in illustrating how the seventeenth century was a time when economic and religious investments were the governing and splintering principles of this vast New World enterprise; when slavery by numerous names and conditions (chattel slavery, peonage, forced labor, and all the rest) was the more general state of affairs, not a racialized status. In a speech she delivered in August of 2000 at America's Black Holocaust Museum, Morrison distinguishes the 'slavebody' from the 'blackbody' in order "to underscore the fact that slavery and racism are two separate phenomena."[191] That said, she goes on to say that the Enlightenment, with its "marriage of aesthetics and science and a move toward transcendent whiteness,"[192] bound the slavebody and the blackbody in a smooth continuum, for the machinations of racism render the latter as the afterlife of the former, as in "the blackbody remains and is morphed into a synonym for poor people, a synonym for criminalism and a flash point for public policy."[193] So while Florens may not inhabit a blackbody as we understand it today, she prefigures the codification of slavery and blackness, which coincides with the codification of blackness, degradation, and dispossession. Thus, in Morrison's fictive rendering of the seventeenth century, race and abandonment are synergistic.

For instance, in the throes of heartbreak, Florens desperately tries to stay connected to the only people she knows who share the 'outside dark' by sneaking into the beautiful manor built by her deceased master Jacob—the one her mourning mistress forbids everyone from entering—and defacing the floor and walls with letters to the blacksmith and her mother. She remembers, however, that the blacksmith "won't read my telling"[194] because he can "read the world but not the letters of talk."[195]

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[190] Best 76.
[191] Morrison, Toni, "The Slavebody and the Blackbody," *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Knopf, 2019) 75.
[192] Morrison, "Slavebody…" 76.
[193] Morrison, "Slavebody…" 76-77.
[194] Morrison, *A Mercy*, 188.
[195] Morrison, *A Mercy*, 188.

Determined to make herself known to the dark man who doesn't want her back, she decides that "these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the soil of the earth."[196] With the help of a fellow enslaved woman named Lina—an indigenous woman whose tribe was incinerated by colonizers—Florens will burn down her master's house, transforming her words into ashes so that they may become part of the world, the only world her estranged lover can read. But for Florens, this has less to do with seeking vengeance against her master and mistress, for they are merely collateral damage, and all to do with holding open lines of communication with the man she still loves and the woman who made her an orphan: "See? You are correct. A minha mãe too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last."[197] In the end, as if prompted by the blacksmith's command to "[o]wn yourself,"[198] Florens finds emancipation in her resolve and rage, alluding to Frederick Douglass's declaration, after violently refusing to be whipped ever again, that "however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact."[199] But rather than refuse the physical violence of slavery, Florens refuses slavery's social violences, its forms of abandonment, by committing to the seemingly impossible project of dark love.

I cannot overstate the significance of Florens' identification with darkness as well as her consequent expressions of loss, efforts to regain intimacy, and declarations of freedom all being driven by her situation at Widow Ealing's house. Florens utilizes darkness as an affective map to make sense of the wilderness that becomes her life and to orient herself in relation to her mother and lover. An undertaking of this magnitude challenges Best's estimation that "once the filial bond is broken, its

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[196] Morrison, *A Mercy*, 188.
[197] Morrison, *A Mercy*, 189.
[198] Morrison, *A Mercy*, 166.
[199] Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, Ed. William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely (New York: Norton, 2017) 53.

affiliative form (i.e., racial kinship) appears no more ready-at-hand as a substitute."[200] While it is indeed true that our contemporary conceptions of race, more broadly, and blackness, specifically, were not in practice during the seventeenth century, Morrison's figuration of (proto-)blackness in terms of night and darkness suggests the ways in which race can come to feel 'natural' (set within the 'order of things') while also alluding to the religious and cultural associations of light/dark, good/evil, God/Devil which were already in circulation before, during, and after the colonial period. Rather than imagining a cosmology for race and racism, Morrison presents a colonial ecology where what will become race is always already precarious, mutable, and bewildering, where race is both nowhere and everywhere, animating and dispiriting, captivating and confining. To figure the interdependent outside and inside darks as the home that binds Florens to both her enslaved African mother and her free African lover is to intimate the horizon of the racialized blackbody (as opposed to the not-yet-racialized slavebody), a horizon that necessitates Florens' continued attempts to sustain her erotic and filial attachments.

All that said, what complicates Morrison's *A Mercy* even further is that Florens speaks and writes almost entirely in the present tense, inscribing everything that's happened and will happen into a seemingly stable 'now,' reminiscent of Morrison's earlier neo-slave narrative *Beloved* in which "All of it is now it is always now."[201] A seemingly boundless now, however, can indeed contain change. So much has happened between the 1600s and today but there's yet to be a global event to undo the structural violations of transatlantic slavery. Then and today are not identical in content but, formally, they belong to now. This temporal entanglement veers into the uncanny when we consider the irony of *A Mercy* being published exactly a week after the United States elected its first black president, Barack Obama. Just as the nation celebrated its myth of post-racial colorblindness, Morrison sought to turn our attention to a time when we were pre-nation as well as, say, *pre*-racial. Rather than read the

[200] Best 79.
[201] Morrison, Toni, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2004) 248.

timing of these two events as a narrative of progress (as in the election of Obama illustrates just how far we've come in eradicating the issue of race), I situate *A Mercy* within what Salamishah Tillet describes as "an African American preoccupation with returning to the site of slavery as a means of overcoming racial conflicts that continue to flourish after the height of the civil rights movement in order to reimagine the possibilities of American democracy in the future."[202] This isn't to say that contemporary black Americans do not have relatively greater financial stability, political engagement, and cultural production than did their antebellum and pre-civil rights predecessors, but it is to say that what black Americans share in the afterlife of slavery, specifically in the post-Civil Rights era, is the seemingly forever 'now' of national abandonment evidenced by exclusion-yet-retention, a dynamic that's reinforced and embroiled by the deeply uneven enterprises of desegregation, integration, and affirmative action as well as mass incarceration, police brutality, and impoverishment. This preoccupation with returning to sites of slavery is, thus, the consequence of "civic estrangement," namely the ways in which, despite having legal citizenship, contemporary black Americans experience a national disaffection—a peculiar combination of melancholy, disenchantment, and "a yearning for civic membership"[203]—due to being "underrepresented in the civic myths, monuments, narratives, icons, creeds, and images of the past that constitute, reproduce, and promote an American national identity."[204] What we find in these returns to sites of slavery is a desire to not only tell the truth of American history but also democratize the civic myths that Americans tell themselves and each other to substantiate affective attachments to citizenship. This "democratic aesthetic"[205] (as Tillet calls it), this recasting and renewal of civic myths, isn't merely a matter of memorializing the past and establishing monuments—it's a matter of making the past useable and animating. It isn't about doing justice to the past merely

[202] Tillet, Salamishah, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post–Civil Rights Imagination* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012) 2.
[203] Tillet 3.
[204] Tillet 3.
[205] Tillet 3.

for the sake of the past—for the sake of fact and empiricism—but about forming justice for the future by reshaping our present relation to the past.

Morrison's *A Mercy* not only offers a narrative centered on a dark enslaved girl navigating the uneasiness of life before America was *America* and before black was *black*—rendering the racializing terror of New World worldmaking and endowing retrospectively our civic mythology with images of blackness (however nascent)—it also presents twenty first century audiences with a seventeenth century model of what it is to be held captive in form but not in fact. When Florens seeks to burn down her dead master's house, she renders her love letters into a language of cinders addressed to few but lived by all. Even though she renounces her own monument of writing meant to secure a future of intimacy, she envisions its full integration into the ecology from which the future of the world will spring forth, a future that is now an ongoing collective abandonment. *A Mercy* is a testament to how, according to Ian Baucom, "[t]ime does not pass."[206] Instead, time "accumulates, and as it accumulates it deposits an ever greater freight of material"[207] onto our ever-expanding now. With Florens navigating emergent racialization within conditions of uneven abjection (how her African mother is enslaved but her African lover is free), in addition to nearly every other surviving character in the novel (enslaved women, indentured servants, and an ailing widow) staring down a menacing future—all set in motion by a debauched Maryland planter who couldn't pay his debts—the ecology of *A Mercy* anticipates the precarity of our "hyperfinancialized late twentieth century and early twenty-first."[208] Put differently, the world of *A Mercy*, one in which debt, finance, and profit are valued above people (paradoxically both because of and seemingly regardless of race), signifies our own. But just as 'a minha mãe' abandoning Florens is an act of mercy, Florens abandoning her words is an act of profound optimism—an act made possible even in an ad-hoc world whose shifting arrangements ensure her

[206] Baucom, Ian, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 325.
[207] Baucom 325.
[208] Baucom 30.

subjection. Time does not separate her world from ours. Malaise charts our belonging to a situation of extant unfreedom.

Ghost Ecology

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing,* Jesmyn Ward illustrates slavery's violences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by taking us on a journey through storied landscapes of Mississippi, from the mythical coastal town of Bois Sauvage up to the cotton-rich land of real-life Parchman Farm, known officially as the Mississippi State Penitentiary. Although the novel inhabits numerous sites of slavery, the primary site is indeed Parchman Farm, which was founded at the turn of the twentieth century as a prison for a predominantly black inmate population—most of whom were forced to pick cotton. Parchman, according to historian David Oshinsky, "resembled an antebellum plantation with convicts in place of slaves."[209] Parchman is not exceptional in this regard; other such prisons include Ramsey Prison Farm in Texas, Angola Plantation in Louisiana, and Cummins Prison Farm in Arkansas. The antebellum design of these prisons, of course, is deliberate and constitutional, legitimized by the thirteenth amendment's provision that slavery and involuntary servitude can be exacted as forms of penalty for a crime. Such places exemplify modern and contemporary structures of centrality/marginality and exclusion-yet-retention attendant to the afterlife of slavery. With regards to Parchman specifically, prior to the Civil Rights Movement, black inmates labored for free in a segregated facility on unincorporated land, producing large profits for the Mississippi economy. In short, those on both the literal and figurative margins, excluded from the privileges of real citizenship, are nonetheless essential to sustaining a white entitled class that is seemingly forever central to ideological concern—central to the

[209] Oshinsky, David, *"Worse Than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996) 139.

business of who matters. Although the novel is set primarily in the twenty-first century, this postbellum slavery on Parchman Farm organizes the lives of nearly every character of the novel as well as stages the conditions of their collective grief.

At the start of the novel, we meet a man named River—tall, black, and quite strong for a man in his eighties. We soon learn that in the late 1940s, when he is just fifteen years old, River (along with his older brother Stag) is wrongfully incarcerated at Parchman Farm. Jojo, River's thirteen-year-old grandson, often asks him to retell anecdotes from Parchman, including those about how he grew fond of a fellow inmate, a twelve year old boy named Richie, who was imprisoned for theft—the only way he could provide for his starving family. He explains to Jojo that, within the brutalizing conditions at Parchman, caring for Richie gave him reason to live:

> *From sunup to sundown we was out there in them fields, hoeing and picking and planting and pulling. A man get to a point like that, he can't think. Just feel. Feel like he want to stop moving. Feel his head packed full of cotton and know he want to sleep. Feel his throat close and fire run up his arms and legs, his heart beat out his chest, and know he want to run. But wasn't no running. We was gunmen, under the gun of them damn trusty shooters. That was our whole world: the long line. Men strung out across the fields, the trusty shooters stalking the edge, the driver on his mule, the caller yelling to the sun, throwing his working song out. Like a fishing net. Us caught and struggling. Once, my grandmama told me a story about her great-grandmama. She's come across the ocean, been kidnapped and sold. Said her great-grandmama told her that in her village, they ate fear. Said it turned the food to sand in they mouth. Said everyone knew about the death march to the coast, that word had come down about the ships, about how they packed men and women into them. Some heard it was even worse for those who sailed off, sunk into the far. Because that's what it looked like when the ship crossed the horizon: like the ship sailed off and sunk, bit by bit, into the water. Her grandmama said they never went out at night, and even in the day, they stayed in the shadows of they houses. But still, they came for her. Kidnapped her from her home in the middle of the day. Brought her here, and she learned the boats didn't*

sink to some watery place, sailed by white ghosts. She learned that bad things happened on that ship, all the way until it docked. That her skin grew around the chains. That her mouth shaped to the muzzle. That she was made into an animal under the hot, bright sky, the same sky the rest of her family was under, somewhere far aways, in another world. I knew what that was, to be made a animal. Until that boy came out on the line, until I found myself thinking again. Worrying about him.[210]

Richie's the youngest boy River knows to have gone to Parchman. Though struggling in his own thwarted boyhood, shrinking into an animalic state, River takes to being Richie's guardian, not only out of pity and goodwill but also out of a need to reverse the dehumanizing effects of mindless involuntary labor, labor sensuously measured by a fellow black inmate charged with keeping time by casting a work song, labor violently driven by other fellow black inmates 'entrusted' with guns and ordered to shoot any gunmen (i.e. laborers) who fall out of line—classical divide and conquer. This social formation prompts River to recall the Door of No Return, how his third great-grandmother is stolen from her own home in broad daylight, marched to the western coast of Africa, and eventually enslaved in Mississippi—River and his brother Stag, nearly a century after Emancipation, are also stolen from their home in broad daylight and forced into what amounts to slave labor. And although the Door, again, remains true to its name, the 'bright sky' binds together Africa and multiple generations of the diaspora.

But River's recollections and associations are made possible only once Richie comes onto the scene. Love for Richie yields a world of knowledge, reminding young River that he in fact is not a beast of burden but a thinking subject, one driven by intimacy across time and space, attuned to the long durée of unfreedom. He describes to Jojo his fantasy of escape:

You see them open fields we worked in, the way you could look right through that barbed wire, the way you could grab it and get a toehold here, a bloody handhold there, the way they cut them trees flat so that land is

[210] Ward, Jesmyn, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (New York: Scribner, 2018) 68-69.

> *empty and open to the ends of the earth, and you think,* I can get out of here if I set my mind to it. I can follow the right stars south and all the way on home. *But the reason you think that is because you don't see the trusty shooters. You don't know the sergeant. You don't know the sergeant come from a long line of men bred to treat you like a plowing horse, like a hunting dog—and bred to think he can make you like it. That the sergeant come from a long line of overseers.*[211]

The field, like the sea, is deceptively available, inciting animus for freedom while remaining accessible only by death. The field and the sea are all horizon without promise, for there's no evidence of time truly passing: the descendants of enslaved Africans keep picking the cotton (some of whom are made complicit in their shared abjection) and the descendants of white overseers keep forcing their labor, emboldened by privilege and guns—neither group, however, is the real winner in this economic arrangement.

Though certainly unconventional material for children, Jojo listens to River's stories again and again because "[h]earing him tell them makes me feel like his voice is a hand he's reached out to me, like he's rubbing my back and I can duck whatever makes me feel like I'll never be able to stand as tall as Pop, never be as sure."[212] It's as if revisiting his grandfather's trauma enables him to resolve, if not altogether evade, some trauma he anticipates on the horizon. River's narration becomes an empowering act of affection. And although Jojo, just an adolescent, registers Parchman as a place of terror, perceiving it through his grandfather's voice allows him at once to sense how he resembles his grandfather and great-uncle Stag as well as distinguish "[t]he ways we are all different."[213] While Jojo doesn't elaborate on this point, what's striking is how Parchman constellates into a scene of trauma and consolation, kinship and distinction, oral history and lessons for the future.

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[211] Ward 22.
[212] Ward 17.
[213] Ward 17.

This becomes more complicated when Jojo himself visits Parchman Farm (to welcome home his father) and encounters Richie's ghost. From then on, Richie compels Jojo to coax River into telling the full story of his death—the story that River's been avoiding—so that he can finally find peace and recede into another world. Through a series of broken conversations (in which River has no idea of the ghost's presence), both Richie and Jojo learn that, after being swept into an elaborate rape and escape scheme by an older inmate, Richie's sure to be tortured, dismembered, and hanged. Because River's been reassigned to overseeing the search dogs, he finds Richie before the white guards do. In an act of mercy, saving him from a prolonged and public lynching, River stabs him in the neck and holds him until he dies. Reminiscent of Morrison's *Beloved*, in which an enslaved women (modeled after Margaret Garner) stabs her infant to save her from a life of bondage, in which the conditions of slavery confound human relations to such a degree that murdering one's child could be conceived as effective parenting, River's tragic experience with Richie illustrates the uneasy moral contortions imposed upon inmates at Parchman Farm—as if sorrow of this depth is all but inevitable. River tells his grandson, with an allusion to Lady Macbeth, "I washed my hands everyday, Jojo. But that damn blood ain't never come out."[214] So fifty years after a single act renders him both murderer and savior, River tells and retells his stories of boy Richie at Parchman Farm to his grandson who's essentially the same age as Richie when he dies.

Although River's unresolved grief surrounding Richie might be understood as melancholy, it's also enmeshed with guilt—guilt for doing what he thought was right within the logics of racialized prison intimacy. In the world of Parchman Farm, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, River's desire (if not duty) to provide his chosen brother with a "good" death can only end with blood on his hands—mourning "well" is never an option. Moreover, as Richie's ghost makes clear, the loss is not only River's. The loss, of course, is also Richie's: loss of life, loss of intimacy, loss of home, loss

[214] Ward 256.

of the knowledge of his own story. But even after he learns the missing fragment of his narrative, after he witnesses River's guilt-ridden sorrow, Richie can't (and won't) move on. "I thought once I knew, I could. Cross the waters. Be home,"[215] he tells Jojo. Instead he and countless other ghosts flock to the trees like watchful birds, stuck in the impasse of here and after. We can't forget, of course, that Jojo also shares in this loss, made responsible for securing Richie's peace in the afterlife—a responsibility he can only fail to fulfill. In the end, Parchman Farm, with all its losses, tales, and ghosts, merely continues to accumulate congeries of sorrow.

As if this weren't enough, the spectre of Parchman itself shadows Jojo's situation, seeing as how so many of the men in his life, both black and white, have done time there: in addition to his grandfather River and great-uncle Stag, an unnamed white cousin (on his father's side) is imprisoned sometime in the early twenty-first century for killing his uncle Given (River's son) in a racist, jealous rage; and his white father Michael—estranged from his family after falling in love with a black woman named Leonie (Jojo's mother, River's daughter) and impoverished after losing his job because of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill—gets caught up in the war on drugs. Although Michael and his cousin are imprisoned at Parchman after the end of segregation and forced labor, Michael describes the conditions there as so horrendous that it was "*no place for no man. Black or White. Don't make no difference.*"[216] As Richie's ghost puts it, modern day Parchman is "like a snake that sheds its skin. The outside look different when the scales change, but the inside always the same."[217] This is not to say that the generations between Richie and Michael have seen Parchman's population rapidly transition from black to white (for black people are still incarcerated at significantly higher rates than their white counterparts), nor is it to say that the elimination of forced labor rids Parchman of its tether to slavery. Instead it points to the fact that whiteness alone or proximity to whiteness (in Jojo's case) isn't

[215] Ward 281.
[216] Ward 96.
[217] Ward 172.

enough for penal salvation. Michael, for instance, whose whiteness is constricted by poverty, is more or less collateral damage in the war on drugs, which disproportionately affects black people and people of color. His cousin on the other hand is a criminal of a different order. After killing Given for beating him in a hunting game, he's admonished by his father, saying "*You fucking idiot… This ain't the old days.*"[218] Here, the crime isn't necessarily murder—it's failing to inhabit and adhere to the conventions of contemporary racism, losing his bearings on whiteness in his time. For all of these men, doing time at Parchman both instantiates and is an instantiation of slavery's cinders.

With such a lineage, readers are left wondering how long it will be before Jojo loses his "freedom" to Parchman or, more precisely, before Parchman catches hold of him, as if time on that land is hereditary. However, rather than following the condition of the mother (the seventeenth century legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* that made enslavement hereditary through the maternal line), the threat of captivity in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*—for Jojo at least—follows the condition of the father. Jojo exemplifies what Kiese Laymon calls being "born on parole."[219] In his book *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, Laymon draws an analogy between American chattel slavery and contemporary mass incarceration to posit a form of civic estrangement in which black people have been convicted and imprisoned—have already done time—before their time has even begun. To be born on parole means one didn't even exist at the scene of the crime. Extrapolating from Laymon, blackness is constituted by the experience of a situation without the experience of its prior structuring event. Malaise, here, is an ecology where (re)capture is imminent and anticipated, i.e. Jojo's suspicion of looming trauma—a sense that a semblance of the past is happening now, indefinitely, and that the future of unfreedom may already be co-present.

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[218] Ward 49-50.

[219] Laymon, Kiese, "How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America," *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America* (Chicago: Bolden, 2013) 43.

Cinders of Slavery

Dawoud Bey's "Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)," the concluding image of his 2017 series entitled *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, is a somber vision of where the horizons of sky and water meet, forming a distinct (though heathered) boundary straight across the very center of the photograph. Rendered in black and white, the heaving water takes on an oily quality, viscous and sinister, while the sky (less defined; congested with storm clouds) is like a colorless Turner-style painting. This image of Lake Erie represents the beginning of the end of one's route along the Underground Railroad—the sublime expanse across which is freedom in Canada. Like captured Africans marched to the Door of No Return and astonished by the sea, not knowing what new life awaits them on the other side, fugitive enslaved people in America would make the perilous journey north aware that Canadian soil promises an end to enslavement but unaware of what such a new life would actually be.

For this series, Bey attempts to recreate what fugitive enslaved people saw on their way through Ohio during the twilight hours when travel was safest. But since filming at twilight presents technological limitations, Bey had to film during the day, later using various techniques (in addition to grayscale) to simulate waning light.[220] Viewers, then, do not see what fugitives would have seen, for even at twilight, there's a great deal of color to witness. Moreover, rather than filming known 'stations' along the Underground Railroad,[221] Bey utilizes landscape photography to produce suggestions of and gestures towards the ecology of historical fugitive slave routes. Although seemingly of a documentarian sensibility, the photographs in *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* are highly composed, producing *ignes fatui* that record neither the past nor the present (or, rather, authentications of the past's occupation of the present). This, however, makes them even more captivating.

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[220] Keller, Corey and Elisabeth Sherman, "Now is the Time," *Two American Projects*, by Dawoud Bey (New Haven: Yale UP, 2020) 10.

[221] Keller and Sherman 10.

As if to highlight this composed quality, Bey selects his title for the series from the second and final stanza of Langston Hughes's 1924 poem "Dream Variations": "To fling my arms wide / In the face of the sun, / Dance! Whirl! Whirl! / Till the quick day is done. / Rest at pale evening . . . / A tall, slim tree . . . / Night coming tenderly / Black like me."[222] Interestingly, in his return to sites of slavery, Bey doesn't seek to render any figurative images of enslaved people. There are no portraits of performers reenacting a journey along the Underground Railroad. Instead, viewers are offered images of autumnal woods where the leaves have fallen, pools of water bordered by tall grasses, aging houses and white picket fences, all in the manufactured gloom of 'pale evening.' The figure of the enslaved traveler is, in effect, the viewer. Or perhaps even the coming night, like when Florens from Morrison's *A Mercy* declares that "the dark is me. Is we. Is my home."[223] And as Hughes' postbellum poem and Bey's twenty-first century attunement to sites of slavery suggest, modern and contemporary black people also belong to this coming night. That said, if the night and blackness bear such a close correlation, one through which identification is possible, and if the night has yet to come, then we might say that blackness, too, is not yet here. In the space of both the poem and the photographs, night remains suspended, aspirational, on the horizon. In *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, and in particular "Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)," viewers are held in transition: water to air, day to night, autumn to winter, enslavement to freedom, 'fact' to fiction—a non-durational corridor between what remains and what remains to be seen.

With its faithfulness to suspension and speculation, conjuring the (im)materiality of the past as it emerges in the present and suffusing the slave era with contemporary sensibilities, Bey's *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* participates in Saidiya Hartman's methodology called 'critical fabulation.' In her seminal essay "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman (working within, alongside, and despite of slavery's

[222] Hughes, Langston, "Dream Variations," *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Norton, 2004) 1294.
[223] Morrison 136.

limited archive) posits critical fabulation as an explicit and self-conscious employment of the "capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities)."[224] Unlike historical fiction, period drama, or documentary, and rather than redeem, recover, or 'give voice' to the dead, forgotten, and unaccounted for, critical fabulation attempts "to paint as full a picture" as one can of the contexts and ecologies lived by the many thousands gone, filling the archival silences and voids with aesthetic and sensuous experiences rendered in the subjunctive mood.[225] Perhaps most importantly, critical fabulation refuses to provide closure, to crystalize the narrative into something like authoritative History. Nonetheless, critical fabulation is a methodology crucial to narrating a history of the present, which "strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing."[226] Such an attachment to the past, to lost and nonexistent artifacts of the past, isn't a melancholic relation, for "[t]he necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future."[227] *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* is a visual translation of critical fabulation's subjunctive mood, rendering a history of the present by mythologizing well-trod landscapes, foregrounding the unfinished business of freedom. While we may call it a 'history of the present,' we might also call it a 'history of the future.' An impossible history, for sure, that reckons with a precarious future augured from the ecology of slavery's afterlife. That said, whatever else the future might be in Bey's vision, we come to know it as black and (assuredly) tender—pale optimism in the midst of it all. This is what I mean by not only malaise but also 'cinders of slavery.'

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[224] Hartman, Saidiya, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, Duke UP, 2008, pp. 11, https://doi.org/10.1353/smx.0.0006.
[225] Hartman 11-12.
[226] Hartman 4.
[227] Hartman 13.

I borrow from Jacques Derrida's theory of cinders, namely "the difference between what remains and what is,"[228] that which stands in for what no longer survives. The cinder, according to Derrida, is "the best paradigm for the trace,"[229] the nonpresence of the past still murmuring in the present. The impetus for Derrida's theory is the peculiarity of two phrases: *il y a là cendre* (there are cinders there) and *il y a la cendre* (there are cinders). Because these phrases are pronounced the same, listeners can't necessarily tell them apart.[230] Derrida even admits to purposefully confusing them for himself.[231] However, when readers look at *il y a là cendre*, the difference is made clear by the accented *là*. Nevertheless, Derrida argues that *là* overwrites *la* (the feminine article), essentially ungendering the phrase, but *la* can never be fully erased, remaining as an inaudible echo; this entanglement of sound and sight renders a kind of motet of voices: one attuned to place, one attuned to the absent figure.[232]

Although there's no grammatical equivalent in English, no polyvocal linguistic slippage through which the cinder may (un)signify, I'm interested in the cinder's liminality, its situatedness between what was and what is. More importantly, I'm drawn to its materiality. Derrida explains:

> What a difference between cinder and smoke: the latter apparently gets lost, and better still, without perceptible remainder, for it rises, it takes to the air, it is spirited away, sublimated. The cinder—falls, tires, lets go, more material since it fritters away its word.[233]

Even though the cinder "remains *from* what is not,"[234] it is still matter that *matters*, even though the illusory passage of time can make it feel like there isn't enough *there* still there. This gathers greater substance when we consider that Derrida's cinder is in response to the Holocaust, naming that which

[228] Derrida, Jacques, *Cinders*, Trans. Ned Lukacher (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) 23.
[229] Derrida 25.
[230] Derrida 3-4.
[231] Derrida 13.
[232] Derrida 3-4.
[233] Derrida 55.
[234] Derrida 21.

"remains without remaining from the holocaust, from the all-burning, from the incineration the incense."[235] The remains of and from the concentration camps still exist in some shape or form. The same can be said of the transatlantic African slave trade. As Christina Sharpe puts it, with regards to residence time, "even if those Africans who were in the holds, who left something of their prior selves in those rooms as a trace to be discovered, and who passed through the doors of no return did not survive the holding and the sea, they, like us, are alive in hydrogen, in oxygen; in carbon, in phosphorous, and iron; in sodium and chlorine."[236] In the end, "what we know about those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in Middle Passage" is that, despite everything, "they are with us still."[237] They exist in the ecologies that (un)sustain us.

My use of the cinder, with regards to transatlantic slavery, registers how the material afterlife of slavery can and often does appear wholly different from the historical facts of the slave era but insists that the matter of slavery still remains. What separates my use of the cinder from the Derridean variety is that I situate it in the *not yet* rather than between what was and what is. Therefore, the cinders of slavery, as a concept, acknowledges that what was and what happened (like what's happening now) are undeniable and operative without overdetermining the forms, arrangements, and affective attachments they make possible. The cinder, in its most diffuse sense, specifies place and placelessness, the figurative and the abstract, the historical and the affective. In this way, the cinders of slavery inhabit and animate the affective ecology of malaise, for (rather than loss and its attendant melancholia) the cinder is a manifestation of what remains and what is yet to be. So to say that the institution of transatlantic slavery is over—gone to flame—is to also say that its cinders remain as an (im)material nonpresence capable of inciting something new but unknowable, like the smell of captive Africans Baldwin imagines at Maison des Esclaves. My conceptualization of the cinder seeks to honor Baldwin's

[235] Derrida 25.
[236] Sharpe, Christina, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016) 19.
[237] Sharpe 19.

assertion in *The Fire Next Time* that black people "can have no future anywhere, on any continent"[238] until we accept our past. But "[t]o accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it,"[239] which is to say that we bear moral responsibility in our handling of history. 'Cinders' acknowledges the material *and* immaterial presence of history, in all its strangeness and mutations, as substance with which to create and repair. In the boundless now of our world, the past-yet-past remains and matters, available precisely because of its unavailability. In the now, there are cinders here. And here the cinders will be.

[238] Baldwin, James, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993) 81.
[239] Baldwin 81.

'Despair Among the Loveless':

Moral Malaise and the Ruse of Innocence

There was nothing to stop him—that "sweating drunk"[240] white man who groped James Baldwin during a visit down South. This man was so influential that he could "prevent or provoke a lynching,"[241] meaning his political agenda and allegiances were precarious and unreliable. The terror of this violation, as Baldwin recounts in *No Name in the Street*, was the recognition that "as my identity was defined by his power, so was my humanity to be placed at the service of his fantasies,"[242] which is to say that this southern man's demonstration of whiteness not only shaped the contours of Baldwin's blackness as a condition of living but also legitimated Baldwin's humanity through degradation, through a reinscription of servitude, which of course isn't humanizing at all. It's as if the fantasizing man, emboldened by drink but forever wavering in his resolve for racial justice, somehow believed that his mortifying touches confirmed the worthiness of black being. The terror is delusion: how violation can be felt (by the trespasser) as intimacy.

For Baldwin, this was an (im)moral holdover from the slave era when white men could violate enslaved people—especially women—with impunity, begetting children without becoming fathers, merely increasing their property. "[T]his loveless, money-making conspiracy,"[243] while conferring power onto white men, "also emasculated them of any human responsibility."[244] In other words, it dehumanized masters by absolving them of obligation—emotional, social, financial—to their own children and victims. But rather than this irresponsibility registering as a moral defect, the law and milieu rendered masters free, unattached, and innocent. With regards to violations against black men, Baldwin points to how white men "invented the nigger's big black prick, [and] are still at the mercy of

[240] Baldwin, James, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Vintage, 2007) 61.
[241] Baldwin 61.
[242] Baldwin 61.
[243] Baldwin 62.
[244] Baldwin 62.

this nightmare."[245] What is more, they "are still, for the most part, doomed, in one way or another, to attempt to make this prick their own."[246] Simultaneously stripping black men of rights and freedom while entrapping them with myths that render them at once desirous and dangerous produces an uneasy dreamtime in which possession knows no bounds, for it apparently is not enough to own the flesh—one must also take hold of the fiction. In either case, whiteness meant to have claim without duty—and certainly without love.

One might say, then, that the antebellum masters' legislation of defilement as freedom authorized their postbellum descendants to confound violation with intimacy. Both, however, are structured by necessary delusions to preserve white innocence at the expense of blackness. This preservation is fulfilled through an "unexamined life,"[247] never questioning the falsities and illogics that constitute the assumed and manufactured sovereignty of whiteness as a state of false innocence. But the costs are too great, for "[t]he despair among the loveless is that they must narcoticize themselves before they can touch any human being at all."[248] By drink, delusion, and deception, arbiters of white innocence diminish their sensorium, having "gone blind" and "lost the sense of touch."[249] For Baldwin, whiteness as a category is senseless, in every sense of the word, and thus loveless. And to be loveless is to have an immense capacity for violation while calling it freedom. Both the master and the son share this position, a changing same, bound in moral incoherence, and casting the future of racial justice as unimaginable, if not unholy.

Moral malaise accounts for the impasse created when this false innocence structures an unwillingness to be undone by futures made possible only through moral action. We enter a state of moral malaise when a present dilemma constituted by a troubling past is met with inaction from those

[245] Baldwin 63.
[246] Baldwin 63.
[247] Baldwin 63.
[248] Baldwin 63.
[249] Baldwin 63.

whose intervention would make a difference—this inaction casts projections of the future into crisis. I use 'moral' rather than, say, 'ethical' to think with Baldwin through his own lexicon, which means thinking beyond (but alongside) codes of conduct, legislation, and legal action; it means to point to something hazier yet more encompassing, to consider less the regulation of right and wrong and instead gesture towards morality's strained relation to the good and sacred—strained because morality can feel all but empty within the customs of our secular age. Baldwin, in fact, had a rather uneasy relationship to religion, having left the church as a young man; his use of 'moral' throughout his oeuvre, as we shall see, is then unloosed (but not entirely divested) from the religious imagination. My task here is to demonstrate how Baldwin's figuration of white innocence within nominally theological habits of mind exemplify moral malaise as an affective ecology that continues to menace the world.

Troubling Genre

Near the end of his life, Baldwin wrote that whiteness is "absolutely, a moral choice (for there are no white people)."[250] In his 1984 essay "On Being White…and Other Lies," he asserts that whiteness is a "totally false identity,"[251] one that seeks to simultaneously (and paradoxically) validate the oppression of black people and sanction the erasure of blackness as a constituent element of the American story.[252] Whiteness itself becomes a moral dilemma because to "choose" whiteness (to claim it; to invest in it; to live in it) means to actively or tacitly accept the spoils of genocide, for one's forebears "became white by slaughtering the cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping black women"[253]—bending the land and all its inhabitants to their will. To live in whiteness, by Baldwin's estimation, is to live in sin but make no genuine efforts toward

[250] Baldwin, James, "On Being White…and Other Lies," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, Ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2011) 169.
[251] Baldwin, "On Being White…" 168.
[252] Baldwin, "On Being White…" 167.
[253] Baldwin, "On Being White…" 167-168.

redemption—be it out of ignorance or refusal. Ultimately, such a "moral erosion has made it quite impossible for those who think of themselves as white in this country to have any moral authority at all—privately or publicly."[254] The real problem, however, is that our political and economic arrangements are such that those apparently without moral authority are precisely those with power, which results in a "crisis of leadership."[255] These compounded crises (of morality, of identity, of authority) mark everyone within their jurisdiction with varying degrees of debasement—none more than those who invest in whiteness.[256]

These damning conclusions (as well as the senselessness and lovelessness we saw in *No Name in the Street*) find their origins in "Stranger in the Village," published three decades earlier in 1953:

> the white man prefers to keep the black man at a certain human remove because it is easier for him thus to preserve his simplicity and avoid being called to account for crimes committed by his forefathers, or his neighbors. He is inescapably aware, nevertheless, that he is in a better position in the world than black men are, nor can he quite put to death the suspicion that he is hated by black men therefore. He does not wish to be hated, neither does he wish to change places, and at this point in his uneasiness he can scarcely avoid having recourse to those legends which white men have created about black men, the usual effect of which is that the white man finds himself enmeshed, so to speak, in his own language which describes hell, as well as the attributes which lead one to hell, as being as black as night.[257]

To live as a beneficiary of prior crimes but bear no responsibility—or imagine oneself free of responsibility—not only produces interracial distance but also intimates a kind of white intraracial yet intergenerational dissociation. This isn't to say that in Baldwin's theory 'the white man' should be convicted

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[254] Baldwin, "On Being White…" 168.
[255] Baldwin, "On Being White…" 166.
[256] Baldwin, "On Being White…" 169.
[257] Baldwin, James, "Stranger in the Village," *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, Ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998) 122.

of the master's crimes; 'the white man' has crimes of his own. To avoid facing the facts of history and to enjoy the spoils of unearned privilege (without suffering the pressing unease of knowing that his position incites resentment amongst black people), he justifies hierarchy by falling back on and contributing to the production of antiblack mythology: black people become criminals and sinners destined for perdition, while 'the white man,' by this logic, is washed in the blood and so prepares for his home in heaven. Whether through loveless touches or stifling distance, whiteness contrives its innocence by rendering itself as an abstraction, and it sustains itself by abstracting blackness. Black damnation serves at the behest of white salvation.

What is more, and perhaps paradoxically, Baldwin figures 'the white man' as an illogic that simultaneously clings to "the illusion that there is some means of recovering the European innocence, of returning to a state in which black men do not exist."[258] Here, Baldwin alludes to innocence within traditions of the Abrahamic religions, which is to say that being innocent means being prelapsarian, inhabiting a space and time before Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—to be without sin, without guilt, without shame. This form of innocence is impossible for all those who exist after the Fall. We could say then that one cannot be both innocent and moral because morality requires judgement of good and evil while innocence requires complete ignorance of them. Therefore, to call oneself innocent is to practice mythmaking of the self—a practice altogether inherently immoral (i.e. the manufacture and distribution of falsehood). The point, however, is not purely theological. The Fall to which Baldwin alludes is European imperialism—an ongoing global event whose origins cast a new world order of near universal moral decay. No one, especially those involved in the maintenance of whiteness, can be innocent. All claims to innocence, no matter how powerful, are absurd—mere reverie. Innocence in this more secular sense, specifically within a legal context, means to have been found not guilty, be it in the absence or even in the face of damning evidence.

[258] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 128.

Here, innocence is determined and contingent. Whether it be the mythmaking of a prelapsarian self or the legislation of guiltlessness, innocence is neither factual nor absolute—it's manufactured and belongs to storytelling. Innocence, as Baldwin uses it, sits somewhere in between, bearing the trace of the sacred while adhering to the ways in which its fictions belong to specific conditions of modern life.

It is in this way that Baldwin's concept of white innocence contributes to midcentury existentialist thought, specifically 'bad faith,' what Jean-Paul Sartre[259] calls the practice of "hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth."[260] Put differently, by Joseph Catalano, bad faith "is a pre-reflective resolution aimed at relieving us of the responsibility of reexamining our life."[261] One of Sartre's most poignant examples of bad faith comes from his 1945 article "Return From the United States: What I Learned About the Black Problem." During his visit to the US in the final months of the Second World War, he meets a white doctor in Louisiana, describing him as a "big, pale courteous man, very competent in all that pertains to his trade. On the subject of international politics, on the relations of France and America, on American literature, he responded to me with much intelligence and broad mindedness."[262] Nevertheless, when they discussed the injustice of black people being banned from donating blood to the Red Cross to save the lives of white soldiers, "all changed."[263] Although this man of learning could rationalize that "[t]here are three blood types…which one finds nearly equally in blacks and whites," he still managed to deduce (without evidence) that "[i]t is not safe

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[259] For a more in-depth discussion of the resonances between Baldwin and Sartre's works, see Radiclani Clytus's "Paying Dues and Playing the Blues: Baldwin's Existential Jazz," included in *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (2015) edited by Michele Elam. Clytus writes that although "there is no material evidence that Baldwin was a disciple of Sartrean existentialism, there are significant parallels between his understanding of the nature of human freedom and those philosophical precepts outlined in Sartre's landmark tome," that is, *Being and Nothingness*.

[260] Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, Trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966) 89.

[261] Catalano, Joseph S., *Reading Sartre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010) 75, EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=344666&site=eds-live&scope=site.

[262] Sartre, Jean-Paul, "Return From the United States: What I Learned About the Black Problem," *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, Tran. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997) 87.

[263] Sartre, "Return From the United States" 87.

for black blood to circulate in our veins."[264] Here we return to the dangers of what Baldwin calls the "unexamined life": an existence forged through irreality, bound to induce real catastrophe.

Near the close of "Stranger in the Village," Baldwin declares that "[p]eople who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster."[265] The maintenance of white innocence through a refusal to reckon with history is ultimately futile and, in fact, accelerates its obsolescence and inevitable demise; and for such innocence to be monstrous means its effects provoke both horror and terror—horror for what is manifest and terror for what is to come. In other words, to act in whiteness is to preserve false innocence by detaching from reality and situating oneself (either actively or passively) in a system of mythography; to live in or with whiteness is to suffer the evermore untenable and menacing futures governed by such a system. Therefore, as Baldwin suggests, the eventual self-destruction of monstrous white innocence would mean the ruination of everything within its jurisdiction.

Baldwin's conceptualization of the white racial category (as a moral choice, a lie, a false identity, and, especially, as the figure of 'the white man') draws attention to the generic properties of whiteness and, by extension, blackness. While there are many racialized people who populate his work—like that white man who violated him down South—Baldwin is almost always more invested in whiteness and, more specifically, white innocence as an abstraction (real in its consequences) that governs sociopolitical arrangements. As he explains to philosopher Paul Weiss in 1969 on the Dick Cavett Show:

> I don't know what most white people in this country feel but I can only conclude what they feel from the state of their institutions. I don't know if white Christians hate negroes or not but I know that we have a Christian church that is white and a Christian church which is

[264] Sartre, "Return From the United States" 87.
[265] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 129.

> black… I don't know whether the labor unions and their bosses really hate me. That doesn't matter. But I know that I'm not in their unions. I don't know if the real estate lobbies are against black people but I know the real estate lobbies keep me in the ghetto. I don't know if the Board of Education hates black people, but I know the textbooks they give my children to read and the schools that we have to go to. Now, this is the evidence.[266]

Here, of course, Baldwin describes systemic and institutional racism, what he calls "evidence," which is to say that segregation corroborates the racializing procedures of whiteness as an overarching (im)material phenomenon—one that, like genre, arranges subjects and objects in ways that promise enduring legibility, regardless of what such arrangements feel like. Baldwin's use of anaphora highlights the ways in which, say, 'systemic whiteness' is endlessly replicable, predictable, tethering the past, present, and future into a restless monotony. Being in the world means being subject to the conventions of whiteness as an organizing logic.

Figuring whiteness in this way is what allows Baldwin to write that "there are no white people."[267] Moreover, in a 1963 interview with Dr. Kenneth Clark—the psychologist who, alongside his wife Dr. Mamie Phipps Clark, developed the 'doll test' that would prove influential in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*—Baldwin declared that "I am not a nigger. I am a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need it."[268] For Baldwin, 'nigger,' with all the negative affects that gather in its name and with all its organizing power, can never signify anything about black people. Instead, "by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is."[269] This 'white man,' the locus of whiteness and white innocence, unwittingly defines

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[266] "James Baldwin and Paul Weiss Debate Discrimination In America," *YouTube*, uploaded by The Dick Cavett Show, 24 July 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzH5IDnLaBA.

[267] Baldwin, James, "On Being White…and Other Lies," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, Ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2011) 169.

[268] "A Conversation With James Baldwin," 1963-06-24, *WGBH*, American Archive of Public Broadcasting (GBH and the Library of Congress), Boston, MA and Washington, DC, Accessed 12 January 2023, www.americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-15-9m03xx2p.

[269] Baldwin, "Stanger in the Village," 123.

itself by mythologizing blackness, but rather than persons hailed by such mythology seeing themselves, they see the mythmaker. Baldwin goes on to assert, "I must accept the status which myth, if nothing else, gives me in the West before I can hope to change the myth."[270] Accepting the status conferred by myth, however, doesn't mean incorporating myth into consciousness, into a sense of self. It means living the reality organized by a fiction. Thinking with Baldwin, we might understand the generic "black man" (the figure of blackness rendered by white innocence) as a kind of veiled clairvoyant gifted with radical imagination, with knowledge gleaned from impressions that elude empirical analysis yet still nonetheless feel true—with knowledge made manifest by the evidence of racial disparity. We might say, then, that for Baldwin, blackness as a genre of living recognizes systemic racism as a moral dilemma in which white supremacy sustains itself through the continuous manufacture of false innocence, an innocence that seeks to erase a violent and imperialist past. Such attempts at erasure merely reproduce the violence and ordain further subjugation, structuring widespread contemporary and future dispossession.

It is in this way that the racializing procedures of whiteness (conceptualized throughout Baldwin's oeuvre) operate as genre. This aligns with Sylvia Wynter's assertion that "[i]t is this issue of the 'genre' of 'Man' that causes all the '-*isms*.'"[271] Here she punctuates her earlier seminal argument that the fallout of Man (white, Western, imperialist, heteronormative) and its overrepresentation—what we might call Man's synecdochic relation to the human—accounts for "all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming,"[272] and myriad additional worldwide catastrophes. But Man itself is the product of catastrophe. Lisa Lowe, in her book *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, argues that widespread unfreedom (forged

[270] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village" 128.

[271] Wynter, Sylvia, and Greg Thomas, "Proud Flesh Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter" *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness,* no. 4, 2009, pp. 24.

[272] Wynter, Sylvia, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 260–61, Michigan State University Press, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41949874.

and regulated through the interconnectedness of the transatlantic African slave trade, settler colonialism in the Americas, and the East Indies and China trades) provided the conditions for the emergence of modern European liberalism and its administration of Man's individual freedom.[273] In the end, the "social inequalities of our time are a legacy of these processes through which 'the human' is 'freed' by liberal forms, while other subjects, practices, and geographies are placed at a distance from 'the human.'"[274] The moral dilemma of whiteness, figured by Baldwin as 'the white man,' belongs to this genealogy of Man, a genre of false identity whose narrative conventions seemingly forever bend towards innocence and freedom.

According to Lauren Berlant, "[t]o call an identity…a genre is to think about it as something repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations."[275] Whiteness and its attendant false innocence are generic in the sense that they provide a "structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances,"[276] assurances that the world organized by white innocence, no matter the additions and variations necessary to accommodate semblances of progress, will forever champion 'the white man.' Put differently, genre provides a set of conventions, expectations, and arrangements that are seemingly stable but only with careful deviation—no matter what happens, overall this object or object world must feel like it belongs to a particular kind of order, an order that incites confidence in its ability to remain as it is for the foreseeable future. An attachment to race (specifically, in this case, whiteness) is also an attachment to the world maintaining its arrangement—that however cruel or unjust, the world will remain legible and predictable in ways that produce

[273] Lowe, Lisa, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke UP, 2015) 6.
[274] Lowe 3.
[275] Berlant, Lauren, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008) 4.
[276] Berlant 4.

pleasure, however painful. Thinking race alongside genre affords deep attention to the synergy between form, temporality, and feeling: white innocence as genre exemplifies moral malaise in that a present situation in which futures projected by a troubling past might be undone or abated through moral action, but the generic protocols for preserving false innocence create an impasse such that the promise of a more equitable and sustainable order remains suspended.

Going Nowhere

William Faulkner's baffling contributions to the 1950s discourse on desegregation exemplifies not only Baldwin's theory of white innocence as a genre of moral incoherence but also the mechanics of moral malaise. In his interview with Russell Howe for the *Reporter*, published on March 22, 1956, Faulkner asserts that although "racial discrimination is morally bad"[277] and that "[t]he Negro has a right to equality,"[278] the real problem at hand is what he calls the 'fact' that "human nature…at times has nothing to do with moral truths."[279] Fair enough. The evidence of this is manifest, so much so that Faulkner expresses what feels perfectly logical when he explains that "[a] wise person says 'Let's use this fact. Let's obliterate this fact first.' To oppose a material fact with a moral truth is silly."[280] In other words, desegregation highlights the ways in which legislating on the basis of morality can be destined to fail—the law is not only a kind of promissory note (as opposed to an animating moral principle) but also an antagonism sure to incite dissent and defiance, if not outright rebellion. Faulkner isn't wrong. He's responding to the urgent crisis of white supremacist riots at the University of Alabama—outrage spurred by the admittance and consequent attendance of Autherine Lucy. Just short of the second anniversary of the United States Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board* (a

[277] Faulkner, William, "Interview with Russell Howe," *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926–1962*, Ed. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York: Random House, 1968) 261.
[278] Faulkner, "Interview with Russell Howe" 260.
[279] Faulkner, "Interview with Russell Howe" 260.
[280] Faulkner, "Interview with Russell Howe" 260.

ruling that paved the way to victory for Lucy and her NAACP lawyers, including Thurgood Marshall, in their lawsuit against the University), a racist mob rampaged on campus, threatening Lucy's life. Faulkner, of course, is troubled by this, for "the Southern whites are back in the spirit of 1860" and "[t]here could easily be another Civil War."[281] This nonsynchonism[282] amongst southern whites, incited by fear of a possible future (soon, perhaps, to become the present) in which whatever assurances they had within the organizing logics of whiteness as genre, threatens to replicate a century-old national trauma that, in fact, would place southern whites in a worse position than they imagined themselves to inhabit during the period of desegregation, for (according to Faulkner himself) "the South will be whipped again."[283]

To avoid such a tragedy as well as safeguard any chance of racial equality, Faulkner offers some disquieting strategies. In "Letter to a Northern Editor," published on March 5, 1956 in *Life*, Faulkner urges (no, warns) "the NAACP and all the organizations who would compel immediate and unconditional integration: 'Go slow now.'"[284] As a white southerner who situates his politics within the "middle of the road" variety, Faulkner never denies that racial inequality is wrong, explicitly writing "I was against compulsory segregation," by all appearances because of "the simple incontrovertible immorality of discrimination by race."[285] However, his reservations concerning the realization of racial equity and inclusion, his being "just as strongly against compulsory integration,"[286] have much to do with what he understands as an invincible drive to preserve any semblance of freedom, specifically white southern male freedom, even when the grounds for that freedom are dubious. He warns black

[281] Faulkner, "Interview with Russell Howe," 258.
[282] Bloch, Ernst, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics," Trans. Mark Ritter, *New German Critique*, no. 11, 1977, pp. 22–38, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/487802, Accessed 10 Dec. 2020.
[283] Faulkner, "Interview with Russell Howe," 258.
[284] Faulkner, William, "Letter to a Northern Editor, 1956," *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters*, Ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: The Modern Library, 2004) 87.
[285] Faulkner, "Letter to a Northern Editor, 1956" 87.
[286] Faulkner, "Letter to a Northern Editor, 1956" 87.

people that if integration is mandated (by the state or otherwise), thereby forcing white southern moderates like himself "to vacate that middle where we could have worked to help the Negro improve his condition,"[287] then, rather than join the side of racial justice, they will join the conservative (violent) factions hellbent on white supremacy. Initially, this seems nonsensical. Why retreat from the labor toward justice as soon as the fruit of this labor begins to bud? The logic, however, is that Faulkner and his compatriots must have been more concerned with conditions, not justice, more committed to making inequality more livable, more palatable—not the elimination of hierarchy but its enrichment. If this freedom to reign as benevolent masters is taken away, the only viable (not logical, not moral) option is antagonism. These warnings to black readers about switching his alliance to conservative white southerners if his preferred "middle of the road" is no longer available due to mandated integration align with his infamous declaration in the Russell Howe interview that "if it came to fighting I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes"[288] (comments he would publicly refute as that "which no sober man would make, nor it seems to me, any sane man believe"[289]).

Nevertheless, to stave off animosity and pacify white conservatives and moderates, the NAACP must "give [the white southerner]a space in which to get his breath…to look about and see that (1) nobody is going to force integration on him from the outside; (2) That he himself faces an obsolescence in his own land which only he can cure; a moral condition which not only must be cured but a physical condition which has got to be cured if he, the white Southerner, is to have any peace, is not to be faced with another legal process or maneuver every year, year after year, for the rest of his life."[290] The white southerner, though morally corrupt, must cure himself without any intervention or

[287] Faulkner, "Letter to a Northern Editor, 1956" 87.
[288] Faulkner, "Interview with Russell Howe" 261.
[289] Faulkner, William, "To the Editor of the *Reporter*, 1956," *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters*, Ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: The Modern Library, 2004) 225.
[290] Faulkner, "Letter to a Northern Editor, 1956" 91.

serious interface with his victims; his redemption must be self-generated and governed by absolute peace: no confrontations, no consequences, no reparations. What is more, Faulkner figures the redeemed white southerner as a kind of savior or hero. In "A Letter to the Leaders in the Negro Race," published in September of 1956 in *Ebony*, Faulkner instructs black readers "to send every day to the white school to which he was entitled by his ability and capacity to go, a student of my race, fresh and cleanly dressed, courteous, without threat or violence, to seek admission; when he was refused I would forget about him as an individual, but tomorrow I would send another one, still fresh and clean and courteous, to be refused in his turn, until at last the white man himself must recognize that there will be no peace for him until he himself has solved the dilemma."[291] Black resistance and perseverance undergo erasure so as to render the results a triumph that belongs to the exasperated white man. But Faulkner's most poignant articulation of this dynamic comes in that infamous Russell Howe interview when he states that the white southern man "has to feel that what he is doing (when he reforms) is not being forced on him but is spontaneous. We have to make it so that he feels that he is being not just honest but generous."[292] In the end, the white man, he and he alone, emboldened by delusions that require manufacture and maintenance by everyone else involved, must define the terms of progress, which merely reinforces hierarchy through unfounded moral authority.

The crucial element for achieving white redemption (and supposedly its corresponding racial equality) is, without question, the patience of black people, for which the white man, of course, can also take credit. Imagining his course of action "If I were a Negro," Faulkner declares that "[t]he white man has devoted three hundred years to teaching us to be patient; that is one thing at least in which we are his superiors. Let us turn it into a weapon against him. Let us use this patience not as a passive

[291] Faulkner, William, "A Letter to the Leaders in the Negro Race, 1956," *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters,* Ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: The Modern Library, 2004) 109.
[292] Faulkner, "Interview with Russell Howe" 261.

quality, but as an active weapon."[293] Rather than name centuries of slavery and Jim Crow as oppression and crimes against humanity, Faulkner figures that time as an education—may the student surpass the teacher, but in the end, the student's success is only possible because of the teacher's mastery. No matter the angle, the white man comes out on top. Faulkner's insistence that black people "go slow" and wait essentially for the white man to make things right, aligns with Julius Fleming's theory of black patience, namely "a large-scale racial project that coerces performances of patience among black people as a way to invigorate and reinforce anti-blackness and white supremacy. A global system of gratuitous violence, black patience weaponizes time, specifically 'the wait,' as a means of racializing the modern world and of manufacturing the racial taxonomies that arrange our global relations of power."[294] In the end, going slow amounts to going nowhere at all.

Baldwin not only lambasts Faulkner and his warnings to go slow, declaring "[t]here is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation… the time is always now,"[295] he also takes Faulkner at his word to delineate his own theory of the white man, specifically the white southern man, whose dealings with the North are forever "uneasy."[296] Baldwin figures the white southern man as a product of "two entirely antithetical doctrines, two legends, two histories,"[297] namely America and the South: "He is, on the one hand, the proud citizen of a free society which has not yet dared to free itself of the necessity of naked and brutal oppression. He is part of a country which boasts that it has never lost a war; but he is also the representative of a conquered nation."[298] Not only is the white southern man a loser in a winning nation, his opponent, by force of Emancipation, "established a moral superiority over the South," a righteousness that, too, is faulty, since the "North was no better

[293] Faulkner, "A Letter to the Leaders in the Negro Race" 111.
[294] Fleming, Julius B., Jr., *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation* (New York: New York UP, 2022) 9.
[295] Baldwin, James, "Faulkner and Desegregation," *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, Ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998) 214.
[296] Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation" 212.
[297] Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation" 212.
[298] Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation" 212.

prepared than the South, as it turned out, to make citizens of former slaves."[299] Regardless, the North (the union) could declare itself the victorious emancipator, while the South could not. So rather than accept defeat and forge a new, more equitable way of life with their emancipated relations, the white southern men "who knew that slavery was wrong" but soldiered on anyway "to perpetuate it because they were unable to turn against 'blood and kin and home,"[300] those men clung to the sentiments and organizing logics of slavery, like heirlooms from a past that must never be forgotten or forfeited: "In sum, the North, by freeing the slaves of their masters, robbed the masters of any possibility of freeing themselves of the slaves."[301] This is why that drunk white man gropes Baldwin during his visit down South; this is why Faulkner, in all his convolution, figures the white man as a subject who must be, at all costs, age after age, the hero—innocent and free.

What we see in Faulkner's outrage concerning desegregation is a refusal to diverge from generic convention, what Berlant calls "genre flailing," namely "a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one's confidence about how to move in it."[302] To fight against the shock of a world becoming unintelligible, we witness Faulkner "[throw] language and gesture and policy and interpretations at a thing to make it slow or make it stop,"[303] retreat to familiar genres rebranded as new and progressive—his admittedly morally corrupt white man of the past and present will ultimately be no different from the promise of some eventual self-redeemed white hero. It is in this way that Faulkner adheres to Sartre's characterization of French colonialists. In his preface to Albert Memmi's 1957 book *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Sartre likens white southerners in the US (who he simply calls 'the Southerner') to French colonialists in Algeria,

[299] Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation" 213.
[300] Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation" 213.
[301] Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation" 213.
[302] Berlant, Lauren, "Genre Flailing," *Capricious Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2018, pp. 156-162, http://capaciousjournal.com/article/genre-flailing/, Accessed 23 Aug. 2022, 157.
[303] Berlant, "Genre Flailing" 157.

for just as the Southerner violently resisted desegregation and black enfranchisement, the French concurrently resisted Algerian independence. Sartre supports Memmi's claim that "[t]here are neither good nor bad colonists: there are colonialists."[304] The real difference is that "some reject their objective reality," so much so that, "[b]orne along by the colonialist apparatus, they do everyday in reality what they condemn in fantasy, for all their actions contribute to the maintenance of oppression."[305] Ultimately, the French colonialists, regardless of how some may convince themselves otherwise, "will change nothing and will serve no one, but will succeed only in finding moral comfort in malaise."[306] While the Civil Rights Movement and the Algerian Revolution are not undifferentiated struggles, the point of Sartre's analogy is that figures in power who imagine themselves humane (like the 'good' French colonialists or Faulkner and his fellow 'middle of the road' white southerners) engage in a form of bad faith that produces moral irreality, thereby reproducing the genres they seem committed to changing but unable to live without. Malaise names not only the uneasy mental and emotional acrobatics such figures of power adopt in order to reconcile the irreconcilable but also the impasse created when moral irreality (which isn't moral at all) inhibits the actions that would realize a more humane future. Or, as Baldwin puts it, "unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or thought one knew; to what one possessed or dreamed that one possessed."[307] Baldwin, however, agrees with Faulkner on a single point: that the white man himself must make things right. But what this looks like is utterly different: Faulkner imagines the white man as a durable moral genre whose self-redemption (an utter refusal to be fundamentally changed) realizes a new façade for the old world order; for Baldwin, a new world order is possible only if the white man makes things right within himself by breaking his genre, abolishing his innocence, and emancipating

[304] Sartre, Jean-Paul, Introduction, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* by Albert Memmi, Tran. Lawrence Hoey (New York: Orion Press, 1965) xxv.
[305] Sartre, Introduction, xxv-xxvi.
[306] Sartre, Introduction, xxvi.
[307] Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation" 209.

himself, for "[a]ny real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety."[308] Then, and only then, can progress begin.

Doom & Burden

Joanna Burden from Faulkner's 1932 novel *Light in August* may very well serve as a prefiguration of Faulkner's own troubling "middle of the road" politics concerning 1950s desegregation. He crafts Burden as the descendant of a northern abolitionist (murdered by a former confederate colonel for espousing black enfranchisement) who has spent her entire life down South:

> She lives in the big house alone, a woman of middleage. She has lived in the house since she was born, yet she is still a stranger, a foreigner whose people moved in from the North during Reconstruction. A Yankee, a lover of negroes, about whom in the town there is still talk of queer relations with negroes…despite the fact that is now sixty years since her grandfather and her brother were killed on the square by an ex slaveowner over a question of negro votes in a state election. But it still lingers about her and about the place: something dark and outlandish and threatful, even though she is but a woman and but the descendant of them whom the ancestors of the town had reason (or thought that they had) to hate and dread. But it is there: the descendants of both in their relationship to one another's ghosts, with between them the phantom of the old spilled blood and the old horror and anger and fear.[309]

Though she's a lifelong resident, perched in an old plantation home with former slave cabins out back, she is resolutely not a southerner. Nor is she a northerner. Nevertheless, she uses her position, driven by the spirit of her martyred grandfather (and brother) to advocate, often clandestinely, for black uplift across the South. Like Faulkner, Burden is a political minority—a stranger; a disruption—in her own

[308] Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation" 209.
[309] Faulkner, William, *Light in August* (New York: Modern Library, 2012) 42.

environment. Unlike Faulkner, her roots are not so deeply southern, which gives her neighbors even more reason to be suspicious of her presence—not to mention her being a woman of independent means and influence within a deeply patriarchal order. Burden, in many ways, is the perfect intermediary: neither young nor old, neither southern nor northern, neither comrade nor outcast. And as her name suggests, this uneasy liminal relationship to her neighbors is felt as a burden—her perceived alliances with black people pose a serious threat to the racial order.

Her lover, Joe Christmas (the novel's protagonist), is also an intermediary. Though he appears white, he suspects, but does not know, that he's part black, having grown up as an orphan. As Krister Friday puts it, "Joe's indeterminate parentage allows him to pass as both white and black but to 'be' or have 'been' neither."[310] What is more, "[w]ithout the anchor of an origin, Joe's past and present become open, unfinished possibilities rather than certainties, making Joe's 'presence' in the novel assume a spectrality."[311] Similarly, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman observes that "Joe Christmas has little interiority and even less discernable motivation for doing what he does. Like the legible outlines of a drawing, he is a sketch figure."[312] So rather than being a fleshed-out character, Christmas (and the specter of miscegenation) functions for Faulkner as a "a viable, living metaphor for the gruesome history, tumultuous present, and uncertain future of black-white relations in the post-Emancipation South."[313] Together, he and Burden personify a temporal crisis: with no present assurances and no past (however well- or ill-defined) to stand on in this southern landscape, the future remains wayward.

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[310] Friday, Krister, "Miscegenated Time: The Spectral Body, Race, and Temporality in *Light in August*," *Faulkner Journal*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2000, pp. 44. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24908240. Accessed 20 May 2022.

[311] Friday 44.

[312] Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah I., "Iconographies of Gang Rape: Or, Black Enfranchisement, White Disavowal, and the (Homo)erotics of Lynching," *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012) 55.

[313] Abdur-Rahman 54.

And yet, as their "wild nights"[314] become untenable, she insists that Christmas lean into his supposed blackness, attend a black school, and ultimately "take over all her business affairs—the correspondence and the periodical visits—with the negro schools… He was to have complete charge, and she would be his secretary, assistant."[315] While this seems as if Burden is being a selfless benefactor, this benevolence isn't necessarily for Christmas's good. For instance, once their affair sours, Burden grows evermore authoritarian, particularly in her religious fervor and pursuit of redemption for her and Christmas's godless affair, even attempting to force him at gunpoint to pray with her. So even though she invests in the advancement of black people, she insists that Christmas submit to her will.

Burden's project of racial uplift is governed by familial convictions of racial (im)morality. Her martyred grandfather, though vehemently against slavery, wasn't free of racism, calling black people "lowbuilt because of the weight of the wrath of God, black because of the sin of human bondage staining their blood and flesh."[316] The sins of the master provoke God's wrath who, in turn, punishes the enslaved—not the enslaver. But rather than envisioning a future in which the wrath is lifted for the sake of reconciliation and racial equality, Burden's grandfather dreams of eventual black extinction: "They'll bleach out now. In a hundred years they will be white folks again."[317] This literary precursor to Faulkner's supposedly drunken remark in the 1956 Russell Howe interview that "the Negro race will vanish in three hundred years by intermarriage,"[318] figures whiteness as stable and blackness as variable, as a manifestation of sin, a menacing object, soon to disappear through moral action—black people, as humans, are nowhere to be found. Blackness, in this vision, is nothing more than a detour on the grand course of whiteness. This, of course, illustrates Baldwin's conception of whiteness as that which seeks to erase blackness, to fabricate prelapsarian innocence. It's also worth mentioning

[314] Faulkner, *Light in August* 256.
[315] Faulkner, *Light in August* 245.
[316] Faulkner, *Light in August* 226.
[317] Faulkner, *Light in August* 226.
[318] Faulkner, "Interview with Russell Howe" 258.

that while this faith in black extinction is predicated on miscegenation, Burden's grandfather is ultimately uncomfortable with the idea that his grandson—his fellow martyr—might be part black and Faulkner, as we've seen, threatens violence at the prospect of integration; even the future one believes in as inevitable must be, somehow, resisted.

In similar fashion, after the murder of his father and son, Burden's father delivers to her a kind of sermon on racial condemnation:

> Remember this. Your grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather or your brother or me or you were even thought of. A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever…You must struggle, rise. But in order to rise, you must raise the shadow with you. But you can never lift it to your level… The curse of the black race is God's curse. But the curse of the white race is the black man who will be forever God's chosen own because He once cursed him.[319]

In this moral logic, God cursed black people because of white people's sins against them and now the black race is the curse of the white race—their mere existence constitutes the white race's punishment. Blackness, then, is both an affliction and that which afflicts. And somehow, even though they are God's favored people (but only because He's done them great harm), black people will never shake this curse and take their rightful place as equals within this bizarre racial order—destined forever to be objects of subjugation. These mental acrobatics align with Faulkner's concerns with improving conditions without actually realizing racial equality. Black uplift must coincide with white uplift—a mechanism to assuage white guilt and manufacture white innocence. To make matters worse, even God must play a role—rather than accept full responsibility for his own crimes against humanity, the

[319] Faulkner, *Light in August* 230-232.

white man enlists God as the guilt-ridden overseeing architect of this morally desolate social order. Burden's steadfast pursuits as a philanthropist and advocate merely reinforce that social order. By this light, her position as an intermediary and a stranger doesn't amount to anything. Burden not only exemplifies Baldwin's assertion that the North (when we consider that her sensibilities are purportedly 'northern') wasn't prepared to accept black people as full citizens but also proves that her morality produces the same outcomes as that of her southern neighbors. Within the genre of white innocence, Burden functions as a promise for disruption and revision, but in the end her status as an intermediary only serves to protect white supremacy. The hate and dread of her neighbors turns out to be unfounded; she is, in fact, one of them.

In the end, Christmas embodies the promise of black people being bleached into whiteness through intermarriage, the wavering faith espoused by Burden's grandfather and Faulkner himself. Christmas is simultaneously not quite, not yet, and no longer black, moving through the world as white, for the most part, until proven otherwise—when the proof is unavailable. He comes to represent the ways in which "the status of black men in the post-Emancipation South made them akin to white men."[320] In material terms, "[e]nfranchisement masculinized black men in that it established both their legal humanity and their U.S. citizenship; furthermore, black men's legal right to marriage and to function as fathers granted them a recognizable position within the (implicitly patriarchal) symbolic order."[321] This, however, is complicated by the fact that Christmas himself doesn't seem committed to his capacity to pass, having shared his ambiguous origins with Burden (and others) and taking residence in one of the former slave cabins on her property. Christmas not only embodies white anxieties around racial equality but also refuses, in all his apparent whiteness, to allow those who encounter him to forget the biochemical intimacies attendant to slavery and its afterlives.

[320] Abdur-Rahman 58.
[321] Abdur-Rahman 58.

For Christmas, determined to escape Burden's will toward a redemption that merely reinscribes racial subjugation, this 'middle of the road' is experienced "as though all the past was a flat pattern. And going on: tomorrow night, all the tomorrows, to be a part of the flat pattern."[322] Moral malaise captures this flat pattern of redemptive time, a malaise that produces an unwillingness to be undone, to surrender to an unknowable future of racial equity and inclusion. No version of the future renders Christmas as more than a spectre or sketch figure or instrument for white salvation. As Hortense Spillers puts it, "We observe a figure drowning in a sea of phenomena, enacting and re-enacting a purposeful purposelessness of movement that is bizarre, madly pointed. Animated by forces beyond his knowing, Christmas provides an analogy on the deracinated person, fixed in cultural vestibularity. Time passes for him, over and around him, but it has no subjective properties that he might call his own."[323] In the end, Faulkner locks Christmas and Burden and their neighbors inside their respective genres: a black male monster rapes and murders a white southern woman, and the townspeople hunt him down and lynch him. In such a flat pattern of redemptive time, a redemption that merely reinscribes delusions from the past, Faulkner writes that "Memory believes before knowing remembers."[324] What makes white innocence an instantiation of moral malaise isn't merely its insistence on defying logic; it's the simultaneous acknowledgement and preservation of delusion, even by brute immoral action.

Loveless Kinship

Jesse couldn't get it up. At least not for his wife. After a trying day of jailing black protesters, this white southern deputy sheriff from Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" wanted only what a black

[322] Faulkner, *Light in August* 256-257.
[323] Spillers, Hortense, "Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor," *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 304.
[324] Faulkner, *Light in August* 110.

woman could give, what he could take from a black woman, what he couldn't ask for from his white wife.[325] But due to political unrest—to black people fighting for their freedom from Jim Crow's dominion, Jesse couldn't simply arrest a black woman as usual and have his way with her, not without stoking the fires of protest.[326] At the age of 42, "[n]othing had ever bothered him before, certainly not getting it up."[327] In his frustration, he questions God, as if to suggest that his erectile dysfunction is unjust since he's "a good man, a God-fearing man," one who "tried to do his duty all his life."[328] He wonders if God is punishing him for sleeping with (read: assaulting) black women, apparently "like any other man"[329] of his race and station had done. What's curious is that Jesse describes black people as "ugly" and "filthy," calling them "animals," but concedes that they're "pretty good" at sex, offering more "spice" than their white counterparts.[330] None of this makes sense to him. He stops short of blaming God for his transgressions, asking "What had the good Lord Almighty had in mind when he made the niggers?"[331] But no matter how shaken his faith may be, Jesse remains (to himself) a man of duty, a man of the law—never examining or taking responsibility for the hypocrisy of his being a deputy sheriff who unlawfully arrests and assaults black women. Baldwin demonstrates through Jesse how disgust, desire, delusion, and devotion can coalesce to produce habits of mind that sustain attachments to false identity.

Jesse doesn't, however, question God's reasoning on one matter: black inferiority. Charged with administering the law to black protesters, "it wasn't his fault if the niggers had taken it into their heads to fight against God and go against the rules laid down in the Bible for everyone to read!"[332] For Jesse, the supposedly natural order has been disturbed and black people are decidedly to blame:

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[325] Baldwin, James, "Going to Meet the Man," *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995) 229.
[326] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 230.
[327] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 230.
[328] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 230.
[329] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 230.
[330] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 230.
[331] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 230.
[332] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 235.

"Each day, each night, he felt worn out, aching, with their smell in his nostrils and filling his lungs, as though he were drowning—drowning in niggers; and it was all to be done again when he awoke. It would never end. It would never end,"[333] for times had changed and times were changing. Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" is set at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, after *Brown v. Board* in 1954, the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the Freedom Rides of 1961, the March on Washington in 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the marches from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, the televised rise of civil rights leaders Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X… This was an era when marches, demonstrations, court battles, and political gains posed a serious crisis for white leadership and supremacy. Baldwin crafts a narrative in which a white male protagonist feels this crisis intensely, intimately, understanding the genres by which he lives to be in flux. While his uninterested wife sleeps beside him, Jesse lies awake, contemplating his existential dread—physically manifested through his erectile dysfunction. As if to cure his loneliness, he gives into nostalgia, thinking fondly of his father and his father's friends, men who "had taught him what it meant to be a man."[334] But "they were now much quieter than they had been, and the tone of their jokes, in a way that he could not quite put his finger on, had changed."[335] Jesse mourns the loss of "their old and easy connection with each other"[336] because he and the other white men of his generation are facing the emergence of an era when their unquestioned dominance—their absolute manhood—might be uprooted.

It's no surprise, then, that Jesse managed to get an erection earlier in the day while using a cattle prod to mutilate a black protest leader's testicles. It also comes as no surprise, as Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman observes, that "[i]n order to reinvigorate and reclaim the white male citizen-subject who has

[333] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 236.
[334] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 236.
[335] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 236.
[336] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 238.

become undone in the face of strident black political mobilization, Jesse remembers a lynching that his parents brought him to as a boy."[337] The way to the lynching site was like a joyous funeral procession, cars of white spectators "stretched up the road as far as he could see."[338] Together, singing, they journeyed "up the long hill"[339] to higher ground, land where, "beneath them, invisible now, lay the town; and to the left, miles of trees which led to the high mountain range which his ancestors had crossed in order to settle in this valley."[340] There upon the hill, they were to have a feast. His mother donned "the dress she wore to church" and the whole experience "was like a Fourth of July picnic"[341]—like a religious celebration of national freedom. Ahead of a great crowd of witnesses, Jesse could see a blazing fire engulfing a black figure, as "wind blew the smoke from the fire across the clearing into his eyes and nose."[342] With everyone breathing in the cinders of the black figure, one could say that the scene was like that of the Eucharist, the ritualized consumption of a sacrificial body meant to sustain the truth of collective redemption. Jesse's father's friends lifted the black figure from the flames and Jesse sees that he's "a big man, a bigger man than his father, and black as an African jungle cat, and naked."[343] The man's sex is "huge, much bigger than his father's."[344] And then it happens. Jesse's father's friends, the men who taught him how to be a man, slice away the black man's manhood and let the flames have their way with him. It is in this way, as Abdur-Rahman argues, that "[w]hite male identity is secured not simply through the propertied entitlements of citizenship but also through communally sanctioned rights/rites of black negation, which are passed on as white male

[337] Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah I., "'As Though a Metaphor Were Tangible': Baldwin's Identities," *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, Ed. Michele Elam (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015) 174.
[338] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 243.
[339] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 243.
[340] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 245.
[341] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 242.
[342] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 245.
[343] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 247.
[344] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 248.

inheritance."[345] This is when Jesse "loved his father more than he had ever loved him."[346] Despite this black man being taller, heavier, and having a larger endowment—possessing ostensible markers of virility, virility that somehow threatened white masculinity and claims to sovereignty—these men triumphed over the terror of black manhood, sure to undo them and their intimate network of power, that is, unless they made this sacrifice for the maintenance of their salvation. But Jesse, at 42, has no children, no white son to whom he might pass along this inherited salvation, making his present dilemma evermore precarious.

Nevertheless, this memory of lynching and castration arouses Jesse and "his nature again returned to him."[347] He grabs his wife, stirring her from sleep, and instructs her to "love me just like you'd love a nigger,"[348] knowing all the while that morning is coming, that he'll be thrust right back into a situation of protest. Curiously, however, Jesse imagines himself as a black man, not the big, healthy, virile, and dutiful white man he's fought so hard to invent. What cures his erectile dysfunction and realigns his moral order is not only his sexual assault of black women but also his ownership of black manhood, which further enables him to violate both black and white women. This memory of white male intimacy simultaneously 're-mans' him and provides him with fortitude to continue enforcing the 'law' against black political mobilization—fortitude to ward off real change. Jesse exemplifies the ways in which, as Jacqueline Goldsby argues in her 2006 book *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*, "anti-black mob murders flourished as registers of the nation's ambivalences attending its nascent modernism"[349] In other words, lynching belongs to a milieu of rapid national (and global) modernization: "Americans' preoccupation with establishing new standards for national identity and citizenship; our anxieties about the purchasing power of money and the

[345] Abdur-Rahman, "As Though a Metaphor" 176.
[346] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 248.
[347] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 249.
[348] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 249.
[349] Goldsby, Jacqueline, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 24.

systems through which capital would come to regulate our social exchanges; our disquiet over the emergence of blacks and women as autonomous participants in civic life; our desire to know whether, in the era of secularized, incorporated power and mass culture, our fates would ever be under our full control again."[350] Lynching, then, can be understood as a response to the uncertainties attendant to living in the modern world—a violent strategy to maintain racial control and sovereignty when an already dominating group's prospects are thrown into crisis.

In the narrative, we see this also in the loss of interracial intimacy. Before witnessing the lynching, eight-year-old Jesse thinks of his friend, a black boy of the same age named Otis—how he hasn't seen him lately. When his father says, "I reckon Otis's folks was afraid to let him show himself this morning," Jesse responds with indignation, saying "But Otis didn't do nothing!"[351] And yet, his father merely instructs him to tell his young black friend that "We just want to make sure Otis *don't* do nothing,"[352] as if to say that the lynching would be as much an education for Otis as it would be for Jesse, for, as Goldsby makes clear, "[l]ynching functioned as a tool of domination meant to coerce (and not rough-handedly correct), to deny (and not merely restrict), and to subjugate (not only banish or dispatch) black people, depriving them of the political, economic, social, and cultural opportunities promised by emancipation."[353] To accomplish this requires bad faith, which is why Jesse's concern for Otis and his guiltlessness melts away as the lynching ritual progresses. Jesse's own coming-of-age coincides with his loss of friendship with black peers. It was never a matter of what Otis or any black person had done; it was a matter of who he was and needed to become within a network of white male intimacy and dominance, how the ritual made self-examination impossible—utterly beside the point. Living by bad faith is what sustains Jesse's position in the social order.

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[350] Goldsby 25-26.
[351] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 240.
[352] Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" 240.
[353] Goldsby, Jacqueline, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 18.

In the end, a present situation of political upheaval presses Jesse to remember a past, an unquestioned past, attempting to seize its energy and symbols for a future he wishes would replicate history. The problem is that those efforts are bound to be ineffective. The times had changed. Meeting the present with nonsynchronous desires casts the future in suspense. Jesse knows that the protests will not end, that he's lost the ease and intimacy of his father's generation, that the memory of witnessing a lynching can't possibly guarantee his future. But, as Baldwin puts it in *The Fire Next Time*, "people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity."[354] In "Going to Meet the Man," Baldwin crafts an allegory for white innocence—a life genre of incoherence that permeates moral malaise and menaces all in its territory.

Coda

Sure. I'd say you were loveless. And yet, I know you loved me. But our love story never culminated, say, in anything like consummation—even though everyone thought we were fucking. Remember how we discussed the possibility on several occasions but concluded each time that crossing the Rubicon was in neither of our best interests, that crossing would somehow rupture the chain of intimacy we'd been forging for so long? Well, that didn't stop you from grabbing my ass—that time I bent over to pick up a book, then again that time you copped a feel through the shower curtain. But you know all of this. What you don't know is that, some days, I wish we had just gotten it over with. Maybe then I'd be set loose from the pulse of unending desire—even though I don't want you anymore. How could I? Not after what happened. Not after what I saw.

[354] Baldwin, James, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993) 9.

As a white guy from a rural community, you had a penchant for racist jokes. This isn't to say that all such men have the same predilection (for instance, our mutual friend from the same town didn't share your peculiar tastes), but I'm just trying to make sense of a predicament. Regardless, I couldn't go on with a man like that. So we had a kind of exorcism: I said, "Let them all out, and that'll be the end of it." Then you jabbered one after another. Some were actually quite funny, so I couldn't be too angry, but, for the life of me, I've forgotten them all. Finally, "What do black people and apples have in common?" you asked. "I don't know. Tell me." "They both look good hanging from trees."

To see your face tense with the effort not to laugh…to feel the surge of…not rage…not sadness…but…utter bewilderment…to feel my body react…without logic…to feel within myself the lurch of laughter…because…this is perfectly ridiculous…right? Who is this man? Certainly not the one who says he loves me; who says he's done trying to find a boyfriend because what we have is so much better; who buys me a cheap sex toy because he himself wants to be the one inside me.

I keep forgetting to forgive myself for having you tell all those jokes. But I wasn't ready for that last one. Who could be? Who jokes about lynchings? Especially nowadays. Is it even a joke? To make matters worse, we were mere months away from the murder of Trayvon Martin. Neither of us, of course, could've known that such an event was on the horizon, but I distinctly remember sensing that your impromptu comedy set augured something ominous.

I also keep thinking that if you really loved me, you would've kept that last 'joke' to yourself. Then I wonder if it was because of our intimacy that you felt somehow safe to share something so loveless—that it was festering inside of you, and I was the only person who could dress the wound. But I was ill-equipped and needed help. They told me that people like you often betray the ones they love because they themselves have been betrayed. They also told me that your compulsion toward racist jokes may have been a kind of free-floating component of your mental illness and history of

suicide ideation. But those all rang like excuses. So I left, needing to nurse the wounds you gave me, which you, of course, were in no condition to remedy.

To be fair, I probably should've left sooner. For instance, when you found yourself falling for that cute musician from South America, you said to me, "I never thought I'd be attracted to a brown man." I should've told you off, but in the moment I thought, *If you can learn to like a brown man, then you can learn to love me.* And what about that time you asked if black guys' dicks are the same color as the rest of our bodies. I mean, really? But I was smitten, in ways that confused and disturbed my family and friends. After I ended things, some even called you hideous, which I still think is untrue—granted, I've forgotten the particularities of your face, now bleared like a morning moon in fog. But you're the reason I know love and lovelessness run side by side.

When I say that I'm burdened with unending desire, what exactly do I want? It's more elusive than closure. Besides, we have that. We've had it for years. It's better to say that you've given me an impression of unbounded pleasure, an impression I keep turning and manipulating with alternating swells of hope and desperation. So I keep writing to you, even when it doesn't seem like it, or especially when it doesn't seem like it, because, frankly, you are no longer *you* to me. 'You' stands in for the version of whiteness that refuses—even in the midst of supposedly trying—to shake its genre. As I watched you struggle not to laugh, I sensed history as the distance between us, which is to say that history is also what brought us together. As Baldwin would say, we were trapped in history and history was trapped in us.

I know now that, for some reason, you needed that loveless image of strange fruit and that our love somehow insisted that I bear witness to your need. And though we were onto something, something good, the past wasn't finished with us, so we had to finish what we started. Perhaps it's too late, and Lord knows I want nothing to do with you, but in this writing to you who is no longer *you*, I wonder—just maybe—if we might begin again.

'Ever Wished You Were Queer?'

Erotic Malaise and the Promise of Ruin

Love is a revelation. In his 1972 book *No Name in the Street*, James Baldwin explains how falling in love taught him that when "you love one human being, you see everyone else very differently than you saw them before—perhaps I only mean to say that you begin to *see*."[355] If not expressly religious (though one might harken back to that old hymn about grace so amazing it gives sight to the blind), erotic love, in Baldwin's formulation, is a spiritual experience that incites the senses, particularly sight, obliging lovers to re-envision the inhabitants of their world. This revelation, however, comes at a price. Everything changes—"and it changes forever."[356] Even the self: Baldwin offers a kind of testimony about how love "forced [him] to attempt to deal with [himself]," to reckon with dimensions of his own subjectivity beyond "the trap of color," which is to say that love compels one to "accept one's nakedness."[357] To be genuinely naked together, in every sense of the word, lovers must see that "nakedness has no color,"[358] that the trappings of race and all the rest, though integral to one's composition, are not the real story of who one is. Here, Baldwin articulates a more explicitly erotic reimagining of his now famous assertion in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) that "[l]ove takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."[359] By returning, nearly a decade later, to this motif of exposure, Baldwin doubles down on his commitment to love as a practice of laying oneself bare not only to oneself and the beloved but also to reality itself. Baldwin clarifies that, for him, love is "a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth."[360] Embedded in his undying commitments to critiquing American race relations is an abiding desire to venture beyond the identity and

[355] Baldwin, James, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Vintage, 2007) 23.
[356] Baldwin 23.
[357] Baldwin 23.
[358] Baldwin 23.
[359] Baldwin, James, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993) 95.
[360] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time,* 95.

politics that constitute so much of the surface of personhood, and search, by way of erotic love, for radical transparency—one in which, once achieved, could render us unrecognizable to ourselves and our world.

Baldwin arrives here by way of disappointment—disappointment with God and organized religion. In *The Fire Next Time*, he uses the opening section of "Down at the Cross" to explore and relate his "prolonged religious crisis,"[361] how Christendom, even with its gospel of love, sustained the terrors of imperialism, how it "sanctified and rejoiced in the conquests of the flag, and encouraged, if it did not formulate, the belief that conquest, with the resulting relative well-being of the Western populations, was proof of the favor of God."[362] Baldwin closes this opening section by asserting that "[i]f the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him."[363] For God's unconditional love to manifest in human activity as imperial dominion throws God's love into question, rousing Baldwin's desire for more secular options. He, of course, isn't alone. The rise of secularism in the modern western world coincided with the rise of new kinds of faithful attachments, particularly love. As Simon May argues in *Love: A History*, since the "*decline* in religious faith," beginning in the eighteenth century, human love has been "widely tasked with achieving what once only divine love was thought capable of: to be our ultimate source of meaning and happiness, and of power over suffering and disappointment."[364] May goes as far as to declare human love as "the West's undeclared religion."[365] While I wouldn't argue that Baldwin, specifically, develops secular love into a religion, it's clear that he has faith in modern (un)godly love to undo subjects in ways that allow for greater insight into what's possible now and in the future.

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[361] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 15.
[362] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 46.
[363] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 46.
[364] May, Simon, *Love: A History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2011) 1.
[365] May 1.

In other words, Baldwin offers us a chance to imagine love as a liaison between revelation and ruin: the erotic encounter, the drive toward revelation, is in part constituted by histories deemed injurious and unfinished (histories of race, gender, and every other category that binds to formulations of selfhood), which in turn, in their falling away, threaten to ruin their subjects—no matter how pleasurable such ruination might be—in a future that remains unrevealed. Malaise, then, is inherent to Baldwin's conception of erotic love in that a present situation of loss, a loss from which something new (but undefined) is emerging, forges an affective link between an ongoing past and a troubling future—troubling because confidence in that future has entered a state of crisis. The loss is that of self, of the self one thought they knew in a world that conditioned them to know it; such loss presents the relation between selfhood and the world as an open question. What follows is an attempt to map the territories of this question, thinking erotic malaise alongside queerness (not necessarily or, at least, not exclusively as an identity) for it provides an occasion to consider love's potential—its willful unknowing and becoming otherwise—to reorient and reorder our social (mis)arrangements.

Queer Yearning

I.

Rufus wanted to be queer. Early in *Another Country* (1962), he found himself depleted and destitute after a tempestuous affair with a white southern woman named Leona. While she suffered in a psychiatric hospital, he lurked through Greenwich Village (depressed, paranoid, and guilt-ridden), avoiding his friends and "peddling his ass."[366] Romance gone sour turned this midcentury jazz drummer into a homeless extemporary sex worker. But their romance was sour from the beginning. Out on a friend's balcony during a house party, they had sex on the night they met, but what initially seems

[366] Baldwin, James, *Another Country* (New York: Vintage International, 1993) 42.

like a consensual encounter swiftly becomes a scene of rape, the way Rufus "cursed the milk-white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon between her thighs."[367] He acted "in spite of himself,"[368] out of control, without intention, surrendering to the Reconstruction-era myth of the black male rapist, the monstrous other—yet strangely defiant, for "nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor a lynch mob arriving on wings."[369] His sense of defiance, however, meant nothing since he couldn't have even stopped himself. Then again and again, in the midst of their affair, "without knowing"[370] he would do it, Rufus would hurl "the whimpering, terrified Leona onto the bed, the floor, [pinning] her against a table or a wall…he twisted his fingers in her long pale hair and used her in whatever way he felt would humiliate her most."[371] After committing these assaults, he'd "[flee] from the raped white woman into the bars," certain that "[i]t was not love he felt during these acts of love."[372] Here, sex is presented as one of love's conventions, as an enactment of love's verbal function. But when love (the action) is emptied of love (the feeling), we're left with form without content, a void that opens onto violence—and yet, we are still, ostensibly, in love's domain.

When Rufus asked his friend Vivaldo (a white writer from Brooklyn) how to make women love him, he alluded to sex, wondering if Vivaldo would "just do it like you was told," adhering to traditional forms of fucking. Then, to make his point even clearer, he asked explicitly about oral sex—what then was apparently taboo. After Vivaldo admitted to only ever receiving fellatio from sex workers, "Rufus laughed,"[373] going on to share that Leona's "the greatest lay I ever had. Ain't nothing we don't do."[374] For Rufus, moving beyond the respectable kinds of sex expected between a man and a woman who have committed to one another, placing no limits on erotic pleasure, is indicative of love.

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[367] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 22.
[368] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 22.
[369] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 22.
[370] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 53.
[371] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 53.
[372] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 53.
[373] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 69.
[374] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 70.

He suggests that love is precisely where unbounded pleasure should reside, but the conventions of their culture relegate these experiences to the world of illicit transactions. And yet, even though he and Leona have an expansive sex life, it's contaminated by Rufus' unloving patriarchal violence: the promise of finding love *in* sex, of reaching real love by breaking the conventions of a normal and normalizing love life (which, by this logic, is also mere form without content)—the promise is unfulfilled by the racist heterosexist paradigms Rufus experiences as both controlling and pleasurable. So is Leona really the woman he loves or is she the sex worker he never pays, acting out (entirely for free) his most cruel instincts and fantasies? Regardless, good sex approximates real love but never amounts to it.

II.

So Rufus wanted to be queer, intimating that loving a man would distance him from the perils of heterosexism. But when the opportunity arose with Eric, a white southern actor with whom he had a brief affair (quite some time before meeting Leona), Rufus gave in to patriarchal cruelty, "treating [Eric] as a woman," "telling him how inferior he was to a woman," and "treating him as nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity."[375] While in the throes of guilt surrounding Leona, Rufus recalls Eric, having forgotten "their battles and the unspeakable physical awkwardness."[376] As with his and Leona's sexual encounters, Rufus found himself out of control with Eric, for "[h]e did not know what he was going to say or do," and "the current that had begun flowing he did not know how to stop."[377] While Rufus admitted that he "despised Eric's manhood,"[378] he also "despised him because he came from Alabama,"[379] the way he despised Leona because she came from Georgia. In many ways, Rufus' affair

[375] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 46.
[376] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 46.
[377] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 46.
[378] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 46.
[379] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 45.

with Eric was a rehearsal for the loveless acts of love he performed on Leona, seeing how he "allowed Eric to make love to him in order to despise him more completely."[380] Here, love without content becomes not only violence but also, emphatically, love's antithesis. Armed with such good practice, Rufus "used against [Leona] the very epithets he had used against Eric, and in the very same way, with the same roaring in his head and the same intolerable pressure in his chest."

Simultaneously tantalizing and threatening, perhaps tantalizing because it was threatening, Leona and Eric's southern-ness epitomize, for Rufus, the extent of their whiteness, their white freedom over black suffering. Early in the novel, it's clear that Rufus's paranoia is suffocating. He tells his friend Vivaldo, "How I hate them—all those white sons of bitches out there. They're trying to kill me, you think I don't know?"[381] While his paranoia might be read as pathological, it's not necessarily irrational. As unnerving and hyperbolic as it seems for Rufus to conjure "the white God" and "a lynch mob" during his first time with Leona, it's important to remember that Baldwin wrote *Another Country* prior to the height of the Civil Rights Movement, sutured between the brutal murder of Emmett Till in 1955 and the Supreme Court ruling in 1967 against miscegenation laws (Loving vs. Virginia). Rufus and Leona's affair unfolds during a period when interracial sex, let alone romance, was deemed, at best, inappropriate and, at worst, illegal—particularly throughout much of the South. Moreover, with Eric, the danger was compounded: their affair was not only maligned by the vitriol against interracial romance but also criminalized throughout a country that wouldn't strike down laws against "sodomy" until the year 2003. Rufus' rage against the composite strictures of race, gender, and sexuality—all impeding upon the intimacy he so desperately desired—consolidates onto Leona and Eric's southern-ness as if the South itself consolidates primal scenes and symbols of black unfreedom in America.

[380] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 45.
[381] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 67.

For that, Rufus could not trust their desire, queer or otherwise. Was it desire for him or was it desire for his blackness, for the right to possess and be pleasured by his black body? Rufus suspected the latter, declaring his innocence in battering Leona because "I wouldn't have to beat you if you'd tell the truth," the 'truth' being his image of how "all them funky niggers screwed you in the Georgia bushes."[382] Although Leona never officially substantiated his suspicions, Eric admitted to himself (not to Rufus) that he may have never really loved him, wondering "[w]as it the body of Rufus to which he clung, or the bodies of dark men, seen briefly, somewhere, in a garden or a clearing, long ago, sweat running down their chocolate chests and shoulders, their voices ringing out, the white of their jock straps beautiful against their skin, one with his head tilted back before a dipper—and the water splashing, sparkling, singing down!—one with his arm raised, laying an axe to the base of a tree?"[383] Here the image of black men laboring in the southern heat, tending to gardens and felling trees, recalls the agricultural production we know to have been the cornerstone of American slavery—antebellum exploitation for economic growth gets remastered for postbellum erotic consumption. Eric suspected that "Rufus had looked into his eyes and seen those dark men…and hated him for it."[384] This racial tension inherent to Rufus' sexual relationships with Leona and Eric exemplifies Sharon P. Holland's assertion in *The Erotic Life of Racism* that "racism consistently embeds us in a 'past' that we would rather not remember, where time stretches *back* toward the future, curtailing the revolutionary possibilities of queer transgression."[385] The so-called past in fact not only bleeds into the present, evidenced by the continued ordinariness of racial disparity, but also threatens to become an immutable future. Unlike erotic malaise, in which the future is rendered as an enigma, we might call this erotic fatalism. For Rufus, this was the only kind of love possible with Leona and Eric, a love he could not live with—

[382] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 56.
[383] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 194.
[384] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 194.
[385] Holland, Sharon Patricia, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012) 44.

nor, in the end, live without. Moreover, neither straight nor gay romance could manifest the queerness he so deeply desired.

III.

So what exactly did Rufus mean when, shrouded in regret, he asked Vivaldo, "Have you ever wished you were queer?"[386] Vivaldo's response was "I used to think maybe I was. Hell, I think I even wished I was."[387] But he, too, had slept with men and, just like Rufus, "associated the act with the humiliation and the debasement of one male by another, the inferior male of less importance than the crumpled, cast-off handkerchief."[388] Vivaldo then characterized his failure to be queer as being "stuck."[389] Both he and Rufus were stuck—stuck in heterosexist patterns that wouldn't lead them anywhere better than they'd been. So while 'queer' in this context comes too early to signify queer studies as a field of academic and political theories, practices, and methodologies, it certainly means more than just 'homosexual.' Even when Rufus and Vivaldo have sex with men, their goal is to demean and diminish their partners, to make themselves feel more powerful, more masculine—simultaneously reinforcing the hierarchical logics of both sexism and homophobia. Queer then points to non-hierarchical forms and practices of love—forms that, for Rufus and Vivaldo, seem to be available only to same-sex pairings; this 'queer' is not devoid of patriarchal trappings, but at least it points to a form of love without violence. For these men, patriarchy wounds not only their lovers but also Rufus and Vivaldo themselves, leaving them empty, remorseful, and stuck.

[386] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 51.
[387] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 51.
[388] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 384.
[389] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 51.

This is exemplified by Vivaldo's failure to comfort Rufus in his time of need. Before committing suicide, Rufus stayed over at Vivaldo's place, and as he settled into sleep, Vivaldo "had the weirdest feeling that he wanted me to hold him in my arms. And not for sex, though maybe sex would have happened."[390] In his confession to Eric, Vivaldo goes on to reflect: "I had the feeling that he wanted someone to hold him…and that…it had to be a man."[391] Given Rufus and Vivaldo's admissions to each other about wanting to be queer, Rufus' need to be held by a man had less to do with sex and pleasure and all to do with his desire for non-violent attachment between men, a near fraternal bond that, at least for Rufus and Vivaldo, can't be replicated with women. But Vivaldo doesn't hold him, doesn't give Rufus what he needs, because he "was afraid that he wouldn't understand that it was—only love."[392] Vivaldo suggests that 'only love' is somehow freed of baggage, specifically the drama and battle of sex, with its seemingly inevitable adherence to racial, gender, and sexual violence. And yet, he admits to being open to sex with Rufus, even though up to that point all of his sexual encounters with men had been tyrannical. Vivaldo seems to understand that simply holding Rufus—lying in the possibility of sex—would be different because, in his own words, "I loved Rufus, I loved him, I didn't want him to die."[393] Comforting Rufus through touch would be an extension of that love. Given his past, Vivaldo's fear of being misunderstood by Rufus is also a fear of being misunderstood by his own self—both he and Rufus would have to become something other than they've been in order to register and respect the difference this act of holding could have made. And even if they had opened themselves to becoming otherwise, there's no proof that their holding wouldn't have devolved into loveless touches of patriarchal violence.

[390] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 342.
[391] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 342.
[392] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 342.
[393] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 342.

IV.

Neither Rufus nor Vivaldo live up to Baldwin's theory of love, with its drive toward revelation and metamorphosis through radical transparency. What is worse, perhaps, is that they both embody Audre Lorde's theory of the pornographic, what she characterizes as a "direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling."[394] In her seminal essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," first delivered in 1978 at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Lorde argues that within a patriarchal order, eroticism is reduced to pornography, which "emphasizes sensation"[395] over spiritual and emotional fullness. By this logic, men like Rufus and Vivaldo, with their loveless acts of love and brutal objectification of their sex partners, achieve minor sexual gratifications that, though fleetingly pleasant, can't amount to anything transformative or liberatory. Lorde thus champions the erotic as "an assertion of the lifeforce of women,"[396] an energy that arises from the sexual but encompasses all of life as well as "becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives."[397] The erotic, perhaps most importantly, is also a "creative power,"[398] enabling women to envision and enact new ways of living despite and outside of patriarchal violence.

And yet, even as Lorde addresses women, encouraging them to exercise the potential of the erotic as something expressly feminine, she intimates that men also have access to the erotic, claiming that the "male world," with its exploitation, regulation, and suppression of eroticism in women, "fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves."[399] It's not that the

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[394] Lorde, Audre, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007) 54.
[395] Lorde 54.
[396] Lorde 55.
[397] Lorde 57.
[398] Lorde 55.
[399] Lorde 53-54.

erotic, for Lorde, belongs exclusively to women; it belongs to everyone; it's just that men have sought to manage and diminish the erotic within women as a means of diminishing the erotic within themselves, creating a crisis for everyone through strict adherence to the status quo. So when Lorde refers to the erotic as a "resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane," one might suppose that there is a consonant male dimension, designating the erotic as a more general intersubjective affective ecology, a kind of reservoir of "our unexpressed and unrecognized feeling."[400] Thus, I agree with Lyndon K. Gill's assertion that "[w]hile it may be the case that Lorde conceived of the erotic as the exclusive domain of women, I contend instead that we must read Lorde for the audience gathered and not presume that she would reject the proposition that eros as a principle be allowed to retain the widest possible applicability—without losing its necessary attention to the ground of lived experience (of women, men, trans people, heterosexuals, queers, and people of color, etc.)."[401] So rather than the erotic (in alliance with shared pleasure and joy) being universal and universalizing, it registers difference while also, according to Lorde, providing "the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between [people], and lessens the threat of their difference."[402] Although Baldwin's conception of erotic love as the pursuit of radical transparency seems to take this a step further, both he and Lorde share a faith in the erotic's potential to diminish the barriers and power dynamics (e.g. patriarchy, racism, etc.) that overdetermine social relations and, thus, prevent subjects from genuinely perceiving themselves and each other.

In addition to patriarchy and racism, the erotic is also suppressed by capitalism. For Lorde, "[t]he principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms

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[400] Lorde 53.

[401] Gill, Lyndon K., "In the Realm of Our Lorde: Eros and the Poet Philosopher," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, Feminist Studies, Inc., 2014, pp. 185, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.40.1.169.

[402] Lorde 56.

of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need—the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment."[403] Capitalism, patriarchy, and racism all diminish the erotic in order to maintain the status quo, to short-circuit feelings and imaginings of a better world. Put differently, without eroticism, populations are forced into closer proximity to bare life; people are sustained enough to survive for labor, to produce profits from which they'll likely never benefit, all without enriching the kind of psychical world necessary for both a worthwhile present and liberatory future. Buried beneath such ideological weight, figures like Rufus and Vivaldo, though contemptable, are at least comprehensible. The antidote, then, is the erotic, which is "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings,"[404] revising the very cosmology of being. Rather than re-emplotting the genesis myth of chaos becoming form, Lorde reverses the order: self-knowledge leads to chaos, formlessness, a disarrangement of the subject that isn't understood as catastrophic but essential for the emergence of a more perfect world order—one free of the brutalizing effects of capitalism, patriarchy, and racial inequality. The erotic, with its optimism and future orientation, is a disruption of form, genre, and narrative, departing from normativity of all varieties, for "[r]ecognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama."[405]

Conversely, in their essay "Love, A Queer Feeling," Lauren Berlant posits "love as a conventional and historical mode of attachment to form"[406] as well as genre. More concretely, Berlant looks to the narrativizing power of marriage, namely the way in which practically any "story about love's

[403] Lorde 55.
[404] Lorde 54.
[405] Lorde 59.
[406] Berlant, Lauren, "Love, A Queer Feeling," *Homosexuality & Psychoanalysis*, Ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) 433.

engendering in individual persons ends with marriage or something promising it, and with the presumption of reproductive acts to come, spawning future generations and sequels."[407] While marriage is only one of love's plots, what's crucial is love's attachment to futurity and repetition. But to say that love (or at least the stories we keep retelling about love) is formal and generic isn't to deny its "wild syncretism."[408] Love as an affect possesses an inherent "incoherence," what Berlant describes as "a virtually rhythmic difference between the encounter with affect and the process of achieving clarity in it."[409] For instance:

> the agony of feeling upended by love is one of its pleasures, whether or not it feels so, because it is deemed an incontrovertible *sign* that one is in proximity to love. When our desires feel out of the control of our intentional agency it might feel tragic or freeing, but it is our pleasure to experience the chaos of desire to the degree that chaos is one of its expected qualities… When we get to seesaw between clarities like this, it is our pleasure to feel intelligible. It is also, I am arguing, a pleasure to appear unintelligible insofar as there are conventions of confusion that constitute evidence that we are in love's domain. Nevertheless, without the promise of clarity at root or in the end, the pleasure of not knowing can spill over into a degree of not knowing oneself that can become intolerable. But even that drama can be a pleasure.[410]

Agony and pleasure; tragedy and freedom; chaos and control; confusion and clarity; unintelligibility and intelligibility—love both accommodates and mediates their apparent contradictions. Crucially, this process requires duration and repetition, for "[l]ove approximates a space to which people can return, becoming as different as they can be from themselves without being traumatically shattered; it is a

[407] Berlant 438.
[408] Berlant 448.
[409] Berlant 433.
[410] Berlant 436.

scene of optimism for change, for a transformational environment."[411] Paired with, say, the incoherence of form and genre, "[r]epetition and uniqueness are the antithetical qualities that make up the experience of love."[412] Although repetition (as in the replication of form) seems incongruous with originality ("the thing that appears to make a distinguishing mark"[413]), they are actually co-constitutive of both genre and love: while repetition produces convention as well as intelligibility (and, thus pleasure), uniqueness provides a consonant pleasure in finding surprise within repetition, which "can be said to place the subject in history."[414] Just as mere repetition without some difference doesn't constitute genre or, for that matter, history, love that is merely conventional isn't love at all, let alone pleasurable. Thus, love and genre are simultaneously unique and conventional, personal and impersonal.

The real problem is that our "installation of romantic love as the fundamental attachment of humans has been central to the normalization of heterosexuality and femininity in consumer culture; it has become a way of expressing desires for normal life."[415] Like Lorde, Berlant traces the effects and affects of love's crisis under patriarchy and capitalism. Unlike Lorde (and Baldwin), for whom 'queer' did not yet belong to cultural discourse, Berlant finds that "love is queered not when we discover it to be resistant to or more than all its known forms, but when we see that there is no world that admits how it actually works as a principle of living."[416] This points again to love's incoherence, the difference between encountering affect and finding clarity in it, between the affect we experience and (later) the feeling we can name,[417] between love as the promise we believe in and love that structures our social arrangements to adverse ends. Berlant argues that "[t]o the degree that gay and lesbian thoughts and desires threaten to impair the comfort people have learned to find in the formal inevitability of their

[411] Berlant 448.
[412] Berlant 434.
[413] Berlant 434.
[414] Berlant 434.
[415] Berlant 441.
[416] Berlant 443.
[417] Berlant 435.

intimate leanings, the resistance to what's *queer* about them can be read not just as a symptom of normativity in general, or as a sexual defense, but also as a fear of what will happen when those forms are separated from loving."[418] Queer here suggests the way in which love and its legitimized forms and norms (e.g. marriage and reproduction) are in fact not natural or weren't always inevitable; what is queer is that our societies have instrumentalized love for the maintenance and regulation of populations while branding it as something worthy of reverence. This flattening of love through normalization amounts to "the will to know that there's nothing shocking to know, that there will be no shock and no waste, just the consolations of the already incorporated form of the taken-for-granted."[419] While for Lorde (and, for that matter, Baldwin), genuine erotic love, freed of patriarchal and capitalistic (and racist) constraints, breaks form and genre for a future that is unknowable but undeniably more perfect, Berlant's account of love's generic dimensions is, in many ways, an unfolding of Lorde's conception of eroticism's diminishment. Berlant offers a sobering vision of love if it remains a biopolitical instrument: a future that is utterly knowable, orderly, and generic—the replication of form with only ornamental variation. We might even say, then, that Rufus and Vivaldo typify this vision, trapped in genres they seem unable and, sometimes (even subconsciously), unwilling to revise; their expression of frustration through patriarchal violence merely renders them, unnervingly, generic and wholly unerotic. Put differently, it is by way of love, the generic protocols that get assigned to love, that subjects risk becoming loveless.

Erotic malaise names an affective ecology that accommodates the resonance and divergence across Berlant, Lorde, and Baldwin's theories. Despite the very real risk of generic love flattening its subjects, Berlant contends that love "holds open the possibility that, beyond all cynical knowledge and

[418] Berlant 448.
[419] Berlant 444.

wisdom, reason and optimism might not be opposites—that there might be forms of nonviolent intimacy that will structure reliably what a life is, what fulfillment feels like, and what a text about people's lives will say."[420] Hope in the face of dispiriting evidence provides its own kind of queer proof that the future, however nebulous, can indeed be otherwise. And before queer was *queer*, Lorde's theory of the erotic unified sensation, perception, cognition, emotion, sexuality, and spirituality with the hopes of revolutionizing the political and economic dimensions of our being in the world. The restoration of feeling—prompted by the pursuit and surrender of self-knowledge for the fullness of chaos—makes possible an impassioned queering of our social order.[421] And for Baldwin, radical transparency (chaos indeed, achieved through revelation and consonant ruin) makes lovers "both stronger and more vulnerable, both free and bound. Free, paradoxically, because, now, you have a home—your lover's arms. And bound: to that mystery, precisely, a bondage which liberates you into something of the glory and suffering of the world."[422] As revelatory love renders lovers unrecognizable but, thus (strangely), apprehensible to themselves and each other, it activates the senses to discern reality, a faith in truth beyond myth and mystifying discourse, and once lovers experience this truth, they're free (in themselves) from the burdens of fiction but forever bound to the responsibilities of reality—which is itself a kind of freedom.[423]

My theory of erotic malaise involves the suspension of love between revelation and ruin (à la Baldwin), self-knowledge and chaos (Lorde), as well as optimism and reason (Berlant). Malaise attends erotic relation for while eros is an attachment and return to form and genre—to a past that is ordered in such a way that becomes both legible and usable—it simultaneously casts one towards what feels

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[420] Berlant 439-440.

[421] We might think of Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" as a precursor to José Esteban Muñoz's theory of queer futurity in *Cruising Utopia*, namely that "[q]ueerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" and that directs us to "dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (1).

[422] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 23.

[423] See Sean Kim Butorac's article "Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love" for a more in-depth discussion of love and democracy.

like (and could be) a breakdown of genres, however transient, and the loss of self within genre is experienced, all at once, as terrifying, pleasurable, and promising. The risk is that return and repetition will entrench one more deeply in genre and normalcy. The greater risk is that the circuit of return and repetition will queer form and genre until there's nothing for subjects to return to.

V.

In the wake of Rufus' death, Vivaldo gets another chance at queerness and the revelatory dimension of love. But not, of course, without complications. After getting into a relationship with Ida (Rufus' sister), Vivaldo cheats on Ida with Eric (Rufus' ex), who, in turn, cheats on his partner Yves with Vivaldo: In the shadows of early afternoon, having spent the morning hours 'making love' for the first and last time, Eric and Vivaldo rested in each other's arms as "the rain came down outside like a blessing."[424] With a smile, Eric said, "What a funny day this is. It begins with revelations,"[425] for their erotic encounter not only revealed to Vivaldo that he would always love Eric but also revealed to Eric that his love for Vivaldo must have begun long before their consummation. Eric then suddenly realized that Vivaldo must have indeed known of his love (Eric's love for Vivaldo) for quite a long time, despite Vivaldo's admittance that "I didn't *know* I knew it"[426] and Eric's own acknowledgement that "I didn't know it, either."[427] In these post-coital moments, Eric somehow has access to Vivaldo's unconscious knowledge. Nevertheless, it takes Eric's realization and articulation of what Vivaldo must have known in order for Vivaldo to both reach and transcend conscious knowledge, eventually declaring that "They're opening up…all those books in heaven."[428] The temporal entanglement of Eric's

[424] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 386.
[425] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 388.
[426] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 388.
[427] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 388.
[428] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 388.

perception of the past and Vivaldo's discernment of the future—within this isolated erotic encounter—propels them toward divine understanding.

This scene of revelation collapses the distance between past and future, bringing them into such tight proximity that their distinctions seem no longer the point. If Eric has always loved Vivaldo and Vivaldo will always love Eric, and if they have always already possessed this knowledge, regardless of being conscious of it, then their scene of revelation has happened, is happening, and will happen ad infinitum. Moreover, unlike Vivaldo's previous sexual experiences with men, all compromised by the intent to dominate, his tryst with Eric was not only egalitarian but also freeing:

> [Vivaldo] felt fantastically protected, liberated, by the knowledge that, no matter where, once that clawing day descended, he felt compelled to go, no matter what happened to him from now until he died, and even, perhaps especially, if they should never lie in each other's arms again, there was a man in the world who loved him. All of his hope, which had grown so pale, flushed into life again. He loved Eric: it was a great revelation. But it was yet more strange and made for an unprecedented steadiness and freedom, that Eric loved him.[429]

Their mutual, non-hierarchical love for one another fosters, in Vivaldo, a sense of security, security that becomes itself a form of freedom. But their love isn't without risk: Eric and Vivaldo risk themselves within their interchange and diffusion of consciousness. The scene of revelation threatens to ruin them—their sense of a distinct and stable self. And yet, the knowledge of being loved, for Vivaldo, rather than making him one with Eric, further solidifies his individuation, making his future (not Eric's) more than possible, more than bearable: the knowledge of being loved, of having always been loved, makes his future reliable.

[429] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 387.

Emboldened by such assurance, Vivaldo "tried to will himself back into his adolescence, grasping Eric's strange body and stroking that strange sex… And they lay together in this antique attitude."[430] Their scene of revelation gives them access not only to each other's consciousness but also to an ancient temperament far beyond their own corporeality—an antiquity that calls forth romanticizations of Greek love, pederasty specifically, in which adolescent boys from prominent families were offered into homoerotic relationships with men as a kind of education for manhood and citizenship.[431] Vivaldo dug so deep that he "seemed to have fallen through a great hole in time, back to his innocence,"[432] to a time when "he felt clear, washed, and empty, waiting to be filled."[433] For Vivaldo, each replication of the scene of revelation is a return to a primal moment of innocence, each return a deeper, more clarifying resignation—the present and future as a cumulative past in which the anticipation of the stability of form tempers the risk of traumatic shattering.

But it's important to remember that while the knowledge of being loved may carry Vivaldo into the future, he and Eric will never have another sexual encounter, let alone a romantic relationship. Being in love with Eric, or any man, isn't an option for Vivaldo. As he puts it, "it's not my battle,"[434] because he's "condemned to women,"[435] or, more precisely, "the necessary war one underwent with women."[436] But rather than identify as heterosexual, Vivaldo simply says, "I'm sensual,"[437] honoring his transformative homoerotic experience—neither denying his love for Eric nor foreclosing the possibility of sleeping with other men in the future. Vivaldo embodies Baldwin's conceptualization of sensuality in *The Fire Next Time*, namely that "[t]o be sensual…is to respect and rejoice in the force of

[430] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 384.
[431] Skinner, Marilyn B., *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 66.
[432] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 386.
[433] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 386.
[434] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 397.
[435] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 385.
[436] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 385.
[437] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 397.

life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does."[438] But regardless of how sensual he might be, Vivaldo simply can't carry this shared love the full distance he expects Eric wishes to travel. Like Rufus, Vivaldo yearns to be queer; like Rufus, he's condemned to love badly, unable (or unwilling) to replicate non-hierarchical love and pleasure with the women he claims to love. But unlike Rufus, Vivaldo doesn't have to pay with his own life.

It's also important to remember that Vivaldo's scene of revelation was supposed to be with Rufus. Laden with shame for failing to hold his friend, Vivaldo dreams that Rufus is out to kill him, emerging out of a "blues he had never heard before…filling the earth with a sound so dreadful that he could not bear it."[439] For Baldwin, the blues is the expression of the knowledge that "[t]here is no way not to suffer" while also remaining—joyously—attached to life.[440] Ironically, Rufus embodies the blues in Vivaldo's dream, but ultimately doesn't get to experience the blues' sustaining power, overtaken by paranoia and depression. Instead, this blues belongs to Vivaldo, for just when he thinks Rufus will kill him, "Rufus lay down beside him and opened his arms. And the moment he surrendered to this sweet and overwhelming embrace, his dream, like glass, shattered."[441] After waking from his nightmare, Vivaldo "heard the rain at the windows, returned, violently, into his body, became aware of his odor and the odor of Eric, and found that it was Eric to whom he clung, who clung to him."[442] Only in the dream can Vivaldo perform the act of love he was initially too afraid to do with Rufus. But his embrace of Rufus, a quasi-atonement, is actually an embrace of Eric, another white man who claimed to love Rufus, whose death precipitates their union. The closest Rufus gets to both redress and queerness is in his friend's guilt-ridden nightmare. And even then, he's made to serve as a kind of omen for a future he'll never experience—a future, as we have seen, that Vivaldo himself cannot sustain.

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[438] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 43.
[439] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 382.
[440] Baldwin, James, "The Uses of the Blues," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, Ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2011) 73.
[441] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 382-83.
[442] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 382-383.

After Vivaldo confides in Eric about his guilt concerning Rufus, Eric understood "the key to the comradeship of men."[443] For Eric, "[t]hey were like two soldiers, resting from battle, about to go into battle again."[444] It is significant, given the novel's penchant for metaphors of battle and racialized sexual violence (e.g. the way Rufus and Leona's romance unfolds like an extended rape scene with all the trappings of Reconstruction-era mythologies of black depravity) as well as its preoccupation with Leona and Eric's southern-ness, that Vivaldo and Eric are understood as soldiers from the north and south, ostensibly fighting in a civil war, finding respite in each other's arms. But a war against whom? Or what? With most romantic pairings in the novel being characterized as battles—battles between black and white, man and woman—it's telling that the only pairing explicitly characterized as *not* a battle is that between two white men, Vivaldo and Eric, north and south, union and confederate. Seeing as how Vivaldo's sense of freedom is made possible by his guilt, by his inability to love and hold Rufus, the black musician who, in the dream, embodies the blues, the articulation of suffering, the enemy seems to have always been the truth of inequality in America. Queer love in *Another Country* belongs to the beneficiaries of black suffering, and even they can't sustain it. The promise of love replicating without end is made on questionable terms, rendering the future not nearly as reliable as it once seemed. This is the social arrangement of erotic malaise.

Menacing Beauty

I.

Baldwin's *Another Country*, with its portrayal of interracial and bisexual romance within the bohemian culture of 1950s Greenwich Village, is perhaps inconceivable without the queer social and aesthetic world(s) of 1920s Harlem. Moreover, the erotic malaise of *Another Country* echoes that of the

[443] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 344.
[444] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 344.

legendary "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" by Richard Bruce Nugent, first published in the 1926 issue (and only issue) of *FIRE!!*. But while the structure of malaise—a present situation of loss and transition that troubles an affective relation to an ongoing past and amorphous future—remains intact, the response to malaise differs: Baldwin presents subjects whose suffering compels them to reel away from the revelatory ruin of erotic malaise, to retreat into familiar genres without the promise of queer futurity, but Nugent, as we will see, aestheticizes suffering (makes grief something to savor and circulate), thereby queering genre and preserving the future as an open question.

"Smoke, Lilies and Jade" begins with a 19-year-old burgeoning artist named Alex recalling a scene of emotional repression from his adolescence: when his father died, his mother stopped his crying, reminding him that "you have to be a little man now."[445] Unable to express and process his grief, Alex is hurled (unceremoniously) into adulthood—into his father's place. And although his father was a singer ("it had been a lush voice…a promise…"[446]), Alex "*wasn't* like his father…he couldn't sing…he didn't want to sing…"[447] Even at the funeral, Alex "couldn't cry for sorrow although he had loved his father more than…than…"[448] As if that weren't enough, Alex's image of his father is mediated through the artificiality of the restorative arts implemented on his dead body:

> when they had taken his father from the vault three weeks later…he had grown beautiful…his nose had become perfect and clear…his hair had turned jet black and glossy and silky…and his skin was a transparent green…like the sea only not so deep…and where it was drawn over the cheek bones a pale beautiful red appeared…like a blush…why hadn't his father looked like that always…but no…to have sung would have broken the wondrous repose of his lips and maybe that was his beauty…maybe it was wrong to think thoughts like these…but they

[445] Nugent, Richard Bruce, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, Ed. Thomas H. Wirth (Durham: Duke UP, 2002) 75.
[446] Nugent 75.
[447] Nugent 76.
[448] Nugent 76.

were nice and pleasant and comfortable…when one was smoking a cigarette through an ivory holder…inlaid with red jade and green……..[449]

Rather than encounter his 'real' father, Alex is essentially presented with a work of art, which he apparently prefers, years later, during intoxicated musings. This approximation of his father, recast by death and cosmetics, becomes an archetype of beauty, a reservoir from which Alex's desires for other beautiful objects and people flow. For instance, Alex's cigarette holder is red like the rouge on his father's cheeks and green like his decaying skin. But more pertinent to concerns of erotic attachment, both of Alex's lovers, Melva and Adrian, have black hair like his father. Blackness, however, also belongs to a "long black cape,"[450] "black velvet trousers,"[451] "black poppies,"[452] and the "hair black and straight" of a beautiful woman named Fania whom Alex would like to sketch. What is more, the only time night is described as black rather than blue is near the end when Alex is left alone after walking Melva to her house, after she asked about Adrian and his thoughts became muddled, after she blushed from Alex's kiss, and after "the sea *dinned*"[453] for his beloved Melva—the first time in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" when we're met with noise instead of music. At the very end, caught in the blue "drifting vapors of smoke and thoughts,"[454] Alex fantasizes about Adrian's black hair. While the color black belongs to objects of beauty and erotic attachment, it also belongs to confusion and discord, which coincides with the disorientation Alex feels in the wake of his father's death—repression induces a kind of affective seepage that emanates with unpredictable, if not unruly, trajectories. Although one could say I make too much of this distribution of color, it's important to remember that the text announces from the start that Alex "*wanted to do something*…to write or draw…or something,"[455] much

[449] Nugent 76-77.
[450] Nugent 80.
[451] Nugent 80.
[452] Nugent 82.
[453] Nugent 87.
[454] Nugent 87.
[455] Nugent 75.

like Nugent himself who, in addition to being a writer, was also a visual artist, which is to say that "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" is a text that is sensitive to visuality—so by tracing the promiscuousness of hue, one can generate insights into the text's affective and perceptual dimensions.

In addition to color, one might also consider sound, specifically the scene in which Alex first encounters (and renames) Adrian: It was a "beautiful night,"[456] and Alex wandered in the "beauty of the narrow blue"[457] Harlem streets; as he "walked music…the click of his heels kept time with a tune in his mind"[458] and a stranger's rhythm suddenly matched his own; "their echoes mingled"[459] and together they made one song; it's only then that Alex (who wasn't a singer and never wanted to sing) suddenly "felt like singing,"[460] to sing like his father, dead and gone, with a voice that had been a promise. Desire for this synchronizing stranger becomes an homage to his father. In the face of a beautiful man, Alex will sing on his behalf, becoming more like his father and perhaps less like himself. After that, Alex and this stranger had "no need for words"[461] because instead they had music; despite having only just met, "they had always known each other,"[462] through sound, through rhythm, belonging to a music that both precedes and exceeds them; and that's why, repressed but receptive, Beauty is the name Alex gives this familiar stranger. The beauty of his father's embellished corpse mingles with the memory of his soulful voice, becoming the street, the night, the air, the smoke (atmospheric and seductive), then gathering onto Beauty (formerly known as Adrian)—the start of a bewildering love affair.

By this light, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" is shrouded by unresolved and aestheticized grief. Crucially, however, this isn't of the melancholic sort. Rather than "pathological mourning," Alex doesn't

[456] Nugent 78.
[457] Nugent 81.
[458] Nugent 81.
[459] Nugent 81.
[460] Nugent 81.
[461] Nugent 82.
[462] Nugent 82.

linger on his father for long; his account of loss is also an account of repression. Mourning never becomes all consuming. Instead, the beautification of the lost object suffuses Alex's world, offering an abundance of beautiful objects and people for erotic attachment: music, sunsets, nighttime, blue streets, liquor bottles, Fania, Gloria, Monty, Bunny, Catherine…but the finest of them all is Adrian, the embodiment of Beauty itself. It is in this way that beauty functions as a mood, what Charles Altieri characterizes as an all-encompassing affective state that doesn't "attach to specific objects but pervade[s] situations."[463] Altieri goes on to explain that "[m]oods are synthetic and imperialistic, absorbing details rather than conforming to their specific appearances,"[464] which is to say that moods synthesize the objects that inhabit their range while always being in excess of their sum total. Moreover, as evidenced by the synchronization of Alex and Beauty's consciousnesses, "[m]ood offers us a thin but evocative sense of how we might find at the core of subjective states conditions we share completely with other agents, as if the psyche could be said to dwell in its own version of atmospheric landscapes."[465] Given that moods are also closely associated with music, this mood of beauty—constellated by unresolved grief—not only commences but also imbues Alex's emerging soundscape for queer erotic love.

With its investments in love and beauty, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" might be considered an heir of Plato's *Symposium*, one of the most authoritative philosophies of Love—or *erōs*, more precisely, which "refers to particularly intense attachment and desire in general," though often "applied to passionate love and desire, usually sexual"[466]—in the Western tradition. After a series of speeches in praise of Love, mostly of the pederastic variety which celebrates beautiful young men, Plato's *Symposium* reaches its climax with the priestess Diotima's speech to Socrates, a lesson that culminates with the

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[463] Altieri, Charles, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003) 54.
[464] Altieri 54.
[465] Altieri 55.
[466] Nehamas, Alexander, and Paul Woodruff, "Introduction," *Symposium*, By Plato, Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Cambridge: Hackett, 1989) xiii.

theory that Love (*erōs*) leads one to Beauty (*kalôi*). Diotima even admits to Socrates that he may never reach this Beauty, which is "itself by itself with itself"[467] and seen only by not seeing—it exists so far beyond the limits of human imagination that the lover who miraculously reaches it would be "in touch with no images."[468] To achieve this ascent to Beauty, according to Diotima, erotic love must be understood as "something in between,"[469] between ugliness and beauty, bad and good, ignorance and wisdom, mortal and immortal—a spiritual messenger who shuttles between human and divine.[470] Again, like Baldwin, Lorde, and Berlant, we find erotic love figured as an intermediary. This in-betweenness is also where love in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" gathers its affective energies, hovering between grief and desire, repression and expression, sobriety and intoxication, wakefulness and dream. While love in *Symposium* is a state of perpetual transition, always in pursuit of Beauty, the same is true of "Smoke, Lilies and Jade": philia modulates into an expanded eros that revels in all things beautiful. But unlike Plato, who renders Beauty as immaterial and inhuman,[471] Nugent humanizes Beauty, making him someone particular while simultaneously making him a mood to inhabit. Instead of making Beauty divine and inaccessible, Nugent makes Beauty a lover, object, and atmosphere that exhumes desires and emotions previously left unattended.

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[467] Plato, *Symposium*, Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Cambridge: Hackett, 1989) 59.
[468] Plato 60.
[469] Plato 46.
[470] Plato 47.
[471] In his book entitled *Love, A History*, Simon May posits a keen critique of Plato's Ascent to Beauty: "for all its majesty, this vision of love as ultimately directed to the timeless essence of beauty severely undermines the value of love between people. It makes a vice of one of love's greatest virtues: to attend precisely to the time-bound particularity of individuals. It makes people—indeed anything transient—less worthy of our love simply on account of their impermanence. It flattens out their individuality to the point where we could just as well swap our beloved for anyone else, providing they embody at least the same degree of beauty. It makes loved ones valuable only as stepping stones to our greater good as lovers, notably our creativity, our immortality, and our perception of absolute beauty—and otherwise gives us little or no interest in their lives or in deepening our relationship with them. Thus, for the sake of the lover's own flourishing, it ends up drawing the truest love from the personal to the impersonal, from the individual to the general, and from the human to the—literally—inhuman" (51). May seeks a conception of love that moves against and beyond Plato, a love that can "become the privileged means of relating precisely to time and brevity and loss and suffering and imperfection and the particularity of embodied individuals" (54).

Beauty, however, with its affects, atmosphere, and embodiment, is a troubling phenomenon: in the end, muddled and dreaming of Beauty, Alex muses "…one *can* love…"[472] but the text fades away before offering a narrative of what this love can be. It is in this way that Beauty adheres to Alexander Nehamas' assertion that beauty "draws us forward without assurance of success."[473] Put differently, "the measure of beauty lies not just in the past and the present but most of all in its pledge for the future,"[474] even though beauty "reveals neither what it is that it promises nor what will become of me if I obtain it."[475] This promise of imminent revelation is quite literally empty, not to mention the fact that promises are so easily unfulfilled, which may actually be the consummate risk of beauty. Beauty, then, as Anne Cheng puts it, "is neither harmonious nor harmony-sustaining."[476] Instead, "beauty is a vertiginous experience, launched by and launching crises of identification in the eyes of the beholder."[477] Beauty confuses Alex, opening him up to new understandings, for "Beauty could make him believe in Buddha…or imps…"[478] Importantly, he claims that Melva can also make him believe in new things, but attributes that to love.[479] Apart from not explicitly ascribing beauty to Melva, Alex also intimates that although "he knew other people who were beautiful,"[480] he did not love them, which is to say that beauty does not amount to love and, regrettably, love does not amount to beauty. Adrian, however, is special—possessing beauty *and* inciting love. It becomes clear, then, that "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," a text of eroticism (and its inherent malaise), exemplifies the ways in which moods may collide and synchronize: while beauty and love need not attend one another, the two can be co-

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472 Nugent 87.
473 Nehamas, Alexander, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001) 131.
474 Nehamas 72.
475 Nehamas 131.
476 Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Wounded Beauty: An Exploratory Essay on Race, Feminism, and the Aesthetic Question." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2000, pp. 196. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/464426.
477 Cheng 196.
478 Nugent 82.
479 Nugent 82.
480 Nugent 82.

constitutive, as in beauty can incite an erotic response and eros can make one's beloved and their environment seem ever more beautiful—and, thus, bewildering.

II.

For all its decadence and celebration of love, the text's mélange of grief and desire—which in turn binds (male) beauty and erotic love—harmonizes with, if not outright orchestrates, its own queering of both genre and race. With regards to genre, one gleans this immediately from looking at—not even reading—the text on the page: rather than having sentences with varying punctuation and intricate syntax, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" is composed of "short disconnected thoughts,"[481] sensations, and desires all flowing in and out of one another through loose association, drawn together by ellipses. And although "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" is formatted into paragraphs giving the impression of fictional prose, it possesses very little plot, most of which consists of Alex (who bears some resemblance to Nugent himself) ambling along Harlem streets and lazing across his bed—smoking, drifting, dreaming. As Alex fantasizes about beautiful objects and people, he repeats and riffs on a number of phrases, especially "blowing blue smoke through an ivory holder inlaid with red jade and green,"[482] reminiscent of what one might expect in blues poetry rather than, say, a short story. This elliptical "stream-of-perception"[483] renders the piece as an intermediary between prose and verse, narrative and lyric, fiction and poetry—making it hybrid yet utterly singular.

This departure from literary conventions mirrors the way in which the piece's intrepid and uncondemning account of same-sex desire stood in direct opposition to the moral principles of its day. Moreover, such a haze of ellipses parallels the altered states-of-mind (dreaming, drinking, and

[481] Nugent 75.
[482] Nugent 81.
[483] Vogel, Shane, "The Sensuous Harlem Renaissance: Sexuality and Queer Culture," *A Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, Ed. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015) 276.

drugs) that dominate the piece as well as suggests that much of the narrative and much of the protagonist's psycho-emotional interiority is left unsaid, as if beneath the words offered on the page lies an alternate story or condition that is unspeakable, perhaps even unknown and unknowable to Alex himself. This indeterminacy expands and extends to the supposed end, culminating with the phrase "…To Be Continued…"[484] Since there is no recorded sequel to "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," Nugent either planned and failed to compose one (even though he lived for another sixty-one years after the piece was first published) or used "…To Be Continued…" as a device with which to open the story's ending. This latter alternative then functions as an invocation to imagine what comes next by reconsidering all that came before, all that was left unsaid. With no closure in sight, readers join Alex in his pursuit of the unspeakable, hovering in an endless silence thick as blue smoke.

But what exactly can one find in the silences? Although "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" is considered the first recorded fictional account of explicit same-sex desire written by a black American, the piece presents Alex as a somewhat lazy and shiftless teenager whose race and sexual orientation are never made explicit. With regards to sexuality, it would be more precise to say that one cannot characterize Alex as "exclusively" gay since he's simultaneously in love with both a woman and a man, Melva and Beauty, neither of whose races are ever made explicit either. The only racially determinate characters in the piece (mentioned in passing) are historical figures including Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston, all of whom were black (some multiracial, some queer), as well as H. L. Mencken, James Branch Cabell, Oscar Wilde, and Sigmund Freud, all of whom were white or European (some of whom were also queer). But again, none of the fictional characters, especially the three main characters who make up the central love triangle (Alex, Melva, and Beauty), are racially determinate. While one might assume that Alex is black simply because Nugent himself

[484] Nugent 87.

was black—and also of mixed racial heritage—such an assumption may actually be reductive of the aesthetic and sociopolitical implications of racial indeterminacy.

For Alex's two lovers, whiteness as a complexion is an obfuscating physical characteristic. In both cases, whiteness, however saturated with racial undertones, is used as a descriptor of hue, not race necessarily, as in white skin rather than white American. This indeterminate whiteness becomes even more peculiar in that it is evanescent within a fog of many other physical characteristics. In a dream sequence, confused by his desire for Beauty, which threatens to destabilize his desire for Melva, Alex searches on his hands and knees through "a field of blue smoke and black poppies and red calla lilies…"[485]

> and suddenly he saw…two small feet olive-ivory…two well-turned legs curving gracefully from slender ankles…and the contours soothed him…he followed them…past the narrow rounded hips to the tiny waist…the fragile firm breasts…the graceful slender throat…the soft rounded chin…slightly parted lips and straight little nose with its slightly flaring nostrils…the black eyes with lights in them…looking at him…the forehead and straight cut black hair…and it was Melva…[486]

With racially indeterminate features like black eyes, black hair, and "olive-ivory" skin, all of which could suggest nonwhite ancestry, Melva becomes almost hyper-racial, reflecting many races while designating none at all, simultaneously racialized and deracialized. Her whiteness is both a possibility and a constraint, for while it may evoke many races, it also remains a specific and fixed complexion, excluding all variations of color within races. The same is true for Beauty:

[485] Nugent 82.
[486] Nugent 83.

> …two strong white legs…dancer's legs…the contours pleased him…his eyes wandered…on past the muscular hocks to the firm white thighs…the rounded buttocks…then the lithe narrow waist…strong torso and broad deep chest…the heavy shoulders…the graceful muscled neck…squared chin and quizzical lips…Grecian nose with its temperamental nostrils…the brown eyes looking at him…. his hair curly and black and all tousled…and it was Beauty… (82)

Like Melva, Beauty's brown eyes, black hair, "strong white legs," and "firm white thighs" mark him with a strangely indeterminate specificity—a kind of queering of race through the prism of whiteness. However, unlike Melva, Beauty's "Grecian nose" complicates his racial indeterminacy, evoking Western (white) standards of beauty, reminiscent of kouroi—ancient Greek statues of athletic male youths (the same youths glorified in Plato's *Symposium*). That said, this entire dreamscape confounds our apprehension of both Beauty and Melva: we as readers 'see' them primarily as illusions, not as embodied persons Alex encounters during his waking hours. Moreover, with its references to poppies, the dream suggests that Alex's cigarettes might be laced with opium, making his account of events (beyond the dream) that much more unreliable. Nevertheless, for a piece that revels in rich description, an avoidance of racial specificity announces itself as something that matters. For instance, it's worth mentioning here, especially with Alex's attention to Melva and Beauty's white skin, that his dead father's skin had turned green, suggesting a loss of color—the loss or dwindling of a racial signifier after death, which further complicates the haunting absence of race in "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade."

While race remains a mystery, it is through a foreign language that readers come closest to learning Beauty's ethnicity. Upon meeting Alex in the street, Beauty's first words are, "perdone me señor tiene usted fósforo,"[487] which translates to, "Excuse me, sir, do you have a match?" The simple fact, however, that Beauty addresses Alex in Spanish rather than in English (though he is more than

[487] Nugent 81.

capable of speaking English) does not fully disclose Beauty's ethnicity (or nationality). For instance, Beauty could be Spanish, Latin American, multiracial, multiethnic, etc. Also, for Beauty to initially address Alex in Spanish implies that Alex might also be ethnically ambiguous, that he can "pass" for Hispanic or Latin American. If we consider "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" as semi-autobiographical, Alex might be much like Nugent himself who occasionally "passed" for South American, assuming the alias Ricardo Nugenti de Dosceta, to enter spaces in which black people were not allowed.[488] It is also worth noting that Alex understands Beauty, musing that "being addressed in English at all…would have been blasphemy,"[489] thereby complicating any assumption that Alex is black non-Hispanic. Like Melva and Beauty, Alex's racial and ethnic ambiguity operates like a void, like an unsignifying signifier, a proxy that could be occupied by anyone. While this indeterminate openness can seem almost inclusive, it can also be interpreted as colorism and internalized antiblackness.

Nugent explains that during the mid- and late 1920s, "Whites [were] making p-i-l-g-r-i-m-a-g-e-s to black Harlem, *doing* the cabarets…being able to mingle freely in every way, including sexual, with blacks. Blacks suddenly having the freedom to have white sex partners."[490] This sudden diversification of Harlem and increase in potential lovers occurred around the time when Nugent "stopped making myself [sexually] available to blacks," a decision he made as a result of the considerable amount of rejection he endured back home in Washington, D.C.[491] (This antiblackness amongst a portion of the black queer community continues even today, portrayed in the Pride episode of *Dear White People* when Lionel, a black gay nerd, is rejected by a fellow black "literati gay" named Deandre, who tells him, "No shade, but I'm not, like…into other black guys."[492]) Therefore, it takes no real stretch of the

[488] Wirth, Thomas H., Introduction, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, Ed. Thomas H. Wirth (Durham: Duke UP, 2002) 12.
[489] Nugent 81.
[490] Nugent, Richard Bruce, "You See, I Am a Homosexual," *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, Ed. Thomas H. Wirth (Durham: Duke UP, 2002) 268.
[491] Nugent, "You See, I Am a Homosexual," 270.
[492] "Volume 2: Chapter III," *Dear White People*, written by Justin Simeon, directed by Charlie McDowell, *Netflix*, 2018.

imagination to consider the indeterminate whiteness of Melva and Beauty as a manifestation of the reciprocated attraction Nugent received from white and nonblack lovers, particularly "Latins" (i.e. Italians and Latin Americans) with whom he shared a special affinity.[493] Nugent even claimed to have been considered "an exceptional Negro,"[494] excluded from the usual racial prejudice against black people and, despite his skin color, accepted into some white social circles. This kind of "honorary" position and relative freedom from antiblack sentiment could explain why there are no references to Alex's skin color. Moreover, it's no secret that Nugent, who had many male lovers, also married a woman—as did a number of other prominent queer figures of the Harlem Renaissance—which could have something to do with Alex's love for both Melva and Beauty. So, for these young artsy-types, gallivanting with Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and the rest of the "Niggerati,"[495] race and sexuality signify differently, always an open question.

I risk drowning in the mires of the intentional fallacy in order to demonstrate how Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" exemplifies what Shane Vogel calls the "sensuous Harlem Renaissance," an interpretive methodology that emphasizes sensuality over sexuality so as not to "approach same-sex intimacy as evidence of proto-gay/lesbian identity or assume its eventual sedimentation into a hetero/homo binary."[496] Additionally, this turn to sensuality "more broadly (re)imagines the desiring black subject in the New Negro movement and remains faithful to the queer Harlem Renaissance's resistance to fixed and fixing racial-sexual norms."[497] My point, then, has not been to uncover the racial, ethnic, and sexual identities of each character or to psychologize Nugent himself, and certainly not to condemn "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" for its evasiveness, but to trace a number of the unsettled and even unsettling dimensions that animate the piece's investment in racial and sexual nebulousness

[493] Nugent, "You See, I Am a Homosexual," 270.
[494] Nugent, "You See, I Am a Homosexual," 271.
[495] Nugent, "You See, I am a Homosexual," 268.
[496] Vogel 274.
[497] Vogel 274.

as well as to demonstrate the ways in which this corresponds with not only the story's troubling of genre but also Alex's troubled heart—all of which contribute to the text's erotic malaise. Loss and its aestheticization engender an affective ecology in which erotic love is constituted by uneasy disidentifications with race and a breakdown of genre(s). The constellation of grief, love, and beauty becomes the impetus for Alex's confusion, dreaming, and quest, "pushing aside poppy stems and lily stems…a poppy…a black poppy…a lily…a red lily,"[498] desperately searching for answers to unspecified questions—answers that never come. Alex's experience of Beauty, compromised by erotic malaise, is "an experience of topographical navigation during which [he] travels the distances between self and ideal in an effort to situate"[499] himself and his newly queer erotic life within an already nebulous world. But the miracle of this erotic malaise is that it promises access to shared consciousness through the senses. However, while erotic malaise portends futurity, it offers no glimpse of what that future might look like: yes, Alex and Beauty may have always known one another, through the syncopated blues of queered and queering consciousness, but the zenith of their erotic chaos is forever "…To Be Continued…"[500]

Coming Undone

Even before the title slide, Isaac Julien immerses viewers of his 1989 film *Looking for Langston* in an atmosphere of temporal and affective entanglement. Dedicated to the memory of the recently deceased James Baldwin (1924-1987), the film announces itself as a meditation on both Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and the Harlem Renaissance, going on to adapt "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" by the also recently deceased Richard Bruce Nugent (1906-1987) as well as poems by the soon-to-be-deceased Essex Hemphill (1957-1995). In her book *Queer Times, Black Futures*, Kara Keeling asserts that

[498] Nugent, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," 83.
[499] Cheng 208.
[500] Nugent, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," 87.

Julien's meditation "rehearses a subterranean history of a gay identity perceptible from within the dominant history of Black cultural production."[501] This genealogy is one not only of celebration and mourning but also of desire and imagination, seeing as how Langston Hughes, for all his immense contribution to and influence on black arts and letters, remains a queer enigma who, as Keeling puts it, "both frustrates and fulfills a Black diasporic desire for a historical ground of a contemporary Black gay identity."[502] Within this queer artistic lineage—beginning, essentially, with an open question, an open secret—Julien inserts himself, but morbidly so.

Elegantly dressed mourners, touched but not touching, look upon Julien's seemingly dead body, lain in a casket brimming with flowers. His skin is smooth and clear like polished bronze statuary. Over this solemn scene rolls the voice of Toni Morrison, delivering her eulogy at James Baldwin's funeral, quoting his own words to the crowd: "A person does not lightly elect to oppose his society. One would much rather be at home among one's compatriots than be mocked and detested by them. And there is a level on which the mockery of the people, even their hatred, is moving because it is so blind."[503] These words come from *No Name in the Street*, essentially Baldwin's meditation on exhaustion and grief, on the loss of so many—too many—black male friends and leaders: the wrongful imprisonment of a colleague, the suicide of an acquaintance, the estrangement from an old friend due to class divides, and, most painfully, the assassinations of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. In the wake of these disappointments and tragedies, all from the era of the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin stands by his ethos of love, that "to attack and condemn" America's failure to live up to the promise of equality and freedom is to "[speak] out of the most passionate love, hoping to make the kingdom new."[504] Love here is like faith, the evidence of a better world emerging in the

[501] Keeling, Kara, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York UP, 2019) 91.
[502] Keeling 91.
[503] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street,* 194-195.
[504] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 194.

future even in the midst of unseen material confirmation, even in fact when one witnesses, "spinning above the thoughtless American head, the shape of the wrath to come."[505] Rather than, say, take up the torch in a diasporic maneuver, Julien (not even 30 years old at the time) envisions his own death and memorial—a prospect imagined perhaps without much difficulty in 1989, edging towards the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis. While *Looking for Langston* mourns black gay ancestors, it also mourns black gay contemporaries—a "poetics of compounding loss"[506] that culminates in anticipatory bereavement for oneself.

Nevertheless, though Julien doesn't render himself present in the future, actively involved in the pursuit of life and liberation, he does present a queer world that precedes and exceeds his absence. After once again gliding across the faces of his elegant mourners, all black men and women, the camera pans down to reveal a neoclassical dancehall held up by Corinthian columns. Using an historic London locale, Julien attempts to evoke the mood of Harlem nightlife in the 1920s, with its cabaret and speakeasy establishments where, as we learned from Nugent, queer and interracial intimacies found a subterranean home: beneath a tableaux of past, present, and future lamentation, we find three male couples locked in pas de deux formation, cheek to cheek, chest to chest, positioned around a loose bouquet of roses. Another eight or so suited men, mostly black, some white, are either seated at tables topped with fine linens or sitting at the bar or leaning on pillars, gazing at the coupled dancers. Everyone is absolutely still, as if to honor Julien's memorial service happening just upstairs. The only movement is the rise and whorl of cigarette smoke, like the burning of incense atop Julien's casket—signals that, even in the midst of mourning and sorrow, a life of queer love and pleasure is not just possible but will, in time, continue.

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[505] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 195.

[506] Woubshet, Dagmawi, *The Calendar of Loss : Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2015) 3.

It is in this way that *Looking for Langston* exemplifies not only Baldwin's theory of the blues but also Shane Vogel's concept of 'irrealization,' that is, turning to the past, in this case the queer Harlem Renaissance, "as inventive and imaginative material to intervene in current notions of queer politics, performance, and history at the turn of the twenty-first century."[507] Irrealization eschews strictly documentarian and historicist practices in order to render a "history in the subjunctive,"[508] a reimagining of a past that cannot be empirically verified, a reshaping of the future by reorienting the present through a reassessment of the past. Irrealization, then, bears a keen resemblance to José Esteban Muñoz's theorization of "queerness as a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity."[509] In the case of *Looking for Langston*, framed by an insistence on a genealogy inaugurated by an open question, irrealization takes the form of "conjuring the cabaret's criminal intimacies and fugitive socialities that allowed for, and continue to allow for, subjectivities, feelings, and experiences that do not always neatly align with easy sexual or racial identification—the queer remainders of the gay and lesbian Harlem Renaissance."[510] We might consider irrealization (and, by extension, queerness) erotic for its attachment to faith in futurity through sensuous imaginings of the past. What troubles this eroticism, making it erotic malaise, is the fact that grief and disparity constitute it in fundamental ways. More importantly, such an affective and material ecology of grief and disparity colors this felt future with a haze of ambiguity.

In his book *Evidence of Being,* Darius Bost reminds us that black gay men in the 1980s and 90s "were disproportionately affected by the AIDS epidemic and urban violence, causing them to lose loved ones and friends en masse."[511] Burdened by such immense loss, "black gay men returned home

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[507] Vogel, Shane, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 198.
[508] Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, 200.
[509] Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York UP, 2009) 16.
[510] Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret,* 201.
[511] Bost, Darius, *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019) 51.

after being rejected by white gay communities, only to be rejected within black communities as well."[512] Unlike the supposed freedom of sexual choice during the Harlem Renaissance and its immediate aftermath, black gay men near the turn of the 21st century found themselves utterly stigmatized, ostracized, and wracked with grief. What separates *Looking for Langston* from its predecessors *Another Country* and "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," specifically with regards to interracial intimacy, is a commitment to imagining a predominantly black gay sociality in the midst of a crisis that sets the terms for a new formation of identity, another in which subjects belong, some perhaps begrudgingly, because they belong nowhere else. It's as if the AIDS epidemic extinguished the glimmers of some new queer order stoked by the promise of interracial sex. But, as we know too well, sex doesn't amount to love. Prior to the outbreak, "the black gay male [was] maintained within the dominant white gay political vision as a sexualized object, as a source of pleasure and an object of desire whose sexual labor [would] never be enough to grant him full citizenship within the white gay community."[513] One could say, then, that the AIDS epidemic unveiled and reaffirmed a subject position overcast by liberal sexuality—that a new queer order was no closer to realization in the previous generations than in the current one. Either way, the AIDS epidemic presented an occasion to grieve in a present crisis exacerbated by historic inequality and confounded by the reality of an ebbing future.

Bost posits 'loneliness' as an articulation of this marginal though shared position: "Situating black gay men's experiences of trauma and loss as stemming from a lack of state protection, the absence of community and familial advocacy and support, and institutionalized sexual discrimination marks their loneliness as psychic and social, individual and collective."[514] That said, loneliness need not produce pessimism or disengagement, for "loneliness is also a form of bodily desire, a yearning for an attachment to the social and for a future beyond the forces that create someone's alienation

[512] Bost 51.
[513] Bost 62.
[514] Bost 51.

and isolation."[515] Bost helps us understand what it means to be lonely together, which is to say that one is never quite alone. To inhabit loneliness together means to register the violences that constitute such an affective ecology without surrendering to those violences—instead witnessing collective suffering as evidence for the possibility of a better world. This is why Isaac Julien—back then in his 20s, attending funeral after funeral for friends lost to HIV/AIDS—imagined and staged his own memorial alongside a promise of abiding life and love—a promise that doubles as an irrealization of a world seemingly lost to history. Such blues, such erotic malaise, in the words of Darius Bost, "moves us beyond the antirelationality and nihilism embedded in Afro-pessimism and antisocial queer theory and toward an aesthetic and political vision of community and futurity that exceeds the black gay body's undoing."[516]

Loneliness, grief, paranoia, guilt...all circulate in the affective ecology that is erotic malaise; all produce the impressions of an ebbing future or a future not worth having; but they all involve a desire to feel and live otherwise. Loneliness, as we've seen, anticipates its own diminishment—a future, however distant, in which the conditions of loneliness have run their course or, more precisely, in which subjects somehow undo the conditions of their loneliness, even if (especially if) they won't live to see the realization of this labor. Likewise, erotic malaise anticipates a love so queer that subjects revel in their own ruination: rather than resign ourselves to a world unfit for our survival, dwelling in erotic malaise means pursuing practices of love that disarrange our social order and, thus, disarrange ourselves. Such disarrangement is akin to Cathy Cohen's appeal for "a truly radical or transformative politics" that "destabiliz[es] the assumed categories and binaries of sexual identity,"[517] which is to say "a politics that does not search for opportunities to integrate into dominant institutions and normative

[515] Bost 49.
[516] Bost 66.
[517] Cohen, Cathy J., "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, Ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham. Duke UP, 2005) 22.

social relationships but instead pursues a political agenda that seeks to change values, definitions, and laws that make these institutions and relationships oppressive."[518] Although she doesn't name love as an organizing principle, Cohen—like Baldwin—insists "that it is the multiplicity and interconnectedness of our identities that provide the most promising avenue for the destabilization and radical politicization of these same categories."[519]

So while Bost helps us reckon with a future still possible even as black gay men are undone by HIV/AIDS, and Cohen helps us imagine a transformative politics constituted by loosening our attachments to overdetermined and overdetermining categories of identity, Jennifer Nash, in her book *Black Feminism Reimagined,* posits mutual vulnerability as a form of relation that "requires us to embrace the fact that we can be—and often are—'undone' by each other."[520] Though being undone is often associated with violence and injury, "[i]t can take the form of grief and mourning, desire and ecstasy, solidarity and empathy, and mutual regard."[521] To say that love sits at the nexus between revelation and ruin is to acknowledge that radical transparency is a practice of undoing not just oneself but also one another, making our survival a question of mutual vulnerability, which "constitutes a commitment to be intimately bound to the other (or to others), to refuse boundaries between self and other."[522] Such a revelatory task is terrifying, especially when the resulting future can't be predetermined. But more terrifying is the alternative: a future all too knowable, governed by unbounded suffering and eventual annihilation. Love, however, as Baldwin tells us, for all its danger and uncertainty, for all it reveals and makes possible, is "the key…to life itself."[523]

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[518] Cohen 29.
[519] Cohen 45.
[520] Nash, Jennifer C., *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke UP, 2019) 117.
[521] Nash 117.
[522] Nash 116.
[523] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 22.

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0. Preface

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