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Outside Relationality: Autobiographical Deformations and the Literary Lineage of Afro-pessimism in 20th and 21st Century African American Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Yumi Pak

Committee in charge:

Professor Camille F. Forbes, Chair
Professor Patrick Anderson
Professor Dennis R. Childs
Professor Fatima El-Tayeb
Professor Lisa Lowe

2012

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The Dissertation of Yumi Pak is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page………………………………………………………………………… iii

Table of Contents……………………………………………………………………... iv

List of Illustrations……………………………………………………………………. v

Acknowledgements…………………………………………………………………… vi

Vita……………………………………………………………………………………. xii

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………….. xiii

Introduction………………………………………………………………………….... 1

Chapter One – Alternative Modernity, Alternative Blackness: Lynching and the Oracular Swan-song of Jean Toomer's *Cane*………………………………………………………… 30

Chapter Two – "A Being Outside of Relationality": Queering Natal Alienation in Chester Himes' *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*…………………………………………………..… 94

Chapter Three – The Futility/Futurity of Exile: James Baldwin and the "Irrevocable Condition" of *Giovanni's Room*…………………………………………………………. 152

Chapter Four – The Afterlife of Slavery: Singing the Unspeakable Familial/Familiarity in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*………………………………………………………………… 210

Conclusion – Frank B. Wilderson, III and the Cosmic Hobo………………………… 268

Bibliography……………………………………………………………………….……. 277

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1.1: The Slave Ship…………………………………………………………..… 1

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Outside Relationality: Autobiographical Deformations and the Literary Lineage of Afro-pessimism in 20th and 21st Century African American Literature

by

Yumi Pak

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

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Professor Camille F. Forbes, Chair

This dissertation brings together the frameworks of queer theory, performance studies and black feminism and offers a new critical analysis on the presence of an alternative modernity set forth in Jean Toomer's *Cane* and subsequently found in Chester Himes' *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and Frank B. Wilderson III's *Incognegro.* This alternative modernity, which pivots on the vicious trauma enacted upon black bodies, communities and psyches, is the literary antecedent of the contemporary field of study known as Afro-pessimism. By

definition, Afro-pessimism posits that blackness as an ontological position resides outside relationality, and that this placement on the outside is necessary for the construction and maintenance of civil society. The project also draws upon Afro-pessimism to further the argument that the distinction between slave and black is an ontological and paradigmatic misnomer, and that the condition of slavery is marked by accumulation and fungibility, and that slavery (and thus blackness) is defined through natal alienation, general dishonor and the openness to gratuitous violence. The violence enacted upon blackness in the afterlife of slavery is done through the rupturing of the flesh, the evacuation of the black psyche, the practice of empathic identification and an acknowledgment that blackness is only made visible through a discourse and narrative afforded a positioning within civil society (such as queerness). The four cultural phenomena tracked in the dissertation – lynching, imprisonment, expatriation/exile and the performance/writing of the blues – are indicative of the social death of blackness. The literary objects of study in the dissertation are utilized to illuminate how in their deformation of the autobiographical form, the authors delineate how the positioning of blackness as such then produces, permeates and enacts itself upon the materiality of traumatized flesh. *Outside Relationality* contends that such a reading of African American literature offers a means of excavating particular strains present extant prior to Afro-pessimism that have been unseen, and of thinking through the persistence of structural suffering and the denial of entry into civil society which persists in maintaining its discourse of rights and inclusion (as opposed to a discourse of slavery).

Introduction

"We couldn't resolve the contradictions of our existence… And we couldn't resolve yesterday's pain" – George C. Wolfe

Figure 1.1 The Slave Ship

Baltimore's Great Blacks in Wax Museum is located on the corner of North Broadway and East North Avenue, adjacent to several abandoned, dilapidated buildings. The aim of the museum, as per its website, includes "stimulat[ing] an interest in African American history by revealing the little-known, often-neglected facts of history." When my colleague suggested it as both a worthwhile tourist attraction during my visit to Maryland, as well as potentially connected to my research interests, I was tickled by the

name, and expecting a less celebrity-focused version of Madame Tussauds' Wax Museum in Hollywood, agreed to go. In some ways, the visit was a humorous one, as I found a few of the curators' choices bewildering: why, for example, is James Baldwin placed with writers of the Harlem Renaissance? Why is John Brown portrayed as a black man? What I wish to briefly touch upon here, however, is the exhibit that one sees immediately on the left upon stepping through the doors into the main hall – "The Slave Ship." Visitors are invited to "enter slave ship here;" once within its bowels, they are surrounded by groans and cries of pain intermingled with the simulated creaking of a ship on water. Wax figurines hold various poses of suffering, and the dim light illuminates their faces frozen in agonized expressions. In the hallway which leads out of the ship, the audio track changes to a multilayered hissing of a single word: "remember."

The majority of the exhibits in the museum do not charge us with this task of remembering. Tellingly, the only other one that does so is the exhibit on lynching, which includes the problematic command, "[i]dentify with the victims and martyrs, and never forget them. But do not get bitter or despondent over what they endured." No other exhibit in the museum makes witnessing, remembering and identifying such a palpable and false experience, caught within the dichotomy of sight and sound, and no other exhibit joins remembering and identifying in such a fashion. I can only speculate on why this particular exhibit asks us to empathize, to give ourselves over to affect as a means of

understanding, of putting ourselves in the metaphorical shoes (and shackles) of the slave.[1] What "The Slave Ship" zeroes in on with frightening accuracy is what Saidiya V. Hartman calls "the fungibility of the commodity" in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. She argues that this fungibility "makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values" (*Scenes of Subjection* 21). In other words, this invocation to experience the Middle Passage, to surround ourselves with wax proxies of an unbearable grammatical and ontological suffering that structures the United States entire, delineates exactly the condition of blackness as being open to what Orlando Patterson calls gratuitous violence.[2] The slave ship in the Great Blacks in Wax Museum stands in for the slave's body, and we are asked, in our empathy, to project our own "feelings, ideas, desires, and values" into this space.[3]

Outside Relationality: Autobiographical Deformations and the Literary Lineage of Afro-pessimism in 20th and 21st Century African American Literature is a critical intervention into the ongoing conversation taking place between scholars who focus on this nexus of empathic identification and structural violence and suffering in African

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[1] The lynching exhibit also includes the admonition to "[g]et angry over the oppression that Black people and other oppressed people are still suffering today; and put yourself in a position to resist now as your ancestors did back in the day when lynching was a national past time as popular as baseball games and circuses." Although the call is for "your ancestors," indicating a call for black-identified individuals, it still advocates for a structure of feeling that can be *shared*, that can be felt and experienced as a means of understanding.

[2] I will elaborate upon the term "grammatical suffering," which I borrow from Hortense Spillers, in the next section of the introduction.

[3] I am aware that this invocation may resonate quite differently with black-identified individuals, and the experiential impossibility for me to empathize, either with the figures in the exhibit or with these visitors, testifies to the positioning of blackness as outside relationality.

American cultural studies, including Hartman, David Marriott, Jared Sexton, Hortense Spillers, and Frank B. Wilderson, III. The nomenclature of Afro-pessimism, which encompasses the work done by these scholars, is attributed to Hartman, and her conceptualization of enslavement as a condition defined through accumulation and fungibility.[4] She confirms, "while the beaten and mutilated body presumably establishes the brute materiality of existence, the materiality of suffering regularly eludes (re)cognition by virtue of the body's being replaced by other signs of value, as well as other bodies" (21). What Afro-pessimists propose is to look beyond the affective, experiential and bodily suffering of the slave, and focus instead on an ontology of social death as the defining factor of, to borrow from Wilderson, the paradigmatic slave (i.e. the black). While this framework is arguably a recent theoretical formulation, I contend that Afro-pessimism finds its literary representations in works by African American authors as early as the 1920s, and that these representations are most markedly present in African American autobiographical novels.

I begin my analysis with Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), a text often cited as a harbinger of the Harlem Renaissance, and then turn to Chester Himes' *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (1952), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975).[5] Although previous research recognizes the writing (and, to some degree, performing) of the self into being in African American autobiographical texts, I

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[4] While Hartman and I both utilize the term "slavery" in our work, this project focuses much more on the *condition* of enslavement (which, as I will argue, is the condition of blackness) as opposed to the institution of slavery.

[5] *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* was originally published as *Cast the First Stone* in 1952; it was republished in 1998 under its correct title. I elaborate upon the publication history of the novel in chapter two of the dissertation.

focus on four historical and contemporary phenomena – lynching, imprisonment, expatriation and the writing/singing of the blues – to illuminate the deformation of this genre enacted by the aforementioned authors.[6] By doing so, I excavate a comparatively unread literary history of blackness that coexists with the more familiar accounts of progressive liberalism and racial uplift. In their refusal to adhere to the structure and content of autobiographies, Toomer, Himes, Baldwin and Jones reveal both the impossibility of black subjectivity and the absolute necessity of antiblackness in the making and maintenance of modern civil society.

Afro-pessimism: a Theoretical Framework of an Alternative Modernity

Because the four authors I examine focus intensively on untangling and retangling the nexus of race, gender, and sexuality in autobiographical narratives, this project originally relied most heavily on the frameworks provided by queer theory and performance studies, as the structural organization and methodology behind both disciplines offered the characteristic of being "'inter' – in between… intergenric [*sic*], interdisciplinary, intercultural – and therefore inherently unstable" ("What is Performance Studies Anyway?" 360). My abstract ideation of the dissertation was one which conceptualized the unloosening of the authors' respective texts from the ways in which they have been read in particular genres. Yet the investigative progression of my

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[6] I borrow the concept of "deformation" from Houston A. Baker, Jr., who writes in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* on the "mastery of the form" and the "deformation of mastery" (*Modernism* 17). By this, Baker, Jr. means the ways in which African American writers utilized skills that were considered more within "white modernism" and then enacted critical reinventions of such forms. "Afro-American discursive modernism," he contends, relies heavily on the image of the mask which is misappropriated by white modernists (17). In the deformation of mastery, African American writers "refuse[s] a master's *nonsense*" (56).

research redirected me to question the despondency I found within Toomer, Himes, Baldwin and Jones' novels, a despondency and sorrow that seemed to reach beyond the individual and collective purportedly represented in these works. What does it mean, they seem to speculate, to suffer beyond the individual, beyond the collective, and into the far reaches of paradigmatic *structure*? What does it mean to exist beyond "social oppression" and veer instead into what Frank B. Wilderson, III calls "structural suffering" (*Red, White & Black* 36)? Briefly, Wilderson utilizes what he calls Frantz Fanon's splitting of "the hair[s] between social oppression and structural suffering"; in other words, Wilderson refutes the possibility of analogizing blackness with any other positionality in the world. Others may be oppressed, indeed, may suffer experientially, but only the black, the paradigmatic slave, suffers structurally. Afro-pessimism, the theoretical means by which I attempt to answer this query, provides the integral term and parameters with which I bind together queer theory, performance studies, and autobiography studies in order to propose a re-examination of these authors and their texts.

The structural suffering of blackness seeps into all elements of American history, culture, and life, and thus I begin my discussion with an analysis of Hortense Spillers' concept of an American grammar in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." To theorize blackness is to begin with the slave ship, in a space that is in actuality no place.[7] In discussing the transportation of human cargo across the Middle

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[7] Spillers, too, makes this argument, writing that on the Atlantic Ocean, "removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet 'American' either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all. Inasmuch as, on any

Passage, Spillers writes that this physical theft of bodies was “a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (Spillers 67). She contends here that in this mass gathering and transportation, what becomes illuminated is not only the complete and total deracination of native from soil, but rather the evisceration of subjectivity from blackness, the evacuation of will and desire from the body; in other words, we see that even before the black body there is flesh, “that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (67). Black flesh, which arrives in the United States to be manipulated and utilized as slave bodies, is “a primary narrative” with its “seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard” (67). These markings – “lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures of the flesh” – are indicative of the sheer scale of the structural violence amassed against blackness, and from this beginning Spillers culls an “American grammar” that grounds itself in the “rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation,” a grammar that is the fabric of blackness in the United States (67, 68). As Wilderson observes, “Africans went into the ships and came out as Blacks” (*Red, White & Black* 38). In other words, in the same moment they are (re)born as blacks, they are doomed to death as slaves.

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given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were culturally ‘unmade’” (Spillers 72).

This rupture, I argue, is evident in the definitions of slavery set forth by Orlando Patterson in his seminal volume, *Slavery and Social Death*: natal alienation, general dishonor and openness to gratuitous violence. The captive body, which is constructed with torn flesh, is laid bare to any and all, and it is critical to note here that Patterson, in line with Afro-pessimists, does not align slavery with *labor*. The slave can – and did – work, but what defines him/her as such is that as a dishonored and violated object, the master's whims for him/her to work, or not work, can be carried out without ramifications. Rather, the slave's powerlessness is heightened to the greatest possible capacity, wherein s/he is marked by social death and the "*permanent, violent domination*" of their selves (Patterson 13). Spillers' "radically different kind of cultural continuation" finds an articulation of the object status of blackness in the United States, one which impugns the separation of "slave" and "black." As Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland inquire, "[h]ow might it *feel* to be… a scandal to ontology, an outrage to every marker of the human? What, in the final analysis, does it mean to suffer?" (Sexton and Copeland 53). Blackness functions as a scandal to ontology because, as Wilderson states, black suffering forms the ethical backbone of civil society. He writes,

> [c]hattel slavery did not simply reterritorialize the ontology of the African. It also created the Human out of cultural disparate identities from Europe to the East… Put another way, through chattel slavery the world gave birth and coherence to both its joys of domesticity *and* to its struggles of political discontent, and with these joys and struggles, the Human was born, but not before it murdered the Black, forging a symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks. (*Red, White & Black* 20 – 21)

Again, the African is made black, and in this murder both ontological and physical, humanity gains its coherence. It is not my intention (nor of other Afro-pessimists) to

argue that violence has only ever been committed against black individuals and zcommunities in the United States, or in the world, but rather that the structural suffering that *defines* blackness, the violence enacted against blackness to maintain its positioning outside of civil society, that demarcates the black as slave, has no horizontal equivalent and, indeed, provides the logical ethos of existence for all othered subjectivities; by this I mean that all other subjects (and I use this word quite intentionally) retain a *body* and not the zero degree of *flesh*. As Sexton writes, "we might say of the colonized: you may lose your motherland, but you will not 'lose your mother' (Hartman 2007)" ("The Curtain of the Sky" 14).

This is precisely why Sexton offers the succinct definition of Afro-pessimism as "a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way" ("The Social Life of Social Death" 23). Furthermore, Afro-pessimists contest the idea that the modern world is one wherein the price of labor determines the price of being *equally* for all people. In this capitalistic reading of the world, we summon blacks back into civil society by utilizing Marxism to assume "a subaltern structured by capital, not by white supremacy" ("Gramsci's Black Marx" 1). While it is undeniable, of course, that black bodies and labor were used to aid in the economic growth of the United States, we return again to the point that what defines enslavement is accumulation and fungibility, alongside natal alienation, general dishonor, and openness to gratuitous violence; the slave, then, is not constituted as part of the class struggle.[8] While it is true "that labor

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[8] Indeed, Wilderson and Sexton, among others, point to how the figure of the slave is actually usurped as a figurehead for the proletariat struggle and how in doing so, the slave's lack and fungibility are illuminated

power is exploited and that the worker is alienated in it," it is also true that "workers labor *on* the commodity, they are not the commodity itself is, their labor power is" (*Red, White & Black* 50). The slave is, then, invisible within this matrix, and, to a more detrimental effect, invisible within the ontology of lived subjects entirely. The slave cannot be defined as *loss* – as can the postcolonial subject, the woman, or the immigrant – but can only be configured as *lack*, as there is no potential for synthesis within a rubric of antagonism. Wilderson sets up the phrase "rubric of antagonism" in opposition to "rubric of conflict" to clarify the positionality of blacks outside relationality. The former is "an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions," whereas the latter is "a rubric of problems that can be posed and conceptually solved" (*Red, White & Black* 5). He continues, "[i]f a Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject… then his or her paradigmatic exile is not simply a function of repressive practices on the part of institutions" (9). Integrating Hegel and Marx, and returning to Spillers, Wilderson argues that within this grammar of suffering, the slave is not a laborer but what he calls "anti-Human, against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity" (11). In contrast to imagining the black other in opposition to whiteness, Wilderson and other Afro-pessimists theorize blackness as being absent in the dialectic, as "anti-Human."

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once more. Wilderson writes, "exploited Humans (in the throes of class conflict with unexploited Humans) seized the image of the Slave as an enabling vehicle that animated the evolving discourses of their own emancipation" (*Red, White & Black 19*).

Outside Relationality: Autobiographical Deformations and the Literary Lineage of Afro-pessimism in 20th and 21st Century African American Literature engages with this modality of the world wherein there is no distinction between black and slave, where "[f]ar from being merely the experience of the African, slavery is now the African's access to (or, more correctly, banishment from) ontology," where the only means of *being* is as a figure marked by and through social death and not the experiences of labor and alienation (*Red, White & Black* 18). To imagine the United States as implicated in this structure where "slavery does not die, as it were, because it is immortal, but rather because it is non-mortal, because it has *never* lived, at least not in the psychic life of power" is to imagine the ongoing phenomenon of the afterlife of slavery ("'The Curtain of the Sky'" 15). Indeed, as Hartman argues, the very articulation of the time of slavery is through "the relation between the past and the present, the horizon of loss, the extant legacy of slavery, the antinomies of redemption (a salvational principle that will help us overcome the injury of slavery and the long history of defeat) and irreparability" ("The Time of Slavery" 757). Blackness operates within this modality of impossibility where time is simultaneously reified and unanchored, indicative of an afterlife of slavery that goes beyond the "horizon of loss."

Critics of Afro-pessimism charge the proponents of this framework with undermining the progress made by and in black cultural studies; some may even claim that reading African American literature in this way reveals a pathological obsession with death that limits the possibility of inclusion into civil society. Yet as I argue, while the theoretical modalities offered by Hartman, Spillers, Wilderson and others may be

indications of a contemporary shift in academia, the literary representations of their articulations of social death and ontological lack, of structural, grammatical suffering and placement outside of relationality, existed long before these theories were put on paper.[9] Toomer, Himes, Baldwin and Jones, as well as other authors, clearly posit their stakes in these ideas as early as the 1920s. For example, in response to the question of whether or not blacks and whites can ever make "some kind of symbolic union," Baldwin answers in the negative and offers the following terse reply, the only solution he sees as being possible to this dilemma: "'[b]low it up'" (qtd in. Bigsby 110). Too, Afro-pessimism offers us a means of conceptualizing the persistence of structural suffering (as oftentimes manifested through systems of oppression) and the foreclosure of access to civil society which still pivots on the discourse of rights and inclusion (as opposed to a discourse of slavery); these are entrenched in the figure of blackness which operates outside the realm of analogy and mired in a structure that has been and continues to be in place. Although Afro-pessimism by definition refutes a regenerative or recuperative process in the condition of blackness, I propose that it does offer us a generative means of seeing a long-established structure that continues to be subsumed under the rhetoric of equal rights, black subjectivity, and, more and more, postracial society.

Furthermore, I do not wish to imply that Afro-pessimism denies the very real presence of black life. Rather, to borrow once more from Sexton,

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[9] The notable theorist, who does in fact articulate these arguments, is, of course, Frantz Fanon, whose integral framework cannot be ignored. I elaborate upon Fanon's psychoanalytic investigation into the impossibility of black subjectivity and ontology in greater detail in the second and third chapters of the dissertation.

> black life is not social in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor – the modern world system. Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space. ("The Social Life of Social Death" 28 – 29)[10]

Black life, then, lives on as death, as outside. While this dissertation does explore the lived, experiential materiality of black life, it does so as a means of articulating black ontology. In other words, while I do not deny the presence of black social life, I argue that it is a presence always constituted through absence, or the constituent element of social death. This is why blackness is, as Sexton claims, underground, in outer space, and not within the boundaries of civil (or social) society. By utilizing the lens provided by Afro-pessimism, I offer a new reading of texts that allocates a space to think through what it means to perform or queer blackness, or to *be* performance or queer, when "not all free persons are white (nor are they equal or equally free), but slaves are paradigmatically black" (18). While the subject of performance studies and queer theory may be alive (and free), they provide a means by which to examine the figures of blackness within the works of Toomer, Himes, Baldwin and Jones, and the ways in which these authors write in this afterlife, and narrate lives that are precluded from civil society – and civil life – altogether. Rather than relying on queer theory or performance studies to propose a recuperative or regenerative reading of blackness, I propose instead that these

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[10] Sexton's phrasing immediately brings to mind Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where the unnamed protagonist narrates from an underground lair, as well as the setting of the basement in the final pages of Jean Toomer's *Cane.* This speaking from underground, from a position of being buried, again, is precisely why I argue that earlier African American authors were deeply invested in the tenets of Afro-pessimism even if the theoretical praxes had not yet been named.

authors and their respective texts and subjects queer and perform concepts of black non-subjectivity, communities, psyches and ontology to make the grammar and structure of suffering legible within more prominent discourses that propose democratic inclusion and citizenship as not only desirable but also possible. Here, I argue that the various configurations of traumatic and traumatized racialized, gendered, and sexualized positionalities of their narrators/protagonists are connected to the tropes of geographical, psychic and temporal dislocation, or the indicators of a persistent social death.

The Genre of Autobiographical Narratives

In *Revised Lives: Walt Whitman and Nineteenth-Century Authorship,* William Pannapacker focuses on the ongoing dialogue which surrounds Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,* to write more generally about African American autobiographies. He writes that since the 1970s, "the efforts of scholars to recover and interpret representative texts by African Americans have contributed significantly to the renewed interest in first-person narratives as documentary evidence rather than as a species of fiction" (Pannapacker 3).[11] While his claim is, in some ways, overly simplistic, as it takes up documentary (or "fact") and fiction as oppositional binaries, we can nonetheless assume that these "representative texts," including slave narratives, combined autobiographical writings and protest literature. As

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[11] I do not claim that autobiography was embraced wholesale by white American literary modernism; indeed, white authors also struggled with the connection between "authorial" self and "fictional" representation as well. The pivotal difference is that for African American cultural studies, these autobiographical narratives often times serve as the only textual mediums for historical recovery. For an example of the difficulties of reading a white modernist author's take on the autobiographical genre, turn to Timothy W. Galow's "Gertrude Stein's 'Everybody's Autobiography' and the Art of Contradictions" (2008).

Valerie Smith discusses in *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative,* the figure of the slave is critical in the way in which freed slaves – including Douglass – attempt to write their subjectivities into being. Smith states, "[w]hether possessed of book learning or not, the dissembling slave was a confidence figure who displayed a profound consciousness of language," and used this consciousness as a means of both plotting escape as well as narrating his/her life once s/he was free (Smith 5).[12] In his discussion of the trope of the talking book, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. also argues that "[w]hat remained consistent was that black people could become 'speaking' subjects only by inscribing their 'voices' in the written word," indicating in much the same way that the slave's writing was not "primarily done to demonstrate humane letters, but to demonstrate her or his own membership in the human community" ("James Gronniosaw" 11, 9). The specific purpose of the slave narrative, it seems, was to illustrate full and exemplary participation in humanity; it was a deeply personal mode of writing that functioned as a "literature of vindication" on behalf of the enslaved and recently freed.

As I contend, African American autobiography offers a discursive means of defining the problematic continuation of state-sanctioned and/or nonjuridical violence carried out on black bodies. From the beginning, the autobiographical form in African American literature was one which was always politicized and communal in the sense that it necessarily assumed a shared political and humanistic cause amongst the authors, their communities and their audience. Stephen Butterfield writes that within

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[12] This is especially true if we consider that the slave narrative was written with the full comprehension of a reading audience most likely comprised of white abolitionists (or whites in general).

autobiography, the "self is conceived as a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members. It is a conscious political identity… the unity of the personal and the mass voice remains a dominant tradition" (Butterfield 3). The presupposition is that the African American autobiography speaks not just for the individual, but also for the group to which the author belongs; this is both a defining characteristic and residual fallout of slave narratives that one can track in African American literature. Furthermore, Kenneth Mostern argues that the category of autobiography "is *not* a 'personal experience,' but rather an articulation based on the determinate memory and recall of the experience via the lens of traumatically constrained ideology, to describe the continuing racialization of politics" (Mostern 10). As I argue, the genre of African American autobiography does not solely consist of stagnant tomes which track moments in individual lives; while Douglass, among others, wrote what Mostern calls narratives of "'personal experience,'" it was inevitable that these personal experiences would be negotiated through political need.

What is striking about Toomer, Himes, Baldwin and Jones' texts is that they are not autobiographies but rather autobiographical novels; while the authors do utilize components of their lives to form the situational backbone of their narratives, they also enact striking changes to their autobiographies. Why, then, to they choose to address their lives – or particular elements in their lives – in such a manner? Smith questions, "[w]hat does it mean for a work of fiction to call itself an autobiography?," which complicates the claim made earlier in her work, or "the paradox that by fictionalizing one's life, one bestows a quality of authenticity on it… the process of authorship… provide[s] the

narrators with a measure of authority unknown to them in either real or fictional life" (Smith 45, 2). In other words, she argues that by being labeled as an autobiography, the text and author claim a kind of authorial and historical "truth" that they would otherwise be denied. In this dissertation, I pose a revised version of the question: what does it mean for a work of autobiography to call itself fiction?

In *Cane*, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry, Giovanni's Room* and *Corregidora*, I read a disavowal to a claim of authenticity and authority to speak "testimony on behalf of" themselves and their communities (Mostern 33). Rather than argue that this is an aesthetic decision on the authors' parts, I assert that this move works to reinforce their self-conceptualization as beings who are forcibly made open to empathy and the accompanying violence, and acknowledgement that speaking "on behalf of" requires a scale of commensurability that is denied them. If we read Mostern's definition of autobiography as "that *process* which articulates the determined subject so as to actively produce a newly positive identity," it appears that to write about one's life is to write one's self into being for consideration as a vessel of subjectivity (Mostern 11). As harbingers and representatives of Afro-pessimism, however, these four texts refute the possibility of subjectivity and Albert E. Stone's statement that the "most significant black autobiographies… are those in which the metaphors of self can be clearly perceived, critically tested, and emotionally accepted as resonant with the reader's own experiences" (Stone 184 – 185). Instead, they open up the jarring irreconcilability between expectant readers and blackness and make visible the structure of civil society that forecloses relationality between blackness and the rest of the world. In doing so, they account for

their own position as, to borrow a turn of phrase from Martin Heidegger, the irreducible ontological abyss.

The Contradictions of Our Existence and Yesterday's Pain

In the first chapter, "Alternative Modernity, Alternative Blackness: Lynching and the Oracular Swan-song of Jean Toomer's *Cane*," I set up the groundwork for defining an alternative modernism and modernity to the one set forth by the more mainstream, white literary modernist movement of the 1910s and 1920s. Despite the near universal praise of *Cane* as the zenith of modernist literature, Toomer's work actually negates the traditional definition of what a modernist literary work is. In brief, the majority of modernist authors were defined by the longing shown in their works for a bucolic past where history was a pastoral ideal that was destroyed by the encroachment of modernity via industrialization and alienation. From here they divided into two camps: one which feared the future and the onset of technology that would push the United States into a position of world power, and another which welcomed the advancement into a more modern era. What sets Toomer apart, despite his embrace of the fragmented narrative form and writing style that were so lauded during the height of his career, is his incredulity at the possibility of a bucolic past in the face of the persistent reality of slavery and antiblackness, as well as the possibility of a hopeful future during an era of mass lynchings. How could African Americans long for a future when its machinations, including trains, automobiles and electric lampposts, were merely items which facilitated the very same lynchings that were still being enacted? The lynched black body and the subsequently fragmented black communities and psyches, are what haunt Toomer as he shifts the subject of *Cane* from

the American South to North and back South again. As Avery Gordon writes in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,* the haunting present in *Cane* is "one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way" (A. Gordon 8). Both the myths of modernity and progress in the United States, which is, in fact, a history of violence, and the Great Migration as a narrative of traveling from terror to freedom, are revealed through the material corporeality and psychic space in Toomer's novel.

When Toomer writes *Cane*, the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill (1922) has been defeated as opponents decried the bill as giving black men free license to rape white women. In such a liminal space, purportedly caught between slave and subject, to be African American is to fall into one of two supposedly stable and separate major camps led by W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Both groups are concerned with ideologies of racial uplift, or the betterment and eventual inclusion of blackness in the continuum of American nationality and citizenship. In contrast, I argue that Toomer imagines blackness as a conspicuous absence that is brought to light through the hyper (in)visibility of the lynched black body; this aesthetic third space, constituted through negation and lack, is where I begin my work. Blackness does not exist as dialectical to whiteness; as one character mentions in reference to an actual, documented lynching, "a nigger baby aint supposed t live" (Toomer 92). Blackness, as conceptualized by Toomer, is not the position of the Other, but rather a position of *anti*-: it stands outside of civil society to lend its incoherence to the logical coherence of the world. Toomer's refusal of

the past and future as offering hope or salvation grounds itself in the trope of lynching, which manifests itself through the fragmented black body, community and psyche in *Cane.* I start my dissertation with a text steeped in the pessimistic knowledge that the past is not dead, nor is it, as William Faulkner claims, "even past," in order to trace the development of an alternative view of modernism and modernity as displacement in African American autobiographical novels; this historical trajectory that Toomer defines, I argue, is the literary documentation of Afro-pessimism. Whereas Mostern argues that black autobiography is a process by which one can bring about positive identity construction (and, presumably, an insertion into legibility and history), Toomer's text refuses to join the narrative of progress, and in fact illuminates blackness as, to borrow from Ralph Ellison, operating on the "lower frequencies," or, to return to Sexton, "lived underground." *Cane* closes with Toomer's subjects trapped in and speaking from an inescapable cellar, and, to return to Spillers, an inescapable ship hold.

In chapter two, I examine Chester Himes' *Yesterday Will Make You Cry,* an autobiographical novel which was originally published in 1952 as *Cast the First Stone.* Entitled "'A Being Outside of Relationality': Queering Natal Alienation in Chester Himes' *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*," this chapter reads the continuation of slavery into the prison industrial complex; if Toomer utilizes the migration from the American South to the North to focus on the impossibility of blackness as subjectivity, here Himes focuses on the microcosm of the prison and moves the body which should not exist into the juridical sphere, a space of entrapment and immobilization. I examine Himes' refusal to labor on behalf of a shared, or shareable, testimony of experience and argue that he

testifies to the distinct lack of difference between black and slave through analyzing the impossibility of identificatory practices in blackness, as it is always constituted through and preceded by the foreshadowing of absence. If, as previously argued, the African American autobiography finds its roots in the slave narrative, which embody what Avery Gordon calls "the complex articulation of… I testify to my transformation into a Slave while I testify to the existence of my shared humanity with you," Himes' work refutes and refuses to do this very work (A. Gordon 145). In other words, this chapter elaborates upon Himes' definition of blackness *as* absence. Although the novel pivots around a white protagonist, it seems reductive to read this, as some have done, as Himes' attempt at "eliminat[ing] the entire subject of racism… the most radical change imaginable, a basic alteration in the nature of the reality portrayed" (Milliken 160). Rather, I read this evacuation of blackness as an incisive precursor to David Marriott's work in *On Black Men* and *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*, namely, his intervention that the black psyche is always already occupied by whiteness. In brief, Marriott utilizes readings of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* to articulate the impossibility of respite from antiblackness; in other words, the emptying of blackness in the black psyche allows me to posit that Jimmy Monroe's white(ned) figure can be read as a symbolic representation of the ultimate black man (i.e., white).

Furthermore, this chapter examines the inability of queer kinship to breach the destruction caused by natal alienation; while same-sex desire and longing are articulated in the novel, I argue that the real desire and longing is for familial bonds, and not sexual pleasure. It is not my intention to define "queer" only in reference to same-sex acts or

object choice (although *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* does focus on the materiality of queer bodies in the space of the prison), but rather to extend upon the argument made by queer studies scholars who have come before me. To be precise, I turn to David Halperin's claim that "by preserving 'sexuality' as a stable category of historical analysis not only have they not denaturalized it but, on the contrary, they have newly idealized it" and that "[w]e must acknowledge that 'sexuality' is a cultural production… and we must struggle to discern in what we currently regard as our most precious, unique, original, and spontaneous impulses the traces of a previously researched and socially encoded ideological script" (Halperin 39 – 40). As a discipline, queer studies is founded on the idea of resisting definition and stability; in its best articulation, it also maintains a political/politicized urgency regarding the nature of otherness without falling prey to the trap of an either/or model of biological essentialism or social construction. Thus, I utilize queerness-as-*function*, rather than queerness-as-*representation*; in other words, I propose that queer functions as a *verb* within the novel to undermine the supposedly rigid boundaries demarcating black and white as oppositional, and to propose a reading of blackness that is not affixed to a black body.[13] If, as Colleen Lamos argues, modernism has come under fire for "idealizing works of art as incarnations of aesthetic value allegedly transcending – but in fact obfuscating – the material conditions of which they are product," and, what's more, "promoting a bourgeois vision of the literary work as a

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[13] This is not an argument that blackness can be experienced by any and all (indeed, such an argument would fall in line with Hartman's analysis of blackness as fungibility). Again, my intention here is to focus on the erasure *of* blackness in *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* as gesturing toward the position of blackness *as* erasure.

sacred icon that rises above the messy chaos of the real world," I argue here that in Himes' work, continuing the project begun by Toomer, decries these allegations; his novel is a direct product of its material condition of entrapment, both in the space of the prison and in the object status of blackness (Lamos 4).

Chapter three utilizes the frameworks provided by Marriott and queer theory but in connection with questions of expatriation, homelessness, diaspora and legibility in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, a novel which has often times been oversimplified as his "queer" novel that does not dwell on race.[14] I contend, however, that much like Himes' *Yesterday Will Make You Cry,* the compelling absence of blackness is in fact indicative of its very entrenchment in the text. Although it is published after Himes' novel, Baldwin's move to Paris predates Himes' – he immigrated in 1948, and Himes first in 1953, and then again in 1955. Baldwin flees because he desires a space to bear witness to the ongoing trauma of racism and homophobia in the United States, and it is this experience of dislocation and violence that I examine in "The Futility/Futurity of Exile: James Baldwin and the "Irrevocable Condition" of *Giovanni's Room*." In the novel, the white American protagonist, David, embarks on an affair with Giovanni, an Italian man, during his stay in Paris, while his fiancée, Hella, is in Spain. I argue that above all, *Giovanni's Room* is a text less concerned with sexuality than with the relationships between race, geographic place and psychic space, and the way in which their shared relationship ultimately configures blackness not as exile, as this would imply

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[14] For example, Marlon B. Ross writes, "Baldwin wanted to prove that once the black man becomes articulate, he does have something to say, and he can say it in whatever color he chooses" (Ross 25).

a belonging to begin with, but as a permanent dislocation pre-scripted through the Middle Passage and predicated upon death as an originating point of departure.

To begin, I challenge the practice of reading the novel as a depoliticized tome on love and humanity because of its purported lack of black characters as overly simplistic. Rather, I turn to Wilderson and argue that Baldwin makes an explicit claim on the psychic wasteland of blackness as only capable of being made legible *through* the position of one who is in conflict with, and not antagonistic to, civil society. In other words, Baldwin forces us to acknowledge that the queer lens *must* be applied to read David's blackness in the text; blackness is only made legible through queerness, and we can only see this "sentient being for whom recognition and incorporation is impossible" by reading an ontology that he is incapable of possessing onto his body (*Red, White & Black* 55). In claiming the novel as Afro-pessimist, I argue that Baldwin points to how the world cannot seem to produce a discourse or, to return to Wilderson, "an ensemble of ontological questions that has as its foundation accumulation and fungibility as a grammar of suffering" (55). Such is the gratuitous violence that is enacted upon the black body; it is both evacuated of its blackness and only made visible and readable through an ontological position that is not its own. As with the second chapter of this dissertation, however, I do not read queerness in the physical enactment or representation of sexual desire; rather, I propose that Baldwin's conceptualization of queerness works to elaborate upon questions of temporality and, in doing so, delineates the absolute distinction between blackness and queerness. In other words, while queerness can still maintain a futurity (even if it is predicated on loss), blackness cannot; thus in Giovanni's room,

"hours and days had no meaning" (*Giovanni's Room* 76). At the same time, however, this chapter engages with Kara Keeling's work on queerness, blackness and temporality to suggest a queer black temporality that does not offer "a way out" of Afro-pessimism, but rather runs alongside it, reifying and complicating slippages out of linear time as indicators of the homelessness – and timelessness – of blackness.

In the fourth chapter, "The Afterlife of Slavery: Singing the Unspeakable Familial/Familiarity in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*," I frame Jones' novel as a collective autobiography of slavery that challenges the contemporary trend in performance studies that states that there is something regenerative and/or recuperative in black performance and blues music. Examining scholars such as Daphne Brooks and Fred Moten, I argue that it is not enough to state that "objects resist"; rather, we must examine the impetus – or the violent force – behind that resistance. In other words, what *makes* them resist? In Ursa's performance of the blues, what becomes evident is Jones' articulation of the social death which permeates the social life of blackness, or the impossibility to sing a black subjectivity that can be incorporated into history.[15] Although the narrative is not one which expounds upon more than the bare bones of Jones' autobiography, I argue that it is still an autobiographical novel by using Joseph Roach's concept of surrogation, or the performance of memory through replacement with revision, the attempt to fill the void left through death and disappearance with performances that gesture toward an absent

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[15] In this chapter, I am particularly interested in Bertolt Brecht's concept of the alienation act, or the means by which one makes performance unfamiliar and uncomfortable to shock the audience and the actor. This is because, as I argue, Ursa sings the familiar, and the very familiarity of her singing – the fact and content of – is what constitutes an unfamiliarity that forecloses the possibility of empathy or identification.

presence, but never perfectly. In *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Roach writes that in "the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric" (*Cities of the Dead* 2). With *Corregidora*, Jones gestures toward the impossibility of a collective that must be defined through a wounding/wounded absence, both in terms of family (the Corregidora women) and history (the history of slavery). What Jones does, too, is to contest the reliance on text, or the archive (the documentation of slavery through papers) and instead prioritize oral history. The unreliability of the written word is discussed by various scholars working in performance studies and elsewhere; in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism,* Madhu Dubey argues that "African-American novelists in the postmodern era thereby convey not only the diminishing credibility of existing models of racial representation but also a keen suspicion toward the very category of print literature" (Dubey 6). In much the same fashion, Ursa's great grandmother focuses on childbirth as the means by which to bear witness, to remember, as opposed to the papers which can be – and have been – burned.

I also elaborate upon the connections between performance, witness and lineage (or "making generations") in *Corregidora*. As Ursa is unable to give birth, she sings the unspeakable history of incest, rape and slavery; her body becomes a site of the repetition of trauma, and her life becomes a means of (re)writing a forgotten, archival history. Through Ursa, Jones challenges the assumptive logic of a shared familial narrative that speaks on behalf of the collective. Indeed, the way in which memory functions in the

novel works in actuality to illuminate the disjointedness that defines the collective of black communities. The history of sexualized violence and ownership of women manifests itself not only through the legacy she bears (Corregidora, the name of her family's slave master, she claims as her name), but through the relationships she has with her two husbands, Mutt and Tadpole. In Jones' novel, there is no recuperation, nor is there an insertion into subjectivity; Ursa and her family live under the shadow of Corregidora, marked as socially dead and open to violence. Furthermore, I explicate how the text itself performs by drawing together the markers of the autobiographical and the performative, in that just as much as Ursa performs within the text, *Corregidora* itself, as a blues novel, enacts its own performance of the traumatized narrative of sexual brutality, the openness to gratuitous violence, that is the genealogy of blackness. Rather than reading the blues as "a forceful condition of Afro-American inscription," I argue that the blues here presents the force *behind* Afro-American inscription, the condition of social death and Spillers' markings of the flesh that continue into and onto the next generation.

The novels examined in this dissertation push the parameters of Afro-pessimism as defined by more contemporary writers. While still adhering to the conditions of accumulation and fungibility and the positionality of blackness as outside of civil and social relationality, *Cane, Yesterday Will Make You Cry*, *Giovanni's Room*, and *Corregidora* are also preoccupied with the phenomena of lynching, imprisonment, expatriation and the blues, and the specific and specialized ways in which they all articulate the structural suffering and impossible empathic identification which define blackness. The novels also delineate the repetitive nature of such empathic practices as

the violence enacted upon blackness; the act of empathy is, in fact, violent in and of itself. In my conclusion, I briefly turn to Frank B. Wilderson, III's memoir, *Incognegro: a Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*, which traces Wilderson's movements to and from South Africa (both during apartheid and afterward) and the United States (from the 1970s through the 1990s). *Incognegro*, which contains the most basic and traditional characteristic of an autobiography – namely, the narrator of the text *is* the author, though represented through a constructed self – still elaborates upon the issue of deformation of the autobiographical genre in that it refuses to speak on a community's behalf. I end with *Incognegro* as it draws together the four prior authors' text and complicates Mostern's claim that "[i]t is because our speech is always received… as being from an identity-position" that "[o]ur identities literally *cannot* be disconnected from our politics" (Mostern 5). What Wilderson's autobiography does is to illuminate the contradiction of attempting to connect an identity predicated on objecthood with the discourse of subjectivity, incorporation and inclusion.

The alternative modernity I trace from Toomer through Wilderson – or, to call it by its other name, the lineage of Afro-pessimism – returns us to the Great Blacks in Wax Museum. In the corner of the lynching exhibit, visitors can peer through glass to a cordoned-off section named the "Blvd. of Broken Dreams." Grinning skeletons are posed as representative of blackness: one brandishes a gun, one holds a syringe poised for injection into her arm, another lies on the ground, presumably dead. Still another wields a weapon and demands money from an innocent bystander. On the wall above the exhibit is the dark silhouette of a man hanging from a tree, and the abject figure of another

crawling on the ground near a gun, a syringe, and a knife. The caption for this picture is also imprinted on t-shirts that are available for sale in the gift shop: “[n]ow we lynch ourselves.” If “The Slave Ship” demands for us to empathize and remember, this particular exhibit equates the grammar and structure of suffering with experience; in other words, it de-historicizes the history of governmentally-sanctioned, racialized violence enacted on black bodies, communities and psyches in the United States. This vicious erasure gestures toward individual responsibility and collective respectability as the ways in which blackness can be included into civil society, made relational, (re)gifted with subjectivity. What I attempt to articulate in the following chapters is the hopelessness of such a desire, and to examine how, to borrow from Fanon, the ontology of blackness is that which has been and continues to be “[s]ealed into that crushing objecthood” (Fanon 109).

Chapter One – Alternative Modernity, Alternative Blackness: Lynching and the Oracular Swan-song of Jean Toomer's *Cane*

"There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" – Walter Benjamin

"Personally, my life has been tortuous and dispersed" – Jean Toomer

In 1921, Jean Toomer moved from Washington D.C. to Sparta, Georgia, to act as the principal at Sparta Agricultural and Industrial School. During this time, Toomer was introduced to "folk-songs and spirituals" in a small, rural valley, which he found "very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful." Yet because of the strong objection to them by African Americans who lived in the actual town of Sparta, Toomer lamented in a letter that "the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out" (Turner 123). The death of the folk-songs and spirituals came at the encroachment of "industry and commerce and machines" and it was this lament that Toomer embodies in *Cane*: "*Cane* was a swan-song. It was a song of an end" (123). Toomer's grief is outlined in the opening epigraph of *Cane*, when he writes, "[o]racular./ Redolent of fermenting syrup,/ Purple of the dusk,/ Deep-rooted cane," for he announces his text as being "oracular," a term which denotes its ability to portend the future, ominous or dismal as it may be. That this *Cane/*cane swallows the purple dusk and gives forth a stench of rotting syrup so often associated with a slavery crop is not incidental; in this case, however, it not only functions as a signal of social death, but also as a rem(a)inder of the then-current terror of mob lynchings in the post-Reconstruction era. The cane is deep-rooted, taking on the purple of the "dusk" that Toomer returns to again and again for the duration of *Cane*, a symbolic demonstration of how the 1920s was not a new dawn, but rather a deepening twilight.

When Boni and Liverwright publish *Cane* in 1923, black thought in the United States is generally divided under the disparate guidance of W.E.B. Du Bois (1868 – 1963) and Booker T. Washington (1856 – 1915). Du Bois, firmly ensconced and thriving in the world of Harlem, advocates the Talented Tenth – the most upwardly mobile and respected male segment of black upper-middle class society – to aid the rest of the community in the project of racial uplift. In addition, he argues that cultural growth in terms of art, music and literature are critical in the establishment of a community and shared cultural identity. [16] While he understands the practical elements of education, he writes in his formative and foundational text, *The Souls of Black Folk,* that "beyond all this, [Negro colleges] must develop men" (*Souls* 75). Du Bois furthers his stance as the founder and editor of *The Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which he creates in an effort to promote both political and artistic representation of African Americans. In contrast, Washington, who rose to prominence as the leader of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, focuses on an effort to create a black workforce that would specialize in manual labor.[17] As opposed to calling for an immediate implementation of civil rights, Washington expounds the

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[16] This brief summary ignores the radical shift that Du Bois undergoes later in his life and writing career in regards to Communism; this is because I am more concerned with Du Bois' political positioning during the 1910s and 1920s, and his imagining of what the future holds for African Americans in direct contrast to Washington's vision.

[17] The fact that Washington moved the location of the Institute from a church to a plantation which he purchased in 1882 is particularly ominous and telling of his ideology. As Houston A. Baker, Jr. writes in *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/ Re-Reading Booker T.,* Washington "did not simply situate his black educational enterprise physically on a *plantation*. He also instituted and argued for an essentially black peasant southern plantation economics, manners, handicrafts, and habits of mind for the black majority – life arrangements or a *habitus* that had been hallmarks of plantation black abjection under southern slavery, and indeed throughout the Americas" (*Turning South Again* 81).

sacrifice of political representation for economic equality, wherein learning a practical trade (i.e., training to work in industrial fields) trumps the call for higher education; this is due to the availability of jobs for African Americans at the turn of the 20th century, especially in light of the widespread practice of debt peonage associated with sharecropping in the American South. Washington stresses that the gradual accumulation of wealth and reputation as steady, hard workers, will someday lead to equality for African Americans. Despite these differences, Du Bois and Washington's ideologies converged on the singular idea of integration; that is to say, while I note that "racial uplift" is adamantly Du Bois' terminology of the phenomenon, the idea of betterment and eventual inclusion of African Americans in the continuum of American nationality and citizenship is one that is, if not sacred, then at least considered possible by both schools of thought, albeit through distinctly different methods.

Here is where the metaphorical "deepening twilight" of *Cane* mimics the literal one in American history; in the official aftermath of the Reconstruction (marked by the 1877 withdrawal of federal troops from the South), the number of mob lynchings skyrocket. W. Fitzhugh Brundage argues that "with each succeeding decade, the proportion of lynchings that occurred in the South rose, increasing from 82 percent of all lynchings in the nation during the 1880s to more than 95 during the 1920s," and also estimates that 3,220 African Americans were lynched between 1880 and 1930, compared to 723 whites (Brundage 8). It is precisely because of this virulent yet normative cultural phenomenon of ritualistic lynching that I read Toomer as offering us an alternative means of imagining the history and trajectory of blackness in the United States; he presents a

historical progression which is, by definition, unable to be assimilated into a racial narrative of eventual integration. If Du Bois offers a space for aesthetics and politics to promote racial empowerment – blackness as equal – and Washington offers a second space for skilled labor as a means of gaining economic empowerment – blackness as separate – then Toomer offers us a third space that has not yet been considered: blackness as entirely outside of relationality and recuperation and the impossibility of the past and/or future that both Du Bois and Washington cling to. Much like Hortense Spillers, Toomer seems to imagine that the grammar necessary to discuss blackness is predicated both upon the violence of rupture and the consequent lack of subjectivity. Toomer's utilization and manipulation of the autobiographical and modernist narrative forms aids in the creation of a text wherein blackness is set forth as being outside of relationality and the discourse maintained by Du Bois and Washington.

Situating *Cane* as Autobiographical Narrative

It is apparent that *Cane* is neither a traditional slave narrative nor an autobiography; while Kabnis, the protagonist from the third section of the text, can be read as a stand-in for Toomer's experiences as a teacher in Georgia, he is neither a slave nor an exact replica of author. Yet it is imperative to read *Cane* as complicating definitions of African American autobiography, especially if we consider Toomer's insistence that "Kabnis is *Me*" in a letter written to Waldo Frank. As opposed to reading this impassioned statement as one where Toomer declares an exact mirroring between himself and his character, I read Kabnis as a figure who is trapped within an impossible history and present, and who therefore cannot lay claim to a collective or individual past

or future. As opposed to arguing that *Cane* fits neatly within the definitions of autobiography, I propose instead that Toomer's creative work functions as an autobiography by grappling with the earlier definitions set forth by Stephen Butterfield and Kenneth Mostern. The most critical difference that Toomer has from their definitions, however, is that *Cane* disavows the possibility of a claim to authenticity and authority over a collective identity, or speaking "testimony on behalf of" (Mostern 33). Specifically, I argue that Toomer recognizes blackness as positionality, and not as relational identity through the concurrent practice of lynching occurring in the 1910s and 1920s, a practice which functions to disavow the proposed resolution of an integration of racial subjectivity; in *Cane,* this possibility – and ergo racial uplift – is revealed to be a fundamental and logical fallacy.

A year prior to the publication of *Cane,* Ezra Pound heralds in a new era of American literary innovation, a modernist writing project befitting a more modern age, where the form of the text mattered just as much, if not more than, the content. The emphasis is on the text's ability to "retain the power of reacting against conformism and conventionalization" and its ability to create something new (Jarab 3). According to Michael North, the harbingers of this age were James Joyce's *Ulysses*, published in 1922, William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All* and Toomer's *Cane*, which are published the following year (*Reading 1922* 1). The epitomic American modernist text was thought to be one that took formalistically innovative risks while expounding on themes of alienation, modernity, movement, and industrialization. At first glance, *Cane* seems to fit into this mold; various critics have called it everything from "an experimental novel" to

"'an elaborate jazz composition'" and, perhaps most importantly, "'a blur of genres'" (Ford 13). The fragmented narrative form of *Cane* on both macro- (three sections comprised of vignettes, poems, short stories, and plays) and micro- (each piece within comprised of fragmented sentences, pauses, and distorted allusions) levels makes it easy to understand why it was classified as modernist. *Cane* is very much a contortionist text which seems to echo the literary movement's stance, where its "mission… is as much a rejection of the old as it is an advocacy of the new" (Jarab 3).

It is critical to examine the preliminary definition of what scholars, both contemporaneous to Toomer, as well as those who are more contemporary, are defining as "the modern" or American literary modernism. While it is generally agreed upon that the form of the text is crucial in literary modernism, it is imperative to think of the content as well. Werner Sollors sets forth four prototypes of modernist writers: first are authors who resent the advancement of modernity (through technology and the large scale urbanization of cities) and express this through traditional verse; second, the authors who appreciate modernity and express this through traditional verse; third are authors who are deeply critical of the encroachment of modernity and express this through modern verse; and lastly, Sollors argues, are authors who welcome modernity and express this through modern verse ("Four Types of Writing" 44). This type of writing is one which functions to "reexamine conventional 'wholeness' – thus breaking it into fragments," both of text and identity (Jarab 5). According to Sollors' model, Toomer is a modernist author in that he fits into the third definition, as a writer who is critical of the advancement of modernity and industrialization, and expresses his disapproval through

the structure and content of *Cane.* Yet what is important to note here is why Toomer is critical of urbanization and the city (specifically in the context of the American North), the two tropes most closely associated with modernity and represented in literary modernism. Numerous modernists, including John Dos Passos, were critical of modernity because they viewed the past as a pastoral scene destroyed by industry and machinery, so much so that American literature was "a rootless product" wherein authors found "themselves floundering without rudder or compass, in a sea of modern life… No ghost hover about our fields, there are no nymphs in our fountains" (Dos Passos 335). Other so-called high modernists, including T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, desired a tradition to cling to, despite expressing it in unconventionally structured written narratives.[18] *Cane* refutes these limited definitions of modernism; the text speaks as a haunted oracle for an author who perceives blackness as being unable to look back at a past with fondness or nostalgia, or to a future with hope, as it is caught in a present that is temporally constituted through both.

If, as Houston A. Baker, Jr. has stated in the past, black modernism starts with Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" Speech, then I contend that Toomer is one who sets forth an alternative black modernity, a literary modernism that provides a grounding point for the Afro-pessimist theory which will follow in the late 20th century; this is accomplished through his portrayal of urban spaces (specifically Chicago and

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[18] Eliot, especially, saw no hypocrisy in the supposed binary of tradition and innovation, as he defined the latter as a kind of creative freedom the writer could engage with in order to create work that would be directly beholden to the authors who came before. His analysis in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" connotes that these authors are specifically white men, to the exclusion of all other individuals.

Washington, D.C.) as reflective of technologies that are contributing both to the metaphorical death of folk culture and the physical dismemberment and death of African Americans (*Modernism* 31).[19] Toomer proposes that in actuality, the symbols of modernity and supposed civilization, including the train, the electric lights, the houses, are for African Americans active symbols of terror.[20] This is not a new idea, as "the depersonalization augured by early-twentieth-century science, technology, and mass culture and targeted by canonical modernism recurs as a theme in the work" of other black authors (Wilks 807). Toomer, however, utilizes the fragmenting of both form and content to mimic the brutal tearing apart of black bodies, communities and psyches; I argue that the violence that imbues *Cane* is configured through the rupture that accompanies the transportation of black flesh into the Americas. As Mark A. Sanders writes, "[i]ndeed, for African-Americans most of the 'chaotic conditions' of modernism stemmed not from epistemological concerns, but from the harrowing dissonance between constitutional guarantees and systematic political oppression;" what had been promised through Emancipation was never delivered (Sanders 137).

Another existing point of discord is that of an undesirable past and an unpromising future, which leads to the African American body, community and psyche being affixed in a frozen temporal moment, a literal and discursive present constituted

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[19] Baker, Jr. has since reconsidered his reading of Washington's speech as "designed for Afro-American empowerment" (*Turning South Again* 21). Instead, Baker, Jr. examines how Washington functioned within his role "of black imperialist to the 'country districts,'" as he primarily emphasized cleanliness and thrift within a reconstitutive structure of racialized power (59). This is a radical shift for Baker, Jr., and in turn reinforces not only the division between Washington and Du Bois, but Washington and Toomer as well. See *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/ Re-Reading Booker T.* for more information.
[20] This becomes especially evident in the second section of *Cane*, where the narrative moves from Georgia to Chicago and Washington, D.C.

through terror and a recognition of their continued openness to accumulation and fungibility, their status as object. Toomer illuminates this temporal entrapment in that although he couches his text within the Great Migration, he concludes *Cane*'s narrative by returning to the South in the third and final section of the text. I argue that indicates not only an inescapable cycle of ontological violence, but also the impossibility of an escape to the North (or the very existence of the North as a haven) for a being that exists outside of geographical location or social relationality. Thus, I read *Cane*'s three distinctive sections as such: the first two bear witness to an alternative modernity that is, in fact, the afterlife of slavery. In other words, Toomer focuses on the black body and fragmented communities in pain and tracks the movement from South to North in order to reveal the irreducibility of difference between slave and black in this logic of modernity. In the third section, Toomer turns to this notion of blackness as being ensnared in an inescapable temporality that can only carry its standing as social death into the future; the black psyche, as embodied in Kabnis, is one which cannot progress. I contend that Toomer utilizes the narrative form afforded him through literary modernism – the practice of fragmented language – in order to problematize the autobiographical form and ultimately begets a literary lineage of Afro-pessimism, or the conceptualization of blackness as being outside of relationality and demarcated as accumulation and fungibility.

<u>Ruptured Grammars, Lynched Bodies, Impossible Freedoms</u>

In the 1926 essay, "Criteria of Negro Art," Du Bois writes that the black artist must use "[t]ruth – not for the sake of truth, not as a scientist seeking truth, but as one

upon whom Truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding" ("Criteria" 757). The work of the black artist is to respond to the call to perform his/her duty as "the highest handmaid of imagination," to inscribe experience onto pages that are then dispersed into an audience. Yet Toomer's "universal understanding" of the past and future, as indicated in *Cane*, diverges from Du Bois and Washington in that he refuses such an understanding. I argue that *Cane*'s fragmented form in fact mirrors the kind of visceral rupture that defines slavery (and subsequently blackness). I briefly turn to Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: a Comparative Study* and his preliminary definition of the term, where slavery "is the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated… persons" and hinges upon the two defining conditions of natal alienation and social death (Patterson 13). Patterson begins his analysis by stating that "perhaps the most distinctive attribute of the slave's powerlessness was that it always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death, usually violent death" (5). It is not until the 1640s that the thirteen colonies begin instituting laws which state that bondage is legal, thereby leading to the creation of chattel slaves, property that can be bought, sold, owned, or killed at a master's whim; their lives become "a conditional commutation" of death (5). Drawing upon Michel Foucault, Patterson, too, argues that for the master, "the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live" becomes "a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (*The History of Sexuality* 138). Patterson argues that this kind of "social death," to

be simultaneously alive but dead, to lack *being*, is a primary characteristic of slavery; as I argue, this is also a primary characteristic of blackness in my analysis of *Cane*.[21]

This commuting of death originally manifests itself through the traumatized and tortured black flesh of slaves. In her discussion of the transportation of biological cargo across the Middle Passage, Spillers writes that this act of physical theft, "with its human sequence written in the blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile" (Spillers 67). These cataclysmic events of deracination are made visible on slaves' flesh, and once the ships reach their destination, "[w]e might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments" (67). I argue that Toomer would answer in the affirmative, that this "phenomenon of marking and branding" as ontologically outside does, in fact, transfer from generation to generation.[22] The torture that marks the flesh accomplishes dual purposes in *Cane*; first, this transfer extends

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[21] While this dissertation does not examine Martin Heidegger's *Daesin* in great detail, this is a point of interest in thinking about the positioning of blackness as the abyss. As Kaja Silverman writes in "All Things Shining," "[t]o be human, he tells us, is to be 'held out' into the 'nothing' – into the void of that nonbeing out of which we have emerged and to which we will return. No external agent performs this action; there is only us and the nothing. Consequently, there is no support onto which we ourselves could grab hold, nothing to protect us from falling into darkness. We typically respond with fear when the nothing looms before us, and spend our lives attempting to avoid it. However, it is only by making the void our own that we can realize our 'most proper possibility' and relate to other beings in a way that permits them to do the same. The darkness of nonbeing brings us to others and ourselves by revealing what animates both: Being itself" (Silverman 324 – 335). What I am interested in pursuing further is what to make of blackness in connection to this concept; although I am aware that Heidegger does not imagine blackness as positioned outside the concept of "Being" (indeed, it is arguable that blackness is left out of consideration for numerous Western theorists except, again, Fanon), what might it mean to be both the abyss and the impossibility of being held out and over that abyss?

[22] I return to this question of what can be transferred, or conferred, through generations of blackness in my fourth chapter on Gayl Jones' *Corregidora.* What I contend is that the only thing that can be passed down is a lineage and status of social death, and, through performance, the figure of the slavemaster and a reinscription of slavery.

through generations as the lingering psychic trauma of blackness that substantiates itself through the physical torture and branding of lynching. Though I agree with Patterson's assessment that the socially dead slave is a "genealogical isolate" who embodies natal alienation, where s/he is "denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendents," I also argue that *Cane* epitomizes the only kind of legacy that can be passed down in the aftermath of slavery (Patterson 5). Second, to return to my discussion of Hortense Spillers in the introduction, American grammar, her artful phrasing of the very foundation of the American English language, is itself constituted as rupture. This American grammar "begins at the 'beginning,' which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation… We write and think, then, about an outcome of aspects of African-American life in the United States under the pressure of those events" (Spillers 68). This "begins at the 'beginning'" identifies the Middle Passage wherein the rupture begins, and *Cane* is a text wherein we see this ruptured grammar utilized in a mimicry of lynched bodies, migrating communities and black psyches that are torn apart.

This ruptured American grammar maintains its critical urgency in Saidiya V. Hartman's work, especially in her discussion of the "encumbered freedperson." Hartman's innovative analysis of the Reconstruction is present in the concept of the "burdened individuality of freedom," wherein she problematizes the very notion of "freedom" as promised in the Thirteenth Amendment issued in 1865. In demarcating the promised transition from object to subject, from slave to citizen, from natal alienation to

supposed national integration, as one fraught with pain and punishment, Hartman examines the relationship between blackness and criminality that rises in the late 19th century and offers a startling juxtaposition to contemporary views of slavery and freedom: "[s]uppose that the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one's suffering but rather of intensifying it?" (*Scenes of Subjection* 5). Here, Hartman questions what it means to be given subjectivity if it only leads to an intensification of fleshly pain; I argue, too, that the intensification is also one on the level of being. She continues, "[o]r what if this acknowledgement was little more than a pretext for punishment, dissimulation of the violence of chattel slavery and the sanction given it by the law and the state, and an instantiation of racial hierarchy?" (5). With this line of questioning, Hartman contradicts the commonly held assumption that recognizing the African American individual as human (as opposed to the black slave as owned) led to an appreciation of his or her subjecthood; rather than a mitigating of "suffering," the supposed move from object to subject actually intensifies it. Specifically, although the individual, experiential suffering that is sanctioned through law may be defunct, the structural, ontological suffering of blackness is exacerbated as it becomes evident that it can never be incorporated into civil society. This recognition of the intensification of pain, and Toomer's articulation of its continued presence in both the American North and South, forms the basis of the alternative modernism that I excavate in *Cane*.

In Hartman's prescient reading of American history, the Thirteenth Amendment is less an event of freedom and more a "point of transition between modes of servitude and

racial subjection," and by this, Hartman means that prior to 1865, African Americans were constituted as property and therefore unable to be punished as citizens (6). What we see occurring in the aftermath of the Civil War is how in the discourse of citizenship (or, even more basically, of humanity) fails in its enfolding of blackness into civil society. Instead "[c]hattel becomes man through the ascension to the hallowed realm of the self-possessed," and "the advent of freedom marked the transition from the pained and minimally sensate existence of the slave to the burdened individuality of the responsible and encumbered freedperson" (123, 116 – 117). Whereas slavery perversely absolved the slave from responsibility (in that the slavemaster was the one ultimately responsible for his property), citizenship brings with it all the responsibilities and conditions of freedom with none of the benefits; in sum, citizenship grants a superficial access into a legal system which is then utilized primarily to mete out punishment, not justice. African Americans are held to a racist system of political and social legality, and instituted into what Hartman calls a "racial hierarchy," which criminalizes virtually every social encounter between blacks and whites. Within this cultural hierarchy, it is not surprising to see an endemic rise in ritualistic lynchings in the United States during the early 20th century.

It is critical to examine the practice of lynching within a larger structure of state-sanctioned (and culturally practiced) violence; here we can see that the aim of mass lynching is not simply death, but the visible spectacle of a traumatic and traumatized death. Borrowing from Michel Foucault's work in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* I propose that the torture inflicted upon African Americans during lynching is

a ritual that fulfills two demands and purposes. First, the spectacle of torture has to be seen as a triumph, as "the fact that the guilty man should moan and cry out under the blows is not a shameful side-effect, it is the very ceremonial of justice being expressed in all its force… Justice pursues the body beyond all possible pain" (*Discipline and Punish* 34). It is not enough that the body suffers pain as punishment; it is necessary that the body suffering this pain be seen as a spectacle of the far-reaching arm of justice beyond death, a spectacle of a being outside relationality. In other words, the only means of being signified into being and legibility is through violent death.[23] Similar to the mentality and justification of lynchers prior to the Civil War, this supposed justice is to replace whatever role the law should have played.[24] Second, torture was to mark the victim, as the intention is to "brand the victim with infamy" (Spillers 67). More critically, "it traces around or, rather, on the very body of the condemned man signs that must not be effaced" (*Discipline and Punish* 34). These inerasable and unforgettable signs function to frighten African American communities into submission, especially in regards to the Fifteenth

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[23] I am interested here in Ken Gonzales-Day's recent exhibit at the University of California, San Diego, *Silent Witness,* where he enlarges lynching photographs and removes the body in pain. In the removing of these bodies, I argue that Gonzales-Day marks spectators as being in line with the spectators and participants of at the actual lynchings themselves. Rather than aligning ourselves with the victims, we are drawn, uncomfortably, into the role of participant. Gonzales-Day's work refuses to repeat the voyeuristic violence of looking upon lynched bodies, and instead utilizes the vacated space within these photographs to articulate an impossible identificatory practice of empathy.

[24] By no means do I propose that only African Americans were lynched; rather, my focus on this particular group is due to Toomer's treatment of lynching in *Cane*, as well as the uncontestable fact that the systemic crime of lynching resulted in the wholesale murder of more African Americans than any other racially-identified group in the United States. It has been recorded by several scholars that Mexicans and Chinese immigrants were lynched in the American West. Moreover, Michael J. Pfeifer writes that lynching during the pre-Reconstruction years "was an aspect of a larger cultural war over the nature of criminal justice waged between rural and working-class supporters of 'rough justice' and middle-class due-process advocates" (Pfeifer 2 – 3). Lynching was seen as a quick means of achieving nonjuridical justice in the face of a seemingly uncaring court system, since for "many rural and working-class people, law only had value as far as it served this understanding of justice" (3). For more information, see Michael J. Pfeifer's *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874 – 1947*.

Amendment, which is intended to guarantee them enfranchisement. Furthermore, this "branding" returns us to the question of what kind of legacy can be left from a history and continuous presence of such structural suffering. In other words, what does black literary modernism and American modernity look like when finding their roots in the barbarism which is the assumptive logic of the nation?

The anti-lynching genre of literature has a long history in the United States, encompassing novels, pamphlets, sociological studies and theoretical frameworks. This genre works against the racist representations of blackness (and more particularly black masculinity) as uncontrollable and animalistic; most commonly these representations have the nation represented as metaphorical, virginal young women threatened by the bestial and beastly figure of the African American male.[25] Much energy was devoted by numerous activists and organizations, including Ida B. Wells and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, to examine the racism behind this assumption, but the inclination, by and large, was to believe this rationale for lynching to be true. Achille Mbembe writes that as "a political strategy, 'the people' is gradually displaced from concrete reality to rhetorical figure" (Mbembe 19).[26] We see this occurring in the dialogue on how to protect citizenship, and ultimately the nation: the "concrete reality" of deracination, chattel slavery, abject terror and object status dissipate under the guise and "rhetorical figure" of the black male. I propose that during and after

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[25] Toni Morrison discusses this need for the oppositional "Africanist presence" in order to uphold a stringent definition of manhood, masculinity and American nationality in literary works in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.*
[26] Mbembe's particular focus here is on the French Revolution as a state of exception, but the analysis is applicable to the rhetorical trope of white female purity and black male sexuality as stand-ins for multiple discussions of citizenship, nationhood, and femininity.

the Reconstruction, lynching African American men occurs as a means of exclusion, of leaving out those "who would be" (or, those who desire to *be* citizens) as opposed to what Trudier Harris labels "ritual killings" which occur earlier in American history. In contrast, these ritual killings are utilized as a means of expulsion, of forcing out those "who once were" (or, those who once *were* citizens). Again, we see the language of a permanent exclusionary practice; while those lynched before the Civil War are seen as having been part of civil society, blackness is always configured as being on the outside.

In *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890 – 1912,* Sandra Gunning argues that lynching focuses on the hypersexualized and hypercriminalized black male body. The birth of the African American male citizen yoke blackness and criminality in the mythic figure of the black male rapist, evident in the defeat of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in 1922, when both Representative Thomas Sisson from Mississippi and House Minority Leader Finish Garrett strongly advise against voting it into law (*Scenes of Subjection* 117; Markovitz xv). The former declares that he "'would rather the whole black race of this world were lynched than for one of the fair daughters of the South to be ravished and torn by one of these black brutes,'" while the latter contests the name of the bill, suggesting that it be labeled what it was: "'[a] Bill to encourage rape'" (qtd. in Markovitz xv). Ostensibly, the concern is for the maintenance of white female purity and safety. However, borrowing from Martha Hodes, Gunning writes that "sexual and political agency became increasingly linked in the figure of the black rapist precisely because of the dependent definition of citizenship on definitions of (white) manhood" (Gunning 7). The supposed fear that Representative Sisson has for the

"fair daughters of the South" is in actuality a fear for the nation and the dismantling of what had been considered a natural definition of citizenship, namely, one which is defined by maintaining blackness as being outside relationality.

While Jacqueline Goldsby's *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* is undoubtedly indebted to the work done by Harris and Gunning, this most recent full-length intervention into the anti-lynching genre is unique in her assertion that lynchings did not solely occur due to a racist (and sexist) understanding of black male/white female relations. Rather, Goldsby states that "lynching's relation to modernity consolidated its repressive force with the long-lasting effects historians and cultural critics usually attribute to the manifestly racist sources and aims of the practice" (Goldsby 5). Goldsby views lynching not as a remnant of an archaic past that lingers as a punitive measure enacted against unmanageable black male sexuality, but as a crucial component in the United States' progression into a modern nation. She uses the phrase "cultural logic" to remove lynching from its supposed irrationality (a frenzied mob mentality) and locale (the South) and to move it to the forefront of American modernity, as "its violence 'fit' within broader, national cultural developments" that occur in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (6). This, too, is why she calls lynching a "spectacular secret"; it is both spectacular in the sense that it is always staged as a spectacle, making visible the tortured flesh of African Americans, and secretive, in that its critical relation to modernity kept silent. By this, I mean that lynchings are often facilitated by the very machineries of modernity, such as the railroad system and the printing press, that speak to the promise of an industrialized future. Goldsby further contends that lynching is

not a practice left from history, but rather one that is fundamentally, and by definition, modern. She writes that lynching both coincided with and revealed American anxieties about its move toward industrialization, "the growing hegemony of secularized science and technology over the domains of public and private life; the rise of corporate-monopoly capitalism; and the confusions brought on by the abundance of mass culture" (4 – 5).[27] The aggression found in lynching is not confined to the practice; Goldsby lists the urban sprawl, the meatpacking industry, and the radical change in warfare from the Civil War to World War I as examples of how modernity has always been defined through violence. Goldsby elaborates that lynching has so often been excluded when discussing American literary modernism and modernity because its forthright barbarism is so startlingly contradictory to the idea of progress and momentum. She writes, "because African Americans lacked the legal, civic, and moral authority to repel mob assaults on their collective lives – the history of those deaths could be marginalized from our conventional accounts," accounts which are set forth as documenting this time period of the early 1900s as overflowing with hope and promise (27). Goldsby's use of the word "lack" is critical to note here, as it reifies her reading of African Americans as included within civil society; although such a reading works directly against mine, it still proffers a

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[27] Although not discussed in this particular chapter, the rise of modern photography is part of this "abundance of mass culture" and adds another element to the idea of fragmentation in relation to lynching, both in the circulation of images and the practice of collecting lynching souvenirs. James Allen and Jon Lewis' *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000), Dora Apel's *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (2004), and Jacqueline Goldsby's *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (2006) are especially critical in examining photography's connection to modernity.

useful means of understanding why there is such a disavowal of violence in the history of modernity.

Although reliant on visibility to repeatedly manifest itself, lynching become invisible in its very visibility and normativity, and thus functions as a "spectacular secret." To turn to Frank B. Wilderson, I recall his anecdote regarding a Native American man and an African American women who call for a returning of land and personhood, and his subsequent argument that in answering these demands, "the structure of U.S. (and perhaps global) antagonisms would be dismantled": "[p]erhaps their grammars are the only ethical grammars available to modern politics and modernity writ large, for they draw our attention not to the way in which space and time are used and abused by enfranchised and violently powerful interests, but to the violence that underwrites the modern world's capacity to think, act, and exist spatially and temporally" (*Red, White & Black* 3, 2). To reiterate both Goldsby and Wilderson's points, it is not that particular acts within modernity can be considered as violent, but rather that modernity itself is constituted vis-à-vis violence. The only grammar that is left to speak ethically is one which acknowledges the standing of blackness as non-Human in a world that pivots on antiblackness. This is precisely the kind of work that I argue is being done within *Cane*; although Toomer's work pre-dates the disciplinary framework of Afro-pessimism by at least eighty years, the text portends its creation and indeed, opens up an originary space that stands as a testament to the impossibility of blackness.

The Rural South: “Time and space have no meaning in a canefield”

Mimicking the 1910 beginning point of the geographical trajectory of half a million African Americans, Toomer’s *Cane* originates in the South; specifically, he sets his narrative in Sempter, Georgia, a rural locale where there is a disquieting sense of violence that waits just underneath the surface before it erupts in “Blood-Burning Moon.” Interestingly, the earlier pieces of this section set the stage for this brutality through ruminations on feminine beauty or the lack thereof. The first story of *Cane* is “Karintha,” a piece which relies on a folk-song that praises the protagonist’s beauty: “[h]er skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon/… When the sun goes down” (Toomer 3).[28] Here Karintha’s beauty points back to the epigraph, invoking the image of dusk. Karintha herself is oracular; her life – beautiful, brief, and ominously tragic – figures as foreshadowing for the stories that will follow. Curiously, Toomer is insistent on Karintha’s “carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down” but also “like dusk on the eastern horizon;” Karintha is at once equated with the horizon upon which the sun first rises – the promise of freedom and citizenship “granted” in 1865 – as well as the dusk of the sun going down – the deferment and absolute gross neglect of the very same promise (3). Toomer’s description of Karintha’s beauty develops into an analysis of how it affects those around her. Her beauty “is a quick thing,” similar to the dissolution of the promise of freedom; she is “a wild flash. At sunset, when there was no wind, and the

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[28] As another method of fragmenting his text, Toomer included several places in *Cane* where the text itself would pause, as indicated by either two (“. . “) or three (“. . .”) period marks in a row. Editor Darwin T. Turner cautions the reader to not confuse the purpose of these marks, which is to bring the reading to a stop and thereby break apart the unified wholeness presupposed in a published book, with ellipses, which indicates original material either lost or edited out of this particular edition.

pine-smoke from over by the sawmill hugged the earth… her sudden darting past you was a vivid bit of color" (3). Because of her undeniable beauty, Karintha's sexual maturation occurs rapidly. Toomer writes that "Karintha is a woman, and she has had a child. A child fell out of her womb on to a bed of pine-needles in the forest. Pine-needles are smooth and sweet. They are elastic to the feet of rabbits. . ." (4). Although Toomer does not specifically tell his readers if Karintha actively kills her baby, or if she simply leaves it to die, what is irrefutable is that the baby's death takes place in silence, away from the lustful glances of men.

It is at this precise and juxtaposing moment of birth and death that Toomer's narrative subject shifts; in contrast to the prior sentences which took Karintha as their subjects with their pronouns of "she" and "her," Toomer abruptly changes his focus to pine-needles and rabbits, creating a break and disturbing the linearity of narrative, as if to draw the readers' eyes away from the scene of death – as if we, too, should look away.[29] Yet Toomer immediately follows with the information that Karintha's child is born near a sawmill; the specificity indicates an importance in the location of this death. In "'In the Land of Cotton': Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer's *Cane*," Barbara Foley states that while Toomer was very much aware of the "essential dynamics of Jim Crow racism," he was sorely misinformed about the economy of the South (Foley 182). She writes that the sawmill in "Karintha" was in all likelihood a "peckerwood" mill, which consisted of moveable machinery that could be set up relatively quickly near the forest and just as

[29] Compare this moment with Toomer's description of Mame Lamkins' lynching in "Kabnis," where her death, and the violently gruesome death of her baby, are explicitly detailed.

easily dismantled (183). Foley asserts that by having Karintha's baby born near this sawmill, Toomer "has to ignore the actual material relation between man and earth – let alone between man and man," or the reality of the imbalance of power between whites and blacks (183). She claims that by making the sawmill an ominously haunted place instead of a place of "material relation between… man and man," Toomer eradicates the historical specificity of the 1921 cotton depression and the resulting violence in the South. In Foley's reading, the death of Karintha's baby becomes a personalized, individualized pain; it affects Karintha and Karintha only to the detriment of economic deprivation and communal violence.

I argue, however, that in a brief sentence which trails off without conclusion, – "[m]eanwhile the smoke curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley. . . " – Toomer utilizes the images of both smoke and trees, the former which "hangs" about the trees and spreads out over the entirety of the valley, indicating a stealthy and pervasive symbol of violence that Foley does not take into consideration. Toomer's analysis does not stop at the sawmill, but continues to include the fire which takes a year before it completely burns out and disappears, resulting in the smoke that "hangs in odd wraiths about the trees" (Toomer 4). His portrayal of racialized violence is done through the symbols of lynching. The overall sense is one of a lingering presence that cannot be ignored, so much so that the "smoke was so heavy you tasted it in water," as something that would water the trees and lead to a kind of perpetual cycle (4). Through the birth of Karintha's baby, *Cane* renders itself a "modernist text in that its narration is fragmented and indirect; it hides what it is finally

talking about and yet makes the hidden its actual topic" (Scruggs and VanDemarr 29). This logic of revealing through hiding is concurrent with Toomer's discussion of lynching and racialized violence in that he opens the text with the trope of lynching, even if an actual, physical lynching has not yet occurred. In this way, he signifies a persistent frame of violence that enshrouds blackness in the United States and signifies its standing as social death.

Toomer ensconces lynching behind both a modernist writing style and images of what seems like a natural death, but in doing so reveals the very unnaturalness of the haunting death of Karintha's baby. While the baby is not lynched in the traditional sense, its death occurs amidst the symbols and tools of lynching; ergo, I argue that this scene both is and points to the cultural practice of lynching. The baby's death occurs near the sawmill, the singular symbol of modernity in "Karintha"; Toomer makes the encroachment of modernity known in this first vignette of *Cane*, and thereby connects the violence of the South with the more industrialized and supposedly progressive North. He returns to the folk-song to indicate the baby's death at the end of Karintha: "[s]moke is on the hills. Rise up./ Smoke is on the hills, O rise/ And take my soul to Jesus," indicating at this early point in *Cane* that this kind of violence is inarguably connected to race (Toomer 4). The actual death of the baby ("And take my soul to Jesus") can only be expressed through folk song, a cultural formation, along with black dialect, which is too often appropriated by white American and European modernists to signify a past that is "rural, repressive, stratified, and static," but which for Toomer signifies a past that is, in direct opposition, constantly present and unable to remain dead (*Dialect* 97). We are

reminded here, too, of Du Bois' contrasting analysis of the sorrow songs; he utilizes them to affirm the American standing of blackness by questioning, "[w]ould America have been America without her Negro people?" (*Souls* 187). Toomer, it seems, argues that it is precisely by placing Karintha and her baby outside – "without" – that America is America.

Symbolically representative of Karintha's fading beauty, Toomer's second portrait of a woman, "Becky," is a story in which a white woman has two black sons and refuses to divulge the names of their fathers. Although she is white, Toomer repeatedly refers to her as "the white woman who had two Negro sons" (Toomer 7). While I do not claim that Becky can be read as black, her "cast… out" body and its production of "Negro sons" foreshadows the fragmenting of black communities and psyches in the later sections of *Cane*. Furthermore, her whiteness allows her an integration into the white community (and into civil society) – "[w]hite folks and black folks built her cabin, fed her and her growing baby" – only until she gives birth (7). Afterward, when faced with a baby whose mixed-race heritage is undeniable, "the white folks said they'd have no more to do with her" (7). In the moment of the baby's birth, Becky is marked as tainted by blackness, and she is then castigated and cast out into a liminal space (although not, to return to Sexton, into outer space). Indeed, Becky gives birth not to mixed-race sons but to "Negro" ones; in having her sire blackness, I argue that Toomer situates Becky as one who embodies the impossibility of relationality for blackness. In other words, although they are white through the racial lineage of their mother, Becky's sons are irreducibly

marked as black because of the lineage of their unknown fathers. They flee the town precisely because of their incapacity to be incorporated.

Becky's physical appearance is decried as hideous, her eyes "sunken, her neck stringy, her breasts fallen," her "[m]outh setting in a twist that held her eyes, harsh, vacant, staring…" (7). Unlike Karintha, whose beauty is not described in specifics, but rather in metaphors of wholeness (for example, the cycle of day and night), Becky's description relies entirely on a short, terse sentence structure that fragments her body into pieces. This second vignette moves us closer toward an urban space, echoing the eventual trajectory of both the text and the Great Migration, and consequently Becky's brokenness is far more emphasized compared to Karintha's. Furthermore, this is indicative of a breaking apart that is symptomatic in modernity, and foreshadows the shattering of the African American community that is present in the second section of *Cane.* Becky's location in this brief vignette is critical; as everyone desires to cast her out of town for bearing "Negro" children, "[t]he pines whispered to Jesus.. …The railroad boss said not to say he said it, but she could live, if she wanted to, on the narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road" (7). The inclusion of pines points back to "Karintha" where the pines play an integral yet passive part in her baby's birth and death; as the rabbits run over their fallen needles, the pine trees function almost as a makeshift cradle in an atmosphere that is heavy with a silent kind of dread. Here, however, the pine trees are themselves personified and offering prayer, active participants in Becky's tale.

In *Cane*, as in the United States during the 1920s, trees are not empty of meaning or intent for African Americans; rather, they are loaded with an implicit violence which

later becomes explicit in lynching photographs. What is unclear at this point is if the pines are offering prayer to Jesus to cast Becky out, standing in agreement with the town's residents, or if they are offering prayer to find her a place of shelter. This strategic ambiguity on Toomer's part seems to indicate the impossible nature of permanence in this first section of *Cane,* which can be attributed to the constant presence of uneasiness that pervades throughout; "Karintha" ends with dusk falling, and "Becky" ends with her death but the remains of her cabin standing as a reminder of brokenness. Moreover, this liminality underlies the cabin she lives in "between the railroad and the road." Becky, more so than any other character thus far mentioned in *Cane*, lives closest to a marker of modernity, showing Toomer's mimicking of the gradual move toward the North: "[s]ix trains each day rumbled past and shook the ground under her cabin. Fords, and horse- and mule-drawn buggies went back and forth along the road" (7).

Most critically, Toomer's focus here is on movement. Becky occupies multiple interstitial spaces, as the mother of biracial sons, as someone undesirable to both whites and blacks in Sempter, and as someone who lives in the in-between of the rural (road) and urban (railroad). Sollors writes that the "literary images of modernity often draw on a set of objects," by which he means, most critically for Toomer and *Cane*, "buildings," "means of communication" and "public transportation" (here, the train), as objects where "the less tangible features of modernity are most fully visualized: the way in which the secular strangers in a mixed populace are thrown together into the same modern landscape, encounter each other briefly and haphazardly, read about each other, live in great proximity to each other, and follow the modern rhythms of work and leisure"

("Four Types of Writing" 49). Becky exists in this constant flux of movement as passengers throw her "means of communication," or "little crumpled slips of paper scribbled with prayers" (Toomer 7); the railroad which she lives next to carries these unknown, unnamed passengers into her life "briefly and haphazardly" only to remove them instantly. Similarly, Toomer uses a "crumpled" language to describe Becky in contrast to Karintha, relying on broken sentences to indicate a lack of wholeness in the figure. Toomer's choice of adjectives in describing Becky's physical features also indicates a kind of crumpled inclination, as Becky is "sunken," "fallen," and "vacant." As Toomer's characters move closer to the urban North, the more fragmented they become.

In the last two paragraphs of "Becky," the narrative voice switches from third-person to first-person, indicating the narrator's (and by extension, the readers') inclusion in the narrative; the unnamed narrator sees Becky's cabin and "[e]yes left their sockets for the cabin. Ears burned and throbbed. Uncanny eclipse!... Pines shout to Jesus!" (8). After a sudden crescendo of sound "the ground trembled as a ghost train rumbled by. The chimney fell into the cabin. Its thud was like a hollow report, ages having passed since it went off" (8 – 9). We the readers are unsure as to how much time has passed, and as to whether or not a real train causes the accident; as a ghost, the train is of the past, yet as a train, it is clearly also a symbol of the future. By juxtaposing the two, Toomer points toward Becky's cabin as a place where, as in the canefield, time and space have no meaning (Toomer 13). Toomer again connects Becky to Karintha; if the latter is described as dusk, a gradual deepening of darkness, the former is an "uncanny eclipse," a sudden darkness that causes fragments of the narrator's body to be drawn to the cabin, a

place which I argue has represented an underlying violence that has, to this point, only shown itself through Becky's "[s]ullen and cunning" sons (8). The narrator's eyes are not drawn to the cabin, but rather leave their sockets, become disconnected from the body even as the text's structure begins to deteriorate from the lyricism present in "Karintha" and break apart into short fragments.

Another element of fragmentation is the way in which the pines have been steadily speaking to Jesus in the entire vignette, but always in slightly different ways, first as a statement in the present ("The pines whisper to Jesus"), then as a statement in the past ("The pines whispered to Jesus"), then as an invocation ("O pines, whisper to Jesus") and finally as an exclamation with a crescendo ("Pines shout to Jesus!"). The repetition of this phrase, with slight variations, switches from present to past tense and back again, seeming to indicate a fragmenting and collapsing of linear time, similar to the collapsing of Becky's cabin. This reliance on repetition and personification marks *Cane* as modernist, and returns to the question of whether or not the pines are beseeching Jesus on Becky's behalf (Rusch 15). The answer seems to be in the negative. It is their shout, after all, and the passing of a train, carrying its message of urban sprawl and travel, which immediately precedes the chimney tumbling into the cabin and resulting in Becky's death. It is also conceivable to imagine that it is their shout alone which causes the chimney to fall in. In "Karintha," the pine needles were used as a soft bed for her child, intimately connecting violence as configured through the image of the tree with a birth, suggesting the inescapable and regular presence and force of this aforementioned violence. Here, the pine trees are shown as acting on the behalf of everyone but Becky

and bringing her house down upon her head. The violence is enacted on Becky as “the white woman who had two Negro sons” (Toomer 7). Becky is not lynched; her body as the site of “two Negro sons” situates the constant violence as experiential, not ontological, in this brief vignette. It is critical to note that the actual death scenes of Karintha’s baby and Becky are never explicitly shown, perhaps to focus on the hidden nature of these deaths. During the late 1910s and early 1920s, primary focus by anti-lynching activists is given to literal lynchings; Toomer explicates what is not discussed through language that deliberately obfuscates his subject. The violence in the South is presented as being an insidious and collective haunting, and it is with the death of Tom Burwell, the story which is closest in proximity to the urban North, both in terms of the placement of “Blood-Burning Moon” within *Cane* and the death scene within a factory, that Toomer presents a scene of brutality, one which looks to the advent of modernity as the advent of escalated terror.

Tom is an African American man who loves Louisa, an African American woman who is also, though perversely, loved by the white Bob Stone. Going against the primary reasons given for the lynching of black men, Toomer inverts the racial and sexual equation in “Blood-Burning Moon.” Instead of the white woman who is desired by the black man and must be protected by the white man, it is a black woman who is desired by both black and white men; again, Toomer takes an idea which supposedly indicates the United States’ growth as a modern nation in order to expose a truth: although the race of the woman may change, the duel for her body is always to be won by a white man. Yet Toomer further complicates the narrative by stating that Louisa loves Bob: “[b]y measure

of that warm glow which came into her mind at thought of him, he had won her" (30). That the racial triangle is inverted is shocking in itself, but what is necessary to note here is that Louisa does not believe Bob loves her; she believes that he has "won" her. This language of conquest and ownership indicates her object status and her openness to the gratuitous violence of accumulation. Furthermore, it speaks volumes that this love affair is being conducted in two places: "factory town" as well as in the canebrake, suggesting a meeting of the future and a past which is still occurring in the present moment.

This colliding of the past and future and the unmooring of temporality is also present in a verbal exchange between Louisa and Tom. She asks, "'[y]ouall want me, Tom?... You wanted to say something?...'" Tom replies in the affirmative: "'I did that, sho. But words is like th spots on dice: no matter how y fumbles em, there's times when they jes wont come. I dunno why. Seems like th love I feels fo you done stole m tongue'" (32). Here we return again to a grammar of rupture: the precise and proper way in which Louisa speaks is contrasted to Tom's response in the black dialect. The binary exposed here is once again between the supposed separation between the modern and the archaic. To return to Michael North, we are reminded of how black dialect is appropriated by white modernists to signify a rural past and a burgeoning present and modernity. Although she is not white, it is possible to read Louisa as symbolizing modernity: she is the one who steals Tom's tongue, in the much the same way white modernist writers appropriated black dialect (*Dialect* 97). The appropriation of black culture and dialect, or what Nathan Grant calls "benign primitivism," is considered necessary in the building of American modernism for several key authors, including Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound.

For Pound, "[b]lack dialect is… an example of visceral freedom triumphing over dead convention. The dialect *in* modernism is a model for the dialect *of* modernism," meaning that this supposed black dialect is in fact attributable to white modernists who needed it to sustain their own mantra of newness, as "the dialect adopted by these early modernists proves to be that peculiar kind that confirms the standard even in deviating from it" (78 – 79). Paralleling Goldsby, who argues that lynching is central to the United States' move into modernity, North proposes that the black vernacular, and its being made available to white modernists, is central to American literary modernism. Furthermore, North specifically connects black dialect to the project of literary modernism in that it allows the writer "to play at self-fashioning," a critical venture in the development of a national literature (11). He, as well as Michael Borshuk, argue that one of the central projects of "a collective modernist literary style is a search for new language and a restlessness with old modes of linguistic expression" (Borshuk 4).

North, however, also argues that black dialect as a type of "new language" is not available for the African American writer in that "[i]n the version created by the white minstrel tradition, it is a constant reminder of the literal unfreedom of slavery and of the political and cultural repression that followed emancipation" (*Dialect* 11). For African American writers, black dialect does not stand for "self-fashioning," but rather an affirmation of racist ideology that many (if not all) of them wish to eradicate, and as such the utilization of this particular language is not afforded to them in a unilateral fashion. This is because "the black finds that access to language is not access to power, to control over his environment or himself. Language becomes dysfunctional" (Bigsby 100).

Literary modernism, then, thrives on the practice of exclusion. Toomer's use of black dialect here is not a deployment of benign primitivism, or an example of a long-gone and desirable past where the privilege of language was awarded to a chosen few. Rather, Toomer's usage points to the difficulty in chronicling this history of violence. The character of Tom speaks *of* the difficulties of language *through* a difficult language; for him, in front of Louisa, the words "jes wont come" because she "done stole m tongue" (Toomer 32). As Rusch summarizes, this "is more 'creative tension,' perhaps a recipe for creative tension, a 'narrative tension between orality and literacy'" and a means of "using the oral black culture in a highly literate and modern way" (18). If we read Louisa as stripping Tom of the ability to speak, we can read this scene as Toomer's statement that the encroachment of modernity is at once eradicating and stealing from folk-culture. At the same time, it his Tom's love for Louisa that renders him speechless. In *Cane*, the unspeakable past is what makes writing in modernist language so difficult; in Wilderson's discussion of Africa and the Middle Passage, he writes that "[n]o other place-names depend upon such violence. No other nouns owe their integrity to this semiotics of death" ("Grammar & Ghosts" 12). The "place-name" of the South is one steeped in this "semiotics of death," and the specter of and present occurrences of lynching are what make the future, as signified through modernist text and the industrialized town, a pessimistic one.

Bob Stone's love for Louisa is the ontological opposite of Tom's love for her in that he maintains a subject status that allows him to claim her as his own. If Tom sees Louisa as a future he hopes to attain, then Bob sees her as a past that is no longer

available to him.[30] As he goes to see her, he wistfully dreams of a past where it would have been acceptable if he "went in as a master should and took her. Direct, honest, bold" (Toomer 33). He is disgusted by the contrast between the past, when he would have been her master, and the present, where he suffers from "this sneaking that he had to go through" (33). After hearing of his rival, Tom confronts him, and in the ensuing fight he slits Bob Stone's throat. Immediately after the murder, Tom leans against a well, and he "seemed rooted there" until the mob arrives with "[s]hotguns, revolvers, rope, kerosene, torches. Two high-powered cars with glaring searchlights" (35 – 36). The items listed first, from "[s]hotguns" to "torches" are ones always associated with lynching, and it is the "high-powered cars" that, like the trains in "Becky" symbolize modernity. Whereas these items generally symbolize industrialization and speed in connection to the betterment of human life, Toomer here connects them to a more efficient method of killing. The mob is singular and machine-like in its purpose, as the "moving body of their silence preceded them over the crest of the hill into factory town. It flattened the Negroes beneath it. It rolled to the wall of the factory, where it stopped. Tom knew that they were coming. He couldnt move" (35 – 36). As Tom freezes, Toomer's own language slips; Tom "couldnt" move. The exclusion of a mere apostrophe here indicates a possible change in the authorial voice as Toomer's grammar veers away from Louisa's careful modulation to Tom's vernacular. In doing so, Toomer seizes the moment of transfixed paralysis to show that the violence that is considered to be in the past is in actuality still

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[30] Although, again, if we consider the Louisa's ontological position as one which is marked by accumulation and fungibility and the experiential resulting history of white men raping black women as a means of subjugation and terror, this past is not, in fact, unavailable to him.

very present. The machinery of whiteness, the industrialization of racism, rolls toward Tom, equipped with the weapons of lynching and aided by the transportation of modernity; there is absolutely no separation between them, and Toomer for the first time explicitly critiques modernity for being vehicles of terror.

Tom remains "rooted" to the ground like a tree until the mob descends; in contrast to Tom's comparison to an element of nature that functions as a symbol of violence in *Cane*, the mob which swarms over him is machine-like. Here we see the preliminary gestures of how modernity is fraught with and contingent upon violence, and particularly so for African Americans. Furthermore, the only actual crime of lynching, as traditionally defined, is enacted in a factory, a place that represents modernity. In *Masculinist Impulses: Toomer, Hurston, Black Writing and Modernity,* Nathan Grant argues that although Tom lives in the town he is not a part of it, as he spends much of his time observing from an adjacent hill; in a sense, as Tom is dragged to the factory, it is a forced migration that is being enacted. It is no accident that he is murdered *in* the town, *in* the factory. The violence in "Karintha" anchors her within the forest, and "Becky" is firmly situated within the straddling of the line between rural and urban. Tom's death takes place in an urban area, away from the forest, the canebrake and within the space of industrial production and money-making. It is with Tom's torture and death that Toomer limns the fracturing of the body; more so here than anywhere else in the first section of *Cane*, Toomer relies on fragmentation as a modernist mode of writing to indicate the fragmentation of bodies during a lynching. He writes,

> [t]he mob pressed in from the sides. Taut humming. No words…Tom bound to the stake. His breast was bare. Nails' scratches let little lines of

> blood trickle down and mat into the hair. His face, his eyes were set and stony. Except for irregular breathing, one would have though him already dead. Torches were flung onto the pile. A great flare muffled in black smoke shot upward. The mob yelled. The mob was silent. Now Tom could be seen within the flames. Only his head, erect, lean, like a blackened stone. Stench of burning flesh soaked the air. Tom's eyes popped. His head settled downward. The mob yelled. Its yell echoed against the skeleton stone walls and sounded like a hundred yells. Like a hundred mobs yelling. (Toomer 36)

I include the entire quote describing Tom's death to show Toomer's emphasis on Tom's dissimilarity to Becky: Tom's various body parts are detailed in short sentences, done so in order to emphasize the particularly brutal and exacting nature of his death. The mob is stretched taut, the "humming" referring back to the humming present in "Becky" when the trains would pass her cabin. Whereas in "Becky," the narrator's eyes leave their sockets, here Tom's eyes "popped" immediately before his head "settled down." His vision is robbed prior to his death, and he is unable to look back upon a crowd that is looking upon the disintegration of his body. On the other hand, we are not allowed access to Becky's death even though we shift to an unnamed narrator's viewpoint. Tom's sight does not merely fade and disappear, but rather explodes from overwhelming pressure. The fact that he is blinded as he dies invokes the imagery of Toomer's prologue where he declares the text as being "oracular," as Tom becomes a blind seer who foreshadows impending violence. It is this moment, too, that breaks the silence of the mob ("The mob yelled") and the disjunctions which exist between these terse sentences indicate pauses where the mob stands and watches this body disintegrate.

The effect of this fragmented narrative is that it conveys in form and statement the psychic peril of modern life; yet in contrast to white modernists, for Tom (and for

Toomer), there is no "perpetual possibility of renewal" (Sanders 150). Toomer's detailing of Tom's individual body parts emphasizes the distance between what Spillers calls "a cultural *vestibularity* and the *culture*" which relies upon the state (Spillers 67). Here, I take this space to configure blackness as articulated through the state in terms of experience, but as outside relationality in terms of ontology. In Tom, we see how his wounds, his flesh, expose the gap between what was promised and what is actually true. I argue that the "writing corporeality" of Tom's flesh anticipates the absolute lack of recourse Toomer sees in the juridical system or American culture (67). To return to the form of the narrative, this scene of a literal lynching is further marked by a continuous confusion of tense, going from past to the present in a roughly alternating sequence: "[t]he mob pushed in. Its pressure, its momentum was too great. Drag him to the factory. Wood and stakes already there… A stake was sunk into the ground. Rotting floor boards piled around it… Tom bound to the stake" (Toomer 36). Toomer's use of past and present tense eradicates the possibility of any kind of future; the continuous movement from the action as already having happened and currently happening indicates the presence of racialized violence, as epitomized by lynching, which ends the first section of *Cane.* After "Blood-Burning Moon" and its explicit portrayal of a lynched and dismembered black body, Toomer moves the narrative North of the Mason-Dixon Line, imitating the Great Migration, away from the rural South and into the urban North and the realization of a failed dream. In doing so, he shifts the focus from the trope of lynching, and its effects on black individuals, to the violence of fragmentation perpetrated against African American communities and communal spaces.

The Urban North: "Who set you flowing?"

The second section of *Cane* takes place in the northern United States; all of the pieces take place in Washington, D.C., with the exception of "Bona and Paul," which is set in Chicago. There has been a shift, both in terms of the narrative style as well as the symbols of geography. Toomer replaces the abundance of poetry in the first section with much more structured prose vignettes; the symbols of racialized violence and lynching, which steadily become more urbane in the first section of Toomer's text, culminating in the death of Tom Burwell in a factory town surrounded by a mob, are here almost entirely industrial and connected to modernity. These changes are attributable to the advent of modernity, wherein "[c]rowded living conditions, regimented time, limited access to land, and more fluid family relationships resulted in new forms of cultural expressions," including, presumably, the creation of a new type of literature (Sanders 139). At the same time, however, the tentative sense of wholeness – as first embodied by "Karintha" – is fractured in the urban North, and Toomer's cultural expression expounds on the reality of isolation that surrounds African American communities through his continuous usage of the trope of lynching.

"Seventh Street," the vignette which opens the second section of *Cane*, does not focus on a particular individual woman, as do the vignettes that come prior to this section. Rather, this piece is an almost anthropomorphic description of Seventh Street, written in a form that mimics the fragmented narrative of a jazz piece, a genre of music that numerous scholars have addressed as both indicator and contributor to American

modernism.[31] The focus here is on possessions and materialism. If “Karintha” possesses her beauty, there is no one here to possess any of these “things.” In sum, there are no people in contrast to the South, which is overflowing with them (the men who desire Karintha, for example, or the community members in “Becky”) As Farah Jasmine Griffin writes, “in the South, nature is personified, on Seventh Street money is personified” (Griffin 65). The folk-song which begins and closes “Karintha” in a call-and-response pattern is replaced here with a poem that focuses on speed: “Money burns the pocket,/ pocket hurts,/ Bootleggers in silken shirts,/ Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,/ Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks” (Toomer 41). What is critical to note here is that the subject of the poem continually seems to shift from line to line – the “money” burns pockets, which belongs to the “[b]ootleggers,” whose shirts “ballooned” as they went “whizzing down the street-car tracks.” This constantly moving subject, along with the tempo of the poem, indicates a kind of frantic jittering down a curved street that is in marked contrast to an earlier “track” in “Becky,” where Becky lived a kind of living death by a railroad track. If “[t]ime and space have no meaning in a canefield,” they find their meaning here in on Seventh Street, where time is speed and space itself twists and turns (13).

Unlike the bastard children present in “Karintha” and “Becky,” the “bastard” here is Seventh Street itself, one born out of the union between “Prohibition and the War.”

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[31] Several authors have written about the jazz form as either connected to or as a language of modernity. See Frederik L. Rusch’s “Form, Function, and Creative Tension in *Cane*: Jean Toomer and the Need for the Avant-Garde” (1991 – 1992) and Michael Borshuk’s *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature* (2006).

Seventh Street is a "crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington" (41). This "soft-skinned wedge" feminizes Seventh Street by alluding to the soft-skinned women in the first section of *Cane*: Fern's face is of "soft cream" (16), Karintha's is of "dusk" (3), Esther's is "chalk-white" (22). This delicate element is quickly jarred by the intrusion of "black reddish blood." This blood can be read in two ways: first, as blood that is dark red, which is a more general reading, or second (and more likely), as reddish blood that is coming from black bodies, indicating that it is African Americans who provide the supply for this endless river of blood. The insertion of soft-skinned black bodies carrying reddish blood into Seventh Street, and specifically into the "white and whitewashed wood of Washington," serves as a reminder of both the Great Migration that occurs into the northern United States, as well as the constant presence of racialized violence. The African American community has largely moved into the "whitewashed" northern United States, and they come not as a unified whole but as an ebb and flow of blood, suggesting that while Toomer does not explicitly focus on physical black bodies, he does imply that their metaphorical and ontological standing as social death, and thus their inability to form cohesive and collective bonds, are what line Seventh Street.

Toomer repeatedly asks "[w]ho set you flowing?" a question which Griffin takes for the title of her book, *"Who Set you Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative*, wherein she argues that migration narratives can generally be seen as confrontations. She writes, "[s]ome artists paint portraits of a city transformed by the

arrival of migrants; others paint portraits of migrants transformed by the city" and that *Cane*'s migratory movement can be seen as the black, rural male's occupation of the white, domesticated female space of Washington, D.C. (64). However, this question of "[w]ho set you flowing?" points less toward a sexed binary of the immigrant and the city, and more toward the idea of brokenness that carries over from the South. Whereas the individuals in the South, as exemplified by Becky, Tom, and Louisa, are ones who are broken due to physical violence, in the North, we see the impossibility of utilizing communities to overcome object status; in other words, the quandary becomes whether or not objects can join with other objects. The focus is less on the literal violence perpetrated and enacted on black bodies, and more on communal violence instigated and exemplified through economic deprivation, racism, and a relegating of blackness to outside civil society.

Thus we see how this "black reddish blood" moves down Seventh Street; it causes a "frenzy of dizziness" in warmongers but could possibly be stopped with Prohibition (Toomer here briefly equates drunkenness with racialized violence; in other sections of *Cane* there is a somber sobriety within all lynchers). This blood causes "[w]hite and whitewash," or Washington, D.C., to disappear, liquidating and flowing into "shanties, brick office buildings, theaters, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets" and "[e]ddying on the corners" (41). This "[w]hite and whitewash" also indicates a kind of national covering, a means of eradicating both the history of slavery and the contemporary moment of juridical and physical violence. On Seventh Street, the rising river of blood traces the path the Cadillacs have taken and swallow up the entire city, and one cannot

help but note the significance that it is the nation's capital, which is to be the zenith of racial equality, that is being consumed. For African Americans, then, both the private and public are bloodied; the blood is invasive and knows no boundaries. The answer to "[w]ho set you flowing?" seems to be Washington, D.C. itself. Rather than arguing that African Americans have aided in the construction of the nation, Toomer seems to be stating that this "whitewash" eradicates the reality of the present moment, which is a reality of terror and fragmentation. The whitewashing of blackness is necessary in order to maintain the myth of the urban north, and particularly of the capitol itself. In other words, "violence towards the Black body is the precondition for the existence of Gramsci's single entity 'the modern bourgeois-state' with its divided apparatus, political society and civil society" ("Gramsci's Black Marx" 5). No other city in the United States stands as so massively representational of political and civil society as Washington, D.C., and here we see the failure of the discourse on inclusion and citizenship.

Toomer's circles back to his eerie reading of "Karintha" and returns to the imagery of smoke. The earlier smoke is caused by a fire in the sawmill, whereas here the smoke is most likely the exhaust given off by automobiles. Here, too, the smoke is blood-red and curls up into "where the buzzards fly in heaven," a mockery of the dream of what the North is supposed to represent; the far-reaching specter of death (as symbolized by the buzzards) reach all the way to heaven, and this indicates that there is racialized violence and carnage in Washington, D.C., so much so that "God would not dare to suck black red blood," and would instead "duck his head in shame and call for the Judgment Day" (Toomer 41). The smoke which was to "take my soul to Jesus" in "Karintha"

finally reaches God in "Seventh Street," yet there is no solace to be found here. Rather, it causes God to turn away in shame. Furthermore, the god who is referenced is a "[n]igger God," helpless and unable to do more than calling for the end of the world; there is, Toomer argues, no end in sight to the river of blood. In this invocation, we see precisely Wilderson's outlining of the end of the world in the acknowledgement of the rubric of antagonism that defines blackness

In "Rhobert," the piece immediately following "Seventh Street," Toomer conflates industrialization with individuation; there is simply no division between object and person, and the object/person is always isolated. He begins, "Rhobert wears a house, like a monstrous diver's helmet, on his head. His legs are banty-bowed and shaky because as a child he had rickets" (42). In comparison to Karintha, Becky or Tom, whose household dwellings are either disregarded or represented as pitiful excuses for homes, Rhobert has a house, a modern and contemporary dwelling place meant to signify progress, or a movement into the future. Yet it remains "important to remember that the rapid pace of social change brought with it a hankering for tradition and that the revolution of modernity triggered its counterrevolutions," indicating perhaps that what was to represent a future resulted in being representative of anything but (Barnard 44). It is because of this that Rhobert's house is something worn "like a monstrous diver's helmet," and its weight crushes him as he is unable to remove it. This, together with the rickets – which has softened his bones – makes Rhobert a grotesque machination, a hybrid between man and building, between human and thing, one who is unable to rid himself of his decaying house. On one hand, Rhobert has managed to escape the trees

from which African Americans were lynched, as well as the wooden stake upon which Tom was lynched in "Blood-Burning Moon." Yet on the other hand, he instead finds himself dying under the weight of a house and all it is meant to signify (which is to come in "Box Seat"), which is essentially built from numerous dead trees (or, to return to "Seventh Street," "white and whitewashed wood"). Rhobert's body is not so much fragmented here as it is shown to be completely alienated from all other bodies; it is through Rhobert's body that the lie of wholeness in the North is exposed.

Furthermore, Rhobert "cares not two straws as to whether or not he will ever see his wife and children again. Many a time he's seen them drown in his dreams and has kicked about joyously in the mud for days after" (Toomer 42). Although, of course, there is a difference between the forced separation of parents from children that took place during slavery and Rhobert's almost lackadaisical attitude toward his family, this seems related to Patterson's idea of the "genealogical isolate," wherein the slave was always a figure of natal alienation, unable to claim ancestors and descendants (Patterson 5). In much the same way, Rhobert is completely alone, pressed down by this acquisition of a house. This monstrous helmet is his house and "the pressure it exerts is enough to convince him of its practical infinity" (Toomer 42). This "dead house of his" is stuffed, and "[t]he stuffing is alive;" the "stuffing" is Rhobert (42). In the northern United States, Toomer argues, there is still the fragmentation of the body through racialized violence, but what is more common is the fragmentation of the community through more subtle

methods of racial domination.[32] Whereas in the first section of *Cane,* dwelling places are mentioned in connection to other individuals (as with "Becky"), here the house belongs to Rhobert and Rhobert alone; there is no one who is connected to the house, and no one connected to Rhobert. As such, it is the figurative body of the African American community that finds itself splintered through the figure of Rhobert.

What is most striking about "Rhobert" is that the violence inflicted upon him is not done through fire or hanging, but rather through suffocation and drowning; this too is an incident of a type of lynching. It is highly likely that Toomer knew of the John S. Williams case which occurred in February 1921 in Jasper County, Georgia, just before he took his visit to Sparta and commenced writing *Cane.* The bodies of several African American men were found in the Yellow, Alcovy, and South Rivers, chained together in pairs and weighed down by rocks. Foley writes that Clyde Manning, Williams' African American foreman, confessed to having murdered the men under Williams' orders. When speaking of the drowning murders, Manning testified that "'Harry Price, he got out… and says, 'Don't throw me over, I'll get over,' and he says 'Lord have mercy,' and he went over'" (qtd. in Foley 189). For Harry Price, life and death are not the options available; rather, he is forced to choose between death and death, designating a lack of any kind of choice and the myth of freedom. Rhobert's choice, too, is between death by choice and death by force; the result of the two is the same. Rhobert is not working on a debt peonage farm, and his impending death is not a literal one, but he is "way down. He is

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[32] This idea of the South as a place of racial terror but at the same time communal gathering is discussed in greater detail in Farah Jasmine Griffin's *"Who Set You Flowing?": The African-American Migration Narrative.*

sinking. His house is a dead thing that weights him down," and the narrator proposes that when he finally sinks completely, "[l]ets build a monument and set it in the ooze where he goes down. A monument of hewn oak, carved in nigger-heads," again articulating trees ("oak") as symbols of violence (dismembered "nigger-heads") (Toomer 42 – 43). Toomer connects the drowning of Rhobert in the North with the murder of several black men in the South even further by ending "Rhobert" with a spiritual more akin to the songs present in "Karintha" or "Becky" than in "Seventh Street." He writes, "[b]rother, Rhobert is sinking./ Lets open our throats, brother,/ Lets sing Deep River when he goes down" (43). "Deep River," in particular, is crucial in its invocation of other brothers to "open our throats," signifying a kind of community to sing in remembrance of Rhobert's death. Yet Rhobert's drowning reifies his absolute alienation from all forms of community; there is no one to sing this spiritual to or with him.

The symbol of the house as a place of isolation and violence reappears in "Box Seat," which opens not with a description of an individual, but with a view into the streets: "[h]ouses are shy girls whose eyes shine reticently upon the dusk [*sic*] body of the street. Upon the gleaming limbs and asphalt torso of a dreaming nigger. Shake your curled wool-blossoms, nigger. Open your liver lips to the lean, white spring. Stir the root-life of a withered people. Call them from their houses, and teach them to dream" (59). Unlike in "Rhobert" the houses here are feminine, but the conflation of place and body remains the same; the houses are "shy girls," whereas the world outside is masculine and black with its "gleaming limbs and asphalt torso" that is always "open[ed] up" to the "white spring" (59). Here, the city streets are dismembered body parts, split open and a

potential source of the blood that overruns Seventh Street. The souls of black folk, to borrow from W.E.B. Du Bois, are connected to "root-life" and "houses," and Toomer commands the "nigger" to teach them to dream. Toomer immediately follows by stating that "[d]ark swaying forms of Negroes are street songs that woo virginal houses" (59). These dark and "swaying" bodies evoke lynched victims hanging from trees, and Toomer explicitly outlines the supposed threat of black male sexuality upon "virginal" white femininity. The house, and thus the North, is a "place of disinheritance and exile," rather than a place of comfort and future hope (Wardi 81).[33]

The protagonist, Dan Moore, walks on Thirteenth Street, thinking to himself, "I was born in a canefield. The hands of Jesus touched me" as he attempts to woo Muriel (Toomer 59). It is implied that he is a migrant from the South, and one who is unable (or unwilling) to assimilate into the genteel African American culture of Washington, D.C. As such, Muriel's conflict over her attraction to Dan is evidenced in her jumbled thoughts: "[s]hame about Dan. Something awfully good and fine about him. But he dont fit in… Dan, I could love you if I tried. I dont have to try… I wont let myself" (61). Toomer clarifies the rationale behind Muriel's refusal to love Dan as attributable to her fear of her landlady's disapproval; she worries that "Mrs. Pribby who reads newspapers all night wont. What has she got to do with me? She is me, somehow… She is the town, and the town wont let me love you, Dan" (61). Dan and Muriel are separated from each other by the rules of propriety, and the community that they may have been part of (a less

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[33] This concept of home as a place of discomfort is one I expound on in my third chapter on James Baldwin, especially in connection to the idea of a black diaspora.

fraught pairing than Tom and Louisa, perhaps) is non-existent. Dan, too, is a fragmented individual; although he claims his birthplace within the canebrake, and therefore in the South, he is a “poor man out of work” in the North (59). In the North, identity is shaped around the ownership of items (houses, automobiles) or money: shallow comforts to some extent, but the defining characteristics of modern success in contrast to the lack of such means in the South.

Toomer’s attention in “Box Seat” shifts from Seventh Street to include interactions between Dan and Muriel, the girl he is courting, in order to emphasize the alienation that Rhobert has already experienced. As Dan sees Muriel, he “feels the pressure of the house, of the rear room, of the rows of houses, shift to Muriel. He is light. He loves her. He is doubly heavy” (61). The weight of the house, the weight of modernity which drowns Rhobert, is clearly aligned here with Muriel; in contrast, Dan is at first “light,” but the moment he acknowledges his love in the span of two terse sentences, he is “doubly heavy.” If the weight of the houses, and, as Muriel indicates, the town, rest on her, then the weight of simultaneously desiring Muriel (and everything she stands for) and finding her repulsive, lies even more heavily on Dan. What he finds attractive about her is “her animalism,” which “still unconquered by zoo-restrictions and keeper-taboos, stirs him” (62). Toomer writes of Muriel’s reluctance to love Dan due to the restrictions placed upon her by Mrs. Pribby and the town; it is logical to assume that in this house that weighs upon him, Dan desires the part of Muriel that reminds him of the South, that is as yet unrestricted by the North and its “zoo-restrictions and keeper-taboos.” That past is not bucolic nor a peaceful memory, as evidenced by his “obstinate desire to possess

her," as opposed to his verbal proclamation: "'Muriel, I love you. I want you…'" (63). This complete contrast between what is thought and what is said again returns to Spillers' concept of a grammar that is predicated on a violent separation and psychic rupture; it indicates a disjuncture between internal thought and external vocalization and, in my reading, the disjuncture between the theory and practice of racial harmony in the northern United States. As the North had been presented as the bastion of racial equality to those living and struggling in the South, it is especially painful to witness Dan's realization that this is not the case, that he is alone and without Muriel's love due not only to his unwillingness to assimilate and accept the status quo of a racial and classist hierarchy, but also because blackness is defined through the condition of natal alienation.

In the second part of "Box Seat," Dan and Muriel see each other in the crowded Lincoln Theater, and as he is seated next to a "portly Negress, he notices that a "soil-soaked fragrance comes from her. Through the cement floor her strong roots sink down. They spread under the asphalt streets… Her strong roots sink down and spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south" (65). In this urban space this woman's roots reach as blood-lines all the way into the South; underneath the finery of the houses and asphalt streets lie the roots of trees. As Dan trembles from the woman's proximity, "[f]rom either aisle, bolted masses press in… The mass grows agitant" (65). In contrast to the mob which forms around Tom in "Blood-Burning Moon," this mass is made up of African Americans, but they, too, are nameless and formless, comprising a single form, for "[t]he state of being numerous turns out to have much to do with the state of being singular" (Esteve 12). While this is the first place in the second section of *Cane*

where we see a large mass of African Americans, they have become blurred into one, a parody of a community. This particular scene is not one of lynching, nor is it one of outright racialized violence, but it is one of a disturbing overlay of the white mob onto the black one, suggesting, as with the "portly Negress," that the threat of violence is always present somewhere "down" there, a thematic element which Toomer addresses more fully in "Kabnis."

Toomer's language becomes surreal as he presents Dan's thoughts while watching the dwarves fight on stage: Dan thinks, "I never really noticed him before. Been sitting there for years. Born a slave. Slavery not so long ago" (Toomer 67). While the subject of whom Dan speaks is unknown, what is clear is his acknowledgement of the perpetual presence of slavery. Toomer does not write that "slavery ended not so long ago," and the absence of "ended" erases the possibility that slavery ever ended. To return briefly to Hartman, here Dan understands that he exists in the "point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection"; whereas it has been argued that this "point of transition" was marked by the Emancipation Proclamation, Toomer seems to point to how this moment has stretched on for years (*Scenes of Subjection* 6). Here, in the Lincoln Theater, a pointedly ironic location for such ruminations, as in the canefield, time and space once again lose meaning in terms of racial subjugation, signifying the North as an unstable location. At the conclusion of "Box Seat," Dan finds himself on the street once more, but unlike the "[c]hestnut buds and blossoms" that adorn the scenery at the opening of the story, here Dan is left with only the promise of the "scent of rancid flowers," indicating a kind of tranquility that has expired, much like the "fermenting syrup" that

begins *Cane* (59, 69). The violence in the South, as evidenced by smoke and trees, has not disappeared, but rather shifted into automobiles and houses in the North, and manifested itself in the breaking apart of community. These symbols of modernity and movement are, for African Americans, not indicators of racial and economic freedom, but rather other modalities of fragmentation and terror.

"Kabnis": Reading Autobiographical Deformation in the Return South

The third and final section of *Cane* features a return of sorts: although Kabnis is not a migrant who had left the South prior to his entry into the narrative, he is an African American who comes to Sparta to discover his history, following the "blood-lines" that Dan Moore recognized as always being present in "Box Seat." In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History,* Cathy Caruth argues that the history of trauma is precisely a history of a return, not in a "simple violent or original event in the individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4). Utilizing Freud, Caruth writes that this event which is unable to be assimilated haunts the survivor through a "moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*" (2). Reading Caruth in connection with Toomer allows us to see "Kabnis" as a history of trauma, wherein the wounds of those lynched and the wounds Kabnis imagines are imminent, cry out together in a sorrowful voice.[34] In "Kabnis," Toomer speaks to the difficulty of capturing that sorrowful voice; if

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[34] The "cry" becomes critical in my reading of Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* in the fourth chapter, and indeed is, according to Cornel West, the "ur-text" of black culture. The unspeakable nature of ontological death

Tom was rendered mute in the face of his love for Louisa, then Kabnis, an almost autobiographical figure for Toomer, is speechless due to his inability to comprehend "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses [him] in the attempt to tell [him] of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). It is this very speechlessness in his consideration of the wound that opens up the possibility of reading *Cane* as a text steeped in Afro-pessimism.

What Kabnis is initially unable to understand is that the past remains a constant in this particular present, and it is this disconnect of the psyche from the current moment that Toomer locates as a site of fragmentation and violence. As Lewis, another African American, points out that Father John, the blind old man in the basement, is the "symbol, flesh, and spirit of the past," Kabnis refuses to acknowledge the connection, arrogantly stating that his "ancestors were Southern blue-bloods –" (Toomer 108). When Lewis reminds him that they were black, Kabnis retorts, "[a]int much difference between blue an black" (108). Lewis comments that they are different enough to "draw a denial from you. Cant hold them, can you? Master; slave. Soil; and the overarching heavens. Dusk; dawn. They fight and bastardize you… tarnished, burned. Split, shredded: easily burned. No use. . ." (108 – 109). Lewis connects all African Americans through the history of slavery, a legacy which is fraught with violence that "bastardize[s]" and leaves them "tarnished, burned. Split, shredded: easily burned" (109). The brief, one-word adjectives here mimic the pieces into which lynching victims were ripped; the double use of

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becomes signified in the impossibility of giving this standing as lack any grammar except one constituted through rupture.

"burned" functions as a pointing back toward the smoke that is present in both the South ("Karintha") and the North ("Seventh Street"). Kabnis, in this moment, desires to forget racial difference as a means of reconciling the present moment with a brutal past, yet Lewis is incapable of doing so. If the trope of lynching and the literary use of fragmentation were used in the first section of *Cane* as stand-ins for lynchings, and in the second section for alienation, here they function as a means of showing the psychological difficulty in acknowledging the past as still thriving in the present moment within the continued existence of racialized violence.

"Kabnis" is perhaps the most formalistically difficult piece in *Cane*; similar to "Box Seat," it is partially written as a play. It is also, as I argue, perhaps the most autobiographical section of the text. Readers gain insight into both the characters' inner thoughts and their spoken exchanges with others without a distinction being made between the two. It is also the longest piece in *Cane*, and for scholars like Foley, the second place where the crime of lynching is explicitly addressed, the first being "Blood-Burning Moon." As "Kabnis" opens, Kabnis is sitting inside his cabin room, listening to the wind outside. He realizes that the "warm whiteness of his bed, the lamp-light" do not protect him from the "vagrant poets" that are the "winds in Georgia" and their song: "[w]hite-man's land./ Niggers, sing./ Burn, bear black children/ Till poor rivers bring/ Rest, and sweet glory/ In Camp Ground" (83). The wind's song encapsulates the history of racialized violence that Toomer has been expressing thus far in *Cane*: in a"[w]hite-man's land" African Americans are expected to "burn" and produce progeny to maintain this burning. Although the "rivers" are promising to bring "[r]est," this promised rest

from the burning is only through death; here Toomer clarifies through the sorrowful voice of the wind that Rhobert's fate is the only fate that is possible when engaged in what Wilderson calls a rubric of antagonism.

Toomer here acknowledges the difficulty in writing this history of brutality. Kabnis begins by stating the impossibility he feels in narrating this history: "[i]f I could feel that I came to the South to face it… How my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul" (83 – 84). Kabnis' desire is to remember, recollect and recount the history of the South; it is as though in this moment he, too, seeks to find the decaying idyllic pastoral which has driven a large element of literary modernism. Yet as his stay progresses, he realizes that there is no song in this history, but rather that the "form thats burned int my soul is some twisted awful thing that crept in from a dream, a godam nightmare, an wont stay unless I feed it. An it lives on words. Not beautiful words. God almighty no. Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words" (111). The language here not only showcases how Toomer, through Kabnis, states that the history of blackness in the United States is one of fragmentation, of being "tortured" and "twisted" beyond recognition, but also recalls Tom's lynched body that physically enacts this "godam nightmare." The voice which cries is not only sorrowful but broken; the history which Toomer relates in "Kabnis" is not only present but "tortured" and "twisted." This history is a "twisted awful thing… a godam nightmare," a document which is always already

both civilized and barbaric (111).[35] In the first section of *Cane*, it is the body that was "twisted," and in the second, the community; here, in the return to the South, Toomer labels history itself as being twisted, as it is something that cannot stay dormant in Kabnis or the United States precisely because it is the afterlife of slavery.

In particular, this history is present in Toomer's account of Mame Lamkins' death. He writes that the night is the "soft belly of a pregnant Negress… Night throbs a womb-song to the South. Cane- and cotton-fields, pine forests, cypress swamps, sawmills, and factories are fecund at her touch," and uses the figure of the pregnant African American woman to symbolize the southern night (92). While the language suggests a kind of tranquility, the things that are made fertile by this night are all sites of terror that Toomer has previously addressed. The forests, the sawmills and factories are places where births and deaths have occurred; thus Toomer theorizes again that the African American is the figure of living death from the moment of birth. This point is made explicit as Layman, at Fred Halsey's urging, recounts the murder of Mame Lamkin: "[s]he was in th family-way… They killed her in th street, an some white man seein th risin in her stomach as she lay there soppy in her blood like any cow, took an ripped her belly open, and th kid fell out. It was living; but a nigger baby aint supposed t live. So he jabbed his knife in it an stuck it t a tree. And then they all went away" (92).[36] It is not that

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[35] I borrow this phrasing from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," where he writes that "[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin 256).
[36] Numerous scholars attest to this lynching being based on an actual case documented by Walter White of the NAACP in *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889 – 1918,* during his time as executive secretary. In particular, Barbara Foley looks at this case as proof that lynchings did not only occur as a

this baby dies as it is born, but rather that the sole purpose of its existence is to be killed. We return here to the matrilineal nature of slavery, wherein birth results in the production of accumulation and fungibility, and not life. The baby "fell out" in much the same way Karintha's baby does, yet while Karintha's dies on a bed of pine needles, Mame Lamkin's is "ripped" out of her "belly" and pinned to a tree, indicating violence that is actively committed, as opposed to passively occurring. The dual use of "belly" – first to describe the night and second to describe Mame Lamkins – points to the idea that these crimes are taking place under the protection of darkness.

Specifically, even after the migration North and the return, even after the years pass, lynching remains a reality. Racialized violence has not ebbed; if anything, Toomer seems to be arguing, it has heightened. In much the same way that Kabnis feels the "split-gut" words stir within him, Mame Lamkins' baby is actually "split-gut," pinned to a tree. Mame Lamkins, too, is "split-gut" literally undergoing a vicious mockery of a Caesarean section. For Kabnis, Mame Lamkins becomes the wound which holds the sorrowful voice, and where he sees the "*crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*" occurring, in that he exists in the present moment, caught "between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival"; this is an entrapment that I will further explicate in my chapter on Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (Caruth 7). To return to Wilderson, if blackness is constituted outside of relationality, then the "analysis cannot be approached through the rubric of gains or reversals in

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means of controlling black male sexuality, but also to silence black resistance against white economic control, which complicates the nuanced discussion of lynching in American history.

struggles with the state and civil society, not unless and until the interlocutor first explains how the Slave is of the world" (*Red, White & Black* 11). For Wilderson and for Toomer, this explanation is impossible as the grammar given to us still locates blackness within civil society; this paradox is why Kabnis cannot speak of the wound, and more specifically, cannot find the appropriate words for the wound.

After hearing this horrific tale, Kabnis retreats even further into his immobilization; he is unable to function in his capacity as a teacher and echoes Layman's words as he thinks of his history: "I wish t God some lynchin white man ud stick is knife through it an pin it to a tree. And pin it to a tree. You hear me?" (Toomer 111). Again, as in "Blood-Burning Moon," Toomer's use of black dialect here is critical; he refuses to utilize it as a means of "self-fashioning" or a representation of an exotic, ethnic literature, but as a way of presenting a history that seems to be drifting from sight. Kabnis' language has considerably lapsed into the vernacular, and the folk-song itself has become embedded in the language of explicit violence, as noticeable in the rhyme scheme and the repeated "chorus" (tree/tree/me). Citing Robert Stepto, Griffin writes that the call-and-response is "fundamentally an act of closure performed upon a formal unit that already possesses substantial coherence. There can be no one response, no one and final closure" (Griffin 147). Yet here Toomer seems to be arguing that there can only *be* one response: an acknowledgement of the past that makes it impossible to move into an untainted future. Kabnis' refusal – or perhaps his inability – to do so indicates that he himself is "split-gut," a direct contrast to Rhobert, "a completely artificial man" (Toomer 85). Borrowing from Charles Scruggs, Grant writes that Toomer is all too keenly aware of the

fact that "'the demonic forces that had shaped America's past might also determine its future'" (Grant 62). In Kabnis, Toomer crafts the modern man who flees the North seeking an impossible benediction in the South.

The conclusion of *Cane* takes place in Halsey's basement, where Kabnis cannot help but be fixated by Father John; this is the "down" that Dan is trapped inside of in "Box Seat," the deepest point of the deep South, a place which exists literally underground and calls to mind both Jared Sexton and Ralph Ellison. It is the presence of Father John that breaks Kabnis' prior paralysis with his words. Kabnis says viciously: "You sit there like a black hound spiked to an ivory pedestal. An all night long I heard you murmurin that devilish word… Mumblin, feedin that ornery thing thats livin on my insides" (Toomer 114). "Death," the devilish word that haunts Kabnis in the darkness, is indelibly connected to the past, present and future as again, Toomer returns to the trope of lynching: Father John is the "black hound spiked to an ivory pedestal," the stand-in for the black body lynched ("spiked") at the altar of whiteness. In Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,* she states that the figure of the ghost is a "social figure, and investigating can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life" (Gordon 8). Father John functions precisely as that social figure, and as a manifestation of the trope of lynching and a racialized past and present that haunt Kabnis. It is this "devilish word" that keeps Kabnis awake at night and draws him, "against [his] will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality [he] come[s] to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (Gordon 8). It is through his encounter with Father John that Kabnis'

brokenness is truly brought to the forefront of the text; it is the apex of Kabnis' "transformative recognition" of an undead past and his alignment with figures like Rhobert, whose life is but a living death.

As Kabnis berates Father John, one cannot help but question whether his comments are addressed to the blind old man or to himself.[37] He rails against being in the basement which is "just like th place they used to stow away th worn-out, no-count niggers in th days of slavery. . . that was long ago; not so long ago. . ." before turning on Father John once more: "Do y know how many feet youre under ground? I'll tell y. Twenty… Do y think youre out of slavery? Huh?" (Toomer 114 – 115). Kabnis' claustrophobia is two-fold, the first being attributable to his being physically in a cramped, clammy basement, and the second to his entrapment in the precise history which he came to investigate. Slavery was "long ago," but immediately, with barely a pause (as indicated by the semi-colon), he states that "it was not so long ago." We return here to Dan's ruminations: "[b]orn a slave. Slavery not so long ago" (67). Toomer understands that chattel slavery itself as an institution was disbanded "long ago," but the vestiges echoing through *Cane* through the interconnected tropes of lynching and modernity suggest that the ontological condition of slavery continues. Hence Kabnis returns to the South and finds not a claimable, understandable history, but rather a past that cannot remain past. Kabnis is the one who truly embodies the spirit of *Cane*: he is the

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[37] While I myself do not do so, Catherine Gunther Kodat examines the usefulness of Lacan's mirror stage and this idea of mirroring that occurs at various moments of *Cane*, and this exchange between Kabnis and Father John is one she examines in "To 'Flash White Light from Ebony': The Problem of Modernism in Jean Toomer's *Cane*."

one who is "oracular" and "[r]edolent of fermenting syrup," the one who recognizes in the figure of Father John – and himself – the impossibility of both laying claim to the past and the future through the usage of words. Kabnis is no longer a "genealogical isolate" in that he finds himself a member of a twisted, tortured family tree, yet at the same time, he is unable to voice his frustration, or voice the narrative itself; the "split-gut song" is one which remains silent. In other words, what does it mean that the only ontology within grasp is one constituted through natal alienation? This traumatic memory functions as a "wound, disaster, catastrophe, and so on," and "breaches discursive representation and eclipses thought itself. Just as trauma's pathology poses limits to critical reason and disciplinary inquiry, it also ruptures archival memory" (Kalaidjian 3). A communal narrative, or even an individual autobiography, becomes impossible; a history of lynching is one which narrates rupture as a means of creating rupture in memory.

As Kabnis leaves the basement, the omnipresent narrator states that "[o]utside, the sun arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest. Shadows of pines are dreams the sun shakes from its eyes. The sun arises" (Toomer 117). Casting aside the symbol of dusk, which has pervaded the entirety of *Cane*, Toomer drenches the ending in the early morning sun. He returns to trees, but this time they are "dreams the sun shakes from its eyes," seeming to indicate the dawning of a new day. He continues, "[g]old-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town. The end" (117). In one reading, it is easy to imagine this ending as a kind of closure: the sun, symbolized by a "gold-glowing child," is connected to the two children who die in "Karintha" and "Becky," and instead of a

death ending the narrative it is a "birth-song," indicating perhaps that the constant traumatic fragmenting of body, community, and psyche has come to an end.

In an interesting authorial strategy, Toomer ends his text, which hinges on the very idea of breaking apart the conventional narrative form, with a structurally formal method by concluding the narrative with "[t]he end." However, what complicates this optimistic reading is that the two words "[t]he end" connect to the figure of Kabnis. Instead of focusing on the "birth-song" as redemptive, I read the ending of "Kabnis" and Toomer's final words not as a means of offering narrative closure, but as an indication of Kabnis' ultimate fate and failure. As Kabnis leaves the basement and passes out of the narrative, the readers are left with the figures of Halsey's sister, Carrie, and Father John. Toomer writes that "[l]ight streaks through the iron-barred cellar window. Within its soft circle, the figures of Carrie and Father John" (117). The sunlight touches Carrie and Father John, but is broken by the bars on the cellar window. Thus the light that enfolds them within "its soft circle" is not whole, but rather a circle broken into fragments, much like the crescent shapes which break the three sections of *Cane* apart. With his conclusion, Toomer offers a wholeness which is always already un-whole and mimics the fragmentation that he has been writing with, and about, in *Cane*. This wholeness which is un-whole points to the idea of blackness as outside of, rather than in opposition to, whiteness; Wilderson writes that a necessary expansion of civil society "requires the intensification and proliferation of civil society's constituent element: Black accumulation and death" ("Gramsci's Black Marx" 10). In order for Kabnis to escape, he must die; as he staggers up the stairs, Carrie murmurs "'Jesus, come,'" the last words of

the Bible (Toomer 117). This symbolic ending mimics a symbolic death; the ending of the text is predicated upon the ending of this central character. Toomer is unable to present Kabnis as a figure who fulfills his task of uplifting his race, nor as a figure who can give voice to a traumatized history or present. To return to Mostern, Kabnis – and Toomer – is unable to speak "on behalf of."

It is also critical to note that while Carrie and Father John are bathed in sunlight, finally free of the dusk, Kabnis is not. In his moment of departure, the narrator's gaze shifts from him to Carrie: "And then, seeing Carrie's eyes upon him… with eyes downcast and swollen," he "trudges upstairs to the work-shop. Carrie's gaze follows him till he is gone" (117). In much the same way that Tom's eyes burst in "Blood-Burning Moon," the narrator's eyes shift away from Kabnis; he simply disappears from the narrative as the narrative returns to Carrie's point-of-view. The omnipresent narrator disappears, replaced by one whose eyes cannot track Kabnis past his exit from the basement. Thus we are not given resolution, nor is Kabnis given absolution; although he exits, the narrative continues. Although the text ends in a stylistically structured method, I argue that Toomer in fact writes his last two words to indicate a non-end. History, for Toomer, is not a straight line, but rather a cyclical formation which still is not a (w)hole. It is this precise idea that allows for us to imagine an alternative modernism that functions as the literary precursor to Afro-pessimism. In the conclusion to "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?", Wilderson writes "[f]rom the very beginning, [black people] were meant to be accumulated and die" ("Gramsci's Black

Marx" 15). This is precisely Toomer's aim in complicating and challenging both the notion of American literary modernism and the movement of modernity.

Although Toomer's writing style and structure are very much in line with this literary genre, the material he writes on goes against the more established definitions. I briefly turn to Michael North in order to think of American literary modernism as not a singular project, but as defined by and through African American literary modernism as well – in sum, to think of literary modernism as literary *modernisms*. Yet what sets Toomer apart is that he is an author who seeks a "language submerged in slaughter, a language apprehensible only in the deformations of contemporary speech," and as such sets forth American literary modernism as a project which serves to highlight a racist past and present, a positioning blackness as one always already constituted through slaughter and deformation (*Dialect* 162). Toomer's revision of American literary modernism also complicates what black modernism envisions. As Wilks writes, the New Negro "rose out of the ashes of the Southern-affiliated Old Negro and gravitated toward urban centers such as Harlem," whereas Kabnis travels on a "journey that reverses the migration heralded by Locke and shares none of its triumphant, optimistic spirit" (Wilks 809). In other words, Toomer offers us an alternative modernism which also complicates black modernism; "Kabnis" reverses the Great Migration, and the character arrives to find a future that is no different from the past. Here, the echo of Afro-pessimism is too loud to ignore, and we are given a trajectory of alternative modernism that continuously perpetuates a cycle of blackness as a relational impossibility. Toomer's invocation of *Cane* as "a swan-song" and "a song of an end" is meant to indicate his wistfulness at the

death of the folk culture that he experienced during his sojourn in the South (Turner 123). At the same time, however, it is also "oracular," and thus we can imagine the text as an oracular swan-song. *Cane* functions to point to the death of African American bodies, communities and psyches, a marker of the living death under which African Americans lived in the post-Reconstruction era. In this way it is oracular as well: Toomer is unable to quell the possibility of a racist future at the end of "Kabnis," and despite the sunshine which floods the "southern town," he is unable to dispel an Afro-pessimistic reality. This lineage of Afro-pessimism is one I continue to expand upon, albeit in the space of the prison industrial complex, in the following chapter on Chester Himes.

Chapter Two – "A Being Outside of Relationality": Queerness and Black Ontology in Chester Himes' *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*

The black man can destroy America completely, destroy it as a nation of any consequence. It can just fritter away in the world. It can be destroyed completely – Chester Himes

To enter into these literary chambers is to enter into conversation with the dead – Diana Fuss

In 1936, Chester Himes was paroled from the Ohio State Penitentiary, where he had spent nearly eight years serving a sentence for armed robbery. In *The Quality of Hurt*, the first volume of his two-part autobiography, Himes recalls the paralyzing numbness that slipped over him at the moment of arrest: "I couldn't run; I never could run. I have always been afraid that that one stupid mental block is going to get me killed… I wanted to faint but I remained conscious. There was too much and not enough hurt" (*The Quality of Hurt* 56). This hurt, coupled with what Himes calls the absurdity of American racism, provide the main frameworks for thinking through the texts in his oeuvre.[38] When Himes left prison at the age of 27, he took with him a manuscript on his experiences while incarcerated, including the horrific fire of April 21, 1930. A highly bastardized version of the novel was published in 1952 with the title *Cast the First Stone,* but it was not until 1998 that *Yesterday Will Make You Cry,* with both the original title and content restored, was made available by Old School Books. It is arguable that Himes

[38] Himes is arrested as he tries to pawn off jewelry that he stole during a robbery**.** Unknown to Himes, a guest at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago, had reported the theft of her jewelry; although Himes had none of her belongings on his person, her description matched the stolen ring he had in his possession. Furthermore, it was later revealed that the Blackstone Hotel's female guest had not had her jewels stolen, but was, in fact, in the process of committing insurance fraud. In essence, Himes is not only caught due to a crime he did not commit, but because of a crime that did not even occur. This is what Himes would consider the absurd taken to the extreme.

is far better known for his Harlem Detective series, which includes *The Real Cool Killers* (1959) and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965), highly stylized pulp noir novels that focused on the gritty and ultra-violent lives of detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones. Readers are also more familiar with Himes' first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), where he sharply critiques Communism, upward mobility (or the descendants of Du Bois' Talented Tenth) and sexual relations between black men and white women.[39] The novel ends with the protagonist, Bob Jones, accused of rape, and offered enrollment in the navy as a means of evading jail time. Himes' protagonists, suffering from their hurt, attempt to navigate their constricted lives, and these navigations are characteristic of his writing. Yet as I argue, these efforts on the part of Jimmy Monroe manifest themselves differently in *Yesterday Will Make You Cry.*

The primary – and most visibly recognizable – difference is that *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* features a white protagonist, as well as frank depictions of queer kinship within the space of the prison.[40] Due to numerous similarities to Himes' childhood and adolescence that one can find between the novel and his published autobiography, I read this novel as an autobiographical narrative that complicates the idea that Jimmy is "Himes's white alter ego, whose merciless self-portrayals are astonishing. He is at times

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[39] Himes is not the only – nor the earliest – African American author who discusses the influence of Communism in 20th century United States race politics. Because of their (albeit sometimes limited) definition of racism as a class struggle, the Communist Party received initial support from prominent writers including Angelo Herndon and Richard Wright (e.g. see "Bright and Morning Star" in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1938). Many of these writers would later withdraw their support to express dissatisfaction in the limited role of blacks within the party.

[40] I differentiate between homosexual *acts* and what I call failed queer kinship; the former is predicated on sexual *desire* (and potential subsequent encounters), while the latter is a means with which familial ties are created but ultimately broken. This is a term that I more fully flesh out later in the chapter.

narcissistic, self-pitying, self-delusory, paranoid, and fearful of his homosexual yearnings" (Margolies and Fabre 76).[41] Although Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre's *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* ranks as perhaps the most definitive biography of the author, this reading of Jimmy as Himes' "white alter ego" does a disservice to what I argue is a much more complicated and provocative authorial decision. The purported absence of blackness, in fact, speaks volumes as to troubled and troubling presence in *Yesterday Will Make You Cry.* In this chapter, I propose that Himes focuses on the microcosm of the prison vis-à-vis the physical, material structure of the building, as well as the psychic bondage of the prisoners, in order to illuminate the absence of blackness itself *as* the ontological construction of blackness. I focus on Jimmy not as mere stand-in for Himes, nor to (dis)prove the historical accuracy of the narrative, but in order to illuminate Himes' complicating of black subjectivity. Namely, I frame the (b)lack in the novel as one negotiated through ontological absence and resistant to the idea of loss, which, by its very definition, entails the possibility of a kind of (re)entry into dominant narratives of normative subjectivity. With autobiographies, specifically, this entry point is constituted as a writing of the self into legibility and thus history. Yet the irreducible truth of Jimmy's whiteness speaks to the opposite of this argument: Himes' novel disavows the claim of writing himself, or creating "testimony on behalf of," into any kind of ontological or subjective being (Mostern 33).

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[41] Himes himself admits to this: in an interview with Michel Fabre in an issue of *Hard-Boiled Dicks,* he states that "[*Cast the First Stone*] is one of my most autobiographical novels, although the publishers cut a lot out of it" (Fabre 131).

In particular, my framework in this chapter is largely indebted to David Marriott's intervention into the field of Afro-pessimism. To expand upon the material in my introduction, Marriott's *On Black Men* and *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*, utilize analyses of Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic scholarship on the black psyche, and it is from here that I borrow the concept of an impossible black unconscious as my methodological structure of reading Jimmy's whiteness not against, but *as*, Himes blackness. Here, too, the condition of blackness relies upon its openness to being violated in all senses of the word. I then examine the ways in which *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* attempts to bridge the divide left by the continuous phenomenon of natal alienation through the formation of queer kinships, and how, in the face of the gratuitous violence that defines blackness, these attempts at shared bonds always inevitably fail. Himes' investment is in what I term queerness-as-function, as opposed to queerness-as-representation (or perhaps a performative queerness, as opposed to a performance of queerness). Through my reading, I propose Himes' autobiographical novel as a text profoundly concerned with – and informed by – the impossible relationality that provides the structural logic of civil society. Ultimately, I propose a reading of *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* in which Jimmy is, in fact, a black man, constructed as such through a whiteness that is inescapable in its ruthless and paradigmatic takeover of the black psyche.

The Interiority of the Prison and the Production of Autobiographical Narratives

The purpose of this chapter is not to outline the history and maintenance of prisons as ideological and physical structures of state-regulated violence in the United

States, nor is it a comprehensive study of the steady output of prison narratives beginning the early 20th century. In order to understand the ways in which Himes' text is in some ways uniquely situated in relation to other narratives of incarceration, however, I begin with a brief overview of prison structures and the subsequent production of texts that speak to physical and embodied containment. It is especially critical to understanding how closely woven narratives about incarceration are with narratives of United States nationalism; indeed, it is perhaps impossible to imagine them as separate entities. In *Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film,* Peter Caster argues that "the history, literary and otherwise, of the United States is indivisible from that of prisons," and that "imprisonment is a condition of human experience that shapes the identity of those incarcerated and the national identity of the state that imprisons"; both individual and state are affected by the practice of incarceration (Caster 3). Furthermore, and unsurprisingly, "the history of racial incarceration in the nation tacitly criminalizes black masculinity in the cultural imagination, in effect if not in intent a strategy of racial containment" (3).[42] While Caster's work addresses both novels and films, some by authors and filmmakers who have never been to prison, his connection between the nation and the prison is relevant here, particularly in light of my earlier argument that America's move into modernity is one which is, by nature, violent. Much like lynching was seen as operating to punish black males for their supposedly unruly

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[42] Caster's argument is a tripartite one that I disagree with; the last component is the argument that texts about prisons "offer a tactic of resistance in an expanded model of personal identity, a social subjectivity emphasizing an engagement with history and a collective sense of the self in that history at odds with the American ideal of autonomous individualism" (Caster 4).

sexuality, the structure of the prison discursively links blackness – and specifically black masculinity – with criminality, while imprisonment functions in the cultural imaginary as a means of effectively containing black criminality.

In the early 19th century, there were two distinct approaches to designing prisons, which, in turn, gave rise to the logic of activity and production of labor. The "Auburn or New York system… celled the inmates separately but worked them during the day in factorylike industries. Strict silence and lockstep regimentation were firmly enforced." In contrast, the "Pennsylvania or silent system, held that any contact among inmates was harmful. It called for complete isolation of all convicts in individual cells." Despite their seemingly disparate ideologies, "[t]he constant element in both the New York and the Pennsylvania penitentiary systems was separation from the outside world, which was seen as the source of corruption" (Massey 19 – 20). What is evident is that inmates were kept away from the rest of society not as a means of containment, per se, but as a method of protection from potentially destructive outside influences. Rehabilitation, the primary focus of imprisonment, eventually lost merit in the 1850s, as more and more African Americans and new immigrants were imprisoned (Caster 9). As previously explored by Hartman, we see how the influx of black bodies within prisons was connected to the Thirteenth Amendment and the failed promise of emancipation beginning in 1865. Hartman argues that the Civil War solidified the racist rationale for the incarceration of African Americans. She writes that in the moment wherein the slave transitions into "freedman," "the sentiment of alienism became for the first time complete.' Without the illusion of 'patriarchal ties' or the 'benevolent sentiments of dependence or protection,'

the African seemed only an outsider and thus a danger to the social order" (*Scenes of Subjection* 164). The perverse ordering of chattel slavery makes it so that slaves were made flesh and property; post-Emancipation, slaves are made juridical subjects in need of excessive scrutiny and policing, "danger[s] to the social order." Thus the "outsider" was locked away, made to disappear, not for protection *from* the outside world, but to protect the outside world from the threatening agent of chaotic insurgency and rage.

Where Caster and I diverge is in the identity and identification of the criminal. Caster writes, "[i]ncreasingly, identity has been addressed not as a stable ontological categorization, but as a culturally situated struggle among competing groups, enacted by individuals through socially coded performances" (Caster 13).[43] He then makes the argument that a "person becomes a criminal, however, not in committing the act of a crime, but through declaration by the court… Criminalization is thus a jurisprudential process, not coincident with the commission of the crime, but rather, an effect of conviction" (13). We can read this as a proposal of the social construction of a criminal, as opposed to the biological imperative of particular social groups to veer toward violence and lawlessness. Yet despite his work on investigating the disproportionate number of black men in prison, I find Caster's argument problematic in that it refutes the work done by someone like Hartman, namely that for slaves – and thus African

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[43] We see a similar ideology in Jose Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications,* where he configures disidentificatory identifications as a kind of resistance available to subjects that occupy minority status. He contends, "[d]isidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (Muñoz 11). Again, the criminalization of blackness does not mean that there is not a performative resistance to such interpellations, and such singular constructs of identity. What I propose Himes is interested in, however, is the futility of such resistance on an ontological level.

Americans – the identity of "freedman/citizenship" was always already made inseparable from criminality.[44] Caster borrows the concept of interpellation from Louis Althusser, whose classic example is of the policeman hailing a subject into being via the call, "you there!": "[Althusser] describes that hailing as the entry of the subject into history" (16). In other words, he does not read blackness as configured through social death. Through that hailing, we can also see Michel Foucault's argument that "[c]onfronted by a power that is law, the subject who is constituted as subject – who is 'subjected' – is he who obeys" (*The History of Sexuality* 85). Hartman's intervention into this conversation, however, is that the African American is hailed as simultaneously "free" and "criminal"; the paradoxical nature of the interpellation is that while there is subjection, there is no subject. In a more nuanced reading, we see how the hailing of the African American is not "an entry of the subject into history," but a (re)animation of the afterlife of slavery, an impossible yet always present hailing of the being who was and remains socially dead.

Under these racist and classist principles of policing and incarceration, we see a staggering output of autobiographical prison narratives from the 1950s and onward which testify to the material conditions of violence in the United States; what sets Himes' novel apart, however, is its fictionalized form. Some narratives, such as Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987) and Leonard Peltier's *Prison Writings: My Life is my Sun Dance* (1999), are more straightforward accounts of the authors' experiences while

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[44] I want to be very clear that Caster is not ignoring, nor is he ignorant of, the very real racism present in the practice of incarceration of the United States. However, what sets his work apart from scholars like Hartman and other Afro-pessimists is that in the aftermath of the Thirteenth Amendment, Caster contends that former slaves were freed and free. For Caster, the disproportionate number of crimes committed against African Americans versus the number of incarcerated African Americans points to juridical and social racism of black experience, not to the social death which constitutes black ontology.

imprisoned, beginning with apprehension, interrogation, and sentencing, and sometimes culminating in escape or a commuting of the sentence. Others, including George Jackson's *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970), take an epistolary form, communicating the prisoners' thoughts to a particular individual or individuals outside of the prison structure. For example, Jackson advocates a militant resistance aligned with the Black Liberation Army, utilizing the letters to Angela Y. Davis, his mother, or his lawyer as a means of education and communication. Still others, such as Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), comprise essays on various topics, including the assassination of Malcolm X and the Watts Riots of 1965, and broaden the struggle for black civil rights to join Third World movements. In "Rallying Round the Flag," Cleaver makes the critical connection of "the link between America's undercover support of colonialism abroad and the bondage of the Negro at home," globalizing the discourse on black rights to an international scale (Cleaver 115). During this time, the tradition of placing the black domestic struggle within the context of international liberation movements finds its home in numerous autobiographical texts in prison literature in the United States; both the specificity and communality of liberation movements become a critical component of the authors' accumulation of knowledge both before and during incarceration.

Yesterday Will Make You Cry technically does not have standing as Himes' autobiography: his later published two-volume collection – *The Quality of Hurt* (1973) and *My Life of Absurdity* (1976) – holds that distinction. Nor is it possible to ignore the author's own admission that a variety of his novels, and not just this particular one, track

experiences of his life.[45] Yet the very oversight of *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* as an autobiographical text because of a white protagonist is precisely why such a reading is necessary; I am not so much interested in Himes' "personal experience" of incarceration, but rather in his "traumatically constrained ideology" in regards to the ongoing tension in African American literary and cultural studies on the topic of black futurity (Mostern 10). For Himes, Jimmy's physical imprisonment mirrors the "traumatically constrained" black psyche he reveals in *Yesterday Will Make You Cry.* This is especially true when reading against the grain of what an autobiography is supposed to do for both the writer and audience; that is, the textual construction of the self – or, in other words, the writing process – is theoretically instrumental in the insertion of the self into a legible, recognizable history. For the audience, the role of the autobiography is to make the author's life open to literary consumption, an empathic comprehension of his/her triumphs and defeats. I argue that Himes' narrative functions as a refusal to adhere to this role because his writing does not inscribe Jimmy into history, but rather illuminates and exacerbates both his and Himes' standing outside of history, ontology and relationality.

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[45] For example, as mentioned earlier, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* is based on Himes' time in Los Angeles; he writes, "[i]t was from the accumulation of my racial hurts that I wrote my bitter novel of protest, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*" and in New York he "encountered the experiences which [he] later put into [his] novel *Pinktoes*" (*The Quality of Hurt* 75). H. Bruce Franklin also offers more detail on this point in *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist,* where he writes that Himes' first five novels are all more-or-less autobiographical, and they span the range of Himes's American experience, from his childhood as the son of a Black professor in Mississippi, through his years in prison and his later work in Los Angeles shipyards during World War II, to that destructive love affair with a white American woman shortly before he left the country" (*Prison Literature in America* 208).

<u>The Absent Presence of a Publication History</u>

The manuscript of the novel Himes wrote while incarcerated undergoes numerous changes in both title and content, and much of Himes' reaction to these changes remains unknown. We do know, however, that the novel has a troubled and relatively obscure publication history, rejected by numerous publishing houses including Alfred A. Knopf and Holt. We also know that the title changes from *Day to Day* (1936) to *The Way It Was* (1939), to *Black Sheep* and *Yesterday Will Make You Cry,* and when Margot Johnson, his editor, "sold the novel to Coward-McCann for a $1,200 advance," it becomes *Cast the First Stone* in 1952 (Muller 39).[46] In terms of the content, there are also critical changes which occur, the most significant of which is Jimmy's race. Himes candidly states, "I had made the protagonist of my prison story a Mississippi white boy; that ought to tell me something, but I don't know what – but obviously it was the story of my own prison experiences" (*The Quality of Hurt* 117). It is this admission of uncertainty that marks the novel as, in some ways, incompatible with the rest of his works; the seeming ambivalence of this authorial choice points to the silences which surround the 1952 publication of *Cast the First Stone.*[47] The 1952 manuscript was markedly different from any of Himes' versions. In their editors' note to the 1998 version, Marc Gerald and Samuel Blumenfield write that Himes' original editors had "upset the whole structure of the book and

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[46] Other titles included *Present Tense, Debt of Time, Solitary,* and *Day After Day.*
[47] In *My Life of Absurdity*, Himes recants this earlier statement, writing, "[m]y publishers wished to imply that the story in *Cast the First Stone* was the story of my life and problems and I wanted to state outright that it had nothing to do with me" (*My Life of Absurdity* 125). He also makes a similar comment during an interview with Michel Fabre for *Hard-Boiled Dicks*: "most of the events I used happened to the tough guys I found in jail, rather than to myself" (M. Fabre 131). Again, my intention is not to ferret out the exact reason as to why Jimmy is white, but rather to examine what this authorial decision does for the construction of blackness in the novel.

reordered chapters, even rewriting certain passages… [they] deliberately and relentlessly erased the tenderer and more artistic aspects to turn Himes's manuscript into a hard-boiled prison novel," and that they had done this because "the only place where the black man was not an invisible man was in a prison cell" (7, 9). To return to my earlier discussion of the social role of the prison, we see how Himes' editors unilaterally make this assumption as well; namely, that criminality must be made visible in order for blackness to be seen.

For Himes, this novel is a testament to the absurd violence which marks his life, as well as to his deft literary skills as a writer; thus his disappointment is beyond measure when the manuscript remains unpublished. In *The Quality of Hurt* he writes, "[t]he publishers didn't want it. I have since learned that American publishers are not interested in black writers unless they bleed from white torture. I was beginning to bleed, but I had not bled enough by the time I wrote that book" (*The Quality of Hurt* 72). As early as 1941 (four years before the publication of *If He Hollers Let Him Go*), Himes sent portions of the novel to Doubleday at the request of its editor-in-chief Ken McCormick, "[b]ut Doubleday's reader Schuyler Crane predictably thought the novel 'too vivid for the average reader's taste' and then they lowered the real boom: 'Frankly, we do not think we can see a book as grim as this one'" (L. Jackson 302). Some scholars assert that perhaps in "Himes' desperate quest for both income and recognition, he may have participated quite willingly in turning the manuscript into a book that would be commercially viable

in 1952 America" (Franklin "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Convict").[48] It is undeniable that Himes may have indeed made editorial changes due to the demands on a reading public; at the same time, Himes comments that "I wrote about white men because their problems were the problems of convicts, no matter what color they were. They experienced the same emotions, whether they were black or white" (M. Fabre 125). While it is tempting to read such comments as an indication of universalism, I argue that Himes' ambivalence toward Jimmy's whiteness – "that ought to tell me something, but I don't know what" – speaks to the often times conflicted nature of Himes' understanding of the structural positioning of blackness and his own position as a black author, especially in the company and under the shadow of Richard Wright. As Stephen F. Milliken writes in *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal,* "the role of spokesperson for the race was thrust upon him as a writer. Few categories could have suited him less… from the beginning, critics insisted on judging his writing, to his own immense disgust, solely on its value as 'protest'" (Milliken 2).

Too, Himes is never fully at ease with the trajectory taken by *Cast the First Stone*¸ the shuffling between editors and publishing houses and his increasing alterations to the novel. In a series of letters between Himes and various editors and authors (compiled by John A. Williams), his disgruntlement and displeasure become increasingly apparent. In a letter to Carl Brandt, Himes writes that the

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[48] Himes is equally confounding in his references to his time in the Ohio State Penitentiary. He veers between a deep-seated ache – "I knew that my long prison term had left its scars, I knew that many aspects of prison life had made deep impressions on my subconscious" – in *The Quality of Hurt* to nonchalance in *My Life of Absurdity*: "Nothing happened in prison that I had not already encountered in my outside life" (*The Quality of Hurt* 3; *My Life of Absurdity* 125). What I read in these conflicting messages is the attempt at forming a cohesive narrative out of, as he calls it, a life marked by the absurdity of racism.

> story is culled from my prison experiences and should have been successful, but it was not. NAL bought the reprint rights to *Cast the First Stone* for $2,500 but after three years decided against publishing it and voided the contract. Avon Books paid an advance of $1,500 for the reprint rights in 1959 or 1960 but decided against publication. I now have all the rights, and the book is for sale. (*Dear Chester* 12)

Critically and commercially, the novel is considered a failure. Furthermore, in a 1969 letter to Williams, Himes beseeches, "I wonder if you can possibly get a copy for me at any cost and I will repay you… I haven't been able to locate a copy anywhere" (102). In this short, succinct request, the invisibility of the text is made hypervisible; what Himes calls the "cut-in-two version of *Cast the First Stone*" has, in less than twenty years after its publication, disappeared. As H. Bruce Franklin suggests, perhaps Himes' editing of the novel, including the decision to make the protagonist a "Mississippi white boy," has more to do with commercialism and financial compensation than artistic satisfaction. Yet this proposal does not eradicate the hurt Himes suffers at the rejection of his manuscript by the public: "[b]eyond all doubt, [*The Primitive* and *Cast the First Stone*] are my best-written books, and, frankly, I fail to see why they should not be of great public interest – as entertainment" (*Dear Chester* 13). While Himes proffers these novels as his best, I argue that their unwieldiness as entertainment stems from the complex and pessimistic articulation of blackness. In *Yesterday Will Make You Cry,* this is done through a still taboo argument – namely, that blackness is always already presupposed through and formed by whiteness, and therefore functions solely as an ontological and psychological impossibility.

Black Psyches as White Psyches, Black Psyches are White Psyches

The logic of my argument hinges on reading Jimmy's whiteness not as standing in as a replacement for the author, but rather as Himes' profound refusal of what Avery Gordon calls "the complex articulation of… I testify to my transformation into a Slave while I testify to the existence of my shared humanity with you" (A. Gordon 145). By having a white protagonist at its center, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* refuses to bear witness to the transformation of black to slave or a shared (or shareable) humanity; indeed, what I trace is the vacating of blackness from Jimmy as a means testifying to the distinct lack of difference between the identities of black and slave, the structural positionality of blackness as being outside the realm of subjectivity, and the violence enacted through empathy upon such a non-subjectivity. The originating form of the autobiographical narrative in African American literature is undoubtedly the slave narrative, which "accomplished its task of laying bare slavery by producing a morality of verisimilitude, by forging a congruence between realism and sympathy. It told the *bare, real truth of slavery*… so the reader would be moved to comprehend, empathize, and seek salvation for the slave and the nation" (143, emphasis mine). In a 1952 letter to Richard Wright, Himes writes, "[*Yesterday Will Make You Cry*]… is a simple story about life in prison; maybe the boys can stand the truth about life in a state prison better than they can stand the truth about life in the prison of being a Negro in America." Yet the "truth" he writes of has no redemptive value; paradoxically, Jimmy's whiteness makes it impossible for the audience to "comprehend, empathize, and seek salvation" precisely because it points to the inescapable reality that the "real truth of slavery" is that it slavery not a

"word which describes an experience that anyone can be subjected to," but rather a "word which reconfigures the African body into Black flesh. Far from being merely *the experience* of the African, slavery is now the African's access to ontology" (*Red, White & Black* 18). Himes turns away from an audience that seeks the truth of blackness and refuses them an experience, and instead offers them an ontology that is contingent upon accumulation and fungibility. In the transference of black bodies from the plantations into prisons, we see the continuance of the ontology of violence, wherein blackness and slavery are not coexistent, but rather one and the same.

I turn here to Hartman's work in African American cultural studies, wherein she problematizes the notion of empathy as a useful or neutral structure of feeling. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America,* Hartman recounts John Rankin's letter to his brother, where he describes how deeply moved he was after witnessing a slave coffle. He writes that his imagination forces him to believe, "'for the moment, that I myself was a slave, and with my wife and children placed under the reign of terror. I began *in reality to feel* for myself, my wife, and my children'" (*Scenes of Subjection* 18, emphasis mine). This notation of beginning to "feel," where the feeling supplants "reality," is the point of Hartman's contention and my intervention. As she writes, "in making the slave's suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to read." Or, in other words, "the ease of Rankin's empathic identification is as much due to his good intentions and heartfelt opposition to slavery as to the fungibility of the captive body" (19). Rankin can *feel* black because blackness is fungible: blackness is

simultaneously tradable and replaceable. This is precisely what Wilderson critiques as the "ruse of analogy." He writes that this ruse "erroneously locates Blacks in the world – a place where they have not been since the dawning of Blackness," and continues that this attempt at "analogy is not only a mystification, and often erasure, of Blackness's grammar of suffering" (*Red, White & Black* 37). In other words, Rankin is able to feel for himself, his wife and his children precisely because the slave is erased in that feeling. He reads himself as analogous to the slave as a means of understanding his subject status when that analogy misreads and misplaces blackness. I contend Himes is making the same argument: by creating a figure that critically displaces the idea of a "shared humanity," by making Jimmy white, he negates an identificatory practice which grounds itself on an eventual recognition of subjectivity, or an insertion into civil society. Hence, Himes voids the novel of blackness (except for the most periphery figures) precisely because blackness is constituted through the absence of relationality itself.

Furthermore, I posit that Jimmy's whiteness is symptomatic of Afro-pessimism via the quandary David Marriott poses in his scholarship, where he challenges us to question "how we can understand black identity when, through an act of mimetic desire, this identity already gets constructed as white" (*Haunted Life* 208). Marriott re-reads Fanon's seminal encounter with a young white boy in *Black Skin, White Masks,* and an anecdote of a little black girl attempting to scrub herself clean of racial markings, not as encounters of interpellation, but as intensely fraught moments of violent phobic recognition of the self as something hateful and hated. Marriott states, "[i]n these two scenes a suppressed but noticeable anger and confusion arises in response to the intruding

other" (the other being the little white child for Fanon, and her own image for the little girl) and that this response has "to do with the realization that the other, as racial imago, has already occupied and split the subject's ego" (210).[49] It is not that blackness is set in Hegelian opposition to whiteness as the O/other, but rather that blackness is dependent on whiteness always already having been present. In other words, blackness is not "something missing," but rather "the addition of something undesirable and dirty that fragments the body by destroying all positive semblances of the self." This "addition" of blackness results in "the self's desire to hurt the imago of the body in a passionate bid to escape it" (210). In this reading of Fanon, Marriott offers his contribution to the field of Afro-pessimism: even on a psychic level, within the discourse of self and ontology, blackness is null and void. The black body is occupied by a white unconscious, one that loves his/herself as white, and hates his/herself as black.[50] As Marriott writes in the introduction to *On Black Men,* "[t]he black man is, in other words, everything that the wishful-shameful fantasies of culture want him to be, an enigma of inversion and of hate – and this is our existence as men, as black men" (*On Black Men* x).

In other words, I read Jimmy *as* the ultimate black man – the white man – as it seems that "black men can only attain a white – as against a black – identification of

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[49] Marriott's language may cause confusion here as he refers to Fanon and the little girl as "subjects." I wish to point out, however, that his terminology is a prescriptive gesture to their understanding of themselves as subjects, and not an indication of their subject status in relationship to whiteness.

[50] Here I must interject to add that I am *not* arguing that black *life* does not exist; indeed, as Wilderson himself states in an interview with Hartman, "I'm not saying that in this space of negation, which is blackness, there is no life. We have tremendous life." What I am arguing, however, is that this black social life is always imaginable only in the space of social death. To paraphrase, "whites gain their coherence by knowing what they are not… [black life] give[s] the nation its coherence because [it is] its underbelly" ("The Position of the Unthought" 187).

themselves," that indeed, "this prototypical identification with whiteness" is "a foundational culture and tradition which can be neither avoided nor eluded" (55 – 56). The absence of a black interiority is also addressed by Kevin Bell as he examines the 1953 meeting between Himes, Richard Wright and James Baldwin at Les Deux Magots in Paris. Bell writes that many of Himes's literary contemporaries, including Wright and Baldwin, are mostly invested in "sonorities, colors, and movements that… constitute little more than added flavorings, punctuations and accents by which to augment an already-established, normative 'white' interiority" ("Assuming" 853). This is in contrast to Himes, who waylays coherence and a structured black subjectivity for the "suffocating thickness of a crazy, wild-eyed feeling" which is the discord always present in the black unconscious, or the realization that one has always been, and will always be, at war with oneself (856). Jimmy thinks that "he could see his mind standing just beyond his reach, like a white, weightless skeleton" (*Yesterday* 52). His mind is not his to grasp, always "just beyond his reach," and is imagined as a white figure of death. It is impossible to incorporate Jimmy and his mind in much the same way as it is impossible to bring blackness into relationality, or to enfold him within civil society. To do so would lead to the logical unfolding present in Wilderson's work, and one which Himes' articulates forty years earlier during an interview: "[t]he black man can destroy America completely, destroy it as a nation of any consequence. It can just fritter away in the world. It can be destroyed completely" ("My Man Himes" 46). In other words, to make blackness relational is to lead to the incoherence and dismantling of civil society as it currently stands.

We see this phenomenon manifest itself almost immediately in *Yesterday Will Make You Cry:* as Jimmy enters his prison cell, he thinks to himself, "[t]he real prison was the one which kept coming back – a prison of dark, dank dungeons with moldy bones in rusted chains, the prison that held the Count of Monte Cristo, Jean Valjean, Saint Paul – the real prison was the prison in his mind" (*Yesterday* 25 – 26). The "real" prison for Jimmy is "in his mind," and he aligns himself with white literary and Biblical figures (many of whom are culturally claimed as white); it repeats again and again, "dank" with the specter of death as evidenced by the "moldy bones." Marriott writes that "[m]ournfully seeing himself trapped and reflected in the eyes of the little French boy, Fanon describes himself as 'arriving too late,' as being displaced by and intruded upon by racial hatred and phobia that fixes him as an imago" (*Haunted Life* 211). Jimmy's blackness is not only "'arriving too late,'" but also displaced by whiteness. In his mind he is the Count of Monte Cristo, Jean Valjean and Saint Paul – wronged men unjustly jailed, but the primary models of identification are not black men; this absence of black identification is the psychic manifestation of Jimmy's whiteness.

In other words, Jimmy *is* white and *thinks* white because to *be* black and *think* black is to be defined through displacement and intrusion "by racial hatred and phobia" (211). Jimmy thinks that "[i]t was all strange; everything was strange. After having been choked up for the past ten days, so scared and lost and alone, he could not realize that he was actually watching convicts play poker and laugh" (*Yesterday* 25). While we could read this moment as Jimmy's alienation from his surroundings – in other words, the "past ten days" have made his world unrecognizable – I instead read it as his alienation from

himself. In the same way that Fanon conceptualizes his moment of interpellation as "happening to something else, damaging someone else… He sees but does not recognize this imago as himself," Himes writes that Jimmy is unable to realize – or recognize – himself; he is foreign to himself because his psyche is not his own (*Haunted Life* 210). The removal of blackness from Jimmy's character is symptomatic of the evacuation of the self in the figure of blackness: Jimmy's racial identity is white because the black imago is an unfathomable conception. Although some have read Himes' decision to make Jimmy white as a means of "eliminat[ing] the entire subject of racism… the most radical change imaginable, a basic alteration in the nature of the reality portrayed," I read this egress of blackness as incisively narrowing the scope to pinpoint the ontological element of antiblackness on the psyche (Milliken 160).

One of the most critical changes between the 1952 and 1998 manuscripts is the voice of the narrator; the former has a first-person narrator, while the later version's Jimmy Monroe speaks and muses in the third person.[51] In his chapter on Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington in *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775 – 1995,* Maurice O. Wallace writes that first-person subjectivity

> is finally only achieved at the expense of the exhausting effort required by the author to repress the fragmentary, dueling impulses of a divided consciousness normally kept in the reserve of the unconscious. Psychoanalytically considered,

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[51] The original manuscript prior to 1952 was also told from the perspective of a third person narrator. As with other editorial changes made to the manuscript, it is difficult to tell which changes were made by Himes prior to publication, and which by his editors. Certain scholars have argued that the first person narrative of *Cast the First Stone* invokes a reader's contempt "as the evidence of [Jimmy's] basic sinfulness steadily accumulates under the first-person narrator's pitiless 'introspective' probing" (Milliken 63).

> first-person narrative, including the fictional impulses in black autobiography and the autobiographical impulses of black fiction, depends on more than “everything available in memory, perception, understanding, imagination, [and] desire” suitable for public discourse… It also rests upon the autobiographer’s success in repressing “everything that… in some way or other [is] painful… alarming or disagreeable or shameful by the standards of the subject’s positionality.” (*Constructing the Black Masculine* 83)

There is much to examine in this lengthy quote, and it seems as though first-person narratives require more work to maintain their literary coherence and progression. For Wallace, the purpose of the first-person narrative, particularly in the construction of black masculinity, is an “exhausting effort” which brings to light the “fragmentary, dueling” nature of a supposedly concrete identity. This mode of addressing an audience is reliant upon the repression of elements that cannot be articulated through the rhetoric of “‘memory, perception, understanding, imagination [and] desire’” by the author. What becomes evident is the “vast area of repression around which the self-conscious autobiographical subject is always skirting” (84).

Why, then, the editorial or authorial change from the third-person narrator to the first, in the original publication of *Cast the First Stone*? I argue that it is precisely because the third-person narrative indicates a level of vulnerability and uncertainty for Himes, a gesturing toward “the quality of hurt” that so defined his life. While it is not my intention to either affirm or deny any authorial intention, what we can gather from Wallace’s argument is that a first-person narrative allows for a more sanitized and cohesive text, as it depends on the author’s ridding the narrative of anything “‘alarming or disagreeable or shameful by the standards of the subject’s positionality’” (*Constructing the Black Masculine* 83). In other words, the first-person narrative presents

a subject whose positionality is entirely comprehensible, whose interiority is empathically accessible. In his introduction to the 1998 version of *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*, Melvin Van Peebles questions, "[w]hat would you call forcing Chester to change the original manuscript from the reflective third person to the more 'natural' (i.e., primitive) first person?" (*Yesterday* 19). This is, in some ways, comparable to Rankin's reading of the coffle: the "I" allows for both rationality and relationality. Thus I read Himes decision to write in third-person similarly to how I read Jimmy's whiteness; it undermines the possibility of psychic empathy and preconceived notions of representative blackness. The changes made by earlier editors remove that possibility completely. We return here to Himes' communication with Richard Wright: "maybe the boys can stand the truth about life in a state prison better than they can stand the truth about life in the prison of being a Negro in America."[52] Himes does not ask for an understanding, or even an acknowledgement of his truth, but rather refuses to provide any kind of haven from his "fragmentary, dueling impulses," at once wrestling with the impossibility of the black psyche and the absurdity of gratuitous violence.

Himes' investment in extrapolating this absurdity is made clear in the opening of *My Life of Absurdity*: "[r]acism generating from whites is first of all absurd. Racism creates absurdity among blacks as a defense mechanism. Absurdity to combat absurdity" (*My Life of Absurdity* 1). When his affair with Alva, a white woman, comes to an abrupt end, he realizes that "[i]mmediately I became impotent again. That was the absurdity

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[52] This concept of blackness being made legible through the ontological positioning of a subject is one I return to in greater detail in the third chapter of the dissertation.

which made me know that I was living a life of absurdities" (21). Himes' statement that racism is absurd, and that it begets even more absurdity, at first reads as a denouncement of racism as having neither rhyme nor reason. I propose instead to read this as an implication of the physical and psychic ruptures that Himes forces Jimmy to undergo (and some of which Himes himself lived through), and that these ruptures are in fact testament to this absurdity. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* Toni Morrison argues that while slave narratives were critical in "influenc[ing] abolitionists and convert[ing] antiabolitionists," they could not and did not undo the master narrative, as the "master narrative could make any number of adjustments to keep itself intact" (Morrison 50 – 51). The master narrative of dominance over black individuals, communities, histories and psyches – those which have no relational narrative – in the United States can "make any number of adjustments" precisely because the way in which gratuitous violence manifests itself can adjust. This shape-shifting capacity of slavery's enduring presence, I argue, is what Himes points out to be absurd.

One cannot deny the result of this violence on the black psyche; Marriott's labeling of it as a war is not hyperbolic, but rather prescient in its implication of warring factions. In the elaborate analyses of Fanon which inform his work, Marriott references Hegel's dialectic and writes that "for Fanon, black self-consciousness is already occupied by a foreign force, an inner divide or unconscious partition that forbids any advance, or counter-attack, in the black man" (*On Black Men* 67). Himes conceptualizes this war as being inevitable and explains, "[i]t did not occur to [Jimmy] that he had it coming, that he

been building up toward it for almost all of his life… That had been his life, all inside of him, not really happening in this world of mass and matter and living people" (*Yesterday* 115). The enormity of this propelling – "that he had been building up toward it for almost all of his life" – points to a signification of social death. The interiority of Jimmy's mind even more tellingly speaks to the divide that is present in the black unconscious. This "blackness is already intruded upon, displaced by, an invasive whiteness which, as it were, gets there first… to be black is to be already interfered with, violated by, a whiteness which comes from the inside out" (*On Black Men* 79). If we read Jimmy's "it" as blackness, we can see the approach of an unavoidable war within the self. If the black man learns to hate blackness via his interpellation as a black man, then we see the startling truth in Marriott's understanding of Fanon: "I am white because unconsciously I distrust what is black in me. That unconscious is not only 'on guard' and suspicious, it is partisan, embattled, like a garrison keeping watch over a conquered black ego" (79). It is Jimmy's recognition of his blackness that splits his consciousness, and I propose that Jimmy's whiteness gives him standing as the ultimate embodiment of a black man.

The conditions of social death are firmly in place, both in the prison and in Jimmy's psyche. In the aftermath of the 1930 Ohio Penitentiary fire which kills some 300 odd inmates, Jimmy and Blocker, another inmate, are planning a poker game, when a "tall colored convict" enters the room and inserts himself into their conversation. The three of them joke and laugh, portraying an easy, affable kind of situation, when suddenly,

> [w]hile they were looking at him, the top of the convict's head flew up into the air. He had been making his bunk, and now, on the white sheet

> which his hands still held, a gooey mass of brains appeared. They were still looking at him, and his mouth was still grinning as it had been before he lost the top half of his head, but his eyes were gone and blood was coming out over the edge of his skull, running down his ears and down his nostrils, and his hands, which had been spreading the sheet, gave it one terrible jerk, pulling the sheet down over him as he fell between the bunks. (*Yesterday* 166 – 167)

Here is a moment where blackness literally shows its face, only to be eradicated and erased immediately. Without warning, without provocation, the "tall colored convict" has "lost the top half of his head" and "blood was coming out over the edge of his skull." It is a sudden and violent death that points to Orlando Patterson's rumination that "[p]erhaps the most distinctive attribute of the slave's powerlessness was that it always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death, usually violent death" (Patterson 5). The convict who loses his life does so to an accident: Jimmy and the others later find out that "these deaths were the result of an accidental burst of machine gun fire, coming from a machine gun stationed a hundred yards distant" (*Yesterday* 167). And afterward, nothing changes: "the incident was forgotten and overwhelmed by memory of the other hundreds dead" (167). The "other hundreds" dead are ones who died in the fire, and Himes stresses that the senseless violence of this catastrophe is inimitably connected to the senseless violence of this singular death; the corpses are piled high in the prison because the status of the slave, the convict, the black, is always one in which violent death is always present, and barely held in check.

This interstitial and knotted space between social death and physical death is demarcated in the structure of the prison as well. In Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California,* she writes that

"prisons sit on the edge – at the margins of social spaces, economic regions, political territories, and fights for rights. This apparent marginality is a trick of perspective, because, as every geographer knows, edges are also interfaces…" (Gilmore 11). If we are to understand the space of the prison as a continuation of the plantation in as much as it is an "interface" of dynamics of social power, nowhere is this idea of how the "condition of slavery did not absolve or erase the prospect of death" more evident than in the passages devoted to this cataclysmic, fiery event.[53] Himes describes the raging fire, and the G&H cell house as "crammed with living convicts; a huge red-brick monster with a thousand fiery eyes, sucking in the flames and the smoke upon the living, writhing convicts in its belly" (*Yesterday* 96).[54] As Jimmy rushes over, he, too, is swallowed, and the "memory of old Blocker, of the dormitory, of the prison, of life itself," all memories are emptied out of him (96). His psyche is ingested, and, to circle back to Marriott, this manifests itself as a "melancholic reaction to being taken over by someone else's anxiety or phobia, an intrusion that violently evacuates the subject" (*Haunted Life* 219).[55] Jimmy manifests this evacuation of the subject on multiple levels: first, through his whiteness; second, through his impossible psyche of blackness; and third, here, in the disappearance of all memories. He is overtaken by the specter of death, of seeing others being burned alive;

[53] It is not my intention to argue that prison and plantations are equals in their articulation of labor. Gilmore herself writes that the comparison between the two fails as "very few prisoners work for anybody while they're locked up" (Gilmore 21). My rationale here is not to examine labor practices but ontological definitions as set forth by Afro-pessimists. Again, slavery (and, as I argue, the containment of blackness) is not defined by labor, but by the marked conditions of violence, accumulation and fungibility.
[54] Some scholars argue that the prison building itself, as opposed to racism, emerges as the antagonist in the novel. For more information, see Stephen F. Milliken's discussion of *Cast the First Stone* in his text, *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal.*
[55] Marriott does utilize the term "subject" when discussing blackness, but I believe that his use is performative, not paradigmatic; his usage of "subject" does not indicate the subjectivity of the black.

the intrusion of the dying convicts ruptures his consciousness, and here we see his status as the embodiment of social death. Himes utilizes the language of death to describe Jimmy's fleeing to the chapel from the scene of the fire: "[w]orms began crawling in Jimmy's stomach; little white maggots and long slimy worms, crawling in his stomach… as if he, too, was dead and in the ground and already rotting" (*Yesterday* 101). Jimmy's identification with the dead convicts speaks to the gratuitous violence that informs his condition. Even while he is biologically alive, Himes presents him as socially dead, the manifestation of always having been lack.

The imagery of the worms extends to Jimmy's psyche as well; we read the corporeality of his body being infested by worms, but Himes also insists that the "worms began crawling about in [Jimmy's] brain again. They were mashed in the middle and they crawled slowly just beneath his skull, dragging their mashed insides" (104). The worms are present "again," indicating perhaps that they have always been present. This imagery occurs when Jimmy falls on a corpse, and he feels the "soft, mushy form" give way underneath the weight of his body, and as he frantically attempts to distance himself, he "could feel their legs gooey with the slimy green stuff that had been strung out on the sidewalk" (104). The "slimy green stuff" is in reference to the dead bodies he has just seen, "hundreds of them lying on the ground, and they all looked alike to him, with their teeth bared and vomit in their lips and their bodies grotesquely twisted and their hands, with the flesh scorched and burned, gripping at something" (103). Himes' reliance on the materiality of the body, of the fluids that are expelled in death and terror which then become evident within Jimmy's mind, indicates the "evacuated space" of the black

psyche, where there is a "violent desire to fend off this intrusion... by putting an end to this sickening charade by looking at oneself *as if one were in their place*" (*Haunted Life* 208). Himes acknowledges the bodies of the dead in order to contrast them with Jimmy's aliveness; at the same time, Jimmy's physical entrapment within the prison and psychic bondage of non-subjectivity indicates his status as socially dead. This impossible contradiction presents itself as Jimmy's looking at himself as if he were in their place; that is to say, legible coherence of his blackness is made possible through Jimmy's identification with the dead, as well as his gradually increasing knowledge of the prison as the structural locus of death. As such, after the fire, Jimmy and Blocker see a room full of prisoners sleeping, "fully dressed, their clothes wrinkled and twisted about their bodies, their mouths open and snoring, some with saliva drooling from the corners. To Jimmy, they seemed no different from the dead" (*Yesterday* 159).

One major point of critical disdain for the 1952 manuscript of *Cast the First Stone* is the excising of Himes' more introspective meditations on Jimmy's intense feelings of life within the psychic space of absence, part of which I address here. After receiving a letter from his mother, Jimmy attempts to return to his poker game, when he is suddenly caught up in a fury of abjection, and

> it all boiled up in him, the accumulations of all his feelings and sensations and emotions and thoughts; all his hates and fears and humiliations and irritations and stagnations; all the putrid, rotten filth of all those years. It spewed up in his mind like the gaseous belch of rotting slop and gagged him.
>
> All the rotting bog of repressions and inhibitions and shames and scares and those dark and secret impulses and passions and loves and hates and degeneracies and loathings; and those stale flat tears that had soured and spoiled inside of him; and all those dreams and ambitions and desires and aims that had rotted into wormy crusted filth were belching out. Those

> secret, hidden things inside him were breaking through. He could not hold them inside of himself any longer; he was beginning to flare, to blow; he was like a burning fuze on a dynamite cap. (*Yesterday* 247)

The editorial decision to remove nearly two pages of such ruminations again speaks to the desire of preserving and presenting a certain kind of subjectivity, a certain kind of blackness appears to be open to empathy. H. Bruce Franklin recounts a contemporaneous book review that was published on *Cast the First Stone*, where the interviewer castigates Himes as "'glib, reasonably literate, authoritative in a superficial way, full of self-pity and whining mannerisms'" (qtd. in *Prison Literature in America* 208). With the absence of this excised material, the more palatable version of the novel could be tossed aside as "glib," and thus it stands to reason that the inclusion of this material in the 1998 publication allows for the psychic space of death, the ontological lack that is blackness, to take center stage.

To return to earlier in the chapter, and the "fragmentary, dueling impulses of a divided consciousness" that must be controlled for a first-person narrator to take control of the narrative, Jimmy's "belching out" of this deep repression indicates perhaps the monumental labor that goes into maintaining that kind of neatly cohesive narrative (*Constructing the Black Masculine* 83). After all, what do we do with the overflow of Jimmy's "secret, hidden things," his "feelings and sensations and emotions and thoughts… hates and fears and humiliations and irritations and stagnations, and "repressions and inhibitions and shames and scares and those dark and secret impulses and passions and loves and hates and degeneracies and loathings… dreams and ambitions and desires and aims"? On one hand, this helps in rationalizing why Himes may have

originally utilized a third-person narrator. By virtue of Jimmy's narration being in the third-person, by virtue of his whiteness, Himes heightens our awareness of Jimmy's untouchability, the non-relational space he occupies as the embodiment of blackness, all the while negating the possibility for empathy. This concept of total alienation, of Jimmy's separation from "this world of mass and matter and living people," directs our attention to the internal alienation from the self that always takes place within his mind (*Yesterday* 115).

Concurrently, I read this scene of abjection as indicative of Afro-pessimism by exploring the ways in which it is not abjection, for, to borrow from Julia Kristeva, abject status presupposes a having once been alive; when face to face with a corpse, a subject can reason that a corpse shows "what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death… Such wastes drop so that I might live" (Kristeva 3).[56] Jimmy cannot make waste because he is waste, cannot make his object body abject and, as a result, "he 'hemorrhages' a deplorable quantity of *black* blood" (*Haunted Life* 211, italics mine).[57] As Himes writes, this waste "spewed up in [Jimmy's] mind like the gaseous belch of rotting slop and gagged him;" although he has a physical reaction, the actual excretion happens within his mind (*Yesterday* 217). Jimmy thinks that he "could not hold them inside of himself any longer; he was beginning to flare, to blow; he was like a

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[56] One can also think here of the triangulation that Wilderson draws between what he calls the White (settler, master, human), the Red (the savage, the half-human), and the Black (the slave, the non-human). Although the question that informs Indian ontology is one of genocide (and not sovereignty), there is still a native land to be found, or generations which can be traced.
[57] This is similar to the "[b]lack reddish blood" that swirls around Seventh Street in Jean Toomer's *Cane.* In both cases, the bodies themselves are made waste.

burning fuze [sic] on a dynamite cap" (247). To return to the scene of the coffle, Hartman writes that while the desire to empathize based on the debasing portrayal of slavery is natural, even ordinary, "what is remarkable is the way violence becomes neutralized and the shocking readily assimilated to the normal, the everyday, the bearable" (*Scenes of Subjection* 34). In similar ways, Jimmy has readily accepted and annihilated all of the categories which defined him outside of the prison; he has kept them within, a character's manifestation of the cell block which kept prisoners within during the fire and resulted in their deaths. Much like the fire and the expelling of corpses, Jimmy is "beginning to flare, to blow." This section of *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* returns later in the chapter when I further examine Jimmy's blackness-as-whiteness, and his status as socially dead, through the failed queer kinships and condition of natal alienation which permeate Himes' novel.

"'Let's make like we're cousins'": Natal Alienation and Queer Kinships

Upon initial examination, Afro-pessimism and queer theory seem incompatible; after all, it is reasonable to ask if the two can be reconciled considering the former takes an object (i.e., non-Human) as its locus of history, and the latter a subject (i.e., Human). I cannot argue against the very pressing reality of discrimination and hatred against those outside of non-normative sexualities and genders in the United States, and the ways in which queerness has been appropriated and commodified in an ever expanding neoliberal world. Yet at the same time, I stress that Afro-pessimism does not necessarily operate on the level of experience, but rather on the level of ontology. Simply put, the question is not one of quantifying suffering, but addressing the way in which blackness is constituted outside of civil society in a way that queerness is not. The structural positioning which

illuminates the possibilities of sexuality, while at times made other in regards to qualifiers of citizenship and belonging, are not outside of relationality. Queer history is still a history, albeit one constituted through loss. The history of blackness, on the other hand, is told through a grammar of antagonism which "breaks in on the mendacity of conflict" (*Red, White & Black* 5). Or, to bring Orlando Patterson's definition to bear upon the discussion, "[the slave] had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage" (Patterson 5).

The fruitfulness of queer theory, however, is that the discipline is founded on the idea of resisting definition and stability around the concept of subjectivity, while at the same time maintaining a political urgency around the situating of that same subject within spheres of lived experience. In other words, queer theory precisely encapsulates the borderland that Gloria Anzaldúa defines as a "vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition" (Anzaldúa 25). It is, in its best incarnation, the epitome of what she calls a *mestiza* consciousness: a consciousness born out of the recognition of multiple and sometimes warring positionalities that exist as a "source of intense pain" and in order to keep "breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (102). Utilizing this definition and purpose of queer theory, I argue that Himes' utilization of queer kinships works to undo the conditions of natal alienation through the formation of familial bonds. Although these gestures toward kinship ultimately (and inevitably) fail, I maintain that Himes seems to directly address E. Patrick Johnson's question, "what is the utility of queer theory on the front lines, in the trenches, on the street, or anyplace where the racialized and sexualized body is beaten, starved, fired, cursed – indeed, when the body is the site of

trauma?" ("'Quare' Studies" 129). Here, on the front lines, I read Himes as staking a claim in queerness-as-function as opposed to queerness-as-representation; in other words, he utilizes queerness to point to the condition of social death that defines Jimmy, and not as a means of expressing either the acts or the orientation of same-sex desire.

Thus far, I have made the case for Jimmy's blackness through psychoanalysis, and here I begin by bringing in the disciplinary praxis provided by Afro-pessimism and elaborating upon his standing as one who is natally alienated. Borrowing from Patterson, I argue that the African American, the one who embodies blackness, is a socially dead individual who "cease[s] to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order" (Patterson 5). As such, Jimmy is not only denied claims to his immediately existing family, but also denied "all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants" (5). While the prison obviously enforces a strict physical separation, the psychic separation that also permeates its occupants cannot be ignored. The black cannot lay claim to either ancestors or descendants; without the ability to do so, he remains outside of history while simultaneously, narrative and civil history/society is contingent upon him remaining outside.

We see this during his first visit with his mother, when Jimmy hastens to reassure her while she weeps, that he likes the food that she has so carefully prepared: "'I do like them, mother… How's Damon, mother? … Did he graduate, mother? Did – did you go to his graduation, mother?' Funny, he could not remember having called her *mother* before – it was always *mama*" (*Yesterday* 65). While it seems an insignificant point, Jimmy's inability to call his mother "mama" signifies a mental and emotional break from her;

although he loves her, and in fact in that moment "love[s] her more than he ever had, or had ever loved himself, or anyone in all his life," the level of intimacy presupposed by love has already started to wane (62). This is not in reaction to any particular mistake on her part. Rather, Jimmy's inability to call her "mama" stems from his desire to lie about the truth of the prison: "[h]e would have traded every hope of freedom for the power to smile. It struck him odd; he had never never never felt that way before" (64). In his article, "Que(e)rying the Prison-House of Black Male Desire: Homosociality in Ernest Gaines's 'Three Men,'" Keith Clark cites Robert Reid-Pharr's claim that "'the prison acts as a primary site for the articulation of a late twentieth-century Black American masculinity'" (qtd. in "Que(e)rying" 241). Thus even during the event of nascent manhood and masculinity, Jimmy is configured through natal alienation from his immediate family; while the physical separation from his family is instigated by the state, the emotional separation is done by Jimmy as a means of shielding his mother from his being as one whose "inside has been turned outside" (Spillers 67). The word "mama" is made inarticulate in the same moment Jimmy is placed outside of his mother's reach, outside of "that pure and holy love, that mother's love" (*Yesterday* 65). Here, we feel intensely Jimmy's status not as Jimmy, but as "convict no. 57232."

Furthermore, Jimmy is not allowed to reproduce and continue his lineage; the self-evident reason is of course that there simply are no women to procreate with. Jimmy mulls introspectively, as the days go by, that "where, before, there had been girls outside the walls; now there were only walls… Before, each moment had been all past, hurting with a deep ache of remorse; or all future, hideous with the thought of twenty years," and

that “[i]n this absoluteness there was no past. No outside world. No thought. No memory” (68 – 69). Even within the discourse of heterosexual desire, we see it being leached from Jimmy’s body; the loss of girls is simultaneous with the lack of time and the world. While Patterson describes the loss of children as the inability to lay claim to one’s family and is “violently uprooted from his milieu [and] is desocialized and depersonalized,” I argue that it is a logical extrapolation that having control over one’s family and children also extends to having control over an individual’s ability to *have* these children in the first place (Patterson 38).

As Himes recounts Jimmy’s adolescence and his lack of children (despite his seeming virility), two women stand out in particular. The first, Margaret Brown, “was rushing him… because she had to.” After his rejection of her love “she left town to have her baby somewhere else” (*Yesterday* 139). The second, Joan, tells him she is pregnant, to which he responds, “‘I know a swell guy in the pool room who’s just crazy about you, Joan. I’m going in and get him and send him out. Marry him, Joan. I’m sorry, but I can’t’” (150). It is caddish and unscrupulous behavior, yet it also gestures to the fact that Jimmy is incapable of rearing children. Himes works within the liminal space that Lee Edelman calls “queerness,” which is “the site outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism… *queerness*… figures outside and beyond its political symptoms, the place of the social order’s death drive” (Edelman 3). In other words, queerness and the desire to remain childless are connected to the

phenomenon of non-futurism.[58] It is no coincidence that on his first night as an inmate, as he mourns the impossibility of his future (that he first understands as *loss*), Jimmy "felt like vomiting when he thought about it; he felt all ruptured down in his groins" (*Yesterday* 36). The body part which aided in his procreation with Margaret and Joan has been "ruptured"; they are, in terms of reproduction, broken and useless. He is unable to lay claim to his mother, his familial relations and his past. Even as the novel progresses, and inmates take to ogling women who work at an ice cream plant across the street, Jimmy "could not imagine himself getting any of it like they said they could" (186). Rather than reading this as indicative of homosexual desire, I read it as pointing toward the lack of regenerative power within the protagonist.

Himes elaborates on Jimmy's position as one of lack, and not loss; his absoluteness is without temporality. Later, in a moment of complete disintegration, Jimmy thinks,

> [a]nd now it was oozing out of him, through his mouth and eyes and ears and nostrils, coming out of the days filled with dullness and sameness and death and violence and absoluteness; the brooding days with the slow change of shadows, but the everlasting scene, eternal and the same… The past and the future were meeting, the one had stopped and the other had caught up – fusing together into red hot chaos like a furnace in his brain. (*Yesterday* 248)

This "everlasting scene, eternal and the same," wherein "the past and the future were meeting" brings up back to Hortense Spillers' claim that "the ruling episteme that

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[58] I do, of course, understand that queer negativity functions differently from Afro-pessimism in its taking of a subject at the center of its discourse, rather than the object. However, I also believe that Himes here gestures toward an understanding of queerness in connection to childrearing that slightly differs from my use of queer theory later in the chapter. Namely, he is invested in the question of Jimmy's childlessness as related to not only natal alienation, but Edelman's concept of "no future."

releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement" (Spillers 68). Jimmy is so much captive flesh, eternally captive outside time and history; he remains stagnant, unable to look backward or move forward beyond the "red hot chaos like a furnace in his brain." Again, Himes proposes an understanding of Jimmy's ontology as one predicated upon containment.

In this moment where "[t]he past and the future were meeting," and "the one had stopped and the other had caught up," we understand that time functions differently within the ontology of blackness, as well as the structure of the prison. As a figure conditioned by natal alienation and marked as black via lack, Jimmy is exists within a "thanatological temporality," a phrase which I take from Allen Feldman's *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland.*[59] Although here Feldman specifically addresses the scene of interrogation, wherein the prisoner exists within a "sensorium of death," a" self-enclosed ecozone exiled from time, in which no day or night exists," there is a particular usefulness to his statement that "[t]he removal of time is the simulation of death" (Feldman 137 – 138). It is not, as Milliken and others have argued, that the prison is the antagonist, but rather that the prison is the space in which temporal constructs and linearity become unmoored, and the black figure

[59] Again, Feldman's work presupposes a subject – the IRA member against whom the state commits violence. There is still an assumption of a body (and not flesh), a recognized temporality (that is stripped away) and a heritage, which makes his work differ from my own. Feldman also argues that the experienced interrogate is able to restore time during the encounter and claim a limited agency, an argument that is impossible to make on behalf of Jimmy (Feldman 138). Nonetheless, his examination of the way time works within the prison still provides a useful means of interrogating Jimmy's location outside of history.

is seen as one outside of time and relationality. To return to Spillers, Jimmy is one who is "'murdered' over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise" (Spillers 68). As one who cannot be hailed into relationality or subjecthood, Jimmy is incapable of reproduction; the only thing which "ooz[es] out of him" are "dullness and sameness and death and violence and absoluteness," conditions which define chattel and not humans (*Yesterday* 248).

In this space, it is not surprising, then, that Jimmy's first attempt at a relationship within the prison is articulated vis-à-vis the practice of queer kinship. These relationships with Walter, Lively and Rico propose a potential eliminating – or healing – of the ruptures that alienate Jimmy from himself and his family. In her chapter on Willa Cather in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History,* Heather Love states that the work of friendship has always been a pivotal element in queer studies. She argues that the "longing for community across time is a crucial feature of queer historical experience, one produced by the historical isolation of individual queers as well as by the damaged quality of the historical archive" and that she "gesture[s] toward an alternative trajectory of queer friendship marked by impossibility, disconnection, and loss" (Love 37, 74). Love's analysis of her texts hinges upon the question of "what to do with texts that resist our advances" to "rescue or save them" (9). My reading of queer kinship in *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* differs from Love's in that Jimmy is incapable of offering consent or resistance. Queer kinship in the novel fails because Jimmy is constituted through natal alienation as one who is socially dead, and we return again to the question of loss versus lack. In other words, subjects and objects cannot speak the same grammar, or express the

same longing; or rather, while they can express the same longing, the longing cannot be equally met. As such, Jimmy's attempts at queer kinship always end, and never happily.[60]

In a sense, Jimmy's desire to connect with Walter, Lively and Rico attempts to disrupt the ontological difference between "body" and "flesh;" we can perhaps understand Jimmy as one who struggles to articulate himself as body, to gift himself with a traceable lineage of kinship and the possibility of futurity. As the genealogical isolate, Jimmy first bonds with Walter utilizing the vernacular of family. Walter says enthusiastically, "'[l]et's make it like we're cousins… Let's tell them we're cousins on our mothers' sides. Our mothers were sisters, let's tell 'em,'" to which Jimmy responds, "'[i]t's okay with me.'" Walter's delight is evident: "'[w]e're cousins. I wish you were my cousin for real. I feel like I'm your cousin for real… We ought to cut our arms and mix our blood and then we would be real blood cousins'" (*Yesterday* 42 – 43). In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route,* Saidiya V. Hartman writes that "[t]he mark of property provides the emblem of kinship in the wake of defacement" (*Lose Your Mother* 80). Although the scars Walter desires are not "mark[s] of property," per se, they do speak to the absolute alienation that surrounds Jimmy, and Jimmy muses upon Walter's insistence of marking each other, as belonging to each other and each other's

[60] This is true of non-queer kinships as well. When Blocker, one of Jimmy's closest friends is paroled, there are endless promises to keep in touch. "Blocker turned and went out. He never wrote. Jimmy never heard of him again. He certainly missed Blocker. He missed Blocker as he would have missed an arm" (*Yesterday* 238).

families, in the "rigid severity of the days that followed, and in the nights" (*Yesterday* 43).[61]

Himes returns us to the scene of the fire and impending death, marks it as the first moment when Jimmy finally speaks to his sexual desire for Walter. Jimmy sees the I&K and the G&H cell, "housing the G&H block, crammed with living convicts; a huge red-brick monster with a thousand fiery eyes, sucking in the flame and the smoke upon the living, writhing convicts in its belly. Sight stopped there, and thought, and conjecture, and memory" (96). In this moment where the evacuation of subjectivity is reaffirmed, when the absence of sight, thought, conjecture and memory becomes all too pronounced, Jimmy thinks that "[f]resh from that greasy, grimy chaos, that sweating, soot-blackened, vomit spattered mass of humanity… Walter was the prettiest person he'd ever seen" (102). While held in Walter's hesitant embrace, "Jimmy could hear the water running in the commode; he could feel the pressure of Walter's body and his lips, but he didn't get anything of what he had hoped he might. After a time Walter said, 'I got to go'" (102). The suggestiveness of "[a]fter a time" leaves just how much time has passed unclear; what the readers are aware of is that Jimmy "didn't get anything of what he had hoped he might." In his reading of Ernest Gaines, Keith Clark argues that Gaines "proffers male nonsexual desire (bonding) as a vehicle for reconceptualizing black male subjectivity" ("Que(e)rying" 242). Here, it is not that the desire or bonding is not sexual, but that the sexual desire functions as failure. Walter's lips do not satiate Jimmy's desire, either for

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[61] One could also argue that is not by accident that the lines of kinship are drawn through the mothers' side, reminiscent of the means by which laboring objects, not subjects (children), were produced during slavery.

sexual pleasure or the reassurance of his still being alive; it can be assumed that Jimmy's desire for Walter is not sexual to begin with, and that he still stands as a figure of social death.

In this moment of complete destruction, we see first Jimmy's natal alienation Immediately following this exchange, Jimmy attempts to send his parents a telegram, alerting them to his having survived the fire. But "[t]hen he couldn't recall his mother's address," On the Western Union blanks, Jimmy writes separate messages for his mother and father: "'I'm living,' he wrote, and then, looking at it, thought he should add something, and wrote, 'Thank God,' but after a moment he crossed out the 'Thank God' and wrote instead, 'Because I wasn't in the cell block where the other convicts died'" (*Yesterday* 103). We see here his incapability to remember the location of home, his status as a natally alienated object as well as his openness to gratuitous violence; the only reason he is "living" is because he "wasn't in the cell block where the other convicts died." Citing Ronald Judy, Wilderson writes that "at the crux of modernity's crisis is the dilemma 'how to represent the Negro as being demonstrably human within the terms of the law.' Here, of course, he does not mean 'law' in a juridical sense but rather 'law' as a portal of intelligibility through which one can be said to have the capacity to access 'Reason' and thus be recognized and incorporated as a bona fide subject" (*Red, White & Black* 44 – 45). The absurdity present here is that Jimmy's having survived the conflagration is indication of his status as *not* "demonstrably human within the terms of the law," both in terms of juridical law and legibility. He is no different from the corpses which scatter the ground, "hundreds of them… and they looked all alike to him"

(*Yesterday* 103). As a non "bona fide subject," Jimmy attempts to insert himself into subjectivity with Walter. He murmurs, "'I want you to-to – I want you for a w-woman. I don't want no more this goddamn cousin stuff,'" and Walter turns him away by saying, "'You wouldn't want me to do that, would you, Jimmy?' There was no condemnation in his voice; it was a question, that was all." As Jimmy turns away from Walter, he realizes that "[w]hatever it was he wanted, Walter didn't have it" (107). It is through Walter and their familial relationship that Jimmy attempts to articulate his embodiment as a subject; the failure of this relationship to do so, the fact that Walter cannot proffer him subjectivity, points to the impossibility of such a positioning.

Himes constitutes Jimmy's desperate attempts to rid himself of natal alienation through Lively, whom Jimmy meets roughly three weeks after the fire. Lively is described as having a "high, beautiful voice like a choir-boy's, only it was slow and slurred and drawn out in a delightful drawl. Now it contained a saucy note as a girl's in witty repartee" (171). As he befriends Lively, Jimmy learns that "Lively made friendship into something of a fetish which he worshipped and which ruled him;" we get the sense that Lively, too, is one who defines himself by and through structures of kinship (176). Their blossoming relationship mirrors the convicts' attempts to form familial bonds within the prison, and Jimmy notices that "[t]he dormitory had become full of little cliques… It was as if every one [sic] had established family life" (177). Desiring a more flirtatiously outright relationship, Jimmy pursues Lively, to the effect where he "put that golden-haired punk before every one [sic], and wanting him was utterly degenerating in its savage intensity" (196). Tellingly, it is because of this "savage intensity" that he

reopens lines of communication with his mother: “Lively needed shoes… a tooth brush, and some pyjamas, and some other things; so he wrote to his mother… for some money and some shoes for a convict in prison whom he wanted to make” (196). While the sexual desire is more explicit here than with Walter, it is precisely *through* this desire that we see Jimmy’s attempt to reinscribe himself into a familial unit, both with Lively and with his mother.

Yet to repeat, Jimmy’s openness to gratuitous violence, not only to his psyche but to his body, is seen through the complete inability he has to dictate his bonds of kinship: he and Lively are transferred to different blocks without being given any prior warning. The impossibility of kinship leads Jimmy to feel “helpless and hurt and frustrated,” and ultimately unable to make any sort of claim on Lively (202). After they are separated, Jimmy receives compensation for his hurt back, caused by a fall from a thirty foot scaffold, and “strangely, or perhaps only naturally, his first thoughts were not of Lively, but of freedom” (206).[62] I read this conflation of Lively and freedom as the conflation of queer kinship and subjectivity; Jimmy attempts to negotiate for the latter through an engagement with the former. Yet although he stabs at hiring lawyers or contacting the warden, these efforts prove to be futile, and Captain Becker also discourages him, as do “the inspector, the cashier, the governor’s secretary, and every attorney out in the city who had any sort of reputation whatsoever… He was not ripe, yet; he had not served

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[62] This back injury is one which Himes suffered as well. While working as a bellhop in Cleveland, Ohio, Himes falls down an empty elevator shaft and is severely hurt: “My chin had hit something that cut flesh to the bone, broke my lower jaw, and shattered all my teeth. My left arm hit something and both bones broke just above the wrist so that they came out through the skin, dead white with drops of blood in the bone fractures. My spine hit something and the last three vertebrae were fractured” (*The Quality of Hurt* 20).

enough time on a twenty year sentence; after two or three more years –" (207). It is only when all possibilities of freedom disappear that his thoughts return to Lively, but his thoughts "were different, now, although he did not know it. There was a slight bitterness in them, a slight chagrin, something of the emotion of one who returns a failure" (207). The disconnect between Lively and the promise of freedom can be read as upholding the reading of queerness as predicated on the death drive, as for Jimmy, "the desire for intimacy is coupled with the threat of destruction and disconnection" (Love 73). In other words, Jimmy's longing for intimacy and kinship are only scripted through the space of the prison, and ultimately found impossible due to his status as flesh and object.

The abrupt halting of his relationship with Lively mimics Jimmy's having walked away from Walter, and the finality with which he declares these relationships null and void speak to the failure of queerness to mediate on behalf of blackness. In the aftermath of Lively, Jimmy thinks, "[i]t was gone and dead, everything that had ever been between them. And in going it left nothing, nor did anything come to take its place, no regret, no remorse, no loneliness. Loneliness would not have come, anyway, because Lively had never done anything to help the loneliness" (*Yesterday* 224). Perhaps most tellingly, Himes continues that "[the loneliness] had been with Jimmy before he had ever seen Lively, and all the while he had known him, and would still be with him. That was Lively. He was gone and that was that" (224). The certainty with which he makes this statement is followed by the scene of abject horror mentioned earlier in the chapter, and he thinks of "how utterly different everything inside of him still was when he let it be; trying all the while to push it down and throw filth on top of it and bury it and forget it

and become some one [sic] else whom he never really was and never would be" (248). While one reading of this passage can be Jimmy's distancing of himself from Walter, Lively, and queer desire, I read it as his absolute realization of his difference; he is a figure who embodies "expressivity as impenetrable as any other… [he] is the criminally resistant idiom of an abjected and discarded urban blackness, defined primarily by [his] being subject to discourses of [his] utter *non*subjectivity" ("Assuming" 853). Bell here presupposes a black subject who is inscribed through discourses of nonsubjectivity, as opposed to a black object who is the epitome of lack, as I argue. At the same time, this passage allows us to read Jimmy's expressivity as pushed down, buried under filth (or himself), and his attempts to connect to and with Lively are forgotten. Lively has no effect on Jimmy's being precisely because Jimmy *lacks* being.

It is with Rico, Jimmy's third and final pairing, that Jimmy shares the most meaningful and most complicated relationship; it is Rico, too, for whom we have the most information from Himes himself. Originally named "Duke Dido" for *Cast the First Stone*, it is evident that Himes' feelings for who he calls "Prince Rico" went beyond a platonic companionship. Margolies and Fabre devote an extensive passage to this figure in Himes' life:

> Rico, a Georgia Negro, wrote and collected work and prison songs and planned to use this material for a folk opera he was composing. He made no pretense concerning his homosexuality, and he and Himes became lovers. They read aloud to one another, wrote a play together, worked on an "opera" together… encouraged each other's creative efforts, and exchanged ardent views about the movies they had seen and the authors they enjoyed… Himes's love affair with Rico inevitably aroused the envy and suspicion of prisoners and guards who separated them.

> Homosexuality, though frowned upon in theory, was unofficially sanctioned in the upside-down work of prison life.[63] When Himes was transferred to the London Prison Farm the following year, he and Rico carried on a correspondence. (Margolies and Fabre 34)

In the published version of *Cast the First Stone*, Jimmy and Dido/Rico never consummate their relationship, and while Jimmy is paroled to the prison farm, Dido/Rico kills himself. In the 1998 edition of *Yesterday Will Make You Cry,* the two are separated, but Rico remains alive. In fact, Himes later writes to Carl Van Vetchen in 1952 and tells him that "the most fulfilling relationship he had ever had was with the man whom he called Dido" (34). To reiterate, I am less interested in whether or not Himes and Rico pursued a sexual relationship; rather, I am compelled to examine why, through Rico, Himes chooses to insert a visually cued blackness into the last section of his novel.

What is interesting to note is that while Jimmy's relationship with Rico is perhaps the most tempestuous and emotionally charged of the three traced in the novel, it is also the most promising in inscribing Jimmy into history. I argue that this is because it is also the most heteronormative and thus gives rise to performances of gender roles that lead to Jimmy's becoming a writer. Here, too, we have the coming together of an author and protagonist. While Jimmy and Rico explicitly engage in queer sex (in contrast to Walter or Lively), Himes mobilizes queerness-as-function to gender Rico as feminine, much more so than Jimmy's prior partners.[64] We see this in their activities together; for

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[63] As Milliken writes, "[s]ex between men, an expedient without evident alternatives, does not shock Himes's convicts, but passionate friendship does" (Milliken 178).

[64] Note the feminization of both Walter and Lively; the former is described as the "prettiest person" Jimmy had ever seen, the latter as having "long, wavy, pure golden curls and mischievous blue eyes" (*Yesterday* 102, 171). It is also interesting to see the similarity between Lively and Margaret, who earlier professes her love for Jimmy and their unborn child; she is "a corn-silk blonde with violet eyes" (139).

example, when Rico fails at a softball game, he taunts Jimmy, "'[g]o ahead and say it and get it over with!'" and "Jimmy went abruptly blind. It was not until afterwards that he realized that he had struck Rico in the face." Instantly apologetic, he begs Rico to hit him back, and Rico refuses, confessing that he won't. He says, "'I love you, that's why'" and "Jimmy gave a violent start. Why he had heard an actress say that in a picture he had seen, and he had never forgotten it" (*Yesterday* 338). I read the alterations in gender assignment and the fluctuations in gender politics as indicative of a homonormative kinship: here, Rico plays a masculine role by participating in a softball game. Because, in this moment, Jimmy views Rico as masculine – and thus male – he is able to physically strike him in his frustration. Yet the moment the rage clears, so does his seeing Rico as male. His contrition indicates his view of Rico as the feminine – and female – one in the relationship, and at Rico's confession of love, Jimmy conflates him with an actress he has seen before. Jimmy and Rico's relationship, then, indicates the constitutive inequality of gender, sex, and sexuality. While "these available analytic axes do after all mutually constitute one another," Jimmy's ability to view Rico in varied ways (as opposed to Walter and Lively) indicates a means by which this particular kinship is being structured; there is a sense of normativity which prevails, as though this may be the means by which Jimmy can ground his subjectivity (*Epistemology* 41). In other words, while the sexuality may be queer(ed), the gender politics are not.

In my analysis of this affirmation of heteronormative gender politics, I am also interested in Rico's presentation as a racial other, clearly contrasted to Walter, Lively and Jimmy himself. Rico had "a high, smooth forehead topped by that mat of blue-black hair.

His face was sweaty and greasy and his sloe eyes, slanting upward at the edges, gave a slightly Mongolian cast to his features. Now his eyes glittered, like those of a cornered animal's" (*Yesterday* 266). Here we are taken back to the fire, when Jimmy sees Walter "[f]resh from that greasy, grimy chaos, that sweating, soot-blackened, vomit spattered mass of humanity" (102). He is both aligned with death and othered, made to be seen in light of the fire but also "Mongolian." While Rico speaks to him, Jimmy's eyes are drawn to his mouth: "[h]e had full, deep-red lips, and his skin was smooth and slightly olive-tinged" (266). When Jimmy questions him on his genealogy, Rico confirms he is Spanish, but refuses to give any other kind of straight answer. Instead he replies, "'No, I'm from a big country that grows big people. We're so big out there that small things are of no interest to us. That's what most people can never understand. I'm from California'" (274). It is suggestive to think of why Jimmy and Rico's queer kinship can be sustained and made tenable for far longer than his with Walter or Lively, and I argue that it is precisely because of Rico's racial otherness; while it may be difficult to read him as black from his physical description, his immediate ease with black prisoners indicates a certain kind of racial bonding that occurs. Rico thinks of them as "'little children, they have a song in their hearts.'" While this language is infantilizing at first glance, when Jimmy dismisses them as needing a bath, Rico retorts that "'[w]e all need a bath… all of us except you'" (271). In this moment, Rico identifies himself with the black convicts and against Jimmy's whiteness. Yet as I argue, it is precisely because of Jimmy's status as black, and Rico's racial otherness, that the two are able to come together under a queerness which "supplants Africanist as the marker for what is an undefiled, sacrosanct

black masculinity;" in other words, the similarities in their symptomatic constructions as black allow them to attempt an "undefiled" kinship ("Que(e)rying" 254).

Yet what occurs when black psyches recognize each other as emptied spaces? This type of recognition becomes discomfiting to Jimmy as he is forced to see himself in Rico's otherness. This is not a matter, as some scholars state, of a unified acknowledgement of their "intelligence, sensitivity, and haughty rejection of the inmates and the world of the prison as far beneath their level" (Massey 93). Rather, to return to Marriott, if the black man is "already split, preoccupied, by a racist, a conscious-unconscious imago," then this pain unleashed "introduces a new dynamic into the structure of identity, the self's desire to hurt the imago – that is, part of the self – in a passionate bid to escape possession as such" (*On Black Men* 55). We see this as Jimmy's precautions regarding Rico veer into cruelty, the "desire to hurt the imago – that is, part of the self," especially when the conversation turns to Rico's mother. Jimmy jokes, "'[m]aybe I'll fall in love with her, too… She seems very young and I go for the Rico family.'" When Rico, all good humor gone, asks exactly what he meant by that comment, Jimmy "went callous… he did not want to, but there was something inside of him, impelling him to say, 'What could I mean? I'm a man, biologically speaking, I like women and –'" (*Yesterday* 304). The final dash is the most provocative part of Jimmy's speech; one cannot help but wonder what he intended to say but can presume a biting remark on how Rico adequately fulfills his need for a woman now. "Something inside of [Jimmy]" compels him to speak in such a manner, and I argue that this "something" is precisely the "self's desire to hurt the imago." For Jimmy, Rico reflects the lack of safety

even within his interior space; through Rico, Jimmy realizes his absolute blackness. Rico forces Jimmy to reflect upon the "radical hollowness at [his] center," or the mark of blackness ("Assuming" 852). Rico, whom Jimmy reflects as having "touched him more than anything… so close to him he could feel him in his heart, and then so remote he saw him as a stranger," is the physical manifestation of Jimmy's status as black (*Yesterday* 323). Rather than seeing whiteness as "an oppressing other, a totality from which one was alienated and against which one must constantly struggle," I read Jimmy as being outside of the rubric of oppression; he is always already alienated against himself.

It is during Rico's involvement with Jimmy that we also see Jimmy's burgeoning growth as a writer; Himes takes us from the end of Book III – "It was then that he met Rico" – to the beginning of Book IV – "Jimmy had gotten as far as the title, A CONVICT IS HUMAN, TOO, but the words would not come" (*Yesterday* 256, 259). Once again, this is perhaps one of the most autobiographical elements of the novel, as "Himes probably began writing fiction in late 1931," during his incarceration. He publishes short stories in "*Abbott's Monthly and Illustrate News, Bronzeman, The Pittsburgh Courier*, and *Atlanta Daily World*" in 1932 and 1933 (Margolies and Fabre 36). The most prestigious publications are in *Esquire*, where he publishes "Crazy in the Stir" and "To What Red Hell," the latter which also discusses the 1930 fire. Certain scholars argue that he writes himself into subjectivity, that "[Himes] was now more than a prison number; he had a name, an identity. He was a writer" (Margolies and Fabre 36). Himes himself attests to this, writing in *The Quality of Hurt* that he was "[f]oremost a writer. Above all else a writer. It was my salvation, and is. The world can deny me all other employment,

and stone me as an ex-convict, as a nigger, as a disagreeable and unpleasant person. But as long as I write, whether it is published or not, I'm a writer, and no one can take that away" (*The Quality of Hurt* 117). Himes' inclination is to contrast his identities as "ex-convict," "nigger," a "disagreeable and unpleasant person" to the occupation of a "writer." Yet it is critical to remember that of the three purportedly negative identifications, it is only one which stands as an ontological positioning and not an identity: that is, Himes' standing as "nigger" in civil society. Thus while on the experiential level, writing allows Himes – and Jimmy – to be seen and read, on an ontological level, I argue that Jimmy's writing does not illuminate possibilities for a (re)inscription of subjectivity, so much as it articulates a self that is constructed only through death.

In the title of his first attempt at writing, "A CONVICT IS HUMAN, TOO," we see Jimmy making a bold claim to his subjectivity. Due to his increasing attraction to Rico, Jimmy finds himself unable to concentrate, and it is only after reading Rico's writing that he is able to write. Rico's written piece mirrors earlier portions of the novel in which Jimmy rages against his entrapment: "*Shadows, they are all about me. In the stench-laden corners of my dungeon, they are black sentinels at the black gates of death, forbidding me sanctuary. On the slime-encrusted floor, they lie motionless, writing in the eyes of my fear*" (*Yesterday* 290). Afterward, Jimmy realizes that "[r]eading the piece again was all that [he] needed to write his story… All the old protests boiled up in him, and he wrote a story, all emotion, from beginning to end. When he had finished, he felt drained of all sensations; he sat there looking blankly at his typewriter" (291). In her

chapter on Ralph Ellison, Valerie Smith writes that "the solution to the problems of identity and authority can be found in the double-consciousness of reliving his story as both narrator and protagonist" (Smith 110). Here, we see the failure of such logic: Jimmy is not imbued with identity or authority; the veil is not lifted from his eyes. Instead, what propels him to write this narrative are the shadows present in Rico's brief story, as again, he reads and sees himself in Rico. Rico states that the story "'came to [him] one night in the cell,'" and it is this mirroring of the two which is compelling enough for Jimmy to write his own story (*Yesterday* 290). Furthermore, it is vital to note that Jimmy has no originary narrative, but only what he gets from Rico (who, although racially othered, is not made black in the text).

Diana Fuss writes that for writers, "the architectural dwelling is not merely something we inhabit, but something that inhabits us. They understand interiority itself as a built structure, as 'imagination merely made'" (*Sense of an Interior* 5). In the aftermath Jimmy is drained and blank because he realizes that as object, he does not have access to Rico's psyche or his own, which is always presupposed by whiteness. The prison structure, as well as the paradigm of blackness, is one which does not inhabit him, but rather leaves him open to natal alienation and gratuitous violence. Jimmy's conditions are always constituted through accumulation and fungibility, and as such, he is uncertain how to act when Rico comments, "'[w]e're so much alike, I could cry'" (*Yesterday* 293). In my analysis of these similarities, I turn to Love who herself borrows from Lacan's proclamation that "love is an exercise in failure. His famous assertion that 'there is no sexual relation'" informs us of how "sexuality is constituted by failure and impossibility

rather than complementarity and fulfillment." Love continues, "[a]lthough such an assertion is true for everyone, some loves are more failed than others. Same-sex desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, impossibility, and loss" (Love 21). To this I would add that with regard to his status as black, Jimmy is laid open for Rico's empathic identification; their similarities bring him to tears. Jimmy is unmoved because what Rico sees as loss, he comprehends as lack.

This lack and alignment with social death is further examined in Jimmy's next story. During this time, the evening paper begins to run photographs from Laurence Stalling's *Photographic History of the First World War*. In a particular photograph entitled "Ennui," Jimmy sees that there is "no death in this picture, no destruction, just a scraggly line of soldiers with rifles shoulder high, standing in a trench in the immense, eternal desolation, waiting for something" (*Yesterday* 321). Jimmy immediate connects with these soldiers "with their tiny rifles standing there in the middle of eternity, like microscopic atoms in the universal sense, seem[ing] so insignificant, so shockingly ridiculous" (321). He bursts out, completely overwhelmed "'[i]t's us! It's every goddamned convict. It's the waiting, the waiting! Waiting for what? Beans or freedom?... That's what kills a convict… Waiting all morning for the noon day whistles to blow so they'll know it's twelve o'clock. I can understand that feeling'" (322). In the immediate aftermath of seeing the photo, Jimmy sits at his typewriter and writes his story, and "[w]hen he got up from the typewriter he had a story. He knew it was a freak of literature. He knew it was impossible. But he had written it" (322). Himes' word choice here harkens back to a conversation on homosexuality between Rico and Jimmy. When Jimmy

labels the people in Los Angeles as "queer," Rico protests that they're not "freaks" and muses that "'Queerness is a funny term… There's nothing really lost when a physical change is made unless you feel that it is wrong. It's the feeling that it's wrong that makes it queer'" (308). The conflation of "queer" and "freak" here points toward Jimmy's story – entitled "Ennui" – about waiting in prison. Ergo, we see Jimmy's literary production indicating a potential means of subjectivity, a queered reading of himself, one which (mis)reads the image of lack as one which gestures toward a loss shared by many, a temporality occupied by citizens, as opposed to an absence embodied through a singular non-Human.

Tellingly, despite Jimmy's stories giving him a measure of standing in the prison, what becomes increasingly evident is that Rico and Jimmy's relationship is untenable; again, as I argue, queerness cannot be utilized to breach the disjuncture left by natal alienation. On charges of sex perversion, Jimmy is denied parole and Rico is placed in "Company 5-D," the "worst company in the prison" (360). However, Jimmy is eventually transferred to the prison farm, and whereas earlier he had mused on the meaningfulness of his relationship with Rico, "[b]ecause there had been those moments that were priceless; those moments which had given him everything," he finds himself ultimately looking forward to the prison farm with pleasure: "[i]t felt strange to be going through the gates again. After a moment a keen excitement filled him… I'm going to the farm, he thought. I've got it beat now. Big, ugly prison, but I've got it beat now… Because the farm was the way to freedom" (360, 363). This ending returns us to the concept of relationality. Writing on the status of African artists who wish to be known only as

artists, Wilderson articulates that "if we think of this demand… not as a wish to disavow relationality, but as a wish to be *imbued* with relationality, then something else emerges" ("Grammar & Ghosts" 122).[65] Jimmy's final wish is to be imbued with freedom, for to be free means to be white, "the one racial identity which does not need to mediate, to copy, or to type, itself" (*On Black Men* 56). Jimmy fails in his queer kinships, and even with the attempt to write himself into legibility, he is unable to unmoor himself from his position of absence, and as such the narrative ends with his transfer not to the outside world, but to the prison farm. If, as scholars have argued, the prison is a continuation of the plantation, we see too how the convict leasing system offers no means of returning to outside society, nor to an ontological arrival into civil society. In much the same way that Bob Jones is offered state-sanctioned imprisonment versus state-sanctioned "freedom" (as symbolized by the navy) at the end of *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Jimmy's move to the prison farm and his numerous failed kinship attempts give credence to the structural positioning of blackness as outside relationality.

<u>The Movement of Exile</u>

Himes permanently relocates to France in the 1950s, and in a 1969 letter to John A. Williams, he articulates his reasons for doing so. While he mentions the discrimination in the American publishing business, he also, and with characteristic clarity and forthrightness, writes that "I left the U.S. because I felt I would have a better chance to survive in some other country… [A]ll I wanted to do was live – *to keep alive*. I supposed

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[65] Himes argues this point as well, stating that a black writer is always under the consideration of "'Well, what statement is he making?... What is he saying about the conditions of the black people in America?'" ("My Man Himes" 70).

I could say that was my main reason for leaving America – just to keep alive" (*Dear Chester* 92). After a 1957 meeting with Marcel Duhamel (who translated *If He Hollers Let Him Go* into French), he begins writing the Harlem Detective novels, and while they are extremely well-received in France, Himes is frank in his assessment of them: "[t]hey offer no solution." Yet at the same time, he finds Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson compelling figures in that he has "come to believe that the only way the American Negro will ever be able to participate in the American way of life is by a series of acts of violence" (Oakes 21). In an even earlier essay, "Negro Martyrs are Needed" (1947), Himes argues that "a few Negro heroes must galvanize blacks for concerted action. He was not thinking of specific kinds of violence – certainly not the violence of a blind man shooting at random" (qtd. in Margolies and Fabre 144).[66] Here we see not only a relationship between Himes and contemporary Afro-pessimists, who theorize blackness as being fundamentally an ontology of death, but also between Himes and Fanon; even without the middleman of Marriott, Himes and Fanon both advocate responding to the absurdity of violence with a stringently focused and revolutionary violence of their own.

In this chapter, I began my analysis of David Marriott's work, which lends itself to my understanding of Jimmy as black, and thus *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* as an autobiographical novel. Himes' "Mississippi white boy" as blackness, configured

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[66] This is in reference to the epigraph to Himes' 1969 novel, *Blind Man With a Pistol.* Himes writes, "A friend of mine, Phil Lomax, told me this story about a blind man with a pistol shooting at a man who had slapped him on the subway train and killing an innocent bystander peacefully reading his newspaper across the aisle and I thought, damn right, sounds just like today's news, riots in the ghettos, war in Vietnam, masochistic doings in the Middle East. And then I thought of some of our loudmouthed leaders urging our vulnerable soul brothers on to getting themselves killed, and thought further that all unorganized violence is like a blind man with a pistol."

through the profoundly disturbing lack of a black psyche and interiority, allows us to see blackness not as "something missing," but rather "the addition of something undesirable and dirty that fragments the body by destroying all positive semblances of the self" (*Haunted Life* 210). In Himes' third published novel, blackness is marked by absence, and thus always and inevitably white from the inside out, black flesh (pre)occupied by whiteness. Furthermore, although Jimmy is able to form queer kinships in the space of the prison, they inexorably fail, and he ends the text the same way he began it: alone and unanchored from familial or temporal bonds. What happens, then, if blackness moves outside of the prison, and into the place of nation, or the space of nationhood? Although Himes' states in an interview that he fled to Europe because "[h]ere a Negro becomes a human being," the impossibility of humanity abroad becomes apparent in my next chapter on James Baldwin, wherein even the politics of exile are established irreducibly outside the grasp of blackness (M. Fabre 127).

Chapter Three – The Futility/Futurity of Exile: James Baldwin and the "Irrevocable Condition" of *Giovanni's Room*

After all, homes are effects of the histories of arrival – Sara Ahmed

Western Civilization is heading for an apocalypse – James Baldwin

In Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, Binh, a Vietnamese-born cook under the employ of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, undergoes a particular ritual every weekend at *27 rue de Fleurus.* He informs the reader that "[o]n Sundays my Madame and Madame are safely settled in their dining room with the memories of their America heaped onto large plates," and he finds himself "excommunicated yet again from that perfect circle that is the center of every home" (Truong 27, 103). Unable to be included in the physical home of Stein and Toklas, as well as the imagined nation that he elaborately prepares and is not invited to consume within this space, Binh enunciates his deeply felt banishment when he meets a nameless Vietnamese man on a bridge, who, as it turns out, is only visiting Paris; he wonders, "[w]hy… are they always visiting? Just once, a man with a Paris address, or, rather, a man with a Paris address who will invite me there afterward" (93). Here, Truong names the continual ebb-and-flow between home and nation, and perhaps more critically, home and desire that is unsettled and embodied in Binh. In this longing to be invited to a "Paris address" and for, even just a singular evening, to be included in the articulation of a *when* and *where,* we hear echoes of James Baldwin's irreducible statement in his essay, "Stranger in the Village": "I am a stranger here" (*Notes of a Native Son* 168).

A prolific writer, Baldwin published *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to critical acclaim in 1953; his immediate follow-up, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), consists of essays including the by-now widely read and anthologized "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949). His most popular works, including *Go Tell It on the Mountain, Another Country* (1962) and "Sonny's Blues" (part of *Going to Meet the Man* [1965]), reverberate with ruminations on race relations and homosexuality, religion, art, and the occupational and aesthetic responsibilities of the artist. Baldwin states that "'[o]ne writes out of one thing only – one's own experience,'" and elements of his life – as precocious pastor, as adopted son, as "transatlantic commuter" – make up the backbone of his bibliography (Standley 45). Perhaps because of his undeniable presence, as well as the deep-seated practice of reading authors into their texts, the novel which Baldwin scholars find most difficult to ascribe to him is *Giovanni's Room* (1956). In all likelihood, this is because much like Chester Himes' *Yesterday Will Make You Cry,* which I address in my second chapter, Baldwin's second novel is heavily autobiographical yet features a legibly white expatriate protagonist.

Like Truong's fictional Binh, Baldwin also resides in Paris; having left the United States for the first time in 1948, he "returned in 1952, with [his] first novel, stayed long enough to show it to [his] family, and to sell it," and, he admits, "I hauled on out of here. In 1954, I came back with *The Amen Corner*, and I was working on *Giovanni's Room* – which had broken off from what was to become *Another Country*" ("Preface to the 1984 Edition" of *Notes of a Native Son* ix – x). It is this second novel which causes a massive uproar. In a posthumous interview published in 1988, the author, perhaps still with a

sense of bitterness, recounts that “my publisher, Knopf, told me I was ‘a Negro writer’’ and that I reached ‘a certain audience,’” and that this novel would “ruin your career because you’re not writing about the same things and in the same manner as you were before and we won’t publish this book as a favor to you’” (Troupe 285). Then, recollects Baldwin, “I conveyed my gratitude, perhaps a shade too sharply, borrowed money from a friend, and myself and my lover took the boat to France” (“Preface” to *Notes of a Native Son* x – xi). It is critical to examine Baldwin’s wording as he discusses why he chose France as a potential haven for his creativity: he admits that he “looked on Paris as a refuge,” but he emphasizes that “[he] didn’t *come* to Paris in ’48, I simply *left* America” (Terkel 14; Lewis 83 – 84). His insistence on Paris as destination is not due to a particular love of the city, but rather because of an anxiety to depart from the United States; in an interview in *The Paris* Review, for example, Baldwin again states that “[i]t wasn’t so much a matter of choosing France – it was a matter of getting out of America” (Elgrably and Plimpton 233). Thus Michelle M. Wright notes that Baldwin “described his move to Paris in negative terms (he didn’t *go to* Paris, rather he *did not stay* in New York)” (M. Wright 220). The transatlantic flight, in other words, is foreground not on *arrival*, but rather on *departure*, commanding our attention to the impossibility of the former.[67] Much like his protagonist in *Giovanni’s Room*, Baldwin’s understanding of his expatriation reveals a blackness constituted through departure.

[67] This tradition of flight to Paris is not new, as “Richard Wright had already chosen that city as his elective homeland, while Chester Himes would arrive in 1953” (Geraci 220).

In this chapter, I examine Baldwin's figure of the departing subject who is inevitably halted in *Giovanni's Room* as the embodiment of antiblackness; specifically, I argue that in this figure, we see the way in which blackness is incapable of being propelled into futurity. Although Baldwin's sleight-of-hand seems to point to Joey and Giovanni as the black characters in the novel, I continue the argument that I began in chapter two and instead read David as the ultimate embodiment of blackness. Furthermore, I propose that the invisibility of blackness in the novel is only made legible through queer desire, although this desire ultimately fails in its efforts to elucidate a black subjectivity for the central figure of David. In other words, Baldwin attempts to undo the geographic fixity of the African American through the simultaneously very real and abstract configuration of David's same-sex desire. Specifically, in the conflicted and conflictual relationship between blackness and queerness in the novel, I read an explication of how race (what does it mean to be black?), geographic place (what does it mean to be in exile?), and psychic space (what does it mean to be black and queer?) come together in a geographic unmooring of American-ness. I link this reading of *Giovanni's Room* with the project of queer temporality, wherein time loses its linear meaning and harkens back to Hortense Spillers' work on the impossibility of temporal linearity aboard the slave ship. In no way do I suggest that black and queer temporalities are one and the same. Yet at the same time, the very absence of relationality between the two gives rise to a fruitful question of precisely what exists in the interstices between them, a queer black temporality wherein blackness is configured as exceeding homelessness, a psychic trauma of permanent and immutable dislocation. In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin

reimagines blackness to gesture toward the problematic nomenclature of black exile and expatriation and the allegedly redemptive promise of a black diaspora.

The Absence of Blackness in *Giovanni's Room*

The critical response to *Giovanni's Room* has been mixed since its publication. In *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), Normal Mailer writes that the novel "possessed a 'sense of moral nuance' and courage," but was also "'sprayed with perfume'" (qtd. in Standley and Burt 5). Yasmin Y. DeGout cites William J. Weatherby's *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire*: "[m]any of those who enjoyed *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Baldwin's early essays considered *Giovanni's Room* to be 'sensational and more cheaply written' (Weatherby 118)" (DeGout 425). In addition, Richard Wright, whose dispute with the younger author has since become literary history, rejected Baldwin for indulging in 'shameful weeping' (Weatherby 124)" (425). In Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America*, he goes so far as to declare *Giovanni's Room* "the weakest of Baldwin's novels… The characters are vague and disembodied, the themes half-digested, the colors rather bleached than vivified" (Bone 226). Much like his agent who couched his disparagement in seeming concern, Baldwin's contemporaries seemed unable to comprehend the novel without taking potshots at the imagined corollary between the author's homosexuality and the supposed feminization of the primary characters. What is even more troublesome, however, is the way in which the absence of blackness and the presence of queerness in the novel have been read. Responses range from reading the text as indicative of Baldwin's desire to escape the confines of being "just" a black writer, or an assertion of the unifying and universal power of love in his body of work. For

example, Marlon B. Ross laments that if the characters "had been black, the novel would have been read as being 'about' blackness" (Ross 25).[68] In *Exiled in Paris: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Samuel Beckett, and Others on the Left Bank,* James Campbell argues that for Baldwin, "his politics were personal, the politics of identity" (Campbell 194). Norman Podhoretz writes that regardless of sexual orientation, "[David and Giovanni] are still individuals and their pursuit of love is still governed by the same fundamental laws of being" and "the only significant realities are individuals and love" (qtd. in Ross 30). Even in Mae G. Henderson's otherwise insightful reading, she claims that in the novel, "race is present, but blackness is erased" (Henderson 313).

To return to the argument made in chapter two, I propose that in the very "erased" presence of blackness lurks Baldwin's nascent elucidation of a primary tenet of Afro-pessimism; namely, that blackness is *in of itself* defined as a lack, an absence. Thus blackness is not erased, but made hypervisible through whiteness. The readers enter the novel *in media res,* as David ponders Giovanni's impending execution while standing in his room. From there Baldwin flashes back to David's leaving the United States, his marriage proposal to Hella and her subsequent departure to Spain to consider his offer, and his love affair with Giovanni. David remembers the lie he told Giovanni, that "I had never slept with a boy before. I had. I had decided that I never would again" (*Giovanni's*

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[68] Although I will address queerness in more detail later in the chapter, I do wish to point out Ross' equally problematic reading of same-sex relationships, particularly because it is relevant to my work. He writes that "Baldwin was not the first black male writer to choose the apparently curious option of treating male homosexuality through the fictional experience of white characters, if not from a white point of view. In 1952, Chester Himes published *Cast the First Stone,* a novel depicting intragender romance in a prison setting and pleading for understanding of sexual variation" (Ross 19 – 20). Again, the language of a universalist empathy – "understanding" – is the primary mode with which Himes' work (and, by connection, Baldwin's) is being read.

Room 6). The truth of the matter is his brief, adolescent sexual encounter with Joey, who "was a very nice boy… very quick and dark, and always laughing. For a while he was my best friend. Later, the idea that such a person *could* have been my best friend was proof of some horrifying taint in me" (6). One afternoon, as he and Joey lie in bed together in an empty apartment, David feels both fright and joy at being with him, and in the aftermath of their lovemaking he thinks that "Joey's body was brown, was sweaty, the most beautiful creation I had ever seen till then" (8). Yet at the same time, David recognizes Joey's maleness, and the "power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood" (8 – 9). Here, in David's sudden fear of the danger present in Joey's body, I begin to read a psychoanalytic identification of himself as black, which he attempts to displace onto the body of the other.

In *The Language of Psycho-Analysis,* J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis elaborate upon Freud's term "identification." They begin with the idea that identification can be understood in two ways – there is the transitive ("to identify") and the reflexive ("to identify [oneself] with"); Freud "uses the word in both these senses… Psycho-analysis uses the term above all, however, in the sense of *identification of oneself with*" (Laplanche and Pontalis 205). What is key to note here is that Laplanche and Pontalis differentiate, too, between what they call "*heteropathic*" and "*centripetal*" identification, "where the subject identifies his own self with the other," and an "*idiopathic* and *centrifugal* variety in which the subject identifies the other with himself" (206). I read the

former kind of identification in David's remarks about the mystery of Joey's body: that he believes that their friendship is "proof of some horrifying taint in [him]" is indicative of an understanding of his schoolmate as an extension of himself. This "taint" correlates to the vocabulary he uses to describe Joey, who is "dark" and "brown," whose body seems a "black opening" of madness and castration; his body is indelibly marked as something different.[69] Yet at the same time, if, as Freud writes, "'identification is not simple imitation but *assimilation* on the basis of a similar aetiological pretension,'" then David's association with Joey irreducibly correlates to the "taint" which marks him – and not Joey – as other. In the act of sexual intercourse, it is *Joey* who assumes *David's* taint, and not the other way around.

We see this, too, in the opening of the text, when David views his reflection "in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times." Moreover, he connects his face to histories of colonialism and slavery: "[m]y ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past" (*Giovanni's Room* 3). In "James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man's Estate," Mae G. Henderson writes, "[w]ho could these ancestors be but Western Europeans, who had to 'cross death-laden plains' to reach their end, who conquered the continent with African and Native

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[69] The allusion to the anal sex that transpires between David and Joey is obvious here. For example, in "'Simply a Menaced Boy': Analogizing Color, Undoing Dominance in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room,*" Aliyyah I. Abur-Rahman writes that "David describes his desire for the male body as being drawn into a dark cavern – an obvious reference to the anus he wants to enter/has entered" (Abur-Rahman 481).

American blood on their hands?" (Henderson 315). Here, it is imperative to note that David sees himself in the "darkening" window while he muses on a "darker past." While the reflection is one of whiteness, it is one shrouded in darkness and a history of genocidal death. He sees himself through a looking glass whitely because the condition of darkness is one without reflection; to gaze into the void of the black self, after all, is to have no reflection of the self. Some scholars, including Aliyyah I. Abur-Rahman, read David's hyper-whiteness as eventually violating "heteronormative codes," and state that in doing so he "undergoes a progressive 'racialization' through *Giovanni's Room* that throws his avowed whiteness into question" (Abur-Rahman 481). These readings suggest that while David begins inscribed as racially and culturally white – and invested with the powers bestowed upon whiteness – the novel ends with David as blackened figure, one who has succumbed to queer desire, and, perhaps more importantly, a particular kind of queer desire that lacks respectability. While the yoking of whiteness and heterosexuality/normativity (and ergo blackness and homosexuality) is not an entirely incorrect reading, I do believe it is overly simplistic; this binaristic view reinforces the idea that David gradually "turns black" in the same way that he "turns queer." Instead, I argue that the black unconscious as defined by David Marriott – or the unconscious that cannot exist – is directly linked to the concept of psychoanalytic heteropathic identification, and in doing so, propose to read David as black from the beginning of *Giovanni's Room.*

To briefly return to my analysis of Marriott's work in chapter two of the dissertation, I remind us of his generative question: "[w]hat do you do with an

unconscious which appears to hate you?" (*On Black Men* 90). This question is, of course, inextricable from Fanon's own proclamation in *Black Skin, White Masks* that "the black is not a man" but rather, "as a result of a series of aberrations of affect, he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated" (Fanon 8). In Fanon's meeting with the little white boy who cowers in fear and marks him as cannibal, as Negro, Marriott theorizes that his askance reaction is "not from the discomfort of provoking fear in a child, but rather from how that child's words and look strip him of whatever imaginary coherence or identity he may have had, leaving him a crumpled, traumatized and amputated heap of fragmented parts; he "hemorrhages" a deplorable quantity of black blood" (*Haunted Life* 210 – 211).[70] No matter that Fanon recognizes that "any black man could have triggered the child's fantasy;" what is undeniable is that he has arrived too late and is "displaced by and intruded upon by racial hatred and phobia that fixes him as an imago" (211 – 212). The tardiness is due to Fanon's unconscious already being occupied by racial hatred and phobia; the child's interpellating cry, the beckoning call that recognizes antiblackness, is already present in Fanon. His coherence of self, of subjectivity, has always been imagined and imaginary.

This is precisely the act how Joey functions for David; I return once more to the post-coital scene between them: "[Joey's] body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my

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[70] It is impossible to read of this massive bleeding caused by trauma and amputation without thinking of lynching, the subject of my first chapter. While my work on Jean Toomer is more focused on physical rather than psychical violence, the fragmentation of the black body here manifests itself as the fragmentation of the black psyche, which I write about in relation to "Kabnis," the third section of Toomer's *Cane.*

manhood," and, later, a "cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern. I was afraid" (*Giovanni's Room* 8, 9). Joey's body in repose strikes David as an inevitable downward spiral into madness; in the cavern of Joey's body David recognizes the "black" cavern of his mind. The "brown" and "sweaty" body which lies next to him marks David as surely as the cry of "'*[m]aman, a* Negro!'" (8; Fanon 93). Marriott states that Fanon is left in an "amputated heap of fragmented parts," and here I point to the exact same fragmentation occurring in David through rumors "half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood," and the recognition of himself in those rumors: "I thought I saw my future in that cavern. I was afraid." If the black unconscious is predicated upon already being occupied by whiteness and "a pitiful denial of… blackness," then, in a manner similar to my analysis of Himes' Jimmy Monroe, it becomes possible to read Baldwin's David as black (*Haunted Life* 211). The cavern of Joey's body is the cavern of David's mind; it is he who is dark, who is black, and who is shattered beyond measure at the sight of himself as other than what he imagined himself as being.

Furthermore, for both Fanon and David, the recognizing other must be there in order for them to recognize themselves. Although this harkens back to a Hegelian dialectic, what makes it not so are Fanon and David's status as non-subjects.[71] Fanon's

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[71] In his essay, "The Harlem Ghetto," Baldwin writes that "It is part of the price the Negro pays for his position in this society that… he is almost always acting. A Negro learns to gauge precisely what reaction the alien person facing him desires, and he produces it with disarming artlessness" (*Notes of a Native Son* 68). An originary point is missing, and the African American always functions as a reflection of white

description of himself as "[s]ealed into that crushing objecthood" reminds us that the black is a being outside of relationality (Fanon 109). When I turn to Frank B. Wilderson, III's *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structures of U.S. Antagonisms,* I again see Fanon's haunting presence:

> the Negro, as Fanon illustrates through *Black Skin, White Masks,* "is comparison," nothing more and certainly nothing less, for what is less than comparison?... By aspiring to the very ontological capacity which modernity foreclosed to them… Black film theorists and many Black films experience as unbearable a tenet shared by [Ronald] Judy and other Afro-pessimists that "humanity recognizes itself in the Other that is not." (*Red, White & Black* 42)[72]

This "not" is symptomatic of the antiblackness which defines blackness; in other words, even the possibility of being the other in relation to the primary subject (that is to say, whiteness) is ontologically sealed off from blackness.[73] Thus it is a heteropathic and centripetal identification that accompanies Fanon and David's recognition of themselves, "where the subject identifies his own self with the other," because there is no self to be had. While whiteness can read itself against blackness, what is made apparent is the ground zero of that relationality: blackness is comparison but only as object. It cannot

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desire and hatred. Marriott makes this point even more explicitly as he writes, "[t]he unconscious (if that is what it is) is taken over, usurped, by the work of identifying (with) what the white man wants" (*On Black Men* 12). Or, again from Baldwin, blackness "is "born in a nightmare of the white man's mind" (Salaam 39).

[72] Although I do not cite his primary text, *(Dis)forming the American Canon: The Vernacular of African Arabic American Slave Narrative,* in this dissertation, Ronald Judy's inclusion under the umbrella term of Afro-pessimism is much deserved when one considers his influence on Wilderson and other authors within the field of study.

[73] This is not to say, of course, that the structure of hegemonic whiteness is not at play in so much of the *lived experiences* of black people. However, I take Wilderson's proclamation that we are working on the level of the abstract (made during his Winter 2011 graduate seminar, Drama 291 *Violent Acts*) as the formative structure of my dissertation. While the presence of black bodies in pain is very real, this dissertation is more invested in the miasma of antiblackness which then produces and permeates the materiality of lived experience.

define itself against whiteness in an equidistant way because of its status as "not," and because its unconscious is predicated upon the very absence of the self in that psychic space. Hence David thinks, "it is somewhere before me, locked in that reflection I am watching in the window… It is trapped in the room with me, always has been, and always will be, and it is yet more foreign to me than those foreign hills outside" (*Giovanni's Room* 10). Ergo, if David's queer desire allows us to read him as black from the beginning, I utilize this queerness to illuminate the black temporality that is unanchored from a history of progress and relationality, and propose a new reading of *Giovanni's Room* as a work redolent with what future scholars term Afro-pessimism.

Black Temporality, Queer Futurity

In "The Time of Slavery," Saidiya V. Hartman recollects a visit to Elmina Castle in Ghana in her analysis of the journey undertaken by African Americans to the "beginning" of the slave trade as a route of "remembrance" and "a promise to foreswear the injustice that enabled this crime against humanity to occur;" we find our redemption in "a salvational principle that will help us overcome the injury of slavery and the long history of defeat" ("The Time of Slavery" 757). The paradox of the narrative of redemption is key, as the logic behind it is that eventually blackness need not be defined through "grief" or the "constitutive nature of loss," but rather the principle of overcoming an "injury." Yet what becomes clear in my reading of Hartman is this very impossibility: "[b]y seizing hold of the past, one illuminates the broken promises and violated contracts of the present… an identification with Africa [is] mediated by way of the experience of enslavement, and perhaps, even more important, by way of a backward glance at U.S.

history as well. That is, the identification with Africa is always already after the break" (763 – 764). As investigated in the first chapter of the dissertation, the "broken promises and violated contracts" of Emancipation render enslaved black objects (slaves) as African American "subjects" only to make them juridically punishable; as Judith Butler states in *Gender Trouble* "[j]uridical power inevitably 'produces' what it claims merely to represent" (*Gender Trouble* 5). The investment of citizenship works actually to illuminate the *lack* that defines the black object who appears and reappears until the moment of and beyond Hartman's writing. The identification of blackness, or, rather, as black, has been and continues to be contingent upon the lack which defines the transatlantic slave trade.[74] In this identification with Africa, "always already after the break," we see, too, the impossibility of a self-identification, an identification which is only possible as hetereopathic.

This "seizing hold of a past," or the fluctuation of time, is seen when David meets the titular Giovanni after an evening with drinks with Jacques, an older homosexual man who takes him to the bar which Guillaume owns and where Giovanni is the prized, handsome bartender. In the midst of *les folles*, the flamboyant men "screaming like parrots" that, as a group, "looked like a peacock garden and sounded like a barnyard," David notices Giovanni: "[h]e stood, insolent and dark and leonine, his elbow leaning on the cash register, his fingers playing with his chin, looking out at the crowd. It was as though his station was a promontory and we were the sea" (*Giovanni's Room* 26 – 27,

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[74] Hartman's wording – "the identification with Africa is always already after the break" – also connects to the geographical location of a continent as well, a *place* which should be locatable. I return to this idea of the seemingly permanent notion of home later in this chapter.

28). Although Jacques clumsily attempts to charm Giovanni, he receives only the most perfunctory of interest in return; the majority of his conversation and attention is given to David. As they speak on the differences between New York and Paris, Giovanni declares, "'I don't believe in this nonsense about time. Time is just common, it's like water for a fish. Everybody's in this water, nobody gets out of it, or if he does the same thing happens to him that happens to the fish, he dies. And you know what happens in this water, time? The big fish eats the little fish. That's all. The big fish eat the little fish and the ocean doesn't care'" (34 – 35). To this David replies, "'[o]h please... I don't believe *that.* Time's hot [*sic*] water and we're not fish and you can choose to be eaten and also not to eat… In my country… the little fish seem to have gotten together and are nibbling at the body of the whale,'" whereupon Giovanni retorts, "'[t]hat will not make them whales" (35). Much like Kabnis in Jean Toomer's *Cane*, David attempts to find a narrative logic which coheres to progress and individualized empowerment.

Giovanni and David's fundamental disagreement is on the issue of temporality. The former believes that no individual is able to escape from the realities of the world, and, should anyone try, s/he would perish. No matter, too, as ultimately the "'big fish eats the little fish and the ocean doesn't care'" (34). When David naively proffers that this imbalance seems to be evening out in the United States, Giovanni's practical rejoinder is that this does not mean a role reversal. For Giovanni, the world is uncaring, and they pass through it unnoticed. Yet it is David's view I am most interested in, as on a cursory reading, it seems he offers us a reading of progress and time that is markedly oppositional to my placing of the novel within the context of Afro-pessimism. However, it is my

contention that we must situate Baldwin's protagonist within the discussions on black and queer temporalities, as well as the risky imagined space of a black queer temporality. Drawing upon my reading of Hartman's work on the time of slavery, as well as Hortense Spillers' discussion on the time and space of the Middle Passage, I begin by expanding on the concept of black temporality as one which lacks linear momentum forward or backward: black temporality hinges upon the temporal isolation of blackness outside of subjectivity. [75]

As Spillers writes, "[t]his body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside" (Spillers 67). To accentuate this point, it is clear that the human cargo undergoes a transformation from the moment of capture and holding in the dungeons Hartman describes in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Here, in what I assume is a reworked version of "The Time of Slavery," Hartman once again presents her readers with Elmina Castle, but this time as a site of capitalism. Rather than seeing their cargo "as a pile of corpses," or the "dark rooms [as] a grave," the slaveholders believe that "dungeon was a womb in which the slave was born" (*Lose Your Mother* 111). That is to say, the "miracle of the slave trade was that it resuscitated useless lives and transformed waste into capital" (111). Again, we return to the idea of a simultaneous birth and death of blackness, of slave status. At the same time, Hartman is skeptical of this uniform reading, and instead focuses on the human waste that must have

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[75] The temporal isolation of blackness cannot be discussed without mention of Orlando Patterson's phrase, "genealogical isolate." In much the same way that the slave cannot lay claim to prior or future generations, the black object is permanently fixed in time without access to a past or future.

accumulated underfoot: "[h]uman waste covered the floor of the dungeon. To the naked eye it looked like soot… In 1972, a team of archaeologists excavated the dungeon and cleared away eighteen inches of dirt and waste. They identified the topmost layer of the floor as the compressed remains of captives – feces, blood, and exfoliated skin" (115). What is of particular importance here is Hartman's reaction to the haunting presence of bodily matter. She states, "I refused this knowledge. I blocked it out and proceeded across the dungeon as if the floor was just that and not the remnants of slaves pressed further into oblivion by the soles of my shoes" (115). Here, in the space of the dungeon, even before the slave ship, the body of the African converts into the flesh of the slave, the production of waste; it is "turned outside" and left as fecal matter on the floor. As Hartman writes, "[w]aste is the interface of life and death. It incarnates all that has been rendered invisible, peripheral, or expendable to history writ large… Waste is the remnant of all the lives that are outside of history and 'dissolved in utter amnesia'" (115).

How then, does temporality function in these locales of filth, the utter objectification of body into flesh, and flesh into excrement? Both Spillers and Hartman provide us with the possibility of a black temporality, but a possibility which is invaded and marked by its own impossibility. Black temporality exists as the futility of a futurity: that is to say, blackness remains *as* remains, as "the profuse discharge of blood, mucus and pus," the "pools of fluid on the brick floor" (120). Spillers writes that "the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation" – that which I read to be modernity – "remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show

movement" (Spillers 68). The halting of temporal movement (i.e. the logic of modernity as the storm which approaches Benjamin's Angel of History) illuminates the black object trapped in time. Hartman's conclusion to her chapter on Elmina Castle can be read as an extension of Spillers' rumination, as she writes that "the crowd packed in this room would remain without names and faces. That was the nature of the crime that had transformed persons into cargo. It was now impossible to fill in the blank spaces." As an acknowledgement of the grief she attempts to refute in "The Time of Slavery," she can no longer turn away from the fact that here, in the dungeon, "missing the dead was as close to them as I would come. And all that stood between artifice and oblivion was the muck on the floor" (*Lose Your Mother* 135). Black temporality, then, is precisely the impossibility of filling in the blank spaces, where one can miss the dead but never claim them, where one can long for ancestors but never find them amidst the muck, and where past, present and future remain "grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation."

Moreover, the temporality which insinuates itself into the slaves once the ships reach their destination is artificial, does not originate without the ordering logic of slavery. In his essay, "Time and Revolution in African America: Temporality and the History of Atlantic Slavery," Walter Johnson proposes that "slaveholders thought they owned their slaves' biographical time" and lists the various means by which they owned it: "they recorded their slaves' birthdays in accounts books that only they could see… they reproduced their own family legacies over time out of the broken pieces of slave

families and communities divided by sale and estate settlement" (W. Johnson 153).[76] Thus the bodies carried "to the frontiers of survival" remain separated from their "motive will" and "active desire." What Hartman terms "the time of slavery," then, can also be called "the embodiment of slavery," as slave owners "infused their slaves' lives with their own time; through the daily process of slave discipline, the foreign, the young, and the resistant were forcibly inculcated with the nested temporal rhythms of their enslavement" (153). To return to David and Giovanni's conversation, time is not common. While Giovanni claims that "'[e]verybody's in this water,'" it becomes evident that black temporality is one which slaves are *subjected* to, and if, as I have been proposing all along, we read no distinction between slave and black, we can also glimpse the continuation of a black temporality which is mired within the realms of violence, commodification and fungibility (*Giovanni's Room* 34).

Here then, is the difference between black and queer temporalities: in contrast to blackness, queerness can still be situated within a history (although it may be one of shame), and it can still propose a futurity (even if it is conditional upon the death drive). I propose to join Heather Love and Lee Edelman in conversation as they each offer relevant analyses of a queer past and future that are key to my reading of *Giovanni's Room.* In Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive,* he proposes that society writ large functions as an ideological and political system to sustain the symbolic

[76] This harkens back to the form of the slave narrative, where so many of them begin with a statement regarding the concealed nature of their birth. Whether it is an unknown patrilineal line or a rough estimation of a birth month or year, the slave narrative functions as the first African American autobiographies and lends credence to the illegibility of blackness. For examples of this condition, one need not look anywhere else but to perhaps the most instrumental of these texts: Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845).

order of the child. He urges us to imagine the "space outside the framework within which politics as we know it appears and so outside the conflict of visions that share their presupposition that the body politic must survive" (Edelman 3). This "space" he names as queerness, or "the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism"; queerness, in other words, is "the place of the social order's death drive" (3). Edelman is adamant that we read his proposal literally, and "hence [queerness is] a place from which liberal politics strives… to disassociate the queer" (3). For Edelman, a queer futurity must exist in order to undermine the symbolic order of civil society; it is marked as that which "can never define an identity" but "can only ever disturb one" precisely in its non-essentialism. He writes that the "efficacy of queerness, its real strategic value, lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality that one ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it" (17 – 18). In other words, there is a psychological, ontological capacity with which to resist in the space of queerness. Edelman's language strikes me as similar to that used by Afro-pessimists, especially as he discusses what a queer identity might look like:

> queerness could never constitute an authentic or substantive identity, but only a structural position determined by the imperative of figuration; for the gap, the noncoincidence, that the order of the signifier installs both informs and inhabits queerness as it inhabits reproductive futurism. But it does so with a difference. Where futurism always anticipates, in the image of an Imaginary past, a realization of meaning that will suture identity by closing that gap, queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects, insisting on the Real of a jouissance that social reality and the futurism on which it relies have already foreclosed. Queerness, therefore, is never a matter of being or becoming but, rather, of *embodying* the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order. (24 – 25)

I include the entirety of this passage as Edelman is at his most empathic here. He urges us to accept queerness as inauthentic, insubstantive, a "structural position" that works to undermine identities promised us through the advancement of futurism. As such, queerness can never be described in the language of progression – of "being or becoming" – but rather must be elucidated in the materiality of the body: queerness *embodies.*

Yet what fundamentally sets Edelman's rallying cry of "[f]uck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized… fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop" apart from the scholarly investigations of Hartman and Spillers is that he sees queerness as having functioned as *part of* the Symbolic order (29).[77] The psychic space of queerness that he imagines is one still constituted by the conditions of relationality. While one can choose to deny symbolic relations and refuse the precepts of reproductive futurism, queer futurity is still imbued with the condition of subjectivity. The ontology of blackness is such that the world pivots on the order of antiblackness; by this I mean that the illegibility of blackness is precisely what makes the rest of the world legible. A queer future, no matter how despondent, is one which is still possible, perhaps not equitably, but available nonetheless. The structural position of the queer is within the realm of relationality; the structural position

[77] The other key flaw in Edelman's thesis is that it presupposes an equality that not everyone can share in. As Kara Keeling writes in "Looking for M – Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future" (which I will return to very shortly), "Calling for no future, it has been argued, might inform a (non)politics only for those for whom the future is given, even if undesirably so. The rest, those for whom the future remains to be won in each moment and who labor within the hellish temporal cycle Fanon describes, continue to dream 'freedom dreams' of a better day ahead, remaining open to the disruptions of poetry from the future might make in the symbolic order of the past and the present" (568).

of the black is that outside relationality; it is always already waste. There can be no subjectivity, no ontological life, because slavery is "non-mortal, because it has *never* lived" ("'The Curtain of the Sky'" 15). By virtue of its definition, the time of slavery marks the slave as socially dead, enscripts the body as flesh.

If the future Edelman gestures toward is predicated upon choice, then the past Love seeks to examine in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* is one deeply rooted in what she calls a "queer modernist melancholia" as "the idea of modernity – with its suggestions of progress, rationality, and technological advance – is intimately bound up with backwardness" (Love 5). While this definition of modernity comes close to my concept of an alternative modernity, what differentiates her analysis from mine is that Love presupposes a backwardness, a looking back; in the lineage of Afro-pessimism, however, there is no history to look back to because it is persistently and consistently carried into the future.[78] Love's illumination on this type of melancholia comes after decades of the rhetoric of gay pride, when notions of grief and mourning have been deemed "bad." Yet as she states, "it is the damaging aspects of the past that tend to stay with us, and the desire to forget may itself be a symptom of haunting" (1). Propelled and haunted by these "damaging aspects" of shame and grief, we as queer readers

> tend to see ourselves as reaching back toward isolated figures in the queer past in order to rescue or save them. It is hard to know what to do with texts that resist our advances. Texts or figures that refuse to be redeemed disrupt not only the progress narrative of queer history but also our sense

[78] I will further elaborate upon this concept of carrying the past into the future in my next chapter, "The Afterlife of Slavery: Performing the Familiar/Familial in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*."

> of queer identity in the present. We find ourselves deeply unsettled by our identifications with these figures: the history of queer damage retains its capacity to do harm in the present. (9)

In light of Dan Savage's "It Gets Better" campaign (2010), supported by numerous well-intentioned individuals from Barack Obama to Lady Gaga, it becomes clear that the rhetoric utilized is one that denies backwardness and instead pushes for a sentimental understanding of progress and citizenship.[79] Thus the queer subject who identifies with these texts and figures for whom it did not get better, who continually feels shame, who does not desire to forget, is marked as unfit for the liberal narrative of mainstream and homonormative queer politics.

Conversely, in her study of queer history, Love states that the turn from "effective history" to "affective history" has also marked the turn from questioning "'[w]ere there gay people in the past?'" to "'Why do we care so much if there were gay people in the past?' or even, perhaps, 'What relation with these figures do we hope to cultivate?'" (31). She answers her own queries: the hope is to "redeem them. By including queer figures from the past in a positive genealogy of gay identity, we make good on their suffering, transforming their shame into pride after the fact" (32). Similar to Hartman's unattainable desire to find her (symbolic) mother, the affective longing is to build these bridges and relationships across time and space, and I read Love's argument as a prolific basis for the

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[79] These taped messages urged bullied youth who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender to look toward the future as an eventual escape from their peers' constant tormenting. What the campaign failed to take into account, however, was its own essentialist, uniform view of all GLBT identified youth as physically, racially, economically and sexually mobile, a mass grouping of individuals able to achieve higher education and a kind of escape from their embodied realities. As a colleague of mine and I discussed, the campaign does not recognize that for some of us, it does not get better; rather, we just get older.

grounds of a queer temporality that embraces the impossibility of leaving behind the past. Here is where queer and black temporalities nestle shoulder to shoulder: both are saturated with pasts that refuse to stay dead. Yet to turn briefly to Frank B. Wilderson, III, it is impossible to ignore the key concept of relationality which precedes analysis: the queer still occupies a place in the world. What Wilderson calls the "ruse of analogy" is that it "erroneously locates Blacks in the world – a place where they have not been since the dawning of Blackness," and that this location is "a provision for civil society, promising an enabling modality for Human ethical dilemmas" (*Red, White & Black* 37).[80] In their introduction to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning,* David L. Eng and David Kazanjian write that "as soon as the question 'What is lost?' is posed, it invariably slips into the question 'What remains?' That is, loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained" (Eng and Kazanjian 2). Loss, and thus melancholia, is possible, as a script for a queer past and future, a queer temporality; in other words, queer "isolated figures" can be found, even if not for rescue.

Both performatively and paradigmatically, however, this is untrue for blackness. When recounting a visit to London with his brother, David, Baldwin remembers that suddenly they were surrounded by a mass, and, panicked, he said, "'Davy, I wouldn't dare look back. If I looked back, I'd shake'" (I. Lewis 90). Looking backward for Baldwin, for the character of David, would mean acknowledging that they "are still

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[80] As stated in my earlier chapters, this location is also "a mystification, and often erasure, of Blackness's grammar of suffering (accumulation and fungibility or the status of being non-Human)" (*Red, White & Black* 37). The key difference is between "social oppression and structural suffering" (36).

looking for an exit from the prison," an exit that does not exist (*Lose Your Mother* 133). This theoretical framework returns us to David and Giovanni, and I recognize that in their initial conversation the question is not about black temporality per se, but rather about temporality as a general frame of reference. What is explicitly stated, however, is the former's refusal of fate – "'you can choose,'" he insists – and the latter's calm acceptance of it. At this stage in the novel, Baldwin articulates a temporality that is neutral if unstable, and we see this in the slippage of tense in his writing. After their initial meeting, Giovanni closes the bar and guides David, Guillaume and Jacques to a café for breakfast. Note Baldwin's description of the cash-hungry madame: "[b]ehind the counter sat one of those absolutely inimitable and indomitable ladies, produced only in the city of Paris" (*Giovanni's Room* 50). Here, he writes in the past tense, but immediately afterward the narrative is thrust into the present; as she rapturously greets Giovanni and praises his "rich friends" (David rightfully parses that he is not included in this group), he introduces them, and with David "[Giovanni] stands back slightly. Something is burning in his eyes and it lights up all his face, it is joy and pride" (52). As David smiles, he feels that "everything in me is jumping up and down. Giovanni carelessly puts an arm around my shoulder. 'What have you got good to eat?' he cried. 'We are hungry'" (53). At the moment of contact, the careless arm thrown over a shoulder sweeps us back into the past.

At first glance, this slippage seems to indicate the dislocating of temporality within the text: in other words, time – the past and present – can and does operate non-linearly, as does the novel itself. As David muses, "[t]here is something fantastic in the spectacle I now present to myself of having run so far, so hard, across the ocean even,

only to find myself brought up short once more before the bulldog in my own backyard – the yard, in the meantime, having grown smaller and the bulldog bigger" (6). His bulldog – his queerness – catches him unaware no matter where he is, in the United States or Paris. At the same time, it also catches him no matter *when* he is: such is the effect of a queer temporality. It brings to mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work, or "another conception and unfolding of temporality, a specifically queer temporality that is at once indefinite and virtual but also forceful, resilient, and undeniable" (Barber and Clark 2). In other words, "[i]f 'queer' is a temporality, a 'moment,' it is also a force; or rather, it is a crossing of temporality with force" (8). The accessibility of past and future are what imbue the present with the necessary "force" to cross time and space, and thus the force of his queerness carries him back and forth, across and beyond.

Yet in Giovanni's statement, "[w]e are hungry" I read an indication of David's blackness because as stated earlier, if the time of slavery is also the time of blackness, then we see an irrevocable linkage between the two: they are, in essence, one and the same. What differentiates blackness from other structural positions is precisely its openness to gratuitous violence. Briefly put, the capacity for blackness to be violated is what marks it as beyond relationality. In the instant before Giovanni declares his hunger, he slips his arm around David, a gesture of property that surely cannot be unnoticed by the madame. The "[w]e are hungry" is vague; what are they hungry for? For food? For sex? The correlation between consumption and hunger brings to mind bell hooks' "Eating

the Other: Desire and Resistance."[81] She writes that the body of what she calls "the colored Other" can be consumed and claimed "instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground" (hooks 24). Furthermore, the "commodification of Otherness," or what I view as the *consumption* of blackness in *Giovanni's Room*, "has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21 – 22). While I do not disregard Baldwin's description of Giovanni as "insolent and dark and leonine," I cannot read him as black (*Giovanni's Room* 28). In his demand for sustenance, coupled with the possessive arm thrown about David, we see the eliding of time from present to past: as the black body (represented vis-à-vis the traumatized black psyche) is cannibalized, the disjointed nonlinearity of history becomes apparent.

Baldwin's reliance on the ocean, or water, as a metaphor for temporality is especially pertinent in reading *Giovanni's Room*.[82] His usage of the metaphor opens the second part of the novel, once David and Giovanni have firmly established themselves as a unit, and I include it in its entirety because of the numerous threads he weaves together to form a composite blackness. David dreamily recounts,

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[81] While it is true that hooks uses the Hegelian Other to define blackness, I still find her argument instructive to my reading of the openness of David's body to consumption. I am less interested in her appreciation of a black subjectivity, and more so in the ways hooks articulates the world's capacity for black consumption.

[82] Baldwin also utilizes the metaphor of the ocean to discuss identification; David recollects that when he first saw Giovanni, "[i]t was as though his station were a promontory and we were the sea" (28). Here, Giovanni functions as the anchor with which to adhere to a temporal space, something David cannot provide for himself.

> I remember that life in that room seemed to be occurring beneath the sea. Time flowed past indifferently above us; hours and days had no meaning. In the beginning, our life together held a joy and amazement which was newborn every day. Beneath the joy, of course, was anguish and beneath the amazement was fear; but they did not work themselves to the beginning until our high beginning was aloes on our tongues. By then anguish and fear had become the surface on which we slipped and slid, losing balance, dignity and pride. Giovanni's face, which I had memorized so many mornings, noons, and nights, hardened before my eyes, began to give in secret places, began to crack. The light in the eyes became a glitter; the wide and beautiful brow began to suggest the skull beneath. The sensual lips turned inward, busy with the sorrow overflowing from his heart. It became a stranger's face – or it made me so guilty to look on him that I wished it were a stranger's face. Not all my memorizing had prepared me for the metamorphosis which my memorizing had helped to bring about. (75 – 76).

I draw two conclusions from this passage. First, the temporality within Giovanni's room operates at a radical alterity that sets it apart from the rest of Paris, and, indeed, the United States which occupies David's mind. Thus I propose that the interior of Giovanni's room functions to ingest David's psyche, revealing blackness only through the legible script of queerness. Second, the changes in Giovanni's face pointedly gesture toward the fact that they are *not* occurring on David's face; rather, Baldwin implies that David is actually the catalyst needed to implement these changes. What, then, is unique about Giovanni's room, on a street that is "wide, respectable rather than elegant" (63)? In the following section of the chapter, I propose that this place on the outskirts of Paris is a space wherein an alternative black and queer temporality struggles to be recognized as a possibility that refuses the categorization of either/or.

Black Temporality in Sedgwick's Closet

In order to begin my analysis of the long passage above, I first turn my attention to the concept of a room. In *Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that*

Shaped Them, Diana Fuss borrows from Walter Benjamin and examines "the phantasmagoria of the interior," where the "modern fantasy that the domestic interior and all its furnishings illuminate the inner personality of its inhabitants is, of course, no less powerful or pervasive for being a fantasy" (*Sense of an Interior* 12). David describes Giovanni's room as a place of squalor, without curtains, without privacy. Gesturing toward the garbage outside, Giovanni wonders aloud, "'[w]here do they take it? I don't know where they take it – but it might very well be my room'" (*Giovanni's Room* 87). What David first takes to be a fanciful figure of speech, he soon realizes that the room is not full of the "garbage of Paris, which would have been anonymous: this was Giovanni's regurgitated life" (87). The room is cluttered with the detritus of failed ambitions, "boxes of cardboard and leather, some tied with string, some locked, some bursting, and out of the topmost box before me spilled down sheets of violin music. There was a violin in the room, lying on the table in its warped, cracked case," and the furniture fares no better, a table "loaded with yellowing newspapers and empty bottles… Red wine had been spilled on the floor" (87). What frightens David about Giovanni's regurgitated life is that there is no "key to this disorder… For this was not a matter of habit or circumstance or temperament; it was a matter of punishment and grief" (87). Here, the interior of the room *does* illuminate the interiority of the queer subject; for David, Giovanni and his room are interchangeable.[83] For all intents and purposes, during David's tenancy in this room, I read him as ingested into Giovanni. Much like the violin case, David feels it is

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[83] We have already established, of course, that David himself does not have an interior as it is configured through self-hate and the omnipresent nature of whiteness within the black psyche.

impossible to figure out if he had been in the room "yesterday or a hundred years before" (87). Again, the matter at hand is one of temporality, and the persistent affective understanding on David's part that "life in that room seemed to be occurring beneath the sea" (75).

One also cannot examine the psychic space of the room, this markedly queer space, without bringing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's closet into the analysis. While her seminal *Epistemology of the Closet* outlines "the relations of the closet – the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition" as pertaining to speech acts, I find that an articulation of Giovanni's room as an extension of Sedgwick's closet is necessary to an extrapolation of a black queer temporality (*Epistemology* 3). She writes, "[t]he closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century," and both it and "'coming out'" have become "all-purpose phrases for the potent crossing and recrossing of almost any politically charged lines of representation," phrases which reveal the "compromised metaphor of *in* and *out* of the closet of privacy" (71, 72). The closet produces the impulse to read homosexual and heterosexual definition "on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority… and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities" (1). What Sedgwick endeavors to do in her text is to demonstrate that binary oppositions – particularly of heterosexual/homosexual – do not exist on parallel lines of equality, that is to say, "term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its

meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B" (10). Not only does term A – heterosexuality – depend on term B – homosexuality – for its meaning, but, in fact, "term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A" (10).

Thus I read Giovanni's room as closet, and contend that it functions as both a replication of his interior and a site that produces and marks both himself and David as queer; remaining in the closet signifies as explicitly as coming out of it, speaks and gestures as loudly as any speech act. In a sense, it functions as a shelter for "David and Giovanni's relationship from the external world's judging eyes, but in doing so effectively traps them in their own internal spaces. These spaces become marked, externally, by confusion and disorder of the room that is almost surreal in its relentlessness" (Drowne 78). The "confusion and disorder" of the room derives not only from the accumulation of discarded objects, but also from the sediment of emotions: underneath the joy are Giovanni's "punishment and grief," are anguish and fear. Yet it marks *David* as well; the room supersedes his rented apartment as *his* interior. It is no accident that the room David occupies when not with Giovanni is a place of and assumed heterosexuality and expectations of reproductive futurity. Asking him about his plans, his landlady declares, "'[y]ou must go find yourself another woman, a *good* woman, and get married and have babies. *Yes*, that is what you ought to do… Where is your *maman?*'" (68). With one brief attempt at boosting his morale (albeit without being in possession of the full story), David's landlady assumes his heterosexuality, his desire for child, and a love for a mother long dead and thereby unknowable. As Hartman writes, "'I have lost my mother'… These were the common refrains" of slavery, of blackness (*Lose Your*

Mother 16). By reading Giovanni's room as David's, I argue that the room exemplifies how the legibility of queerness (the sexual desire between the two men) is necessary to script the illegibility of blackness into the narrative.[84] Summarily put, this closet is not where heterosexuality's dependence on homosexuality comes to light; rather, it is where the paradoxically excessive void of blackness is made decipherable *through* queer desire, and not, as some have argued, "the *racializing* effects of queerness" (Abur-Rahman 480).

The passage of time is markedly different within the room, existing "beneath the sea. Time flowed past indifferently above us; hours and days had no meaning." Here I invoke Sedgwick's explication of "I" in her foreword to *Tendencies:* when responding to potential critics of her use of "I," she writes the pronoun "marks the site of such dense, accessible effects of knowledge, history, revulsion, authority, and pleasure," and that the usefulness of the "I" is that it is "a heuristic; maybe a powerful one" ("T Times" xiv). The "I" which begs for and begets personal experience, and powerful ones at that, speak to the "peculiar temporal disorientations within which that 'I' abides… present tense, forwarded into an unknowable future, *remains*" (Barber and Clark 19). We see the disjuncture of past and present in the conclusion to part one of the novel, which leads directly into the passage cited above. As his landlady leaves, David remembers that "Giovanni had had great plans for remodeling the room," and this thought leads,

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[84] We see this occur as David's landlady takes note of the bedroom he has been living in, which is "quite untidy, the light burning, my bathrobe, books, dirty socks, and a couple of dirty glasses, and a coffee cup half full of stale coffee – lying around, all over the place; and the sheets on the bed a tangled mess." She exclaims, with displeasure, "'[y]ou really must take my advice, monsieur, and get married'" (*Giovanni's Room* 69 – 70). As David's room comes to mimic Giovanni's, the only means of understanding it is through heterosexual impulse: the room is messy because he lacks a woman. David's place cannot echo his psychic space as it is already occupied; it is only made legible as a reflection of Giovanni's room, which then, in turn, reflect a compulsory need for heteronormative behaviors.

sorrowfully, into what we have known since the beginning of the novel, that Giovanni is slated for execution: "I suppose they will come for him early in the morning, perhaps just before dawn, so that the last thing Giovanni will ever see will be that grey, lightless sky over Paris" (*Giovanni's Room* 71). From the present tenses of I – "I suppose," "I remember" – we segue into past tense: "Time *flowed* past indifferently above us; hours and days *had* no meaning." The heuristic "I" functions to propel the present tense into the unknown future (which David is thinking of as the narrative frames the text) via the remembering of the past.[85] Although it is tempting, then, to read this room as the location of a solely queer temporality, the changes which occur in Giovanni, and not in David, complicate this notion. His face "hardened… began to give in secret places, began to crack. The light in the eyes became a glitter; the wide and beautiful brow began to suggest the skull beneath. The sensual lips turned inward" (75). His face becomes a death mask, a thin layer of skin over his skull. Baldwin's language here reflects the interior: if the room reflects both Giovanni and David, we see how Giovanni's exterior begins to turn inward. The cause of "the sorrow overflowing from [Giovanni's] heart" is David, and he thinks that "[n]ot all of my memorizing had prepared me for the metamorphosis which my memorizing had helped to bring about" (76). The act of love, the memorizing of his lover's face, is what turns Giovanni's face into that of a stranger's. Contrary to Abur-Rahman, who writes that "Giovanni is the dark figure in the novel who serves as a

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[85] I think, too, of Stuart Hall's statement that "[w]e all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', 'positioned'" ("New Ethnicities" 447). For Sedgwick, the queer subject writes and speaks from a particular place and time that complicate normative places and times.

repository for the longings and anxieties of the white characters. It is against him that they define and measure both their humanity and their whiteness," I argue that Giovanni's death mask occurs due to his ingestion of David; as the two, as subject and object, respectively, occupy the room, Giovanni begins to decay (Abur-Rahman 482). As with Joey, David taints Giovanni.

If, as hooks argues, eating the other is fucking the other, then the "direct objective was not simply to sexually possess the other; it was to be changed in some way by the encounter" (hooks 24).[86] Where I disagree with hooks is that the change caused by the sexual possession of blackness is not only the possessive subject "asserting themselves as transgressive desiring subjects," but also as an illumination of the black object's status as living death. In *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity,* Sharon Patricia Holland examines the "possibility of being among the dead in the course of living," and I read this statement as indicative of the presence of blackness as the contaminating abyss (Holland 18). David's presence in Giovanni's room speaks to how his body is the embodiment of what "no one wants to be beholden to… in order to speak, queer black bodies have to search in outrageous places to find work – they have to come back from the dead to get the recognition they deserve" (120). While I empathically disagree with the language of coming "back from the dead," I do see the usefulness of this notion of queer black bodies needing "outrageous places" in order to speak. David's

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[86] This occurs in the earlier encounter between David and Joey. As they awaken from their nap, Joey finds himself bitten by a bedbug, which has never occurred before (*Giovanni's Room* 7). The visual imagery of being bitten – of being taken into the mouths of insects – signifies Joey's proximity to death via David's body.

status as black and therefore socially dead manifests itself through the changes in Giovanni's face. Possessing the status of subject, Giovanni is able to exhibit melancholia for David, as the "complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies… from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished" (Laplanche and Pontalis 589). The impoverishment of longing for an object weakens Giovanni, for what is there to long for, to hope for, from an object constituted as socially dead? The same changes do not occur in David precisely because he is always already dead; his face is already a skull, and he already bears "the marks of a cultural text whose inside as been turned outside" (Spillers 67).

The presence of both queer and black temporalities within Giovanni's room brings to mind Kara Keeling's "Looking for M – Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future," as she offers a means of allowing blackness to slip outside of temporality. Here, Keeling invokes Fanon's conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks* where he rewrites Marx's dictum from his pamphlet, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Fanon's version, cited by Keeling, reads that "[t]he social revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future… Before, the expression exceeded the content; now, the content exceeds the expression" ("Looking for M" 565). Keeling takes this passage as an indication of "Fanon's own interest in exploding the temporality of the colonial mode of representation of otherness and in revealing a temporality raises the possibility of the impossible within colonial reality, black liberation" (565). From this notion of a temporality that raises possibilities of the impossible, that can be "a rupture within history that also breaks from history," Keeling

asks us to read this possibility as a "project that thinks the temporal structures of blackness and queerness in conjunction with one another" as a means of imagining a queer black temporality (567). In this effort, Keeling reads Edelman's figure of the queer and Fanon's black concurrently, both as figures "currently capable of unraveling the libidinal economy of signification through which a particular dominant socius reproduces itself" (567 – 568). For Edelman, the socius is heterosexuality, for Fanon, colonialism. Their methodologies are different, of course, as Edelman "advocates for an ironic embrace of that figure and a rejection of politics *touts court*," whereas Fanon "advocates for a revolutionary, cleansing violence, a radical violence through which the existing structures would be destroyed and a new man would be born" (568). Having established the two diverging methodologies, Keeling then proposes to "address the tension between the hermeneutics of recognizing a figure of radical alterity within the structures that guarantee futurity and the determination of a politics in the face of such a recognition" (568). It is precisely in this tension, the interstices of Edelman's abhorrence of reproductive futurism, and ergo, a queer futurity precipitated by death, and Fanon's call for revolution, that Keeling seeks to locate a queer black temporality.

I read this question of a queer black temporality as becoming more and more pressing as the room loses its charm for David, and his queer desire becomes tinged with self-doubt. The nature of the room is that it halts temporal progression both forward and backward. He thinks,

> I scarcely know how to describe that room. It became, in a way, every room I had ever been in and every room I find myself in hereafter will remind me of Giovanni's room. I did not really stay there very long – we met before the spring began and I left there during the summer – but it still

> seems to me that I spent a lifetime there. Life in that room seemed to be occurring underwater, as I say, and it is certain that I underwent a sea change there. (*Giovanni's Room* 85)

The room is "every room I had ever been in and every room I find myself in hereafter," and David is never able to conceptualize the passage of time, and one short season from spring to summer registers as a lifetime. From a past that is "surgically created and recreated in every present," he invokes Benjamin's notion of seizing an "image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" ("Looking for M" 570; Benjamin 255). A queer black temporality is precisely this moment which collides with historical materialism: by understanding that this image, or this moment can be read ephemerally and only just, this particular temporal register allows for a presence through absence that refutes the necessity for a location grounded in historicity or geography. Rather than seeking a subjectivity that is mired in and given logic through temporality, Keeling proposes a simultaneous temporality which runs alongside, or *outside,* in much the same way that David's lifetime in Giovanni's room simultaneously occurs as his life outside of it.[87] In other words, a black queer temporality is one which is constituted as being outside relationality, and I read this slippage in the persistence of both past and present tenses in the novel, as well as the letters sent by Hella to David, and from David to his father.

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[87] Although not included in the analysis of this chapter, I am reminded of Baldwin's screenplay of *Giovanni's Room*. Queer black temporality is configured here as both "Hollywood (the deceit of a chronological ordering of 'real' space and time) and experimental cinema (the radical disruption of that deceit) are simultaneously crucial to Baldwin's aesthetic transformation of racial and sexual identities. Both models of cinema enable, as Baldwin engages them, the historically weighted 'now' to be portrayed as something more than a simple 'obsession' with black and white, homosexual and heterosexual" (Gerstner 76). Further analysis can be found in David A. Gerstner's *Queer Pollen: White Seduction, Black Male Homosexuality, and the Cinematic.*

David’s attraction to Hella occurs because she is one who watches; he is seduced by her image, “very elegant, tense, and glittering, surrounded by the light which ills the salon of the ocean liner, drinking rather too fast, and laughing, and watching the men. That was how I met her… she was drinking and watching, and that was why I liked her” (*Giovanni’s Room* 4). Wanting to be watched himself, David realizes that “nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom. I suppose this was why I asked her to marry me: to give myself something to be moored to” (5). The “freedom” which Baldwin writes of is precisely his unmooring from time and space; he wishes to enter the sacrosanct heteronormative/sexual institution of marriage to feel he is rooted. Ironically, it is Hella who bolts at his proposal, as she leaves him for Spain to contemplate what marriage to David might entail. Her letter to him reads in part, “I’ve decided to let two try it, this business of loving me, I mean, and see how that works out” (93). Her acceptance of his proposal and subsequent return to Paris spurs David to write his father: “Dear Dad… I won’t keep secrets from you anymore, I found a girl and I want to marry her” (124). These images of himself which David maintains – the heteronormative fiancée who patiently waits for Hella’s whimsy to end, the heteronormative son who confesses his “secret” of straight sexuality – travels within the structures which Edelman and Fanon desire to annihilate.

To return to Keeling’s reading of this annihilation, I turn to her assessment that “[f]rom within the logics of reproductive futurity and colonial reality, a black future looks like no future at all” (“Looking for M” 578). How then, does one escape from these confining logics? Is such an escape even possible? David’s standing within reproductive

futurity, and, as I have argued, as the embodiment of the void of blackness, marks him as existing on multiple affective frequencies. In the queer black space of Giovanni's room, he is able to loosen his ties from temporality and geography and be made legible through a "sea change" that scripts him outside of the constraints of an "intolerable yet quotidian violence" placed upon "black possibility and on queer existence coterminously" (579). Concurrently, however, how do we then read David's eventual suffocation in this room? During a passionate argument with David, Giovanni exclaims that the world "'is full of rooms – big rooms, little rooms, round rooms, square ones, rooms high up, rooms low down – all kinds of rooms! What kind of room do you think Giovanni should be living in? How long do you think it took me to find the room I have?'" (*Giovanni's Room* 117). He stakes his claim in this grounded location; having left Italy, he refuses to leave this room as for him, it signifies a queer space that David can help beautify. He continues, "'since when, since when… have you so hated the room? Since when? Since yesterday, since always?'" (117). Rather than reading this pointed attack as an indication of David's self-hatred as queer, I instead propose to read it through the lens of the impossibility of home. In other words, while Keeling's claim to a subjectivity outside the realm of temporality and history is desirable, I argue that David has never been included within temporality and history to begin with. The overwhelming cavern of blackness reveals itself through the absence of a home space, and consequently the inability to take flight outside of that home. Although Baldwin wishes to reassure us that that "'[y]ou never leave home. You take your home with you. You better. Otherwise, you're homeless,'" I contend that it is precisely this condition of permanent homelessness which precludes the

possibility of both home and exile, and comes to stand as a defining characteristic of blackness in *Giovanni's Room* (*Black Manhood* 36).

The "Irrevocable Condition" of Expatriation

The movement of Americans to Europe is not an entirely new phenomenon when Baldwin expatriates in 1948. As Robert Tomlinson writes, "[s]ince colonial times, the Grand Tour of Europe, and more particularly visits to Paris and Rome, had signified for the sensitive American artists a return to the locus of Western civilization" (Tomlinson 135). Their reasons were many: "the provinciality of American life, the cultural density of Europe, the need for the artist to distance himself" (135). He also argues that "Black American writers and artists were no different from their White compatriots," making the "obligatory pilgrimage to Europe, even if social reasons were added to the cultural ones" (135 – 136). Despite his attempt at articulating reasons for black expatriation, Tomlinson does not address that what propels this move is vastly different from a white impulse to "return to the locus of Western civilization." What is evident to me is that "the provinciality of American life" usually meant crimes of lynching and that "the cultural density of Europe" translated to an exoticizing of blackness (which, while problematic, could still be preferred to the vicissitude of state-sanctioned violence occurring wholesale), and it is undeniable that African American expatriates experienced their move across the Atlantic and their status abroad as drastically different from that of their white contemporaries.[88]

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[88] It is of utmost importance that we differentiate between exile and cosmopolitanism. James Darsey's unethical definition of cosmopolitanism is that "if cosmopolitanism can be oppressive, oppression can be

To being thinking about exile, I offer a rudimentary definition, wherein "[e]xile is here broadly defined to include the alienation often brought about by the experience of oppression and/or exclusion" (Johnson-Roullier 3). The status of the expatriate as an individual in exile holds even more weight for the African American. Tomlinson continues that "exile may be the result of banishment by superior powers or self-exile due to hostile circumstances, and the latter, in fact, does not require physical displacement." Particularly in light of the Middle Passage, "the voyage to a foreign land is an exile that restages the original historical and cultural alienation at 'home'… the fact of geographic exile can be seen as the symbolic extension of a radical existential exile" (Tomlinson 136). In other words, the plight of the African American recalls the theft of human cargo from Africa in that s/he is "irremediably exiled from his/her African past, yet denied access to the new American culture" (137). In his essay "Encounter on the Seine," Baldwin recounts the experience of being an African American who meets an African on the Seine and writes, the "African before him has endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty; but the African has not yet endured the utter alienation of himself from his people and his past" (*Notes of a Native Son* 122). Both Giovanni and David are in exile in Paris. Giovanni tells David about his village in Italy, and the woman he left behind. He confesses, "'I wanted to stay there forever and eat much spaghetti and drink much wine and make many babies and grow fat,'" but eventually departs "one wild, sweet day…

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perversely liberating. Oppression makes of certain conditions – gender, race, sexual orientation - incorrigible outlaws, who may as well do as they please (and who are expected to) since their fate is sealed; they will be oppressed for what they are, regardless of what they do" (Darsey 188). The insinuation that blackness is a condition of cosmopolitanism and ergo liberated harkens back to notions of primitivism, and ignores wholeheartedly the lived realities of those who cannot "do as they please."

That was the first time in my life that I wanted to die. I had just buried my baby in the churchyard where my father and my father's fathers were and I had left my girl screaming in my mother's house" (*Giovanni's Room* 139). Despite this traumatic experience, Giovanni's language still presupposes a home that has been left, *even if* one can no longer return. He says bluntly, "'I do not think I have a home there anymore,'" and to David, "'you will go home and then you find that home is not home anymore. Then you will really be in trouble. As long as you stay here, you can always think: One day I will go home'" (116).

What I contend is that Giovanni does not realize what David begins to suspect: that David never had a place to claim as home to begin with. In Giovanni's narrative, we have a dead child buried in a graveyard of fathers and fathers' fathers, a grieving lover left with a mother. Giovanni is afforded a narrative with which to trace familial lines, and although his futurity is aborted through death, it is still present. David is bereft of both; he is left with a father who boasts that "[w]e were not like father and son… we were like buddies. I did not want to be his buddy; I wanted to be his son," and a mother who creeps into his nightmares, "blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive" (16, 10 – 11). He is one who cannot lay claim to his father as father, and whose mother becomes an orifice of death (reminiscent of Joey's body and Giovanni's room) and stinks of waste; the matrilineal line of slavery is manifested through the "breach" of David's mother. As Hartman writes, "[t]he most universal definition of the slave is a stranger… [He] is the

perpetual outcast" (*Lose Your Mother* 5). In other words, the slave is one who cannot lay claim to any genealogical and familial lines at all.

Uprooted from temporality and isolated both geographically and psychically from family lines, David embodies the impossibility of exile for blackness, for there is no home to be exiled from. Baldwin continuously utilizes the metaphor of the sea to define David's temporal, geographic and genealogical isolation. A sailor, "dressed all in white, coming across the boulevard," causes David to "think of home – perhaps home is not a place but an irrevocable condition" (*Giovanni's Room* 92). A different sailor then reveals David's homosexuality to Hella:

> I roamed all the bars of that glittering town, and at the end of the first night, blind with alcohol and grim with lust, I climbed the stairs of a dark hotel in company with a sailor. It turned out, late the next day, that the sailor's leave was not yet ended and that the sailor had friends. We went to visit them. We stayed the night. We spent the next day together, and the next. On the final night of the sailor's leave, we stood drinking together in a crowded bar. We faced the mirror. I was very drunk. I was almost penniless. In the mirror, suddenly, I saw Hella's face. I thought for a moment that I had gone mad, and I turned. She looked very tired and drab and small. (162)

The figure of the sailor calls forward several things, the first being the 500 million moved across the Atlantic in the dank holds of ships, and it is critical to note that the sailors embody queer sexuality in Baldwin's novel. In "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley defines "queer" "not in the sense of a gay' or same-sex loving identity waiting to be excavated from the ocean floor but as a praxis of resistance," namely in its "marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so" (Tinsley 199). While Tinsley's definition is more for her excavation of queerness onboard the slave ships between what she calls

"commodified flesh," I find the idea of queer as disruptive to normative order pivotal; in a similar fashion to Sedgwick and Keeling's contentions regarding queerness, the dislocating and disruptive power of queerness is made visible and palpable (yet unreachable for David) in the figures of the two sailors.

Second, the sailor reminds us of David's positionality as belonging outside; as I have theorized, David exists within a queer black temporality that runs alongside and outside history.[89] Baldwin writes that the two together, David and the sailor, "we faced the mirror." Yet instantaneously the sailor vanishes, and "I was very drunk. I was almost penniless… I saw Hella's face." Here it is not only the sailor's sexual interest in David that renders David visible, but also his occupation. The sole reason the two are together is because the "sailor's leave was not yet ended," indicating an individual who is in perpetual motion. As the sailor disappears in the mirror, leaving only David's "I" behind, I am reminded of Abur-Rahman's argument that "for Baldwin the experience of exile… powerfully parallels – and analogizes – the social alienation and psychic fragmentation that African Americans and/as sexual outsiders experience at home" (Abur-Rahman 478). Baldwin's protagonist always longs to flee: in the aftermath of his experience with Joey, he avoids his father's camaraderie as he was now "in full flight from him" (*Giovanni's Room* 16). As Yasmin Y. DeGout succinctly summarizes, "David considers leaving Giovanni in the bar when they first meet; he longs to go home to America when he finds

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[89] Giovanni makes reference to David's outside status as well. In his declaration of hatred for Paris, he says "'I have lain here many nights… and thought how far away is my village and how terrible it is to be in this cold city… where Giovanni has no one to talk to, and no one to be with, and where he has found a lover who is neither man nor woman, nothing that I can know or touch'" (*Giovanni's Room* 139). Rather than reading this as indicative of David as in between man and woman, I instead argue that he is here, too, outside of relationality; he is neither/nor precisely because he cannot be either/or.

himself attracted to Giovanni; he seeks escape by looking for a whore then by having a sexual encounter with Sue (DeGout 427). Furthermore he flees from Giovanni, from what he is sure is “the longer and lesser and more perpetual murder,” and instead prolongs his relationship with Hella; he is fully cognizant of how his social death contaminates Giovanni’s social life (*Giovanni’s Room* 118). The two sailors in the novel function to define home as a psychic space, and to highlight David’s perpetual being in flight as one who has never had a home.

I return us here to the conditions under which Baldwin left the United States: during the eras of Jim Crow laws and continual racialized violence, what becomes undeniable is that the African American citizen has never been meant to be included in the domestic narrative of the nation. As such, at first Baldwin’s insistence on his American-ness seems perplexing. For example, in his dialogue with poet Nikki Giovanni in 1971, he frankly confesses that “there isn’t any way ever to leave America… So I’m a cat trying to make it in the world because I’m condemned to live in the world” (Baldwin and Giovanni 15). In an interview with Kenneth B. Clark, he reiterates, “I could, my own person, leave this country and go to Africa, I could go to China, I could go to Russia, I could go to Cuba, but I’m an American and that is a fact” (Kenneth Clark 39 – 40). Moreover, to return to an earlier citation, Baldwin indicates that “‘[y]ou never leave home. You take your home with you. You better. Otherwise, you’re homeless’” (*Black Manhood* 36). In these multiple examples it appears that Baldwin insists on his status as an American, that although he as an artist exists “to disturb the peace,” he exists as part of the United States nonetheless (Terkel 21). What is apparent, however, is the

inadequacy of language to delineate Baldwin's claim that he makes through David – that the meaning of "American" is obviously contingent on one's placement within the nation, or, in this case, outside of it.

That Baldwin's identity as an American forever marks him in the same way that David's does is not cause for comfort; rather, it is an indication of the antiblackness which pervades both author and protagonist. As Wilderson writes, "violence towards the Black body is the precondition for the existence of Gramsci's single entity 'the modern bourgeois-state' with its divided apparatus, political society and civil society" ("Gramsci's Black Marx" 5). In this same text, Wilderson cites Cornel West's statement that

> "[a] central preoccupation of black culture is confronting candidly the ontological wounds, psychic scars, and existential bruises of black people while fending off insanity and self-annihilation. This is why the 'ur-text' of black culture is neither a word nor a book, not an architectural monument or a legal brief. Instead, it is a guttural cry and a wrenching moan – a cry not so much for help as for home, a moan less out of complaint than for recognition." (qtd. in "Gramsci's Black Marx" 7)

Baldwin's insistence on being an American is exactly this "cry not so much for help as for home," as otherwise he is marked as homeless. The "irrevocable condition" of home that encapsulates blackness is both a present absence and predicated on a gratuitous violence of theft and death. He claims that "I don't feel like a Black expatriate at all… You can't be an expatriate anymore because America is all over the world. I'm still an American citizen" (J. Walker 132). The "America" which is inescapable, even for David who seeks respite in Giovanni's room, is all-pervasive and scars him as one who cannot claim exiled status.

David's longing for home, too, is at first disconcerting. Precipitated by his first evening with Giovanni, he "ached abruptly, intolerably, with a longing to go home; not to that hotel, in one of the alleys of Paris, where the concierge barred the way with my unpaid bill; but home, home across the ocean, to things and people I knew and understood" (*Giovanni's Room* 62). We see the conflation of home and nation as Giovanni's displeasure with David is voiced through his naming of "'*vrai americain.*'" At the same time, "[c]onversely, when delighted, he said that I was not an American at all… I resented being called an American… because it seemed to make me nothing more than that… and I resented being called *not* an American because it seemed to make me nothing" (89). In their final altercation which occurs after Hella's return to Paris, David disparages Giovanni and rages, "'[w]hat kind of life can we have in this room?... [Y]ou want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room and kiss you when you come through that door and lie with you at night and be your little *girl*.'" In response, "[Giovanni] was pale. 'You are the one who keeps talking about *what* I want. But I have only been talking about *who* I want" (142). David's longing for a home which does not exist is irreducibly connected to both his status as an American and his hatred of the room where he has spent much of the spring and summer during Hella's absence. Here I refer to Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, where she invites her readers to think of orientation not as object-choice but rather as how "consciousness is always directed 'toward' an object," and where it is not "simply about the arrival of an object," but "also how we turn toward that object" (Ahmed 2). As she imagines the self within the space of the home, Ahmed

makes the critical point that "[f]amiliarity is what is, as it were, given, and which in being given 'gives' the body the capacity to be orientated in this way or in that. The question of orientation becomes, then, a question not only about how we 'find our way' but how we come to 'feel at home'" (7). This is precisely what is impossible in *Giovanni's Room*: for David, home is unimaginable both as a geographical place, as America functions on the condition of antiblackness, and as psychic space, as his unconscious renders him white. He is either "nothing more than" an American or "nothing" at all; he functions either as the marker of physical death in the United States, or the social death of blackness. David cannot find his way "home across the ocean" in much the same way that Baldwin cannot leave America.

The fury which David expels toward Giovanni – "'[w]hat kind of life can we have in this room? – this filthy little room'" – is also indicative of the failure of home and of David's object status. It is not that he awaits the "arrival of an object," nor how he "turn[s] toward that object." Rather, *he* is the object arriving, *he* is the object that one turns to. Giovanni desires him because David is what makes the room home for him. Ahmed writes,

> [t]he temporality of "what comes before" is erased in the experience of the object as "what is before" in the spatial sense… Objects take the shape of this history; objects "have value" and they take shape through labor. They are formed out of labor, but they also "take the form" of that labor… History cannot simply be perceived on the surface of the object, even if how objects surface or take shape is an effect of such histories. In other words, histories cannot simply be turned into something that is given in its sensuous certainty, as if it could be a property of an object. (41).

Again, the issue at hand is one of temporality – the history of the object is obliterated in the presence of the object which came before it. Despite this quote being from Ahmed's

work on orientation, I find it especially fruitful in examining the production of labor from bodies. If the slave's body (be)labored to produce both capital and children (which are one and the same), then the black body labors to produce the legibility of the rest of the world. This is the work David does in Giovanni's room. As such, the two characters' dialogue operate on separate frequencies: Giovanni is discussing a "who" (David as lover), whereas David discusses a "what" (David as object).

David is cognizant here of how he embodies and bleeds a history of violence, as he symbolizes exactly Giovanni's accusation: "'[y]ou do not… love anyone! You never have loved anyone, I am sure you never will! You love your purity, you love your mirror'" (*Giovanni's Room* 141). Although this indictment can be read as Giovanni's disgust at David's continuous denial of his homosexuality, I understand it instead as an extension of the impossibility of relationality between an object and a subject. David cannot love anyone *not* because he remains closeted but because he cannot possess (in) love; to refer back to earlier in the chapter, it is Giovanni who possessively tucks his arm around David, and not vice versa. And what of the mirror that Giovanni accuses him of loving? It reflects nothing more than the abyss of the black unconscious; all David can see is gleaming blond hair and a history of "death-laden plains" (Baldwin 3). As Fanon writes, "I am a White Man. For, unconsciously, I guard against what is black in me, that is, the totality of my being" (Fanon 191). David-as-object signifies the history of slavery as both accumulation and fungibility; in other words, David cannot love because he can be accumulated.

If exile is constituted as impossible without a home, then I propose that the usefulness of conceptualizing a black diaspora is also put into jeopardy. While it is not my intention to argue that a black diaspora does not exist, nor ignore that the very same slave trade which marks the birth of blackness also functions as a means of forced dispersal, I do wish to trouble traditional definitions of this phenomenon in light of the absence of home and nation.[90] I am particularly interested in and indebted to the works of Stuart Hall and Gayatri Gopinath as they each illuminate means of negotiating diasporic spaces in *Giovanni's Room*. I begin with a more static classification of the diaspora from James Clifford, who writes that diasporas "presuppose longer distances and a separation more like exile: a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future. Diasporas also connect multiple communities of a dispersed population" (Clifford 246). Against this most basic of definitions I argue that in the case of the black Atlantic, there *is* no possibility of return as the condition is not one of exile whether self-imposed or not; as Hartman has eloquently described, Africa is deracinated and decimated. The United States, too, cannot be thought of as home for African Americans, particularly in light of Ahmed's claim that "[l]oving one's home is not about being fixed into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of a space where one has expanded one's body, saturating that space with bodily matter: home as *overflowing* and *flowing over*" (Ahmed 11). In neither

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[90] Robin D.G. Kelley addresses this point in his essay, "How the West Was One: The African Diaspora and the Re-Mapping of U.S. History," when he writes that for "people of African descent, 'diaspora' has served as both a political term with which to emphasize the unifying experiences of African peoples dispersed by the slave trade, and an analytical term that enabled scholars to talk about black communities across national boundaries" (Kelley 124). Again, it is not my intention to disregard the critical importance of both the community and scholarship Kelley invokes here; however, I wish to unearth how Baldwin imagines a diaspora in a novel where blackness is made present through its very absence.

Paris nor the United States is David able to overflow or flow over; the former is saturated in "'all the time gone by,'" and in the latter, "'all the time to come'" (*Giovanni's Room* 33). As one who functions at the level of a queer black temporality, outside of mainstream temporality and subjectivity, David cannot be at home in time gone by or time to come.[91] Although Stuart Hall is discussing the colonial subject, his statement that home is "a site of dislocation, or one which is never yours" renders visible the impossibility of a home for David (Chen 490).

Hall complicates the concept of diaspora by arguing that it depends not on "essence or purity" but rather on "the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*." This is because identities within a diaspora "are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" ("Cultural Identity" 235). On one hand, this production and reproduction of the self anew happens in *Giovanni's Room*: while with Giovanni, "our life together held a joy and amazement which was newborn every day" (75). As opposed to stagnant identities, the possibility of new selves is made abundant in the beginning of their time together. On the other hand, all too quickly these possibilities of love are overtaken by the "beast which Giovanni had awakened," a beast which "would never go to sleep again… With this fearful intimation there opened in me a hatred for Giovanni which was

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[91] David's inability to find a home in Giovanni's room echoes Hartman's visit to the dungeon, when she writes, "[t]ime was at a stand still. In the underground, there was no measure of the days, just walls of stone and mortar… I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it" (*Lose Your Mother* 125, 133).

as powerful as my love and which was nourished by the same roots" (84). What David realizes is that the difference between himself and Giovanni is not one that produces identities that can co-exist "with and through;" instead, the difference operates on the structural level and marks him as object, and Giovanni as subject. Moreover, I am also troubled by the necessity of hybridity in this formulation of a diaspora. In Hall's use of "hybridity" I read the definition given by Lisa Lowe in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics,* where she writes that hybridity is the "formation of cultural objects and practices that are produced by the histories of uneven and unsynthetic power relations" which do "not suggest… assimilation of Asian or immigrant practices to dominant forms but instead marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination" (*Immigrant Acts* 67). On the level of lived experience, this reading of hybridity can be applied to blackness: black lives are produced and positioned in relation to power relations, and black lives are the proof of survival.

Yet on the ontological level, I think of Jared Sexton's work, where he writes that "Humans do not live under conditions of equality in the modern world," yet blacks are not included within this categorization; "[r]ather, slavery establishes the vestibule of the category of the Human" ("The Curtain of the Sky" 17). If blackness exists "outside," be it relationality and/or temporality, what does a black diaspora on a structural – and not geographical – level look like? Robin D.G. Kelley examines Paul Gilroy's work on W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright and utilizes the self-same trope of *flight* found in Baldwin's novel to argue that "[n]ot only were these men betwixt and between 'Negro' and 'American,' but travel generated transnational identities between

Europe and the United States," which "exposes the inescapable hybridity of Western civilization" (Kelley 131). In other words, Kelley argues that what the black diaspora brings to light is not the hybridity of itself, but the hybrid stature of Western civilization; the flights of these men articulate the cross-pollination of cultures and positionings that indelibly mark not only the objects in travel but the subjects as well. Interestingly, this becomes evident in the figure of Giovanni, and not David.[92] After he kills Guillaume, he goes on the run, and his unmistakable status as foreigner makes it so that the longer remains free, "the press became more vituperative against him and more gentle toward Guillaume… Guillaume's name became fantastically entangled with French history, French honor, and French glory, and very nearly became, indeed, a symbol of French manhood" (*Giovanni's Room* 150). While Guillaume was alive, he was thought of as nothing more than a parasitic figure who preys on Giovanni's hunger to get him to do his bidding; in death, it is his killer's positioning as non-Parisian (and indeed, this is foreshadowed by the placement of his room on the outskirts of Paris) which gives Guillaume credence as an honorable man, a messianic figure for history, honor, glory and manhood. Giovanni's flight across France is what enables the French public to literally, via newspapers, read into Guillaume the status of hero, and ironically, it is this flight that exposes that the heart of France depends precisely on the hybridity that Kelley invokes.

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[92] In polar opposition to Abur-Rahman's claim that David undergoes a "progressive 'racialization,'" is it possible to read Giovanni who, through his eating/fucking of David, becomes more black? As he is not under the condition of social death, does his literal death at the end of the novel signify a kind of transformation?

Finally, I turn to Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires; Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* as a means of disrupting the notion of home. Gopinath begins by invoking the home not as a space of over flowing and flowing over, but rather as "spaces that are permanently and already ruptured, rent by colliding discourses" (Gopinath 15). As I established in the first chapter of this dissertation, "home" for African Americans is a place/space of terror, where the private is made public. What Gopinath suggests, however, is that we imagine the home precisely in this manner as a means of invoking queer diaspora as a project which undoes the remembering of "an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history," and instead reminds us of "a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprooting, displacements, and exiles" (4). Similar to Keeling, who urges us to imagine a temporality which can exist without a subjectivity, Gopinath reveals the patriarchal and nationalist framework of a diasporic project that perpetuates the home/nation as bucolic and desired. Such a reading of home is fruitful in *Giovanni's Room,* particularly at the conclusion of the novel. Having endured the night of Giovanni's execution, David returns the keys to his apartment to his landlady's mailbox and sees a few men and women up the road who are "waiting for the morning bus… The morning weighs on my shoulders with the dreadful weight of hope and I take the blue envelope which Jacques has sent me and tear it slowly into many pieces, watching them dance in the wind, watching the wind carry them away" (*Giovanni's Room* 169). This "dreadful weight of hope" compels him to rip up Jacques letter, which must have contained information on Giovanni's execution (or perhaps an admonition of his complicity in his death); David imagines himself as

joining these men and women “for the morning bus,” implying not a diaspora rooted in commonality, but rather in the process of dispersal: the bus will carry him away from the apartment, from Giovanni’s room, and from Paris into an unknown future. A queer diaspora potentially invokes “the particular interpretive strategies that are available to those who are deemed ‘impossible’ within hegemonic nationalist and diasporic discourses,” and David’s flight from Paris seems to be one of these strategies (Gopinath 22).

Before I examine the final, sorrowful image within *Giovanni’s Room*, I return to David’s final hours in his apartment. He walks into his bedroom, and “[t]here is a mirror in this room, a large mirror. I am terribly aware of the mirror” (167). In a similar fashion to David’s face eclipsing the face of the sailor earlier in the text, here he is cast out of the mirror and replaced by Giovanni, his face “like an unexpected lantern on a dark, dark night” (167). As David imagines Giovanni’s last few moments before his execution, the two are conflated in the mirror: “The body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it. And I look at my body, which is under sentence of death” (168). I have argued earlier that the “absence” of blackness in the novel is made present through queerness; here, the two operate similarly as David’s body is seen as and through Giovanni. David’s body is held captive under the conditions of social death; Giovanni’s is about to die. His own face made obscure, his “dark, dark night” thrown into sharp relief by the “lantern” that is Giovanni’s face, it becomes impossible to know whose body David is seeing in the mirror. If his image at the beginning of the novel illuminated the chasm of the black unconscious, then the overlay of Giovanni’s face on his at the conclusion exposes

precisely the necessity of queerness to *see*, to read blackness. As such, it is unsurprising that as the novel closes, we are left with David's final movements: "as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of [Jacques' letter] back on me"; the signifier of queerness, the commemoration of Giovanni's death through the literal script of Jacque's letter, is necessary to make David legible (169). Thus while Gopinath's formulation of a queer diaspora does prove beneficial to the maintenance of the imagined space of a black diaspora, it, too, performs the violence of superseding the latter; the impossibility of blackness becomes visible through the visibility of queerness. The seeming absence of blackness in *Giovanni's Room* does not indicate the lack of blackness; rather, it exposes that very lack as the ontological condition of blackness, and the history which names it as an aporia of both excess and illegibility. Through the "irrevocable condition" of home, we see that the gratuitous violence enacted here is that blackness, as a structural position outside of relationality, always needs a positioning within civil society to render it visible.

The Life of Blackness in the Afterlife of Slavery

In this chapter, I utilized the frameworks provided by scholars in Afro-pessimism, queer theory and diaspora studies to argue that Baldwin's second novel was indeed about the status of the African American. In a televised conversation between James Baldwin and Peregrine Worsthorne in 1972, Baldwin calmly states that "I've always been a slave in the Western world." Worsthorne, misinterpreting the statement, rebuts that no one in Baldwin's generation could have been a slave and attempts to draw Baldwin into a discussion of capitalism. "A wage slave you mean?," he asks, to which Baldwin, in no

uncertain terms, replies, "[n]o, I mean a slave" ("A Televised Conversation" 122). Here he refutes the idea of "work – or alienation and exploitation – [as] a constituent element of slavery, as well as the co-existent formulation that "profit motive is the consideration within the slaveocracy that trumps all others" (*Red, White, & Black* 14). Predating the major scholars I cite by at least forty years, *Giovanni's Room* stands as a testament to the complicated nexus of race, place and space in the configuration of blackness. Much like Himes, Baldwin utilizes a "white" character to narrativize blackness as not only physical but psychic absence, wherein David, to paraphrase Marriott, cannot love himself as black and so instead hates himself as white. In this arrangement we see a figure who attempts to exist outside of subjectivity and of temporality, which stands in for a kind of diaspora that does not configure the space/place of the home/nation as desirable. Yet concurrently, Baldwin's novel speaks to the impossibility of reading these absences without the presence of structural positionings which always already exist as antiblack.[93] As Baldwin states in an interview with Eve Auchincloss and Nancy Lynch, "I said that one of the hardest things anyone has to survive in this country is his friends" (Auchincloss and Lynch 64).

In his last interview before his death, Baldwin offers a scathing denunciation of the world at large. Speaking in 1987 to his friend Quincy Troupe, Baldwin declares that "the world is present, and the world is not white, and America is not the symbol of

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[93] This idea is one I borrow from Jared Sexton's *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism.* As it is particularly useful for my final chapter of the dissertation, I will refrain from offering a nuanced reading of his argument, but for my purposes in this conclusion, what Sexton calls for us to understand is that modern society and racism do not take white supremacy as its locus of being, but rather antiblackness.

civilization… Something else is happening that will engulf them by and by. You, Quincy, will be here, but I'll be gone. It's the only hope that the world has – that Western hegemony and civilization be contained" (Troupe 292). This "something else" can be read as symbiotic with Fanon's cleansing revolution, or perhaps with Wilderson's ethics of suffering wherein the inclusion of blacks within civil society would precipitate the end of the world. Although he remains vague on this "something else," he is empathic that the only means of survival will be the containment of "Western hegemony and civilization," the very system and vocabulary utilized in order to justify practices of genocide and colonialism to this very day. As Hartman writes, "[i]f slavery feels proximate rather than remote and freedom seems increasingly elusive, this has everything to do with our own dark times" (*Lose Your Mother* 133). In the following chapter, I turn to Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* to examine a literary and literal representation of losing your mother, where the performance and performativity of blackness/slavery further disrupts relational discourses that presume black subjectivity and linear temporality.

Chapter Four – The Afterlife of Slavery: Performing the Familiar/Familial in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*

Of course, black writers – it goes without saying why we've always had to hear – Gayl Jones

How might it feel *to be that sort of problem, a scandal to ontology, an outrage to every marker of the human? What, in the final analysis, does it mean to suffer?* – Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland

In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday,* Angela Y. Davis posits that far from affirming heteronormative discourses of sexuality, the legacy of these three performers in fact gestures toward new articulations of agency and possibility in the post-slavery era. Writing on Billie Holiday, Davis states that "her originality consists not so much in what she sang, but rather in how she sang the popular songs of her era" (*Blues Legacies* xvii). While Ursa, the blues singer protagonist in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora,* is not especially known for performing music belonging to the 1940s – 1960s, I am intrigued by the way she moves both within and beyond Davis' definitive boundaries for Holiday. Namely, for Jones, the focus is on *what* Ursa sings just as much as *how*; indeed, as I aim to show in this chapter, the two are intrinsically linked in black performance and the corresponding implication of black non-subjectivity.[94] In Ursa's performance and embodiment of the blues, we see Jones' articulation of the social death which permeates the social life of blackness; she does not – or, rather, *cannot* –

[94] I borrow this concept from a similar one set forth by Soyica Diggs Colbert. In *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage,* she writes, "the union of theatrical display and construction of blackness is deeply related to the philosophical enterprise of slavery" (Colbert 51). In other words, Colbert argues that theatricality and blackness intertwine in the development and maintenance of slavery. In this chapter, I aim to examine how social death is repeated and reconstituted through the continual theatrical performance of blackness.

sing herself into a moment in history. Similar to the works by Toomer, Himes and Baldwin that I address earlier in the dissertation, Jones' novel speaks to an ontological condition of blackness that refutes easy classification under the auspices of progress or liberation.

The 1975 publication of *Corregidora* portended a felicitous literary career for Jones: the novel was published by Random House under the guidance of Toni Morrison, and both James Baldwin and Maya Angelou lauded the author and text for "plumb[ing] the depths of the brutal realities of sex, class and race in the lives of black people" (Manso, "Chronicle of a Tragedy Foretold"). Since the suicide of her husband Bob Higgins in1998, Jones has largely remained outside of public view; her last full-length text, *Mosquito*¸ was published the following year. Despite – or perhaps due to – the controversy surrounding Higgins' death, *Corregidora* remains Jones' most widely-read work.[95] Reviewers and critics have hailed it as "a bizarre, romantic story which exposes the intimate family history of three generations of black women residing in rural Kentucky from the early- to the mid-twentieth century," as well as a neo-slave narrative which "focuses on the horror, on the raced sexual violences of slavery and freedom and the demands (and then the effects) of the formerly enslaved on their descendants to

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[95] On February 20, 1998, Higgins died from a self-inflicted knife wound after a stand-off with the police in Lexington, Kentucky. Jones was also present during the confrontation, and the flurry of media coverage that followed painted her as "the brilliant black writer whose comeback had been blasted by her husband's death" and at times "another victim of an abusive, controlling husband" (Manso, "Chronicle of a Tragedy Foretold"). The linear comparisons were inevitably made to Ursa, her character who also embodies artistic brilliance and suffers at the hands of an abusive, controlling husband. It is not too much of a stretch to say, then, that readers pored over the story of Ursa and Mutt, and even perhaps Ursa and Tadpole, to find narrative linkages between the author and her heroine.

reproduce" (Tate 142; Sharpe 23).[96] With earlier admirers and detractors, especially, there seems to have been an undeniable impulse to read Jones *as* Ursa, both artistic black women from Kentucky, both in complex relationships with black men. Jones has distanced herself from such comparisons; during a 1975 interview with Michael S. Harper held shortly after the publication of *Corregidora*, she adamantly states, "I'm not an autobiographical writer at all. I 're-contextualize' a lot of the things in my life" (Harper 713). However, I read Jones' novel as a text which deforms the autobiographical genre not necessarily because of a strict adherence to her own life, but because it performs collective memory *not* in affirmation of a "we" but in order to name the impossibility of such a community in the afterlife of slavery.

The novel structures itself as a blues song, and we see this in Jones' statement that "*Corregidora*… is a blues novel. Blues talks about the simultaneity of good and bad, as feeling, as something felt… Somebody said *Corregidora* was ambiguous. I think I wanted it to be" (Harper 700). *Corregidora* opens with Ursa remembering that she and Mutt "were married in December 1947 and it was in April 1948 that Mutt came to Happy's drunk and said if I didn't get off the stage he was going to take me off" (Jones 3). After finishing her singing shift, Ursa and Mutt resume their argument outside, and in a moment of characteristic ambivalence, Ursa recounts her fall: "'I don't like those mens messing with you,' [Mutt] said. 'Don't nobody mess with me.' 'Mess with they eyes.'

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[96] By neo-slave narrative, I turn to Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's work, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* for a preliminary definition. He argues that "there are three kinds of neo-slave narrative: the third-person historical novel of slavery, the first-person narration of the life-story of a slave, and the recounting of the traumatic legacy of slavery on later generations (95)" (Vint 241).

That was when I fell" (3 – 4). The last sentence occurs on a line break of its own, and the information that follows slips forward through time: "[t]he doctors in the hospital said my womb would have to come out. Mutt and me didn't stay together after that. I wouldn't even let him come in the hospital to see me when I knew what was happening. They said he'd come in when I didn't know what was happening. They said when I was delirious I was cursing him *and* the doctors and nurses out" (4). In this brief opening scene, we are privy to the ambiguity that weaves throughout the novel, one which Jones does little to refute. In her very answer above – "I think" – we see the indistinct nature of Jones' narrative, and in Ursa's recounting of the incident, which slips from the past (the doctors' statement) to present (remembering the end of Mutt and her relationship), and remains hazy (the moments where she was unclear as to what was happening), it becomes clear that performance, time and memory are all unmoored in this neo-slave narrative.

In this chapter, I argue that *Corregidora* brings together the forms of autobiography and the collective memory and portrays a textual performance through Joseph Roach's concept of surrogation. I examine how Jones' concept of "storytelling" as opposed to "fiction" challenges the assumptive logic of a shared familial and communal narrative, first between herself and her novel, and second between Ursa, her mother and her foremothers, Ursa and Mutt, and, enveloping all others, Corregidora and his women. In this way, I am able to examine the text as an autobiography although it does not read as such at first glance. I then turn my attention to the questions of reproduction and childbirth in the novel and read the violence adhered to these questions in the ontology of blackness. Through Ursa's childlessness and her development on stage as a blues artist, I

read a means of providing evidence which flies in the face of historical documents of slavery not through conditions of life but rather through the overwhelming presence of death. In her blues song, we see the way in which Corregidora, and the trauma inflicted upon Great Gram and Gram, continue to haunt Ursa and her ability to produce something new. I then examine how these impossible performances work against the contemporary trend in performance studies that proposes a (re)generative element in black performance. Furthermore, Jones' text colludes the markers of the autobiographical and the performative and gives rise to a performative autobiography through what she terms "ritualized dialogue," or "the language, the rhythm of the people talking, and the rhythm *between* the people talking" (Harper 699); in other words, the text functions with a(n) (after)life of its own. Thus the Corregidora women embody the unspeakable knowledge that the only means blackness has of inserting itself into history is through the narrative of rape, sexualized violence and incest that is America's family genealogy.

Writing as Performance and the Collective Memory of *Corregidora*

At first glance, *Corregidora* appears to sit uneasily alongside the earlier texts in this dissertation. Unlike Toomer, Himes and Baldwin, whose lives explicitly intersect with those of their protagonists, Jones and Ursa share little other than the aforementioned, more superficial characteristics.[97] Yet the novel functions similarly to Toomer's *Cane* in that it indicates a shared experience of antiblackness and the inescapable remnants of slavery. As Christina Sharpe writes in *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects,*

[97] As a reminder, these are Toomer and Kabnis, Himes and Jimmy Monroe, and Baldwin and David.

> *Corregidora,* perhaps more than any other African American neo-slave narrative, focuses on the horror, on the raced sexual violences of slavery and freedom and the demands (and then the effects) of the formerly enslaved on their descendants to reproduce and keep 'as visible as the blood'… in effect to reproduce the horrific experiences of violence experienced during slavery in order that they not be forgotten. (Sharpe 23)

In this sense, *Corregidora* works to deform the genres of autobiography and slave narrative not only through the subject (both the subject/object and subject matter) being written about, but also by means of addressing these questions of reproducing and keeping. How does one write a slave narrative when one is not, as legally defined, a slave? How does one write a slave narrative *about* one who is not, as legally defined, a slave? What does it mean to reproduce the experiences of slavery when they are not yours to reproduce? What does it mean to reproduce the experiences of slavery not as a means of empathic identification, but rather as an instrument of remembrance – "that they not be forgotten" – that speaks to the total and complete impossibility thereof?

It is useful here to summon Joseph Roach's distinction between collective memory and history before addressing his concept of surrogation. Roach argues that "memory requires collective participation" whereas "history entails the critical (and apparently solitary) interpretation of written records" ("Culture and Performance" 47). A deeper contrast is that while "[b]oth also function as forms of forgetting," the "persistence of collective memory through restored behavior… represents an alternative and potentially contestatory form of knowledge – bodily knowledge, habit, custom" (47). It is critical to note the connection that Roach makes between "history" and "written records"; one can assume that the same linkage does not exist between collective memory and written records, and (rightfully) extrapolate a mistrust of the written word when

imagining the different methods and contexts of *knowing* presented by the two. For the moment, however, I wish to leave this conjecture and Roach's language of resistance behind, and briefly turn to his other point: the way in which collective memory lives through "restored behavior." Roach borrows this concept from Richard Schechner, who states that restored behavior "is symbolic and reflexive" and connected to performance which means "never for the first time. It means: for the second to the nth time. Performance is 'twice-behaved behavior'" ("Restoration of Behavior" 36). Bluntly put, restored behavior is that which "can be repeated, rehearsed, and above all *recreated*" ("Culture and Performance" 46). However, therein lies the paradox: in performance, "no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance" (46). The very definition of performance is that it cannot be "twice-behaved" in *exactly* the same way. What Jones does is produce a written narrative that is autobiographical *through/as* performance. My argument here is twofold: first, the author maintains that her writing process and the resulting work are performances, and second, she records collective memory *through* the written word and effectively engages in what Roach terms surrogation.

When discussing her writing process, Jones notes, "I still feel that the best of my writing comes from having *heard* rather than having read… I just felt that the first-person narrative was the most authentic way of telling a story, and I felt that I was using my own voice – telling a story the way I would talk it" and that "I think my story-telling writing style was influenced first by the people I've heard talk" (Harper 692, 694; Tate 145). She identifies not as a fiction writer, but as a storyteller, which "has its human connections.

First, the connection to the listener, the hearer; but there's also the connection between the teller and the hearer. 'Storytelling' is a dynamic word, a process word… 'Storytelling' for me suggests possibilities, many possibilities" (Harper 695).[98] What comes through in these interviews is the importance she places on orality: in a similar vein to how Ursa is told to bear witness through her body and not through text, Jones believes that it is the "telling" in storytelling that indicates the most critical aspect of *Corregidora:* the "telling" is, in fact, mired in "hearing." During the writing of the novel she was interested "in oral traditions of storytelling – Afro-American and others – where there is always that consciousness and importance of the hearer, even in the interior monologue where the storyteller becomes the hearer" (Tate 143). The way she writes is clearly influenced by questions of speaking and hearing, and less so by those of writing and reading; she is less invested in who *reads* her work than who *hears* it. Her first novel is a text that is meant to be heard: she claims that she "never did type or show the first version of *Corregidora* to anyone. The whole thing was sort of a song and she would "like to read over this very first version, though, to see what kinds of movements I make, or if I write a sequel to *Corregidora*, I could write it as a 'song' rather than a 'story'" (Harper 697). Jones sees performance as the driving force behind her writing process and purpose of a text; although the text is *written down* and thereby fits the definition of "history," it can never be *performed* the same way twice. Succinctly put, a text *is* a

[98] In her invocation of "process" we hear strains of Jacque Derrida's distinction from J.L. Austin: "Where Austin, then, seemed intent on separating the actor's citational practices from ordinary speech-act performances, Derrida regarded both as structured by a generalized iterability, a pervasive theatricality common to stage and world alike" (Parker and Sedgwick 4). By this it becomes clear that Derrida's definition of performance is that it is widespread and defined through its capacity to be repeated (and thus is performative). The speech-act *does* its deed in the world.

performance, and "writing as *doing* displaces writing as meaning: writing becomes meaningful in the material, dis/continuous act of writing… writing becomes itself, becomes its own means and ends, recovering to itself the force of action" (Pollock 75).

Jones' writing process and textual production thus encapsulate the connection between collective memory and performance, and give rise to what Roach calls surrogation in performance and performance studies. Roach defines surrogation as "the theatrical principle of substitution of one persona for another" wherein it "operates in two modes. In the first mode, one actor stands in for another… In the second mode of doubling, one actor plays more than one role – two (or more) masks appear on one actor" ("Culture and Performance" 53). In addition, surrogation is a means by which a "culture reproduces and re-creates itself," and furthermore, "the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric. Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure… survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates" (*Cities of the Dead* 3). As I argue, Jones' authorship – and her control over the novel – satisfies both qualifiers of surrogation. First, she "stands in for another" in that she is conscious of how "[w]riting is a very responsible thing. It documents human experience, and when it documents it wrongly – that's the really bad thing. Black people and Native Americans in this country can attest to that" (Harper 696). In other words, she stands in for the "[s]ixty

million and more."[99] Furthermore, she is invested in "getting across that sense of an intimate history, particularly a personal history, and also to contrast it with a varied, broad kind of impersonal telling of the Corregidora story. Thus, one reason for Ursa's telling her story and her mother's story is to contrast it with the "epic," almost impersonal history of Corregidora" (Tate 143). What this reveals to us is Jones' awareness that her writing is simultaneously about and not about her. It is a "human experience" and can perhaps be "almost impersonal," but at the same time, it is specifically about "Black people" and "intimate" and "personal." As evidenced by her emphasis on hearing, she stands in, too, as one who wears "two (or more) masks" – that of hearer and that of teller. In a sense, what Jones does is to draw together the performance of collective memory and the "written records" of history; instead of articulating that these are polar opposites, Jones deforms the written record of an autobiography by performing it.

What differentiates this from simplified replacement, however, is the *imperfection* of Jones' filling of that role.[100] To continue from Roach, as "collective memory works selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely, surrogation rarely if ever succeeds… The intended substitute either cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or actually exceeds them, creating surplus" (*Cities of the Dead* 2). As I have been discussing in this project, the authors whom I analyze write into narrative their status as (to borrow from Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson) unthought positions, "scandal[s] to ontology" and

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[99] This well-known phrase is the dedication from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and points out not only the sheer mass of bodies in the bowels of the slave ships, but also the impossibility of naming the human cargo shipped from Africa to the plantations.
[100] This imperfection is also addressed later in the chapter in my literary analysis, specifically in relation to Ursa and her mothers, and Corregidora and Mutt.

"outrage[s] to every marker of the human" (Sexton and Copeland 53). In Jones' recounting of both her own blackness as well as the collective history of slavery, we see a performance that remembers and refuses to forget while standing in "for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace" (*Cities of the Dead* 3). As she says, her role as a storyteller is "standing in there with [the people in the story] – I don't mean that he has to be a character in the story, but he's in there" (Harper 702).[101] She does not *replace* anyone in the narrative; rather, she performs her role in the text through her present absence: "the author isn't there anywhere… when I'm telling the story or reading it out loud, I don't want to say 'I' am these women, but those women are telling the story" (712). The lack of the authorial voice, her incapability to embody the women who are telling the story, showcases the deficit created in the novel. She does not speak for the women, but rather attempts to stand with.

Yet her present absence shifts each time as performance permanently remains in flux: Jones asks, "Why do something again when you've already done it? Why say something the same way again? Why sing something the same way twice?... I like to change a tune" (697). In the tenacity of her changing tune we see "the degree to which this voice haunts American memory, the degree to which it promotes obsessive attempts at simulation and impersonation, derives from its ghostly power to insinuate memory between the lines, in spaces between the words, in the intonation and placements by

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[101] I want to emphasize here that the storyteller being in the story does not indicate that Jones is empathizing with Great Gram, Corregidora's original woman and the only "slave" in the novel. Rather, what this illuminates is that slavery did not end in Brazil with the *Lei Áurea* in 1888, but continues to manifest itself through the Corregidora family lineage.

which they are shaped, in the silences by which they are deepened or contradicted" ("Culture and Performance" 60). Jones attempts to be a surrogate for the those lost "through death or other forms of departure" through her text-as-performance; she parlays her collective memory (as well as that of the characters in the novel) into performance and harnesses resistance to "such erasures by taking into account the give and take of transmissions, posted in the past, arriving in the present, delivered by living messengers" (61). Yet as I attempt to show in my analysis of *Corregidora*, Jones' resistance vis-à-vis Ursa is not one which adjudicates rationalizing these erasures; in other words, Ursa does not lay claim to subjectivity or a regenerative performance in effort to contest blackness as being outside of relationality and civil society. Rather, Ursa's resistance returns us to Roach's "potentially contestatory form of knowledge – bodily knowledge, habit, custom" in that she affirms the knowledge of these erasures as demarcations of blackness (47). That is to say, Ursa's performative role in the novel is to embody knowledge of the deracination of black lives in the (after)life of slavery.

"'The important thing is making generations'": Reproduction and Futurity

Jones presents the entanglement of past and present by illuminating the far-reaching arm of trauma through Ursa's immediate hospitalization which opens the novel. In the aftermath of her hysterectomy, Ursa refuses to see Mutt and asks Tadpole McCormick, who owns Happy's Café, to take her home. While she lies in bed, Tadpole confesses that he can never remember her last name. Ursa replies, "'Corregidora. Old man Corregidora, the Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger… He fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed'" (Jones 8 – 9). The virulent animosity as evidenced

through her crude language is later complicated when Ursa tells the doctor that Corregidora is "'*my* name, not my husband's'" (19). Other scholars have pointed out the deliberateness with which Jones named the slave owner in her novel: Christina Sharpe, for example, writes that the "surname Corregidora combines the Spanish *corregidor*, 'magistrate and correct,' with the Portuguese *carregador,* 'laden, to load or carry, to overdo'" (Sharpe 40). That Ursa claims this name as her own indicates an entangled family history between owner and owned, an overriding presence of a man she has never met but who is nonetheless inescapable. His legacy of incest and rape becomes manifold through the bodies and voices of Great Gram and Gram.

Ursa continues to tell Tadpole, "'[m]y grandmamma was his daughter, but he was fucking her too. She said when they did away with slavery down there they burned all the slavery papers so it would be like they never had it'" (Jones 9). When he asks her where she is getting her information, she replies,

> "[m]y great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget. Even though they'd burned everything to play it like it didn't never happen. Yeah, and where's the next generation?" He nodded but said nothing. (9)

Four relevant aspects of *Corregidora* are present in this exchange between Ursa and Tadpole, namely, the creation of a new type of being, the excruciating burden of a compounded history, the collapsing of borders between childbearing and bearing witness, and, in the face of such atrocities, the incapability of expression.

The construction of a new breed begins with Corregidora's obsession with Great Gram, which is then passed down through the generations: "*[a] Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner, he took her out of the field when she was still a child and put her to work in his whorehouse while she was a child*" (10). Although there were other women whose bodies he used for sexualized labor, "*[s]he was the pretty little one with the almond eyes and coffee-bean skin, his favorite. 'A good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece'*" (10). Ursa's repetition of her history to Tadpole is deliberate: Corregidora "fathered his own breed." The use of "breed" indicates not only the procreative and obviously unequal nature of the sexual relationship between Corregidora and Great Gram (he as human, she as something less), it also speaks to a new stock, a new group of individuals that belongs solely to Corregidora and no one else. This brings to mind Hortense Spillers' work in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," where she reminds us of the non-place that is the Atlantic Ocean (Spillers 72). In this *nowhere* that they occupy, there is a "dehumanizing, ungendering, and defacing project of African persons" taking place (72). The only semblance of community that is made possible is precisely through Corregidora's using of Great Gram: in his rape of Dorita and other slave women, including his own daughter, we see a perverted familial structure being born, both figuratively and literally. Although Frank B. Wilderson, III is here addressing Africa, I believe his words are still relevant to the space of the plantation: "[n]o other place-names depend on such violence. No other nouns owe their integrity to this semiotics of death" ("Grammar & Ghosts" 120). The impending birth of new slaves vis-à-vis Great Gram and the other slave women is the simultaneous

birth of an economy of not just death, but non-life; they are remade as that which was never even alive to be put to death.

What becomes evident here is Sharpe's claim that in slavery, amalgamation is incest. As she states, "[s]lavery provides both a time and space (real and fantastic) where to commit incest or amalgamation is to break *the same law*" (Sharpe 28). In other words, "under slavery, system and sign, *lexico-legal acts of transubstantiation* occur in which blood *becomes* property (with all of the rights inherent in the use and enjoyment of property) in one direction and kin in another" (29). Thus when Great Gram gives birth to Gram, Gram is unable to lay claim to any rights of kinship. When Corregidora rapes her, he commits both incest and amalgamation and she becomes designated as property. The only means by which Great Gram and Gram can insert themselves into American grammar or American history, the only means by which they become legible, is through their object(ified) status, in this "violent reduction of women to objects of exchange" (Gottfried 560). The breed that Corregidora fathers, his "own breed," is in fact property. While they remain dehumanized and defaced, they are re-gendered, made female and feminine in their capability to produce children who are, in fact, chattel. Specifically, Great Gram is only known as a "gold piece," and as for Gram, her daughter, "the only formal name Jones gives these women is their rapist's surname" (560). In this engendering process, "black women's wombs are the gateway to a whole masculine world of exploitation, monopolization, and brutality" (Cognard-Black 45). What the Corregidora women – and black slave women – give birth to is chattel slave marked as property and through social death.

It also becomes clear that Ursa bears the weight of a family history that becomes more and more dense, seething with and saturated through the narrative of trauma, through the generations: "[m]y great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through" (Jones 9). Logically, then, it appears that Mama is the one who tells Ursa the family lineage, yet just prior to this sentence Ursa declares that "[m]y grandmama was his daughter, but he was fucking her too. *She* said…" (9, italics mine). Here it would appear that Gram is the one passing on the story of Corregidora. Still later, Ursa recollects that "*Great Gram sat in the rocker. I was on her lap. She told the same story over and over again… It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than memory*" (11). The words which are "repeated again and again" are done by Great Gram, Gram and Mama, and in this oral history we see how it and "its performance practices are always decidedly repeated" and "always reconstructive, always incomplete, never in thrall to the singular or self-same origin that buttresses *archontic* lineage. In performance *as* memory, the pristine sameness of an 'original,' so valued by the archive, is rendered impossible – or, if you will, mythic" ("Performing Remains" 7). In the density of history we see how Ursa begins to function as a surrogate for Great Gram and Gram; she becomes a substitute for memory in that she also becomes a bearer of these memories, even though for her, "slavery is an inherited memory, not a reality that she has experienced firsthand" (Li 132). I would argue, however, that while what Ursa experiences firsthand is perhaps not chattel slavery as

historically defined, it is still what Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg calls "a *pained present*, symptomatic of the representation of a body still in pain rather than of a traumatized subject attempting to grasp a pain which sustains itself upon living memory" (Goldberg 447). Ursa lives in the pain of slavery and is beckoned to remember what is not hers as a means of rendering it "mythic": the story of Corregidora and slavery must always be kept the same, even if this act of surrogation is, as Roach says, impossible. She is "charged not only with the telling but also with the living of the impossible instruction to stigmatize her body in ways that selectively mimic an unknown initiating trauma but *only* in the ways that *they* (the women) *need* to bear witness – to reinscribe the original inscription" (Sharpe 39). Ursa's body is made to remember something that she cannot, to carry forth and bear witness to the original crime of slavery, rape and incest.

This act of remembering, of bearing witness to the atrocities of slavery, is done through childbearing: Great Gram admonishes Ursa,

> "*they didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done – so it couldn't be held against them. And I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That's why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them.*" (Jones 14)

Thus it becomes clear what is most problematic to Ursa about her operation: "it reinforces her belief that she is somehow flawed as a woman… In the logic of her mothers, without a womb, how can she function as a woman?" (Gottfried 563). Without her womb, she is unable to reach for "'[w]hat all us Corregidora women want. Have been taught to want. To make generations'" (Jones 22). Barren, she cries, "*let me give witness the only way I can. I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When*

it's time to give witness, I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee. I'll stain their hands" (54). The coffee grounds invoke Great Gram with her "coffee-bean skin," and Ursa makes clear that the only children she could have are ones made out of traumatized, sexually violated flesh. At this juncture, however, even that possibility has been removed.

What begins to trouble her, however, is what Sharpe calls "the 'proximity between antagonism and identification,'" or the ways in which Ursa's mothers invocations for her to make generations "inhere in slavery's legal arrangements and the internalized logic of the slave master through which they were able to survive and through which they were originally wounded" (Sharpe 32). In other words, "the resistance of one generation" has become "the trauma of another" (Li 132). Whereas "political self-objectification is a vital yet problematic step toward the empowerment of these women," what Ursa realizes once her capacity to bear children is taken away from her is that she was never meant to bear a child at all (Gottfried 559). Rather, her purpose was to give birth to a witness, a daughter who "signals rebellion" and will then create more daughters. It is specifically female children that Mama and Ursa are told to have, and some critics have argued that this is because "[t]elling a revised history of slavery to one's daughter does two things: it establishes a matrilineage in opposition to slave patriarchy, and it 'embodies' a black female script, a black female history" (Cognard-Black 45). What such an analysis ignores, however, is that slavery is, by definition, matrilineal, and what gets passed down through the enslaved woman is "enslaved status itself" (Hong 8). As I argue, it is important to remember that the passing down of "enslaved status" is *not* empowering. As Hortense Spillers reminds us, "[s]uch naming is

false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false, once again, because 'motherhood' is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance" (Spillers 80). Thus the "black female script" that is handed down is always already the history of slavery. As Tadpole bluntly states, "'[p]rocreation. That could also be a slave-breeder's way of thinking'" (Jones 22).[102]

This is a moment of extreme discomfort for Ursa, as well as Jones' readers; procreation and regeneration are often conceptualized as positive or politicized, a means of gaining community or numbers. Yet as Tadpole returns us to the question of breeding, Jones also appears to question the motives behind the Corregidora women. Ursa decides to speak to Mama about the circumstances surrounding her own birth. Mama has kept quiet, determined to keep her individual memories outside of the sphere of collective memory. Ursa knows that "*though she passed the other ones down, the monstrous ones,"* she *"wouldn't give me her own terrible ones… Still she carried their evidence, screaming, fury in her eyes, but she wouldn't give me that, not that one. Not her private memory*" (100). It is as though an individual memory, which puts her out of the reach from Great Gram and Gram, is to be cherished, despite how horrific it might be.[103] Ursa

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[102] Tadpole attempts to share his own history with Ursa, and tells her that his white grandmother "'was a orphan and they had her working out in the fields along with the blacks and treated her like she was one,'" and that eventually his black grandfather married her. "'She never got crazy though'" (Jones 13). What this indicates is the specificity of the collective memory of slavery for black women, and the reaffirmation of the idea that slavery is not about *labor* but rather about being *owned*. Tadpole's white grandmother is excluded from this economy of exchange because she retains subjectivity; thus she never "got crazy."

[103] In an earlier essay on *Corregidora*, Janice Harris argues that "Ursa is unforgiving, uncompromising, hypochondriacal, self-pitying, voyeuristic… Perhaps most damaging, Ursa goes back to her mother's house mainly to steal away her mother's memories and turn them to her own designs, her own songs" (J. Harris 3). I find this reading of Ursa's motives far too simplistic (and even caustic); rather, it seems that Ursa goes to her mother because she recognizes that she is filled with "*'[a]lways their memories, but never my own'*"

wonders, "*[h]ow could she bear witness to what she'd never lived, and refuse me what she had lived?*" (103). In the aftermath of the wreckage of Tadpole and her marriage, Ursa goes to visit her mother. Mama ascertains her needs when she asks, "'Corregidora's never been enough for you, has it?'" (111). She speaks of meeting Martin, who works at a restaurant where she ate lunch. She pleads with Ursa, "it was like something had got into me. Like my body or something new what it wanted even if I didn't want no man… But it was like it knew it wanted you. It was like my whole body knew it wanted you, and knew it would have you, and knew you'd be a girl" (114). Mama remembers that the night she becomes pregnant, recollecting that "I hadn't even given myself time to feel anything else before I pushed him out… I wouldn't let myself feel anything" (117 – 118). The possibility of letting herself feel anything – be it tenderness for Martin or sexual pleasure for herself – is non-negotiable as to *feel* would defy the injunction to bear children: both Mama and Ursa live under "a collapse of history such that their present reality appears as an overdetermination of their foremothers' memories" (Li 134). Sexual intercourse is not for pleasure; especially in light of the knowledge that Corregidora is "the lover and husband of all the women," sexual intercourse for pleasure becomes impossible (qtd. in Gottfried 561). As Ursa tells Mutt, "'*[h]e made them make love to anyone, so they couldn't love anyone*'" (Jones 104). Ursa herself embodies this when she makes love to Tadpole: "[h]e was up inside me now… He was inside, and I felt nothing. I wanted to feel, but I couldn't" (82). What systematic slavery and its afterlife do is to

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(Jones 100). It appears more that Ursa desires to know what an individual, "own" memory might even be comprised of, no matter how "real and terrible and lonely and dark" it may be (101).

circumvent desire and make affective relationality, even between objects, impossible. To turn briefly to Baldwin, I recall his claim that "it's absolutely dangerous to be in love if you're a slave because nothing belongs to you, not your woman, your child, not your man" (Salaam 41).

Ursa hears this entanglement, the slipping of the present reality and collective memory as Mama continues speaking. While describing how things shifted when Martin moved into their home, Ursa notices that "Mama kept talking until it wasn't her that was talking, but Great Gram. I stared at her because she wasn't Mama now, she was Great Gram talking" (124). The conversation slips from Martin to Great Gram's recollections of who Corregidora allowed her to prostitute herself with. Great Gram remembers a fellow slave who runs away, and while he is being chased, she is being raped by Corregidora who orders, "'[d]on't let no black man fool with you, do you hear? I don't wont nothing black fucking with *my* pussy'" (127, emphasis mine). Corregidora claims Great Gram's sexual organs as his own, as both sex and capital (his "little gold piece"); even in the realm where money is not being exchanged for sex, Great Gram still only amounts to property. As she narrates the story of the slave's eventual drowning and death, Mama returns to herself and says, "'[Great Gram and Gram] figured they didn't have to tell me no more, but then what they didn't realize was they was telling Martin too…'" (129). Martin, who is described as a "Black man," "kind of satin-black. Smooth satin-black," is privy to Corregidora's admonitions about black men and the Corregidora women (112). He knows, too, to some degree, that Mama remains firmly entrenched in the grip of this command to make generations, and thus calls her "Correy" instead of

Irene. Whereas Ursa *hears* the slippage between Mama and Great Gram, Martin witnesses this every day he stays married to Mama.

Hong writes that "in terms of African enslavement in the United States, the violence of enslavement was manifested in part through the procreative function" (Hong 6). In other words, childbirth was always and only sanctioned through the violence of slavery. Jones illuminates this in Ursa's birth, as shortly thereafter, Martin leaves. When Mama goes to see him, he scornfully tells her that he knew exactly what role he had been there to play: "'I lived in that house long enough to know I helped you… How could I have missed. I mean, the first time. The other times were all miss, weren't they, baby? They were all miss, weren't they?'" (Jones 119). Some scholars have read the ensuing beating as signifying Mama's "identity as angry victim" which "not only thwarts her sexuality, but also reinforces Martin's sense of powerlessness and frustration as a black man in twentieth-century North America" (Gottfried 565). This reading of the relationship between Mama and Martin is far too reductive; although much of Gottfried's analysis is useful in my reading of *Corregidora*, the designation of Mama as an "angry victim" and Martin's "powerlessness" veers a bit too close to the 1965 "Moynihan Report" and ignores the structural violence that that live within. I argue that for Jones, the birth of black life is not only defined as violent in that children-as-property can be wrestled away at any given moment, but that the violence committed against black life is that it is so deracinated that it is waste, literal excrement. As Mama tells Ursa, Great Gram "squat down on the chamber pot. And then that's how she had your Gram, coming out in the slop jar. That's how we all begin, remember that. That's how we all begin. A

mud ditch or a slop jar or hit the floor or the ground" (Jones 41).[104] Black life is, by definition, "pure [female] spoor and meat" (Baraka 35). Thus Martin is angry because he is disposed of in such a casual manner, because he sees himself for what he is; the waste that even the "pure female spoor and meat" do not want, the waste whose only use is to beget more waste.

If Tadpole questions the usefulness of "making generations," then Martin is the one who hits the proverbial nail on the head in regards to Corregidora's function in the present. As Mama walks Ursa back to the bus stop, she gives her something else to mull over, saying, "'I think what really made them dislike Martin was because he had the nerve to ask them what I never had the nerve to ask… How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love'" (Jones 131). Here I am less interested in the question of love for Corregidora than that of desire for him, not with sexual overtones but rather within the context of witnessing.[105] Some literary scholars have criticized and read Great Gram and Gram's motives for maintaining this collective memory as a result of their being "stuck in the past," and as a result, "they pass on not only evidence but their obsession with Corregidora and their destructive habit of blaming him for all that is wrong with their lives" (Allen 269).[106] Leaving aside the idea that the trauma of slavery

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[104] I am reminded here, too, of my analysis of Saidiya V. Hartman's visit to Elmina Castle, where she is compulsorily made aware of the dust underneath her feet, the dust which was once waste. Thus in birth and in death, blackness is always originated and deracinated as waste.
[105] As to why I am uninterested in this question, I turn to Christina Sharpe who cites Annette Gordon-Reed's work on Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson: "'the romance is not saying that they may have loved one another. The romance is in thinking that it makes any difference if they did" (qtd. in Sharpe 22).
[106] What I see happening in Allen's myopic reading is exactly the same kind of individual blame found in the Great Blacks in Wax Museum – "[n]ow we lynch ourselves." Rather than reading the structural

can be relegated to the past, this reading of Great Gram and Gram as obsessive is problematic in that it does not consider the impetus behind keeping Corregidora firmly affixed in the present. As I have already discussed, Jones is aware of the role of the hearer, the audience, in writing a text as performance; she states that "in oral storytelling there are three kinds of identification – the identification of the storyteller with the story, the identification of the storyteller with the hearer, and the identification of the hearer with the story" (Harper 698 – 699). The triangulation of relationships here indicates the necessity of the one who hears, and what I suggest is that in much the same way, Great Gram and Gram demand that Corregidora be present for the recounting of their grievances against him.

The "love" for Corregidora, or what I read as desire for him, is not only the desire the Corregidora women have to bear witness against him, but for the slave master to *witness this witnessing*. In other words, "[w]itness in this model, then, is not a witness to pain or affect, but rather to an otherwise erased history; bearing witness means retelling events in the same historical narrative mode from which they were originally excluded" (Goldberg 460). For Great Gram and Gram, the two women who have had direct contact with the man they repeatedly refer to as a "whoremonger," "to reproduce is to reproduce (enough) Corregidora" (Sharpe 41). With their childbearing, they attempt to "make their trauma visible to and readable by a symbolic Corregidora – or a Corregidora stand-in – that is both external and internal to them" (41). As Jones writes, "'your roots are where

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violence perpetrated against the Corregidora women, Allen instead posits their "obsession" as a pathological refusal to take responsibility.

you was born and you can't pull them up, the only thing you can do is cut yourself away from them but they still be there'" (Jones 73). The ever present roots creep into Ursa, and she dreams that she gives birth to Corregidora. She hears, "'*[t]hose who have fucked their daughters would not hesitate to fuck their own mothers.' Who are you? Who have I born? His hair was like white wings, and we were united at birth*" (77). To her horror this manifestation replies, "'*[y]ou don't even know your own father?*'" and at her claim that she is not "'*one of [his] women*,'" his implacable answer is "'*Corregidora's women. Yes, you are*'" (77). Ursa cannot separate herself from Corregidora's women; it becomes a cycle wherein he rapes her foremothers as she simultaneously gives birth to him and is raped by him. She knows that the "old man still howls inside me… My veins are centuries meeting" (46). In effect, "[s]truggling to be free of Corregidora, Great Gram produces evidence to attest to the fact of her former enslavement and to defeat Corregidora even as he is carried into the future" (Sharpe 45). As Ursa is told, "'*... [t]hey burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn't burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness*'" (Jones 72). The slipping from what is in "their" minds to "our" minds indicates just how interwoven Corregidora is within the lives of his women, and their attempt at ridding themselves of him – "*'We got to burn out what they put in our minds*'" – is abruptly cut in the "*'need to bear witness*'" (72). Herein lies the paradox of black futurity, and precisely why it is impossible for Jones: a progression/procession into the future is dependent upon bringing the past forward into it.

Ursa feels this keenly through the silencing of her womb. For her, giving birth is directly tied to her communal history, and when advised to forget the past, she sighs, "*'I can't forget… The space between my thighs. A well that never bleeds… Silence in my womb. My breasts quiver like old apples'*" (99). The blood which accompanies giving birth has been replaced by the blood that gushes during her miscarriage, and the subsequent scar that can be felt – "'I can just reach down and feel it. It's going to leave a bad one'" – is the physical version of "*'[t]hat scar that's left to bear witness'*" (17, 72). Ursa's body becomes defined through the silencing of her womb, and this denies her participation in the very contradiction that has thus fed the Corregidora genealogy, where "[i]f she has a child, she can express her foremother's history, yet a child also signals a participation in a dehumanizing narrative based on the silencing of female bodies: in either case, Ursa is being valued for the same thing" (Cognard-Black 45 – 46). As Grace Kyungwon Hong asks, "[h]ow do subjects imagine a futurity in the absence of the notion of the child or of generations?" Such a question "cannot displace literal children and procreative reproduction – the bearing of one's own children – but must also set aside a linearly temporal definition of generations as the primary narrative of futurity" (Hong 1). Although Hong assumes a black subjectivity while I do not, her statement is still useful in that it deconstructs the nationalist-normative reliance on generations as being the only signifier of futurity. In the following section, I contend that what Jones proposes is the ineffectuality of black performance in imagining any narrative of futurity that is grounded in subjectivity. What Ursa cannot give birth to, she gives voice to, but always with the

simultaneous recognition that what she gives voice to is reducible only to its very unspeakability.

Singing the Erasures in the Blues: Ursa

In the opening scene of *Corregidora*, Jones highlights the tension between Ursa and Mutt as that of sexual ownership, the intermingling of desire and capital. Ursa is aware that "[Mutt] didn't like for me to sing after were married because he said that's why he married me so he could support me. I said I sang because it was something I had to do, but he never would understand that" (Jones 3). In a circling around of the narrative, we learn that previously Mutt had threatened to embarrass her when she refused to quit singing for his sake.[107] He taunts her in front of an imaginary audience, "'[o]ne a y'all wont to bid for her? Piece a ass for sale I got me a piece a ass for sale. That's what y'all wont, ain't it? Piece a ass. I said I got a piece a ass for sale, anybody wont to bid on it?... I'ma be down there tonight, and as soon as you get up on that stage, I'ma sell me a piece a ass'" (159). The horrific nature of Mutt's abusive speech is that it hearkens back to the slave auction block; he brings together the auction and the stage as one and the same. In this conflation, I read Jones as directly challenging a longstanding tenet of black performance: "[t]he history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist" (*In the Break* 1). Taken directly from Fred Moten's formative *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, this quote foregrounds two of the major components in the dialogue on the usefulness of performance studies as it relates to the

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[107] I turn to the performative elements of the text itself – including the fluctuating presence of temporality – and elaborate on the blues structure of the novel in the next section of the chapter.

social life and social death of blackness, namely the object and abject status of blackness, and the search for a regenerative, if not recuperative, power that is to be found through the stage. By elaborating upon Jones' contestation of the latter of these two agendas, I affirm my reading of *Corregidora* as an Afro-pessimistic novel in that it problematizes the possibility of regeneration and redemption, as well as the concept of resistance in the face of deracination.[108] Here, I begin with an assessment of black performance on stage before moving on to the specifics of the voice and the blues in the novel.

At the time of writing, Soyica Diggs Colbert's *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance and the Stage* is one of the most recent publications on questions of black bodies on stage. Covering several major black plays of the twentieth century, Colbert posits that

> black drama destabilizes the temporality of the black radical tradition. African American drama often introduces familiar racial performances that have historically been associated with the objectification of black people… and then challenges those performances by creating sites that interrupt that objectification… African American drama returns to the scenes of crimes to interrupt historical processes used to render black people objects and offers performance strategies that not only keep the dehumanizing force of objection at bay but also enable the performers and audiences to object by reconfiguring the historical order… Black performance not only perpetuates a radical tradition, it intervenes in the past not to undo or override it but to actively engage and abide with it in the present. (Colbert 10 – 11)

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[108] Jared Sexton claims that critics who misread Afro-pessimism have misconstrued it as a "negation of the agency of black performance, or even a denial of black social life, and a number of scholars have reasserted the earlier assumptive logic in a gesture that hypostatizes afro-pessimism to that end" ("The Social Life of Social Death" 23). It is not my intention here to deny the agency that black performance artists may claim through performance, but rather to question what that agency looks like. For Jones, that agency is through the embodiment of erasure, not as a means of resistance but rather as a way of signifying the ontology of black life as black death.

I include the entirety of this quote because Colbert gets to the heart of the matter in black performance and elucidates the issues of temporality and resistance. Her argument engages with both Moten and Saidiya Hartman and presents the stage as a place where both black performers and audience members can object to their object status. The temporal dislocation that occurs by bringing the historical "scenes of crimes" to the forefront is done in an effort to recognize how they have been present all along.

Yet it is critical to conceptualize the issue at hand not as a "wish to disavow relationality, but as a wish to be *imbued* with relationality" ("Grammar & Ghosts" 122). The seeming momentum in black performance studies has been to first contest and then accept the object status of the black, but to retain utilizing the language of resistance, or the inclusion within civil society. While the purpose of this chapter is not to provide a historical/theoretical overview of black performance studies, it is necessary to briefly elaborate on this point before continuing with my literary analysis. In *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism,* Kimberly W. Benston argues that black performance "de-naturaliz[es] 'history' as an essential, teleological display of a preconstituted being-as-blackness" and thus" forces us to consider blackness as a mediated, socially constructed *practice*, a process and not a product of discursive conditions of struggle" (Benston 9). In effect, blackness is a process which struggles to undo history and perhaps proposes, again, an elevation of collective memory and "augurs a sacramentalized performative present in order to redeem, not deny, the promissory notes of historicized subjectivity" (21). Moten utilizes Frederick Douglass' discussion of Aunt Hester's screams (and Hartman's refusal to re-present the scene) to argue that "the

conjunction of reproduction and disappearance is performance's condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production" (*In the Break* 5). I take this to mean that the disappearance of Aunt Hester after her screaming, and the reproduction of the sounds of pain in the slave songs that Douglass later hears, gives rise to his subsequent manhood; in the space of fugitivity and fugitive life, Moten argues, is the "condition of possibility" to be found. Furthermore, Moten continues that "the resistance to enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness… is a *being maternal* that is indistinguishable from a *being material*" (16). What he gestures toward here is a reinscription of the mother/woman's body, the way in which the object is, at the very least, a commodity. In turn, Daphne Brooks proposes what she calls "Afro-alienation acts," a "trope that reflects and characterizes marginal cultural positions as well as a tactic that the marginalized seized on and reordered in the self-making process" (Brooks 4). Considering the stilled and stalled time of slavery, Brooks argues that Afro-alienation is "encoded with the traumas of self-fragmentation resulting from centuries of captivity and subjugation" as well as "the counter-normative tactics used by the marginalized to turn the horrific historical memory of moving through oceaning space while 'suspended in time'… into a critical form of dissonantly enlightened performance" (5). Through these Afro-alienation acts, she pushes Bertolt Brecht's contributions to theater and proposes that performance may "offer itself as an avenue for these women of the flesh to instead *act* themselves into being, to act themselves into history" (157).

While I am indebted to these scholars for their groundbreaking analyses of black performance, I contend that what they miss is precisely what Wilderson denotes as an

Afro-pessimistic stance in performance studies: no matter what the intention may be, "[p]erformance cannot reconcile this gap between the place of slaves and the place of all others" ("Grammar & Ghosts" 120). As Sexton notes, what Moten and Wilderson agree on is that "black life is not social, or rather that black life is *lived* in social *death*" ("The Social Life of Social Death" 28 – 29). Where they differ, however, is that Wilderson argues that *in* black performance, "the intersection of performance and subjectivity" results in "a palpable structure of feeling, a shared sense that violence and captivity are the grammar and ghosts of our every gesture," and that *for* black performance, slavery, or the "African Holocaust," is "the condition for the emergence of African being, just as grammar conditions the emergence of speech" (119). In other words, Wilderson posits that black life is always forcibly, irreducibly outside in order to give a grammatical structural to civil society, whereas Moten imagines a fugitive black life which is possible on the margins. This is precisely where Jones makes her intervention, first through the figure of Ursa and then through the performative nature of the novel. She, like Wilderson, cannot reconcile Ursa's past and her performance to construct a regenerative model of resistance. Rather, what she does is to examine how "the iconography of the black female body remains the central ur-text of alienation in transatlantic culture" and excavates Ursa's embodiment of the "intellectual knowledge, philosophical vision, and aesthetic worth" of social death through denying alienation in favor of accumulation and fungibility (Brooks 7 – 8).

If Ursa's body is the "iconography" which provides the textual measure of "intellectual knowledge, philosophical vision, and aesthetic worth," we see this

manifested in the way in which she is aware, from the beginning, that the originating relationship between Mutt and herself is already positioned as one which is bound to fail. In recalling their first meeting, she recalls,

> [w]hen I first saw Mutt I was singing a song about a train tunnel. About this train going in the tunnel, but it didn't seem like they was no end to the tunnel, and nobody knew when the train would get out, and then all of a sudden the tunnel tightened around the train like a fist. Then I sang about this bird woman, whose eyes were deep wells. How she would take a man on a long journey, but never return to him. (Jones 147)

Jones relies on the image of the fist, which in the novel signifies as both perpetrator and victim of supreme violence. Mama, at first reluctant to share her individual memory about Martin, is "closed up like a fist"; when Cat, an older woman who takes Ursa in from Tadpole, learns of Jeffy's clumsy move to seduce Ursa, she warns her much younger lover that "'[i]f you bother her again I'll give you a fist to fuck'"; and finally, when Ursa catches her husband Tadpole in bed with another women, she repeats Cat's words – "'[i]f you want something to fuck, I'll give you my fist to fuck'" (101, 46, 87). The train, indicating a movement forward or into the future, is crushed within the grasp of a fist, and in her second song, the woman with the deep eyes is also likened to a train, able to "take a man on a long journey, but never return to him."[109] Ursa also thinks to herself later that Mutt could perhaps "see [her] feelings somewhere in the bottom of [her] eyes" (51). She is simultaneously the train, the fist, and the woman with bottomless eyes, repeating the trauma of collective memory even as she attempts to escape. Jones gestures

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[109] We are reminded here, too, of Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s claim that the blues can be symbolized by the juncture, "the way station of the blues" which is a "[p]olymorphous and multidirectional, scene of arrivals and departures, place betwixt and between" (*Blues* 7). Ursa simultaneously arrives and begins departing from Mutt in their very first meeting.

to the complete and utter loneliness which surrounds the Corregidora women; as with Mama, who admits that "'I carried [Martin] to the point where he ended up hating me, Ursa. And that's what I knew I'd keep doing. That's what I knew I'd do with any man,'" Ursa's performance, if not Ursa herself, acknowledges the impossibility of a loving union between two black objects (121).

Some scholars have argued that Ursa turns to the blues as a means of counter-(re)production after her hysterectomy, a regeneration of communal lines that she finds herself unable to create through her genitals. For example, Donia Elizabeth Allen writes that Ursa's inability to bear children "forces her to think about other ways to 'make generations.' Singing blues is her way of doing that" (Allen 261). Still others state that "[b]lues singing permits a remarkably open expression of being oppressed" and that for Ursa, "two ways out of her repetitive familiar narrative are the blues song and her verbalized anger" (J. Harris 4 – 5; Gottfried 567). I challenge these assumptions in that Ursa has never once been *without* the blues, either prior to her operation or in the aftermath of it; indeed, we are reminded of this when she states that she was only five-years-old when Great Gram inducts her to bear generations (Jones 14). She proclaims, "*I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother's tiddies. In her milk. Let no one pollute my music*" (77). Her past, which she both hears and ingests through her mother's milk, results in her music, her blues. When Mutt asks her, "*'Ursa, have you lost the blues?'*" she replies, "*'[n]aw, the blues is something you can't loose'*" (97). Jones' deliberate usage of the word "loose" as opposed to "lose" indicates that while Ursa cannot lose the blues, she also cannot loosen herself from the

fist that it forms around her. She has nursed from the blues in her mothers' breasts, and has nourished the unpolluted music she found there. With no child of her own that needs suckling, Ursa's past flows instead through her voice.

Extrapolating on Heidegger's work on thingliness, Moten distinguishes between the thing or vessel, and the object. The "thingliness of the thing, the jug, is precisely that which *prompts* its making" ("The Case of Blackness" 183). In other words, before it is made, the jug still holds its own shape; it contains its self although it cannot be seen. There is an inherent worth of the thing, and this worth is what prompts its making, or, more simply, "the jug, as thing, is better understood as filled with an always already mixed capacity for content that is not made" (184). Moten then imagines what blackness looks like contained in this vessel, "in terms of what it gives, particularly when we take into account the horror of its being made to hold, the horror of its making that it holds or bears" (185). What he seems to propose is the very *thingliness* of blackness, but in doing so he affirms a kind of stolen life that can still exist, even if it is within the realm of social death. Blackness as *thingliness* still contains. Jones, however, contests this claim and instead speaks toward the *object* status of black, that which is even lower than thing in that it does not contain itself; rather, it contains everything *but* itself. In Ursa's hollowed out body which contains not *her* making but rather the collective memory of slavery, we see how the "black body… is a space not simply owned by those who embody it, but constructed and occupied by other embodiments" (Brand 38, qtd. in Sharpe). The traumatic repetition of slavery is that Ursa's body and her blues are not hers to own.

To borrow from Ralph Ellison's ruminations on Richard Wright's blues, "the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" ("Richard Wright's Blues" 62). Yet what I contend is that in Jones' novel, the blues is a deformation of autobiography and instead cries out the impossibility of the individual and the collective. The "personal catastrophe" is that it decimates the personal entirely. While Ursa is the one who gives voice to the blues, it has always been present for her mothers. Mama claims, "*'[s]ongs are devils. It's your own destruction you're singing. The voice is a devil'*" and Ursa thinks, "*'still I'll sing as you talked it, your voice humming, sing about the Portuguese who finger your genitals.'*" To her mother's query of, "*'[w]here did you get those songs? That's devil's music,'*" she replies, "*'I got them from you'*" (Jones 53 – 54). Although Mama cannot see this, Ursa knows that "if you're not singing the past, you're humming it" (45). What she has done is to take the words spoken, set them to music, and, most importantly, *perform* the blues as absence. Although Gram enjoys the blues, "*Mama would say listening to the blues and singing them ain't the same. That's what she said when I asked her how come she didn't mind Grandmama's old blues records. What's a life always spoken, and only spoken?*" (103). Here Mama returns us to Jones' concept of storytelling and oral history but through a reinforcement of the storyteller (or blues singer) at the center of narrative creation; as long as the song remains a hum and inarticulate, or remains within the privacy of the home, it does not matter. It is when the song is given words and "gives us back the visuality that ocularcentrism had repressed," or, in other words, makes us see what we could not see, that the blues become

dangerous (*In the Break* 235).[110] As Sharpe rightly points out, "[a]lthough they listen to the blues in private, Ursa sings about sex and desire in public places where men, black men, watch her" (Sharpe 58). Again returning to Corregidora's admonition to Great Gram – "'I don't wont nothing black fucking with my pussy'" – we see Ursa's "impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain" ("Richard Wright's Blues" 62).

Angela Y. Davis offers a historical reading of the blues as connected to the revolution in black relationships post-Emancipation. She writes that "masses of black women and men were in a position to make autonomous decisions regarding the sexual partnerships into which they entered," and that "[s]exuality after emancipation could not be adequately expressed or addressed through the musical forms existing under slavery" (*Blues Legacies* 4). This is because the slave songs were a "collective desire for an end to the system that enslaved them" (4). Blues, on the other hand, "articulated a new valuation of individual emotional needs and desires" (5). While I do not contest Davis' claim that emancipation meant that "sexuality could be explored freely by individuals who now could enter into autonomously chosen personal relationships," I argue that for Jones, these relationships are still conducted between objects, and the regenerative project at hand allows for a regeneration of social death (8). The sexuality that can be explored is still done under the onus of slavery. I return to Ursa's claim that the "old man still howls inside me… My veins are centuries meeting… When do you sing the blues? Every time I

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[110] It is not by chance that we readers are introduced to Ursa first through what Tadpole calls her – "U.C." (you see). Ursa sees, is seeing embodied, because she sings. As with Jones' reliance on the hearer to understand her work, as opposed to the reader, visual knowledge acquisition becomes secondary.

want to cry, I sing the blues… And you said, Sing for me, goddamn it, sing. Your plate was stained with flies, and you kept requesting songs. I sang to you out of my whole body" (Jones 46). Here Mutt is the "you" Ursa addresses, but she is also invoking her lineage and Corregidora. Ursa cannot embody the "individual emotional needs and desires" Davis speaks of, because she is imbued with Corregidora's "howls" when the centuries – Great Gram, Gram, Mama and herself – meet, and because she sings at Mutt's request. She sings to him out of her "whole body," indicating a porous saturation of song.

In his discussion of Dutch painter Piet Mondrian's work, Moten argues that his work is an "open, textured, mobile, animated, content-laden border… whose chromatic saturation indicate that Mondrian's late, exilic, catastrophic work was given over to a case of blackness" ("The Case of Blackness" 202). While Moten is reading this chromatic saturation in terms of both visuality and black social life, it is still useful to think of Ursa as one who is "open, textured, mobile, animated, content-laden," as one who is saturated through and through with "a past that she has lived through and one that has been transmitted to her, introjected into her, one that overtakes her" (Sharpe 42). She does not sing out of her whole body alone, but rather with the howls of centuries meeting; it becomes a performative repetition of incest and amalgamation, of slavery.[111] As with her foremothers, it is a bearing witness that reinscribes Corregidora into the present. In Ursa, we observe the embodiment of how "[t]he blues remembers everything the country forgot" (Scott-Heron "Bicentennial Blues Live").

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[111] As Davis argues, "blues songs were never considered the personal property of their composers or the performers. They were the collective property of the black community, disseminated, like folktales, in accordance with the community's oral tradition" (*Blues Legacies* 136).

In Ursa's singing we see a deformation of both Brecht's idea of the alienation effect and what Daphne Brooks calls Afro-alienation acts. In "A Short Organum for the Theatre," Brecht writes generally that the alienation effect is a representation "which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it unfamiliar" (Brecht 192). He then differentiates between the old and the new, wherein the old effects "remove the object represented from the spectator's grasp, turning it into something that cannot be altered," whereas the "new alienations are only designed to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp" (192). The alienation effect works to fossilize performance into something concrete, something that saves rather than spending, or makes that which is familiar, unfamiliar.[112] Brooks focuses on the specifics of the Afro-alienation act, wherein black figures defamiliarize "their own bodies by way of performance in order to yield alternative racial and gender epistemologies" (Brooks 5).[113] In this case, black stage performers made unfamiliar their familiar bodies in order to construct something unknown to the audience. I argue, however, that Ursa's singing offers us something different: she sings of something familiar which in its very familiarity, becomes unfamiliar, or what we might call an Afro-pessimistic act.

In June of 1969, when Ursa is forty-seven, she encounters a man at the Spider Club where she now works. As they speak of performing, the man confesses that he, too,

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[112] I borrow here from Peggy Phelan's observation that performance "resists the balanced circulation of finance. It saves nothing; it only spends" (Phelan 148).

[113] Brooks is careful to distinguish herself from Brecht, writing that while Brecht "imagined that audiences might indeed 'awaken' to history through gestic performance in theatre," she presumes "that most audiences were less willing to recognize the ways that black cultural producers negotiated identity polyvalence in performance" (Brooks 349 n. 6).

is a performer and asks Ursa, "'[y]ou know how long Thelonious Monk was playing in that place all that long time before they discovered him. You know, I don't like to use that word 'discovered,' cause it's already there, ain't it?... Yes, indeed, it's already there, but don't seem like they can see it'" (Jones 169). The past which is transmitted, introjected and overtakes Ursa is already there, has always already been there, but because it is so familiar, it "don't seem like they can see it." Mama, hearing Ursa sing the blues, can only ask "*'Where did you get those songs?... I didn't hear the words,'*" and Mutt, from the beginning, can only read Ursa's stage presence as lascivious, and not "something [she] had to do" (54, 4). This is precisely why Ursa claims that the blues "helps me to explain what I can't explain" (56). In the face of having nothing of her own, filled to the brim with "*'their memories, but never my own,'*" Ursa beseeches the loved ones in her life to understand that she "*'was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words'*" (100, 66). All she can claim is a shared collective memory (which is not even hers) and make it *familiar* even in the face of misprision. It has been noted that Ursa's body and her voice slip into silence whenever faced with sexual desire: when having sex with Tadpole, for example, she recollects that "I was struggling against him, trying to feel what I wasn't feeling… I kept struggling with him. I made a sound in my throat. I didn't know what he wanted me to say. What I felt didn't have words" (75). When Mutt tries to seduce her and she gives in to her fear, he attempts to reassure her by saying "'[w]hichever way you look at it, we ain't them.' I didn't answer that, because the way I'd been brought up, it was almost as if I was" (151). The "them" Mutt refers to is his great-grandfather who buys his wife's freedom only to

lose her because of her property status. At the same time, Ursa's identification with "them" reminds us that she, along with her mothers, are unable to move forward and away from this narrative of slavery. She is unable to express this to Mutt, and when he grows angry, she "sang all his favorite songs to try to make up to him" (151). To return to my earlier point on how the blues have always nursed Ursa, we also see how she "*'didn't feel nothing'*" when playing doctor with Henry, a neighborhood boy (42).

Ursa's speaking voice and her body lack the signifiers to manifest this history, but her blues allows for her to sing something that is familiar to her audience entire; even if they visibly recoil from the familiarity. It is not that Ursa's singing is 'a way of establishing empathy with her audience. She hurts them by expressing her own hurt," but rather that she sings the collective hurt of her audience. She hurts them by expressing *their* hurt, *their* knowledge of the afterlife of slavery (Li 138). Max Monroe, the owner of the Spider, comments on this, stating that Ursa has "'a hard kind of voice… like callused hands. Strong and hard but gentle underneath. Strong but gentle too. The kind of voice that can hurt you. I can't explain it. Hurt you and make you still want to listen'" (Jones 96). For Mutt, what he cannot bear to acknowledge is that he has come to stand in for Corregidora, her "*'original man'*"; as his surrogate, he both falls short of and exceeds his role due to his lack of structural power (that Corregidora has as non-black and non-Slave), and his ability to physically join himself to Ursa (that Corregidora lacks), respectively (100). Mutt, his very name signifying miscegenation, is struck full-force by Ursa's blues, but when she shies away from his advances, he refuses to see (or hear) how he and Corregidora are interwoven in much the same way that Martin was for Mama. Just

as Corregidora refers to Great Gram's genitals as "his," Ursa reminds Mutt that when she answers "*'[y]ou fucking me'*" to his desire to know what he is doing to her, "*'[d]idn't I tell you you taught me what Corregidora taught Great Gram. He taught her to use the kind of words she did. Don't you remember?'*" (76).[114] He is familiar with the story of Corregidora's cruelty and complains, "'[s]hit, I'm tired a hearing about Corregidora's women. Why do you have to remember that old bastard anyway?" (154). Ursa reads her relationship with Mutt as similar to the one between Great Gram and Corregidora, and in the face of this familiar narrative that makes him unfamiliar to himself, that alienates him from himself, Mutt chooses instead to believe that Ursa is one of Corregidora's women: "'[i]f you wasn't one of them you wouldn't like them mens watching after you'" (154).[115] In this way, Jones makes clear that the concept of individuation in the blues is perhaps an oversimplification, that perhaps what comes through in the fingering of "the jagged grain" is the multiple shackled hands which are still there.

What is incontrovertible, however, is that Ursa's voice changes after her operation. Cat is the first person to hear her sing after she comes home from the hospital,

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[114] We also have his asking Ursa, "'[y]our pussy's a little gold piece, ain't it, Urs? My little gold piece,'" a deliberate conflation not only of Corregidora and Mutt, but also of Ursa and Great Gram/Dorita (Jones 60).
[115] This is a deliberate reference on Jones' part to an earlier scene in the novel, where Mama tells Ursa how she caught Martin watching Gram "'powdering up under her breasts. I don't know if she seen him or not… She was acting like she didn't know we was there, but I know she had to know… I know she knew'" (Jones 129 – 130). It is a moment where Gram flaunts the frigid relationship between Mama and Martin in his face, a tense moment of looking where we see how Gram (and Great Gram) "willfully carry forth the transgenerational racial hatred, sexual violence, and incestuous violation as a symbolic power that acknowledges and redoubles a legal continuum of the captivity of black bodies before and after slavery" (Sharpe 56). It is an attempt to harness any kind of power that they have, but at what cost? In much the same way that Great Gram recollects that the choice for slave women was rape or death, or between the only affirmation of their social life (vis-à-vis sexual violation and the production of commodities) and a transformation of their social death into physical demise, the only options given to Great Gram and Gram is to either repeatedly wound their new generations or become forgotten.

and she notes that "'[y]our voice sounds a little strained, that's all… it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now'" (Jones 44). The connection that Jones makes between Ursa's womb and her voice is undeniable when Ursa blames Mutt, thinking that "it's your fault all my seeds are wounded forever. No warm ones, only bruised ones, not even bruised ones. No seeds… Is that what snaps away my music, a harp string broken, guitar string, string of my banjo belly. Strain in my voice" (45 – 56). The strain is caused when her seeds, her regenerative properties, are removed. As Sharpe writes, the "disavowed or impossible desire for Mutt and the full pressure of her family hysteria on making generations all come together in her womb. The result is a miscarriage, a hysterectomy, and a change in Ursa's voice" (Sharpe 52). What occurs here is more than the loss of her unborn child and her desperate hope in Mutt's differential signification from Corregidora; in a single stroke both the next generation and what made the next generation are decimated. What is made visible through this individual loss is the ontological *lack* that Ursa embodies. At the same time, however, I argue that the change in Ursa's voice indicates not how she sings of that loss, but rather points toward an acknowledgement and affirmation of her self-identification as lack. She is merely "*a substitute for memory… somehow more than the memory*"; she recognizes through the excavation of her womb her excavated being (Jones 11). I partially agree with Hong when she claims that in "the novel's invocation of the blues, I'm arguing for a model of cultural *transmission* that is *invention,* a form of *reproduction* that is, more precisely, *production*" in the sense that Ursa stops relying on lineage – or children – as the sole means of making generations (Hong 16). Where I disagree,

however, is with this concept of *invention*. Ursa does not and cannot sing a new song, a "new world song. A song branded with the new world," because it is precisely this new world forecloses her subjectivity through the history of slavery (Jones 59). The grain of her voice shifts when she realizes that her womb, which would have carried a child who was *not* a child but rather a receptacle for collective memory, is now silenced; in connection, she realizes that her voice, too, is not her own. It flexes and changes because she recognizes that she sings the collective not as a means of a transformative regeneration, but a repetitive, performative regeneration of the geno-song of trauma and the unmaking of the world.[116]

The novel ends with her engaging in fellatio with Mutt, and here she blurs once again the line between her and Mutt, and Great Gram and Corregidora. The great mystery of the text has been what Great Gram had done to Corregidora that caused him such fury that she fled, leaving her daughter behind: "*'[w]hat is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?'*" (173). In this intimate reunion with her first husband, Ursa thinks, "[i]t had to be sexual… In a split second I knew what it was, in a split second of hate and love I knew what it was, and I think he might have known too. A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but

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[116] This is not a phenomenon that solely belongs to Ursa. She recollects, for example, that Mama had written her a letter about "having left a certain world behind her. I wasn't sure what she meant, but was sure that only one man could remake that world. My father" (Jones 182). The impossibility here is two-fold. First, Martin has disappeared from view because of Mama's objectification of him; second, and more provocatively, if Martin is Mama's Corregidora stand-in (as Mutt is Ursa's), what does it mean that the only means by which Mama can remake a world is through experiences of sexualized violence that harkens back to a memory which is not hers?

not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin" (184). Scholars have offered a variety of ways to read this sexual act, some in direct contradiction to each other. For example, Gottfried reads the Ursa's fellatio as her opting "not for pain, but for pleasure" in her willingness to pleasure Mutt, whereas Li argues that this shows that Ursa "seeks something other than sexual pleasure from Mutt" (Gottfried 567; Li 146). Li further posits that this is in fact a reversal of power; it is Mutt who is at Ursa's mercy, in much the same way that Corregidora was at Great Gram's when she threatened him with castration. Allen contends that this act reveals Jones' most crucial themes: "acknowledging the past and the ambiguities it encompasses: violence, healing, reconciliation and forgiveness" (Allen 266). Sharpe does not agree with Allen, but proposes that Ursa and Mutt share in the knowledge of her position of power in this moment (Sharpe 63). The overarching concept at hand is that this is an empowering and generative moment for Ursa; as both Madhu Dubey and Hong note, fellatio is "a distinctly non-procreative act," and that when "*Corregidora* rejects 'generations' as a mode of cultural transmission, this does not mean that it then must imagine the death of culture, history, memory, and futurity" (Hong 17). Rather, Hong proposes, the novel "suggests a different – imaginary, non-factual – connection to the past, and by implication, to the future" (17). What I have been articulating throughout this chapter in response to such claims is that in the face structural power, individual empowerment and resistance are possible but ultimately to not register within relationality. In a similar way, what Jones indicates is not the death *of* "culture, history, memory, and futurity," but

“culture, history, memory, and futurity” *as* death in the ontology of blackness. I elaborate upon this position in the next section, which focuses on the blues structure of the novel itself. As much as it is Jones’ authorial voice that drives the text, it is also what she calls the “ritualized dialogue” of her writing that allows for *Corregidora* to perform its own Afro-pessimist position.

Writing the Erasures in the Blues: Jones

To return to the beginning of this chapter, Jones claims that what she means by “‘ritualized dialogue’ is that either the language isn’t the same that we would use ordinarily, or the movement between the people talking isn’t the same. No, there are really three things: the language, the rhythm of the people talking, and the rhythm *between* the people talking” (Harper 699). When discussing *Corregidora* as a blues novel, it is impossible to ignore the structure of the book itself, and its focus on the three qualifiers mentioned above. In the same interview, Jones expresses admiration for Latin American writers, saying that “[y]ou have the sense that they’re trying to make the language do things. And it’s not just to be playing with words, either; they have a stake in it; it has to do with their being” (706). She gestures toward the performative utterance of these writers to clarify that her writing, too, is “do[ing] things,” namely, performing the very same blues that Ursa sings throughout the text; in other words, the way the novel is formatted invokes both the limitations and trauma of collective memory and articulates them through a semiotics of the blues. While the language that Jones uses is more clearly exemplified in Ursa’s singing of the blues, I argue here that “the rhythm of the people talking, and the rhythm *between* the people talking” are the sectors which belong to

Jones, specifically in the moments of halted speech and repurposed song in *Corregidora.* The novel exists in the interstices between collective memory and history; it is both performed and written. In its very form, it gestures toward Diana Taylor's work in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas,* where she writes that all too often the archive (or written texts) and the repertoire (what she calls "embodied memory") are constituted as binaries, "with the written and archival constituting hegemonic power and the repertoire providing the anti-hegemonic challenge" (Taylor 22). What *Corregidora* does is to offer a repertoire that is performed through the archive.

The blues text has had a longstanding relationship to literary scholarship, beginning with Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s seminal text, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory.* Baker, Jr. argues that in naming the blues as vernacular, he gestures toward the very American-ness of the genre: the "'vernacular' in relation to human beings signals 'a slave born on his master's estate.' In expressive terms, vernacular indicates 'arts native or peculiar to a particular country or locale'" (*Blues* 2). The vernacular for African American literary analysis is rooted in the blues as "the multiplex, enabling *script* in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed" (3 – 4). The blues conceptualize the things that cannot be said and cannot be seen, and "because the blues confront raw emotional and sexual matters associated with a very specific historical reality, they make complex statements that transcend the particularities of their origins" (*Blues Legacies* 24). This transcending script is evident first on a macro-level: *Corregidora* is divided into five sections which travel through time and space,

alternating between Ursa's memories of her childhood (which are always tinged by the memories of Corregidora), her dream-like conversations with Mutt, her mothers and Corregidora, and indications that the overarching narrative is actually taking place *after* the conclusion of the novel. Goldberg argues that the "action of the first half of the novel closely follows the patterns of sleeping, waking, and daydream symptomatic of trauma survivorship, and the subjects of the dream sequences which interrupt the narrative are most often events from Ursa's past, as well as her foremothers" (Goldberg 448). Meanwhile, Li proposes that the narrative structure indicates a healing in process between specific characters in that the first two chapters "are told in a series of fragmented outbursts that do not follow a clear chronology or logical sequence. Memories and voices of others intrude upon Ursa's consciousness such that it is often difficult to distinguish between dream and reality and to identify various speakers" (Li 139). After Ursa meets with her mother and collects her individual memory, the "final chapters of the novel are told with a greater sense of clarity and narrative control" (139).

While I agree with both Goldberg and Li that the earlier chapters of the novel are deliberately amorphous in their structure, while the later ones are much more coherently linear, I argue that this is not indicative of a healing of the rupture that is black social life. Rather, I propose that the structure of the novel indicates a collapsing of identities between Ursa and the other Corregidora women . As opposed to Ursa's individuation, the progression of the novel indicates how she, like the blues, "transcend[s] the particularities of [her] origins." In the earlier chapters of the novel, the increasingly blurry line between Ursa and Great Gram, Gram and Mama is indicated both through her relationships with

Mutt and Tadpole. Mutt asks her, "'[y]our pussy's a little gold piece, ain't it, Urs? My little gold piece'" and rages, "*'[a]in't even took my name. You Corregidora's, ain't you? Ain't even took my name. You ain't my woman'*" (Jones 60 – 61). In a similar manner, Tadpole's increasing frustration at Ursa's inability to feel results in the language that Corregidora used with Great Gram: "'[d]amn, you still got a hole, ain't you? As long as a woman got a hole, she can fuck'" (82). What Tadpole does not realize is that the only ones who can *feel* sexually are Great Gram and Gram because "*Corregidora was theirs more than hers. Mama could only know, but they could feel*" (102). Yet at the same, Ursa is able to feel through her voice, stating that she has "[a]ll those blues feelings… My feeling ways. My voice felt like it was screaming… My voice screaming for him to take me. And when he would, I'd draw him down into the bottom of my eyes" (50 – 51). Thus Ursa does not necessarily align herself with Mama who *knows;* she aligns herself with Great Gram and Gram who *feel,* even if what she feels is not hers and not desire.

The delineation between Ursa and her foremothers draws ever closer in that the men in her life conflate them, and here Jones brings Della Pollock's work to bear upon her own. Pollack proposes that performative writing is citational in that it is "composed in and as repetition and reiteration. Citational writing figures writing as rewriting, as the repetition of given discursive forms that are exceeded in the 'double-time' of performing writing and thereby exposes the fragility of identity, history, and culture constituted in the rites of textual recurrence" (Pollock 92). In the repetition and reiteration of speech between Corregidora, Mutt and Tadpole in their interpellation of the women, we see how the boundaries between separate identities and histories are broken down. In a powerful

moment, Ursa declares, "*[b]ut look at me, though, I am not Corregidora's daughter. Look at me, I am not Corregidora's daughter*" (Jones 103). Instead of reading this as a disavowal of her family history, however, I read it as an affirmation of Ursa's status as Corregidora's *lover*; because her family "*squeezed Corregidora into*" her, Ursa is manifested as a "little gold piece," the original woman to Corregidora/Mutt's original man.

It is tempting to read what Li calls the "fragmented outbursts" that cut through the narrative and their gradual disappearance as indicative of a healing wholeness, but I propose that they disappear because the multiple voices which war inside of Ursa ultimately become one. In other words, the collective *becomes* the individual. As numerous scholars have already given attention to the dreamlike sequences wherein this happens, I focus here instead on the slippage between Tadpole and Mutt. During a scene of failed sexual encounter with Tadpole, he grows angry and leaves for the bathroom. Ursa says, "I stood facing the wall, remembering that time I wanted it but Mutt was angry and wouldn't give it to me" (84). Immediately Tadpole's absence is replaced by Mutt's presence and his jealousy at the male attention that Ursa receives at Happy Café. As he refuses to touch her, Ursa attempts to reach out to him, and he says "'I said I don't want it'… That time I'd gone in the bathroom" (84). As the Ursa of the past disappears, "Tad came back," and Ursa "was still facing the wall" (85). The individual memories that Ursa has of Mutt and Tadpole merge with each other; although these are sexualized memories of psychological violence that are specific to Ursa, Mutt and Tadpole's eventual transformations into Corregidora stand-ins indicate the loss of individuality. We see the

intermingling of characters elsewhere as well: when Mama admonishes Ursa to never let the neighborhood boys touch her, she sullenly thinks, "*I bet you were fucking before I was born,*" to which comes the silent reply, "*Before you was thought*" (42). The lack of speech quotations around the statements show the lack of inner/outer monologues, and at once we cut to either Mutt or Tadpole asking, "*'Ursa, what makes your hair so long?'*" and her reply, "*'I got evil in me'*" (42). Tadpole, Mutt and Mama all speak/think in the same voice, and Ursa and Mama's voices also are not allowed any individuation.

This lack of individuation is sharply brought into clarity in the last scene of the novel. I return to the scene of fellatio between Ursa and Mutt, and on her knees she "held his ankles. It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora – like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram" (184). It is in this moment that "Ursa feels the most direct connection to her great-grandmother," and where Mutt, like Corregidora, "is forced to acknowledge the convergence of his pleasure and pain" (Hong 17; Li 147). Here Mutt and Corregidora are made similar in the incommensurate individual (although not structural) vulnerability before Ursa and Great Gram, and Li calls it "a quintessentially blues moment in that it attempts to articulate a depth of feeling that cannot be contained in words" (147). In a scene which returns us and the protagonist to the beginning of the narrative (i.e., the relationship between Great Gram and Corregidora), we see how "*[e]verything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning*" (Jones 54). In this circuitous loop we see that nothing can be "said" better because the grammar for it does not wholly exist. The grammar of suffering "begins at the 'beginning,' which is really a rupture and a

radically different kind of cultural continuation" (Spillers 68). In other words, there is no beginning to return to except for one which is founded upon a rupture; specifically, the rupture here points to Great Gram's bruised seeds and genitals, the "moment that stops before it breaks the skin" (Jones 184). In other words, the search for an individual identity is impossible in the face of accumulation, wherein the density of history originates and ends in the same moment of structural pain. Although the latter two chapters may appear to be more cohesively structured, what Jones illuminates is in fact a subsuming of Ursa into the collective memory of the Corregidora women. There is no speaking "on behalf of," but instead a "singing as." As Goldberg writes, "by structuring her novel in a pattern of traumatic repetition, Jones offers neither the satisfactory closure of a linear narrative… nor the redemptive healing of a circular narrative" (Goldberg 446).

I also wish to draw attention to the moments of aborted and outraged speech in *Corregidora* so as to illuminate how these instances also negate the possibility of redemption or regeneration; the two I focus on occur in the first chapter. In the first situation, Ursa muses upon Cat's inability to see Mutt's behavior as inexcusable. She says, "'if that nigger loved me he wouldn't't've throwed me down the steps,'" to which Cat replies, "'I know niggers love you do worse than that'" (Jones 36 – 37). Eventually she decides that "[n]aw, that nigger's to blame. What's bothering me? Great Gram, because I can't make generations. I remember everything you told me, Great Gram and Gram too and" (41). In the second, Ursa thinks about her relationship with Mutt and still cannot rationalize his behavior: "[y]ou don't treat love that way… I can still feel your fucking inside me. If it wasn't for your fucking I" (46). What do we make of these

deliberate instances of stalled speech, the “and” and the “I”? Why is Mama left out of the first example, and what would Ursa do if it was not for Mutt’s fucking in the second? I turn here again to Baker, Jr., who argues that “[v]ernacular levels of Afro-American expression such as the blues remain ‘things unknown’” (Baker, Jr. 69). I contend that Mama is left out, blunted in Ursa’s thoughts because she has, at this point, not told Ursa anything about herself. Ursa is pointedly aware that Mama has her own memory, her own history of hurt with her as-yet unknown father, and that she has refused to share this memory with her. Thus, everything that Mama has told her is exactly what Great Gram and Gram have told her, nothing more and nothing less.

As for Ursa, “if it wasn’t for [Mutt’s] fucking” she would still be able to procreate. Here I read “fucking” not in terms of sexual activity, but rather the fall she suffers under his hands. When Ursa remembers their sexual life, she mentions that she remembers “your hands on my ass. Your damn hands on my ass. That vomity feeling when they squeezed my womb out… Even my clenched fists couldn’t stop the fall” (Jones 46). Jones deliberately utilizes language that invokes the fall, connecting Mutt’s hands with how he “grabbed [Ursa] around [her] waist” and “knocked his piece of shit down those stairs” (3, 167).[117] His “fucking” results in the removal of her womb, but this causes her to realize that there are “things unknown.” Ursa wonders, “even if I still had my womb, even if the first baby *had* come – what would I have done then? Would I have kept it up? Would I have been like *her*, or *them*?” (60). This is precisely why I argue that

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[117] Again, we think of Great Gram giving birth to Gram in the slop jar, and the utter reducibility of black life to waste.

these jarring stops in Jones' narrative are attuned to the nuances of the blues as they both gesture toward the unknowability of a history or futurity outside of the collective and communal. In the disappearance of Mama and Ursa's unborn generation, we see how "[t]he disappearance of the object is fundamental to performance; it rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject who longs always to be remembered" (Phelan 147). I propose here that as Mama and Ursa's reproductive capabilities, both black objects, vanish, what is left are the memories that Great Gram and Gram imparted upon both Mama and Ursa. The "subject who longs always to be remembered" is, in fact, Corregidora, as he is carried forward through Great Gram and Gram.

Finally, I wish to bring attention to "the rhythm of the people talking, and the rhythm *between* the people talking" as a specific adherence to the critical call-and-response pattern present in blues music. As Patricia Hill Collins proffers, "'[t]he widespread use of the call-and-response discourse mode among African-Americans illustrate the importance placed on dialogue,'" where "'all of the speaker's statements, or "calls," are punctuated by expressions, or "responses," from the listener'" (qtd. in Davis 56). We see how Jones' writing process is based upon this mode of discourse, and here I argue that the structure of the text relies upon it as well. Allen writes that Jones "uses call and response and repetition, both characteristics of but not exclusive to the traditional blues stanza, to create the ritualized dialogues she speaks of" (Allen 258). Gottfried agrees and further conjectures that Jones focuses on "the *sounds* of these dialogues" in order to elaborate upon the necessity of blues and call-and-response within the novel (Gottfried 568). Rather than examining the actual songs that Jones uses, I focus instead

on the ritualized dialogue wherein spoken speech transforms into song as a rendering of Jones' blues in order to complicate these readings of the call-and-response pattern in *Corregidora.*

In an ambiguously situated dialogue with Mutt (in that we do not know if it is real, or if it occurs outside the temporal realms of the dominant narrative), he questions, "*'[w]hat bothers you?' 'It bothers me because I can't make generations.' 'What bothers you?' 'It bothers me because I can't.' 'What bothers you, Ursa?' 'It bothers me because I can't fuck.' 'What bothers you, Ursa?' 'It bothers me because I can't feel anything.' 'I told you that nigger couldn't do nothing for you'*" (90). In an inversion of Ursa's role as the blues singer, here we have Mutt being the caller, and Ursa responds to the call. What is interesting to note here is that although Mutt's calls remain the same, Ursa's responses continually shift; she is bothered by her inability to make generations, because she "can't," the scarring of her sexual organs, and her complete and total lack of feeling. Here we see a narrowing of scope from the concerns of her family down to her own worries regarding her sexual liaisons with Mutt and Tadpole. In some ways, we can see that it is tempting to read how "the blues was a privileged site in which women were free to assert themselves publicly as sexual beings" (*Blues Legacies* 46). Ursa seems to assert *her* concerns over her sexuality, as opposed to the concerns of her foremothers; it is not by chance, too, that it is Mutt who guides her down this path. Yet at the same time, the call-and-response pattern ends with her accusing Mutt, "*'[y]ou left me when you threw me down those…'*" (Jones 90). Jones circumvents any kind of privilege by ending the song's pattern on an unending note of abandonment and cruelty; the erasure of the stairs by way

of ellipses indicates that Ursa's trauma is repetitive and harkens back to the cycles of abuse that Great Gram, Gram and Mama suffered through. Thus although the song originally progresses from the collective down to the individual, it still ends in a return back to the reality of a past continually living on into the future.

We see this, too, in two other dialogues with Mutt, one imagined and one real, where he again assumes the role of the caller: "*'[c]ome over here, honey.' 'Naw.' 'I need somebody.' 'Naw.' 'I said I need somebody.' 'Naw.' 'I won't treat you bad.' 'Naw.' 'I won't make you sad.' 'Naw.' 'Come over here, honey, and visit with me a little.' 'Naw.' 'Come over here, baby, and visit with me a little.' 'Naw'*" (Jones 97 – 98). At Ursa's insistent, monosyllabic refusal, Mutt curses, "*'[t]hen fuck you'*" (99). In the next situation, Mutt utilizes Ursa's desire for him to create another call-and-response pattern. Deliberately invoking Corregidora's diction, Mutt asks, "'[m]y pussy, ain't it, Ursa?' 'Yes, Mutt, it's your pussy.' 'My pussy, ain't it, baby?' 'Yes.' 'Well, it's yours now'" (156). Jones highlights the sexualization of the blues and Ursa's own insight that "*A man always says I want to fuck, a woman always has to say I want to get fucked*" in an effort to point out that although it is Ursa who sings the blues in the text, and Jones who writes the blues into the text, it is ultimately Mutt/Corregidora who still makes the call (89). To return to Joseph Roach, although Ursa functions as the blues protagonist, if Mutt functions as a stand-in for Corregidora, the black music "pour[ing] from a white face" indicates how "the dead remain among the living" ("Culture and Performance" 60). Ultimately, call-and-response, as much as Great Gram and Gram, keep Corregidora alive to bear witness.

This perversion of call-and-response, wherein the collective participation results in a reiterative trauma as opposed to a narrative of healing, is heightened at the end of the novel. Again, Mutt functions as the caller: "'I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you'… 'Then you don't want me.' 'I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you.' 'Then you don't want me.' 'I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you.' 'Then you don't want me.' He shook me till I fell against him crying. 'I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither,' I said. He held me tight" (Jones 185). While it is appealing to read this as an act of tenderness after twenty-two years of separation – Jones herself posits that "[p]erhaps brutality enables one to recognize what tenderness is" – I theorize that the novel ends on a note of cyclical pessimism in that it echoes the traumatic incident which opens *Corregidora* (Tate 147). Ursa leaves Happy's Café and "didn't see [Mutt] till he'd grabbed me around my waist and I was struggling to get loose… That was when I fell" (4 – 5). At the end of the novel, Mutt "shook me till I fell against him crying… He held me tight" (185). While the call-and-response articulated sounds as though it gestures toward an optimistic future, their bodies open and close the narrative in the same way. As much as Ursa cannot "loose" the blues, she cannot struggle "loose" from Mutt. Taken to its utmost conclusion, we can also read how Ursa can never struggle "loose," then, from Corregidora and his far-reaching violence.

Furthermore, I return here to the non-linear, non-temporal structure of the novel to contend that Ursa is narrating the text *after* Mutt holds her tight. Ergo, the dialogue that can be read as imagined between Ursa and Mutt also contain the possibility of actuality, that Ursa is, after all these years of separation, filling Mutt in on the erasure of her self

and her womb. For example, as Ursa achingly remembers that she "sang to [Mutt] out of [her] whole body," Mutt asks, "'Urs, do you remember?' 'Yes, I remember. Who told you I was here?' 'The girl did.' 'I thought she would, the little bitch.' 'If she hadn't, I wouldn't have found you. 'You never lost me'" (46). At first glance, this reads as a dream, as Ursa immediately follows this exchange with "[t]he shit you can dream" (46). I hypothesize, however, that perhaps Sal is the "girl" who tells Mutt where Ursa is, as she is the one who tells Ursa, "'I seen Mutt th'other day'" (180). This purposeful ambiguity manifests itself on multiple occasions with Mutt: in the dialogue mentioned above, he tells Ursa "*'I told you that nigger couldn't do nothing for you,'*" indicating not only that he knows about Tadpole's treatment of Ursa, but also of Ursa's unending quest to reproduce even though she knows that all she can reproduce is living death. In yet another event, Ursa is woken by Mutt during a nightmare: "'[y]ou must have been having a nightmare.' He got into bed with me, stroking my hair. 'Was it the old man again?' 'Yes'… My voice was dancing, slow and blue, my voice was dancing, but I was saying nothing" (61). The line breaks around this passage offer no clues as to when it occurs; we as readers, as hearers, can only strain to hear the "nothing" in Ursa's dancing voice.

What, then, is the purpose of this ambiguity? Jones speaks of her acceptance of *Corregidora* as an "ambiguous" blues novel in that it "talks about the simultaneity of good and bad, as feeling, as something felt" (Harper 700). The eliding of time done here to promote this ambiguity speaks to what Hartman calls "the time of slavery, that is, the relation between the past and the present, the horizon of loss, the extant legacy of slavery, the antinomies of redemption… and irreparability" ("The Time of Slavery" 759). In other

words, the novel maintains the uncertainty surrounding time and Mutt's presence in the book in order to point toward his function as Corregidora's surrogate and the absent presence within. The surrogate always fails either through lack or excess, and it is in these gaps that we see the original, or Corregidora's, continual presence. As Wilderson contends, "[t]he cry is not the effect of a neurotic complex that refuses to live in a deconstructive relation to the ego; it is a narrative strategy hoping to slip the noose of a life shaped and compromised by slavery" ("Grammar & Ghosts" 122). By utilizing the blues – the cry – as both the occupation of the protagonist as well as the structural integrity of the novel, Jones addresses the impossibility of slipping free of that noose. What she proposes instead is that in the black performance which is blues music, all that is possible is a reconstitution and solidification of social death.

Conclusion – Frank B. Wilderson, III and the Cosmic Hobo

There is something organic to Black positionality that makes it essential to the destruction of civil society – Frank B. Wilderson, III

During my penultimate year as a graduate student, I had the good fortune of auditing Frank B. Wilderson, III's seminar, Drama 291 *Violent Acts*. Having been introduced to him virtually by Patrick Anderson, I made the weekly drive to the University of California, Irvine, to discuss filmic representations of "the ways in which *acts* of violence diverge from and converge with *paradigms* of violence" with Wilderson and other graduate students. Or, to paraphrase his framing of the guiding question of our seminar, we engaged with "the relationship between performative violence and paradigmatic violence" ("Drama 291 *Violent Acts*"). While I found many components of this seminar pedagogically instructive and intellectually formative in my ability to vivisect the multiple threads of Afro-pessimism, I was especially interested to learn that two years prior to the publication of *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* in 2010, South End Press had published his autobiography, *Incognegro: a Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*. Considering that Wilderson is the one who proffers the terminology of Afro-pessimism as a means of grouping together a list of scholars in disparate fields, it seems only fitting that my dissertation closes with a brief reflection on his memoir, and the ways in which it curtails the form and function of an autobiography. It bears repeating that while Wilderson's text is perhaps the most traditionally autobiographical (in that it is not fictionalized), it still functions to reaffirm the impossibility of writing the self into history; rather than relying on a shared testament

of experiential knowledge, it makes legible and legitimate the structure of grammatical and ontological suffering that encapsulates blackness.

While teaching in the Department of English at Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, California, Wilderson is confronted by a young female student who asks, "'[w]hy did you go to South Africa?... Why there and not somewhere else?'" After some thought, he responds, "'[w]ell… I wanted to kill someone White'" (*Incognegro* 170, 171). Acknowledging that "[t]here are as many White people in California," Wilderson gives voice to the desire for narrative that Toomer, Himes, Baldwin and Jones all share:

> South Africa, in the throes of revolution, provided me with something I didn't have here; a narrative of legitimation through which I could return the gift of murder to the world – the gift the world gave me: that gift of creation that brought me into existence on the plantation…no…before that...at sea… Let me put it this way. Here, I'd be just an ordinary criminal. A murderer. A dot on a graph. A number at San Quentin. But there I could have a story. (171 – 172)

To wit, it is not the murder of a white individual that lies at the heart of Wilderson's statement; rather, it is this desire to have a story, to have a logical coherence that goes beyond the identity statuses listed, beyond, for example, "convict no. 57232" (*Yesterday* 25). What precipitates the possibility of a story, however, is the act of murder; Wilderson makes clear that for blackness, murder and creation are one and the same.[118] Even before the plantation, black bodies are made black flesh, and the deracination of peoples from land is accompanied by the deracination of will from body. In other words, what Wilderson points to as the only means of entry into civil society, history and temporality,

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[118] Again, to draw attention to the presence of the strain of Afro-pessimism in earlier works of literature, the connection here to Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*, and Clay's death at the hands of Lula, cannot be ignored.

is a violence enacted against the self-same structure of violence that holds blackness at bay. Where queerness and performance fail, revolutionary violence might succeed.

The longing for inscription into narrative structure also reveals itself through the concerns and constraints Wilderson eventually feels with his then partner, Alice, a white woman who is twenty-two years his senior. Long before he even meets her, however, Wilderson discusses the (im)possibility of being with a white woman with Jim Harris, an expatriate living in South Africa. When he admits that he cannot conceive of how he would ever talk to a white woman, Jim responds scathingly, "*'[t]alk* to her? She got her face and her body all over the TV and the billboards. She don't need to hear what you got to say. She don't need you. She got a family. She ain't no cosmic hobo, like you, Negro" (*Incognegro* 404). We are reminded here of Jared Sexton's insistence that black social life exists not only underground, but in outer space. In Harris' scornful vernacular, we see all that whiteness embodies and that blackness lacks: recognition, familial ties, temporal momentum, a place to call home. Wilderson feels all too keenly the truth of Jim's statement, even before he meets Alice. At the age of twelve, Wilderson asks a white classmate, Jane Peterson, to go steady with him; while she acquiesces at first, her father eventually forbids her from doing so. When pressed for an answer, she replies, "'[y]ou're a Negro… I can't go steady with a Negro,'" and Wilderson the author reflects upon what Wilderson the protagonist must have felt at that moment, even if it was inarticulate: "I was already dead, if to be alive is to live with relations sutured by something more substantial than a wave of a hand to the right and wave of the other to the left. The wound

was only an incision into a corpse" (156).[119] Here is Wilderson's knowledge of his flesh, and, as Saidiya V. Hartman argues, how it "acts as witness to the cruel repressions of history… It has withstood the unimaginable; the body has existed as an object of property, harnessed as a productive and reproductive machine, and acculturated and disciplined through monumental acts of violence" ("Excisions of the Flesh" 55). Even in the most innocent of flirtations, blackness is constituted as outside relationality; it is his "Black death and her White life," his black flesh against her white body (*Incognegro* 85).

I have traced the lineage of Afro-pessimism by expanding upon these very same sorrows that Wilderson recollects in his memoir: first, I posited that Jean Toomer's *Cane* functions as an oracular swan-song that portends the development of Afro-pessimism. By relying upon the trope of lynching, Toomer draws together the lived reality of the concomitant violence enacted upon black bodies, communities and psyches and the fragmentary discourse afforded him in literary modernism. Through his text, he articulates blackness as being trapped in a present that cannot turn to the past or the future as a means of redemption or regeneration. Whatever the machinations of the future, Toomer envisages them as ominous carriers of structural pain and suffering, a continuous

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[119] What Wilderson is referencing here is his father's anecdote as to why they have the surname Wilderson. His father replies, "'[a]t the end of the Civil War the master came out and told the slaves that everyone in the free world had surnames. If they were going to live in the free world, they had to have surnames too. There were two rows of slave quarters. He waved his hand to the row on the right and said, "I name y'all Wilson." Then he waved his hand the other way and said, "Y'all be Wilderson." Then he looked at me, that sullen-Wilderson-look that my mom always found so disparaging, but she was wrong, for the first time I knew she was wrong. It wasn't a Wilderson-look, for it could just as well have been a Wilson-look. He looked that look at me, the look of chance, and said, 'Now you know'" (*Incognegro* 150 – 151). What is made abundantly clear is the inability to trace a family lineage beyond the plantation, and the sheer arbitrary nature of a slave's interpellation into citizenship and freedom. To borrow Saidiya V. Hartman's turn of phrase, the "encumbered freedperson" is not only weighed down with the civil and civic responsibilities of citizenship (even if these responsibilities are used solely for juridical and non-juridical punishment), but also with the understanding of his/her fungibility.

renewal of the afterlife of slavery. Just as Tom loses his tongue when speaking to Louisa, just as Kabnis is haunted by "[m]isshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words," Wilderson expresses this incapacity for language to function as a method of self-subjectivity when he writes, "*[m]y loss has no language because 'it' has no grammar*" (Toomer 111; *Incognegro* 185).

Chester Himes moves the black body into prison in *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*, and in this space of entrapment he brings to light the impossibility of a black unconscious and the failure of queer kinships to close the breach left by natal alienation. I argued that James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* functions in a similar way; in Baldwin and Himes' white protagonists (David and Jimmy, respectively) we see the vacated abyss that is the black psyche overrun and predetermined by whiteness. Baldwin's novel speaks, too, of the impossibility of home and the subsequent troubled notion of a black diaspora. In *Giovanni's Room*, however, queerness functions differently than in Himes' autobiographical novel. If queerness is utilized in the latter as an attempt to bridge natally alienated objects, then it is negotiated in the former to make blackness legible. The gratuitous violence enacted upon the psychically black figure of David is that Baldwin must rely on an ontological position within relationality (i.e. queerness) to make David's (and, by connection, his own) standing outside of relationality visible. To borrow from Jared Sexton, "racial difference *issues* from direct relations of force – the scales of coercion – and it is only elaborated or *institutionalized* within relations of power – the scales of consent" (*Amalgamation Schemes* 9). Although Sexton is here discussing the troubling ways in which multiculturalist efforts enact antiblackness, I find his definition

of the scales of coercion and the scales of consent compelling in my analysis of the usefulness of queer theory. What sets blackness apart stems from the "direct relations of force – the scales of coercion;" this is a history of bodily theft, the torture of the flesh, and the maintenance of a civil society complicit in these terms. All other positionalities remain "within relations of power" through the (un)acknowledged consent of casting blackness outside of relationality. Thus I proposed that the only means by which to make blackness visible in Himes' and Baldwin's novels is through queerness; for Himes, these kinships ultimately fail, and for Baldwin, queerness enacts a threat on the black body that holds it open to gratuitous violence.

In my concluding chapter on Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, I examined how in black performance we see a perpetual reproduction of slavery as opposed to a regeneration of black life. Although childbirth is held up as the answer to the destruction of papers that document slavery in Brazil, Ursa's inability to have children and her blues song instead illuminate the ways in which Corregidora has been kept alive to bear witness to the atrocities he committed upon the bodies of his slave women. The narrative structure of Jones' novel, too, draws our attention to the repetitive nature of slavery, and the ways in which the men and women in the novel perpetrate the *experiences* of slavery upon one another within the *structure* of antiblackness that permeates their world. I turn here to Wilderson's conflicted response to a colleague's question as to whether or not he would ever be with a black woman again: "nothing terrifies me more than such a question asked in earnest. It is a question that goes to the heart of desire, to the heart of our *black capacity to desire.* But if we take out the nouns that you used… your question to be

would sound like this: Would nothing ever be with nothing again?" (*Incognegro* 265). In other words, can an object be with an object? I argued that for Jones, the answer is no; the only way Mutt and Ursa reconcile at the conclusion of *Corregidora* is if we read him as a stand-in for Corregidora.

Outside Relationality: Autobiographical Deformations and the Literary Lineage of Afro-pessimism in 20th and 21st Century African American Literature took the cultural phenomena of lynching, imprisonment, expatriation and blues music to articulate the complex ways in which Afro-pessimism informs particular texts within African American literature. What Toomer, Himes, Baldwin and Jones fundamentally agree upon is that the ontology of blackness is one which stands outside of relationality; civil society relies on this positioning to maintain its assumptive logic, linear coherence and narrative of progress. What these authors and their text illuminate is the falsity – indeed, the impossibility – of such a promise, for to include blackness is, as made clear by Wilderson, to call for the end of the world. Interestingly, it is not Wilderson who articulates the stakes of Afro-pessimism most clearly in *Incognegro*; that distinction goes to Jocelyn Brown, a classmate at St. Mary's Junior High. As Wilderson, Jocelyn and another classmate, affectionately nicknamed Wolfman, refuse to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, they invoke the wrath of the Mother Superior. It is in this moment that Jocelyn lays bare the fundamental lie of the promise of redemption to be found in the discourse of progress: "'that flag up there – that flag made us slaves'" (*Incognegro* 341). The making of slaves from Africans, the transformation from body into flesh and the

continuance of this practice is made succinctly and absolutely clear in Jocelyn's indictment of her teacher and the Mother Superior.

The cosmic hobo, the figure of blackness, seeks "*a place and time in the universe, something to salvage as opposed to nothing to lose*" (405). As a figure who embodies social death, it is "pure corporeality, is lifeless; it is a corpse," and furthermore, "[t]he black body lives as Absence" (*Bad Faith* 35, 100). The black exists as the paradigmatic slave; although the institution of slavery is no more, I have traced its afterlife through the victims of lynching, those imprisoned, the figure of the black expatriate and the impossibility of articulation in the singing of the blues. In their deformation of the autobiographical form, whether in terms of the narrative structure, the racial makeup of the protagonist, or the untangling of the supposed corollary between history and collective memory, the authors analyzed in this dissertation all present a grievous acknowledgement of antiblackness. In other words they are all invested in this figure of the cosmic hobo who seeks "something to salvage as opposed to nothing to lose." As I have argued, however, what they and Wilderson find is that they have nothing to lose precisely because they embody a paradigmatic lack; as the Guy and Girl from George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* admit, "[w]e couldn't resolve the contradictions of our existence… And we couldn't resolve yesterday's pain" (Wolfe 9). Where Toomer, Himes, Baldwin, Jones and Wilderson come together is in their recognition of ontological suffering and their response to the following query: what can an object constituted through lack – a lack of temporality, of home, of history, of future, of subjectivity, of

narrative – actually lose? The experiential answer is everything; the structural answer is nothing at all.

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