From the Steps of a Burning House:

Blackness, Domesticity, and Fugitive Reading Practice

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Sometime last year, I decided I wanted to be a Baldwin scholar, and I told Professor
Garrett as much. I still do.

I dedicate this work to you all.
Preface

Mine is a creative-critical project that meditates on the relationship between blackness and domesticity, and which mobilizes critical reading practices—fugitive ones—that are informed by Black and Queer Studies, in particular. By “Black Studies” I refer to a body of scholarship that officially began to take shape in the post Civil Rights era, particularly in the 1970’s and 80’s, and which merged scholarly and activist theoretical forms in order to deal with the ongoing threat that structures of power in the United States pose to black life. By “Queer Studies” I refer to the field of affect studies, queer of color critique, queer formalism, and close reading practices that move beyond post-structuralism’s Eurocentrism that emerged in the 1990’s and early 2000’s.

When I say “blackness” I not only refer to the state of experiencing the world in visibly black skin. Blackness, as I see it, is also a way of moving through the world. It is a way of movement that often overlaps with those who experience the world in black skin, but by “blackness” I also invoke the black radical tradition, a field of radical study that, to use Ralph Ellison’s conceit, reads against the grain. My use of the word blackness sometimes invokes both the definitions I provided—blackness as embodiment and blackness as mode of movement/thought—but, more often than not, my use of the word leans toward the latter.

Blackness as embodied experience, I would argue, always has recourse to having been rendered black, which is to say that blackness as such always has
recourse to that thing that calls itself whiteness, an affect and biological fantasy of power that blackens bodies for the sake of its own representation. By comparison, understanding blackness as a mode of thought, seeing, listening, and feeling (understanding blackness, in short, as an affect) makes it possible to turn away from whiteness—to an extent—and, perhaps, practice alternative ways of conceptualizing a world that is not toxic for black life. Reading in a black affective register, or, said differently, reading blackly, enables us to read in solidarity, and perform reparative readings, with difficult objects.

Although I do not invoke this text in the more substantive body of the thesis, I have to credit Eve Sedgwick's essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You,” from her collection of essays Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (2002) for turning me toward the reading practice that made possible the assembly of this thesis. Sedgwick criticizes what she calls paranoid reading practices, practices that are always suspicious of and seek to eviscerate their objects. For Sedgwick, such practices have had the unintended effect of making it more difficult to “unpack the local contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller” (124). Paranoia as the only reading strategy asks the least of its objects, which is to say that it forecloses the possibility of more pleasurable and generative relations between readers and texts. Luckily, Sedgwick notes, following Melanie Klein’s conception of positions,
paranoia is one position among others, which is to say that paranoid reading practices are one way among many to approach a text. That is the task I take up here.

The first chapter, “Toward a Theory of Insurrectionary Black Motherhood,” is divided into three parts. I begin with a meditation on Mamie Bradley’s decision to exhibit the body of her son, Emmett Till, and I juxtapose this decision with some of the critical work of Angela Davis, Hortense Spillers, Robert Reid-Pharr, and Lauren Berlant. Following Spillers and Davis, I draw attention to the precarity of the institution of black motherhood in order to emphasize that Mamie Bradley’s performance of grief and love is conceptually illegible to the hegemonic gaze that hates and actively works to destroy black life. Following Reid-Pharr and Berlant, I explain how the process of domesticity visits violence upon and regulates black life. The latter sections of the first chapter privilege the character of Ruth Foster from Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977). In the second section I trace my own engagement with the text; I draw attention to the violent reading practice I initially mobilized against Ruth, and I explain how subsequent engagements with Black and Queer Studies led me to develop a more generous and generative mode of reading. In the third section, I focus on a nursing scene between Ruth and her son, Macon Dead III, emphasizing that, like Mamie Bradley’s performance of grief for Emmett, the nursing scene, which occurs when the boy is “too old” to be nursed by his mother, is conceptually illegible to the hegemonic gaze. The scene owes it insurrectionary potential, I argue, to the fact that Ruth’s insurgency occurs in secret, which is why the discovery of the practice by her husband’s tenant, Freddie, brings it to a tragic end.
In the second chapter, I turn to a character who, I would argue, wages guerilla warfare successfully against the power structures that destroyed Emmett Till and quelled Ruth’s insurrection. Pilate Dead, sister to Ruth’s husband, Macon Dead Jr., I read as a queer character who offers modes of escape from the sociality to which her brother is bound. I begin the second chapter with the image of a burning house, summoning the structure that the title of this thesis invokes. The title of my thesis owes part of its imagination to a quote from James Baldwin’s 1963 book-length essay, *The Fire Next Time*, in which Baldwin questions whether black people would do well by integrating into a burning house. Turning away from a burning house, we move toward the home of Pilate Dead, a structure which, to the hegemonic gaze, is in disrepair, but which is not without utility or life. In the remainder of the chapter I read a series of scenes in which I emphasize the queerness and abjection of Pilate’s body and way of moving through the world, especially by comparison to modes of thought employed by the second Macon and, to a lesser extent, the third Macon. The second and third Macons are doomed to repeat an always already impossible assimilative performance because, regardless of how much they posture as bourgeois subjects, they cannot be white. Fortunately, Pilate offers a viable alternative which they simultaneously refuse and desire.

Having found a portal—Pilate’s home—to an alternative space, in the third chapter I begin with James Baldwin’s 1955 essay, “Stranger in the Village,” from his collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son*. In the beginning I meditate on the final line of the essay, in which Baldwin declares that “this world is white no longer and
will never be again” (179). By “this world,” Baldwin means that the world of the text and the field of representation is no longer white. Since representation and the realm that calls itself the real world are often inextricable, then the so-called real world cannot be white because black representational forms and aesthetics abound with it. From Baldwin’s essay, I oscillate temporally between select scenes from Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts’ *Harlem is Nowhere: A Journey To The Mecca of Black America* (2011), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), and Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014).

By remixing readings from these works I warn that by looking toward other spaces—alternative worlds—we should be careful not to reproduce the logic of settler colonialism. The logic of settler colonialism, as evinced in the last paragraph of Fitzgerald’s novel and in a conversation which Rhodes-Pitts overhears, desires new spaces that are, representationally speaking, devoid of legitimate life and, therefore, ripe for conquest. The settler colonial gaze performs representational violence upon indigenous inhabitants by insisting on their nonexistence and, in the context of the TransAtlantic slave trade, blackens the body for the sake of its own whitened representation. Readers of this text will find no definitive answers on how to dissemble white supremacy, capitalism, heterosexism, and patriarchy. Instead, the reader will see how what I am calling (as a reader of Fred Moten) fugitive reading practices can be mobilized to read against, and, perhaps, away from, hegemonic
powers. Thinking with one of Eve Sedgwick’s students, I align my hopes for this project with what I have learned as a reader of Jennifer Doyle: that it will will succeed in minimizing, if not avoiding, the kinds of epistemic violence that often is reproduced against the most cherished of our difficult objects.

I will begin with a closing thought from Ralph Ellison’s 1964 essay, “The World and the Jug,” which I pulled from the 1995 edition of *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. The essay, which is composed of two editorials in which Ellison debates Irving Howe, emphasizes the way that black writers are often pigeonholed into aesthetic lineages that exclusively privilege race. Ellison—who criticizes the limited scope of Bigger Thomas from Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), emphasizing that Wright could imagine Bigger Thomas, but Bigger could not imagine Richard Wright—comes under fire from Irving Howe, who suggests that Wright paved the way for Ellison and James Baldwin, accusing them both of being ungrateful.

Two things, in particular, stick with me about this essay. First, I appreciate the gentleness and care which Ellison brings to the reiteration of his initial critique of Wright’s novel. Ellison critiques Wright’s representation of Bigger Thomas because Bigger internalizes the white world’s insistence that hegemonic structures overdetermine the longevity of black life, if not prevent black futurity altogether. In other words, Ellison critiques Wright’s representation because it forecloses the possibility of a future that can sustain, if not nurture, black life. Second, in response
to Howe, Ellison argues that the notion of the singularity of black experience, and he emphasizes that, as an artist, he may not be able to choose his relatives, by which he means Wright, but that he is definitely free to choose his ancestors, those writers in whose tradition he sees himself (185).

I invoke Ellison’s essay to emphasize that the writers whose texts I invoke here, I am claiming as ancestors, however difficult of objects their texts might have been for me. This comment applies to Morrison’s novel in particular, a text with which I read over a dozen times during the year I prepared this thesis and with which I grappled the entire time. This comment also applies to Baldwin and Ellison, who were not without their differences, and it applies to Fitzgerald’s novel, a text whose aesthetic beauty I appreciate and with which I disagree politically. Examples abound and I cannot list them all here. Reading in this way, on the run, and repeatedly, has taught me how difficult it is to claim and be in kinship with others, and this practice, which I share with you, has exposed the constitutive friction of reparation, which, like repeated readings, is a form of love.
Chapter One: Toward A Theory of Insurrectionary Black Motherhood

“The designation of the black woman as matriarch is a cruel misnomer. It is a misnomer because it implies stable kinship structures within which the mother exercises decisive authority.” Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” (1981)

This American riddle begins like a racist joke. A black(ened) boy allegedly whistles at a woman. The woman believes herself white. Some men, her husband and brother-in-law among them, invested, too, in the mediated effect of their whiteness, intervene on her behalf. The black/boy is taken, dies, and is remade at the hands of persons unknown. The mangled body, which is no longer his, and perhaps never was, is freighted to Chicago, home, where a black(ened) woman named Bradley claims him. At the wake, she opens the casket for the world to see (itself). His name was, became, and remains Emmett.
My opening summary of the 1955 unmaking and subsequent figuration of Emmett Till takes as its point of departure the precarity of the position of black motherhood. I avoid using the word “motherhood,” however, because, as the epigraph from Angela Davis’ essay, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” (1981), suggests, the claim which black women have historically made to their offspring has routinely been under assault, when it has not altogether been denied. Davis’ essay illuminates the precarity of the notion of black motherhood by emphasizing that motherhood, “the cruel misnomer,” presupposes the existence of structures that protect the mother’s right to, and command over, her offspring.

These reflections are a critical departure point for this study because they emerged in a moment where the United States government was in the process of destroying the Black Power movement and frantically attempting to preserve the representation of itself as a heterosexual white nation, hence the murderous policies which reinforced the AIDS epidemic. Davis, who reflects from the confines of a California prison at the beginning of the epidemic, writes in a moment when black artists, nationalists, and intellectuals are being killed and gay men are dying because of racist and homophobic institutional practices. In other words, the thousands of subsequent deaths notwithstanding, she writes from a moment that overlaps and diverges with our own.

We may draw continuities between the historical moments specific to Davis and Emmett Till because it is necessary that we grapple with the historical, which is
to say contemporary, precarity of black ontology, where, according to a Western
conception of personhood as property, the people rendered black as a result of the
Atlantic slave trade, and their visible descendents to varying extents, are foreclosed
the right to their bodies and their bodies’ ongoing futurity. My invocation of
blackening, then, is attuned to the frequency on and with which race is manufactured
and reconfigured in order to dispense with the notion that terms such as “whiteness,”
“blackness,” “motherhood,” and everything we presume to know about them are
rigid, impenetrable, and transparent.

The reader may have noticed that I do not summarize the violence performed
on Emmett’s body, a violence which remains, nonetheless, indispensable from the
way in which he has historically been represented. This particular writing and reading
strategy shorthands to Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and
Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1997), in which the refusal to reproduce
sensational depictions of black suffering is meant to withhold from whiteness the
enjoyment of its eerie, and often unquestioned, pastime. Hartman refuses to reproduce
the beating of Aunt Hester in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) to
best emphasize the laxity with which black suffering is often consumed. Instead of
sparking indignation, Hartman argues, such tellings often “immure us to pain” (3) She
wonders about the extent to which we, as readers, are called to participate in such
scenes, critically engaging the distinction between witness and spectator, reader and
participant. Instead, Hartman focuses on the scenes where violence is, seemingly, not
privileged. She focuses on the mundane and the quotidian to better demonstrate the
nature of slavery, how the same totality of power always already lingers in even the most banal of scenes (4).

All the while, I am aware of the illusory nature of this avoidance, specifically as it manifests in Fred Moten’s critique of Hartman’s abstention from narrating the violence of the beating of Aunt Hester. In *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), Fred Moten argues that the violence visited upon Aunt Hester is reproduced, first, in Hartman’s “reference to and refusal of it”; second, “the beating is reproduced in every scene of subjection the book goes on to read — in both the ritual performances combining terror and enjoyment in slavery and the fashionings and assertions of citizenship and ‘free’ subjectivity after emancipation” (4). Although Moten respects Hartman’s strategy of developing and performing a reading practice that refuses to reproduce epistemic violence, he questions whether the performance of subjectivity in particular and performance in general is “ever outside the economy of reproduction.” When considering that the construction of the white subject requires the creation of the black subject as coextensive with corporeal and intellectual lack, subjectivity emerges as a form of violence with which the reader is made to grapple.

Our understanding of Emmett Till and the relative ease with which someone may become familiar with his story is inextricable from the violence performed on his body. Ashraf Rushdy has lamented the fact that there is a scarcity of biographical details surrounding lynch victims. In his essay, “Reflections on Indexing My Lynching Book” (2015), he lists the difficulties he faced while indexing his
forthcoming book whose name he does not mention, noting the emotional drain and psychic cost of the research and unsettled by the fact that lynch victims are rarely remembered for reasons other than the often gruesome circumstances of their deaths. The “solitary importance” of these people, insofar as the hegemonic archive is concerned, “is that they were tortured and killed in a particular way” (182).

Reading Rushdy with great respect, no doubt, for his generous and painstaking contribution, I am curious about whether Mamie Bradley sought to deal with the violence performed on her son by amplifying it. Instead of allowing for Emmett to be footnoted into irrelevance, she exhibited the body for the world to see, transforming the body from a site against which the white subject made himself into the site where the white world was brought to trial outside the precincts of its own law. The white world was, in fact, made to see itself, to recognize the violent preconditions on which its continued existence is based. Bradley revealed the grounds upon which American Citizenship was erected, emphasizing that citizenship entailed the right to visit violence upon and destroy black life.

Recognizing that one of the privileges of American citizenship is the ability to perform a variety of forms of anti-black violence makes apparent the continuity between Davis’ reflections on the black slave community and the post-bellum moment in which Emmett lived, died, and was refigured. Davis’s essay is complemented by Hortense J. Spillers’ 1987 essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Published on the latter end of the AIDS epidemic, Spillers obliterates the findings of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s infamous report on the
Negro family. For Moynihan, the crisis of the Negro family is easily explained: black women emasculate black men; therefore, black men are incapable of setting proper examples for their children; the absence of adequate father figures accounts for the shortcomings usually experienced by historically disenfranchised peoples, effectively obscuring the systemic violence visited upon black people by the state; for Moynihan, black men can be made fit for society through military service.

Spillers demolishes Moynihan’s findings, first, by arguing that the black family could not have been forced into a matrilineal structure because, historically, enslaved black women were denied rights to their offspring, hence her conceit of “stolen black motherhood”; second, she demonstrates that the suspension of kinship rights among the enslaved required the formation of alternative modes and conceptions of kinship because the nuclear family model, occupied by the master’s insistently white family, was foreclosed for enslaved people. Third, Spillers draws attention to the way in which an affectively white, which is to say racist, gaze perceives all difference as indicative of lack, hence why the alternative modes of kinship and domesticity practiced among black people are pathologized (219).

Spillers’ work is particularly informative when it comes to the foregrounding of domesticity and domestic space in this project. “Domesticity,” which connotes “the quality or state of being domestic,” of bearing some relation to “home or family life,” and the “domestic,” that which belongs to a “household,” then, are provocative departure points for theorizing black corporeality. For Spillers, domestic space, the white slave-owning home, is the site in which gender is designated; gendering “takes
place within the confines of the domestic, an essential metaphor that then spreads its
tentacles for male and female subject over a wider ground of human and social
purposes” (214) The process of gendering, according to Spillers, is inextricable from
domestic space and domesticity, a process which gains “its power by way of a
common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper
names,” particularly the patronymic, name of the father, which “in turn situates those
persons it ‘covers’ in a particular place” (214).

In other words, the captive body is designated a gender in the space of the
home by the patriarch, whose name emphasizes the fact of that body as property and
which forecloses the possibility for that subject to become propertied. Simply put, the
patronymic ascribed the slave indicates that the slave is the property of he whose
name is cast on the body and makes impossible the acquisition of property by the
slave. Because the black children often fathered by white men were categorized as
illegitimate, they were denied the patronymic, the name of the father, a crucial legal
device for inheriting property. That enslaved black children were denied the
patronymic and that they were situated in domestic space as unexceptional
commodities indicates that, historically, black people have been made to inhabit
non-normative gender positions.

The Transatlantic slave trade imposed upon the captive population alternative
modes of gender from those reserved for the master class. This is the takeaway from
Spillers’ diagnosis of domestic space. Because the household becomes the key site in
which the markers according to which bourgeois identities are mapped are
distributed, withheld, and managed, the process of gendering is inextricable from the process of racialization, particularly in relation to the black body. Robert Reid-Pharr’s work on domesticity, race, and the body is helpful here. His book, *Conjugal Union: The House, The Body, and The Black American* (1999), and his collection of essays, *Black Gay Man* (2001), offer innovative ways of thinking blackness and domesticity, and blackness in domestic space and as the target of domesticity.

In *Conjugal Union*, Reid-Pharr historicizes the construction of the notion of blackness, undermining the “assumption of a black body that is necessarily prior to any Black American representational strategy” and emphasizing that, “as a function of both social necessity and philosophical clarity,” the black body “had to be normalized, turned black” (4-5). Arguing that the black body became “a primary site in the negotiation of slavery and white supremacy,” Reid-Pharr attends to the relationship between the body and the household, specifically to the way in which “homes and families negotiate the production of the black body” by employing technologies such as cleaning, physical violence, and marriage. The white bourgeois household mobilizes domestic technologies to demarcate the boundary between those who are related to the proprietor/patriarch by legally recognized bloodline and those who, if the context is slavery, belong to the house (6).

The household, regardless of the proprietor’s race, is charged with producing racially intelligible subjects. Domesticity, which Reid-Pharr defines not as “a static phenomenon, the achievement of a sort of guarded piece between individual desire and communal interest,” but as an “irregular process of regulation, of law, in which
the constant flight and return of desiring bodies is negotiated,” is the primary mechanism by which subjects are made intelligible. The domestic sphere, the argument follows, exists as “as a fiction insofar as it is taken to be sociologically demonstrable, the locus of a stable set of ‘real’ economic and social relations that exist apart from the public, particularly the market” (65). For Reid-Pharr, the lie constitutive of the representation of the household is the insistence on the distinction between the private and public realms, the space of the home and the space of the market. This distinction is always already fraught because the American home has always been a product of that market and, moreover, market forces are necessary for its upkeep. The technology of cleaning, Reid-Pharr argues, is indispensable to the demarcating of self and other, hence why figures such as nursemaids, cooks, and butlers labor to erase the filth of the market, paradoxically trapped by the fact that they, too, are representative of market forces (65-66).

That the boundary between home and market is rendered illusory prompts a crisis of representation, which the process of domesticity is charged with resolving. Domesticity, as I imagine the notion, continues to be the process of regulation of which Reid-Pharr speaks, but it is a process of regulation that is not limited to the space of the home. Instead, domesticity, because it is a process of regulation that privileges the proprietor/patriarch, behaves as a force that privileges those who have been historically protected by the illusory boundary between private and public space, the notion of domestic space.
Lauren Berlant’s work has been particularly helpful for my foregrounding of domesticity as such, specifically her collection of essays, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (1997). This collection, whose title is a citation of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), speaks against homophobic and conservative responses to the civic protections gained by mainstream feminist and gay rights movements. Attentive to the limited demands of certain mainstream agendas, Berlant attends to the murderous policies enacted by an anxious country which conceives of itself as predominantly white, heterosexual, and male, and, thus, feels threatened by the civic gains of minoritarian subjects.

Berlant’s project in *The Queen of America* precursors her later work in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), where she takes as her object of study a North American conception of “the good life,” read as white middle class bourgeois domesticity. This conception of “the good life”, mobilized by post-second World War economic growth, is threatened by neoliberal practices that have historically weakened the infrastructure which made possible the construction of the middle class. The growing anxiety which revolves around the realization of the increasing unattainability of this violent set of social relations lends itself to conservative reactionary responses that scapegoat minoritarian subjects.

The American public, for Berlant, has become an arena of political feelings, a stage where reactions to what is presumably most private about a subject, sexuality, becomes the determinant litmus of how rights and protections are distributed among the population. “Something strange has happened to citizenship,” Berlant writes;
“during the rise of the Reaganite right, a familial politics of the national future came to define the urgencies of the present”(1). The family, here, means the heterosexual white family that, incited by a politics of paranoia, believes itself encroached upon by alien races and sexualities. In other words, the “intimate public sphere” of which Berlant speaks, is born of conservative responses to the civic gains of minoritarian subjects. As a result, the often homophobic and racist reactions of people who insist on their whiteness and heterosexuality, Berlant demonstrates, have a dangerous impact on the kinds of protections they can expect from the state because the state, arguably, does not value their lives to begin with or, at least, never promised civic inclusion to those who mark the boundaries of hegemonic groups.

The feelings of the presumably heterosexual, white, and often male subject whose interests are protected by the state determine the longevity and quality of the lives of minoritarian subjects. This paranoid figure interprets the civic gains of non-normative beings as an encroachment upon his own civil liberties, which, in a sense, is correct because constitutive to the liberties of normative subjects is the right to perform violence against those identified as his others. This ability to perform violence based on a perceived threat to that which is most private, I argue, is a performance of domesticity.

If domesticity is a process of regulation, to borrow Reid-Pharr’s wording, and if the domestic interests of the normative subject are always already protected by the state because they are written into and legitimate each other, then domestic space, which always has recourse to the home, becomes a force field of potentially
murderous energy that can be employed against minoritarian subjects whose very
movement, at times, is registered as a threat to white corporeality. That domesticity
can function in this way might explain the proliferation of racist American fantasies,
that, in the case of Emmett Till, figured his body as a sexual menace and, therefore,
insofar as his lynchers were concerned, necessitated his destruction.

Our interest should not be with those men, however. Lynchers Bryant and
Milam enjoyed outstanding publicity for their actions and they will not be indulged
here. My interest lies with Mamie Bradley, a woman who claimed “the insurgent
ground,” to borrow Hortense Spillers’ phrasing, by claiming kinship with the boy so
violently wrested from her. It is the exaggerated nature of her response to the
lynching (and I do not condemn exaggeration) that had the effect of turning Emmett
Till into an icon, a mantra indicative of and mobilized against the quotidian forms of
anti-black violence on which the United States gorges itself.

Mamie Bradley is an exceptional figure, but she is not unique. When I speak
about black motherhood and black mothers, I am speaking about people who have
always been with us, but who have not, legally speaking, been recognized as such.
Also, to my mind, being a black mother is not necessarily to say that that woman,
whoever she may be, has given birth, which is to say that black motherhood is an
institution that does not adhere to the familial structure envisioned by hegemonic
powers. Insofar as the popular American imaginary is concerned, the notion of the
black mother is unpalatable, if not hated. We might consult “the welfare queen” of the
Reaganite imaginary, coded as black, whose mortal sin seems to be her audacious insistence that the state provide the resources for her to raise a family.

The “Welfare Queen,” according to hegemonic powers, does not pay taxes even though she reaps, or better yet, ciphens, government benefits. Mamie Bradley, whose name sonically slips into “Mammy,” also invokes the figure that the American imaginary can stomach, on whose presence it continuously insists. The Mammy is exemplary in the precincts of the American fantasy because she willingly and enthusiastically turns away from the children who were, legally speaking, never hers, but devotes herself, instead, to the service of the white family, which is proxy for the state. In other words, because the Mammy’s body cannot be a site of the white state’s articulation, she offers her services for the sake of the insistently white home and the insistently white nation. Her name invokes kinship relations between the slave and master, even as it paradoxically obscures the fact that her condition is premised on those violent relations of property.

While I do not study the figure of Mamie Bradley in detail, her presence, like Emmett’s, haunts this text. Mamie’s practice and performance of grief and reparation is particularly helpful when it comes to conceptualizing the character of Ruth Foster from Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), the privileged figure of this chapter. Like Mamie, Ruth engages in a practice which, from a hegemonic perspective, is conceptually illegible, and which, from my perspective, is failed by the representational discourses and tools at our disposal. Mamie’s exhibition of grief exists outside the normative frame of keeping time that forecloses the possibility of
grief for those mourning the ongoing loss of black life. Ruth, by comparison, nurses her son within a system of domination that develops innovative ways for stopping the production of black life. It is the unintelligibility of the nursing scene I go on to read (and the word “nursing” is used loosely) that lends Ruth’s performance of motherhood its insurrectionary potential.

**The Case of Ruth Foster**

When I first used the expression “insurrectionary black motherhood” my advisor told me it looked insane, though not in a “bad” way. One possible feminist critique, my advisor noted, is likely to chafe at the proximity of insurrection and motherhood because motherhood, from a hegemonic standpoint, is a site of female agency foreclosed. One may be reasonably unsettled by the lumping together of insurrection and motherhood, since the *figure* of the mother exists within a system of patriarchy that renders the female body as the site of its own reproduction and, which, for the sake of the process must disavow the fact of that body’s desire.

In other words, because the figure of the mother cannot be divorced from the normative family unit, which is to say the white heterosexual family, and because motherhood is primarily written and read as a site of negated desire, motherhood, so the argument follows, cannot possibly be imagined as the natal site of insurrection. But black motherhood is, by definition, insurrectionary because blackness, a signifier that necessarily bears the mark of enslavement and domination, always already
carries insurrectionary potential. This is not to impose an unmitigated equivalence between blackness and insurrection, but I am situating insurrection as fundamental to what it means to read, write, and move blackly.

It would be misleading to write about Ruth Foster without first naming the difficulties I faced when reading her the first several times. Admittedly, that practice entailed a number of misreadings, but the experience was illuminating because it exposed a general inclination toward hostile critique. It is no secret that black women, or characters based on them, have been made to carry the West’s epistemic baggage: racism, sexism, and homophobia. There is rampant anxiety about the “bad black mamma,” a term which Robert Reid-Pharr reminds us is “a study in redundancy.” His essay “At Home in America,” from the collection *Black Gay Man* (2001), tracks the narrative of the bad black mother, specifically as she emerges in the black nationalist rhetoric of the latter half of the 20th Century. Simultaneously charged with, and scorned for, the task of reproducing black bodies, the black mother “provokes great reverence and icy hostility” (81, emphasis in the original).

Reading and writing against the masculinist and homophobic shortcomings of black nationalism as evinced in George Jackson’s prison letters, Reid-Pharr identifies the revolutionary black mother of the black nationalist imaginary in the figure of the bush mama, she who has no sons. For Jackson, Reid-Pharr argues, the revolutionary black mother is the one who raises young male soldiers and lets them sacrifice themselves in the ongoing war against the state. By comparison, for Reid-Pharr, the bush mama is figured in the character of Dorothy from Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama*.
(1979). Dorothy struggles against the state, which threatens to withhold relief/welfare funds unless she terminates her pregnancy. The insistence on having the child, alongside her decision to kill the police officer who rapes her pre-teen daughter, figures her as the revolutionary mother, or the bush mama, because she insists on the black future made possible for her children. Working toward black futurity is a difficult process because hegemonic powers and reading practices actively work to foreclose black futures and black lives. Unfortunately, those who perform and reproduce epistemic and physical violence against black life do not always identify with hegemony, or even recognize the violence of their own practices.

Morrison’s Ruth Foster has been the target of unforgiving attacks in the form of refusals to conceptualize her in generous and generative ways. In her essay “The Quest for and Discovery of Identity in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*” (1985) Valerie Smith writes: “Weak and pathetic as she is, Ruth finds subtle methods of objectifying the members of her family as well...After she realizes her husband will never again gratify her sexually, she uses Milkman to fulfill her yearnings by breastfeeding him until he is old enough to talk, stand up, and wear knickers” (34,35). Smith’s essay, which later appeared in the anthology *Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon: A Casebook* (1991), does not by any means produce the most hostile assessment of Ruth. In fact, her essay does a commendable job of addressing the novel’s drama. Nonetheless, this analysis of Ruth, which is the only moment when she surfaces in the essay, suggests that she is someone who objectifies others despite being weak and pathetic and, thus, is unentitled to our sympathies.
I emphasize this slippage in Smith’s essay not to disavow her scholarship, but to draw attention to the limitations that scholarship on Morrison’s novel has faced. My intervention is not meant to condemn previous scholarship on the novel, but to revisit the same site at a different historical and ideological moment and with the additional tools of Black and Queer Studies. I draw attention to the relatively unquestioned investment in the ideology of masculinity and heterosexuality in Smith’s essay. The title of Smith’s essay, for instance, “The Quest for and Discovery of Identity,” presumes an equivalence between the identity of the character renamed Milkman and his masculinity.

Smith’s analysis follows the trajectory of the third Macon’s flight, a man-child who presumably searches for and discovers his identity. By Smith’s estimation, the third Macon is “doomed to a life of alienation” because he “adheres to excessively rigid, materialistic, Western values” and “a linear conception of time.” His situation is remedied once he “incorporates both his familial and his personal history into his sense of the present,” thus learning to recognize the cyclical temporality of matters (33). While I do not disagree with Smith’s analysis of the character renamed Milkman, I am also optimistic about the extent to which Black and Queer reading practices can further unpack this analysis.

Admittedly, by the end of the novel, the third Macon is more bent toward horizontal modes of community building, but this achievement, if it can be called that, is made possible by the consolidation of his masculinity. Under the pretense of searching for gold, the third Macon goes to the U.S South. During this trip he loses all
vestiges of his material life and later, while on a hunting trip with some members of his extended family, he is nearly killed by his best friend, Guitar. After managing to escape, and once he has been thoroughly humiliated, he becomes friendly with the townsmen, who initially disliked him. He arrives in the town as a stranger and by the time he returns home he reconnects with his extended family.

While this account is faithful to the novel’s events, it is also particularly flat. The third Macon’s journey is animated by the search for gold that his father, the second Macon, comes across after killing an unidentified white man in a perceived moment of self-defense. The white man’s remains and the gold are never found, thus raising the question of whether the man was actually killed. What I am drawn to about this quest is how the third Macon’s journey echoes the colonial search for El Dorado, the city of gold. The analog between these stories indicates that the masculine mode of self-making for Milkman is in relation to that of the colonizer who whitens himself as he colonizes. In a way, the trajectory of Milkman’s journey seems to complement Moynihan’s desire for black men to be, in effect, “good citizens,” especially if we recognize the violence constitutive to the practice of citizenship under capitalism.

While it is also true that the third Macon develops a connection with his extended family, this unity is forged once he discovers the identity of his great-grandfather, Solomon, bearer of the presumably authentic patronymic: the name of the father. In addition, Solomon’s flight, which the third Macon celebrates, is problematized by Morrison, who in the foreword emphasizes that instances of male
flight are often entailed by female suffering (xiv). Solomon’s flight, after which the cliff, Solomon’s Leap, is named, is complemented by his wife’s suffering, whose geographic marker emerges by way of Ryna’s Gulch (323). The second Macon, one might argue, flees the South in which his father was murdered and becomes a propertied man, but his transformation into propertied man comes at a considerable cost to his wife, his children, and himself. The preservation of his marriage and estate, for instance, requires the steady deterioration of Ruth’s mind and quickly boils dry Magdalena called Leena and First Corinthians. The third Macon takes after his father, abusing his cousin and lover, Hagar. He also is poses an obstacle for Corinthians’ relationship with Empire State, and, by flying from home, indirectly contributes to Hagar’s death. The third Macon plays the villain for the majority of the novel because he is neglectful and, thus, believes himself innocent.

Drawing attention to these facts, while it need not spell the disavowal of the novel’s male characters, should at least prompt us to mine this text for more nuanced readings. By attending to the problematization of flight which Morrison lays out we might begin to see how flight is represented as a tool of male subject-making which consequently visits violence upon or renders certain women susceptible to other modes of violence. By emphasizing this point we can better understand the novel’s negotiation of gender and, thus, are better situated to respectfully read characters whose importance has been vastly minimized, if not summarily refused.

My emphasis on the importance of Ruth Foster is a relatively new development. As I deliberated how I would stage a queer intervention that sought to
restore to Ruth some of the nuances previously denied her, I faced several challenges. First, I had to unsettle the unquestioned premise of the third Macon’s journey to the South, his search for the patronymic. Ruth had something to do with this journey, but I did not understand what. I began to focus on the patronymic after reading the novel for the fourth time and, up until then, Ruth had skipped my mind as significant to the novel in a particularly overwhelming manner. At best, I dismissed her presence and deterioration as collateral damage of what I then considered to be a marvelous adventure. Once I became disenchanted with the third Macon’s journey, it was easier to hear the screams in the novel, which is not to say they were easy to listen to. Then, it was easier to direct my attention to Ruth.

That I began to consider Ruth as a critical figure is not to say that my difficulties lessened. For some time, my readings of the novel privileged the “use of the past,” a popular phrase which emerges in a lot of the scholarship on the novel. It was around this time that I began to read Darieck Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in The African American Literary Imagination* (2010), which addresses questions of blackness as abjection and a tendency in the Black Power and Black Arts Movements to attempt to break with a past characterized by abjection. For Scott, blackness is a form of abjection which dominates those who bear it as an identity (4). Scott diagnoses this approach to blackness as it manifests in the work of Frantz Fanon and, later, as it is picked up and misread by Black Power and Black Arts intellectuals. My engagement with Scott’s book is more substantial in
chapter two. For now, I will explain how chapter three, “Slavery, Rape, and the Black Male Abject,” impacted my approach to Ruth Foster.

In that chapter, Scott attends to the understudied figure of the black male rape, the black man who, under conditions of enslavement, is raped by his white master and/or other white man. Writing in relation to Paul D from Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987), Scott analyzes Paul D’s experience of sexual humiliation, forced fellation, on the Georgia chain-gang, emphasizing that the supposed unspeakability of the act belies an investment in the notion of the inviolable masculine body.

When I first began to focus on the affliction of the third Macon, I began to wonder whether Milkman had, in some way, been violated and whether Ruth was somehow behind it. Early on, I sensed there was something profoundly important about the nursing scene at the beginning of the novel. It was evident that the discovery of the nursing by Freddie was a traumatizing moment for the third Macon, and, like Smith, I was quick to condemn Ruth. What I did not question at first was the logic that rendered the act of nursing as perverse and wrong. Taking for granted the legitimacy of the masculine gaze which Freddie represents, and the notion of the inviolable male body, I figured that Ruth had in some way violated her son. At one point, I argued that Ruth, because she effectively objectified the third Macon, had penetrated his mouth with her nipple, enacting upon him a perverse sexual desire.

Additional readings of Extravagant Abjection led me to change my argument. I began to consider the relative ease with which I had jumped to critique Ruth, based almost entirely on the secondary material I had picked up. Moreover, because I had,
at that time, been rereading Beloved, I compared the similar reception which the character of Sethe received. Ostensibly, Sethe’s character was distasteful to critics because she kills the baby, Beloved, instead of surrendering her to slavery. But, as Darieck Scott reminds us, we should take care to not figure “Sethe’s decision to murder her toddler daughter” as a choice, “at least not without troubling assumptions about individual agency that are commonplace in a liberal democratic society”; the murder notwithstanding, Scott argues, “Sethe’s strategy seems a compelling strategy for responding to the demands of the moment (1). Instead of condemning Sethe, or making the racist mistake of conflating Sethe’s character with Morrison, Scott’s reading practice insists that the reader attend to the complexity of text, rather than seek for comforting representations.

Ruth and the other female characters are not, in the novel’s scholarship, represented as if they are formative figures in the third Macon’s development. Instead, they are rendered the material through which the third Macon violently maps his identity. In other words, the third Macon is represented as having to inflict suffering in order to behave more humanely; he is destined to learn, we are led to believe, from his murderous mistakes. This particular reading is in keeping with an affectively white insistence on the necessity for the white subject to achieve his humanity by continuously sacrificing the body of color. Because the third Macon is a black man, however, he cannot effectively occupy this position, despite his performance of whiteness. Even more paradoxical is the fact that the murderous
process of his self-making emerges as a result of his being dispossessed of the patronymic.

The answer to the third Macon’s affliction, the yearning for the patronymic, is perhaps found in his nickname, Milkman. Thus far I have exclusively referred to him as the third Macon in order to set up the moment of his rechristening. The moment in which he is rechristened most informs his flight because it necessitates his participation in the search for the patronymic. Although his father, the second Macon, fantasizes about their long lost ancestor, a “lithe young man with onyx skin” and “a name that was real,” this yearning cannot be passed on until the third Macon has a reason to yearn. Yearning, in this context, connotes a strong desire or longing for something. But yearning also connotes the process of curdling milk and, if we turn to the instance of the nursing, we begin to see the way in which Ruth’s milk is yearned in the third Macon, effectively derailing his formation as masculine subject.

The nursing is indicative of Ruth’s yearning for intimacy and, by implication, the presence of her desire or her existence as desiring subject. Tethered to an intimately bankrupt marriage, Ruth Foster supplements the lack of intimacy in her life by nursing her son. I use the term “nursing” loosely, however, because this activity, like Mamie Bradley’s exhibition of grief for Till, is, from a hegemonic standpoint, conceptually illegible. Although Ruth engages in an activity we might easily misrecognize as a nursing, I want to divorce this activity from the normative institution of motherhood to which it is attached.
During the afternoons, while the second Macon is at work, Ruth calls her son into the small green room, which was once her father’s study, and which is characterized by a “damp greenness.” The room, inhabited by a sewing machine, a dress form, a rocker, and a footstool, is constructed as a performatively feminine space, a site of domestic labor, and is shielded from external gazes by an evergreen. The third Macon who, we are told, is “too young to be dazzled by his mother’s nipples” comes reluctantly his mother’s call, as if to a chore (13). Ruth sits in the small room, her illusion of her privacy mediated by the evergreen, listening to the sound of her son’s sucking.

To the untrained eye, Ruth’s activity, which I cannot begin to name, appears passive. As a black woman with considerable financial privilege, that she nurses her son may hardly seem worthy of comment. Such a reading, however, would belie a reactionary tendency to overdetermine what hegemonic categories can say about a subject, and it may also belie a racist demand for authenticity which automatically situates said authenticity in a poor body of color. Ruth’s compensatory gesture for a lack of sexual and nonsexual intimacy may also lead us, like Smith, to register her as “weak and pathetic.” But we would do well to keep in mind that the space which she inhabits does not grant her the autonomy we might presume she has or wish for her to have. For a black, female identified person, the bourgeois household is the site of ultimate surveillance because the house and the patriarch’s body are, as Reid-Pharr reminds us in *Conjugal Union*, one and the same (61). Perhaps, this consolidation of
patriarch and household might explain why, to the narrator, the Dead home is, for Ruth, more a “prison than” a “palace” (11).

The nursing scene is laden with insurrectionary potential because the representational possibilities opened up to Ruth multiply. As the third Macon receives her milk, Ruth has the impression that he pulls from her “a thread of light;” launched into fantasy, she imagines herself as “a cauldron issuing spinning gold” (13). Because the child is not a baby, he does not, from one standpoint, need his mother’s milk to survive. Therefore, this exchange, which appears in the form of a regenerative investment, cannot be said to exclusively, or even primarily, privilege him. The exchange between Ruth and her son exceeds the logic of finance capital because this gold which emanates from her is not circulated in an exploitative market. What I think is particularly valuable about this regenerative exchange, an investment that exists outside the market and which continues to gain interest, is that the third Macon does, in fact, need his mother’s milk, her love, to survive the processes of subject formation always already laid out for him. Is it so outrageous to say that Ruth’s love may be the only thing that can save the third Macon from becoming a man?

What is at stake in this scene is not only the longevity of the individual nursings, but the sustainability of the practice itself. As Ruth sits there, listening to the sound of her son’s sucking, she stares at his closed eyes, though not from a particular sense of maternal joy, but in order “to avoid seeing his legs dangling almost to the floor” (13). The dangling feet are a problem for Ruth because they point toward the inevitable foreclosure preempted by being grounded in the world beyond the
home. The Dead home can, for Ruth, be a place in which to stage insurrection because the state’s surveillance is of a distinct kind. The Dead home’s “deadness” is linked to the fact that, for however bourgeois it aspires to be, it cannot be white and, therefore, it cannot be a site of the state’s reproduction. For that reason, its development must be limited, if not destroyed. The relative absence of other black bourgeois models, however, renders a sense of isolation which Ruth negotiates as a limited form of privacy. It is within this space that Ruth can intervene in the masculinizing of her son, but his body is always already destined for a masculinizing process that threatens to destroy him in multiple ways.

The dangling feet invoke the figure of Till in particular, who haunts this chapter and Morrison’s novel, and the figure of the lynch victim, who haunts the American imaginary. In so doing, the feet invoke the modes of systemic anti-black violence that historically challenge a black woman’s right to her children. The dangling feet also gesture to the fact that the child will grow, will be manned, and, thus, will be compelled by normative modes of sociality to distance himself from Ruth. In other words, Ruth’s anachronistic claim to her son is under assault by masculinity and heterosexuality, which, in moments, can be conceptualized as institutions encapsulated by white supremacy. As a result, what occurs between Ruth and the third Macon is anachronistic and insurrectionary, conceptually outside the time and space of the normative sociality which governs their world. The enactment of Ruth’s desire is insurrectionary because there is no space in which she can perform what she does and, therefore, this desire, which we access by way of this nursing,
must emerge in secret. The tragedy which underlies these nursings, enacted on borrowed, or perhaps nonexistent, time, is that they must inevitably come to a close.

These nursings come to a close because they are representative of an alternate form of keeping time and entering history that is antagonistic to normative modes of recording time and producing history. The second Macon, for instance, adheres to a system of time in which his experience of the world is mediated by the workday. The second Macon goes to work in the morning, he comes home in the evening, and the life in his household is structured around this arrangement.

Although Ruth’s existence is, to an extent, structured around her husband’s workday, she experiences time in relation to instances of pleasure. Although the second Macon’s presence bookmarks the beginning and end of her day, hence why she both begins and ends her days respectively stunned and animated by his contempt, Ruth’s experience of the day is tempered by the afternoon in which she habitually nurses the third Macon.

Ruth’s insurrection is ultimately quelled by Freddie, her husband’s tenant, who comes by the house under the pretense of delivering the rent and discovers her in the act:

Before either mother or son could speak, rearrange themselves properly, or exchange looks, Freddie had run around the house, climbed the porch steps, and was calling them between gulps of laughter. “Miss Rufie. Miss Rufie. Where you? Where you all at?” He opened the door to the green room as though it were his now. “I be damn, Miss Rufie. When the last time I seen that? I don’t even know
the last time I seen that. I mean, ain’t nothing wrong with it. I mean, old folks swear by it. It’s just, you know, you don’t see it up here much...” But his eyes were on the boy. Appreciative eyes that communicated some complicity she was excluded from. Freddie looked the boy up and down, taking in the steady but secretive eyes and the startling contrast between Ruth’s lemony skin and the boy’s black skin. “Used to be a lot of womenfolk nurse they kids a long time down South. Lot of ‘em. But you don’t see it much no more. I knew a family— the mother wasn’t too quick, though—nursed hers till the boy, I reckon, was near ‘about thirteen. But that’s a bit much ain’t it?” All the time he chattered, he rubbed his chin and looked at the boy. Finally he stopped, and gave a low chuckle. He’d found the phrase he’d been searching for. “A milkman. That’s what you got here, Miss Rufie. A natural milkman if I ever seen one. Look out, womens. Here he come. Huh!” (14-15)

That which comes before the discovery is a scene of “absolute dereliction,” to use Fanon’s expression. What has been derelicted, or abandoned, in this case, is the performance of an impossibly aspirational, though methodologically necessary, whiteness. The absence of the mother and son’s speech does not signal the absence of expression; instead, it is the mark of a form of expression, black expression, which, by definition, is illegible to the whitened gaze that mediates the encounter with Freddie. The inability to “rearrange themselves properly” indicates the presence of two subjects who have been disarticulated or, better yet, chosen disarticulation, within a hegemonic system of intelligibility.
In one register, Freddie peers through the window, catches Ruth nursing the third Macon, and Ruth drops the boy as a result. The inability of the mother to exchange a look with her child indicates the suspension of the economy the nursing has brought into being. The third Macon, stunned by the blow of the fall, comes into consciousness, which is to say he comes into a violently coherent world where, according to the hegemonic gaze which necessitated the end of the nursing, he is wrested from the influence of his mother and rechristened as Milkman.

Freddie’s intervention upsets the fiction of domestic space, thus violating his pact with the second Macon, even as he paradoxically respects the male imperative to police each other’s women. We only need ask, for instance, why Freddie is situated by the window to begin with. Freddie violates the boundaries of the household, even though he is licensed, to an extent, to move around it. At the moment of discovery, however, the location of Freddie’s body cannot be explained by the contractual obligation he shares with the second Macon as his tenant. Freddie may have gone to the home in order to deliver the rent, but he is effectively trespassing when he discovers Ruth in the act of nursing because he has no business by the window. His trespass takes the form of a sanctioned intervention when he stumbles across a criminal site, the gaping black hole in this aspirationally bourgeois space. Ruth, who performs insurrection under the guise of performative white femininity, must be straightened out, brought into a proper comportment, which is why Freddie’s status as tenant renders him the vessel through which the second Macon’s will can be acted out—though only to an extent.
Freddie takes limited liberties with Ruth. As subject to, and an agent of, the second Macon, Freddie enters the house “as though it were his” and he refers to Ruth as Miss Rufie. At this point, Freddie has simultaneously identified and misrecognized the act as a nursing and has misread the exchange between the Ruth and the third Macon. Freddie’s appreciateive eyes privilege the third Macon and endow him with a fabled sexual prowess which he is believed to be enacting on his mother. For Freddie, the practice of nursing is associated with the antiquated, backward South, and he believes Ruth inept for engaging in it, hence why the only example he cites features a woman who “wasn’t too quick.”

Ruth’s presumed stupidity becomes the occasion for the embrace of the third Macon’s cunning. His new name, Milkman, carries the promise of sexual prowess which is inextricable from the playful and aggressive not-quite-warning which Freddie gives: “Look out, womens. Here he come. Huh!” Ultimately, the thrust of Freddie’s interpellation of the third Macon as Milkman suggests that the boy is being (re)manned, that the production and consolidation of his masculinity will come at the expense of black women who are his to abuse. Because Freddie is unequipped to see what occurs before him, the enactment of an insurrectionary desire, he (mis)interpellates the boy as Milkman, paradoxically restoring the boy to the process of masculinizing already operative on him. Freddie’s only error seems to be that he makes explicit the masculine violence inextricable from the name. The nickname is, for the second Macon, marked by filth and perversity because it connotes an illegitimate, lewd sexuality.
We know that the second Macon loathes his wife because he suspects her of having an incestuous relationship with her father. Incest, for our purposes, signals the violation of the imperative for men to forge alliances by way of marriage with the women of their choosing. Marriage functions as a vehicle for the expansion of male estates, of which women are a constitutive accessory. Within the context of normative kinship arrangements, incest is a bad investment because, as a practice, it does not expand the patriarch’s property/self, but rather produces more subjects who will inherit the dwindling estate. By comparison, in the context of slavery, the suspension of kinship rights among enslaved people meant that masters could, and often did, father children with their own offspring as a pragmatic, industrially (re)productive, and, therefore, profitable practice.

While I go into further detail into Ruth’s relationship with her father in the second chapter, suffice it to say, for now, that the spectre of incest further illuminates the precarity of the second Macon’s fantasy of hermetic domesticity. It should come as no surprise, then, that the second Macon juxtaposes his son’s nickname with the dairyman, the standard bearer of domestic and market arrangements. “Milkman,” the narrator tells us, “it certainly didn’t sound like the honest job of a dairyman, or bring to his (the second Macon’s) mind cold bright cans standing on the back porch, glittering like captains on guard” (15).

The figure of the dairyman is exemplary in the second Macon’s fantasy of hermetic domesticity because he respects the boundary between the home and market; he never dares enter the home, which is why the milk cans remain on the
porch. In addition, the cans themselves seem to respect this illusory boundary, even though they are destined to go inside. The milk cans, like sentries, police the barrier between the home and that market to which it supposedly bears no constitutive relation. The nickname, Milkman, by comparison, invokes the figure of the nursemaid, she who haunts the beginning of this chapter and whose status is akin to the figure of the mammy, whose violent interpellation as such obscures the fact that she is product of property relations and not kinship relations. The enactment of Ruth’s desire, this nursing, exceeds the economy of which her home and body are a part. The ultimate tragedy of this scene is that Ruth is caught in the act and her son is restored to his masculinity, a project which, the black men fail to realize, is always already fraught.

When I presented part of this paper at a conference earlier this semester, one respondent lamented that the scene of the nursing, and my subsequent reading of it, was cut short. That, I said, was exactly the point of this study. There is, from a hegemonic standpoint, no time in which this nursing can take place. It is a criminalized gesture, which is to say it cannot be law-abiding, cannot ever be brought into the set of behaviors that that world promotes, or at least tolerates. Still, that Ruth’s insurrection went on for as long as it did is an occasion for hope. Although Milkman is restored to the masculine imperative, that he has been touched by Ruth in the way he has implies the presence of an inner yearning, a curdling of his mother’s milk, that offers refuge for the road ahead.
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“He crossed a yard and followed a fence that led into Darling Street where Pilate lived in a narrow single-story house whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground. She had no electricity because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas.” - a description of Pilate Dead’s house from Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*

“Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?” - James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

The house is grand, painted white and, seized by fire, its appendages crack, give, and slide from the frame, like slabs of roasted flesh. This house is the Big House of the underside of the Southern imaginary, or the bourgeois domicile of the metropolitan Northern elite, or it is the project that is set in flames in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952). Notwithstanding the friction and stylistic and political lapses between Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, I think the scene in which the
housing project is destroyed from Ellison’s novel can be fruitfully read alongside Baldwin’s 1962 book-length essay, *The Fire Next Time*. In that essay, Baldwin diagnoses the problematics of integration, questioning whether the black population would be served well by integrating into a system that threatened to suffocate those within. Presupposing that such integration was ever intended, if logistically possible, Baldwin refuses the mode of life delimited by white sociality. For Baldwin, the Negro is “the key figure” in the United States and the future of this country is “precisely as dark or as bright” as hers (91). White society, from his point of view, is doomed to combust and, therefore, he turns away from this always already burning structure. I am listening for how Baldwin’s question echoes the scene in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* when the Harlem residents prepare to set fire to the tenement:

“So that was it, the meaning of the kerosene. I couldn’t believe it, couldn’t believe they had the nerve. All the windows seemed empty. They black it out themselves. I saw now only by flash or flame. “Where will you live?” I said, looking up, up. “You call this living?” Scofield said. “It’s the only way to get rid of it, man...” (545)

For Ellison, the tenement is beyond reform and must therefore be burned down. Ellison’s narrator is relieved of the affectively white racist logic which insists that black people lack interiority and, therefore, need to be mobilized by external forces, which is why he is surprised to learn the tenement inhabitants “had the nerve.” Although the narrator’s question is not answered, which is to say he is not offered an explanation of what comes after the tenement, Ellison, by way of Scofield’s response
and what the narrator perceives, offers an alternative that begins with the destruction of the tenement itself, a mode in which one sees “only by flash or flame.” If we consider Robert Reid-Pharr’s conflation of house and body, which I mentioned in the first chapter, then the incinerated home I invoked signals the combustion of the white patriarch whose home stands on stolen indigenous land and whose sense of security crumbles under the weight of history and rage. Still, the narrator has a point; shelter is needed. Where is one to go in the absence of the superstructure provided by the state?

We might turn to the home from the epigraph, Pilate Dead’s home. This structure is, from a hegemonic standpoint, a dead home because it produces nothing the nation can use; a winehouse devoid of men, Pilate’s house cannot circulate as equity within a market built on inequity and what it produces—black life—is hated by the state. That the home lacks utilities, electricity and gas, is not to say, however, that the space is without utility. That Deadness is attached to Pilate’s home is not to say the site is without life. Pilate offers a generous and alternative way of being in the world, a mode of sociality is centered around a politics of pleasure and an attentiveness to the abject past.

My analysis of Pilate draws on Darieck Scott’s Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination (2010) and Elizabeth Freeman’s essay, “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography” (2005). These two texts are, from one point of view, unlikely companions. Following Frantz Fanon’s thesis in Black Skin, White Masks (1952), that blackness is a form of sexual domination and abjection which “accomplishes the domination of those who bear it
as an identity,” Scott wonders whether there is power to be found in abjection. “If we are racialized (in part) through domination and abjection and humiliation,” Scott asks, “is there anything of value or to be learned from the experience of being defeated, abjected” (6)? By comparison, Freeman argues that the development of a historical consciousness need not be centered around the collective remembrance of pain.

Instead of insisting that pain is “the proper ticket into historical consciousness,” Freeman emphasizes the reparative potential of a politics of pleasure. Queer people, according to Freeman, survive “across time” by inventing and/or seizing pleasurable relations between bodies (58). As a result, there is an implicit danger in the “powerful turn toward loss,” experienced as “failure, shame, negativity, grief, and other structures of feeling historical,” because that move may also be a “premature turn away from a seemingly obsolete politics of pleasure that could, in fact, be renewed by attention to temporal difference” (59).

Freeman’s argument is useful because it belies a desire for, and the possibility of, new and alternative possibilities other than representation. In the character of Pilate, Freeman and Scott’s arguments find refuge. After being rejected by several communities of itinerant laborers, for example, Pilate, who begins to take count of when she “is happy” and when she is “sad,” gives up all apparent interest in “table manners or hygiene” and “acquires a deep concern for and about human relationships”(149). Similarly, once she is shot by Guitar at the end of the novel, Pilate regrets not having had the opportunity to know and love her estranged kin; “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all. If I’d a known more, I
would a loved more” (336). Pilate is animated by a politics of pleasure that emphasizes, as Freeman suggests, “seizing pleasurable relations between bodies (58)” 
She holds love alongside knowledge and mobilizes them in the service of a black future.

At the same time, Pilate’s emphasis of seeking pleasurable relations does not have to forego what may ostensibly be an abject past of enslavement and other modes of captivity and constraint. After Pilate has helped bail Guitar and Milkman from jail for stealing the sack they believed filled with gold, but which actually had the first Macon’s bones, Pilate explains her decision to keep the remains. Pilate returns for the bones because the ghost of her father visits her and, first, tells her to “Sing;” then, the ghost suggests that one simply cannot fly off and leave a body, which Pilate interprets as his saying that once you “take a life” you own it and that the dead stay with you, haunt you, regardless of whether they are claimed by the living (208).

We later discover that the ghost of the first Macon actually invokes the name of his wife, Sing, the Native American woman he married and the mother Pilate never knew. Also, his suggestion that “you can’t fly on off and leave a body” turns out to be a lamentation of his own father’s flight, Solomon. Still, what the ghost of the first Macon mobilizes by way of Pilate is a critique of forward-looking movement that shakes off the past, especially the abject past. This critique of such forward-looking sociality stands in contradistinction to the family name, Macon Dead, which deliberately obscures the family’s enslaved past.
For all the anxiety and disagreement that circulates around the importance of the past, the past of slavery merits only passing references in the novel. *Song of Solomon*, published in 1977, is born into an environment when profound disagreements are being had within black nationalist circles about the use of the enslaved past. The latter half of the novel, as suggested by the fact that Guitar is charged with avenging the Birmingham church bombing of 1963, takes place in the same year that Malcolm X releases his “Message to the Grassroots” and precedes Stokely Carmichael’s 1966 call for Black Power. While I cannot speak to the complexity of the responses surrounding the use of the past, I will say that Morrison vents some of these anxieties in her novel. Guitar, for instance, who represents an understudied black nationalist position, does not denounce the slave name because, as he insists, it is a part of his past; instead, he refuses slave status (160).

Although Pilate does not forego the abject past, her turn toward the past does not primarily privilege abjection. Instead, there is equity to the way Pilate conceptualizes the past, asking, “when am I happy and when am I sad and what difference does it make” (149)? Moreover, as the moment of her death suggests, Pilate is also thinking about a black futurity that centers around knowing and loving others (336). In so doing, Pilate offers an alternative to the use of the past which mobilizes Guitar and his circle, looking toward the abject past to fuel a future characterized by self-destructive vengeance, and she counters the model provided by the second Macon, whose forward-looking movement requires the disavowal of the black, female, and queer subject for the sake of the affectively white one.
Pilate’s home offers a viable alternative to the mode of sociality offered by a white liberal society, which pretends as if the plantation shack and the tenement are the only available forms for black life. Her home stands as an alternative to what her brother, the second Macon, inhabits and, as we see early in the novel, it is a form which tempts him. After the stand­off with the drunk Porter, the second Macon walks home and decides to cut through the poor section of town in order to see his rent houses:

Tired, irritable, he walked down Fifteenth Street, glancing up as he passed one of his other houses, its silhouette melting in the light that trembled between dusk and twilight. Scattered here and there, his houses stretched up beyond him like squat ghosts with hooded eyes. He didn’t like to look at them in this light. During the day they were reassuring to see; now they did not seem to belong to him at all—in fact, he felt as though the houses were in league with one another to make him feel like the outsider, the propertyless, landless wanderer. (27)

Unlike his journey into town, when he fingers and finds comfort in the bunchy solidarity of his keys, the second Macon, in the ambiguity of this hour, is unsettled by the image of a property which, in theory, is supposed to be an extension of himself. The image of the property is always slightly out of focus, at the mercy of the unforgiving, trembling light, which is to say that the second Macon suffers a crisis of representation; he cannot see himself in the property which conspires against him, effectively splitting his subjectivity. Without his property, the second Macon believes
he is nothing: uprooted, a wanderer. The sight of the houses invokes his own status as wanderer in the moment after his father’s death, whose murder is paradoxically indicative of the fact that integration in the form of property ownership is foreclosed for black men.

Pilate’s performance of anti-domesticity, by comparison, offers an alternative to what the second Macon performs and it is an alternative that is ostensibly anterior to the mode of sociality which the second Macon adopts. As the second Macon begins wandering toward Pilate’s house, he crosses over someone’s yard and follows a fence; in so doing, he breaks with the designated space of the sidewalk and steps onto someone else’s property, effectively undermining his purported investment in the sanctity of private property. Pilate’s house, which sits “eighty feet from the sidewalk,” is “backed by four huge pines,” effectively safeguarded from the normative gaze which frequents the state-sanctioned space of the sidewalk. To access the space of Pilate’s house, the second Macon is required to cast off the illusion of his proper comportment.

Sarah Jane Cervenak’s *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (2014) offers a generous framework for which to think about wandering, the illusion of proper comportment, and the inextricability of violent Enlightenment thought from everyday life. Wandering, for Cervenak, is not necessarily physical but mental, a philosophical wandering that compensates for personal pain caused by private trespass (1). Cervenak’s conception of wandering resists a hegemonic conception of wandering, which insists that non-normative
subjects lack interiority and, therefore, are always already affectable, moved by outside forces. Blackness, insofar as the Enlightenment imaginary is concerned, is conceptualized as incapable of rational comportment because it is guided by an illegitimate exteriority (6-7). The authors of Enlightenment thought, by comparison, posture as if they were always already animated by reason, obscuring the fact that philosophical wandering and desire are reason’s condition of possibility.

If the second Macon aspires toward a normative mode of being that values property ownership, adheres to market principles, and is invested in Enlightenment notions of a subject endowed with reason, then Pilate exposes how unstable these investments actually are. The second Macon, who owns multiple properties, fares worse than his sister, Pilate, whose home, the second Macon believes, is in disrepair because it is devoid of the infrastructure that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois household. Pilate’s sequestered space is without utilities, windows, and doors, the women, insofar as the second Macon is concerned, “eat like children” because they never sit down to “proper meals”; and it is a site that does not respect the illusory boundary between home and market, considering that the women make the wine for their illegitimate business in the kitchen, where they eat their daily meals standing (27-29). Pilate’s home does not employ the technologies which mediate the effect of the security of domestic space and, therefore, does not reproduce the violence that necessarily goes into producing the illusion of safety which renders blackness as its incommensurate threat.
This insight into how the second Macon conceptualizes personhood particularly informs the advice he later gives his son. After discovering that Milkman has been inside Pilate’s house and after suggesting that Pilate can teach him nothing he can use in “this world,” the second Macon gives his son a lesson in the notion of personhood as property. “Own things,” he says; “and let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (55). The second Macon is an astute student of Western notions of property ownership, but his investment in that conception of the human and in capitalism is fraught because, as the murder of his father demonstrates, black men cannot accumulate property without violent white supremacist intervention.

The second Macon’s blackness is incompatible with a hegemonic conception of property ownership, which is why he is unable to unequivocally reap the benefits which such modes of property are supposed to entail: mastery over his home, self, and others. In addition, the correlation between the degradation of the second Macon’s connections with his family and community and his development as man of property demonstrate that the inhabiting of the position of hermetic, propertied man is unsustainable for both those within and without its precincts. In other words, capitalism and overlapping notions of personhood as property destroy those who succeed and fail according to its logics.

The second Macon’s toxic attachment to capital is one he bequeaths his son. “Attachment,” here, gestures to what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism,” an optimism that becomes a barrier to the flourishing of the subject (1). Berlant’s Cruel
Optimism (2011) speaks to the instability of “good life” fantasies that have been rendered inaccessible by neoliberal forces that have consistently deteriorated the infrastructure which made possible the formation of the middle class. Attentive to the fact that the formation of the middle class was always already a violent formation, Berlant analyzes the way in which the promise of white middle class domesticity has become increasingly toxic because that model of life, which postures itself as the only desirable model, has become more difficult to obtain for most people in the world. Berlant’s analysis is useful here because the novel is situated in a moment when post-war optimism is on the rise. This optimism is, of course, complicated by the fact that the second Macon is a black man, but it is an optimism indicative of toxic attachment which other characters echo.

When Milkman goes to the South, for instance, he is, after some tribulations, well-received by the men in Shalimar, who indulge in Milkman’s reciting the story of his father’s upwardly mobile journey from dispossessed orphan to propertied man. In order to “rekindle the dream” to which the town’s men are attached, Milkman brags about the second Macon’s properties, his new car, the fact that he married the daughter of “the richest Negro in town,” and he lays bare his father’s plan to acquire Lake Eerie Lackawanna (236-237). The town’s men live vicariously through the narrative of the second Macon’s success; his presumed triumph is represented as compensatory for the dispossession of the first Macon’s estate, Lincoln’s Heaven, as well as the continuous deaths which, from Milkman’s perspective, they are made to
live; “even as boys,” he speculates, “they began to die” and they “were dying still” (235).

Rather than alleviating this condition, Milkman’s bragging only belies the toxicity of their attachment to capital. The narrative obscures the violence performed by, and on, the second Macon and it demonstrates that an investment in property ownership as such inevitably holds dispossession. The name of the lake, for instance, “Lake Eerie Lackawanna,” demonstrates that this attachment to capital is eerie, strange or frightening, because all that the lake holds is “lack” and “want.” Furthermore, the name of the lake gestures to the absence of the indigenous people who we imagine only in imagining their forced removal from the land, effectively invoking the loss of the second Macon’s mother, Sing, and drawing attention to the fact that sites marked historically by genocidal violence have become resorts for the financially privileged, affectively white class.

The second Macon’s assimilative performance is best emphasized by his Sunday drives. The Dead family’s Packard, colloquially known as Macon Dead’s Hearse, rolls silently through the black section of town and toward the white neighborhood, a ritual much too important for the second Macon to pass up (31-33). The Packard is a dead site because it cannot produce anything living. This act of assimilation in the form of a drive, which, to varying extents, both the second Macon and Ruth endorse, effectively threatens to kill the family.

This always already impossible assimilation echoes Frantz Fanon’s declaration in the introduction to Black Skin, White Masks (1952, 1967) in which he
suggests that the only possible future for the black man is white (xiv). For Fanon, the insistently white gaze, which imposes blackness on the body, demands that the black body do everything and anything to make itself white. This task is impossible, however, because the imposition of that blackness is whiteness’ precondition. Ultimately, the black body is asked to make itself white, even though the task is impossible, and, as a result, the black body is often destroyed attempting to whiten itself.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes a similar point in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). In her second chapter, “Literature,” Spivak argues that no “perspective critical of imperialism can turn the other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been an incommensurable and discontinuous other into a domesticated other that consolidates the imperialist self” (130). For Fanon and Spivak, the figure of the Other is produced by the gaze which insistently declares itself white. In Spivak’s register, the “self” is the white, male self of the Enlightenment imaginary; this figure emerges, for Fanon, as the white man.

Rey Chow’s *The Protestant Ethnic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (2002), particularly her third chapter, “Keeping Them in Their Place: Coercive Mimeticism and Cross-Ethnic Representation,” makes similar claims. For Chow, the non-white subject in neoliberal modernity is locked in an impossible bind. “Considered to be imitating others” in order to exist as herself, the ethnic subject navigates three levels of mimeticism. The first level of mimeticism, for Chow, is related to the Western
imperative “of the white man as the original” and, by implication, the non-white as insufficient derivative; the second level of which Chow speaks has to do with the insistence that the ethnic subject is animated by an impossible desire to be white; third, behaving in accordance with a script that the white gaze has already imposed upon the ethnic subject, she is “expected to come to resemble what is recognizably ethnic” (106-107).

The implications for the second Macon and his family are sobering. Even though the family drives toward the wealthy white neighborhood they are, representationally speaking, never destined to arrive. The second Macon cannot be white, despite his assimilative performance. As a result, it is particularly telling that the scene is cut short when Milkman demands that the car stop so he can pee. The second Macon’s insistent representation of the assimilative bourgeois black family is undercut by the presence of that which bourgeois white representation always disavows: the waste which the army of domestic servants labors to erase, in this case urine.

The scene comes to an end when Milkman inadvertently pees on his sister, Magdalena; startled by her footsteps, Milkman turns around and “wets” on her, foreshadowing the tendency Milkman develops to lay waste on the women in his life. “This concentration on things behind him,” the narrator informs us, had become a habit of his, “almost as though there were no future to be had” (35). Milkman is afflicted by the inability to see beyond, or adjacent to, the mode of sociality presented by his father. The turn toward the past is particularly ambiguous because what is
invoked in that scene is not pain, simply a past. The past which is invoked is difficult
to situate, however, because Milkman has little access to a past that precedes his
father.

Behind Milkman lies his family, their assimilative performance, and their
abject past. The second Macon’s past is characterized by the dispossession of his
father’s estate and the first Macon’s past is marked by the presumably unsalvageable
past of slavery. Ruth Foster’s abjection is distinct. In the last chapter, I explained that
the second Macon’s disgust with his son’s nickname is, in part, related to his
contempt of Ruth. On the night that Ruth’s father, Doctor Foster, passed away, the
second Macon claims to have stumbled into the room where Ruth lay on the bed,
naked, sucking her father’s fingers (74-75).

The second Macon, at first, questions whether the Doctor may have fathered
children with Ruth; he abandons this suspicion soon afterward because he realizes the
Doctor’s ether addiction rendered him impotent, and the second Macon believes that,
were the children, First Corinthians and Magdalena called Leena, his, then he would
not have stressed over the possibility of their having dark skin. Still, the second
Macon angrily speculates, “there’s lots of things a man can do to please a woman,
even if he can’t fuck,” which is why, he argues in the case of Ruth, “there’s nothing
to do but kill a woman like that” (74).

Ruth, according to the second Macon, is disentitled to life because she is an
unstable female subject, someone who cannot be relied upon to perform the
designated role of passive femininity. And, the possibility of her inclination toward
incest means that she risks jeopardizing the normative family arrangement, since it becomes more difficult to discern the second Macon’s legitimate heirs from the illegitimate ones. While the second Macon’s contempt of Ruth is informed by what he believes to be her potentially sexually incestuous relationship with her father, the role of Pilate in Milkman’s birth is inextricable from the second Macon’s hatred of the name, a hatred which emerges as a response to the loss of sexual intimacy between himself and Ruth, or, arguably, what she comes to represent for the second Macon.

“There had been a time,” Morrison writes, “when he had a full head of hair and when Ruth wore lovely complicated underwear that he deliberately took a long time to undo. When all of his foreplay was untying, unclasping, unbuckling the snaps and strings of what must have been the most beautiful, the most delicate, the whitest and softest underwear on Earth.” The description goes on at length and comes to close when the second Macon unties Ruth’s shoes, peels away her stockings, and “enters” her, at which point he ejaculates quickly (16).

The complexity of this scene throws into question the notion of sex, and who is necessarily having it; my reading of the scene is contingent upon not conflating the notion of sex with the act of penetration. Although the second Macon and Ruth seem to enjoy the disarming of her negligee, the second Macon ostensibly is having sex with the bourgeois article of clothing which constrains his wife’s black body. When the fun of unbinding his wife from the clothing is through, the second Macon enters
her and ejaculates, indicating that his wife’s body is the repository for the second Macon’s assimilative fantasy.

I would argue that Ruth and the second Macon are not having sex with each other, but, instead, participate in the same masturbatory, assimilative fantasy of performing bourgeois domesticity. This is not to say that each character participates or stands to gain equally; the second Macon’s orgasm effectively ends the encounter and what Ruth’s pleasure manifests as remains a mystery. What is particularly informative is that the second Macon laments only the “underwear,” not the intimacy with Ruth because, ostensibly, they never shared intimacy to begin with. In one register, and, again, invoking the notion of modernity which Scott and Freeman use, what remains intact for the second Macon is the conflation of modernity with whiteness, hence why the underwear is what remains in his memory, and the disavowal of the past which, in this case, is manifest in Ruth’s black body. Freeman, for instance, understands a hegemonic notion of modernity as representing “its own forward movement against a slower premodernity figured as brown-skinned, feminine, and erotically perverse” (57). Ruth’s black, however “lemony,” skin, her legibly female body, and potentially incestuous relationship with her father render her premodern within the second Macon’s assimilative schema.

Pilate, by comparison, is not quite premodern, even though the second Macon attempts to interpellate her as such. For the second Macon, Pilate is revolting because she cannot be put to the service of consolidating the domestic household, which, if we follow Reid-Pharr’s conflation from the last chapter of household with patriarck, is to
say she cannot be put to the service of consolidating his assimilative self. Pilate carries “a sickening smell,” effectively dirtying the mediated purity of the home, and because she has no interest in or “knowledge of descent housekeeping” she simply gets in the second Macon’s way.

The presence of Pilate is incompatible with bourgeois domestic space; she is, in a word, anti-domestic (20). In the second Macon’s frustration we can hear echoes of Spivak’s reading of the categorical imperative in Kant as travestied by the state: “make the heathen into a human so that he can be treated as an end in himself (124). Ultimately, for Spivak, the state’s social mission is to demand mimeticism of non-white others for the sake of consolidating itself.

Pilate, to the second Macon’s frustration, cannot be domesticated and, thus, needs to be banished because she represents alternative representational possibilities that hegemonic powers take as their condition of possibility and whose existence they paradoxically disavow. The black future made possible by Pilate emphasizes the pastness of the present and, unlike the affectively white model, does not have to destroy minoritarian subjects, even though their existence set the boundary of the known white world. Pilate’s presence is also unsettling to the second Macon because she unveils the illusory nature of his power and the overdetermination of his particular mode of being. She is, from the beginning, a different sort of creature, activated by a mode of gender designation distinct from the process employed in the normative household.
Again, we might benefit from turning to Hortense Spillers’ 1987 essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Gendering, Spillers argues, “takes place within the confines of the domestic, an essential metaphor that then spreads its tentacles for male and female subject over a wider ground of human and social purposes;” the process of gendering, according to Spillers, is inextricable from domestic space and domesticity, a process which gains “its power by way of a common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names,” particularly the patronymic, name of the father, which “in turn situates those persons it ‘covers’ in a particular place” (214).

The model Spillers offers is the model employed by the white slave owning class. The inapplicability of this model for enslaved people, coupled with the continuities between antebellum slavery and its postwar configurations may help explain the process which Pilate undergoes. Pilate’s mother, Sing, dies in childbirth and the first Macon, contrary to the nursemaid’s protest, picks the baby’s name at random from the Bible:

“That’s the baby’s name.”
“You want this for the baby’s name?”
“I want that for the baby’s name. Say it.”
“You can’t name the baby this.”
“Say it.”
“It’s a man’s name.”
“Say it.”
“Pilate.”
“What?”
“Pilate. You wrote down Pilate.”
“Like a riverboat pilot?”
“No. Not like no riverboat pilot. Like a Christ-killing Pilate.
You can’t get much worse than that for a name. And a baby
girl at that.” (19)

The first Macon does not participate in the normative process of gender designation. He never refers to Pilate as a girl; he simply calls her “the baby.” It is the nursemaid, Circe, who interpellates the baby’s gender, hence why the name, Pilate, which she claims is ill-suited to any child, is rendered especially inappropriate. The designation of the name and withholding of gender at the moment of Pilate’s birth respects the phenomenon which Spillers describes; the only distinction, however, lies in the fact that the first Macon exercises a relative degree of autonomy because he chooses to name Pilate as such and does not interpellate her gender. These circumstances, complemented later by her rejection of capitalism and heterosexuality, make Pilate queer. Here, queerness connotes a refusal of what heterosexuality promises and it invokes a particular mode of sociality, a way of being in, and moving through, the world with others.

The moment of Pilate’s birth is also informatively read alongside Judith Butler’s Bodies That Matter (1993). For Butler, and with respect to the vocalization of sex, and, thus, the emergence of an offspring as a sexed subject, the act of naming is simultaneously “the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm”(8). This act of naming is also the precondition for the figure of the Human, the
thing which emerges through a process that simultaneously produces a subject and its boundary, the abject. For the nursemaid to have interpellated Pilate’s body as such is to have attempted to oblige with the imperative to gender a body. Although the continuous reading of Pilate’s body as female by other characters heavily informs her experience of the world, that her father does not gender her as female leaves room for other possibilities.

The abject body Pilate occupies is a source of repulsion and attraction for the novel’s characters, particularly Milkman. At Guitar’s insistence, and despite the second Macon’s prohibition, Milkman goes to Pilate’s house where she is encountered at the front steps “sitting wide-legged in a long-sleeved, long-skirted black dress;” Milkman remembers her as being composed of “angles,” knees and elbows mostly, and he notices that her feet point in opposite directions: east and west, respectively (36). What is upsetting and fascinating to the second Macon and to Milkman about Pilate is their inability to read and, thus, contain her. As the previous description demonstrates, we see the angles of Pilate’s body, but these angles are not necessarily indicative of boundaries. That her feet point east and west, respectively, indicates that her body fills the limitless space in between. We are tempted to suggest that Pilate takes up the entire space between an imposed binary, or it may even be possible that her body exceeds its boundaries.

Pilate’s body, whose boundaries are denied us, stands in for an unfathomable field of representational possibility. Her body is the queer, abject body which makes visible the illusory self-contained nature of Milkman and Guitar’s bodies. Her
exceptionalism as indicated by the absence of her naval gestures not only the literal
dispossession of her mother’s mark, but also has the potential to be a nodal point for
Milkman, whose left leg is longer than his right, and whose posture, in the form of a
strut, is marked by this bodily abjection. That Pilate occupies a non-normative body,
alongside the fact that the moment of her gender designation is not overdetermined,
makes it possible for her to shuttle back and forth across a spectrum of gender
performances (Cervenak, 19).

Although Pilate’s legs are parted, indicating, from a hegemonic standpoint,
the availability of her presumably female body, access is foreclosed by the length of
the dress and what might be recognized as the posture’s association with masculinity.
In addition, Milkman is captivated by the absence of her navel, he marvels at the fact
that she is almost as tall as her father and, once Pilate stands, he notices that she
wears unlaced men’s shoes and that she walks as though she is “holding her crotch”
(38). Although the word “marvel” cannot be entirely divorced from the colonial
gaze, I would argue that Milkman’s fascination with Pilate is not informed by an
exploitative colonial desire. Instead of using her non-normative performance as the
departure point for the consolidation of his assimilative, normative self, Milkman
finds comfort in the presence of Pilate and her family; it is the first time in his life, the
narrator remarks, that he “remembers being completely happy”(47).

Milkman feels completely happy because he has, in a sense, returned home.
The comfort Milkman experiences around Pilate is threatening to the second Macon
because it gestures back to the circumstances around which Milkman was conceived.
“Fifteen years at not having a son,” the second Macon speculates, were made more indigestible by the circumstances around which he was conceived (16). When Pilate first arrives in town, she is saddened to find the condition of his brother’s family: the second Macon is embittered by greed and his wife and daughters’ bodies are boiled dry by his contempt. Pilate asks Ruth whether she is interested in staying in the marriage; once Ruth decides she wants to preserve the marriage, Pilate slips the second Macon an aphrodisiac which temporarily rekindles his love life with Ruth. After several months, Ruth discovers she is pregnant, at which point the second Macon tries to have the baby aborted, only to be stopped by Pilate, who threatens him with voodoo.

Pilate, who manipulates the second Macon’s body, effectively inseminates Ruth, which explains why, as the second Macon notes, she appears to have such an intense interest in the third Macon, almost as if he were her own (20). The insemination is upsetting to the second Macon because it demonstrates the illusory nature of his self determination. Stripped of his interiority, the second Macon is moved by the substance Ruth slips him, all but shattering the posture of the self-determined Enlightenment man. Pilate demonstrates the existence of alternatives to the way of life and kinship the second Macon espouses.

This kinship model, which, as Pilate suggests early in the novel, muddles the distinction between cousin and brother, reaches back to the past, a past which, to invoke the first Macon, insists on a continuity between the contemporary moment and slavery. The existence of alternative kinship structures, whose roots are found in the
phenomenon of Transatlantic slavery, means that Pilate operates within an existent framework that is not somewhere in the future, but which encompasses the hegemonic model to which the second Macon aspires. The different cultural context which Pilate mobilizes, returning to Spillers,

actually reconfigures, in historically ordained discourse, certain representational possibilities for African Americans: 1) motherhood as female blood-rite is outraged, is denied, at the very same time that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment; 2) a dual fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father’s banished name and body and the captor father’s mocking presence. In this play of paradox, only the female stands in the flesh, both mother and mother dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject. Actually claiming this monstrosity (of a female with the potential to “name”), which her culture imposes in blindness, “Sapphire” might rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment. (203)

I read Pilate as the monstrous figured by Spillers’ imaginary. Pilate, who loses her mother during birth, is both mother, to Reba, for instance, and arguably Milkan, and mother-dispossessed. As the moment of her birth suggests, and the non-normative way by which she gets her name, Pilate is alternatively gendered. She is a female social subject unlike any we have seen thus far. It is the alterity of her positionality that makes possible her resistance to and overpowering of the hegemonic structure for
which the second Macon stands in and to which he unsuccessfully aspires.

Ultimately, that she can manipulate the illusory comported figure of Enlightenment man, of whom the second Macon can only be imitation, renders her able to, in a sense, bring a child, the third Macon, into the world. With child in one hand and torch in the other, Pilate stands before the bourgeois home and seizes the insurgent ground.

Works Cited


Chapter Three: Never Toward Distant Shores

“This world is white no longer,” James Baldwin claims, “and it will never be
again” (179). My advisor and I sat in her office, meditating on this thought, the
closing lines from James Baldwin’s essay, “Stranger in the Village.” A single
question lingered, for me: what did Baldwin mean by “this world”?  

Published in the collection Notes of a Native Son, in 1955, the same year
Emmett Till was lynched, Baldwin’s essay recounts his travels to an unnamed Swiss
village, a place in which “from all available evidence,” or so he is told, “no black man
had ever set foot” (163). His experience of the village is always already tempered by
the testimony of the presumably white interlocutor, who informs him of the villages’
racial homogeneity and which carries more historical weight, or legitimacy, than what turns out to be Baldwin’s experience.

Baldwin demonstrates the extent to which anti-blackness is a constitutive element of this mythic, or, for some, an Edenic and idyllic place. He is told that he is going to be “a sight” for the village, an expression which he interprets as indicative of the relative scarcity with which people of his complexion frequent the place. Because he is an American, Baldwin claims, it did not occur to him there could “be a people anywhere who had never seen a Negro” (163). While it may be easy, or smug, to castigate Baldwin for reproducing a certain notion of American exceptionalism and presuming that an American perspective can occupy a universal stance, that he takes for granted people all over the world are familiar with Negroes demonstrates that the Transatlantic slave trade and its legacy are not exclusive to the Americas. Baldwin’s position, in other words, potentially offers a way to think about the global reach of Transatlantic slavery and anti-blackness.

That Baldwin situates the trans-atlantic slave trade as constitutive to the formation and knowledge of the modern world shatters the desire of a paradoxically insistent white population that fantasizes about places devoid of blackness, which is why Baldwin cannot fathom that there exist people who have never seen a black person. “Seen” in Baldwin’s idiom implies having made physical contact. As an indicator of a visual relationship, however, “seen” takes on a slightly different meaning because, as Baldwin later discovers, the villagers are familiar with visibly black people; “everyone in the village knows my name, though they scarcely ever use
it, knows that I come from America—though, this, apparently, they will never really believe: black men come from Africa” (165).

This extant knowledge among the villagers, contrary to what the interlocutor at first insists, indicates that their relationship to blackness precedes Baldwin’s arrival. In fact, Baldwin’s arrival in the village becomes the occasion in which the villagers, including children, use his body to consolidate their own subject positions. “But I remain as much a stranger today,” Baldwin writes, “as I was the first day I arrived, and the children shout Neger! Neger! as I walk along the streets” (165). This instance of interpellation echoes the epithets he is accustomed to hearing in the states, epithets that, for all the abjection they hold, are constitutive of who he is.

Baldwin’s essay is in conversation with Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952, 1967), specifically chapter five of the book, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man.” At the beginning of the chapter, before Fanon’s authorial voice has entered, we hear a child violently interpellate Fanon as a black man. For Fanon, racialization is necessarily a visual process which creates what it names by way of that interpellation. Fanon, the black author, cannot exist as a black author until he has been blackened, a violence which even white children are able to visit upon him. Similarly for Baldwin, the shouting of the children follows him and prompts echoes that travel across the Atlantic and lock him in a history from which he cannot escape; “the children who shout Neger! have no way of knowing the echoes this sound raises in me” (138).
The echoes achieve their intended effect, regardless of the individual interlocutor’s intentions: they situate Baldwin in a past characterized by abjection, having to exist, representationally speaking, for the sake of another. Like the spring waters which comprise the village’s sole attraction, Baldwin becomes an additional object of study, a tourist attraction. He smiles in order to soften the blow of the children’s interpellation, but his smile, Baldwin notes, is received as “another unheard-of phenomenon” which enables them to see his teeth. Because the village’s impression of Baldwin is tempered by their preconceived notions of blackness, they have always already foreclosed the fact of his humanity and so, Baldwin concludes, it would make absolutely no difference if he were to begin to snarl (166).

The persistence of this white gaze is characterized by “genuine wonder,” which is to say “struck with surprise or astonishment,” but it is a feeling which has the effect of transforming Baldwin into a “living wonder,” a body that can only astonish, which exists and is (de)valued precisely for that quality. While in the village, Baldwin is informed by the bistro owner’s wife of the village’s tradition of “buying” African Natives in order to convert them to Christianity; “I tried not to think of these so lately baptized kinsmen,” Baldwin writes, “of the price paid for them, or the peculiar price they themselves” would pay (167). Even though the village has allegedly never been visited by a black person, as the invisible interlocutor suggests at the beginning, the village has a tradition of anti-blackness. The tradition of buying Africans, paying for converts, is preconditioned on the racist logic that insists that black bodies are in need of Enlightenment and salvation.
Soon afterward, with these converts in mind, Baldwin speculates on the distinction between being the first white man to be seen by black people and the first black to be seen by white people; “I thought of white men arriving for the first time in an African village, strangers there, as I am a stranger here, and tried to imagine the astounded populace touching their hair and marveling at the color of their skin” (167-168). Baldwin springs a trap on the reader, mediating an illusory equivalence between himself and the white invaders. The difference between being the first white man to be seen by black people and being the first black to be seen by whites is made clear by the process of racialization evinced by this sentence. The white man whitens himself as he blackens the so-called African tribe, rendering them the philosophical lack of his purportedly Enlightened subjectivity. This is to say that there can be no encounter between black and white men that precedes the process of racialization that blackens the body and, thus, consolidates the whiteness of the colonizer.

Therefore, when the white man arrives in the African village he “takes the astonishment as tribute, for he arrives to conquer and to convert the natives, whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned.” By comparison, Baldwin, who is “without a thought of conquest,” finds himself “among a people whose culture controls him,” whose culture “has even, in a sense, created” him (168). Baldwin recognizes the inextricability of his identity from the process of racialization that renders him black. It is for this reason, the mediated effect of the villagers’ whiteness, and despite the relative simplicity of their lives, that they have claims to Dante, Shakespeare, and Michelangelo in ways foreclosed to the black person.
Baldwin does not, however, continue to indulge this reasoning. At the end of the essay, once he has made clear that the Swiss village does, in a sense, stand in as allegory for the United States and the West, he castigates the fantastic logic that insists on a place devoid of blackness; “no road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger” (179). The history of the United States, of the West, is the history of blackness, and the history of blackness is the history of the world. That “this world is white no longer, and it will never be again,” is to say that the world that exists within and without Baldwin’s text cannot, by definition, be a white world: ahistorical, self-contained, pure. In sum, Baldwin lays claim to a future marked by blackness, a future in which blackness as aesthetic property gives over to boundless representational possibility.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Pilate’s home offers refuge for those of us determined to turn our backs on Baldwin’s burning house and Ellison’s incinerated tenement. Turning toward Pilate’s house may be unsatisfactory, for some, because it is an imagined space, a representation that, one might argue, cannot be actualized. If Baldwin is correct, however, and the world can no longer be white because the representational strategies that actualize the white world cannot efface the “fact” of blackness, or, differently said, of black life, then we might, to borrow Spillers’ conceit, assume the insurgent ground and write into being a world that can nurture black life.
All of this is not to say that the process is easy. To think of a black future that, to invoke Darieck Scott, does not turn away from the abject past is difficult, and it is also necessary. I began this chapter with Baldwin’s essay because, at the end, he offers us an unfathomable philosophical project. This world, the geographic space of the earth, the notion of the West, the American imaginary, and the world of the text, is white no longer; if so, then the problem to be reimagined is the notion which, to invoke W.E.B. Du Bois, is always already imagined as a problem, blackness.

Imagining a new world is difficult because, by definition, it means invoking that which has yet to be thought. It is for this reason that yearnings for other worlds and other ways of being in the world frequently give over to the same hackneyed logics that consolidate whiteness and racism. Take, for instance, a scene from Sharifa Rhodes-Pitt’s collection of essays *Harlem is Nowhere: A Journey To The Mecca of Black America* (2011), which takes part of its name from Ralph Ellison’s essay “Harlem is Nowhere,” written in 1948 and published in 1964. In the early 2000’s, Rhodes-Pitt’s sits in a cafe that has newly opened in Harlem and which serves the invading class of urban professionals:

Once, while sitting inside the cafe, I happened to overhear a conversation between two white men seated nearby. One seemed to be a stay-at-home dad who worked in marketing; he talked business while nursing a toddler in a stroller. I gathered from eavesdropping that the other man was visiting his friend’s new neighborhood for the first time. *This is fabulous,* he exclaimed. Then, noting the first man’s skills in marketing, he added: *Really, you have to do something to get the word out. There need to be more people up here!* (31)
The men, Rhodes-Pitts notes, are activated by the logic of settler colonialism; insofar as they are concerned, Harlem is a space devoid of life, a new frontier. More people need to be up there because, presumably, the poor blacks in Harlem are not people. The frighteningly quotidian nature of this response demonstrates how rampant is the logic which Baldwin writes against in “Stranger in the Village.” The world may be white no longer, but the desire for a white world remains and, as a result, the black body count continues to rise.

Examples of this racist logic are sure to abound, but there is one work in particular that draws my attention because it comes to notoriety in the moment when Baldwin publishes his essay. Published in 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* met little success. It was well received by close writer friends of Fitzgerald’s, but was not a commercial hit. Fitzgerald, who died in 1940 from a heart attack, believed himself a failure and thought his work all but forgotten by the commercial public whose approval he desired. The book achieved notoriety between 1942 and 1960, the former date marking its distribution by the Council on Books in Wartime, the latter marking the year when the book sold steadily onward.

At the end of the novel, once the man known as Jay Gatsby has been murdered, Nick Carraway wanders the Long Island shore and fantasizes about the moment of colonial first contact. Fitzgerald writes:

> Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat
across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for the Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night. Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eludes us then, but that’s no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...And one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (180).

The simultaneous violence and tragedy of this scene is owed to the impossibility of the repetition of first contact. The presumed discovery of the new world, from the perspective of the Dutch sailors who Carraway summons, cannot be repeated and, thus, every attempt to reenact this instance of colonial invasion, repackaged as a wondrous journey, is rendered a poor imitation. Only the Dutch sailors of Carraway’s imaginary have access to this visibly empty “green breast” of land, a land insistently
devoid of indigenous life, and it is they who enjoy and endure the simultaneous
privilege and the tragedy of the loss of this originary and unique experience.

The final scene is haunted by this historical memory, but it is a memory which
only the white Carraway can access. Gatsby, whose parentage and race are uncertain
and who, by Carraway’s estimates, “turned out alright in the end,” which is to say he
was killed, can be lauded for attempting to reproduce this moment of first contact, a
scene which he stages by the conquest of Daisy Buchanan’s white body. But this
tresspassive movement ultimately necessitates his death for the sake of the
consolidation of the insistently white corpus (2). It is Carraway, the man with a
legitimate name, who has a father, who can trace his family back into the antebellum
era, that is the legitimate heir of this soon-to-be white escapist fantasy: the Dutch
sailors whose descendants would become white men, for whom Carraway and the
“forever seeking” Tom Buchanan are representative.

By comparison, Gatsby, who insists on having access to this legacy, and who
attempts to breach the white corpus by way of Daisy, is implicitly lauded and mocked
for the attempt, though he can never be allowed to succeed. Carraway may help
facilitate Gatsby’s encounters with Daisy, but these affairs are never a real danger
because Daisy has already been put to service in the hegemonic white household. She
is married into wealth, has given birth to a white child, and, regardless of whether she
sleeps with Gatsby, her whiteness is never threatened, which is to say that the
whiteness of her husband, Tom, or her cousin, Carraway, are also secured.
Carraway can therefore admire Gatsby, the man who represents everything for which he has an “unaffected scorn.” In death, Gatsby can be memorialized for the beauty of his performance; his was a performance that simultaneously pleased and abhorred. “If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures,” Carraway speculates, “then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away”(2). It is the perfection of Gatsby’s performance that betrays its disingenuity; his act is so good that it is known to be fake.

Gatsby and Carraway, Fitzgerald demonstrates, share the same dream, a desire for whiteness that obscures the fact of its desire, but Gatsby’s dream has long been Carraway’s reality. Carraway’s desire is figured as destiny, which is to say he has an inalienable right to this dream, while Gatsby’s desire is cause for alarm. It is Gatsby and, by implication, “what preyed on” him, ”the “foul dust that floated in the wake of his dreams,” that figure as threats to Carraway’s insistently white ancestral fantasy: the descendants of Eastern European immigrants who attend the parties, who can, in a word, pass for that thing called white (2).

I suspect that Fitzgerald’s book is not generally taken for the nativist propaganda it is because, for the average reader, the anxieties about racial difference, however obvious they are in the character of Tom, do not center primarily around the black body. The black people in the limousine who Carraway spots on the way to the city, for instance, or even the “pale well-dressed negro” who witnesses the car
accident which kills Myrtle Wilson, do not threaten Carraway’s understanding of reality (69, 139). The “three modish negroes” in the limousine driven by a white chauffeur can only imitate the behavior of the white elite and, therefore, despite how much they roll their eyes in “haughty rivalry,” can never amount to the real thing, whiteness. The pale, well dressed Negro is even more palatable to Carraway because he is lighter-skinned and, therefore, represents a blackness that is close to erasure and, however pale, it can be spotted and, therefore, cannot breach the circle in which Carraway is ensconced.

Within the economy implied by the presence of the Dutch sailors within Carraway’s fantasy, the black body cannot anticipate the new world from the deck, cannot fantasize or wonder about it in an analogous way, because its body relegated to the category of flesh is held in the hull of the ship. The dream continues, however, and the “we” which Carraway invokes, the legitimate, white heirs to this imaginary, who are characterized by an expansion, will “run faster” and stretch their arms farther, hoping to grasp this always already impossible notion, a biological fantasy of power in whose name these heirs repeatedly kill and whose glory lies not in the fact that it is an attainable fantasy, but that it is a movement which must be reenacted infinitely and without success.

Ironically, it is likely that the audience which gorged itself on Fitzgerald’s novel was descendant of the class of western European immigrants and their children about whom the novel vents so much anxiety. The descendants of the people who provoke such hostility from Carraway, he who has the right to get carried away, to
travel the States and trespass if need be, become the people who best receive
Fitzgerald’s book because they, too, have ostensibly been admitted into whiteness, the
adaptable creature.

The desire for a world devoid of blackness is a philosophical impossibility,
insofar as there is an insistence on preserving whiteness. At the beginning of Alex
Haley’s The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1964), we witness another scene in the
regenerative and reconfigurative drama of blackness, whiteness, and domesticity.
Tellingly titled, “Nightmare,” the first chapter begins with Louise Little, pregnant
with Malcolm, who protects her children when her home is besieged by the Ku Klux
Klan. The horsemen demand that the family leave town for proliferating the teachings
of Marcus Garvey, particularly his insistence on a return to Africa (1). The Klan’s
justification for their violence is complemented and undercut, however, by the later
accusation that X’s father, the Reverend Earl Little, “uppity” as he is for wanting to
“own a store,” spreads dissension and unrest among the rest of the black population
(3).

The Klan’s demands and reasoning are particularly illuminating as indicators
of a crisis in white self representation. The town’s white population, represented by
the fact of the Klan’s murderous state sponsored pastime, wants the Little family
gone because they encourage mass black flight. At the same time, Little’s father is
condemned by the white population, and those affectively allied with it, for wanting
to own property, for the desire to become a propertied man.
This tension between black flight/fugitivity and property ownership is the field in which whiteness protects what it has staked for itself. The black body cannot leave because its existence is the condition of possibility for the white subject. Simultaneously, the black body cannot be allowed to own property because the notion of personhood as property ownership is hoarded by the subject who blackens the body as a way of asserting his own whiteness. The Klansmen, who are an extra legal body which nonetheless upholds the law’s investment in the destruction of black life, arrives at an always already criminal site. The black household, which is locked in an antagonistic relationship with the state because it cannot be a site of its rearticulation, demands, from the perspective of the horsemen, the violence they visit upon it. The black household, which produces nothing the state values, must be destroyed, even though the negation associated with blackness is arguably the most critical investment for a state which fancies itself white.

Particularly important in this economy is the figure of Louise Little, whose body is the location where the state’s representation of itself is reconfigured and, perhaps, undone. It is particularly provocative for X to invoke Garvey’s insistence on black racial purity in the moment before he discloses that his own mother “looked like a white woman” and that her father “was white”(2). X demonstrates that there can be no such thing as racial purity, even though the illusion of race as biological/natural property is the cornerstone of Americans’ experience of social reality. Louise Little is a threatening figure because, as a mulatto, she is a testament to the
permeability of racial categories and her body, which can lean toward whiteness or blackness, has the potential to produce white and black bodies.

It may be helpful to turn to Robert Reid-Pharr’s “At Home in America” from the collection *Black Gay Man* (2001) in order to further understand what necessarily is at stake for X and for the world which he describes. Reid-Pharr, whose essay takes as its point of departure the construction of the mulatto as a viable alternative to unyielding investments in whiteness and blackness, revisits the opening scene of *The Autobiography* with particular emphasis on Louise Little. According to Reid-Pharr, the “twisted logic that has been lost” on commentators of the autobiography is “the fact that this woman, this quintessential black revolutionary mother” was “no black at all”; her skin was fair, her hair was straight, and her father was white (76). Reid-Pharr dispenses with the lie of racial difference and, like X, draws attention to the inextricability of whiteness and blackness, specifically to the fluidity between the two.

Because Louise Little “looked” white, and because race is not a biological property, she ostensibly could have chosen to be white. Reid-Pharr argues, however, that Louise Little “became black” and, therefore, demonstrates that race is not a fixed property, which is to say that conceptions and performances of race are vulnerable to manipulation. Reid-Pharr speculates that Little chose blackness because “she knew there was greater promise in the black tomorrow than in the tomorrow guarded by strange men in white sheets” (77-78). Ultimately, the white tomorrow gives over to a paranoid future where the normative subject scrambles, rapes, and kills for the
mediated effect of his whiteness. The black tomorrow, though it cannot disavow the abjection constitutive to it, holds the promise of something else, worlds we have yet to imagine.

Summoning alternative spaces does not have to mean that we create an entirely new structure. Visionary aesthetic interventions can look toward the past in order to curtail some of the representational violence routinely enacted on the black body. We might ask, for instance, what happens to a lynching photograph without the lynch victim? This is the question posed by Claudia Rankine’s collaboration with John Lucas in her elegiac poem to Trayvon Martin in *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014). Emphasizing the relationship between the practice of lynching, police violence against black men, and state sanctioned anti-black violence by private citizens, Rankine juxtaposes one of the most well-known lynching images, *A Public Lynching*, with her elegy to Martin.

The poem begins with a meditation on the space of the prison, a site which, the speaker insists, “is not a place you enter,” but is, in fact, “no place” at all (2-3). Those within the prison have no agency. “They have not been to prison,” Rankine writes; “they have been imprisoned” (1-2). The prison marks the outside to civil society; it is the structure which is civil society’s precondition. The lamentation continues and the speaker simulates a phone call with an unnamed prisoner for the rest of the poem. Considering how fluid are the boundaries between the forms of anti-black violence Rankine invokes, it is possible that the unnamed recipient of the phone call is Martin, with whom the speaker tries to prolong the conversation.
Adjacent to the fourth, fifth, and sixth stanzas of the poem, is the lynching photograph. The absence of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, the lynch victims, notwithstanding, the photograph remains the same. This 1930 lynching in Marion, Indiana was attended by several hundred people. In the photograph provided, we can see the profiles of several dozen of the participants. In the far left hand corner, a tall man with slicked back, black hair leans in, poses, for the photograph. To his left, a lanky young man in a shirt and tie with a big mouth appears to hold the hand of his sweetheart, whose expression indicates the photograph caught her off guard. Beside them, a young girl looks not quite in the direction of the camera with excitement. To her left, a woman with her hair in a bun looks over her shoulder, indifferently, at the camera. In front of her, a short heavy-set woman looks at the camera with her hands interlaced. To her left and slightly back, a bone-thin woman looks over her shoulder, to far right side of the frame. To whom she looks we do not know. Adjacent to this woman, a short, balding man with a Fuhrer-like mustache points to the space where Shipp and Smith once hung.

In his book, *The End of American Lynching* (2012), Rushdy historicizes the “end of lynching discourse,” a discourse that emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century which insisted that lynchings were going out of style, that they would soon be a thing of the past. Rushdy argues that lynchings are not a dead practice, regardless of how uncommon that particular form of anti-black violence is performed today. Following the work of Amy Louise Wood, Rushdy offers a detailed analyses of the technology of the lynching photograph, a form which combines two of
the most prominent 18th and 19th century photographic conventions: the bourgeois portrait and the mug shot. Amy Louise Wood, whose own work follows Michelle Smith’s, Rushdy notes, argues that the white-middle class portrait invoked “the shadow image” of both the criminal mugshot and the lynching photograph. “If we took the dead body at the center of the lynching photograph,” Rushdy argues, “we would be left with the conventions of portraiture;” similarly, if the surrounding mob was removed, “we would be left with pictures that look like criminal mugshots—photographs of unsmiling, stoical faces captured in a state of unfreedom” (63).

Rushdy, like Michelle Smith and Amy Louise Wood, demonstrates how inextricable are the notions of civil (white) society and anti-black violence, how symbiotic is the relationship between the hegemonic law and the criminalization and destruction of blackness for the sake of the white subject. The lynching photograph, which Rushdy demonstrates, becomes a technology that, first, is used to celebrate white supremacy and which, in the hands of activists, becomes a way to shame the nation, perfectly captures the violence of whiteness and the criminal behavior, the savagery, that is whiteness’ condition of possibility. Instead of mobilizing the photograph to shame white folks into proper comportment, Rankine offers an alternative. With Lucas’ assistance, Rankine lifts the bodies from the frame and spares them the burden of spectacularity. Like the Little family, whose presence and absence was cause for concern among their town’s white population, the mediated
absence of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith is also the occasion for a crisis of white self-representation.

Although the bodies have been lifted from the frame, not all of the spectators/participants pose for the photograph. As a result, the image falls short of the bourgeois domestic portrait which the form invokes. In the figure of the man who points into the space where Smith and Abram once hung, we witness an anxiety. Smith and Shipp who, to use Rankine’s conceit, are “completed by the sky” disappear into the blackness of the horizon, denying the mob the notion upon which they depend for their own representation. As a result, the mustached man points at a blackness that is without boundaries that, in a sense, threatens to come over them all. The inability to locate this blackness of the absent Shipp and Smith denies the mob the power they once held. Their world is white no longer because blackness, as the form of domination they insist it is, has been suspended. Blackness is limitless, now, and it signals a return, refuge, for those taken into its embrace. Whiteness comes forth in the space above the image, within the page of Rankine’s book. It is a whiteness which comes down, ostensibly, on the heads of the lynch mob, a whiteness in which, perhaps, they will drown.

The reading practice that Rankine mobilizes to rescue the representations of Thomas and Shipp is akin to what Mamie Bradley performed when she grieved Emmett. Rankine and Bradley found portals, like Ruth and Pilate, through which to imagine other forms that turn away from hegemonic powers. Unlike the Dutch sailors of Carraway’s imaginary or the men Rhodes-Pitts overhears in the cafe, whose search
for alterity reproduces the logic of settler colonialism, Rankine manipulates the text in order to create alternative representational possibilities for Thomas and Shippe. Rankine’s exhibition of love for Thomas and Shippe, and Mamie’s insistence on grieving her son, is where we ought to begin when conjuring a black future.

Works Cited


A Conclusion

It is with a sense of urgency that we must insist on black futurity. If we cannot begin from the position of blackness and black life, then there is no life to be had. Ruth Foster and Mamie Bradley’s exhibition of love for their children demonstrated how porous is the hegemonic structure that insists on its impermeability and which actively works to destroy black life. After seizing the insurgent ground, Mamie Bradley insisted on a space for grieving the loss of her son, which is to say that she reclaimed his life and restored Emmett from the violent state apparatus that stole him to begin with. Similarly, working from an unstable position, Ruth Foster found an
opening within the precincts of the Dead Home and carved out a space in which she prolonged intimacy with her son.

This tragic practice, tragic because it operated against unfathomable odds that ultimately quelled the insurrection, imbued her son, Macon “Milkman” Dead, with his mother’s milk. That she yearned a part of herself within him is an occasion for hope, since we cannot know whether Milkman will weather the obstacles posed by the anti-black world that destroyed Emmett Till, in addition to the destructive consequences of masculinization. As the end of the novel demonstrates, once he and Guitar fly off the cliff, Milkman is left in suspension of whether he will live and, if so, where he will go. Morrison does not say.

In league with Mamie and Ruth, Pilate Dead emerged as the monstrosity figured by Hortense Spillers’ imaginary, the female with the power to name, a female who traversed and spanned the gendered binary according to which hegemonic power structures the world. Unbound by the same constraints as Ruth Foster and, yet, bound to Ruth them, Pilate helped inseminate her and, therefore, is equally as much a parent to Milkman, if not more so, than the second Macon. Like the little green room in which Ruth nursed Milkman, Pilate’s home is one of the portals— the gaping black hole—in which it is possible to imagine other ways and other worlds. Pilate demonstrated that having escaped does not mean that one has physically left a space. She occupies a different world because she operates according to a logic that values relationships with others and, unlike her brother, the second Macon, her sense of freedom does not depend on owning things and other people (55). All of this is to say
that Pilate, who “can fly without leaving the ground,” conceptualizes freedom as a practice, a way of moving through the world that turns away from the overdetermination of hegemonic structures and, to invoke Cervenak, turns toward philosophical space for the enactment of desire.

In the last chapter, James Baldwin, alongside Spillers and Morrison, spoke to the way in which other worlds can be envisioned, summoned, and created. The world of the text is white no longer because Baldwin, who can only exist as a commodity within the economy established by the colonizer, writes inside, through, alongside, and around it. Baldwin’s 1955 essay, “Stranger in the Village” is a testament to the fact that the world is white no longer because, arguably, it had never been. Baldwin’s presence is a testament to that reality. I am reminded, now, of an article Ralph Ellison published in *Time* magazine in 1970, titled “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks.” Ellison argues that the “fantasy of an America free of blacks is at least as old as the dream of creating a truly democratic society” (577). This idea is a fantasy, impossible, because what Americans refer to as democratic society was quite literally built on top of the slave’s body. Like I emphasized in my reading of the Little family from the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and in my reading of Baldwin’s essay, the insistently white nation is paradoxically bound to its hatred of blackness, even though blackness is its condition of possibility.

This project has grappled with the possibility of imagining a world that begins with blackness and black life, but that does not indulge the petulant and murderous insistence on a white body. In other words, we strive to imagine and move toward
adjacent worlds without mobilizing the logic of settler colonialism, a logic that looks toward distant shores and insists on the emptiness of those places. This rampant logic, I argued, accounts for the overwhelming popularity of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and it animates the men—contemporary colonizers—Rhodes-Pitts overhears in that cafe in Harlem. Whiteness, that deity, reconfigured its pact with those who insisted on being white. The descendants of European immigrants, the people who provoked so much anxiety in Caraway, were admitted into whiteness and, paradoxically, celebrated a novel for which their ancestors’ bodies were the central problem.

Returning to Baldwin and Ellison, however, this dream for a white world without blackness is pathological and impossible because blackness as a form of abjection, to invoke Darieck Scott, is whiteness’ precondition. Ellison likens this fantasy to “a boil bursting forth from impurities in the bloodstream of democracy;” this fantasy is an infected lesion, a wound through which runs waste and puss, impurity, a fantasy which, if left unattended, can kill the host. The desire to be white is a maddening and murderous desire that enacts representational and physical violence on the bodies it renders black. This puss-ridden, white wound is not the portal opened by Rankine and Lucas, who lift the bodies of Smith and Shipp from the lynching photograph, but, instead, this wound emphasizes the pathology of the lynch mob itself, and the United States by association. Whiteness drowns those within, it strangles and suffocates those without, and it insists that those bodies outside whiteness’ precincts are, to borrow Rankine’s phrasing, characterized by lack.
However real are the impacts of this illusory thing that calls itself whiteness, we must remember that dispossession is, to an extent, a mediated effect.

I invite the reader to savor with me one last image, a portrait of Emmett and Mamie before he left for Mississippi. My eye was drawn first to his cheeks, mi cachetón. The flesh is full, round, and fatty, and Emmett smiles at the camera, a fifth of his face blanketed by shade. He wears a white shirt and a dark tie, bisected by a vertical white stripe, and, gently, the tie embraces the circumference of his neck. The background seems to be a white wall on which, slightly left of center, a photograph is pinned. I cannot discern the image, but it looks like a bird's eye view of a body of water, a lake, perhaps, that brushes up against a lushly wooded green. Emmett continues to smile and his long eyelashes, I imagine, endow us with a flutter.

The blackness of Emmett’s shadow punctuates the space between himself and his mother. Mamie’s shadow creeps out of focus and disappears into the right side of the photograph. Lost in her slick, black hair, which is curled into a mound, inches above Emmett’s handsome, cropped fade, I notice that a wedge of curls fall across her forehead. The sharpness of her eyebrows complements the precision of the dimple in her cheek and the silky, ruffled veil of her dress reaches for Emmett’s left ear. If Emmett cannot see, then he can at least feel her radiance and her love. Mamie loops her right arm around her son, and all her fingers, save for the thumb, stroke Emmett’s collarbone. She is his and he hers, and our future—the black future—begins with her smile.