“The Inhabitants of the Deep:” Water and the Material Imagination of Blackness

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School
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2017

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned."

If the biblical Exodus begins with Moses turning to see the bush burning, yet not consumed, my dissertation turns aside to see that "sign and wonder" which arguably founds the kindred exodus of the African Diaspora. That great, if impossible, sight which Olaudah Equiano beheld from the deck of a slave ship: the slaves underwater, yet not dead, those he bafflingly names the "*inhabitants* of the deep." In a narrative explicitly committed to telling the truth about the horrors of the African slave trade, why does Equiano use "inhabitants," a word typically reserved for the living, to describe those we know to be dead? Moreover, how can he possibly claim to "env[y] them the *freedom* they enjoyed?" Yet, if we suspend our initial objections to Equiano's apparent misnaming of the drowned, and take seriously the lives that were *lived* underwater, awfully abbreviated as they were, then what emerges is a profoundly ecological vision of life and freedom.

Compelled by Equiano's miraculous vision of life and freedom underwater, *Inhabitants of the Deep* undertakes a black ecocritical study of the trope of water in African Diasporic literature. Over the course of five chapters, I elucidate how black literature recursively figures "how it feels to be a problem," to borrow W.E.B. Du Bois' oft-cited phrase, as a crisis of having no ground originating with and haunted by the waters of Middle Passage. Take Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, for instance, whose fear rendered his legs "like water." Or the black folk in *Invisible Man*, who shoot up from the South with a gait like "that of deep sea divers suffering from the bends." Or even Emmett Till (or Trayvon Martin more recently), whose Tallahatchie River grave belies the radical

exclusion of blackness from modern subjectivity and its constitutional obsession with the right to "stand your ground." In black studies, perhaps the most influential delineation of the "problem" of being black is Orlando Patterson's notion of "social death." On the one hand, inhabitation of the deep in the texts I examine registers this radical exclusion from human society. But on the other hand, I also argue that, due to the seemingly conflicting demands of a responsibility to bear witness to how we are *weighed* in the water, relatively little scholarly attention is given to the emancipatory and ecological ends to which black folks also, in the words of the old negro spiritual, *wade* in the water. Employing ecocriticism's broader analytic of the ecological, rather than an exclusively human notion of the social, this study argues for the ecological and revolutionary significance of such wading. Far from social death, I posit that inhabitation of the deep, when recognized as exclusion from a social configuration of the human that is itself asocial and anti-ecological, actually uniquely positions blackness to think and enact a more genuinely social, because also ecological, life.

Besides outlining a genealogy of black wading in the water, this study primarily contends that such wading is performed most significantly as an act of imagination. One that historically derives from African captives' momentous encounter with the ocean precipitated by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Although Africans undoubtedly possessed their own conceptions of water prior to the Atlantic crossing, historian Stephanie Smallwood has explained that "the landless realm of the deep ocean did not figure in precolonial West African societies." Thus, I argue that the Middle Passage required African slaves to perform a terrific feat of imagination. Theirs was the historical labor of

having to make a ground out of no ground, of having to imagine and improvise a life lived absolutely at sea without even the faintest relief of a future promised land. *Inhabitants of the Deep* looks at the black expressive traditions produced in the wake of and profoundly informed by this imaginative feat. Thus, beyond merely figuring a "problem," as yet another sign of black abjection or social death, I argue that water also yields the feature element of what I call, following Gaston Bachelard, the *material imagination of blackness*. This is the water-wading imagination that I understand to be at work when Dionne Brand writes in *Map to the Door of No Return*, "water is the first thing in my imagination," or when M NourbeSe Phillip writes in *Zong!*, "always what is going on seems to be about water." Over the course of three chapters, in a project both multi-generic and interdisciplinary in scope, I outline the creative history of this water-wading imagination as it may be detected in black fiction (Chapter 1), drama (Chapter 2), and photography (Chapter 3). Ultimately, I demonstrate how the water-induced problem of having no ground has simultaneously occasioned a longstanding meditation on the physiopoetic properties of water. And this meditation, I argue, has given rise to a black poetic and ethical imagination that inspires literary creation as well as enactments of black social life that, in their refusal of solid ground, embrace a more ecological and entangled vision of life and freedom.

BROADER SIGNFICANCE

By taking up water in this way, my dissertation participates in the recent "oceanic turn" of the environmental humanities as exemplified in the emerging subfield of

“oceanic studies” and books like Dan Brayton’s *Shakespeare’s Ocean*. Included in this turn is a critique of what scholars have labeled the “terracentrism” or “green bias” of the environmental humanities, which are terms meant to express the field’s over-preoccupation with land at the expense of a general neglect of what Herman Melville called the “watery part of the world.” Brayton, in particular, argues that this neglect stems from a longstanding cultural status of the sea in the West as an ahistorical realm of disorder and chaos or what he alternatively describes, in a manner stunningly similar to the cultural status of blackness in the West, as “a void forever evincing a hostile alterity” and “lying eternally outside of human social constructs.”

While I largely affirm this critique, which serves to amplify, by extending to the sea, ecocriticism’s originating critique of a neglect of the environment at large, I do so by calling attention to the unacknowledged ways in which black literature’s ongoing meditation on water speaks to and anticipates the oceanic turn currently underway in the environmental humanities. Furthermore, I arrive at this important critical conversation from the vantage point of the writings and voices of those who hardly enjoyed the inside of humanity’s social contracts to begin with. What populates the constitutive outside of humanity’s social contracts is not only the ocean, as the hyper-marginalized sector of an already marginal environment, but also blackness. Thus, in order to be thought completely, I propose that blackness and the environment must be thought together, since it is their colluding degradation and exclusion which founds modernity’s dominant configuration of the social.

For this reason, I turn in *Inhabitants of the Deep* to a study of the material

imagination of blackness. Born, as I claim, of the material realities of the "lived experience of blackness," and that experience's encapsulating likeness to an experience of water, the material imagination of blackness has long understood that the Earth consists of both land *and* sea, and set about the labor of imagining life on Earth accordingly. August Wilson captures this exact insight when he writes in *Gem*, "Some know about the land. Some know about the water. But there is some that know about the land and the water. They got both sides of it." Spared neither the vicissitudes of nature's greens nor its blues, the material imagination of blackness merits critical attention precisely as that which harbors the knowledge of "both sides of it." In the context of environmentalism's growing attentiveness to "the watery part of the world," its significance should be understood in relation and distinction to an otherwise impoverished western environmental or planetary imagination that to increasingly devastating effects has disproportionately imagined, with respect to land, life on a planet overwhelmingly made of water.

Dedication

for my father, who baptized
me in the atlantic
in the name of the father, son, and holy ghost

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Introduction

The Blueness of Blackness: The "Problem" of Water in African Diasporic Literature

always what is going on seems to be about water
—M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*

Water is the first thing in my imagination.
—Dione Brand, *Map to the Door of No Return*

But would they be ready to use as a figure a fact which so sorely manifested their slavery. I hardly think it.
—George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*

I. Coloring Book

The problem of the twenty-first century is still the problem of the color-line. Though perhaps, in the years since W.E.B. Du Bois' famous proclamation about the twentieth century, the colors we now have to consider are no longer so black and white, at least in the same sense that this racial binary was thought at the outset of the twentieth century.[1] Black Studies scholars, for instance, have asked us to think black not as an essential racial category attended by a particular set of aesthetic norms, but rather as a mode of sociality whose aesthetic protocols are to be read more openly and flexibly.[2] But beyond even the call to think black differently, scholars working within the environmental humanities and the field of ecocriticism have also challenged us to think *green*. In fact, we can point to a mutually enriching conversation between the fields

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[1] Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
[2] Here, I am responding specifically to the noticeable reflex of recent black studies scholarship which begins by rehearsing some version of the question: what is blackness? See, Evie Shockley's *Renegade Poetics* or Paul Taylor's *Black is Beautiful*.

ecocriticism and black studies that has yielded important discussions around the issues of environmental racism and environmental justice, which have not only challenged black thinkers to think green, but also green thinkers to think black.[3] Not to mention the *blue* turn currently underway in the environmental humanities, which, in addition to a previous inattentiveness to issues of race, has further critiqued ecocriticism for sustaining a "green bias," or an over-preoccupation with land at the expense of a general neglect of the sea.[4] Similarly, historians like Marcus Rediker have argued that history is likewise plagued by a "terra-centrism" that has resulted in the neglect of the sea as a meaningful site of historical inquiry.[5] It is within the context of this neglect that we should appreciate the intervention of the relatively recent work around the Atlantic in all of its manifestations—"Black," "Circum-," "Trans-," and "Queer"—as well as attempts to attend to the history of the Pacific and Indian Oceans or the Mediterranean Sea.[6] Yet, that both history and ecocriticism show signs of this preference for land suggests the possibility that, more than any single discipline's oversight, this profound land-orientation may actually be epistemological. Perhaps, it betrays something deep about not only how we organize knowledge, but also how we think and imagine. The possibility

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[3] I have in mind the recent anthology of edited by Camille Dungy, *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Writing* as well as the black ecocritical studies, *Black on Earth* by Kimberly Ruffin and Race and Nature by Paul Outka.
[4] See, Hester Blum's article "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies" in the special *PMLA* issue on "Oceanic Studies" and Daniel Bryant's *Shakespeare's Ocean*.
[5] Redicker's scholarship in general responds to this oversight. But for his discussion of terracentrism in particular, see: Rediker, Marcus. *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2014.
[6] Scholarship on the Black Atlantic is extensive. But some emblematic studies that employ and introduce the terms I have listed above include: Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, and Natasha Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's article, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage" in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*.

that in all our exercises of mind, we fetishize solid ground, prioritize the carving out of some stable foundation upon which we might under*stand*. The etymological sense of the word—"to step under" or "to take upon oneself"—bespeaks the an image of literally stepping under and bearing up the weight of knowledge.[7] Taken this way, the old Enlightenment adage, "I think therefore I am," can be recognized to belie within it an unspoken prosthesis to thought. Namely, domesticated ground always already given in facilitation of human understanding and, consequentially, the being of not just man, but who we must further recognize as *standing man*. What's fundamentally at stake in the instrumentation of thought as a litmus for ontology, then, is the need to secure some stable foundation in order to create the conditions of possibility for our thinking, the organization of our thinking, and its preservation. We can hardly appreciate meaning otherwise. Until solid ground, our troubled minds wait like Noah in his ark for the olive branch of peace. But there's a problem in all this. For if, in the West, our backs really are to the sea, in some deep and culturally sustained way as Daniel Brayton argues in *Shakespeare's Ocean*, then the question with which we have to contend is: What does it mean to disproportionately think and imagine, with respect to land, life on a planet mostly made of water?[8]

In the troubled years to come, I submit that our color thinking will have to proceed in shades of black, green, and blue, as these may be understood to form the elect, tripartite, and triune antagonists of whiteness, its colored neighbors across the color-line.

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[7] See specifically the etymology in, "underˈstand, v." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 16 March 2017.
[8] See the Introduction, "Back's to the Sea?", of Daniel Brayton's *Shakespeare's Ocean*.

But what these pages specifically undertake is a black study of this blue, as that hue which, for reasons to be explored, may afford us the opportunity to think the intersection of black and green as the colluding racial and environmental degradation foundational to the modern world. I say foundational because one way to think about the achievement of modernity, or what whiteness has visited upon the Earth, is the dissemination and sedimentation of a particular practice of ground. One indexed, for instance, in the motive expressed in J.W. Milam's confession to the murder of Emmett Till in *Look Magazine*: "just so everybody can know how me and my folks *stand*."[9] Or, by way of a metaphor that also confesses, in humanity's conspicuous carbon *footprint*. Against this "dominating stand," as Ralph Ellison names it in *Invisible Man*, and what I am proposing can be thought even more precisely as the "dominating stand" of whiteness, these pages are after some other posture of being in the world, some other relation to the ground.[10] But make no mistake about it. This is nothing short of a call for the end of the world. Just as it is also a call to come to terms more fully with whiteness as planetary practice, as worlding. The world created by and in the image of whiteness—as how it feels *not* to be a problem and as flight from precariousness—must end.[11] Like Moses' burning bush, then, these former trees burn with a prayer that asks us to take our shoes off and know the stuff beneath our feet again as holy ground. It's not merely incidental that this peculiar episode

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[9] Huie, William B. "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." *Look Magazine* 24 Jan. 1956: 46–50.
[10] Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, 1952.
[11] I borrow the formulation of whiteness as "how it feels *not* to be a problem" from Paul Outka. See, Paul Outka. *Race and Nature: From Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.

precedes the Exodus of the Israelites. The theory and practice of our gait is the first order of business of any genuine enactment of flight or fugitivity, of revolution, of the start of the end of the world. Here, in the collapsing space and elapsing time between our feet and the ground, at this ground-zero of sociality and the given problem of Relation and life together, human and nonhuman (the only given thing we've got), is where we begin to think and reimagine not only something like freedom, but life itself. And for such an endeavor of thought and study, there are perhaps no better interlocutors than the water beset soles of black folk, who, though strangers to neither arks or branches, never received modernity's memo of the olive branch. They remain instead in the passionate throes of the naïve questions that Édouard Glissant speculates that middle passing slaves, unfamiliar with the landless realm of the deep ocean, must have asked of the planet from the holds of slave ships: "What kind of river then has no middle? Is nothing there but straight ahead?"[12]

Or this question: what kind of ground is no ground?

II. No Body Knows the Water I've Seen

The problem of blackness is the problem of water. It's precisely this water problem that concerns M. NourbeSe Philip in the poems of *Zong!*, in which she undertakes the paradoxical labor of telling a story "there is no telling," while nevertheless insisting that "it must be told."[13] In 1731, 133 slaves aboard the Zong, the British slave

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[12] Glissant, Édouard, and Betsy Wing. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997. p, 7.
[13] Philip, Marlene Nourbese. *Zong!* Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. p, 189.

ship from which Philip's collection derives its name, were ordered to be thrown overboard after the ship's captain determined that, because of the slaves' declining health, their insurance policy would yield a greater profit than their sale. In a journal reflecting on her attempt to "not tell this story which must be told," Philip observed the following about the experimental writing practice she adopts in order to negotiate the impossibility of her witness: "always what is going on seems to be about water" (195). Taking my cue from this passing remark in Philip's writing journal, I want to investigate the possibility that a *reading* journal committed to a survey of the literature of the African Diaspora might arrive at a similar conclusion. Thus, in the pages to follow, I stage a reading experiment that interrogates the extent to which "always what is going" in the black literary tradition "seems to be about water."

The motivation for undertaking such a reading experiment is born of the years I've spent eavesdropping, in classrooms and coffee shops or the library-anywheres where two or three books are gathered, on how black literature wrestles into words what Frantz Fanon has called "the lived experience of blackness."[14] Such wrestling manifests in the paradoxical attempts of black writers to describe what the self-professedly ineffable experience of blackness—which spans the historical episodes of Middle Passage, slavery, colonization, and their afterlives—is like. Consider, for instance, the black folk in *Invisible Man* (1952), who "shoot up from the South" with a gait "*like* that of deep sea divers suffering from the bends."[15] Or Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* (1940), whose "fear

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[14] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 2008.
[15] Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*.

rendered his legs *like* water."[16] The appeal to "like" in either of these attempts at description registers a general strategy of analogy that I submit has long facilitated the impossible witness of a literary tradition that harbors the terrible testimony of, to invoke a Du Boisian phrase, how it feels to be a problem. Yet, it's not just that Wright and Ellison appeal to analogy as a general technology for representing the "problem." They also deploy analogy in a strikingly similar way that I want to suggest is emblematic of a broader pattern throughout the tradition at large. That is, both glimpse the nature of the "problem" of being black by appealing particularly to water. Where what specifically seems to suit water to the representation of this "problem" is its incompatibility as ground, or at least the sort of ground upon which we could hope to stand. In other words, I am arguing that this recurrence of the analogy of blackness' sea legs that we witness in Wright and Ellison is emblematic of the general way in which African Diasporic literature recursively figures how it feels to be a problem as a water-induced crisis of having no ground.

That the impossibility of black literature's witness arises out of an imperative to speak to its unspeakable problem recalls the familiar dilemma confronted by Du Bois in the opening sentences of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

> Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your

[16] Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. 1st Perennial Classics ed. New York: HarperPerennial, 1998.

> blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (7)

Given the similarities of their mutual difficulty speaking to the "problem," Du Bois may be read in the passage above as a metonym for the black literary tradition. While to read Du Bois in this way risks reducing the tradition to a mediation on the problem of being black in a way that I do not intend, by doing so I mean only to accentuate the ways in which this literary tradition may be recognized as engaging, from its slave narrative beginnings, in a practice of testimony and witness that, in its attempt to represent the "problem" of being black, arrives again and again at the limit of the expressive power of words. Thus, analogy, which as a supplement to bare words, appeals to whatever image it invokes, represents one of the strategies available to this tradition to "not tell" its ineffable story. When to "not tell" or to answer "seldom a word" isn't to not testify or answer nothing, but rather constitutes a viable form of telling in its own right that necessarily appeals to extra-verbal modes of expression. We may therefore think Wright's and Ellison's recourse to the analogy of blackness' sea legs in relationship to the well-remarked way in which this tradition has similarly been understood to appeal to music in order to not tell its story which must be told.

Two particularly illustrative incidents of this appeal to music to express meaning that lies beyond words are found in the privileged power of expression that Frederick Douglass and Du Bois credit to negro spirituals in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *Souls*, respectively. Douglass, for instance, remarks that the "deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs" could do "more to impress some

minds with the horrible character of slavery than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do." Somehow in their rudeness and incoherence, qualities which we don't usually associate with eloquence, Douglass explains that these songs:

> told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an *expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek*. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul—and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because "there is no flesh in his obdurate heart."[17] (emphasis added)

So Douglass describes the expressive power of the spirituals, and sound more generally, to render the otherwise "ineffable" effects of slavery. But it is also worth noting, given this project's immediate concern with water, the other expressive medium that supplements words in the passage above. Namely "the *expression* of feeling," or tear, that Douglass informs his reader is concurrent with the writing of these words. So that perhaps he too might have remarked with Philip that "always what is going on seems to

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[17] Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988. p, 38.

be about water." In the context of the passage above, sound in fact shares the burden of extra-verbal expression with the material sign of water.

We find that spirituals fulfill this same function, and in a way that similarly suggests some signifying collaboration with water, in *Souls*. In "The Sorrow Songs," a chapter devoted entirely to the negro spirituals, Du Bois describes the "heart-touching witness of these songs":

> I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world….They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways. (169)

Yet Du Bois' appeal to sound is not limited to this chapter alone, but operates as a primary means of expressing the problem of being black throughout *Souls*. It has gone well-remarked that each chapter of *Souls* begins with the same general epigraphic pattern: a poem from the Euro-American literary canon followed by a lyric-less fragment of sheet music from a number of prominent negro spirituals. Explaining this aesthetic decision, Du Bois writes:

> [B]efore each thought that I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men. Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine. (167)

That "these weird old songs" come before the words "written in this book" once again privileges sound as a medium suited to the expression of a problem that exceeds what words alone can say. It also bears mentioning that, while unknown on the level of understanding in a way echoed in Douglass, these songs are rather known to Du Bois on the level of expressing a cultural and aesthetic relation, of expressing a unity between

"me and mine," which we are otherwise in the habit of calling blackness. But I want to specifically call our attention to the epigraph which begins the first chapter of *Souls,* "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," and immediately precedes Du Bois' introduction of the ineffable "problem" of being black. I submit that, in addition to gesturing, once again, toward the expressive power of sound, this epigraph also, in a manner similar to Douglass, solicits the signifying capacities of water in a way that further develops and informs the analogous relation between water and the "problem" of being black that I am attempting to elucidate.

The poem-song combination that furnishes the epigraph of "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" begins with an untitled poem by British poet Arthur Raymond, in which one can immediately recognize the prominence of water:

> O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand,
> All night long crying with a mournful cry,
> As I lie and listen, and cannot understand
> The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea,
> O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?
> All night long the water is crying to me.
>
> Unresting water, there shall never be rest
> Till the last moon droop and the last tide fail,
> And the fire of the end begin to burn in the west;
> And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the sea,
> All life long crying without avail,
> As the water all night long is crying to me. (7)

This poem, to which Du Bois assigns the special responsibility of beginning the opening chapter of *Souls*, is tellingly addressed to water. Given our specific interrogation of water's relation to the ineffable problem of being black, it is further significant that water appears in the poem specifically in the form of "the voice of the sea," a voice that is

"crying," and which the poem's first-person and presumably white speaker "cannot understand." Then there is the fact that the poem is followed by an untitled and wordless fragment of sheet music which, we only belatedly learn in "The Sorrow Songs," sounds out the melody of the well-known negro spiritual, "No Body Knows the Trouble I've Seen." Arriving at this musical phrase, after having comfortably read the words of the poem, Du Bois' readership is confronted with a significantly less straightforward exercise of reading. With no title or lyrics to aid them in this reading dilemma staged by Du Bois, the only instrument available to the reader for making sense of the musical notation is the voice, and the speechless voice, in particular. This assumes, of course, that Du Bois' readers are even able to read music. In the event that they are not, these musical notes merely cry out to those who, in a manner conspicuously parallel to the speaker of the poem, "cannot understand."

Taken together, as their presence together in a single epigraph seems to encourage, this white poem and black song establish a dynamic of communication that fails across the color-line, in the expansive sense that we have understood it previously. The very construction of the epigraph, poem followed by song, not only structurally renders the song as a response to this poem written in the mode of address, but suggests that this black and illegible song actually sustains an incomprehensibility response that initiates with respect to the environment (green), and the ocean in particular (blue), within the body of the poem itself. Just as the poem is addressed to "the voice of the sea," which the speaker cannot understand, the song sounds out a trouble which Nobody, speaker presumably included, Knows.

This failed communication across the color-line in the epigraph is redoubled in the famous passage that immediately follows: Du Bois' previously quoted description of the ever unasked question that stands between him and the white world—"How does it feel to be a problem?"—to which he also illegibly answers "seldom a word." Together, the epigraph and this passage establish a layered parallel between the "voice of the sea" which cannot be understood, the musical "trouble," which cannot be read and which nobody knows, and the "problem" which cannot be spoken, that compels us to think the precise nature of their interrelation, and invites speculation about the possibility that water, and the sea in particular, *is* this trouble and problem which no body knows and which can't be spoken, but perhaps can be voiced, if as the phrase "voice of the sea" seems to suggest, water really may be understood to furnish a kind of a voice.

The specific circumstances that precipitated the creation of "No Body Knows the Trouble I've Seen," which Du Bois details in the final chapter of *Souls*, further suggests this relationship between the problem and water. Du Bois writes:

> When, struck with a sudden poverty, the United States *refused to fulfill its promises of land to the freedmen*, a brigadier-general went down to the Sea Islands to carry the news. An old woman on the outskirts of the throng began singing this song; all the mass joined her, swaying. And the soldier wept. (170, emphasis added)

This specific sorrow song, then, is rooted in the trouble of having no land, this "swaying" relation to the ground which echoes the self-same trouble visited upon the slaves thrown overboard the Zong, who in steps too short upon the face of the Atlantic, were also refused the promises of land. Echoes too in the water-frustrated posture of Bigger Thomas and the sea-legged black folk in *Invisible Man*.

The white general may further be read as a kind of foil to the first-person speaker of the poem. Like the speaker, who is close enough to the sea to hear its voice, the general similarly goes down to the Sea Islands and hears a song. In a way, both participate, with a different location, in the type of listening session prescribed by Douglass when he suggests that to be impressed by the soul killing effects of slavery, one has only to visit the deep pine woods of Colonel Lloyd's plantation and "analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul." On the one hand, if we accept Douglass as a suitable judge of the listening experiment he prescribes, we might conclude that "there is no flesh in [the] obdurate heart" of the speaker who "cannot understand/…the voice of the sea" crying out to him. Indeed, it's something like this hardened or estranged heart that is suggested by the fact that the speaker also "cannot understand/ The voice of [his] heart." The weeping soldier, on the other hand and in contrast, gets got by the sound in much the same way as tearful Douglass, and in such a way that would suggest that his, if it wasn't before, is a heart of flesh sensitive to "the heart-touching witness of these songs."

III. The Angel of the History of the Black

However, this recurring image of the faltering soles of black folk is no mere invention of fiction. It's as much literal (and, for that matter, littoral) as literary. Its claim to analogy in the strictly figurative sense is not pure. Rather, the growing catalogue of water-beset steps that I hope to elucidate as a foundational trope of the black literary tradition is attended by a material history that originates with the black maritime

experience of Middle Passage. In *Poetics of Relation* (2006), Édouard Glissant remembers the literal crisis of groundlessness that history visited upon the soles of slaves, who, like the 133 aboard the Zong, were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage:

> Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands. Navigating the green splendor of the sea…still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. (6)

Glissant's meditation upon drowned slaves calls our attention to the historical moment when the inability to stand on the water was not merely like, but quite literally *was* how it felt to be a problem. These countless literal crises of groundlessness, which occurred all throughout the duration of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, threaten the purely literary status of the analogy of the faltering soles of black folks. The painful and protracted history that accompanies the discovery of this image as a suitable means of expressing the problem of being black might have been unwittingly summarized by Gaston Bachelard in *Water and Dreams*:

> Images discovered by men evolve slowly, painfully; hence Jacques Bousquet's profound remark: "A new image costs humanity as much labor as a new characteristic costs a plant."[18]

So might we characterize the painful centuries of not just labor, but modernity's paradigmatic laborers, i.e. slaves, which constitute the mounting historical cost incurred in the discovery of images like Wright's and Ellison's respective portraits of blackness'

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[18] Bachelard, Gaston, and Edith R. Farrell. *Water and Dreams : An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1999.

sea legs. And incurred especially and first by those middle passing slaves who learned the awful lesson of how to blink with their feet as well as their eyes.

Perhaps the steps blinked upon the face of the Atlantic were what Ed Roberson had in mind in the writing of these lines from *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In* (1995):

> The footprint on the water, filling.
>
> Often you don't even notice the steps,
> that is that each
> is *bridged* by the falling body to the next,
>
> Discontinuous through the ground.[19] (36)

In the lines above, Roberson zeroes in on and decelerates the infinitesimal instant that a foot contacts the water, and asks us, however counterintuitively, to credit to this abruptly fleeting moment an actual footprint. But one that, relative to the cleanly delineated molds that we delight to leave in the sand or snow, takes on water like a sinking ship and dissolves, unraveled by a mouthful of sea. Perhaps we "don't even notice the steps" like those swallowed by the Atlantic because they disappoint our basic expectation of what a viable step is. Namely, if I may hazard a definition, a *pedestrian* engagement with ground propelling the body horizontally and continually (for each step begs another) through space. That, in addition to a person walking, "pedestrian" can also in its adjectival form mean uneventful or commonplace bespeaks just how given we perceive this engagement with ground to be. It implies a decidedly impoverished notion of ground as the given support and foundation of our every kinetic whim, and thus, something like an "infinite

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[19] Roberson, Ed. *Voices Cast out to Talk Us in: Poems*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995. p, 36.

limb," the planet's unquestioning punctuation of autonomous human motion. Relative to this understanding of what constitutes a step, and the reduced notion of ground implicit therein, Roberson's "footprint on the water, filling," registers as a failed, and thereby, illegible step. Part of this step's failure inheres in its inability to perform autonomy by managing to subsume and domesticate ground as the infinite limb. Here, far from given, ground gives too much. Furthermore, if under normal circumstances a step should constitute an interstitial unit of *continuous* motion horizontally across space, Roberson's footprint also fails in the sense that it flounders "*[d]iscontinuous* through the ground." As far as progress is concerned, the soles of these black folk never quite manage to get started. Instead they are held by the water in a vertical stall, like floundering fossils stuttering forever outside the progressive march of historic time.

Yet, failures aside, Roberson insists that we notice in this footprint drowning in ground's give an actual step. And this noticing, for Roberson, is not just a matter of attending to isolated steps that we might otherwise easily overlook, but also of the connections between such precarious step. The fact "that each/ is bridged by the falling body to the next." These lines from Roberson articulate an ethic of noticing, of bearing witness not only to the steps that faltered on the face of the Atlantic, but also the bridge of falling bodies connecting each awful step to the next in what constitutes what should be recognized as a genealogy of the faltering soles of black folk. Moreover, I propose that the purview of this bridge of falling bodies is not limited to the water alone, in the way glimpsed by Glissant's underwater columns of drowned slaves, but extends to wherever and whenever it is that black bodies still fall. In other words, there is a history of falling

to which I am arguing we must attend that, even if instigated by the waters of the Middle Passage, persists well beyond this particular season of the diaspora as the organizing "problem" of blackness. A problem of a precarious relation to ground that did not simply dissipate when slaves gained the other shore. Indeed, the soles of black folk falter as much on land as they do at sea.

Consider the example of Emmett Till, whose Tallahatchie River grave, along with the more recent death of Trayvon Martin and the host of black folk who have lost their lives to the police, broadly considered as to also include forms of white vigilante justice and surveillance, bespeaks blackness' radical exclusion from modern subjectivity and its constitutional obsession with the right to "stand your ground." Or Fanon, for whom, at the interpellating cry of "Look, a Negro!" in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), *terra firma* began "to rock with laughter," the way sailors know to expect at sea, until his "feet no longer felt the caress of the ground" (117). All these incidents of the foundering soles of black folk populate the cacophonous wreckage of the water-haunted images ever accumulating, though never quite piling *up*, at the feet of the Angel of the History of the Black. In distinction to Benjamin's famed "Angelus Novus," the domain of this angel's flight portends not to the land, but to the sea. It may be spotted in an early passage from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (henceforward *The Interesting* Narrative), which shows a slave ship that looks as though it were about to move away from something Equiano is staring at:

> Soon after this the blacks who brought me on board went off, and left me abandoned to despair. I now saw myself deprived of all chance of

> returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore.[20]

What I am calling the Angel of the History of the Black must look just like this ship, ever receding from the land with the wings of its sails unfurled and full of the wind issuing forth from the storms of modernity. Perhaps Frederick Douglass establishes sufficient precedent for reading the ship in this way when he writes of the "swift winged *angels*" in motion across the Chesapeake Bay.[21] But further precedent still may be found in a Derek Walcott poem, which insists that "The Sea is *History*."[22] And where we might see, in the aforementioned catalogue of crises of having no ground, a chain of discrete events our angel sees only the "one single catastrophe" that we otherwise call Middle Passage. And the peculiar pile created by this black maritime disaster is inverted, growing ocean-deep rather than sky high. The "rubble on top of rubble" that it heaps at the feet of our angel, we are given to understand by Édouard Glissant's memorialization of incidents like Zong in *Poetics of Relation*, consists rather harrowingly of slave on top of sinking slave.

I am forwarding a possible vision of the history of black peoples in which the chains binding the underwater columns of drowned slaves extend unbroken unto figures as diverse as Fanon, Bigger, or Trayvon Martin. In which, we might recognize in the wobbly gait of Ellison's "deep sea divers," or the water-frustrated posture of Bigger, or Fanon's groundlessness, something of the crisis originally visited upon the soles of the

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[20] Equiano, Olaudah, and Werner Sollors. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African : An Authoritative Text*. 1st. ed. New York: Norton, 2001. p, 39.
[21] Douglass, Frederick. p, 96.
[22] Walcott, Derek, and Edward Baugh. *Selected Poems*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. p, 137.

over-the-side ones in the steps they blinked upon the face of the Atlantic. That like Equiano, "who saw [him]self deprived of all chance of" regaining the land, this tradition sees itself as profoundly divested of the ground, thinks this divestment as the problem of being black, and figures this problem through a recursive appeal to water.

But, if, in this first instance, we'll mean "problem" in the now dominant sense of "a matter or situation regarded as unwelcome, harmful, or wrong and needing to be overcome," we will also come, over the course of our reading experiment, to think the problem of being black in that older, and more open sense of "a *question* of academic discussion," which you'll notice, in contrast to the former connotation, has yet to determine decisively whether the problem of being black is an unwelcome one or not, and thus leaves open the possibility for some other understanding of or orientation toward blackness than a problematic condition needing to be overcome.[23] More specifically, we will have occasion to consider the extent to which water's representation of the problem of being black in African Diasporic literature also gives rise to the elaboration of an ecological vision of human sociality to which, far from overcoming, we had rather and better consent.

With this latter possibility, I mean to suggest how, along with water's association with the problem of being black and the historical incidents populating the genealogy of the foundering soles of black folk, we have also to consider the significance and implications (for how we think, imagine, and conceive of social life) of what we must

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[23] See: "problem, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 16 March 2017.

nonetheless appreciate as the paradigm-altering and explosive insight that "The Sea is History." Indeed, such a claim is no straightforward proposition in a western context in which Brayton has argued "the historicity of the ocean has been consistently denied, repressed, or erased."[24] So that, as far as the West is concerned, the sea *isn't* history. Indeed, according to Brayton, the sea generally presents throughout Western culture as little more than "a colorful blue background against which the *important* action—war, desire, nation-formation—occasionally takes place." He argues that the roots of this "longstanding cultural status of the sea in Western culture as a realm of chaos and radical alterity" derive from "biblical and Hellenic cosmogonies" and are "articulated within countless works of literature…[f]rom the book of Genesis to the English Romantic poets."

It is when we can anticipate the potentially devastating effects of disproportionately imagining with respect to land, life on a planet predominately made of water, that we are prepared to recognize in blackness' historical and figurative relation to the water, not a problem to be overcome, but a portrait of life on a watery planet that affords us a unique opportunity to think the Earth proportionately and anew.

With this understanding of African Diasporic literature as harboring the knowledge of the water as the planet's faithful prophet to the neglected sea, let us proceed on to our proposed reading experiment. The select passages that shall serve as the primary laboratory, or perhaps library is the better word here, for our reading experiment will come from Olaudah Equiano's late eighteenth century slave narrative,

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[24] Brayton, Daniel. *Shakespeare's Ocean*. p. 23.

The Interesting Narrative (1789) and Richard Wright's classic 1940 novel, *Native Son*. Though separated by nearly two centuries, I choose these texts in particular and by way of introduction because of the rich moments of intertextuality that they share around the trope of water, which, when considered together, will help guide us not only to an appreciation of water's historical relation to the problem of being black, but also to the enduring ways in which water remains, even into our contemporary moment, suited to the representation of this problem long after the obvious historical reasons for why this would be the case have elapsed.

III. The Dawning of Blackness

As we begin our reading experiment, perhaps we had better, in the mode of Hortense Spillers and the genealogy of black study in which she partakes, begin at the beginning.

> The symbolic order that I wish to trace in this writing, calling it an "American grammar," begins at the "beginning," which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation. The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness, that take place on the subsaharan Continent during the initiative strikes which open the Atlantic slave Trade in the fifteenth century of our Christ, interrupted hundreds of years of black African culture. We write and think, then, about an outcome of aspects of African-American life in the United States under the pressure of those events.[25]

This passage, excerpted from Spiller's groundbreaking essay *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, exemplifies a significant strain of thought within the field of Black Studies which

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[25] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (1987): 65–81.

understands the ordeal of being black to have first emerged during the forced abduction and trans-Atlantic migration of millions of slaves from the African continent to the New World, an event to which we more colloquially refer as the Middle Passage. Among the "we," who Spillers explains "write and think…under the pressure of the event" of Middle Passage, we might also include Édouard Glissant, who, in *Poetics of Relation*, asserted that: "[T]he entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green."[26]

Then, there is Fred Moten, who, in his essay "Blackness and Nothingness," observes, "it's terrible to have come from nothing but the sea, which is *nowhere*, navigable only in its constant autodislocation."[27] And finally, there's Frank Wilderson, who, in his book, *Red, White, and Black*, deemed Middle Passage the "dawning of blackness," or as he otherwise puts it, "the Black's first ontological instance."[28] The scholars included in this brief genealogy of black study, all trace the "problem" of being black back to the Middle Passage and the trouble visited upon slaves transported across the Atlantic, trouble which Spillers again describes as the opening up of a rupture that defines the originating and violent circumstances of the birth of African Diasporic culture. Water figures the problem, then, as that element which presided over blackness'

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[26] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 6.
[27] Fred, Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112.4 (2013): 737–780.
[28] Frank Wilderson, *White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010.

beginnings by bearing the terrible traffic of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. But what kind of beginning is the water? Spillers gives us to understand that, for the middle passing slave, water meant "rupture" and "interruption," a gaping tear in the fabric of African culture and life, a wound, blue and undressable, and, thus, a wounded beginning.

In an attempt, then, to begin our reading experiment at the beginning, I turn now to one of history's only accounts of Middle Passage written by and from the perspective of a slave who endured it. Early in *The Interesting Narrative*, the significance of which can hardly be overstated, the former slave Equiano offers his first-hand account of the water that there was at the "dawning of blackness":

> The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon *converted* into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of *bad spirits*, and that they were going to kill me.[29] (emphasis added)

This passage is, in the first case, significant because it actually documents what we have heard Wilderson call "the Black's first ontological instance," that is, Equiano's original interpellation as black and a slave, at the historical moment where these terms become perfect synonyms. This passage also documents, for that matter, "the White's first ontological instance" in the sense that white skin acquires new meaning as a signifier for not only "not a slave" or "free," but also "human."

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[29] Olaudah Equiano, Werner Sollors, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. p, 38.

But we have not fully appreciated this passage until we recognize that in it dawns not just blackness or whiteness, but an entire and attendant world. Which is to claim that what we witness in this incredibly significant passage from Equiano's narrative is nothing short of a veritable genesis, the creation of a world, the "New World" as it were, which Equiano had "gotten into," and which we might alternatively call, reflecting what many maintain as the centrality of slavery to any viable account of modernity, the modern world.[30]

To further elucidate this point, notice the resonances between the bad spirits hovering over the face of the Atlantic and that watery scene of beginning which is famously illustrated in the opening verses of the book of Genesis.

> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was without shape and empty, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the *Spirit* of God was hovering over the face of the waters.[31]

While in the Genesis account of creation it's darkness and the spirit of God that we find hovering over the face of the deep, in what I am suggesting we read as Equiano's narration of the creation of the New World, it is rather the bad spirit of whiteness and an ontologically demoted blackness that we find hovering over the face of the Atlantic aboard the slave ship. And, having gotten into this world of bad spirits, to which the racial parsing out and reconfiguration of the human gives rise, Equiano significantly is persuaded that he is going to die.

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[30] And this, I don't mean merely rhetorically. If as historian Smallwood has argued, the landless realm of the deep ocean did not figure in West African cosmologies, then in crossing the utterly alien space of the ocean, it would have been unknown to a slave that they were still on planet Earth, or at least, which is why literary reimaginations of MP are often staged as alien abductions

[31] Genesis 1:1-2 (KJV)

Turning again to the passage in question, we can isolate the creation of this New World of slavery, the precise moment of it's big bang so to speak, in the "conversion*"* at its center; the transformation of the "astonishment," that initially characterizes Equiano's emotional reaction to the ocean, into "terror." This emotional conversion signals another implicit, and more basic conversion, realized at precisely the moment Equiano is carried on board. That is, the moment Equiano realizes that the ship "waiting for its cargo," is waiting for *him*, that he *is* the cargo for which the slave-ship waits. It's this conversion, of a man into a black man, into a slave, of a person into an exchangeable and fungible commodity, I argue, that constitutes the epicenter around which the New or Modern World and its attendant social configurations of the human into citizens belong to nation states, reverberate into existence.

Yet, Equiano's persuasion that he had "gotten *into* a world of bad spirits" notwithstanding, this conversion should furthermore be recognized as effecting a radical exclusion from the realm of the human. In other words, this "into" should not be mistaken for inclusion in "the world of bad spirits," which is a white world, a world created by and in the bad spirit of whiteness. Rather, we know by his belief that this world of bad spirits was going to kill him, that Equiano has been included only as he who is going to be killed. His position, then, relative to this world may be more precisely theorized as an inclusive exclusion. Which is to say that Equiano had gotten into this world of bad spirits only as its constitutive and committed outside. He is included as the eternally excluded, and it is, in fact, his exclusion which creates and defines this white world in which he is not. This is precisely what Wilderson argues in *Red, White, and*

Black when he asserts that "the imaginary of the state and civil society is parasitic on the Middle Passage. Put another way, no slave, no world. And in addition…no slave is *in* the world."[32] The "world" whose creation we witness in the Middle Passage, then, is founded upon and sustained in the radical exclusion of blackness, and is, in this way, constitutionally anti-black. It is little wonder, then, that Equiano believed that these bad spirits and their world were going to kill him. In fact, being what it is, such a world as this could do nothing else.

Precisely because what's at stake in the problem of being black, is a world, the anti-black world, and not an event, period, or interval, we can expect a certain continuity of the "problem" beyond the centuries which hosted the Middle Passage (or the years of slavery for that matter). It's not as if, simply by gaining the other shore, the world into which Equiano had gotten suddenly dissipated. Even at the end of the beginning, time subsequent has still to follow in its wake. This is what we mean when we appreciate Middle Passage as beginning and genesis, which, though Spillers calls it a rupture, also paradoxically initiates what she describes as a "different kind of cultural *continuation*." And it's precisely this continuation—the "carceral continuum, " as Wilderson would have it—not only of the problem, but of the representation of the problem, which we glimpse some two centuries later, in Richard Wright's classic 1940 novel, *Native Son*, and in such a way as would suggest that this continuation is specifically a continuation of spirit.

In an understudied passage from the concluding chapter of Wright's novel, significantly titled "FATE," Wright depicts a despondent Bigger Thomas, the novel's

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[32] Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, p, 11.

protagonist, resigning himself to his impending execution after being apprehended by the police for his accidental and racially overdetermined murder of a white woman:

> Having felt in his heart some obscure need to be at home with people…and failed, he chose not to struggle any more. With a supreme act of will springing from the essence of his being, he turned away from his life and the long train of disastrous consequences that had flowed from it and looked wistfully upon the dark face of the ancient waters upon which some spirit had breathed and created him, the dark face of the waters from which he had been first made in the image of a man with a man's obscure need and urge; feeling that he wanted to sink back into those waters and rest eternally.[33]

I propose that by "ancient waters," Wright immediately intends the Atlantic Ocean. Yet, by casting these troubled waters in the familiar rhetoric of Genesis, he also means to ascribe to them a cosmological import, to, as we have observed with Equiano, once again credit them, and by extension the event of Middle Passage, with the creation of a world. And, since Wright situates this portrait of Bigger's resignation to his death in a chapter titled "Fate" it would appear that he too, like Equiano, had gotten into a world that was going to, because fated to, kill him. Furthermore, by employing the rhetoric of Genesis, Wright also signals to his readers, including us today, that so far as our world is concerned, we had just as well refer to Middle Passage in order to satisfy our cosmic curiosity about where it all comes from, than to open a Bible. Here is the beginning of our world, Wright tells us. Here, on the face of this deep.

Yet, for all of the ways in which he intentionally imitates the rhetoric of Genesis, Wright's rendering of the beginning nonetheless differs from the Genesis account in one

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[33] Richard Wright, *Native Son*, p, 253.

glaringly significant way, which helps us further to refine our understanding of what about water suits it to the representation of the problem of being black well into the twentieth century. Whereas, in Genesis, God "formed man of the dust of the *ground*, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life," Wright informs us that it was rather immediately and directly upon the water that "some *spirit* had breathed and created" Bigger. And what better culprit for Bigger's differentiated creation than those "bad spirits" we find pushing wind with their sails across the face of the Atlantic in Equiano's narrative? By thus distinguishing the creation of the black man from the creation of man universal, Wright illustrates the problem of being black as a matter of the black man's or slave's exclusion from the ontological property that Western or universal man otherwise claims mythically in the ground. In this way, the problem of blackness—relative to whiteness as how it feels not to be a problem, but merely to be—takes the specific form of an original and originating divestment of ground and a corresponding consignment to the water. So that the crisis of having no ground which the "ancient waters" visited upon the soles of the slaves thrown overboard from the *Zong* yields a physical dramatization of what was also and already metaphysically true of their ontological standing in this New World. Concomitantly, Wright implies an ideological construction of whiteness or the human that takes the specific form of an original and originating ontological claim to and in the ground in a way not all that unlike the evolutionary narration of the human as a biped, that is, as distinguished from the rest of the animal kingdom and nature by the ability to stand on two feet, the capacity to stand one's ontological ground, as it were, within and atop the hierarchy of nature.

Thus, even beyond the historical period of Middle Passage, what suits water to the representation of the problem of being black is the way that this element indexes what Wright gives us to understand as blackness' constitutive crisis of having no ground, a crisis initiating with and subsequently haunted by the "ancient waters" of Middle Passage. It is, in this way, that the ancient waters of Middle Passage reveal the barest and most essential feature of the problem of being black. Which, it turns out, is not primarily or at all a matter of coerced labor that can be remedied with the mere abolition of slavery, or human rights violations that can be amended by the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, but rather and most fundamentally, a condition of radical exclusion, often theorized in the field of black studies as the condition of "social death."[34] And something like "social death" is indexed in the inevitable failure of Bigger Thomas' "obscure need to be at home with people." Though, for reasons I will explore later, I stop short of describing black life in the utterly abject terms of Orlando Patterson's notion of "social death." Nonetheless, it should be recognized that it is in fact the failure of Bigger, and those like Bigger, to be at home with people, which constitutes the condition of possibility for people, that is white people, to be at home with one another in the first place. Which is why, Wilderson argues that, as an "ontological position…the slave is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity." Since the end of Bigger's struggle to be at home with people takes the specific form of sinking into the "ancient waters" of

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[34] See Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Middle Passage, Wright suggests the ways in which the slave's anti-humanity takes the specific form of what, relative to whiteness, is blackness' opposing inability to stand its ground.

This understanding of the "problem" as a crisis of having no ground is further informed by what the historian Stephanie Smallwood describes as the "unparalleled displacement" experienced by middle passing slaves in her book *Saltwater Slavery*:

> For African emigrants…the slave ship was not just a setting for brutality and death, but also *a locus of unparalleled displacement*. As the sight of land grew faint, or as the land disappeared suddenly on the closing of the hatch, the disorientation that for many had begun with the process of procurement on the African coast became more marked. Out of sight of any land, enslaved Africans commenced a march through time and space that stretched their own systems of reckoning to the limits.[35] (emphasis added)

As a "locus of unparalleled displacement," the slave ship, as experienced by the slave, presented a place whose very status as a place was serially undermined by its enactment of two kinds of displacement. First, the slave's displacement from their native lands, which Glissant imagines in terms of a mass vanishing punctuated by the disappearance of terra firma:

> …crossing in this way the land-sea that, unknown to you, is the planet Earth, feeling a language vanish, the word of the gods vanish, and the sealed image of even the most everyday object, of even the most familiar animal, vanish. The evanescent taste of what you ate. The hounded scent of ochre earth and savannas.[36]

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[35] Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007, p, 131.
[36] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p, 7.

Then there is the displacement effected by the simple fact of the slave ship's physical presence on the ocean, and what we have heard Moten describe as its "constant autodislocation," its restless filling and evacuation of space which, though enabling motion across, utterly frustrates any desire to stay put, fix, or define. If on terra firma, it becomes possible to take the ground for granted, to domesticate and demarcate it, build walls around it, transform it into guaranteed territory or private property, the ocean by contrast elicits our restless and conscious negotiation of not only space, but our relations with one another in space. The inconvenience of the ocean to the relation of men to the ground may in this way be likened to a painter having suddenly to wrestle with a canvas he previously thought passive. One would have to create, think, and imagine life differently.

What Smallwood helps to illuminate about the ordeal of Middle Passage for a slave, is even further complicated when she explains that "the landless realm of the deep ocean did not figure in precolonial West African societies." A detail, which, further informs our understanding of Equiano's initial astonishment upon seeing the ocean, an astonishment owing to the fact that he was seeing it for the very first time. Here, Glissant performs an invaluable service for our capacity to imagine the vicissitudes of what this must have been like when he ventriloquizes the passionate and naive questions that middle passing slaves asked the planet in the holds of slave ship. Though referenced earlier, they bear repeating: "What kind of river, then, has no middle? Is nothing there but straight ahead?" Given the limitations of the archive, we cannot ever be sure these questions were asked, but need to find some way of hearing them anyway.

Glissant's questions dramatize for us how Middle Passage required African slaves to perform a terrific feat of the imagination. Suddenly displaced from all signs of land, and neither being assured of reaching some future someplace other than the eternal now of the Atlantic, theirs was the historical labor of having to make a ground out of no ground, of having to imagine and improvise a life lived absolutely at sea, without even the faintest relief of a future promised land. Which is to say, that for the three months or so that it took a ship to cross the Atlantic, African slaves rehearsed and practiced an unstable occupation of and precarious negotiation of space that, because they could not be certain that it would ever end, came to be conflated in their minds with what it meant to live. With *LIFE* as such. It is this passing, passionate labor of mind, this black thought of the Earth, that I want to distinguish, after the poetic philosophy of Gaston Bachelard, as the *material imagination of blackness*. That is, a poetic and ethical imagination whose feature element is water and whose poetics is consequently animated by what may be might be recognized as water's physio-poetic properties. It's flow or liquidity, for instance.[37] It is with respect to the activity of this imagination that the slave may be recognized as a creature born of water, displaced from land, and excluded from the world. Indeed, while all of the world endeavored to live on land, the slave was *absolutely* at sea. Yet, if life, as such, has any integrity, such that it at all calls for a living practice commensurate and proportionate to the physical composition of our planet, or, put another way, if we take our mostly blue globe to make, by its composition, an immense

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[37] Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1999.

suggestion as to how we should comport ourselves on the Earth, then it may just be that the slaves of the hold *LIVED*. That in what we have had occasion to appraise as the "social death" of slaves and their descendants, we have also to recognize and contend with their profound practice of *ecological life*.

In contrast to the Middle Passage experience of the slave, Smallwood gives us to understand that the conditions typifying the European's trans-Atlantic voyage were significantly different:

> By the time Europeans began to colonize the New World, voyagers to the west were confident that their journey would follow a linear path, with known beginning and end points. European seamen translated the land-based systems of time-space reckoning of medieval Europe to the wider temporal and spatial context of life in a "new" Atlantic world.[38]

Thus, for European Man, the Atlantic functioned rather like a vestibule, and not a place or space to be regarded in itself or on its own terms, and certainly not a place of human habitation. Which is to say, Europeans traveled the ocean with the land in mind, and with a sense of space dominated by the privileges and possibilities of, and ways of knowing associated with, the land. Whatever crises instigated by the ocean as a space altogether other from terra firma were sufficiently accounted for and resolved by the technology of the boat. Indeed, for the European, the boat, was, or at least aspired to be, land at sea. Which is why, in a telling letter which Smallwood brings to our attention, a white traveler writing home to assuage the fears of his family of the dangers of the trans-Atlantic voyage could claim, in a way unthinkable to a slave who has just witnessed his shipmate being thrown overboard, that "a ship at sea may well be compared to a cradle rocked by a

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[38] Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, p, 131.

careful mother's hand, which though it be moved up and down is *not in danger of falling*" (emphasis added 129). Even at sea, then, the ship keeps the promises of the land to the soles of European feet, insures their not falling, in such a way that renders the ability to "stand your ground," in this middle passing moment, a distinct privilege of whiteness. And if, in arguing blackness is "social death," we unintentionally credit to whiteness something like social life, what are we to make of what registers here as a profound ecological death?

IV. "giving up on land to light on"

If, thus far, we have mostly meant "problem" in the more dominant sense of an unwelcome situation, i.e. social death, needing to be overcome, we will now transition to thinking the problem of being black in the more open sense of "a question of academic discussion," More specifically, we will consider the extent to which blackness' origins in the water might, beyond some definitive account of the beginning, gesture more significantly to an ethic for beginning, one which has much more to do with life than death.

Given the way that we have understood the "problem" of being black to inhere in a crisis of having no ground originating with and haunted by the waters of Middle Passage, Equiano's reaction to his initial confrontation with the brutal violence of slavery may come as a bit of a surprise. He writes:

> Two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the windlass and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced anything of this kind before, and although, not being used to

> the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped *over the side*.[39]

That, as an escape from the incredible violence of slavery, Equiano would wish to hasten the death for which he already anticipated that the New World of slavery was built is simple enough to grasp, at least intellectually. What is perplexing, however, is that for which Equiano went looking to the water. Not, at least in the first instance, only death, but Life:

> Often did I think many of the *inhabitants* of the deep much more happy than myself. I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and often wished I could change my condition for theirs.[40]

Equiano uses "inhabitants," a word typically reserved for the living, to describe those we otherwise know to be dead. And what's more, he claims to envy these slaves, their "freedom." Thus, if indeed always what is going on in African Diasporic literature seems to be about water, it would seem from this passage that it is not only to the end of representing the problem of being black as an ocean-induced crisis of having no ground, but paradoxically also to the end of generating alternative imaginings of life and freedom. Indeed, I propose that if we forgive Equiano's apparent misnaming of the drowned, and take seriously the lives that were *lived* underwater, awfully abbreviated as they were, then what emerges is an intensely precarious and profoundly ecological vision of life and freedom.

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[39] Olaudah Equiano, Werner Sollors, p, 39.
[40] Ibid, p, 41.

To further illuminate this point, we might return to the example of Bigger Thomas and Wright's portrait of Bigger's resignation to his death. In the paragraph that immediately follows the passage we have already considered, Wright recasts Bigger's resignation, first rendered as a desire to sink into the "ancient waters" of Middle Passage, in the more general terms of a merger with the natural world.

> The feelings of his body reasoned that if there could be no merging with men and women about him, there should be a merging with some other part of the natural world in which he lived. Out of the mood of renunciation there sprang up in him again the will to kill. But this time, it was not directed outward toward people, but inward, upon himself…This feeling sprang up of itself, organically, automatically; like the rotted hull of a seed forming the soil in which it should grow again.[41]

What are we to make of Bigger's desire to merge with the natural world in the face of a racial interdiction against being at home with men and women, whose very being as men and women Wright constructs as deriving from whiteness' ontological and mythological property in the "dry ground?" I'm not sure that Wright recognizes in this merging with the natural world anything beyond death. But that is not to say that we can't. In fact, I propose that the very fact that this merger with the natural world would effect a corresponding exclusion from human society puts pressure on the notion of blackness as "social death" by calling into question the sincerity of the human sociality belied as the referent of this social. It reveals the human social of social death as ecologically deficient and impoverished, in so far as it implicitly excludes the natural world in addition to those racialized as nonwhite. In this sense, I want to propose that, far from social death, "inhabitation of the deep," when recognized as exclusion from a social configuration of

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[41] Richard Wright, Native Son, p. 253.

the human that is itself asocial and anti-ecological, actually uniquely positions blackness to think and enact a more genuinely social, because also ecological, life. Which is to claim that blackness wades in the water in which it is weighed, refuses the land refused to it. Dionne Brand, in her book of poems, *Land to Light on*, articulates this refusal well:

> you come to this, here is the marrow of it,
> not moving, not standing, it's too much to hold up, what I
> really want to say is, I don't want no fucking country, here
> or there and all the way back, I don't like it, none of it,
> easy as that. I'm giving up on land to light on [42]

What would it mean to think inhabitation of the deep, then, not as blackness' problem to be overcome, but as the ethical refusal of whiteness' assorted lands to light on, of the grounds whiteness stands? What if, relative to a reductive notion of standing your ground as territory or private property, inhabitation of the deep elaborates an ethical posture of being in the world that in "giving up on land to light on," as Brand so beautifully puts it, consents to the precarious and ecological conditions of life on a planet predominantly made of water? What if the future of blackness is in the beginning, not as a point of origin per say, but rather as an ethical practice of consenting to hover over the face of the deep?

To further elucidate this final point, consider, this passage from *Being and Nothingness*, in which Sartre narrates his understanding of the ontological drama set in motion with the "appearance of the Other in the world":

> Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place; everything still exists for me; but everything is traversed by an invisible flight and fixed in the direction of a new object. The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a fixed

[42] Dionne Brand, *Land to Light On*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997.

> sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting.[43]

I am interested in Sartre's interpretation of the Other as that which not only puts the world to flight—interesting in itself in so far as this fugitive world resists its own territorialization in the form of private property—but also that which sets the world flowing. For now that the other has seen me, Sartre writes, "It appears that the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole." What if we were to understand this phenomenon, not as a crisis, but rather as the gracious lesson of all alterity, both human and nonhuman. What would it mean to be open to the *terra firma* flowing beneath our feet as the given ground of human being, as the real situation of life and not that which we might seek to consolidate or stabilize? What if when we meet each other, we consent to walk on water, to be found upon the given relations that give us, and so, in this way, to join the ranks of the "inhabitants of the deep"?

Taking up this question, my first chapter, "'Gone with the Ibos': Notes on the Material Imagination of Blackness in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," performs a comparative reading of *Praisesong* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Through the parallel struggles of their protagonists to "really listen" respectively to a story about a group of Ibo slaves who walked on water and a recording of Louis Armstrong's "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?", I argue that both novels are

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[43] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness; an Essay on Phenomenological Ontology.* New York: Philosophical Library, 1956. Print.

invested in theorizing a method for aesthetically appreciating what Ellison calls the "blackness of blackness." However, *Praisesong* does so in such a way that pushes us to think about what might constitute the "Blue" in Armstrong's musical meditation on being "Black." Compelled by Marshall's revelation that the Ibo Landing story originates from a mind that is "gone with the Ibos," I argue that reading blackness, a familiar dilemma in black literary studies, may be a matter of learning to detect the creative activity of a mind that, like the Ibos, is given to the water; and that Marshall's portrait of this mind figures what I, following the aesthetic philosophy of Gaston Bachelard, theorize as the *material imagination of blackness*.

My second chapter, "Wade in the Water: The Passion of the Black in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*," takes up Frank Wilderson's stunning observation that "no slave is in the world," and hazards two questions: Where, if not the world, is blackness? And does the place where blackness is matter? Critical to my consideration of these questions is the ecocritical distinction poet Ed Roberson makes between the "Earth" and the "world." Through close readings of *Gem*, the inaugural play in August Wilson's famed "Century Cycle," I demonstrate the ways in which Wilson locates blackness in the water. Yet, for all of the ways that this position registers the violent exclusion of black people from a fundamentally anti-black world, I argue that *Gem* conceives of the black position as one that is nevertheless "under God's sky." Situating the black position in the "Earth" in this way, I argue that, far from social death, *Gem* forwards a vision of blackness that, due to its knowledge of both the land and the sea, is perhaps uniquely

positioned to respond to the play's concluding exhortation—"So live!"—in a way ecologically beholding to the character of life on a watery planet.

Finally, in a concluding turn to the extra-literary, my final chapter, "'Across the Tallahatchie': Black Looking and the Photograph of Emmett Till," revisits the infamous photograph taken after Till was brutally murdered and thrown into the Tallahatchie River all to show, as Till's murderers confessed, "how me and my folks *stand*." In revisiting the image so often credited with instigating the Civil Rights Movement, I reappraise the significance of Mamie Bradley's contested decision to bare the bloated face of her son to the world. Prompted by her conviction to "let the world see *what I've seen*," I propose a reading of the photograph as Mamie Bradley's look and a performance of what I call in this chapter *black looking*. Through close readings of the recently released trial transcript, I show how the juridical treatment of the photograph, deemed unrecognizable by the court, belies a violent scopic regime predicated on the prohibition of black looking. Turning then to the contrasting ocular attention to Till during his open-casket funeral in Chicago, I argue that the challenge of bearing witness to Till's face pushes us beyond the logic of Hegelian recognition towards the radically social vision of those who, by their inhabitation of the deep, refuse the murderous "stand" of whiteness refused to them.

V. "Sturm und Drang"

Altogether, this return to a consideration of how it feels to be a problem, here thought specifically as the crisis of no-ground visited upon blackness by the water, is, in fact, an organizing reflex of Black Studies. In Jared Sexton's account, the field ever

addresses itself, though in many different variations, to Du Bois' twentieth century question.

> What is the nature of a form of being that presents a problem for the thought of being itself? More precisely, what is the nature of a human being whose human being is put into question radically and by definition, a human being whose being human raises the question of being human at all? Or, rather, whose being is the generative force, historic occasion, and essential byproduct of the question of human being in general? How might it be thought that there exists a being about which the question of its particular being is the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility for any thought about being whatsoever? What can be said about such a being, and how, if at stake in the question is the very possibility of human being and perhaps even possibility as such? What is the being of a problem?...The formulation of a sustained response to such an inquiry is the province of the field of investigation called black studies, or African American studies, or, more recently, African diaspora studies.[44]

Having been ceremoniously revisited and recast since its original formulation by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Black Studies' constitutional question is perhaps still no more succinctly and plainly put than it was then. That Black Studies is not yet through with its question, after its many significant iterations and interpretations, that it seems to have gone no further, is the field's faithful abiding and willful stammering. Which is perhaps why immediately after offering a comprehensive delineation of the "Negro Problem," Du Bois writes at the conclusion of the opening chapter of *Souls*:

> And now what I have briefly sketched in large outline let me on coming pages *tell again* in many ways, with loving emphasis and deeper detail, that men may listen to the striving in the souls of black folk.[45]

No sooner does Du Bois tell it than he resolves to tell it again, to retell it. And this

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[44] Sexton, Jared. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *InTension Journal* 5 (2011)
[45] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p, 14.

retelling, it is important to point out, is an act of *love* expressed in the measure of its *depth,* its exhaustion. This stuttering announcement of our problem is nothing but the enactment of Black Studies' ongoing stammer, our ongoing telling again, in depth and love, of the problem in which we are cast down just as much as we *get down*, the trouble visited upon us and the trouble for which we wait. And what is crucial to understand about this telling again is that its going forth enacts an antiphonal commune of sound. That is, it gathers a fellowship of sound listeners, a body sonic, which, if it was not already there—and it often isn't—is gathered there by and in the telling. Which is to say our telling again believes in its listeners that aren't there even as it actively creates them, when the telling touches them and they get down with the get down, like the brigadier-general after hearing tell of the trouble "Nobody Knows." And if this sounds evangelical, it's because it's an evangelical sound.

In conclusion of these introductory remarks, then, let us supplement the reading of the epigraph of "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," with which we began our investigation into the blueness of blackness, with a reading of the portrait of the Negro Problem which Du Bois offers up at the end:

> So dawned the time of *Sturm und Drang*: storm and stress today rocks our little boat on the mad waters of the world-sea; there is within and without the sound of conflict, the burning of body and rending of soul; inspiration strives with doubt, and faith with vain questionings. The bright ideals of the past,—physical freedom, political power, the training of brains and the training of hands,—all these in turn have waxed and waned, until even the last grows dim and overcast. Are they all wrong,—all false? No, not that, but each alone was over-simple and incomplete…Work, culture, liberty,—all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that

swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood.[46]

Du Bois' representation of the "Negro Problem" as an embattled boat at sea—invites even further speculation about the water as not only the trouble blackness has seen, but also the $trouble_2$ for which blackness waits. For in the very same waters that assail "our little boat," there curiously also swims before us "the ideal of human brotherhood." In other words, if in the assessment of the "Negro Problem" we are determined, in the sense of a diagnosis, to be at sea and if this is a bad thing, it appears that for Du Bois we are also *determined* to be at sea in the sense of a decision we make. In the effort to overturn the world whose condition of possibility is the problem, a modern world created in and by the interdiction against "human brotherhood," we also, like Douglass, determine to "take to the water," believing too that "this very bay shall yet bear [us] into freedom." Thus, it remains for us to think the enduring saliency of the ship and sea not only to the study of our trouble—our racial subjection and domination—but also and more importantly, a study *in* our trouble, when to study from the position of trouble is precisely how we make and wait for $trouble_2$ as we, in the words of the old sorrow song, wade in the water. And what is this $trouble_2$ if not the ideal of human brotherhood. This is nothing but a radical rejection of Milam's ground. Black Studies simply refuses this standpoint. "Our little boat" is our laboratory. And before it swims "the ideal of human brotherhood," that revelation of Relation, which we passengers take as our horizon of water and sky. The "world-sea" is where we conduct the social experiment otherwise known as blackness: the radical and revolutionary effort to make a ground out of no ground, to

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[46] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p, 13.

walk on water and elaborate an inhabitation of the “world-sea,” without the world, but in the Earth.

Chapter 1

"Gone with the Ibos:" Notes on the Material Imagination of Blackness in Paul Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*

Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue"—all at the same time…Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he *is* invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music.[1]
—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

I. "black and *blue*"

That's salt water coming out of Louis' spit valve, our faithful witness to the liquid residue of the music and the way it sounds. We forget this crude matter when we attend to the poetry black and blues people make out of being invisible. Lose the sense of its relation to the music, of the saliva all bound up in the way it sounds. All five phonographs might be playing. But have we *really* heard unless we've somehow managed to hear the spit too?

Claiming "few really listen to this music," (12) the Invisible Man proposes and performs in the novel's famous prologue what he calls "a new analytical way of listening to music" (8). The newness of his method can be located in its augmented sense of what's available to be heard. It listens not only to sound's time, but also its space; not only sound's sound, but its silence. This excessive hearing calls for *five* phonographs instead of the usual one. A detail, which, along with the Invisible Man's aspiration to also

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[1] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Vintage Books, 2006, p, 7-8.

feel the music with his whole body, suggests a desire to employ all *five* senses in a single but expanded act of listening. The following chapter is in many ways kin to this effort of conceiving an augmented listening practice, one as suited to hear the poetry as the music. We concern ourselves here, then, with not only how we listen, but how we read.

With Louis' spit valve as my witness, I propose that the expressive traditions of the African Diaspora are wet. Profoundly given to what Gaston Bachelard has called a "primitive material reverie" about water.[2] This, I argue, is what we must ultimately come to understand and appreciate about the *mind* that is "gone with the Ibos," those middle passing slaves we find songfully hovering over the face of the deep in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983).[3] But prior to any discussion of this mind or its relationship to the expressive traditions of the African Diaspora, we have first to understand just where the Ibos have gone and wrestle a while with the improbable testimony about what they did there. And in that Benajaminian sort of way, flinching not to wrestle with the angels of history even when we find them underwater.

In concerning itself with where the Ibos have gone, this chapter's black study by way of *Praisesong* and other texts invites us to go with them. In this way, our critical journey will mirror that to which a reluctant Avatara "Avey" Johnson, the novel's protagonist, consents after her deceased great-aunt Cuney implores her in a dream to resume their ceremonial walks to a place called "Ibo Landing."

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[2] Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1999, p, 3.
[3] Marshall, Paule. *Praisesong for the Widow*. New York: Putnam's, 1983.

> [T]hree nights ago, in the dream, there the old woman had been after all those years, drawn up waiting for her on the road…Standing there unmarked by the grave…beckoning to her with a hand that should have been fleshless bone by now…
>
> …[S]he was pleading with her now to join her, silently exhorting her, transformed into a preacher in a Holiness church imploring the sinners and backsliders to come forward to the mercy seat. "*Come/O will you come…?*" (40, 42 emphasis original)

As a child, Avey spent the summers visiting her great-aunt Cuney in Tatem, South Carolina. At least twice a week during these visits, Aunt Cuney ritually took the younger Avey to a place known locally as "the Landing," and each time recounted a curious story about a group of Ibo slaves who landed there in a slave ship some generations prior. It's to the landing, in the dream above, that Aunt Cuney is exhorting the now much older and recently widowed Avey to "*Come*." And since "people in Tatem said [Aunt Cuney] had made the Landing her religion," her transformation into a preacher in the dream is telling (34).

If the text of the preacher hooping in Ellison's "underworld of sound" is the "Blackness of Blackness," Aunt Cuney's text is the story of the Ibo Landing. In fact, she's been coming from the same scripture ever since Avey turned seven and Aunt Cuney

> ordered [Avey's] father to bring and deposit her every August in Tatem…And there year after year had filled her head with some far-fetched story of people walking on water which she in her childish faith had believed till the age of ten. (42)

Seated, as it were, in Aunt Cuney's waterfront church between Sister Avey and Brother Invisible, in the pages to follow we will consider how black study in general, and black literary study in particular, always begins with a reading of the "Blackness of Blackness." That is, always begins by concluding something about the nature of blackness. It is

certainly no mistake that the text resounds from the *ground* floor of Brother Invisible's "underworld of sound," his concentrated listening to Louis' horn. Nevertheless, we are gathered in Aunt Cuney's church and not that of Ellison's preacher, because of the ways in which the ambivalent valuations of blackness overheard by the Invisible Man are profoundly echoed with respect to water in the story of the Ibos. So profoundly, in fact, that even before we turn to Aunt Cuney's sermon in full, we might summarize it in this undoubtedly familiar way.

> *"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is 'the Landing of the water-walking Ibos.'"*
> *And a congregation of voices answered: "That water is most blue, sister, most blue…"*
> *"In the beginning…"*
> *"At the very start," they cried.*
> *"…There was water…"*
> *"Preach it…"*
> *"Now water is…" Aunt Cuney shouted.*
> *"Bloody…"*
> *"I said water is…"*
> *"Preach it, sister…"*
> *"…an' water aint…"*
> *"Amen, sister…"*
> *"Water will git you…"*
> *"Yes, it will…"*
> *"Yes, it will…"*
> *"…An' water won't…"*
> *Naw, it won't!"*
> *"It do…"*
> *"It do, Lawd…"*
> *"…an' it don't."*
> *"Halleluiah…"*
> *"…It'll put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY."*
> *"Preach it, dear sister…"*
> *"…an' make you tempt…"*
> *"Good God a-mighty!"*
> *"Old Aunt Cuney!"*
> *"Water will make you…"*
> *"Water…"*

"…or water will un-make you."[4]

Recalling that the "Blackness of Blackness" resounds somewhere deep down in the depths of Armstrong's "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue," the text of the Ibo Landing takes up this blue. Thinks the blue(s) of black by way of blackness' primordial relation to the water that there was in the beginning. Teaches us to hear the spit.

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[4] These lines, while adopted to reflect the analogous place of water in Aunt Cuney's sermon, are inspired by and derived from the sermon concerning the "Blackness of Blackness" in the prologue of Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.'"

And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother, most black…"
"In the beginning…"
"At the very start," they cried.
"…there was blackness…"
"Preach it…"
"…and the sun…"
"The sun, Lawd…"
"…was bloody red…"
"Red…"
"Now black is…" the preacher shouted.
"Bloody…"
"I said black is…"
"Preach it, brother…"
"an' black ain't…"
"Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!"
"Amen, brother…"
"Black will git you…"
"Yes, it will…"
"Yes it will…"
"…an' black won't…"
"Naw, it won't!"
"It do…"
"It do, Lawd…"
"…an' it don't."
"Halleluiah…"
"…It'll put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY."
"Preach it, dear brother…"
"…an' make you tempt…"
"Good God a-mighty!"
"Old Aunt Nelly!"
"Black will make you…"
"Black…"
"…or black will un-make you."
"Ain't it the truth, Lawd?" (9-10)

II. food! for (black) thought

i.

Each time they reached, after miles of walking, the place where the slave traders brought them, Aunt Cuney started into telling the story of the Ibo Landing.

> It was here that they brought 'em. They taken 'em out of the boats right here where we's standing. Nobody remembers how many of 'em it was, but they was a good few 'cording to my gran' who was a little girl no bigger than you when it happened. The small boats was dragged up here and the ship they had just come from was out in the deep water. Great big ol' ship with sails. And the minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran' said, and taken a look around. A good long look. Not saying a word. Just studying the place real good. Just taking their time and studying on it. (37)

Later we will have occasion to consider this studying of the Ibos as an enactment of black study. For now, however, we give our attention to the moment in Aunt Cuney's story where the suggested parallel with Ellison's preacher appears to break down. For if, in the traditional antiphonal mode of black preaching, he solicits the free participation of his congregation, Aunt Cuney, for all of her obvious calling, seems relatively uninterested in Avey's response. As Aunt Cuney starts to tell how the Ibos turned to the water, a point in the story where she routinely asks Avey a question, she strangely ignores the girl's answer.

> "Do you know what the Ibos did? Do you?…"
>
> "I do." (It wasn't meant for her to answer but she always did anyway.) "Want me to finish telling about 'em? I know the story good as you." (Which was true. Back home after only her first summer in Tatem she had recounted the whole thing almost word for word to her three brothers, complete with the old woman's inflections and gestures.)
>
> "…They just turned, my gran' said, all of 'em—" she would have ignored the *interruption* as usual, *wouldn't even have heard it over the*

> *voice that possessed her*—"and walked on back down to the edge of the river here. Every las' man, woman, and chile…And they didn't bother getting back into the small boats drawed up here—boats take too much time. They just kept walking right on out over the river. Now you wouldna thought they'd of got very far seeing as it was water they was walking on. Besides they had all that iron on 'em…and chains hooking up the iron. But chains didn't stop those Ibos none. Neither iron. The way my gran' tol' it (other folks in Tatem said it wasn't so and that she was crazy but she never paid 'em no mind) 'cording to her they just kept on walking like the water was solid ground. (38-9 emphasis mine)

Yet if Aunt Cuney ignores Avey, it is not because she prefers to be alone in the telling. In fact, because of "the voice that possessed her," she isn't alone at all. Rather she is accompanied by her gran', Avatara, who first passed the story on to her. Far from demonstrating an aversion to antiphony, then, Aunt Cuney's story may actually be read as her response to a call first sounded by her gran'. Nevertheless, I argue that the story should also be read as Aunt Cuney's call to Avey. The mere fact that she now tells Avey a story she received from her own "gran'," and that she does so regularly, suggests a desire that Avey one day be able to tell it too. Telling the story may even be the mission the old woman was entrusting to her.

> [I]n instilling the story of the Ibos in her child's mind, the old woman had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill. It had taken [Avey] years to rid herself of the notion. (42)

It's when Avey finally succeeds in ridding herself of this vague notion of being called that Aunt Cuney appears to her in a dream as a "preacher" imploring her to return to a place "she had made her…religion." More than simply wanting her to tell the story, we might even say that Aunt Cuney wished to make Avey her disciple. (34)

If in this way we can be sure that Aunt Cuney actually wants Avey to tell the story, how then do we explain the refusal to allow her to "finish telling about 'em?"

Especially since Avey insists (and Marshall even confirms), “I know the story.” If we understand Aunt Cuney to also *hear* the story she tells (from the voice possessing her), then the fact that she doesn’t even hear what’s significantly called Avey’s “interruption” suggests that the story Avey knows somehow differs from Aunt Cuney’s. It is true that Avey can perfectly render the story’s content (“word for word”) and form (“the old woman’s inflections and gestures”). But perhaps that is not all there is to tell. In this sense, Aunt Cuney ignoring Avey may be read as an attempt to guard the story’s integrity or at the very least as a fidelity to the voice possessing her. It implies that something about Avey’s knowledge is not quite up to the telling. What more of the story would Avey have to know, then, if content and form alone is insufficient, in order to “finish telling about ‘em?”

Since Aunt Cuney hears the story she tells, perhaps Avey’s incomplete knowledge of the story can be attributed to a failure of her listening. In other words, Avey can’t really tell it because she hasn’t really heard it. Yet, Aunt Cuney does not simply hear the story. Her hearing takes the specific form of being possessed by Avatara. It is certainly telling, then, that Avey, who I have already suggested is hard of hearing, also expresses an aversion to being possessed by Avatara. During the dream sequence in which Aunt Cuney implores Avey to return to “the Landing,” Marshall voices Avey’s resistance to being Avatara’s “little girl” and resentment for having been “saddled with her name.”

> Couldn’t [Aunt Cuney] see she was no longer the child…scrambling along at her side over the wrecked fields? No longer the Avey (or Avatara as she insisted on calling her) she had laid claim to for a month each summer from the time she was seven. Before she was seven! Before she had been born even! There was the story of how she had sent word months before her birth that it would be a girl and she was to be called after her

> grandmother who had come to her in a dream with the news: "It's my gran' done sent her. She's her little girl."
>
> Great-aunt Cuney had saddled her with the name of some-one people had sworn was crazy. (42)

I propose that Avey's inability to "finish telling about 'em" is ultimately rooted in her aversion to being possessed by her namesake in the way we have understood Aunt Cuney to be when she tells the story. But what exactly would it mean for Avey to consent to be possessed in this way? Perhaps Aunt Cuney's insistence on *calling* Avey "Avatara" offers some insight given what it arguably reveals about how she expects Avey to *respond*. In this respect, I propose that the original question—"Do you know what the Ibos did?"—should be understood as a call intended for Avey only in so far as she might learn to respond in the spirit of her name. Then Avey would have recognized that Aunt Cuney's hail was really addressed to her, that it was really Avatara who was meant by the hailing (and not someone else). Here, I employ the rhetoric of Althusser's drama of interpellation intentionally, but not without some amendment of its original spirit in order to better suit our purposes here.[5] In Avey's specific case, we are discussing not the

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[5] The famous passage to which I am alluding here reads as follows: "I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'
Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject.* Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really him* who was hailed' (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by 'guilt feelings', despite the large numbers who 'have something on their consciences'." See Althusser's essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" collected in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review, 1972. p, 174.

interpellation of the subject, but rather that very subject's unmaking. Like the Ibos, who, to hear Aunt Cuney tell it, also "turned," the "one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical *conversion*" solicited from the "backslider" Avey is precisely a turn unto the water. This water that, like blackness, *will make you…and unmake you*. Since Avey's aversion to her name manifests in her dream precisely as a stubborn reluctance to return with Aunt Cuney to "the Landing," we can already suspect that Avey's ability to "finish telling about 'em" in the novel would require an oneiric turn to the water.

ii.

Perhaps at this point, as an illuminating foil to Aunt Cuney's inspired hearing (and Avey's lack thereof), it will prove useful to remember the symptoms of Brother Invisible's "new analytical way of listening to music" as well as the fact that it is induced by a drug trip.

> I know now that few really listen to this music. I sat on the chair's edge in a soaking sweat…It was exhausting—as though I had held my breath continuously for an hour under the terrifying serenity that comes from days of intense hunger. And yet, it was a strangely satisfying experience for an invisible man to hear the silence of sound. I had discovered unrecognized compulsions of my being—even though I could not answer "yes" to their promptings. I haven't smoked a reefer since, however; not because they're illegal, but because to *see* around corners is enough (that is not unusual when you are invisible). But to hear around them is too much; it inhibits action. And…I believe in nothing if not action. (12-13)

Brother Invisible may not be concerned with the fact that reefer is illegal, but we might just as well charge him with possession anyway. Don't mistake me. I certainly don't mean to conflate the spiritual phenomenon of possession with drug use. But I do want to call attention to how they similarly inhibit our faculties of self-possession. Both have a way of making us vulnerable to getting got. And while, Brother Invisible decided never

to smoke reefer again, it is important to point out that not all forms of getting got inhibit action. Spiritual possession, in particular, that is, being in the spirit, even has a record of prompting it. Nevertheless, it's unclear whether the Invisible Man's decision not to smoke expresses a belief that action is the exclusive work of the self-possessed. Because he concludes that it is enough just to be invisible in order to sense in the augmented way he desires. If Brother Invisible thinks there is actually something to, if not invisibility, then blackness—something more the mere nightmarish consequence of white fantasy—then to be invisible because one has consented to be got by blackness (and not the other way around), may instance a kind of possession in its own right. Blackness, in this respect, is a call to which one may or may not respond. A vocation to which one may or may not consent. It "*will git you*." And "*it won't*."

The symptoms of Brother Invisible's drug trip are more interesting still, in the way that they resemble and even help to focus elements of Aunt Cuney's inspired hearing that are absent from Avey's prior to her oneiric turn. If the Invisible Man wanted not only to hear the music with his ears, but to *feel* it with his whole body, then the "soaking sweat" in which he emerges from his descent into the depths of sound suggests that the music may just feel wet. But wet in such a way that calls to mind the black maritime experiences of those who also held their breath continuously. For where else do we hold our breath but underwater? In other words, when Brother Invisible gives an expanded (or perhaps even transparent) ear to Armstrong's sounding of the travails of being black and blue, he "feels" a drowning.

It is important to note how the water-walking Ibos, per the testimony of the slave trader, William Mein, preserved to us in the form of letter that dates from May 24, 1803, are also numbered among the drowned slaves who shared in this experience of the water. Especially since, to Mein's eye, the Ibos didn't walk at all. They drowned.

> We have had a great many Ibo and Angolas—all of which have readily sold about L.E.100 round of his prime. Spaulding and Couper bought a whole bay of Ibos and have suffered much by mismanagement of Mr. Couper's overseer Paterson who poor fellow lost his life. The Negroes rose by being confined in a small vessel. Patterson was frightened and in swimming ashore he with two sailors were drowned. The Negroes took to the Marsh and they have lost at least ten or twelve in recovering them besides being subject to an expense [of] ten dollars a head for salvage.[6]

If for Aunt Cuney and her gran' "*water is*," and *is* ground, in William Mein's estimation "*water ain't.*" His letter has helped researchers determine the actual historical events that inspired what has been preserved in the oral and folk traditions of the Georgia and South Carolina sea islands alternatively as the myth of the Flying Africans and the Ibo Landing story. From this archival record, Timothy Powell has offered the following summary of what we know for sure:

> What we do know for sure is that in May 1803, a group of Ibo…slaves arrived at Skidaway Island, just south of Savannah, Georgia, after enduring the nightmare of the Middle Passage. The slave dealer William Mein sold the Ibo to Thomas Spalding and James Couper…On the short voyage from Skidaway to St. Simon Island, the Ibo rose in rebellion, leading to the death of the white overseer and two sailors aboard the *York*. According to archival evidence, the Ibo did not fly, but instead committed collective suicide by drowning themselves in Dunbar Creek, at a place now called Ebos Landing. (254)

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[6] Timothy Powell, Philip D. Morgan, "Summoning the Ancestors: The Flying Africans' Story and Its Enduring Legacy," *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: The Atlantic World and the Gullah Geechee*, Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, p, 253-282.

Timothy Powell has insightfully argued that "the distinction between suicide and flight may very well depend on whether the analysis takes into consideration the spiritual dimension of the story, the realm of the ancestors." While for Mein the story clearly ends with the Ibos' death, Powell explains that "the oral histories of the black community…focus most intently on what happens immediately after Mein's conclusion, when the Ibo are transformed into powerful ancestral spirits." It is this afterward, according to Powell, that is dramatized in the Ibo's "flying" or "walking" home to Africa.

By privileging the more cyclical (as opposed to linear) sense of time that Powell reasons the Ibos likely possessed, Powell submits Mein's letter to "a more expansive reading" that should call to mind Brother Invisible's expanded hearing. His reading unpacks the more complex spiritual elements inhering in the events reductively detailed by Mein as "the Negroes rose" and "The Negroes took to the Marsh," and illuminates two additional events elided by the letter's sparing attention to the Ibos and their cyclical sense of time. In addition to the Ibos' uprising and mass suicide, Powell draws our attention, on the one hand, to their initial capture in Africa, and, on the other, to their subsequent return home to Africa as ancestral spirits.

While I generally affirm and agree with Powell's reading, I want to call special attention to his assessment of this very first event, which, precisely because it is first, overdetermines what it is possible to see in the subsequent events he so nimbly illuminates in Mein's letter.

> The first event…can be construed as the capture of "ten or twelve" souls who were transformed from freemen to slaves and thrown into a state of spiritual crisis. This crisis constitutes a dam of time…wherein the Ibo

> undergo a transformation of energy that Orlando Patterson calls the "social death" of slavery. (268)

I am particularly interested in how this assessment of the initial capture of the Ibos overdetermines what can be seen in the Ibos' collective suicide. By regarding slavery as social death, Powell divests the Ibos' suicide of any meaning in itself, at least in so far as it might bear significance for life. It is meaningful, even to the survivors who would later tell the story, only in so far as it allows the Ibos' to escape the living death of slavery and return home to Africa as ancestral spirits. The claim that the Ibos walked on water, then, lapses into merely a metaphorical dramatization of the afterlife. The Ibos still drown, and only drown. But their spirits walk. The problem with this reading, however, is that it itself obscures the tremendous implications for *life*, and not just the after life, of the literal walking insisted upon by those left behind to tell the story. If as Powell has explained—

> The African American community that was left behind after the Ibo flew away is ultimately responsible for the creation and preservation of the many different versions of the story that have been passed down to the present day. (264)

—then the rendering of the Ibos' walking as mere metaphor obscures the foundational aesthetic decision guiding and inspiring the "creation and preservation" of these stories. Namely, the decision to regard water as a kind of ground. The widespread implications of such a decision, particularly with respect to what we might discern about the Gullah imagination, are especially apparent in light of the story's ubiquity throughout the sea islands. While Mein's letter locates the original events of the Ibo Landing on St. Simons Island in Georgia, Marshall stages her rendering of the Ibo Landing myth on the fictional Tatem Island in South Carolina. And in her film *Daughters of the Dust*, director Julie

Dash, who incorporates an extensive retelling of Marshall's version of the myth into her script, stages her own representation of the Ibo Landing myth on Dahtaw Island, South Carolina.[7] Helping to explain this geographic proliferation of Ibo Landings, Dash has remarked that "nearly every island off the Carolina/Georgia coast has an 'Ibo Landing,' a place renowned as the site where a group of newly-disembarked captive Africans returned to the waters of the Atlantic rather than become slaves."[8]

What drops out of view in Powell's reading of the Ibo Landing story is a sense of the character of the collective imagination of those left behind to create it. What can be discerned about the Gullah and Geechee imagination given the widespread aesthetic decision to regard water as ground. What species of imagination does such a decision found? To what manner of creation does it give rise? How might we characterize the poetic orientation of the imagination whose ground floor is the water? Can we now begin to think about Aunt Cuney's possession as a matter of having been got by the water? Indeed if this aesthetic decision or judgment about water is taken to decide one's participation in the imagination that is able to "finish telling bout 'em," then we might begin to detect the lack of such an imagination in the question Avey asks about the improbable feat of the water-walking Ibos.

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[7] Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust,* New York, N.Y.: Kino International, 1999. Film.
[8] See Sara Kaplan's note 17 "Souls at the Crossroads, Africans on the Water: The Politics of Diasporic Melancholia," *Callaloo* 30.2 (2007): 511–526. See also, Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film*, New York: New Press, 1992.

iii.

The germ of the aversion to possession Avey demonstrates in her dream as an adult may already be discerned in the question she asks Aunt Cuney as a child. After four straight summers of hearing about the improbable feat of the Ibos, Avey finally thinks to ask:

> "But how come they didn't drown, Aunt Cuney?"
> She had been ten—that old!—and had been hearing the story for four summers straight before she had thought to ask.
> Slowly, standing on the consecrated ground…her great-aunt had turned and regarded her in silence for the longest time. It was to take Avey years to forget the look on the face under the field hat, the disappointment and sadness there. If she could have reached up that day and snatched her question like a fly out of the air and swallowed it whole, she would have done so… (Marshall 39-40)

Just as it would take Avey years to rid herself of the vague notion of a call inhering in her name, it would take her years to forget the look bounding into her from beneath the brim of Aunt Cuney's hat. And even when she finally manages to forget, the look stubbornly resurfaces when she dreams of Aunt Cuney imploring her to return to "the Landing" with eyes that:

> were filled…with the same disappointment and sadness that had greeted the thoughtless question she had asked as the ten-year-old long ago. In them was reflected also the mute plea: "*Come/Won't you come*." (44)

This later instance of Aunt Cuney's look informs our understanding of the nature of her "disappointment" so many years before. It reveals that Aunt Cuney was disappointed with Avey's "thoughtless question" only in so far as it revealed that she had yet to *come*. When to come is precisely to come to the water and learn to regard it as ground. This is

the aesthetic decision animating the story of the water walking Ibos. All who would *really* tell the story must make it.

However, I want to insist that Avey's question is not utterly thoughtless. It only lacks the sort of thought with which the story's foundational conceit must be apprehended: faith and imagination. Thus, while reprimanded above, it seems to me at least that Avey's question *should* be asked; that we cannot fully appreciate Aunt Cuney's claim about what the Ibos did unless we feel the terrible need to ask it. In fact, Avey can't even begin to *come* without asking. Because it's precisely here, in her recognition of the questionable, that she even approaches the opportunity to exercise the kind of "thought" Aunt Cuney accuses her question of lacking.

Aunt Cuney's answer to Avey's question offers some insight into the sort of thought by which the story should be the apprehended.

> "Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?"
> "No, ma'am."
> "I din' think so. You got any more questions?" (39-40)

In response to Avey's question, Aunt Cuney claims the precedence and authority of two signature ground-miracles of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. The Ibo slaves take off their boats in that Moses way.

> …And when they got to where the ship was they didn't so much as give it a look. Just walked on past it. Didn't want nothing to do with that ol' ship. They feets was gonna take 'em wherever they was going that day. (39)

The ground of Ibo Landing is not just "consecrated." It's *holy*. By which I mean to suggest a relation between this ground and that which is disclosed to Moses at the burning bush. Only this ground, as in the second of our ground miracles, includes the

water. The Ibos walk on it as ably as Jesus. If "the Landing" is Aunt Cuney's religion, then its name derives from its founding miracle. The Landing. The improvisation of land, the revelation of holy ground. *Ground*, Aunt Cuney insists, and yet the daughter of the Ibos has no place to rest her feet. No place, but the no place of the water.

By invoking the precedent of Jesus walking on the water, Aunt Cuney at once signals that this story calls for *faith* even as she critiques the racially coded processes by which what is dignified as faith in one context is arbitrarily denigrated as superstition in another. Or put another way, she critiques the restriction of faith as viable, if at all, only in relation to the miracles recorded in the canonical scriptures of the Christian Bible. That said, I think that belief in Jesus is precisely what Aunt Cuney *wants*, at least in so far as he walked on water. Only she understands his feat, and the kindred miracle performed by the Ibos, not primarily as a demonstration of transcendent power, but rather as a teaching about how we should walk. Blessed are those who walk on water, for they will inherit the earth before the end of the world. This earth, whose surface is 71% water, so that no truer steps have ever been taken than those taken at sea. To say that Aunt Cuney wants faith in Jesus, then, is to say she believes in the way he and the Ibos walked, and would have others *come* and believe too. The tone is less: "If you believe Jesus did, then why not the Ibos?" And more: "if not the Ibos, then you could hardly really believe Jesus did either." By not drowning when he went walking on the water, as Aunt Cuney reminds Avey, Jesus takes hold of boatless human engagement with the water in a way that imagines something other and more than just our drowning. There are actual steps here. However brief. What remains to us now is the work of coming to believe in them. To believe in

these steps, however, also requires an act of the imagination, that faculty able to produce images that, by many accounts, are not there.

Besides its lack of faith, then, Avey's question is also "thoughtless," with respect to its lack of imagination. Aunt Cuney's invocation of Jesus in relation to the Ibos is also telling in this regard. We hear tell of both in stories of tremendous suffering as well as incredible beauty. And because the presence of the former obscures our recognition of the latter, these stories pose a severe challenge to our imaginations if we hope to faithfully bear witness to both. James Cone's comments on the imagination it takes to apprehend the mysteries of black life in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* are telling in this regard.

> It takes a powerful imagination, grounded in historical experience, to uncover the great mysteries of black life…The beauty in black existence is as real as the brutality, and the beauty prevents the brutality from having the final word. Black suffering needs radical and creative voices, prophetic advocates who can tell brutal and beautiful stories of how oppressed black people survived with a measure of dignity when they were not meant to.[9]

The thing about a mystery, about the moment we apprehend not knowing something and find it so exhilarating that we need a word for it, that we set about naming it with the precision of a poet because we'd like to somehow formalize for posterity a way to know not-knowing, is that it's nothing if not aesthetic. If it weren't, there wouldn't be such delight when you find yourself on the inside of one—marveling at its finishes, all the ways it kept itself from being known, until you even find yourself wishing you could not know again. The Ibo Landing story, as a portrait of black life or the lived experience of blackness, is beautiful in this way. Not because it is a flight of fantasy from the historical

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[9] James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011, p, 95.

realities inspiring it, but precisely because it isn't. The story, I argue, is terribly aware of the brutal history of the drowned, and yet still insists on the co-presence of the beautiful. And the beautiful keeps the brutal from having the final word because its sheer being there is a mystery that is itself beautiful. In this way, beauty can't help but finish brutality's sentences. This, by the way, is why it would be a mistake to think that Louis is able to make poetry out of being invisible because he's somehow unaware. Quite the opposite is true, in fact. Because even if invisibility can't sing, since as the phantom of some white nightmare it could hardly be said even to exist, blackness can. Which is to say there is more to blackness than being invisible. But detecting awareness of this is not so straightforward as poring over the song's content and form or turning up the volume. I'm not refuting that a grasp of invisibility (or blackness) helps Brother Invisible to understand the music, but I am refuting the assumption that a similar awareness of being black (if not invisible) can't likewise aid Louis' playing.

It's a matter, then, of learning to hear *in the music* the operation of the "powerful imagination" that it takes to uncover the great mysteries of being black and blue. The playing *is* already this uncovering. When we really hear it, we uncover it too. But it's the musician and the poet, long before the critic, who first lend their "radical and creative voices" to the revelation. Louis is the prophet sounding out the brutal-beautiful story on his trumpet. Indeed, it takes "a powerful imagination, grounded in historical experience" to make poetry out of blackness. Especially when that historical experience is precisely the experience of having no ground. This, the operation of this imagination, *is* the mystery we only belatedly uncover with the hole of Louis' spit valve.

With respect to the mysterious paradoxes and contradictions of black life uncovered in the Ibo Landing story, the faith and imagination missing from Avey's question are, according to Cone, poignantly exercised by black Christians with respect to the deeply resonant example of the cross of Jesus.

> That God could "make a way out of no way" in Jesus' cross was truly absurd to the intellect, yet profoundly real in the souls of black folk. Enslaved blacks who first heard the gospel message seized on the power of the cross. Christ crucified manifested God's loving and liberating presence *in* the contradictions of black life—that transcendent presence in the lives of black Christians that empowered them to believe that *ultimately*, in God's eschatological future, they would not be defeated by the "troubles of this world," no matter how great and painful their suffering. Believing this paradox, this absurd claim of faith, was only possible through God's "amazing grace" and the gift of faith, grounded in humility and repentance. There was no place for the proud and mighty, for people who think that God called them to rule over others. The cross was God's critique of power—white power—with powerless love, snatching victory out of defeat. (2)

If the cross' claim to "make a way out of no way" is "profoundly real in the souls of black folk," perhaps it is because the effort to apprehend this paradox as a non-absurdity is commensurate to the effort these same souls undertake in the creation of the sorrow songs. This effort also expresses a paradox in so far as they, as Brother Invisible would have it, make "poetry out of being invisible." Yet if the cross of Jesus is real to the souls of black folk, I wonder if his other miracle invoked by Aunt Cuney isn't all the more real to their *soles*. When Jesus "went walking on water," he made a ground out of no ground. This paradox resonates even more profoundly with the creation of the sorrow songs and the poetry they make out of invisibility. Because, obscured among the more brutal symptoms of Brother Invisible's discovery of his invisibility is the beautiful gift of our sea legs.

> It occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare!…I stared at him hard as the lights of a car stabbed through the darkness. He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a phantom. It unnerved me. I was both disgusted and ashamed. I was like a drunken man myself, wavering about on weakened legs. (Ellison, 4-5)

Brother Invisible's experience of invisibility here is not unlike Bigger Thomas' experience of fear in *Native Son.* "Fear," writes Richard Wright, "rendered his legs like water."[10] Both moments speak to what blackness serially confronts in a myriad of historically shifting ways as the situation of having no ground. But the sorrow songs demonstrate that "wavering about on weakened legs," this symptom marking Brother Invisible's experience of invisibility, can nonetheless provide sufficient ground for poetry or song. Recall the peculiar circumstances that, following Du Bois' account in *Souls*, precipitated the creation of the well-known spiritual "No Body Knows the Trouble I've Seen."

> When, struck with sudden poverty, the United States *refused to fulfill its promises of land* to the freedmen, a brigadier-general went down to the Sea Islands to carry the news. An old woman on the outskirts of the throng began singing this song; all the mass joined with her, swaying. And the soldier wept.[11] [170 my emphasis]

The old woman might just be Aunt Cuney. Not only because the song, like her story, arises in the context of the Sea Islands. But also because both the song and the story demonstrate the creative potential of "swaying," of "wavering about on weakened legs." In this way, the sorrow songs (and "No Body Knows" especially) bear witness to how

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[10] Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. 1st Perennial Classics ed. New York: HarperPerennial, 1989, p, 95.
[11] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, p, 170.

poetry can be made from the *awareness* of having no ground. And since we find strains of this song in an epigraph that also includes a poem in which the persona is straining to hear water's voice, *really hearing* this song might just require an ear for water as the enduring sign of the condition of having no ground. But an ear for water in the sense of detecting the operation of the imagination that has found its sea legs and learned to make this situation sing. Learned, however paradoxically, to regard no ground as grounds for singing. So it's not like Louis makes his poetry out of absolutely nothing. The potter, as it were, is not quite grasping at a phantom on the wheel. There's water there. Sure, it's a trickier matter than clay, but it's something all the same.

Ultimately, Aunt Cuney's invocation of the profoundly kindred precedent of Jesus for the baffling feat of the Ibos suggests that, instead of suspending the conditions of thought's possibility, paradox can actually sustain and propel it. Though a stumbling block to what Cone calls "the intellect," it is food for faith and imagination. We might finally name the joint operation of their thought in this way: if the story of the Ibo Landing is to be apprehended, it must be *fathomed*. That is, it must be thought as a mystery by a mind unafraid of getting wet.

iv.

And yet even if the question must be asked in order even to have the opportunity to fathom in the way we have described, there is a way in which we ask questions that belies the fact that we really want nothing to do with them. We much prefer answers. Often this preference is so strong that one wonders whether we have any genuine

investment in the question at all. We can further think the fault Aunt Cuney finds with Avey's question in precisely this way. Consider that in response to the old woman's reprimanding look, Avey's remorse manifests as a desire to reach out and swallow her question. If this response tells us anything about the nature of the reprimand itself, perhaps Avey's question doesn't disappoint Aunt Cuney so much as her little regard for her question, or Aunt Cuney's before it, as something she might actually eat.

The distinct orientations Avey and Aunt Cuney maintain toward their respective questions further illuminates this point. Recall that to hear the Ibo Landing story is, in fact, to hear Aunt Cuney's answer to her own question ("Do you know what the Ibos did?"). The answer, the subsequent story about *what the Ibos did*, is *in* her question. And the story itself is questionable. Even in her answer, Aunt Cuney preserves something of the character of the question to which she responds. In this sense, Aunt Cuney turns to her question in the same way the Ibos turn to the water, preparing to wade, to fathom. So committed is she to the mysterious object of her inquiry that, far from seeking its resolution in some armored answer, she is content to tell a wounded story, untroubled by its vulnerability to being questioned.

If, in this way, Aunt Cuney's question demonstrates a genuine investment in what the Ibos did, then Avey's ("how come they didn't drown…?") by contrast disinvests from their improbable feat to weigh instead the conditions making it unlikely. Again, not that Avey's question shouldn't be asked. Only that it should be asked *with* this first question and its persevering interest in the mystery of what the Ibos did and not *without* it. Asked alone, it is hardly a question at all. Jettisoning a genuine inquiry into what the Ibos did,

Avey's "question" becomes only the veiled desire for an answer to what is rendered the mere "problem" of having no ground.

What would it mean, then, if rather than a problem to be done away with, Avey regarded her question, and not just its possible answer, as something she might actually eat? Fred Moten might have advised Avey to "beware, in yourself, the effects of the kind of thinking that produces certain traditional ideas of unlikeliness,"[12] and not have been very far off from the heart of Aunt Cuney's disappointment. The kind of thinking behind Avey's question, which struggles to maintain its interest in the questionable object of its inquiry, may still be able to relay the story's content and form, but of the baffling matter of slaves walking on water it can speak seldom a word.

That Moten's caution to black studies scholars in his essay "Notes on Passage" so nearly approximates Aunt Cuney's is also telling. For like Avey, we too have a question, the "Negro Question" so famously articulated by Du Bois in *Souls* when he wrote, "How does it feel to be a problem?" Following Jared Sexton, "the formulation of a sustained response to such an inquiry is the province of the field of black studies."[13] Yet if we accept this characterization of the field, it remains for us to examine the orientation we assume toward our question, one perhaps belied in the interchangeability that the "Negro Question" has historically enjoyed with the "Negro Problem." Precisely how do we regard the being of the problem into which we are inquiring? Do we find therein a

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[12] Fred Moten, "Notes on Passage (The New International of Sovereign Feelings)," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*, 3.1 (2014): 51–74, p, 55.
[13] Sexton, Jared. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *InTension Journal* 5 (2011), p, 7.

proposition no less baffling than the Ibos who didn't drown? Surely a problem, which is a problem precisely because of its exclusion from being, cannot *be* any more than slaves can walk on water. In what ways, then, has a question to which we might respond, and in such a way that genuinely invests in the questionable object of our inquiry, become only a problem to be answered and done away with? Is it very long after we ask, "How come they didn't drown," that we find ourselves asking, "How do we get out of the water?"

Perhaps, like Avey, we too must learn to eat our question, take and eat in remembrance of the Ibos, imagining that if we reach out and swallow it, we just might feel full. The "Negro Problem" alone just doesn't tell it. It may be perfectly adept to tell the (hi)story of how we drowned or elaborate the sociological implications of our drowning. But this will not have been to have fully told this story that M. NourbeSe Philip insists "must be told." Something remains after the question is cast in the anemic terms of a problem. If we are to "finish telling about 'em," we must tell that too. A whole meal lies in the break between the question and the problem, one we miss if we do not maintain our interest in the questionable gait of the Ibos or the being of the problem. It may just be our eucharist.

III. *long* gone

i.

If we are not prepared to fathom the feat of the water-walking Ibos, then we are almost certainly assured of neglecting the creativity of the mind that has elected to go with them. This, by far, is the larger oversight. For even greater works than walking on

water has the mind that has “gone with the Ibos” performed. This mind whose first and ongoing work is to tell the story. We only begin to suspect the costliness of this oversight once we finally allow Aunt Cuney to “finish telling about ‘em,” and we learn that the Ibos not only walked on water, but “started into singing.”

> And when they got to where the ship was they didn’t so much as give it a look. Just walked on past it. Didn’t want nothing to do with that ol’ ship. They feets was gonna take ‘em wherever they was going that day. And they were singing by then, so my gran’ said. When they realized there wasn’t nothing between them and home but some water and that wasn’t giving em’ no trouble they got so tickled they started in to singing. You could hear em’ clear across Tatem ‘cording to her. They sounded like they was having such a good time my gran’ declared she just picked herself up and took off after ‘em in her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos…” (Marshall 39)

It’s not just that the Ibos went walking on the water. Contending with this claim alone does not exhaust our wrestling. There’s also the fact that they “started into singing.” We wrestle as much with a song as we do the underwater angels of history. If the feet of the water-walking Ibos prompted us to ask what kind of ground is no ground, their singing lures us one wavering step further into asking: What kind of grounds for singing is no ground? Is the water? This second question, you’ll notice, has a made-up mind when it comes to the water, because it recognizes that, whatever our valuations of its viability as ground, it is ground *enough* for singing. The joy of this discovery so gripped Old Avatara that “she just picked herself up and took off after ‘em in her mind.” We’d do well, then, to attend to it.

Significantly, this discovery by Old Avatara (who personally witnessed the Ibo Landing and recounted it to Aunt Cuney) means that the Ibo Landing Story is the product

of a mind that is "gone with the Ibos." Avey's ability to really hear the story then becomes a matter of learning to appreciate the secreted activity of this mind, this imagination. And likewise, her ability to really tell it becomes a matter of coming to have this mind in her that was also in the Ibos. In other words, I am suggesting that what Old Avatara discovered in the singing at Ibo Landing was, if not literal steps, then a sea-legged posture of mind, an imagination swaying on the deep, poised for creation. To be gone with the Ibos, then, is more elaborately to consent to participate in their poetic posture and mode of creating. It's for us to decide if this is reason enough to linger with the terrible steps blinked upon the face of the Atlantic. To be patient with the faltering soles of black folk. To learn to think ground in the broadest sense possible so as to include whatever it is we find beneath our feet, however precarious its give.

The discovery of this imagination has tremendous implications for any discussion of "black aesthetics." It suggests more is available to being heard or read as black than the content or form of a thing. If, as recent scholarship has argued, aesthetic inquiries into the "blackness of blackness" typically run aground in their attempts to delineate specifically black "form" or "content," it is certainly compelling that in Avey's case knowledge of the story's "content" and "form" alone proved insufficient to "finish telling about 'em."[14] And that she was only able to do so after her oneiric decision to "*Come"*—a decision she significantly makes in her mind—to a place Old Avatara's mind had

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[14] Here, I am thinking specifically of the critique of racial essentialism and narrowly drawn definitions of blackness in the work of Evie Shockley and Michelle Wright. See, Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011, and Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

already long gone. A brief overview of the novel's narrative stricter in relation to Avey's dream helps to illuminate this point.

Praisesong begins with Avey's sudden decision to leave a luxurious cruise prematurely and embark on an impromptu journey of cultural and spiritual rediscovery. Only belatedly do we learn that her perplexing decision is inspired by the dream, in which she reluctantly consents to go with her Aunt Cuney to "the Landing." Poet Ed Roberson may have unwittingly summarized the novel when, regarding dreams, he mused:

> the dream itself, a vision, is created by creating its completion, its accomplishment, creating its waking. Otherwise, it's just sleep. But that's only an introduction to the real question: of waking…The question is how to wake into the continuum of creating, into life, rather than a dried-up eternal sleep. It's about the life of creation, trying to live a life of creativity—and about the works themselves.[15]

All of *Praisesong* can be reduced into Avey's attempt to "wake" in precisely the way Roberson describes above. Its pages narrate Avey's endeavor to consummate *in life* her oneiric decision to join Aunt Cuney on the road to Ibo Landing, to create her waking by venturing fully into the ongoing creative life of a mind gone with the Ibos. Thus, the novel fittingly concludes with Avey having finally learned, after so many years, to "finish telling about 'em."

> [A]t least twice a week in the late afternoon, when the juniper trees around Tatem began sending out their cool and stately shadows, [Avey] would lead them, grandchildren and visitors alike, in a troop over to the Landing.

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[15] Horton, Randall, and Ed Roberson. "'The Structure, Then the Music': An Interview with Ed Roberson." *Callaloo* 33.3 (2010): 762–69, p, 763.

> "It was here that they brought them," she would begin—as had been ordained. "They took them out of the boats right here where we're standing…" (Marshall 256)

That Avey's oneiric consent to go to the water ultimately enables her to tell the story, and not her knowledge of its content or form, challenges and renews our understandings of black aesthetics. It suggests the possibility that, in detecting the blackness of a text, we have not only to consider its form or content, but also its *matter*. Gaston Bachelard has established a precedent for thinking of literature in this way by arguing that, "it is possible to establish in the realm of the imagination, a *law of the four elements* which classifies various kinds of *material imagination* by their connections with fire, air, water, or earth."[16] Further elucidating the operation of what he calls the "material imagination," he writes:

> If a reverie is to be pursued with the constancy of a written work, it must discover its matter. A material element must provide its own substance, it's particular rules and poetics. It is not simply coincidental that primitive philosophies often made a decisive choice along these lines. They associated with their formal principles one of the four fundamental elements, which thus became signs of philosophic disposition. In these philosophic systems, learned thought is linked to a primitive material reverie, serene and lasting wisdom is rooted in a substantial invariability. If we still find these simple and powerful philosophies convincing, it is because by studying them we may discover completely natural imaginative powers. (3)

Psychoanalyst that he was, Bachelard might have interpreted the significance of Avey's dream as having enabled her "to finish telling about 'em" by facilitating her discovery of the story's matter: water. Just as, you may recall, Creole and his bass fiddle were

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[16] Gaston Bachelard. *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1999, p, 3.

attempting to help Sonny and his piano to do in James Baldwin's short story, "Sonny's Blues."

> [Creole] wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for the deep water. He was Sonny's witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing—he had been there, and he knew. And he wanted Sonny to know. He was waiting for Sonny to do the things on the keys which would let Creole know that Sonny was in the water.[17]

And finally succeeded when:

> Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell; it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.
>
> And this tale, according to that face, that body, those strong hands on those strings, has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation. Listen, Creole seemed to be saying, listen. Now these are Sonny's blues…Creole wasn't trying any longer to get Sonny in the water. He was wishing him Godspeed. Then he stepped back, very slowly, filling the air with the immense suggestion that Sonny speak for himself.
>
> Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his…He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. (862-3)

Just as Aunt Cuney helped Avey to discover her matter, Creole helped Sonny to discover his. And, suggestively, in both cases the matter animating their creativity in the way theorized by Bachelard, is water. Perhaps, somewhere along the long line of trouble "of

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[17] James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, "Sonny's Blues," *Early Novels and Stories: Go Tell It on the Mountain, Giovanni's Room, Another Country; Going to Meet the Man*, New York: Library of America, 1998, p, 861.

which [Sonny] knew only Mama and Daddy," stood the Ibos songfully hovering over the face of the deep. Not unlike the predicament the narrator, Sonny's brother, imagined that Sonny confronted on his piano.

> All I know about music is that not many people ever *really hear* it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with *the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air.* (861 emphasis mine)

In other words, Sonny's body may have been seated in front of his piano, but his mind was gone with the Ibos, learning with them the difference between deep water and drowning, making the water sing.

That Louis' horn, the Ibos' song, and Sonny's blues each present not so straightforward exercises in *really hearing*, and that each discovers its matter in the water, at once stages a familiar quandary to students of the expressive traditions of the African Diaspora—namely, how do we name the "blackness of blackness" supposed to cohere these traditions—and suggests a possible, if unlikely, way forward. Evie Shockley's recent theorization of "black aesthetics" argues that "blackness" should be read as inhering not in any specifically black from or content, but rather and more flexibly in "aesthetic decisions" motivated by, to borrow a common Fanonian phrase, "the lived experience of blackness."[18] I elaborate upon this important innovation in our

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[18] Evie Shockley argues that we should understand the modifier "black" to describe aesthetic decisions motivated by the "subjectivity of the African American writer—that is, the subjectivity produced by the *experience* of identifying or being interpolated as "black" in the U.S.—actively working out a poetics in the context of a racist society. See her discussion of "black aesthetics" in *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*.

conception of black aesthetics by calling attention to the ways in which this experience is repeatedly cast throughout African Diasporic literature in the specific terms of an experience of the water. So that Bachelard's literary regard for matter can perhaps yield a fitting and refreshing water-way out of no way for really hearing and reading blackness.

Taken together in this way, Bachelard and Shockley aid us in the effort to think not only the relationship between the water giving way beneath the Ibos' feet and the song they sing (or the spit valve and Louis' horn, or the void in Sonny's blues), but also what this relationship has to tell us about the poetic orientation of the mind gone with them. Perhaps the mind that is gone with the Ibos is best characterized by a poetic devotion to the water, the feature element of Old Avatara's imagination, swaying on the deep. Such a mind as this we might call the "material imagination" of blackness.

It's the creative activity of this imaginative power—the material imagination of blackness exemplified by Old Avatara's gone mind—and its operation back of the variable content and form of the expressive traditions of the African Diaspora, that we risk overlooking when we fail to fathom the ground-miracle of the Ibo Landing. How, then, might we begin to sketch the contours of the creative history of the mind that is gone with the Ibos; and *long* gone, that is, gone for quite some time? Perhaps, we might start with a slave narrative penned by another Ibo, Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* (1789). The fictional Old Avatara was hardly the only one with a made-up mind about the water during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. If Old Avatara witnessed "the Landing" in 1803 (assuming Marshall was true in this way to the historical events inspiring it), then Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* yields a contemporary non-fictional account of

a landing from elsewhere in the Diaspora. His narrative bears witness to a mind gone in ways kindred to Old Avatara's, and in such a way as to provoke the consideration of this mind's relation not just to the Ibo Landing Story, but the expressive traditions of the African Diaspora more broadly. Together they will offer us some insight into just how long this mind has been gone.

ii.

The Ibos did not hover over the face of the deep idly. Rather they *started*. Specifically, they "started into singing," but, here, I want to call special attention to their starting. Under the circumstances of being forcefully transported to a New World, one can imagine how the power to start or start over, begin or begin again, possessed special appeal for a slave. In this way, starting is not limited to singing alone. It extends to the capacity to start into any number of things. Or, with respect to the anti-black New World, to even start into the remaking of the whole damn thing. You'll remember that the Ibos took to the water only after a protracted study of this New World. Let us finally consider more carefully Aunt Cuney's report about what they saw.

> they seen things that day you and me don't have the power to see. 'Cause those pure born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you 'bout things to come long after they's dead. Well, they seen everything that was to happen 'round here that day. The slavery time and the war my gran' always talked about, the 'mancipation and everything after that right on up to the hard times today. Those Ibos didn't miss anything. Even seen you and me standing here talking about 'em. And when they got through sizing up the place real good and seen what was to come, they *turned*, my gran' said, and looked at the white folks what brought 'em here. Took their time again and gived them the same long hard look. Tell you the truth, I don't know how those white folks stood it. I know I wouldn't have wanted 'em looking at me

> that way. And when they got to studying em', when they knew just from looking at 'em how those folks was gonna do, do you know what the Ibos did? (Marshall 37-8 emphasis mine)

By now we know they turned. But at issue, here, is the turn before the turn to go walking out on the water. After "studying the place real good," the Ibos turn to look at "the white folks what brought 'em here." And if Aunt Cuney wouldn't want them looking at her that way, it is because this look is a look of judgement. As if to ask with no small bite of condemnation, "Just what sort of new world are you creating here?" Such a look recalls the non-fictional study of white folk performed by another Ibo, though much more subtly given the tight space in which he writes. Early in his slave narrative, Olaudah Equiano offers this description of his encounter with "the white folks what [*bought*]" him. Though quoted once before in the introduction of this study, it bears quoting again here.

> The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of *bad spirits*, and that they were *going to kill me*. Their complexions, too, differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke (which was very different from any I had ever heard), united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed such was the horror of my views and fears at the moment, that, if 10,000 worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country. (38-9 emphasis mine)

In the beginning, Equiano neared the end. The earth, quite suddenly, was "without form, and void" and "bad spirits" were moving upon the face of the deep in slave ships. Versed in the Bible as he was, one wonders whether Equiano didn't have Genesis in mind while relating this moment in his narrative. Is there not a deep irony and critique in the

recognition that those who arrived on the African continent with knowledge of the beginning, are here judged by Equiano to be beginning badly? Is there any implied relationship between their knowledge of the beginning and the manner in which they begin? If we understand Equiano to be alluding to the biblical account of creation, then, the particular verse to which he alludes is significant. It reads: “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”[19] Theologian Catherine Keller has argued in *Face of the Deep* that this verse has been systematically elided from the western theological imaginary.[20] A similar elision would be much more difficult for the likes of Equiano and his shipmates. Indeed, Africans in the New World can hardly speak of their beginnings without also speaking of the water. What then would it mean if the spirit of creation ceased to hover over the face of the deep? Or worse, grabbed a boat? And not just any boat, but this boat that, similarly to his countrymen in *Praisesong,* Equiano wants no part of. This boat that transforms his astonishment into terror precisely at the moment he realizes the ship “waiting for its cargo” was waiting for *him*. The moment he realized he had been bought. Might such a disavowal of the water constitute the stuff of a “bad spirit”?

Of course, when Equiano takes the phrase “bad spirit” into his mouth, we should recognize that he wears the mask.[21] He has taken on nothing less than the denigration of

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[19] Genesis 1:2 (KJV)
[20] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, New York: Routledge, 2003.
[21] See Houston Backer’s discussion of the mask in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

African religions as demonic, irrational superstition. By which I mean to suggest how an African speaking of “bad spirits” in the eighteenth century goes down easy. Nonetheless, the spoonful of sugar should not distract us from the medicine it helps to go down. And what has just gone down is a black man calling a bunch of white folk “bad,” if not outright devils. From within a negative valuation of black religion he tastefully condemns the bad spirit prowling over the face of the deep in slave ships. That is, he condemns the bad spirit of whiteness animating the creation of the New World of slavery. A spirit condemned by its fear of getting wet, its over infatuation with land, its idolatrous worship of Plymouth Rock. Consider these words from French political thinker and historian Alexis De Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America* (1835):

> This Rock has become an object of veneration in the United States. I have seen bits of it carefully preserved in several towns in the Union. Does this sufficiently show that all human power and greatness is in the soul of man? Here is a stone which the feet of a few outcasts pressed for an instant; and the stone becomes famous; it is treasured by a great nation; its very dust is shared as a relic…[22]

Perhaps more than anything it might say about the soul of man, the veneration of Plymouth Rock reveals a great deal about the over-infatuation of white soles with the land. The time the *Mayflower* spent on the water dwarfs the mere “instant” the stone was pressed, and yet it is the stone that is remembered. Such a landing as was happy to forget the water was always going to be a problem. Equiano and his fellow Ibos in *Praisesong* anticipate the New World to which the bad spirit of whiteness and its aversion to water would inevitably give rise. Discerned from the very start that Plymouth rock was going to

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[22] Alexis Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, New York: Century co., 1898, p, 30.

land on them, that this world was going to kill them. Hence, the need to start over. Begin again.

But if the look of the Ibos is a look of judgment, we must be precise about the fact that it is a judgement not of white folk, per say, but of whiteness. Their struggle was not against flesh and blood, but against bad spirits. Which is what we have to understand about the echo in the Ibos' turning to look at these white folk in the moment when Aunt Cuney "turned and regarded [Avey] in silence for the longest time" after she asked her thoughtless question. This too is a look of judgement. "What sort of world will you create," she might have asked. Yet, we also know that it is also an invitation to *Come.* If we allow this look to inform that of the Ibos, then perhaps theirs was an invitation too. Maybe they would have had those white folks go with them. Then, perhaps, they could have done their water-walking on land, together.

Like Avey, Equiano has a similar opportunity to *Come*, in such a way that recalls what we have spoken of in terms of an amended sense of Althusser's notion of interpellation. If Avey is hailed by the vague calling expressed in her birthname (Avatara), Equiano undergoes a similar process of hailing that is perhaps obscured by the more obvious instances of hailing (now in the traditional sense of Althusser's use of the word) by which he is subjected. Recall that the very "first object which *saluted* [his] eyes when [he] arrived on the coast was the sea" (emphasis mine). This salute filled him with an astonishment that was only converted into terror after he "was carried on board" the second object to salute him, the slave ship. There are two hails to be distinguished here. On the one hand, there is the hail of the slave ship, which, true to Althusser's original use

of the word in his drama of interpellation, subjects Equiano as a slave. This is the hail epitomized by the new names to which Equiano and his countless shipmates were made to answer. But there is also and *before*, the hail of the astonishing sea. Its “salute,” its *wave*, is nothing but the aquatic announcement of a kind of hail: “Hey you there! *Come* and see the Earth before the beginning of the New World.”[23] With regard to this very first hail, Equiano’s turn is delayed until some moments after his initial confrontation with the ocean, once he is subjected to the violence of slavery:

> soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced anything of this kind before; and although, not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, *I would have jumped over the side*…(Equiano 39 emphasis mine)

Equiano’s body might be on the ship, but this Ibo’s mind was gone with the “over the side” ones, those he bafflingly calls the “*inhabitants* of the deep.”

> Often did I think many of the *inhabitants* of the deep much more happy than myself. I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs. (41 emphasis mine)

Like Old Avatara, it’s a celebration that causes Equiano, after an initial fear of the water, to pick himself up and take off after ‘em in his mind. And while Equiano does not claim to have seen these slaves walk water, he nonetheless insists that they managed to *live* there. Which is how I have previously understood his use of the word, “inhabitants,” typically reserved for the living, to describe those we know to be dead. And, as if this were not already requisite enough faith and imagination, he even claims to “env[y] them

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[23] Here, I riff on a line from Ed Roberson’s poem “to see the earth before the end of the world.”

the *freedom* they enjoyed" (41). Yet if we suspend our initial objections to Equiano's apparent misnaming of the drowned, and take seriously the lives that were *lived* underwater, terrifically brief as they were, then what emerges is an intensely precarious and aquatically recalibrated vision of what it means to be human and free on this planet. What Equiano witnessed from the deck of the slave ship were the inhabitants of the deep, starting into sociality. He discovered a social imagination of being together, unmediated and unmitigated by the subjectivity-reifying logic of solid ground that is always already presumed to constitute private property.

Thus, the blue(s) of blackness, "the lived experience of blackness" as an experience of the water, is not only a question of having been interpellated as slaves or even subjects. It's also, and *first*, a matter of consenting to go join the "inhabitants of the deep." We are hailed as much by the astonishment of the ocean as the terror of the slave ship. From the very first, there is this fork in the road of black study yielding paths to optimism and pessimism.[24] And while I don't propose we do away with the fork, I do propose we recognize that there is one. Perhaps, then, we might find ourselves better equipped to eat our question.

Helping us to a final appreciation of the significance of the "home" Equiano locates in the water is Bachelard:

> The region we call home is less expanse than matter; it is granite or soil, wind or dryness, water or light. It is in it that we materialize our reveries, through it that our dream seizes upon its true substance. From it we solicit

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[24] I specifically have in mind the ongoing theoretical debate in black studies between "afro-pessimism" and "black optimism," but leave off the prefix in favor of the more general terms of optimism and pessimism to call attention to the ways in which the tradition has always wrested with the suffering and joy inhering in the lived experience of blackness.

> our fundamental color. Dreaming by the river, I dedicated my imagination to the water. (Bachelard 8)

So too has the African Diaspora dedicated its imagination, dreaming by the Atlantic its primitive material reverie about water. For what I am calling the material imagination of blackness is a development historically rooted in the tremendous encounter of Africans with the ocean precipitated by the onset of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. While Africans undoubtedly possessed their own conceptions of water prior to slavery, if, as historian Stephanie Smallwood has argued, "the landless realm of the deep ocean did not figure in precolonial West African societies,"[25] as it didn't for Equiano, then what we must understand about the Middle Passage is that it required African captives to perform a terrific feat of the imagination. Theirs was the historical labor of having to make a ground out of no ground, of having to imagine and improvise a life lived absolutely at sea without even the faintest relief of a future promised land. We read "black aesthetics," then, as developed in the wake of and profoundly informed by this imaginative feat.

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[25] Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007, p, 124.

Chapter 2

Wade in the Water: The Passion of the Black in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*

…no slave is *in* the world.
—Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*

The African who arrived chained and malnourished in the hold of a 350-ton Portuguese vessel—he has not vanished from the face of the Earth; he is here, in whatever manifestation, alive in the thirty million black people who are in this country now.
—August Wilson, *Conversations with August Wilson*

Caesar: You under arrest.
Solly: I'm under God's sky, motherfucker! That's what I'm under!
—August Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean*

I. (no)where?

In *Red, White, and Black*, Frank Wilderson makes a claim possessing all the ambition of hyperbole, but with no admission to its usual embellishment. And there is none to acknowledge. In purest sincerity he declares, "no slave is *in* the world." Or, as he puts it more elaborately some pages earlier, "the position of the Black is a paradigmatic impossibility in the Western Hemisphere, indeed, in the world" (9). But I want to establish from the outset, and in the strongest possible terms, that nothing I will have to say here disagrees at least with this basic assertion, which I regard as a relentless testimony to the nature and extent of the problem of being black. Rather, like a boxer disoriented by a sharp blow, I attempt in what follows to gather my bearings and recalibrate the coordinates of my flesh in this, my black space and time, by thinking through the meaning and implication of Wilderson's startling claim. Say, for my island grandmother's exuberant first steps in the Philadelphia snow. I still have occasion to

think about these steps. So poor is my Spanish, and consequently so sparing my knowledge of Abuela's life and loves, that I have always counted as a special gift the story about her first snow which erupted one day into one of our broken conversations. But only recently have I begun to consider these steps as partaking in the sea-legged history I consider throughout this study, having discovered that Abuela's father, per the testimony of my fair-skinned Puerto-Rican mother and a photograph of him riding a horse, buried somewhere too inconvenient for her to search for just this moment, was "chocolate." Were these steps not taken in the world? And were I to bring Abuela the news of her extraterrestrial gait, would she not think me ridiculous?

"Abuela, winter testimony crunching beneath your feet notwithstanding, you'd sooner manage to walk on the moon than here. You see, you are not in the world."

"Hijo, I have always conceded the world, and lay no claim to being of it. In, not of, the Bible says."

The difficulty in fully appreciating the breadth of Wilderson's remarkable diagnosis of the "position of the Black," and not dismissing it as mere hyperbole, inheres in the seemingly refuting here-ness of black flesh. That we take our steps on concrete or clay or dirt or snow or sand, that, diaspora though we may be, we still rise and fall on no other planet but planet Earth. Nevertheless, there's something to be said for the world-vanishing enormity of his assertion, the truthfulness of which we might better apprehend either by clarifying precisely what we mean by "world," or, in the case of my grandmother and Wilderson at times, employing "of" as an alternative preposition for the mapping of the Black position. This alternative phrasing, no slave is *of* the world, admits

a queerness to the spatiality of the black position without totally relinquishing the sense of the spatial altogether, as *in* the world might, if, again, we were not precise about what we mean by "world."

To the end of such precision, the distinction Ed Roberson's draws between the majuscule "Earth" and the miniscule "world" in his remarks about the nature poem proves a faithful guide.

> The nature poem occurs when an individual's sense of the larger Earth enters into the world of human knowledge. The main understanding that results from this encounter is *the* Ecopoetic: that the world's desires do *not* run the Earth, but the Earth *does* run the world.[26] (emphasis original)

Although we come to Roberson's distinction between the "Earth" and the "world" in the specific context of a passage explaining his sense of the nature poem, it may nevertheless be usefully brought to bear upon and extended to our present inquiry into the nature of the Black position. For if "no slave is in the world," perhaps the place to begin to alternatively locate the Black position or Abuela's steps is the Earth. It may even be that the slave, with regard to the Master/Slave dichotomy which Wilderson insists remains the most appropriate terms for analyzing the black position, is in the Earth *alone*. That the obverse of the postulation that no slave is in the world is that no Master is in the Earth. All this is toward the following question: What happens when the larger sense of the Earth enters the field of black studies and informs how we think and theorize blackness?

To begin to distinguish the Earth from the world, in consideration of where, if not the world, the slave might be, the precision of Roberson's phrasing above is important.

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[26] See, Ed Roberson's "we must be careful" in Camille Dungy, *Black Nature*, 4.

To hear Roberson tell it, the world is more precisely “the world of *human* knowledge.” Or, to put it differently, we might say that the world is the *known* Earth, where the one doing the knowing is significantly the human, and where the accumulation of knowledge about the Earth that comes to constitute a world is driven by the dictates of what Roberson calls “the world’s desires.” That is, the desire to make possible and facilitate a particular interpretation and performance of the human. In other words, the “world of human knowledge” is driven by and limited to only that which is worth knowing about the Earth because it accommodates the ideal human. It is therefore a world that excludes, and comes to be what it is precisely by way this exclusion. This understanding of the relation between the category of the human and the world effected in the excluding aspiration to its realization marks an important point of intersection in the thought of Roberson and Wilderson.

We shall have more to say in the way of outlining the specific elements and protocols of the desires of this specific world, in which, Wilderson alerts us, the slave is not. For now, however, it is sufficient just to mark Roberson’s insistence that these desires, even if effecting and animating a worlding, should not be overestimated or confused with overtaking in scale what Roberson gives us to understand is the “larger Earth,” in which, it follows, the smaller world is embedded, and by which that world, in spite of all apparent evidence to the contrary, is “run.” The world is, therefore and more precisely, the *human* world, and exceeded by the human and more Earth. The world is what happens when the Earth is subjected to the calculations of human regard and comes to be held in the under*standing* minds of men. It has no more hope of being

comprehensive than the narrow vision of a room glimpsed through a keyhole. The world is, in this sense, more the stuff of maps, than dirt. When we say world, then, we mean the domain of the human, the sphere of human influence and activity on Earth. The world is what humans know about the Earth, when that knowledge is oriented toward the facilitation and facility of a particular vision of human life on Earth. It is thus a knowledge limited by this goal. The known earth. And greater is the life that is in the Earth that that which is practiced in the world.

Wilderson's remarkable diagnosis of the "position of the Black" can be attributed to the fact that the "world," as Wilderson so powerfully argues throughout his study, is founded upon the radical exclusion of blackness, and is, in this way, constitutionally anti-black. For this reason, Wilderson insists that the Master/Slave dichotomy, even after the apparent gains of emancipation and Civil Rights, remains the most genuine characterization of the global racial problematic. So much so, in fact, that he esteems any plan of revolution or emancipation that would negotiate the terms of the Black's freedom or equality *in* the world as futile. One has first to demonstrate how the laboring slave—the first coming and initial form of the black ontological position—was ever a part of the world to begin with. For Wilderson, the unfreedom of enslavement inheres not in the fact of coerced labor, but rather in the condition of being "generally dishonored," "perpetually open to gratuitous violence," and "outside of relationality."

> …work, or forced labor, is not a constituent element of slavery. Once the "solid" plank of "work" is removed from slavery, then the conceptually coherent notions of "claims against the state"—the proposition that the state and civil society are elastic enough to even contemplate the possibility of an emancipatory project for the Black position—

> disintegrates into thin air. The imaginary of the state and civil society is parasitic on the Middle Passage. Put another way, no slave, no world. And in addition, as Patterson argues, no slave is *in* the world.
>
> If, as an ontological position, that is, as a grammar of suffering, the Slave is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity; if the Slave is, to borrow from Patterson, generally dishonored, perpetually open to gratuitous violence, and void of kinship structure, that is, having no relations that need be recognized, a being outside of relationality, then our analysis cannot be approached through the rubric of gains or reversals in struggles with the state and civil society, not unless and until the interlocutor first explains how the Slave is **of** the world. The onus is not on one who posits the Master/Slave dichotomy but on the one who argues there is a distinction between Slaveness and Blackness. How, when, and where did such a split occur? (10-11 emphasis mine)[27]

Besides the formulation that "no slave is in the world," here, I am also drawn to Wilderson's related observation that blackness is outside of relationality, which I would slightly amend by arguing instead that blackness is outside of the reigning solution to what, in the understanding of the West and its abiding terracentrism, is always the supposed *problem of relationality*, as we find "relation" theorized, for instance, in Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*. The specific solution to the problem of sociality that I have in mind is the "social contract," which Charles Mills has persuasively argued is more precisely a "racial contract," and thus, more elaborately stated, the social contract of whiteness.[28] Given the anti-black state of the union that is whiteness and its constitutional stake in the ground, this reigning solution to the problem of life together

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[27] See, Frank Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
[28] Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

whereby not only the U.S. but an entire (human) world has come to found and cohere itself on the ground-enacting, settling gesture of blackness' exclusion, Wilderson, qouting Fanon, concludes that the only force capable of calling the world into question is absolute violence.

> "This narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence."
>
> This is because the structural, or absolute, violence, what Loic Wacquant calls the "carceral continuum," is not a Black experience but a condition of Black "life." It remains constant, paradigmatically, despite changes in its performance over time—slave-ship, Middle Passage, slave estate, Jim Crow, the ghetto, and the prison-industrial complex. (75)

Wilderson would not have us struggle with the state and civil society. Rather, he would have us burn it down in a terrific display of what he calls "pyrotechnics." And some days I think I might too. Perhaps we are too many days beyond "the fire next time," which James Baldwin both prophesied about and hoped against, and find ourselves approximating ever more nearly the time of the fire *now*. Who's to say? It's clear, however, that, for Wilderson, the implication of our anti-black world and its self-constituting and original exclusion of blackness is that nothing short of "absolute violence" on the part of those occupying "the Black position"—the gun powder and cannon blasts alluded to by Fanon in *Wretched of the Earth*—is capable of calling this world into question. And while I am never surprised by the fire, and often affirm its utility and necessity, I've elected, in these pages, to cast my lot with a different element. And in that decision, I am not alone.

> *God gave Noah the rainbow sign,*

no more water, the fire next time.[29]

Ask Noah. He'll tell you fire's not the only element capable of "starting the end of the world" (and there's no doubt in my mind that this is what needs to be started). The water has a career in Armageddon too. And yet, it's at the very least bi-vocational, since, by many cosmological accounts, this element is also suspected to have presided over the world's beginning; and did in fact preside over what Wilderson has called, in reference to the Middle Passage, the "dawning of Blackness" or "the Black's first ontological instance." Perhaps, these dual faculties of water suit it all the more to the emancipatory work of "*starting* the end of the world." Which is the thing about endings. What they really call for are beginnings. And even if the "rainbow sign" signals the end of this career of the water in terms of a great deluge, other revolutionary means remain available to the element. Particularly its tendency to visit upon our feet the terrific revelation of the alterity of the Ground. That the earth and life is no more for us to stand—in some purely instrumental sense of the ground as absolutely given as some kind of infinite limb—than it is for us to understand. This career of the water is intimately known to the African Diaspora: to the water-walking Ibos, to runaway slaves absconding as sailors, to black pirates and black jacks, to the "inhabitants of the deep," and to all those walking in *Invisible Man* with "a case of the bends" refusing to make a "dominating stand." What were all those black folk taking to the water to do but start the end of the word? That is, the end of the New World, created and conceived in pursuit of securing the conditions of

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[29] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, New York: Dial Press, 1963.

possibility of making a “dominating stand.” Perhaps, those who were known to wade in the water, did so believing, like Douglass’ *Heroic Slave* that, “the water, if not the land, is free.” In recognition of how often the African Diaspora’s freedom drive has led it to the water, this chapter sets out to demonstrate how that element, long in the business of the beginning and the end, is also capable of starting the end of the anti-black world by calling its dominating mode of standing into question.

Wilderson’s contentions that there is no “distinction between Blackness and Slaveness” and that “no slave is in the world” raise an important question about blackness. Namely, where is it? For if the slave, and by extension blackness, is not *in* the world, then where do we imagine blackness is? Are we really to conclude that blackness is nowhere at all? Which is also to ask, is the world all there is? Is there even an elsewhere for blackness to be? And is thinking this elsewhere worth it? That is, is there any value to thinking the “Black position” *in itself*, in excess of merely elucidating the situation and problem of being outside the world? Is there any more to thinking “the Black position” than illuminating the need to, in Fanon’s words in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “take the colonizer’s place?”[30]

We might condense the flurry of questions above into the following line of inquiry taken up by this chapter: Where, if not the world, is blackness? And does the (no)where where blackness is *matter*? And in both senses of that word. Does it, in itself, mean anything to us? Is it significant, precious even? Does it count? But also, is it made

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[30] See, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 1963.

up of the same stuff of which we know the planet to be made: of matter, of the material elements in all of their possible configurations? Which is really to ask, does it have any weight of existing in the earth, so that we might actually decide to live there?

This chapter takes up these questions as they are raised by Wilderson's reflection on the worldlessness of "the Black position" by way of performing a black ecocritical reading of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* (2003). I argue that while Wilson might have agreed with Wilderson's general claim that "no slave is in the world," he also demonstrates in *Gem* a deep investment in thinking the noplace where blackness is, and does so by way of engaging us in the study of the nature of a (non-)being that, though under arrest and underwater, is nonetheless, the play insists, "under God's sky." If, then, Wilderson asks us to recognize structural and absolute violence as a fundamental condition of black life, and not merely a feature of the black experience, *Gem* asks us to think about what the conditions of life, in fact, are? I want to suggest that Gem's signal intervention in the thought of blackness is the claim it makes about the fundamental precariousness of life, as presenting conditions that better approximate the supposed abject conditions of blackness than that non-problematic simulacrum of life incubated and maintained within the white or human world. Put another way, *Gem* challenges the extent to which the "world," in which the slave is not, fosters anything like life at all, and stages our lingering in the oft-supposed abjection of blackness to the surprising revelation of its claim on and to life.

II. citizen***ship***

Save thyself, and come down from the cross.

—Mark 15:30 (KJV)

He could have come out the water.
—Black Mary, *Gem of the Ocean*

We die enough. Are killed, beaten, shot, hung, and drowned enough. So when it is actually within our power to escape, or at least defer, death—to come down from the cross, or to come out of the water—that is, when there is actually something that can be done, either to live or live longer, the choice to willfully die understandably baffles and bewilders. There is too much out here trying to kill us to turn around and compound the efforts of an anti-black world. We've seen too many of those postcards, and too many of our minds and hearts have gone to pieces, to tolerate the prospect of our faces in the trees *and* the mobs. If we must die, let us for damn sure not kill ourselves. Live, by any means necessary.

There's something of this bewildered frustration at the failure to live when more life is possible in August Wilson's play, *Gem of the Ocean* (henceforward *Gem*).[31] Set in 1904 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, *Gem* opens in the turbulent wake of the death of a local mill worker named Garret Brown. Amidst an off-stage climate of rioting and striking mill workers galvanized by the incident, we learn in the beginning of the play's first act that Brown drowned after jumping into a river to avoid being arrested for a crime he didn't commit.

> Eli: They had a man named Garret Brown who jumped into the river. Caesar chased him and he jumped in and wouldn't come out. They say he stole a bucket of nails. He said he didn't do it. They having his funeral

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[31] August Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006.

> today…
> Black Mary: He could have come out the water.
> Eli: They couldn't get him to come out…He just treading water. Holding on to the barge. Caesar see he wasn't gonna come out he tried to beat him over the head with a two-by-four…I believe he would have killed him right on the spot if he came out.
> Black Mary: He wouldn't have done nothing but arrest him and the judge give him thirty days. (11-12)

Black Mary's response to the news of Garret Brown's death bespeaks an attitude of dismissiveness, if not outright contempt, for Brown's wasted opportunity to continue living that we find echoed by others throughout the play. For instance, when questioned by Aunt Ester about Brown's death, Citizen Barlow, who solicits Aunt Ester's spiritual counsel after being overcome with guilt as the actual thief of the bucket of the nails, similarly retorts, "He could have come out the river" (21). And Caesar, the local constable of the Hill District who attempted to place Brown under arrest, calls him a "damn fool," leaving no doubt as to the nature of his contempt (34). Taken together, these reactions to Brown's death lament what they regard as an avoidable death and wasted life.

Not insignificantly, given the analogous relation between water and the Negro Problem that I elucidate throughout this study, Wilson gives expression to these sentiments in the hopeful context of the aftermath of a pivotal moment in U.S. history, when it suddenly became possible for black Americans en masse to "come out the water." In so far as being a slave, which I use here simply to mean a forced and unpaid laborer, can be understood, albeit naively, as the principal source of the problem of being black, emancipation promised to a new generation of free-born African Americans coming of age at the turn of the Twentieth Century the opportunity to leave forever, with

none of the ambivalence of Lot's wife, the humiliation and suffering of enslavement for the dignity and new privileges of citizenship, including, perhaps most prized of all, the right to be paid a wage. It's in the light of emancipation, then, and all of its newfound possibilities that Garret Brown's decision to waste his life in the water, rather than take what might have only been 30 days, appears especially egregious. There is less understanding for his preference for death than what we can extend rather more easily to the "inhabitants of the deep." Perhaps, we might even think his suicide to dishonor the more extreme deprivation and suffering that inspired theirs. For the ship Brown jumped was the citizen*ship*. The land he refused, only a two-by-four away.

If Brown jumps from the citizen*ship*, then the play's protagonist, Citizen, by contrast, is in a desperate struggle to lay claim to the rights and advantages of his namesake. In a scene during which Citizen explains to Aunt Ester the circumstances which led to him stealing the bucket of nails, we learn that Citizen has only been up North for "four weeks," having recently migrated from Alabama to escape a post-emancipation Southern climate of white reactionary violence and terror. Upon arriving in the Hill District, as if to escape the humiliation of the de facto slavery of sharecropping down South and revel in the novelty and opportunity of paid industrial labor up North, Citizen immediately heads to the local mill to get a job, only to find the same oppressive economic structures he hoped to have left behind in Alabama.

> Me and a fellow named Roper Lee went over to the mill. They say they was paying two dollars a day but when we got there they say a dollar fifty. Then they say we got to pay two dollars room and board. They sent us over to a place the man say we got to put two dollars on top of that. Then he put two men to a room with one bed. The fellow I was with want to fight about it. I'm just starting out I don't want no trouble. I told him I

> would sleep on the floor…Come payday they give me three dollars say the rest go on my bill. I had to give the man what own the house two dollars. What I'm gonna do, Miss Tyler? I told the people at the mill I was gonna get another job They said I couldn't do that 'cause I still owed them money and they was gonna get the police on me. I was gonna go to another city but then before I had a chance I killed a man. People say you can help me. I don't want to go to hell, Miss Tyler. (22-23)

Set in 1904, little more than a quarter century after the formal abolition of slavery, and centered around the struggle to eek out a life in freedom of the suggestively named Citizen Barlow, *Gem* offers a dramatic treatment of the first decade of the twentieth century that suggests its historical significance as host to post-emancipation black experiments in freedom. Indeed with a protagonist whose "mama named [him] Citizen," Wilson places his play in conspicuous conversation with the Emancipation Proclamation:

> Citizen: My mama named me Citizen after freedom came.
> Solly: Your mama's trying to tell you something. She put a heavy load on you. It's hard to be a citizen. You gonna have to fight to get that. And time you get it you be surprised how heavy it is. (26-7)

In Citizen's name, Wilson alludes to that parallel nominal moment in U.S. history when those who were formerly known as slaves were also named citizen. Furthermore, we learn in the character list that Citizen is in his "Late twenties/early thirties," placing his birth sometime after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Thus, Citizen may also be read as a metonym for the very first generation of African Americans to be born in freedom. Through Citizen's struggle to live in freedom, Wilson figures the problematic historically confronted by this post-emancipation generation of free-born black Americans who, at the turn of the twentieth century, were testing, to mostly disillusioning results, the advantages and limitations of their newfound status as citizens.

But far from commemorating or celebrating a freedom finally realized with the abolition of slavery, I argue that Citizen's name in fact suggests the need for an alternative practice of freedom beyond that formalized in either the Emancipation Proclamation or the Thirteenth Amendment. Hence, Solly's suggestion that with his name Citizen's mother intended to alert him to a "fight," which wouldn't still require fighting if that supposed fight for freedom called the Civil War had settled the matter. Elsewhere Solly reiterates this point when he remarks about freedom that "You have to fight to make it mean something," again suggesting an understanding of freedom not as nominal political status, but rather as an active and ongoing work and struggle (28). In Solly's estimation, then, Citizen's name functions similarly to how we have previously understood Avey's name to function in *Praisesong* as a matrilineal call to which he must yet respond. In many ways, *Gem* chronicles Citizen's response to the call of his name, which, in this case, is a call unto a freedom unrealized by the nominal act of emancipation.

We have therefore to distinguish in *Gem* between two kinds of freedom: on the one hand, what the play calls "emancipation," a status recalling and cohered by its opposition to the former status of enslavement, and, on the other hand, what the play alternatively refers to as freedom as such. These two strains of freedom may be glimpsed in an exchange between Aunt Ester and Caesar Wilks near the conclusion of the play in a scene during which Aunt Ester presents Caesar with her "Bill of Sale" while he attempts to serve a warrant for her arrest.

> Caesar: Aunt Ester, I got a warrant here…
> Aunt Ester: I see you got a piece of paper. I got a piece of paper too…

> Caesar: …This a Bill of Sale.
> Aunt Ester: It say on there Ester. That's a Bill of Sale for Ester Tyler. That's me…You see, Mr. Caesar, you can put the law on the paper but that don't make it right. That piece of paper say I was property. Say anybody could buy or sell me. The law say I needed a piece of paper to say I was a free woman. But I didn't need no piece of paper to tell me that. (77-8)

Rather than inhering in the fickle paper events of amendments and proclamations, Aunt Ester conceives of her freedom as anterior to such legal and political paraphernalia and, it follows, outside and in excess of the performance of freedom afforded to the citizen within the nation state. In so naming Citizen, his mother calls him to a practice of freedom that is also prior to and in excess of emancipation and that likewise aspires to a mode of sociality or life together other than that which is indexed by the nation state. Solly helpfully elaborates on Aunt Ester's critique of the limitations of emancipation when he explains:

> They never made Emancipation what they say it was. People say, "Jesus turn the water into wine what you look like telling him it was the wrong kind?" Hell, maybe it is the wrong kind! If you gonna do it…do it right! (60)

If, as I have suggested, *Gem* stages through Citizen a black experiment in freedom intended to reflect those historically undertaken by the first free-born generation of black Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, Solly's words offer us a helpful language for outlining the two primary forms that Citizen's experiment takes. First, blackness' fresh inspection via the gateway of emancipation of the "wrong kind" of freedom now more than a century familiar to whites, and second, the imagination of what it would mean to "do it right." These two potential outcomes of Citizen's freedom experiment are modeled within the play respectively by Caesar Wilks, the local constable of the Hill

District, and Solly Two Kings, a veteran of the Underground Railroad. Their respective practices of freedom serve as foils for one another and hold themselves out to Citizen, who is just "just starting out," as potential molds.

Thus, with a protagonist named Citizen, Wilson strongly signals *Gem's* central preoccupation with the question of freedom, one Solly explicitly puts to words when he remarks: "The people think they in freedom. I say I got it but *what is it*? I'm still trying to find out. It ain't never been nothing but *trouble*" (emphasis added 28). In the effort to think along with *Gem* about what freedom is, we will have to think its relation to what Solly calls trouble. Indeed, what would constitute the trouble of freedom, particularly when freedom has otherwise been theorized within Western political philosophy as providing a resolution for and escape from the unwanted trouble that humanity confronts in a "state of nature"?[32] And given this apparently antagonistic orientation toward nature, how might we understand the stakes of the mutual association of freedom and trouble in *Gem* with water in a way further glimpsed, for instance, by the lyrics of "Wade in the Water," the negro spiritual which clandestinely instructed fugitive slaves to use bodies of water to throw hounds off their scent?

> Wade in the water.
> Wade in the water, children.
> Wade in the water.
> God's gonna trouble the water.

[32] On the "state of nature" see: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. 1st ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012 and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *An Inquiry into the Nature of the Social Contract, Or, Principles of Political Right*, Manchester, England: A. Heywood, 1848.

In a way similar to this well-known spiritual, *Gem* elaborates a vision of freedom that insists that we wade in the water in the sense of assuming an ecological posture that remains open to the trouble of our common life together in nature rather than disposed against it.

Through the possibilities available to Citizen as he attempts to eke out a life in freedom, *Gem* stages a post-emancipation experiment of freedom that enacts what Wilson elsewhere describes in an interview as the "fundamental question" facing black Americans after Emancipation:

> white America issued a *social contract* that said you can participate in the society if you are willing to deny the fact that you are African: that you cannot bring your Africanness inside the door. I think that the fundamental question that has confronted blacks since the Emancipation Proclamation is, Are we going to adopt the values of the dominant culture, or are we going to maintain our cultural separateness [the wall] and continue to develop the culture that has been developing in the southern United States for some two to three hundred years? I think that is the question. Ultimately the people are going to decide one way or the other about *how we are going to proceed*.[33]

This is precisely the question, I propose, that Wilson takes on in *Gem* through the figure of Citizen. How now in the light of the new day of Emancipation, will we proceed? And how much of yesterday will we bear with us into today? Or put another way, is there anything in yesterday worth bearing with us into today? Or is yesterday only the prologue of abject defeat to the victory of our finally acknowledged presence in historical time and admission into the body politic? The possible answers to this fundamental question are

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[33] See, Wilson's interview with Vera Sheppard in Jackson R. Bryer, and Mary C. Hartig, *Conversations with August Wilson*, Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2006, p, 105-6.

modeled for Citizen by Caesar and Solly. While the former proceeds in emancipation by appearing to disavow blackness as a liability to be overcome, the latter proceeds by continuing to be black in a way that suggests there is more to bear witness to in blackness, and blackness' inhabitation of the deep in particular, than the chronicling of our suffering, and obversely, little to the freedom conceived in the image of whiteness.

Demonstrating that blackness enacts a viable way of proceeding after emancipation is part of Wilson's explicit objective not only in *Gem* but the remaining nine plays that constitute his critically acclaimed "Century Cycle" or "Pittsburgh Cycle": a series of ten plays, each set in Pittsburgh, which undertake to represent black life and culture over the course of each decade of the twentieth century. In a 1990 interview with Vera Sheapherd, August Wilson frames the entire cycle as a response to James Baldwin's call for "a profound articulation of the black tradition."

> The suffering is only part of black history. What I want to do is place the culture of Black America on stage, to demonstrate that it has the ability to offer sustenance, so that when you leave your parent's house, you are not in the world alone. You have something that is yours, you have a *ground* to stand on, and you have a *viewpoint*, and you have a *way of proceeding* in the world that has been developed by your ancestors. It was James Baldwin who called for a "profound articulation of the black tradition," which he defined as that field of manners and rituals that sustains a man once he has left his father's house. And I said, Ah-hah! I am going to answer that call. I am going to show that this culture exists and that it is capable of offering sustenance. Now, if in the process of doing that, you have to explore the sufferings of black America, then that is also part of who we are. And I don't think you can ignore that because our culture was fired in the kiln of slavery and survival.[34] (emphasis added)

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[34] See, Vera Sheapherd's interview with Wilson collected in *Conversations with August Wilson*. Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2006, p, 104-5.

Like Aunt Cuney, it would seem, Wilson too would desire us to eat the Negro Question, insisting, as he does, that it is able to "offer sustenance." Beyond and in excess of the suffering precipitated by black people's exclusion from the world, the Century Cycle undertakes to represent the sustenance of blackness via the dramatization of the "ground," "viewpoint," and "way of proceeding in the world" that, according to Wilson, is expressed and performed within black life. In fact, we might ourselves proceed in the pages to follow in just this way, by attending in *Gem* to the *ground* blackness claims in the water, the *radically social vision* yielded by this profound relation to ground, and the ways in which these, when taken together, constitute *a viable way of proceeding in the world*.

But prior to this, it is important to first mark the attendant critique of whiteness played out through Citizen's experiment. Significantly what we have called Citizen's freedom experiment takes the specific form of an "adventure," on which Aunt Ester sets Citizen flowing in order to wash his soul from the guilt of Brown's death.

> You on an *adventure*, Mr. Citizen. I bet you didn't know that. It's all adventure. You signed up for it and didn't even know it. (24 emphasis added)

If Aunt Ester suspects that being "on an adventure" would come as a surprise to Citizen, perhaps it is because it, along with the escalated claim that "It's *all* adventure," would come as no less of a surprise to citizens. We suspect this possibility when we consider how an escape from the now more muted sense of risk buried in the word "adventure" is precisely what occasions the construction of the citizen*ship* in the first place, to facilitate, as it were, human life and sociality on the otherwise inhospitable sea of what has been

theorized within Western political philosophy as the insupportably hostile "state of nature."[35] I have in mind two older uses of "adventure," in particular, to mean "a course of action which invites risk; a perilous or audacious undertaking the outcome of which is unknown," and, in the context of marine insurance and even more pertinently to this study of water, "the risk or peril insured against; the period during which a ship, cargo, etc., is considered to be at risk."[36] The sense of riskiness in either of these senses of adventure bears a striking resemblance to the "precariousness" which Judith Butler understands as a defining characteristic of our given and common life together.

> Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies the exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all. Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous…It is not that we are born and then later become precarious, but rather that precariousness is coextensive with birth itself (birth is by definition precarious), which means that it matters whether or not this infant being survives, and that its survival is dependent on what we might call a social network of hands. Precisely because a living being may die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live.[37]

Just as for Aunt Ester, it would appear that for Butler too "It's all adventure." That basic to life, from its very outset at birth, is an element of being constantly at risk "in the hands of the other," in the vicissitudes of a given and unpredictable sociality that, while potentially injurious, is also absolutely necessary to sustain and care for life. But a

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[35] On the "state of nature" see: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. 1st ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012 and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *An Inquiry into the Nature of the Social Contract, Or, Principles of Political Right*, Manchester, England: A. Heywood, 1848.
[36] See: "adventure, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2017, Web, 17 March 2017.
[37] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* New York: Verso, 2009, p, 14.

consent to what Butler and Aunt Ester together suggest as the inherent precariousness of life is decidedly not the spirit which animates our now thoroughly naturalized notion of citizenship, which has its roots in social contract theory. A careful consideration of the social contract, as articulated perhaps most famously by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, will help illuminate this point.

In *The Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau elaborates a notion of political subjectivity in which the Other functions merely to conduct me to myself. Following Rousseau, the occasion for political organization is the resolution of the crisis instigated by the ineluctable encounter with the Other within what he terms "the state of nature," or what we might otherwise term as the crisis of the precariousness of our common life together.

> We will suppose that men in a state of nature are arrived at that crisis, when the strength of each individual is insufficient to defend him from the attacks he is subject to. This primitive state can therefore subsist no longer; and the human race must perish, unless they change their manner of life.[38]

In a way similar to Hegel, for Rousseau the presence of Others also instigates an ineluctable "struggle to the death," one giving rise to the necessary alienation of the social contract. Rousseau offers the following gloss of the social contract: "All the articles of the social contract will, when clearly understood, be found reducible to this single point—THE TOTAL ALIENATION OF EACH ASSOCIATE, AND ALL HIS RIGHTS, TO THE WHOLE COMMUNITY" (12). While perhaps not immediately

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[38] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *An Inquiry into the Nature of the Social Contract, Or, Principles of Political Right*. Manchester, England: A. Heywood, 1848. Print.

apparent from Rousseau's summation, this alienation constitutive of the political subjectivity of the citizen indeed assembles a community, but to the complete disavowal of relation and its precariousness. Rousseau's delineation of the particular crisis for which the social contract is the solution helps to illuminate this last point.

> Where shall we find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole aggregate force the *person* and the *property* of each individual; and by which every person, while united with ALL, shall obey only HIMSELF, and remain as free as before the union? Such is the fundamental problem, of which the Social contract gives the solution. (12, capitalization original, emphasis added)

Here, Rousseau elaborates a political fantasy of sociality that I propose is also the fantasy of whiteness in which the individual is able to exist in relation with Others—"united with ALL"—in such a way that, in fact, spares him the trouble of having to be in relation with anyone but "HIMSELF." The problem, then, for Rousseau, for which the social contract is the solution, is precisely the problem of the Other—flattened here into the mere threat of violence—and the imposition that the Other may make upon our freedom. In this way, the social contract proposes to return us to ourselves through our alienating, though no more than nominal relation with others, and to do so in such a way that we remain "as free as before." Thus, Rousseau conceives of freedom autonomously, outside and before the fact of relation as precisely a freedom *from* the Other.

The claim that this political fantasy is also a fantasy of whiteness has to do with the peculiar conflation of "person" and "property" belied in Rousseau's notion of political subjectivity. While he understands the social contract to defend and preserve "the person and property of each individual" as a preexisting and motivating cause for assembly, it is rather and more precisely the case that the very possibility of such a unity

of person and property is the social contract's *effect*.

> In fine, each person gives himself to ALL, but not to any individual, and as there is no one associate over whom the same right is not acquired which is ceded to him by others, each gains an equivalent for what he loses, and finds his force increased for preserving that which he possesses.[39]

In this way, the social contract effects the augmentation of one's personal force such that the individual subject may now do that which he formerly, as a function of his being-together with the Other in the state of nature, could not; that is, to preserve and guarantee "that which he possesses," including his self. In other words, rather than that which restores us to some original condition of freedom from the Other as discrete and autonomous beings, the social contract is, in fact, that which makes such a being possible in the first place. And what we must understand is that the social contract makes this autonomous person-property hybrid possible precisely by way of its disavowal of the precariousness of what we are perhaps now prepared to acknowledge as our original and given condition of being in relation with the Other. It is precisely this disavowal of the adventure of our common life together that gives rise to and transforms human sociality into grounds for playing out modernity's preoccupation with securing private property as an essential characteristic and expression of personhood.

III. ground

Gem is the first installment of August Wilson's famed "Century Cycle"

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[39] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. p. 13.

(alternately called the "Pittsburgh Cycle"): a series of ten plays set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania that together endeavor to represent black life and culture over the course of each decade of the twentieth century. Wilson's dramatic interest in the twentieth century places the esteemed playwright in direct conversation with another more prominent figure in the field of Black Studies, who, in predicting that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line," also recognized this century as a drama of blackness.[40] In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois forecasted at the outset of the twentieth century what Wilson, who published the cycle between 1982-2005, reflected on at its end. By considering these bookending bards of the twentieth century together, I hope not only to demonstrate how Wilson is also a significant practitioner of the black study we more easily attribute to Du Bois in his prolific contemplation of how it feels to be a problem, but also to call attention to the ways in which both do so in strikingly similar ways. And this similarity, I argue, has to do with the way in which both conceive of blackness as the problem of being in the water. But again "problem" in that more open sense of "a question for academic discussion" and not the now dominant sense of "a matter or situation regarded as unwelcome, harmful, or wrong and needing to be overcome."[41] For the latter, you might notice, has already started negatively into an evaluation of blackness that the former has yet to begin, either positively or negatively, and thus remains open to both valences.

Although chronologically first, *Gem* was just the second-to-last of the "Century

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[40] W. E. B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, p, 3.
[41] See "problem, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 17 March 2017.

Cycle" plays to be written. The play was both published and premiered in 2003, just two years prior to Wilson's death from liver cancer. So at the end—of the century, of the cycle, of his life's work, of his life—Wilson confronted the ordeal of how to begin. Written in the light of most of the whole, *Gem* represents a self-conscious exercise in beginning. And since it is the first installment of the series, its beginning bears the double responsibility of beginning the entire cycle. It's not insignificant, then, that *Gem* opens with the announcement of Garret Brown's death, with the bad news of our being in the water. The matter-of-fact cadence of Eli's words, "They say he stole a bucket of nails. He said he didn't do it. They having his funeral today," recall the rhythmic regularity with which news like this always spreads, across our television sets and alerts on our phones. *They say she stole a juice box. She said she had the money to pay. They having her funeral in LA.* Indeed, there is a haunting echo in the news Eli shares with Solly in the play's first scene. Since Wilson personally lived through hearing the news of Latasha Harlins, the beating of Rodney King, and the LA riots, one wonders whether he may have had L.A. in mind in the telling of this Pittsburgh story, which significantly begins against the backdrop of the closing of the local mill due to the breakout of strikes and riots in protest of Brown's death. Just by sharing this news with Selig, Eli performs the most basic aspect of what can be understood as the fundamental labor of black study: bearing *witness* to the problem of being black. Here, the object of Eli's witness takes the form of an "old, old, unwelcome visitation" (to borrow the language of one of the play's later stage directions). One, which, owing to how frequently we're still visited today—this ceaseless parade of the dead across our phones and computers—we might further

distinguish as the visitation of the bad news of being black in the world. In this way, this initial stage of black study is not unlike that which is performed by the "five hundred people" that assemble around Brown as he drowns.

> Caesar: Five hundred people standing around watching the man drown. I tried to break it up. Get them to go home. But they wanna stand around and watch a damn fool drown himself in the river…People wanna blame me but I got to keep order. Just like them niggers wanna riot over a bucket of nails. Talking about they ain't going to work. Talking about closing the mill down. (33)

To this already substantial cloud of witnesses, we might also add the countless audiences *Gem* has gathered unto itself since its premier at The Goodman Theater in Chicago on April 28, 2003. As a function of its very nature as a play intended to be seen and heard, as well as a narrative structured around a drowned black man, *Gem* stages, both within and without its pages, an exercise in witnessing. And if, as I am arguing, Black Studies begins with the quotidian act of bearing witness to the problem of being Black, Wilson asks us to attend to this problem as one analogous to the problem of being in the water.

Garret Brown's drowning, his refusal to come out the water, in particular, recalls a parallel episode regarding a slave named Demby in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, where we find Douglass also engaged in the witness of black study:

> Mr. Gore once undertook to whip one of Colonel Lloyd's slaves, by the name of Demby. He had given Demby but few stripes, when, to get rid of the scourging, he ran and plunged himself into a creek, and stood there at the depth of his shoulders, refusing to come out. Mr. Gore told him that he would give him three calls, and that, if he did not come out at the third call he would shoot him. The first call was given. Demby made no response, but stood his ground. The second and third calls were given with the same result. Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with any one, not

> even giving Demby an additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood.[42] (47)

Demby was weighed in the water when his "mangled body sank out of sight." But, if we follow the witness of Douglass closely, we also notice that he wades there, "refusing to come out" in a manner reminiscent of Garret Brown's refusal. This homonym, wade/weighed, faithfully sounds out the *black ambivalence* of the witness we bear to the "inhabitants of the deep." On the one hand, both episodes portray what Wilderson has called "the Black position" in ways that confirm black positionality as a radical exclusion from a fundamentally anti-black world. In relegating blackness to the water, they bear witness to the ways in which Wilderson has argued that "no slave is in the world."[43] In the Demby episode, for instance, we see how he is subject to wanton violence and devoid of any relation that need be recognized, in that, "without consultation or deliberation with any one," Mr. Gore kills him. Likewise, Garret Brown was described by Aunt Ester as having died a "lonely death," and refused to come out in the first place because of the violence to which he would likely have been subjected (21).

> Eli: He just treading water. Holding on to the barge. Caesar see he wasn't gonna come out he tried to beat him over the head with a two-by-four. Talking about he wasn't gonna do nothing to him. I believe he would have killed him right on the spot if he came out.
> Black Mary: He wouldn't have done nothing but arrest him and the judge give him thirty days.

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[42] Frederick, Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988, p, 47.
[43] See, Wilderson, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Eli: Well, as it is he dead. (12)

Yet even as they bear witness to the ways in which "the slave is not in the world," Demby and Brown also suggest that the slave is in the water, and in such a way that suggests that their inhabitation of this space matters. Both aquatic episodes bear witness to the ways in which blackness wades in the water in which it is also weighed. They provide an occasion to think through the nowhere where blackness is, in that both represent the problem of being black as a matter of willfully wading in the water. Such that, water becomes the substantial sign of nowhere, the opportunity to think the somewhere of nowhere and the substance of nothing, however seemingly unorthodox.[44] Which is what is so compelling about the impossible way in which Douglass describes Demby's refusal to come out the water as a matter of "[standing] his ground." But what does it mean to stand your ground in water, especially when water is commonly conceived as the absence of ground? What kind of ground is no ground? And how might we articulate the mode of standing to which it gives rise?

Douglass' compelling phrase recalls Wilson's motivation to demonstrate that blackness has a viable ground. It means that, when *Gem* stages our black study of Garret Brown's drowning, Wilson too is out to illustrate the ground we have to stand on, though in the admittedly unorthodox and demonstrably precarious way exemplified by Demby. Which is why the play solicits our patient interest in Garret Brown's decision to wade in the water, through an appeal that Aunt Ester makes to Citizen Barlow.

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[44] Interestingly, the emergent field of oceanic studies is predicated upon the exclusion of water from the thought of space and place, and the construction of the ocean as a kind of forgotten space that hardly registers as space at all.

> Aunt Ester: You got to find out why it was important for Garret Brown to die rather than to take his thirty days. Do you know why he didn't come out the water, Mr. Citizen? Do you know why he chose to die rather than to be branded a thief? (44-5)

In so many words, Aunt Ester's question reiterates what we have already heard Wilson declare is the fundamental question facing black citizens post-emancipation—how will we proceed—in the sense that Brown's "inhabitation of the deep" bespeaks a posture of being in the world belied by his more readily apparent death. I propose that the significance of Brown's refusal to come out the water inheres in the fact that he, here more specifically, refuses "30 days" and the brand of a thief. Perhaps, to accept these days would also be to consent to a particular testimony about the world, one predicated on the fetishization of private property, which Brown doesn't hold to be true.

Aunt Ester articulates her appeal for Citizen to find out why Brown refused to come out the water by likening Brown's death to the passion of Jesus Christ.

> Aunt Ester: …There was a man who ran and jumped in the river. They say he stole a bucket of nails. Did you hear about that? He died a lonely death. Wasn't nobody but him. All them people standing around watching and he was the only one who died.
> Citizen: He could have come out the river…I was standing there. I seen him. I thought he was gonna come out. I told myself he was gonna come out. The people was telling him to come on out then he just sunk down in the water. He kept saying he didn't steal the bucket of nails. Everything they say to him he just say he didn't steal the bucket of nails.
> Aunt Ester: Jesus Christ was falsely accused. He died a bitter death on the cross. This man was like Jesus. He say he would rather die innocent than to live guilty. (20-21)

Some meditation on the meaning of the cross may prove useful here. The God on the cross could have come down. It may have looked otherwise, owing to the nails in his

hands, but the man being held was holding on. Desire hollowed his hands. At the heart of the Christian faith there lies not simply a cross, but a cross carried, held, and embraced.

The God on the cross could have come down, where coming down was precisely the proof that would have substantiated Jesus' claims in the hearts and minds of men. This is what they needed and wanted to see. This victory over suffering, this survival, this enactment of life and not any other. This triumph over death.

The God on the cross, who could have come down, elicits the contempt of follower and foe alike. Whether manifesting in vengeful mockery or bewildered disappointment, the underlying contempt for the cross, if not the man, was the same. But within this general reaction to the cross, there is a class of men to which I would like to call special attention. "And they that were crucified with him, reviled him." So the Bible testifies of the *thieves* crucified beside Jesus, who was *nailed* to a tree. Indeed, the thieves stand in unique relation to Jesus in that their mockery arises from within the experience of crucifixion. I highlight the mockery of the thieves flanking Jesus at the cross because of the thematic significance of theft within the play. Indeed, we may establish a parallel between the mockery of these thieves, who share in Christ's crucifixion, and the dismissiveness and disdain with which the thief Citizen, who shares with Brown in the "problem" of being black, reacts to Brown's death. There are echoes of "come down from the cross" in "come out of the water," that suggest a possible parallel between the passion of the Christ and what, following the logic of Wilson's analogy, we might call the passion of the black. What if black study, in this way, mirrors the activity and method of the theological enterprise of Christology, all that peering into the meaning and

significance of Jesus' life and death, Especially that death on a cross by which he paradoxically claimed to be the way, the truth, and the LIFE? In soliciting our attention to Garret Brown's "inhabitation of the deep" by staging blackness' "ground," "viewpoint," and "way of proceeding in the world," Wilson may likewise be understood to dramatize the *way* blackness makes in water, the *truth* of a vision of the planet proportionate to its predominantly blue status, and the LIFE realized in the insistence on a different relation to ground mediated by water's deterritorialization.

There is another historical reason why black study might consider the thieves that further illuminates how the thematic of theft is working throughout the play. In addition to Citizen stealing the bucket of nails, for which Garret Brown dies in Citizen's place, we hear of another incident in the play Caesar shoots and kills a boy for stealing a loaf of bread. Furthermore, upon first meeting Citizen, Caesar immediately reads him as potentially criminal in a way that places special emphasis on the particular offense of stealing, in such a way that suggests theft as the paradigmatic expression of criminality par excellence. By so distinguishing the special offense of stealing, Wilson gestures to the ways in which theft constitutes no neutral offense when performed by a people who were once property themselves. The haunting echo of the slave's former status as property pre-emancipation manifests in the play as Aunt Ester's "Bill of Sale," which interestingly doubles in the play as the boat on which Citizen journeys to the City of Bones. The seemingly organic and passive way in which, to borrow a Caesar's words, "too many niggers breed trouble" in *Gem*, suggests the ways in which blackness in and of itself, post-emancipation, registers a permanent visual defiance of the protocols and

logics of private property in such a way that further explains why Citizen, as a mere function of his black skin, is already heading to jail unless he shows some "visible means of support" to counteract what already functions as a visible sign to the contrary. It suggests the ways in which blackness, as the enduring visual sign of the freed and emancipated, threatens the permanence and naturalness of private property with its past tense, as its living, incarnate afterlife. This is perhaps the visual deficit which explains the relative ease with which black victims of Katrina are read as looters while their white peers are read as survivors in a state of crisis. The black is always already a looter, the walking incarnation of a mass heist, black echo of a moment when the entire nation got jacked. The need to arrest blackness and black trouble, in this sense, are inseparable from the gestures of private property.

If there is analogy between the passion of the Christ and the passion of the Black, then, we might also recognize an analogy between black study from within the lived experience of blackness, and the thieves. To what extent does our black study offer up a vision of blackness that implicitly asks us to come out of the water? And how might we otherwise orient ourselves to blackness in such a way that insists upon and calls for our wading, and thinks the relation between this wading and LIFE? Put another way, which thief are we who practice black study? And which thief is Citizen? Consider the record in the gospel of Luke of the repentance of the Good or Penitent Thief:

> One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he was saying, "Jesus, remember

> me when You come in Your kingdom!" And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."[45]

In calling our attention to the Penitent Thief, I realize there is a danger of suggesting that black suffering is somehow right or just, which I certainly do not intend. Neither do I personally understand the thief here to be repenting of theft, primarily, so much as he is repenting of a negative orientation toward Christ's cross. In a similarly, given Wilson's Catholic education, I suspect that Wilson primarily has this in view by employing this analogy between Garret Brown and Jesus, and centering his drama around the specific infraction of Citizen's stealing a bucket of nails. Like Jesus, Brown died for a crime he didn't commit, but this is not also to say that Wilson thinks that justice in this instance required Citizen to die instead. Rather, the injustice for Wilson, and I would even argue for Jesus, inheres in the proliferation of a dominant relation to the world as private property that criminalizes Life, the often desperate actions taken by the oppressed and disenfranchised to live and survive. That Citizen meets Brown again at the conclusion of his journey to the City of Bones may already suggest the ways in which Wilson writes with the Penitent Thief in mind, in the sense that Citizen also joins Brown in the unlikely type of Paradise that is the "City of Bones." My investment in this instance in scripture, then, is to point out how until this moment, the God on the cross who wouldn't come down was utterly alone. He hadn't a single friend in the world, perhaps especially among his followers and those who "were crucified with him." For they knew with their blood the flagrant offense of a God who could come down, but wouldn't.

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[45] Luke 23:39-43 (NAS95)

The God on the cross was alone, but he was not by himself. He was with the world, but the world was not with Him. Which is to say that the God on the cross was alone in love. “For God so *loved* the world” or “No one has greater love than this, that he would lay his life down for his friends.” What can we say about such aloneness?

If ours is a world animated by the desire to “come down,” that is, to secure the conditions of life by eliminating that which seems to endanger it, if “coming down” is our horizon and sky, the willful death of Jesus embodies a dramatic tear in the fabric of such a world. He *is* the unshrunken cloth from the parable tearing our world to pieces. It would not do to suture him to the purple cloak, the old garments of empire or nationalism and all of their attendant interpretations of life. What the soldiers do in mockery, we do in our hearts. Rather Jesus’ death is the lifeline that gives its thread for the creation of an entirely new garment. It is the fulfillment of the psalmist’s words concerning the heavens:

> They will all wear out like a garment.
> You will role them up like a robe;
> Like a garment they will be changed

On the cross, Jesus peels away our tattered, threadbare sky and inaugurates a new world, by sewing and sowing into the world an entirely new subject. The sky “will wear out like a garment, like clothing you will change them.” Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do. They are not where we are, but elsewhere. But I desire that they join us where we are. Aloneness like that which Jesus experienced in the world deserves distinction for its capacity to hew a way out of no way. By subjecting his life to the material conditions of a world that at least for him presents a “no way,” while maintaining the integrity of that life as decisively different and otherwise from the order

of that world, and this to the therefore logical end of his death, Jesus' sacrificial death opens a kind of door to a world otherwise. Such aloneness as is alone in love sows a universe. It is an act of creation all unto itself, a death whose "energy," love, James Baldwin—in all of his manifest ambivalence toward and poignant critique of Christianity—argued and prophesied must come back into the world in *The Fire Next Time*.

> White Christians have also forgotten several elementary historical details. They have forgotten that the religion that is now identified with their virtue and their power…came out of a rocky piece of ground in what is known as the Middle East before color was invented, and that for the Christian church to be established, Christ had to be put to death, by Rome, and that the real architect of the Christian church was not the disreputable, sunbaked Hebrew who gave it his name but the mercilessly fanatical and self-righteous St. Paul. The energy that was buried with the rise of the Christian nations must come back into the world; nothing can prevent it. Many of us, I think, both long to see this happen and are terrified of it, for though this transformation contains the hope of liberation, it also imposes a necessity for great change.[46]

If, then, like Baldwin, we can locate in the passion and love of Christ, displayed at the cross, which was nonetheless an actual and horrific death, a "hope for liberation," then the implication of the analogy Aunt Ester draws between Christ and Garrett Brown invites the speculation that there is not only the bad news of our drowning to be heard in the history of the black, but also, though difficult to imagine or believe in, the *good news*. The good news is in the bad news. That is, it happens in the context of bad news but can neither be reduced to bad news nor the mechanism or structure of that bad news. It is where the good news happens and takes place, but, in point of fact, the good news

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[46] Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial Press, 1963, p, 58.

precedes the bad news. Which is why, when confronted with the question of the paradox of the simultaneous presence of the "marvelous" and the "terrible" in the "Negro situation", or whether the elimination of the terrible would also mean "the elimination of that which [he had] commemorated in fiction," Ralph Ellison's answer is self-professedly "odd."

> Well, what I have tried to commemorate in fiction is that which I believe to be enduring and abiding in our situation, especially those human qualities which the American Negro has developed despite and in rejection of the obstacles and meanness imposed upon us. If the writer exists for any social good, his role is that of preserving in art those human values, which can endure by confronting change. Our Negro situation is changing rapidly, but so much which we've gleaned through the harsh discipline of Negro American life is simply too precious to be lost. I speak of *faith*…[47]

The oddness of Ellison's response, in the face of this paradox of the co-presence of our good and bad news and whether we might have to risk the good to rid ourselves of the bad, inheres in his act of faith, which echoes Baldwin's active faith; for both simply believe that the good will outlast the bad. The basis for this faith—and Ellison does not quite say this but his insistence on the endurance of the marvelous leads us to this point—is the possibility that what is good about the good news actually precedes and exceeds the bad news that is the context in which it happens.

Besides Brown's death, the second way in which *Gem* testifies to water as ground is the "City of Bones," a mythical underwater city made from the bones of the slaves who foundered during Middle Passage.

> Take a look at this map, Mr. Citizen. See that right there…that's a city. It's only a half mile by a half mile but that's a city. It's made of bones.

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[47] Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage International, 1995, p, 21.

> Pearly white bones. All the buildings and everything is made of bones. I seen it. I been there, Mr. Citizen. My mother live there. I got an aunt and three uncles live down there in that city made of bones. You want to go there, Mr. Citizen? I can take you there if you want to go. That's the center of the world. In time it will all come to light. The people made a kingdom out of nothing. They were the people that didn't make it across the water. *They sat down right there*. They say, "Let's make a kingdom. Let's make a city of bones." (52)

That they "sat down right there" makes a claim for water as ground. And that sitting down right there could yield a kingdom, and that a kingdom could be made from bones, that not so subtle marker of human mortality, suggests an alternate imagination of life together in *Gem* that runs counter to that which is assembled by the social contract under the banner and aspirations of citizenship. Indeed every black character in *Gem*, besides significantly Caesar, makes the journey to the City of Bones. In the specific case of Citizen, his "adventure" to the City of Bones, where he is reacquainted and makes peace with Garret Brown, is the means by which he is able to get his soul washed and transforms from a selfish man aspiring to the new privileges of citizenship into what Wilson calls "a man of the people."

IV. way of proceeding

Wilson's proposition that blackness is capable of yielding a viable "way of proceeding in the world" is complicated by the spectacular nature of the existing evidence to the contrary. I speak of the manifold obstructions historically confronted in "the lived experience of blackness" that occasion the need to pray for, make, or imagine

what many a pew and pulpit colloquially call "a way out of no way."[48] The paradoxical logic of this phrase so familiar to the black church may be thought in relation to the same verbal ingenuity and nimbleness of mind demonstrated by several kindred utterances found throughout the literary tradition. In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, for instance, Dionne Brand meditates on the unlikely way-making of middle-passing slaves when she explains that: "To travel without a map, to travel without a way. They did, long ago. That misdirection became the way."[49] And Toni Morrison concludes *Song of Solomon* with these words, which render a similar kinetic surprise: "If you surrender to the wind you can ride it."[50] Lastly, these lines from Ed Roberson's *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In* marvel at how in spite of the "nothing" filling the hollow bones of birds, still they rise.

> their bones
> how nothing frees them
> how nothing lifts them up
> The birds put nothing in their bones.[51]

Each of these examples of improbable motion by authors steeped in a literary mediation on the "problem" of being black suggest a heightening image of deprivation or lack that should otherwise thwart movement. Traveling "without a map" or riding "wind" too insubstantial to support one's weight together suggest unmet conditions of kinetic possibility—the want of terrain or orientation in the world—that trend towards the sheer "nothing" or absolute lack founding the flight of birds. Just as Wilson sets out to

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[48] Whelchel, L. H. *The History and Heritage of African American Churches: A Way Out of No Way*. St. Paul, Minn: Paragon House, 2011. Print.
[49] Dionne, Brand. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Doubleday Canada, 2012.
[50] Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Knopf, 1995. Print.
[51] Roberson, Ed. *Voices Cast out to Talk Us in : Poems*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995. Print.

demonstrate in his cycle, then, these authors similarly demonstrate an insistence on the viability, if unlikeliness, of blackness' "way of proceeding in the world." They share as their muse blackness' kinetic propensity for making "way out of no way."

Yet, there is much in the way of black life that may justly be described in the colloquial terms of this "no way." Particularly when we attend to how frequently we employ words like "rupture," "discontinuity," "break," and "fracture" in the theorization of blackness, or the sheer frequency with which we hear the news that another black boy or girl has been prematurely escorted by the police to that ultimate and universal "no way" of death. As we grapple, then, with the claim of black literature for the viability of blackness' "way of proceeding," we must first come more fully to terms with the nature of the "no way" out of which black people nonetheless manage to make a way. This interrogation of "no way" that is blackness is really just another way of undertaking the "investigation of [the] nothingness" or blackness of the slave that Fred Moten calls for in his essay "Blackness and Nothingness," which I also cite here for its suggestion, along with Brand and Wilson, of the original relation between the waters of Middle Passage and the "no way" or nothingness confronted in and as blackness.

> It's terrible to have come from nothing but the sea, which is nowhere, navigable only in its constant autodislocation. The absence of solidity seems to demand some other ceremony of hailing that will have been carried out on some more exalted frequency. This is exacerbated by the venal refusal of a general acknowledgment of the crime, which is, in any case, impossible, raising the question of whether the only way adequately to account for the horror of slavery and the brutality of the slaver, the only way to be (in Sexton's words) a witness rather than a spectator, is *to begin* by positing the absolute degradation of the enslaved. This is not a trick question; it's not merely rhetorical. If the slave is, in the end and in essence, nothing, what remains is the necessity of an investigation of that nothingness. What is the nothingness, which is to say the blackness, of the

> slave that it is not reducible to what they did, though what they did is irreducible in it? This is a question concerning the undercommon inheritance of another world, which is given in and given as fantasy in the hold. Those who are called into being by the desire for another call relinquish the fantastic when they make the choice to leave the hold behind. In resistance to such departure we linger in the advent, in the brutal interplay of advent and enclosure.[52]

Gem undertakes precisely such an investigation into blackness as nothingness. When considered in conversation with Brand and Moten's words above, Wilson's black study in *Gem* helps us to tease out the terribleness of being "from nothing but the sea," and the specific ways in which this original terror might easily suggest the "absolute degradation of the enslaved." But together they also suggest the possibility of nonetheless recognizing in nothingness or blackness' manifold deprivations "the undercommon inheritance of another world." And we can already suspect that this could be the case, that an interrogation of nothing could open us up to another world, because of the ways in which they each associate the nothingness of blackness with the sea, which, strictly speaking, is not only not nothing, but actually happens to encompass the overwhelming majority of everything in the only world, which is to say Earth, we know.

Water constitutes roughly 71 percent of the Earth's surface. Given the more expansive sense of ground for which I argue throughout this study, this means that, far from a paradigmatic engagement with ground, our standing is a relatively rare phenomenon to and on the Earth. Not to mention that we ourselves are also constituted by 50-75 percent water. All this water more than warrants the sort of recalibration performed

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[52] Moten, Fred. "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112.4 (2013): 737–780. *saq.dukejournals.org*. Web.

by the synonyms for the planet which we find in Du Bois' notion of the "world-sea" in *Souls* or Glissant's notion of the "land-sea" in *Poetics of Relation*. The circumstances informing how such a vision of the planet, as consisting of both land and sea, finds expression in black studies when Western culture has otherwise been demonstrated to perpetuate a profound neglect of the sea is part of what I understand to be at stake in these lines from *Gem* spoken by Aunt Ester and addressed to Citizen.

> Some people don't like adventure, Mr. Citizen. They stay home. Like me. I done seen all the adventure I want to see. I been across the water. I seen both sides of it. I know about the water. The water has its secrets the way the land has its secrets. Some know about the land. Some know about the water. But there is some that know about the land and the water. They got both sides of it. (Wilson 52)

These words from Aunt Ester, who we here learn personally survived the Middle Passage, suggest how the slave knows all too well that the Earth consists of both land and sea. Spared neither the vicissitudes of nature's greens nor its blues, the material imagination of blackness merits critical attention precisely as that which, owing to the material realities attendant to the experience of racial antagonism in the modern world, harbors the knowledge of "both sides of it." Specifically in the context of environmentalism's emerging critique of a longstanding neglect of "the watery part of the world," its significance should be understood in relation and distinction to an otherwise impoverished western environmental or planetary imagination that to increasingly devastating effects has disproportionately imagined, with respect to land, life on a planet overwhelmingly made of water. Indeed, if blackness has both sides of it, whiteness doesn't know the half.

When we are attentive to just how much of the Earth consists of water, Moten's call to investigate the sea-induced nothingness of blackness, and the suggestion that this investigation might open us up to "another world" not only seems plausible, but also suggests the possibility that this other world may just be the Earth. In investigating blackness as nothingness, we may just be endeavoring "to see the Earth before the end of the world," as Ed Roberson puts it. Or, to put it differently, endeavoring to enact a planetary practice that, in being ecologically beholden to the Earth, actively refuses and ends the world. To the extent that this distinction between the Earth and the world holds, what remains, as necessary extension of an investigation into nothingness, is a related critical interrogation of the something called the world, relative to which the sea and blackness both register as nothing. That is, we have to come to terms with the world's method of reckoning things as no-things, a zeroing calculus whereby the majority of the Earth's surface could happily and alarmingly be entertained as nonexistent.

As we proceed, then, to think the nothingness or "no way" of blackness in being from nothing but the sea, we have already seen how Brand imagines the deprivation the sea visits upon the slave manifests as a lack of orientation or direction in the world, in a way that recalls these words from Equiano that interpret the interdicting motivation for the technology hold: "We were all put under deck, so that we could not *see* how they managed the vessel" (40). Moten calls our attention to another sense of the sea's deprivation, namely its lack of solidity, an autodislocation expressed in blue miles of undulating anarchy that render the sea a "nowhere." This aspect of the nothingness imposed by the sea also finds expression in Equiano's narrative, when after boarding the

slave ship, he asks his shipmates if white people “had no country, but lived in this hollow place (the ship)” (40). Here Equiano attributes to the sea a spatial deprivation that he specifically attributes to its exclusion not ultimately from solid ground, terra firma, but more precisely from the modern political configuration of togetherness we call the “country.” In other words, the sea is spatially impoverished relative to solid ground only in so far as solid ground can facilitate the formation of the nation. The “where” in nowhere is patriotic. The sea registers as a no place in a way that obscures the presumption of solidity belied by the reflexively anthropocentric ways that we think place exclusively in facilitation of the protocols of modern human life.

Gem undertakes an investigation of blackness as nothingness in a way that understands the sea and Middle Passage to have imparted unto blackness the terrible inheritance of not only an originating “nowhere,” but also an originating nowhen. In this way, I mean to forecast the ways in which Wilson specifically portrays blackness as nothingness or an obstructive “no way” by rendering it within the play as not only a frustrated relation to space induced by the traumatic experiences of Middle Passage and slavery, but also a frustrated relation to time. Furthermore, *Gem* also suggests the need to likewise investigate and critique our measures for recognizing something as such. Particularly in so far as the play suggests that the somethingness of something may ultimately be attributed to its inclusion within the reigning configuration of the world. Thus, as we examine Wilson’s black study of nothingness, we will also consider *Gem*’s accompanying critique of what the character Caesar Wilks, the local constable of the Hill District, confuses throughout the place for “everything.” This critique is significant

because it complicates the status of nothing as such by also interrogating the genuineness of everything's claim to everything. Nothing in *Gem,* it turns out, is just something that doesn't count, something after it has been excluded from a specific ordering of the world that, in laying claim to and coming to be conflated with everything, subjects everything else to its zeroing calculus. And in a way reflective of nothing's alignment with the sea, water throughout the play functions as the substantive sign of nothing, an opportunity to think the substance of nothing, to better understand what motivates nothing's exclusion from and something's inclusion in the world, to theorize nothing not as utter lack, but the "undercommon inheritance of another world" underwater that Wilson names the "City of Bones."

In *Gem*, the "no way" of blackness registers as a frustrated relation to space and time that complicates any effort to proceed, progress, or continue in the world, in so far as these represent colluding exercises of space and time. This we glimpse in the anti-black orientation of Caesar's autobiographical narration of the obstacle-laden "race" that leads to him successfully becoming the constable of the Hill District.

> You look around and see you black. You look at the calendar. Slavery's over. I'm a free man. I can get up whatever time I want to in the morning. I can move all over and pick any woman I want. I can walk down the street to the store and buy anything my money will buy. There ain't nothing I can't have. I'm starting out with nothing so I got to get a little something. A little place to start. You look and see the race you got to run is different than somebody else's. Maybe it's got more hills. It's longer. But this is what I got. Now what to do with it? (37)

For Caesar to "look around and see [he's] black" and subsequently conclude that he's "starting out with nothing" indexes an enactment of black study that appraises blackness as nothingness. But whereas Morrison, Brand and Roberson think this nothingness as

somehow enabling a viable black kinetic practice, we find that it presents for Caesar a sheer impediment. We glimpse this in the way that Caesar attributes the capacity to begin a "free man." He imagines "starting" as an absolutely new possibility for the emancipated slave enacted in the autonomous exercise of all that he can now do as a "free man." But what does this understanding of the implications of emancipation imply about enslavement? The suggestion is that prior to emancipation, the slave, like a hopelessly skipping record, lay stalled forever in a stuttering anti-beginning. The attribution of the capacity to start to the free man as a *new* privilege also implies the denial of the same to the slave. In this way, we witness Caesar beginning his race in much the same way that Moten cautions against above, "by positing the absolute degradation of the enslaved."

Just as significant to the negative appraisal of blackness as nothingness are the gestures which enable Caesar to begin in the way otherwise denied to him in blackness. Thus, the gestures enabling him to start, he must first "look at the *calendar*" and secure "a little *place* to start," suggests that blackness opposes to Caesar's aspirations to begin a thwarted relation to time and space. This point is further illuminated by closely attending to Caesar's description of the conditions of possibility for "starting" his race as well as his enumeration of the autonomous rights that constitute what it means to actively proceed in the wake of starting as a "free man."

The preconditions of Caesar's start are, in the first instance, a matter of a new-found relation to time that registers in his "look at the calendar" to see that "Slavery's over." Significantly, this look follows what I have suggested should be read as a black study that appraises blackness as nothingness. The look to the calendar, then, is a look to

something that should be recognized as a look away from blackness that implicitly locates blackness outside of time, or at least the reckoning of time indexed by the calendar, a distinction that shall prove critical to the investigation into the nothingness of blackness that we undertake here. Caesar's redirected look recognizes the calendrical event of emancipation as a necessary precondition for starting. But it also implicitly denies time and history to the slave, in a way that suggests that prior to the legal abolition of slavery blackness foundered forever outside the timeline of history, in a waiting room just anterior to the field of temporal expression, the right to happen and occur. This forestalled relation to what we might call *calendar time* is exemplified by a trope we find repeated all throughout the slave narratives. Consider for example, the opening lines of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, in which Douglass laments his ignorance of his birthday.

> I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege.

Douglass offers us a pre-Emancipation portrait of beginning in which it is no more possible for him to look at the calendar to see that slavery's over than to see his birthday. Thus, in contrast to Caesar, who constructs his autobiography as a race that begins with an anti-black embrace of calendar time, Douglass must eke out a beginning to his

autobiography from within blackness and its thwarted relation to time.[53] Without recourse to the narrative privilege of the ability to trace his origins back to a single 24 hour day, Douglass—and by extension the slave—had only the unwieldy masses of time represented by the seasons (spring time and fall time) and agricultural labor cycles (planting-, harvest, or cherry-time) with which to conceive of his origin.

In documenting a time when knowledge of one's birthday constituted a distinct "privilege" of whiteness, this passage bespeaks the operation of a *temporal contract* that is as much racial in nature as Charles Mills has illuminated the social contract to be.[54] Ultimately, I will elucidate an interpretation of the social contract as enacting both a temporal and a spatial commons, a way of dwelling in space and time together equivalent to whiteness and anti-black.

Douglass describes the "unhappiness" of the slave's exclusion from the temporal commons of whiteness in terms of the specific deprivation of what, relative to calendar time, we might call *bare time*. What calendar time facilitates that bare time does not is the capacity to think and narrate oneself as an autonomous individual. Or put differently, bare time disappoints calendar time's temporal logic of individuation. The calendar, as a technology for organizing and recording the progression of time, indexes a reckoning of time predicated on the 24-hour day, which makes it possible to conceive of a discrete

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[53] And, it bears mentioning, that this deprived relation to time is most fundamentally a factor of being black than being a slave laborer. For not only does this relation to time persist for Douglass after he escapes slavery, but he also explains it specifically in terms of race. It is "*white* children," and not the alternative *free* children, that can "tell their ages." Calendar and bare time, then, are better understood in relation to whiteness and blackness respectively than to slavery and freedom.
[54] Mills, Charles W. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997. Print.

birthday. This development in humanity's reckoning of time makes it possible to speak of one's beginning as temporally distinct from others, and thus, to narrate oneself as an isolated individual distinguished from and independent of one's human and nonhuman environment. Just as it also makes it possible to track individuated progressions through time, as we do whenever we are watching a race and wondering which *one* will win. By contrast, temporal markers like "planting-time" or "fall-time" think time cyclically and on a level irreducible beyond the network of relations they represent. To be born at "planting time" registers a sign of original environmental entanglement that cannot fail to signal the laborers and plant-life, which is to say, the human and non-human environment, attendant to one's birth. In this way, bare time as Douglass portrays it here is also *ecological time*. Moreover, it bespeaks a sense of time that thinks in recurring cycles and seasons that are communal in their implication and, in both these ways, less accommodated to tracking individual and individuated progress. The seasons and agricultural labor cycles bespeak instead a sense of time that is better exemplified by the circle, always looping back upon itself and failing to progress forward, than the (time)line's ambitions towards progress.

The specific deprivation of ecological time, then, inheres in the inability to look back through time and locate one's beginning at a discrete point, from which a discrete and clean autobiographical timeline might proceed. In contrast to the "white children" and those who may lay claim to the privileges of whiteness, the slave's looking back yields only an unwieldy thicket of entangled relations. In the thought of the beginning, the slave can think in no smaller terms than the network of relations which constitute him

or her. This further informs why Caesar would need to begin what he specifically intends to undertake as a race by looking at a calendar to see that slavery is over. In a sense, Caesar adopts the day of Emancipation as a kind of prosthetic birthday that enables his entrance into the temporal commons of whiteness and a meaningful participation in calendar time that registers in the freedom to "get up whatever time I want in the morning." Relative to the egregious unfreedom of slavery and the utter subjection of the slave's time to the grueling demands of the plantation economy, we can hardly begrudge Caesar a desire for autonomy over his time. Nevertheless, the status of Caesar's temporal autonomy as a good is complicated by the fact that it sustains a practice of time that eventuates with him becoming the constable of the Hill District. Consider, for example, how Caesar does time after getting arrested and put on the "county farm" for running a "gambling joint" and having "to put some bullet holes in a couple of niggers."

> A fellow named John Hanson started a riot. I seen that wasn't gonna be nothing but bad news. I took him on one-to-one. Man-to-man. He busted my eye. **That's why I can't see but so good out my one eye**. He busted my eye but I put down the riot. They gave me a year. I did six months when the mayor called me in to see him. Say he wanted to put me in charge of the Third Ward. Told me say you fry the little fish and send the big fish to me. They give me a gun and a badge. (Wilson 38)

Caesar does his time by taking on "one-to-one" and "man-to-man" a fellow prisoner who starts a riot. In this way, Caesar's individuated manner of doing time, even as an incarcerated black man, aspires to calendar time's logic of individuation. Not only does he "put down the riot," he also catches "a couple of niggers" who "tried to escape," reasoning: "That don't do nothing but make it harder on everybody. They out there enjoying their freedom ducking and dodging the law and everybody else on half rations

and got to make up their work." Thus, Caesar manages to gain autonomy over his time only by practicing time in such a way that demonstrates a personal investment in the integrity and protocols of the temporal contract of whiteness. He can "wake up whenever he wants," but only as one whose very occupation it is to ensure that other "niggers" do time. Writing *Gem* in the age of the prison industrial complex, Wilson asks his free audiences who can catch a play whenever they want, to remember the prisoner and consider the nefarious relation between carceral time and the time of citizenship.

We gain greater insight into this aspect of Caesar's job description when he first meets Citizen Barlow, who has recently traveled up North from Alabama.

> Caesar: …Too many niggers breed trouble. If you stay around here you stay out of trouble. My name's Caesar. I'm the boss man around here. What's your name?
> Citizen: Citizen Barlow.
> Caesar: Are you a troublemaker, Citizen Barlow? You ever been to jail?
> Citizen: I ain't never been in jail.
> Caesar: That's where you heading. You got to have visible means of support around here. If I see you standing around looking to steal something and you ain't got two dollars in your pocket you going to jail. You understand? Get you a job and stay out of trouble. Stay off the streets. (31)

This exchange between Caesar and Citizen yields another name for the nothingness of blackness: trouble. Here, the trouble of blackness manifests specifically as idleness or a failure to use time productively. This failure is in and of itself criminal. Citizen needs not break the law in any especially egregious way to go to jail. It is enough simply to fail to show legible signs of productivity by "standing around" or not having "two dollars in [his] pocket." In fact, we learn from Caesar that Citizen's default position is one that is already and actively heading to prison. In order to avoid jail, he must actively reorient

himself to time, in the way suggested by Caesar's look at the calendar, by getting a job and consenting to be on the clock, as it were.

In addition to idleness, the trouble of blackness also manifests throughout the play in the form of the riots that break out after the death of Garret Brown. Solly describes the scene:

> They had a riot over at the mill. The people said they wasn't going to work and the police tried to make them. They threw bottles at the police and started busting out the windows. The police charged the crowd arresting everybody they could get their hands on. They couldn't arrest them fast enough. The horses trampling the people. Ran right over the top of one fellow. He liable to be crippled for life. (24)

Reading *Gem* today can hardly fail to call to mind the riots that broke out in Ferguson after the death of Michael Brown in August 2014 or in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray in April of 2015. The cloud of witnesses that gather round the suspected thief Garret Brown to bear witness to his drowning at the hands of Caesar share a kindred witness to those who assembled around the lifeless body of another suspected thief, foundered in Ferguson by a policeman's bullet and allowed to lie in the middle of the street for four hours. Black study inheres in the activity of this ever-growing crowd, assembled like a hurricane around its eye. Indeed, how are we to think the relation between the trouble we've *seen* and the trouble we *make*? Is it just that the humiliation and offense of one inspires the revolutionary action of the other? Or might we locate a continuity between them? Discover that if we surrender to the ground, we can ride it too?

Then, there is the careless force of the law, "trampling the people" underfoot as the no more than incidental collateral damage of an essential directive to keep order. The man liable to be "crippled for life" by the police who ride their horses indiscriminately

through the crowd recalls the accidental nature of the miscarriage of Freddie Gray in the back of a police van, "crippled [into coma by a severed spine and not waking up] for life." These deaths, we must say, are accidents, unwilled by anyone in particular as such, but rather the trivial and passive outcome of the law's actual, active, and anti-black objective: order. I'm wrestling here with a difficulty in language that we encounter whenever we attempt to talk about or explain the wrong of each new death that is also related to the deep and painful offense of every new acquittal. We know a wrong to have taken place, but exhaust the terms of the available juridical vocabulary in the need to assign blame to some *one* or ones, to the one(s) who killed my baby, in hopes of getting the justice system to acknowledge a wrong that it is only prepared to prosecute as a willful, intentional "murder" of one by one, when the very construction of this one is in itself anti-black, the achievement of an anti-black gesture of creation. This is part of what's at stake when black studies scholars like Hortense Spillers and Wilderson, in their attempts to delineate the nature problem of being black, speak in terms of an "American grammar" and a "grammar of suffering" respectively.[55] This grammar, like a language barrier, renders our trouble non-communicable and helps to explain the incredulity of white responses to black outrage: "*I know that it's unfortunate, even tragic. But do you really mean to say that he murdered him? He was just doing his job.*" We die, not at the hands of murderers, but of people who are just doing their jobs. We lose our lives to accidents. Our children don't come home due to accidents, inculpable tragedies and incidental digressions of law and order. And how do you put an accident on trial? If that

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[55] See, Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" and Frank Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*.

accident *is* the law? If, owing to its regularity over time and across the globe, like the dependable arrival of the seasons or the celestial exchange of night and day, those accidents constitute a world? How do you try a world? What account do we give of the world or order in which it is and has always been somebody's job to accidentally kill you? What does it mean to live black in this world? To be, not a casualty, but debris?

Caesar demonstrates the inculpability of the law when occasioning the trouble blackness sees and suppressing the trouble blackness makes in his apology for his apparently excessive enforcement of the law in two incidents of theft: a bucket of nails, in the case of Garret Brown, and a loaf of bread, in the case of an anonymous boy. First, in response to people blaming him for Garret Brown's death, an incredulous Caesar retorts, "I tried to save him but he ain't have enough sense to save himself. People wanna blame me but I got to keep order." Wilson casts serious doubt on the sincerity of these efforts by Caesar when Eli remarks, "Caesar see he wasn't gonna come out he tried to beat him over the head with a two-by-four…I believe he would have killed him right on the spot if he came out" (12). But beyond his dubious claim to have actually tried to save Brown, Caesar's apology primarily assumes the form of an appeal to his obligation to "keep order" as a "custodian of the law" (78), that is, to just doing his job. He offers the same defense to his estranged sister, Black Mary, while trying to persuade her to work for him again at the bakery he owns and operates in addition to working as the Hill District's constable and landlord. Black Mary, however, prefers to work as Aunt Ester's understudy and housekeeper, explaining, "I'm doing just fine. You selling magic bread and overcharging rent. Putting people out in the street. I don't want no part of it" (35).

Beyond Caesar's exploitative business practices, Black Mary ultimately leaves her brother after he shoots a boy for stealing a loaf of bread.

> Caesar: …I miss having you work with me. I remember when we was working together. It wasn't about Caesar or Black Mary. It was about the Wilks family.
> Black Mary: That was before you killed that boy.
> Caesar: He was a thief! He was stealing. That's about the worse thing you can do. To steal the fruits of somebody else's labor. Go out and work for it!...
> Black Mary: It was a loaf of bread Caesar. He was stealing a loaf of bread.
> Caesar: I gave him an opportunity to stop. I told him he was under arrest. He started running. With the loaf of bread under his arm! I had to shoot him. You can't do nothing like that and get away with it. People don't understand the law is everything…There ain't nothing above the law. That's what I try and tell these niggers. Everything come under the law. You got to respect the law. Unless you dead. That's the only way you ain't got to respect the law. (36)

Just as with Garret Brown, Caesar explains that the culpability lies not with him, but with the boy who stole the bread. And just as Brown could have come out the water and consented to be placed under arrest, the boy also could have stopped when Caesar "told him he was under arrest." That, in either of these incidents, the stolen object is rather inconsequential, a single loaf of bread or a bucket of nails, suggests that the real offense inheres not in the value of stolen object but in the act of theft itself, however apparently minor. Although Caesar's enforcement of the law seems to Black Mary disproportionate to the petty nature of the crime, Caesar explains that "law is everything." In other words, we can more precisely understand the specific offense of theft, as "about the worse thing you can do," by carefully attending to the implications of an understanding of the law as everything.

We have not fully appreciated the weight of Caesar's words until we understand their existential implications, the way in which they outline a particular view of existence. Let us, for the moment, take seriously the assertion that "the law is everything." This would mean that the law leaves no room for the existence for anything besides itself. Any transgression, however small or great, would therefore equally bear the full and absolute offense of a no-thing. Which is to suggest that when the boy steals the loaf of bread or when Caesar shoots him, what in fact happens is *nothing* at all. It makes no difference that a real boy was really gunned down right here in this space. He might just as well have been *in space*. And not just alien, but *tehomic.* Aligned existentially with the void and formless state of the earth in the very beginning, the watery deep so often appraised by the Western theological tradition as a chaotic nothingness.

It's this horrifying math, the asymptotic zeroing of something into nothing, and not some exceptional malice on Caesar's part, that primarily accounts for how differently Caesar and Black Mary regard the offense of the boy's bread theft, on the one hand, and the gravity of his death, on the other. For Caesar, it hardly registers as a death at all, and certainly not something for which he should be blamed or criticized. Less than a subtraction of life, his actions merely consummate the boy's nothingness. They are the sealing off into non-being of a boy abiding nowhere, doing nothing. A nothing that is no less nothing for its incarnation in black flesh.

Yet in order for the law to genuinely come to be considered "everything" such that nothing can happen in the way described above, what has to happen to our sense of

life, in general, and the planet, in particular? In our attempt to answer this question, we might once again appeal to Brother Invisible, who might have cautioned Caesar that “the mind that has conceived a *plan of living* must never lose sight of the *chaos* against which that pattern was conceived.” In other words, by shooting the boy in recognition of the law’s supposed claim to everything, Caesar may be guilty of losing sight of the chaos, or, put differently, of forgetting the unorganized and unplanned life that exceeds any “plan of living.” This has everything to do with the way in which the law may be understood to delineate and police the integrity of a specific ordering of life. Thus, I argue that Caesar can genuinely claim that the law is everything because he has come to confuse the particular “*plan* of living,” which the law functions to define, stabilize, and secure, with *life itself*. It’s precisely this confusion that we can detect in Caesar’s description of what would happen to the Hill District if the mill closed down.

> People wanna blame me but I got to keep order. Just like them niggers wanna riot over a bucket of nails. Talking about they ain’t going to work. Talking about closing the mill down. They don’t understand the mill is what hold everything together. If you close down the mill the city would be in *chaos*. The city needs that tin. They need that tin in Philadelphia. They need it in Detroit and Cincinnati. Industry is what drive the country. Without industry wouldn’t nobody be working. That tin put people to work doing other things. These niggers can’t see that. They ought to be glad the mill is there…You close down the mill you ain’t got *nothing*. (33-4) [emphasis mine]

Like the law, we can reasonably conclude, Caesar esteems the mill to be everything, especially given his belief that its closure would precipitate the city’s dissolution into “nothing.” In the same way that the law functions legally to “keep order,” the mill functions economically to “hold everything together.” And it’s this particular configuration of “everything together,” such that the law and industry cohere the whole,

that comprises what we, borrowing from the Invisible Man, have been calling a “plan of living.” Significantly, the particular plan at issue here is not limited to the Hill District. Rather it extends to the entire country and, we might even suspect, to the very notion of a “country” itself. But the crucial point here, before going on to delineate the particulars of this “plan of living,” is Caesar’s confusion of this plan with life itself. He has, in the words of Brother Invisible, quite literally lost sight of the chaos against which his presiding order and plan was conceived. For although he goes so far as to name the chaos, he appraises it a mere nothing in such a way that pretends to collapse all of life into a “plan of living.”

But far from reducible to any single “plan of living,” life, as Brother Invisible learned underground, is rather best defined by infinite possibility.

> But my world has become one of infinite possibilities. What a phrase - still it's a good phrase and a good view of life, and a man shouldn't accept any other; that much I've learned underground. Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility. Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos…or imagination.

Yet when Caesar asserts “there ain’t nothing above the law” and “everything come under the law,” he is essentially confessing his belief in a successfully straightjacketed world, one in which the law, drawn taut around the planet, has come to usurp the lofty place of the sky. In such a world, nothing is the product of a mass forgetting, the name we call the excess life leftover after we’ve traded our sky and consented absolutely to a “plan for living.” After we’ve imposed order upon what was otherwise described by the Invisible Man as a “vast seething, hot world of fluidity” and elected to afford it the authority of reality. Which is to say nothing is something that doesn’t matter, or rather matter that

doesn't *matter*. Not because it lacks substance or mass, but because it carries no weight of significance within and falls outside of a particular "plan of living."

In addition to time, Caesar's narration of how he got his start as a constable constructs blackness as maintaining a thwarted relation to space. This we gleam from Caesar's mention that he needs "a little place to start." It further bears mentioning how Caesar further advises Citizen to "Get you some shoes. This the city. You don't need them farming boots up here. Get you some shoes and stay out of the saloons" (31). In the beginning of the play, these boots immediately mark Citizen as Southern. While a distressed Citizen waits outside to be seen by Aunt Ester and get his soul washed, Eli remarks: "He look like he just come up here. He still wearing clodhoppers" (9). In a way parallel to the deprivation of being born at "planting-time" in Douglass' narrative, Citizen's boots similarly bespeak an original entanglement with the natural environment that would inhibit starting in the mode exemplified by Caesar. In his estimation, clodhoppers, as a visible sign of the humiliation of slavery and black Southern life, aesthetically fail to accommodate the protocols and new-found possibilities of life up North. Boots, on the other hand, are just the kind of shoes that Solly, a veteran of the underground railroad, buys in preparation for a trip back down South to get his sister, who is having a "hard time with freedom" in a post-emancipation Southern climate of reactionary white terror (15). "I went down to see Butera and got me some new boots…Soon as I break in these boots I got to go" (26). In comparison to Caesar's self-interested race, the journey accommodated by these boots is communal in its objective

and orientation. Solly's description of the circumstances that motivated his enlistment in the "Railroad Band" further illuminates this point.

> I was in Canada in 1857. I stood right there in Freedomland. That's what they called it. Freedomland. I asked myself, "What I'm gonna do?" I looked around. I didn't see *nothing* for me. I tried to feel different but couldn't. I started crying…I breathed in real deep to taste the air. It didn't taste no different. The man what brought us over the border tried to talk with me. I just sat right down on the ground and started crying. I told him say, "I don't feel right." It didn't feel right being in freedom and my mama and all the other people still in bondage. Told him, "I'm going back with you." I stopped crying soon as I said that. I joined the Underground Railroad. (emphasis added, 57)

V. Conclusion

Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, and the "Century Cycle" in general, is best understood as black study, that is, as a part of the ongoing investigation into the nature of the problem of being black. But Wilson intervenes in the study of blackness by helping to illuminate the ways in which the problems associated with black being—which include a vulnerability to wanton violence, suffering, and death—are not sui generis. Rather, they are the consequence of the concentration, redistribution, and ultimate disavowal of what was already a problem, and more than a problem (call it problem+), in and basic to life: that is, the precariousness of our bare life together. The lived experience of blackness and how it feels to be a problem unfolds in the context of modernity's solution to what is already and first the problem+ of life, which is nothing less or more than and always life together. The solution I have in mind is the social contract, particularly as theorized by Rousseau.

The antecedent of the Negro problem is the given problem of life itself, of our bare life together, a reality which has been theorized in the West as the abject "state of nature," in which, owing to his insufficient power, it is impossible for man to protect his person and property. This is the "primitive" state which modernity aspires to leave behind in favor of the peculiar species of assembly made possible by the social contract.

To acknowledge the problem+ before the Negro problem, and to acknowledge this first problem as a constitutive part of life itself, has incredible implications for any study of the blackness of blackness. It means that far from pathologies, the problems familiar to blackness are rather the consequence of a particular solution to the already existing problem+ of life together. It means that the world from which blackness is barred is not given. The phrase "New World," however pretentious, is profoundly telling in this regard. The dawning of blackness is not fully understood unless we recognize that it is paired with the dawning of a New World whose creation is inspired by a flight from the precariousness of Relation. Which means that terms like "freedom," "rights" (even, and especially, human rights), and "citizenship"—the refusal of which we often resist—are themselves already implicated in this genesis. They are the achievements of a world whose very condition of possibility is the self-constituting exclusion of blackness. Blackness, therefore, is the excess and the leftover, the ongoing testimony to the larger Earth that Ed Roberson insists runs the world. At foundation, what dawns concentrated in blackness is, in fact, yesterday's life that ever haunts the citizen when he crosses spooked to the other side of the street.

None of this means that the problem(s) of black life are desirable. No one wants to be beaten, maimed, drowned, lynched. We would and should not want the present *re*distribution of the precarious burden of relation. But neither should we want to be restored to the world which called for that redistribution in the first place. If we would not have the present redistribution of the inherent precariousness of relation under the social and racial contract, does this mean that we would also not have Relation? And is there anyway to be for relation without being for that which is concentrated in our very selves, that is, without insisting on being black?

"So live." This is the exhortation that concludes *Gem of the Ocean*, the opening play of August Wilson's celebrated "Century Cycle." Significantly, this imperative to live is immediately followed by a stage direction: "Without a word Citizen turns and exits. The lights go down on the scene.…END OF PLAY." Thus, the end of *the* beginning announces the end of *beginning*: Life.

This concluding moment of *Gem* suggests that the play is as interested in *the* beginning, in the study and representation of the beginning of blackness, as it is the *act* of beginning itself. That is, in critically evaluating how black people, in light of the special circumstances of the lived experience of blackness, might consequently choose to begin. What form that beginning should take in order to align itself with the imperative to live.

And as if in response to some Althusserian hail, the announcement of the imperative to live elicits from Citizen, the play's primary protagonist, a turning. But a turning, significantly, that is also an exit. Of course, it's also not insignificant that within ear or eyeshot of this announcement are, in most cases, a bunch of citizens. If the

exhortation resounding from the stage at *Gem's* conclusion is enough to turn Citizen, how might we imagine its capacity to elicit a like revolution from citizens? To, in a word, turn us out?

Chapter 3

“Across the Tallahatchie”: Black Looking and the Photograph of Emmett Till

Isn’t that just like a nigger to swim across the Tallahatchie with a gin fan around his neck.
—a joke circulated by local Mississippians after the death of Emmett Till

Emmett's body floats the foam of a Jim Crow southern sea
—Bob Dylan, “The Death of Emmett Till”

The African Diaspora is full of lookers. From the deck of a slave ship, Olaudah Equiano looked upon “the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than [him]self.”[1] From a mountaintop in the Jim Crow South, Martin Luther King Jr. saw the promised land. And through a “loophole scarcely large enough to give [her] a glimpse of one twinkling star,” Harriet Jacobs “peeped at [her] children’s faces,” cradling them in her iris.[2] Yet, the mere fact of looking is no miracle, as if the terror of slavery and Jim Crow weighed so heavily upon the eyelids as to foreclose the possibility of vision altogether. Rather, what prompts us to turn aside and see are the impossibly circumscribed conditions despite and because of which black looking takes place and, what’s more, the impossible things that are seen. Joy underwater. Promises in the Jim Crow South. Motherhood from a crawl space.

As instances of black looking, these ocular touchstones contour and inform what is my own looking again upon the photograph of the broken face of Emmett Till. My

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[1] Equiano, Olaudah, and Werner Sollors. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African: An Authoritative Text*. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.
[2] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Boston: Pub. for the Author, 1861, *Gale*. Web, 17 Mar. 2017, p. 224.

very first look came in my seventh-grade English class during a screening of the opening episode of *Eyes on the Prize*, the acclaimed documentary series chronicling the American Civil Rights Movement.[3] Moments before the b(e)aring of Till's face, Mr. Stambaugh paused the video to warn us about the something it costs to look, of the weight there would be for pupils to carry, this weight that is also a wounding. He repeated this warning, only this time making it mine (the only black student in the class) by extending to me a special invitation to be excused from the classroom. I accepted not because I sincerely wanted to, but because of some vague sense that I could not be black and look at this.[4] Still I wondered why my white classmates could better afford to look than I (true, they could better afford most things, but this had nothing to do with money). Curious, I found myself peeping through the door's window pain, scarcely large enough to offer me a glimpse of the face that flashed upon the screen. And I remember looking away. In that frantic prayer eyes pray for somewhere rid of what should not be. Prayers to a God who I heard in Sunday school had also been beaten beyond human recognition. Was *this*—and not the notorious blue eyed portraits—how his face looked as he hung there, lynched?

> many were astonished at thee;
> his visage was so marred more than any man,
> and his form more than the sons of men…[5]

How do we bear witness to *this* face, which overflows the frames of family photos and human recognition? Which suspends the hackneyed Hegelian logic of recognition

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[3] Hampton, Henry. *Eyes on the Prize*. Vol. 1. Alexandria, Va.: PBS Video, 2006. Film.
[4] Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can You Be Black and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," *Public Culture* 7.1 (1994): 77–94.

[5] Isaiah 52:14 (KJV)

altogether. And what would it mean to enact an ethics of witnessing, or looking more generally, beyond recognition?

This memory returns me to the question of looking. Who can and cannot look and why? How does one's ontological standing (or lack thereof) inform or jeopardize one's capacity to see? In this chapter, I consider these questions as they are specifically raised by the photograph of Emmett Till, who, because he was cast in the Tallahatchie River, can also be numbered among "the inhabitants of the deep." Indeed, I propose that in some sense, with the photographing of Emmett Till, so many cameras flashed underwater. By which I mean to suggest that even before the now emerging effort in the field of maritime archaeology to recover the submerged and irretrievable histories of the wreckage of Middle Passage (wrecked ships, wrecked lives, wrecked bodies, wrecked lungs), the "inhabitants of the deep" had already resurfaced in our visual consciousness in 1955 on the pages of *Jet* magazine, and then subsequently in newspapers around the world. Prior to this, no eye had seen, nor ear had heard, the inhabitants of the deep or their "black mo'nin" underwater.[6] Not even the divers now wrestling the Atlantic like so many underwater angels of history, blown about by vicious currents, eyes fixed on the conspicuous piles of wood, iron, and bone that the water otherwise spares us. In other words, I am suggesting that Emmett Till's photograph *is* a photograph of the inhabitants of the deep. And as such, it affords a significant measure of insight to our study of Middle Passage, blackness, and how it feels to be a problem. One that uniquely glimpses

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[6] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

the problem that no ground specifically creates for black looking. A problem, which Equiano documented when he wrote of the visual jeopardy precipitated by the architecture of the slave ship: "We were all put under deck, *so that we could not see* how they managed the vessel" (emphasis mine).[7]

Nevertheless, we know from the ocular touchstones referenced above that black looking can and does take place, even where it's explicitly meant not to. Having thus suggested the visual jeopardy and facilitation simultaneously a/effected in the photograph of Emmett Till, this chapter takes up the following questions: How might we delineate the scopic regime which presided over interracial encounters in the Jim Crow South? And what did this *crow's eye view* have to do with the death and photograph of Emmett Till? Furthermore, how did Mamie Bradley's contested decision to bare Till's face disrupt this scopic regime? And finally, what did Mamie Bradley see, and what do we stand to learn from her and other instances of black looking? Such are the questions raised by the photograph of Emmett Till, to be considered in the pages to follow at once as a testament to the violent operations of the crow's eye view and, somewhat counterintuitively, as an enactment of Mamie Bradley's *black looking*. That is, the radically social vision of those who, by their inhabitation of the deep, refuse to make the "dominating stand" refused to them.[8]

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[7] Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African: An Authoritative Text*, New York: Norton, 2001, p, 40.

[8] I borrow the phrase "dominating stand" from Ralph Ellison. The specific quotation I have in mind describes the boys on the subway platform as "running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand." See: *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries - Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 2006, p, 441.

I. Valley of the Shadow of Jim Crow

You could hold your head up in Chicago.
—Mamie Bradley

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low
—Luke 3:5 (KJV)

For Equiano, on a slave ship in the middle of the Atlantic, there was little doubt about where to look for those of his middle passing shipmates who went missing. Centuries later in the Mississippi Delta, after the innovation of several new places for the missing and missed, strangest among them tree limbs, there was *still* one place you checked first. The mo(u)rning after Emmett Louis Till was lynched for whistling at a white woman, his family searched for the boy along riverbanks and under bridges, "where black folks always look," Moses Wright (Till's great uncle) said, "when something like this happens."[9] Three days after his death, Emmett Till's mutilated body resurfaced in the Tallahatchie River in spite of (or, we might even imagine, propelled by) the redolent weight used to anchor and conceal him harmlessly below see level. Of his improbable resurfacing, local Mississippians joked, "Isn't *that* just like a nigger to swim across the Tallahatchie with a gin fan around his neck."[10]

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[9] This quote was obtained from the transcript of Stanley Nelson's documentary, The Murder of Emmett Till, which was broadcast as part of the PBS American Experience series. See, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/filmmore/pt.html
[10] Emmett Till's body was recovered from the Tallahatchie River with a cotton gin fan wrapped around his neck with barbed wire. For quote see transcript of documentary Stanley Nelson documentary, *The Murder of Emmett Till*, Alexandria, Va.: PBS Video, 2005.

But what about this “that,” which it is just like a “nigger” to do? How do we understand how amusingly fitting Mississippians regarded Till’s place in the water? Or the humor expressed in his hyperbolic movement there? And what of the looming signifier of slavery used to weigh him down? All of this is really to inquire about the underlying conception of blackness grounding the joke’s humor? What specifically about Till’s resurfacing, his dexterous and miraculous inhabitation of the deep, registers as black? In posing these questions, I insist that, however derisively referenced above, we undertake the nonetheless serious intellectual labor of thinking “that” and its amusement in the cruel joke circulated by local Mississippians after Till’s death. For the epistemological architecture of its humor is telling. Its laughter, not just old, but nervous.

That there are places “where black folks always look,” that they have been looking there for quite some time now, suggests that there is, first, a history of space and, second, a history of looking that has something to do with the murder of Emmett Till. This suspicion is even further substantiated by D.W. Milam’s confession to Till’s murder in a story ironically published in *Look* magazine mere months after his acquittal.

> I’m no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers—*in their place*—I know how to work ‘em. But I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain’t gonna vote where I live. If they did, they’d control the government. They ain’t gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he’s tired o’ livin’. I’m likely to kill him. Me and my folks fought for this country, and we got some rights. I stood there in that shed and listened to that nigger throw that poison at me, and I just made up my mind. “Chicago boy,” I said, “I’m tired of ‘em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddamn you, I’m going to make an

> example of you—just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.[11]

Black Americans had "their place" in the Jim Crow South, and where Emmett Till whistled at a white woman he stood flagrantly outside of it. Yet, that concerns about miscegenation spill over into anxieties about voting polls and schools, particularly in a confession to the murder of a "Chicago boy" of no immediate threat to either, is telling. This imprecise response to the transgression sounded in Till's whistle suggests that Milam's declaration that "niggers are gonna stay in their place" is less concerned with the integrity of any particular place and more with the integrity of a relationship, one having everything to do with Milam's explicit purpose for killing Till: "just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand."

Emmett Till's first encounter with the mode of standing practiced by Milam and his folks stood would have come soon after his arrival in Mississippi in 1955. Indeed, as soon as he disembarked the train carrying him from his native Chicago to Mississippi, Till doubtlessly confronted a skyline more ocularly arresting than even that of his native Chicago. Though the Mississippi sky likely appeared relatively empty to the 14-year-old boy, what Mississippi lacked in towering skyscrapers it made up for in looming spines. In other words, what we must understand about how Milam and his folks stood along with Mamie Bradley's assertion that "You could hold your head up in Chicago" is that an arrangement of straight spines and bowed backs marred the Mississippi sky, constituting

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[11] Huie, William B. "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." *Look Magazine* 24 Jan. 1956: 46–50. Print.

what we may consider the corporeal skyline of the Jim Crow South. Spines littered the Mississippi sky like so many looming skyscrapers otherwise would, casting terrific shadows, the shadow of Jim Crow, a shadow like the psalmist's shadow of death.

Emmett Till walked for the last time in the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South. My appeal here to the language of the twenty-third psalm is not merely rhetorical, nor only my way of attending to those who lost their lives walking along this way. Rather, I esteem "the valley of the shadow of death" a fitting name for the space whose history and relevance to Till's murder we are attempting to delineate here. A space which, just like a valley, discloses itself only in relation to a height—a height which, respecting Till, we find incarnate in Milam's straight-spine, but which we may also locate in the elevated deck of the slave ship drawing its shadow over the hold. Of this initial moment of capture, Glissant too spoke of shadows, delineating the experience of enslavement into "the first dark shadow…cast by being wrenched from their everyday, familiar land" and "the second dark of night" that "fell as tortures and the deterioration of person."[12] Yet as both Glissant—in his theorization of the slave ship's hold as a "womb-abyss," responsible at once for the terror of enslavement and the conception of a New World black sociality by which slaves would survive—and the twenty-third psalm's insistence against the fear of evil makes clear, that which looms over the valley is but "the shadow of death" and not the absolute substance to which it pretends, by which I do not mean to trivialize the fact of Till's death, but rather to take seriously the religious belief in an afterlife maintained by Till's family (or slaves on a slave ship for that matter)

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[12] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997, p, 5.

and to call attention to that which baffles necropower by surviving its own death in the photograph of Emmett Till (a point to which we shall return later).

How Milam and his folks stood, then, was tall, and so at a height realizable only in relation to their stooped, black peers who, by the very fact of their being stooped, inhabited what I am calling the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South. By this moniker I mean the valley which flashed whenever black Americans, prompted by their approaching white peers, stepped down from the elevated sidewalk and, with bent backs, bowed heads, and downcast eyes, waited for the terrific shadow of death to pass them over. This is the valley Mamie Bradley beseeched her son to inhabit and about which she testified during his murder trial:

> I told him when he was coming down here that he would have to adapt himself to a new way of life. And I told him to be very careful about how he spoke and to whom he spoke, and to always remember to say "Yes, Sir" and "No, Ma'am" at all times. And I told him that if ever an incident should arise where there would be any trouble of any kind with white people, then if it got to a point where he even had to get down on his knees before them, well, I told him not to hesitate to do so. Like, if he bumped into somebody on the street, well, and then they might get belligerent or something, well, I told him to go ahead and humble himself so as not to get into any trouble of any kind.[13]

Mamie Bradley "told him when he was coming down *here*." Here, because she too, delivering her testimony in the Tallahatchie County courthouse, finds herself "down here" where Till came. But this only in the most literal sense of being down here in Mississippi, down here in the Jim Crow South. Yet, in an altogether different sense,

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[13] See transcript of the Emmett Till Murder Trial, recovered and transcribed by the FBI in May 2005. It may be accessed by web at: https://vault.fbi.gov/Emmett%20Till%20. The quote in question is found on page 206. Henceforward, citations of this resource will read Emmett Till Murder Trial Transcript with appropriate pagination.

Mamie Bradley is “down here” where Till never came (at least voluntarily), and consequentially where he was made to stay. “Down here,” in this sense, is no more a place than the humility Bradley asked of her son. That is, until humility takes place, until humility happens. In this sense, the “down here” about and in which Mamie Bradley bears witness, the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South, is no place at all. It is instead, like humility, a relative and placeless place, a deference immaterial until the moment it takes place there before an erect spine. This theorization of the valley as a relationship, placeless until it takes place, calls for some discussion of the specific understanding of space and place adopted by this chapter.

I take space to mean something like the “placeless spaces” that concern Foucault in his essay “Of Other Spaces,” in which he writes, “we do not live in a kind of a void, inside of which we could place individuals and things…we live inside of a set of relations that delineates sites.”[14] Understanding space as a placeless set of relations, I contend that the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South along with its attendant relation of inferiority and deference is best considered a space. Place, on the other hand, I take to be precisely that space which has *taken place*, which has happened in the world. Put differently, place is a set of relations that has landed and taken root in a physical location. Respecting this particular delineation of space and place, what initially seemed imprecise about Milam’s response to Till’s whistle, may now be recognized as thorough. For beyond any one place, Till was ultimately out of space (or is it outer-space), in whichever place the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South might take place.

[14] Foucault, Michel. “Of Other Spaces.” *Diacritics; Ithaca, N.Y.* 16.1 (1986): 0–5.

Mamie Bradley understood, then, that on the occasions that Till "bumped into some[white]body," his back needed to bend, his head to bow. Neither complied when Emmett Till whistled at a white woman. And although transgressions like Till's always risked death, avoiding them was perhaps never more urgent or grave than in the years immediately following the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, when death appeared to drop the pretense of its shadow and lurked in nude terror over the valley. Similar to Milam's (over)estimation of the extent of the threat sounded by Till's whistle, white Southerners understood the *Brown* decision to not only threaten the racial integrity of public schools, but the integrity and privilege of whiteness itself. If, in its legal separation from blackness in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, whiteness stood tall as Milam, then *Brown* threatened whiteness with an unallowable erosion to its height. Confronted with such a leveling, every inch of the sidewalk counted.

Just how much is illuminated by Mississippi Senator James Eastland's peculiar denunciation of the Brown decision as "an attempt to put the races together, *physically*, upon a plane of social equality."[15] Gunnar Myrdal similarly appeals to the language of planes in the contemporary study of American race relations in which he writes, "it is assumed that Negro men have a strong desire for intermarriage, and that white women would be open to proposals from negro men, if they were not guarded from even meeting them on an equal plane."[16] While we might otherwise understand this "plane of social

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[15] See, Hugh Stephen Whitaker's graduate thesis submitted to the Graduate School of Florida State University, *A Case Study in Southern Justice: The Emmett Till Case*, August, 1963, p, 67.
[16] Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, New York: Harper, 1944.

equality" abstractly, the plane is reigned into the realm of the physical by Senator Eastland's insistence that the effect of the *Brown* decision would be to bring the races together *physically*. Furthermore, the implicit contention that black and white Americans do not already inhabit the same plane, physically speaking, expresses the potency of the illusion of their planar separation. That this is somehow the accomplishment of the Jim Crow South is a categorically different and bolder claim than the mere separation of races into segregated schools and neighborhoods, which is how we usually conceive of segregation and its economy dealing in a currency of distance. But the feat of racially segregated planes maintains the luxury of separation even when such distance is collapsed, which is precisely why white women need not be guarded from encounters with black men in and of themselves, but only the possibility of doing so, physically, on an equal plane.

Unless we are given to understand that the topography of the Jim Crow South somehow accommodated its racial politics, we know that black men and white women trod on relatively level ground—the height of the elevated sidewalk is hardly enough to warrant the distinction of a physically distinct plane. By what ruse, then, is the Jim Crow South able to separate black and white Americans into physically distinct planes of social inequality?

William Faulkner's insightful interrogation of his fellow Mississippians in his essay "On Fear," written in response to Till's murder, helps guide us toward an answer to this inquiry. He writes, "Why do we have so low an opinion of our blood and traditions as to fear that, as soon as the Negro enters our house by the front door, he will propose

marriage to our daughter and she will immediately accept him?"[17] According to Faulkner, then, the physically co-planar meetings of black men and white women are not feared in and of themselves. In fact, they are tolerated in places as intimate as the home. Rather, the precise object of Southern fear was how such meetings would transpire once black men entered white homes "by the front door" and not the back. Like the Door of No Return, centuries prior, entry through the back door signaled one's irrevocable entry not into a New World of slavery, but into a New Plane of social inequality or, what I have called the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South.

Entry through the back door, along with a host of other social niceties—including the incessant pronunciation of "Yes, Sir" and "No, Ma'am," stepping down from the sidewalk, bowing one's head, bending one's back, looking down—were all spectacles constituting the illusion and ruse by which white women were guarded from meeting black men "on an equal plane." This ruse, which others have previously called Jim Crow's "racial etiquette," reigned over inter-racial encounters in the Jim Crow South with a bluff so potent as not even to require the ground's agreement in boasting the physical reality of segregated planes of social inequality.[18] That is, at least, until Emmett Till blew the whistle on racial etiquette's enchantment over the interracial encounter and the ground's agreement became suddenly indispensable.

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[17] William Faulkner, "On Fear: The South in Labor," *Harper's Magazine*, 212:1273. (1956: June), p, 29.
[18] Packard writes of racial etiquette: "racial etiquette had come to control practically every public or semipublic facet of the lives of African-Americans in the South. No less dangerous than breaches of statute, lapses in race etiquette resulted in many of the criminal assaults that beset black American life: the so-called back talk or sassing that whites were taught from earliest childhood not to tolerate from blacks, the 'crime' of blacks getting above themselves...or—deadliest of all for the transgressor—an inadvertent or casual or misplaced indication of a black man's interest in a white female." See, Jerrold M. Packard *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow*. New York: St. Martins, 2002. p, 165.

So indispensable, in fact, that Till's murderers "drove close to 75 miles" searching for the bluff that might affirm Jim Crow's bluff. It is no coincidence that in the effort to put Till in his place and demonstrate how he stood, Milam sought out a bluff about which he boasted, "she's a 100-foot sheer drop, and she's a 100 feet deep after you hit!" Along with his brother, he intended "to stand [Till] up on that bluff, 'whip' him with the .45, and then shine the light on down there towards that water." However, when they failed to find this particular bluff, they settled instead for a place where "the river-bank was steep."[19] Thus, in the selection of Till's proper place, a place where the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South could take place, Till's murderers demonstrated a preoccupation with height. Height because Till's place needed to accommodate the peculiar way in which Milam and his folks stood. The bluff, functioning as a prosthetic spine compensating for the height eroded by the *Brown* decision and Till's whistle, provided such a place.

If in our consideration of the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South, we are guided by Milam's flashlight, what flashes now "down there towards that water" is not only the manifestation of the valley present in the Tallahatchie River and realized in relationship to the height of Milam's bluff-spine, but a genealogy of valleys in which black bodies have both seen and been seen. This last point has everything to do with the cotton gin fan, with which, of all things, Till's murderers weighed Till harmlessly below see level. For if in our consideration of the space in which Till was placed, we too are

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[19] William B. Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," *Look Magazine,* 24 Jan. 1956: 46–50.

anchored by a consideration of the history of African slavery suggested by this looming signifier, then we sink even unto an acquaintance with the depths of the Atlantic and the holds of slave ships. We acknowledge the valleys that black bodies have inhabited for quite some time now, and how, by casting Till into the Tallahatchie River, his murderers re(-)member the jettisoning and stowing of their slave-trading fathers. And this not only manually, but ocularly in the way that they looked. In other words, if as places, the bottom of the Tallahatchie, the depths of the Atlantic, and the holds of slave ships appear distinct, as spaces they are the sanguine members of a genealogy of the valley, and the offspring of a particularly Southern kind of looking, what I am labeling in this chapter the *crow's eye view*.

II. Crow's Eye View

The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man…
—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*

Over my head I see freedom in the air.
—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The visualization of physically distinct and racially segregated planes implicit in Senator Eastland's denunciation of the *Brown* decision betrays that there is not only a look, as if the mechanics of the eye alone are sufficient to explain the phenomenon of having seen something, but that there is also the play of light and men who play with light. Poised for play of this sort, Till's murderers drove "close to 75 miles" in search of their bluff, perched atop of which they intended to "whip' him with the .45, and then *shine the light* on down there toward that water." Thus, in addition to the angst over height belied by the 75 miles, what we must understand about the flashlight is that Till's

murderers were equally concerned with lighting. Lighting, not merely to see in the dark, but also and more importantly because they needed to see him drop. If not by some illusion of racial etiquette, then the actual 100 feet. Lighting, because they themselves were numbered in the "everybody" who needed to know how they stood and were, in fact, the only bodies, besides Till's body, to attend the viewing. Because perched atop the bluff beholding Till's flashlit descent, Till's murderers intended to *see* him to his proper place "down there toward that water"; that is, quite literally to escort him with their pupils away from white pupils and white women and down to the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South. While Till's murderers never did find their bluff, eventually settling for a place where the river bank was steep, I nevertheless consider the visuality exemplified in this scene (itself an augmentation of the sidewalk that nevertheless discloses the latter's real situation and stakes) to be paradigmatic of what I am labeling in this paper the "crow's eye view," the feat of which shall prove a bluff indeed.

If as a function of Jim Crow's racial etiquette black Americans were understood to have a place, the successful policing of the interracial encounter necessitated that they be seen within it, and this repeatedly. That is to say that a black body falling from a bluff, or another stepping down from the sidewalk, or another bending his back, or another bowing her head, were all spectacles intended for looking, all a social pornography that needed to be seen, and the very seeing of which functioned to produce segregated planes of social inequality: the valley and the peak.

Yet prior to delineating precisely how the crow's eye view functions to produce the New Plane of the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South, some consideration of

the genealogy of looking to which it arguably belongs is worthwhile. In so doing, we concede that pupils are neither discrete nor wholly autonomous points, rather they follow in any number of ocular timelines. Which is also to assert that looking takes place within already established histories and conventions of vision. One might even conceive, as a consequence of so many looks over time, of so many sightways, scopic grooves worn into ocular-aerial space, which do not determine, in any absolute sense, what we can and cannot see so much as the ease with which we are able to see. Not to mention the frames by which we see, which have histories unto themselves. All of which is to say that looking has a history, and it is to the historical heritage of the crow's eye view that we turn now.

Toward situating the crow's eye view within a history of looking, the description of J.W. Milam in the *Look* murder confession is telling:

> J.W. "Big Milam" is 36: six feet two, 235 pounds; an extrovert. Short boots accentuate his height; khaki trousers; red sports shirt; sun helmet. Dark-visaged; his lower lip curls when he chuckles; and though bald, his remaining hair is jet black. He is *slavery's plantation overseer.* Today, he rents Negro-driven mechanical cotton pickers to plantation owners. Those who know him say that he can handle Negroes better than anybody in the country.[20]

That Milam is here described as "slavery's plantation overseer" belies the ways in which slavery survives itself in its ocular politics, the enduring grooves of looking that actively reproduce and render self-evident slavery's relations of production. So that the emancipation proclamation is a sound swept away in the quiet brush of resurrecting

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[20] William B Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," *Look Magazine* 24 Jan. 1956: 46–50.

blinks, our continuing to look in this way. Perched atop the bluff, then, Milam's eyes open onto an apparition of slavery that he is uniquely positioned to see into being. Slavery's ocular afterlife is the major insight of Nicholas Mirzoeff's important work *The Right to Look*, in which he argues that "modern ways of seeing" are the posterity of the oversight first enacted on the slave plantation. He writes:

> Visuality's first domains were the slave plantation, monitored by the surveillance of the overseer, operating as the surrogate of the sovereign. This sovereign surveillance was reinforced by violent punishment but sustained a modern division of labor.[21]

By "visuality," Mirzoeff intends operations of looking that assert an exclusive claim both to be able to look and to determine the real, that is, to authoritatively determine over against alternative visualizations what there *really* is to see in any given visual event. That Milam is described as "slavery's plantation overseer" already suggests how the crow's eye view might be fruitfully considered within a genealogy of looking. However, beyond the oversight of the plantation, I submit that this genealogy may be traced even further back to the *watches* performed on slave ships, which anticipate almost exactly the ocular politics of the Jim Crow South.

Cycles of maritime labor and their sailors were organized into starboard and larboard watches. In this way, the complex of skills performed by sailors may be encapsulated by a look. This was especially true for vessels engaged in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, where, once slaves were b(r)ought aboard, "the primary purposes of the

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[21] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011, p, 2.

sailor's work were now to keep a vigilant watch." Marcus Rediker offers the following description of the vigilance peculiar to the slave ship:

> As the ship filled up, sailors *oversaw* the routines of the captives on both the lower and main decks. Below deck the sailor would assist in "stowing" the slaves—that is, the assignment of a particular space where each person was to lie or sit whenever below deck, while on the coast and during the Middle Passage. The chief mate and the boatswain…*supervised* stowing the men; the second mate and gunner, the women. The sailors helped to pack the enslaved together tightly, "adjusting their arms and legs, and prescribing a fixed place for each."[22]

Stowing—considered here primarily as an ocular act, an overseeing, a supervision—entailed the seeing of slaves to and the supervision of slaves within their assigned spaces below deck. But not only below deck, lest we forget that some slaves were assigned to the bottom of the Atlantic. In any regard, I argue that the prescribing of fixed places is a phenomenon as functionally ocular as it is manual. Which is to suggest that there were things slave traders needed to see, and that watching is what actively produces the valley.

Thus, we may narrate the act of stowing as follows: the sailor looks upon the socially pornographic descent of the slave below deck, and a moment later *still* sees the slave there, either by a literal sighting or a recognition of the slave's absence above deck. The silent elapse of time separating either look witnesses the ocular (re)production of the slave's apparent faithfulness to his or her assigned space below deck, the slave's still being there. In this way, the stowing look is busy in the ocular (re)production and policing of the spatial order of the slave ship, as it is delineated by the boundary distinguishing the upper and lower decks. Equiano's depiction of stowing in his

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[22] Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, London: John Murray, 2007, p, 328.

Interesting Narrative reveals still another attribute of this special species of vigilance. He writes, "We were all put under deck, so that we could not see how they managed the vessel."[23] Thus, stowing not only functions to (re)produce the valley, but also to secure the right to look as an exclusive one, to impose a blindness. Thus, whether perched atop a straight spine in the Jim Crow South, in the plantation, or the elevated deck of a slave ship, the look and its valley are the same.

Following Foucault, I have previously defined space as "the set of relations that delineates sites." But our consideration of the watches of slave ships also suggests the sights that are delineated by a specific set of relations. I am referring here to the organization and distribution of the power and right to look that is determined by the relations implicit in the (a)social performance of racial etiquette. My particular interest in racial etiquette is the scopic order effected by its demands upon bodily posture. That which we behold in the ocularcentric rendering of the encounter below:

I look upon the Other and there, finding no ocular traffic besides my own, rest my gaze in what is a private and autonomous act of looking wholly interior to myself. I am its undisputed author and may linger as long or as short as I please. Then, suddenly and without warning, the Other's pupils flex with concentration, flooding all at once my looking with his own. It is not merely that the Other has noticed me, but rather and more significantly, the Other has noticed my looking; and by this I am undone. For at this precise moment, perception has slipped outside of me. It is no longer wholly mine, nor is

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[23] Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African: An Authoritative Text*, New York: Norton, 2001, p, 40.

it wholly the Other's. Rather it is transfigured into a mutual recognition which we observe suspended there before us in a tangle of looks; and for the very first time I consider if I should look away.

Within this rendering of the encounter between "I" and the "Other," the delineation of sight prior to the tangle of our looks approximates the ocular situation determined by racial etiquette. In my encounter with the Other, whose head is bowed and whose eyes are cast down toward the ground, I am spared his ocular traffic. My looking bounds forth unimpeded and without restriction, and I can look for as long as I please. In contrast, the scopic field allotted to the Other is restricted only to the ground. And just as it did for Equiano and countless other middle passing Africans, this vision in the valley renders the Other functionally blind to my management of the encounter. But even if the other cannot see me, he is nevertheless sure that I am there, because, with his eyes fixed on the ground, the one thing he can see concerning me is my shadow, even if he cannot be sure whether it will pass him over without incident.

The significance of such an encounter is its delineation of racially segregated sightscapes, so that just as anxiously as they were in classrooms, black and white pupils were prohibited from converging. Distinguishing these segregated horizons of sightways is what may be understood as the scopic equivalent of the Mason-Dixon Line, located somewhere hauntingly about the neck.[24] Or perhaps it is more accurate to speak of an angular threshold of posture breached somewhere along the longitudinal trajectory from

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[24] Haunting because in the case of Emmett Till, we are ultimately talking about a lynching, whose violence, once complete, may be understood to coerce the head bowing otherwise ensured by racial etiquette. Haunting because they tied barbed wire around his neck.

stooped to *erect*. It is as they are expressed within these two postures that we identify the operative sightscapes of the Jim Crow South: the *bounded look down*, that is, the vision of the valley reserved for and animated by black looking (the subject of the final section of this paper), and the *unbounded look ahead*, the horizon reserved for white pupils and animated by the crow's eye view that supervises the encounter, oversees the Other, and overlooks the Other's face and looking. The consequence of such a delineation of looking is principally its evasion of mutual recognition, which, it will be shown, is the principal means by which a crow's eye view sees black others to the New Plane of the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South.

That the segregated sightscapes of the Jim Crow South successfully evade the tangle of black and white looking is the foundation of the ruse by which white women may encounter black men and nevertheless be perceived to inhabit physically distinct planes. This is because, more than anything else, it is our mutual recognition that, at least perceptually, decides whether I and the Other are cohabitants of the same plane. An elementary understanding of the geometrical definition of a plane will aid our understanding of this last point. A plane is a flat two-dimensional surface extending infinitely in all directions, which, it is generally accepted, is minimally established by any three non-collinear points in space. The application of this definition of a plane to a reading of the ocular encounter delineated above illumines the silent activity of a crow's eye view both in producing the New Plane and ocularly escorting black Americans to it.

Casting I and the Other as two points in space, our mutual recognition—neither wholly mine nor wholly the Other's but rather suspended before us in a tangle of looks—

would constitute the third and decisive point that minimally establishes our cohabitation of a single plane. With respect to the crow's eye view, however, I and the Other do not yet broach recognition. For recognition at the very least requires some guarantee of the Other, who, if he be truly and absolutely other, cannot appear solely as the exclusive invention of my perception, but instead must exceptionally present himself by himself as he does by the flexing of his pupils. The Other, then, uninvited from our looking, is merely an object I perceive external to myself by myself. So that my seeing the Other, in the absence of the third point of our mutual recognition, is simultaneous with the ocular production of the New Plane of the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South (for if not on my plane, he must inhabit another) and my seeing him to it. Thus, tucked in the shadow of the valley are black faces. And the diet of a crow's eye view, that which sustains and nourishes its ruse is blackfacelessness.

And if the Other enters a New Plane, he does so as a disproportionately precarious life shouldering exclusively the possibility of being killed. Judith Butler's discussion of life's precariousness in *Frames of War* helps guide us to an understanding of this last point:

> To say that a life is injurable, for instance, or that it can be lost, destroyed, or systematically neglected to the point of death, is to underscore not only the finitude of a life (that death is certain) but also its precariousness (that life requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as a life). Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other.[25]

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[25] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, New York: Verso, 2009, p, 14.

The problem confronted by Jim Crow in life's precariousness, as it is described by Butler here, is the intolerability of white women in the hands of black men. The tangible contingency of interracial sociality threatens a proximity unthinkable to the logic of white supremacy and which, it was imagined, threatened its dissolution entirely via miscegenation. Butler also guides us to an understanding of the full implication of Eastland's declaration that *Brown* threatened to put the races together on the same plane "physically." For it is the Other's physical occupation of the plane with me that implicates him irrevocably within the conditions sustaining or threatening my life, so that whether I live or die, my doing so is all bound up with the Other. The segregated sightscapes created and policed by racial etiquette, however, evacuates the encounter of my precariousness with respect to the black Other, for by it not only can I be*hold* him, but I am in great measure withheld from the eyes with which he might be*hold* me, exempting only my shadow. And it is precisely because I am withheld in all but my shadow, that the Other is not also loosed of his precariousness, but, quite the contrary, is made to bear my share, by which as it passes him over, he will know beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he has somehow survived because of me. Thus, the Other's company along the way to the New Plane is death, from whose threat I am loosed by my crow's eye view and its unequal distribution of precariousness.

Through its evasion of mutual recognition, then, the crow's eye view not only produces the New Plane of the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South, but also populates the valley with precarious black lives. Yet, that such looking is presumed successful—that by seeing Till to his place at the bottom of the Tallahatchie, Milam

believed he had actually silenced the disconcerting whistle Till blew on the ruse of racial etiquette—belies certain basic assumptions about the Other and his powers to resist, most basically that the Other is even able to be resisted. Implicit in the segregated sightscapes by which racial etiquette guards the interracial encounter is what may be considered a Hegelian assessment of, first, the consequences of mutual recognition and second, the Other's propensity to resist. Within Hegel's rendering of the encounter in his master-slave dialectic, the moment I and the Other "recognize [our]selves as mutually recognizing one another," our "struggle to the death" ensues.[26] For Hegel and also, I am arguing, for the Jim Crow South, the consequence of mutual recognition is the onset of a struggle which, in so far as it is to the death, is essentially violent and negative. This is at least in part what is meant by precariousness, since the hands of the Other, once we find ourselves inside of them, threaten us with a possible death. Can, among many other things, kill us. Racial etiquette's only addendum to this assessment of the Other's negative and violent opposition is to qualify his powers as planar, which is precisely the danger of the races being put together physically on the same plane. It is in an attempt to neutralize what is understood to be the negative, violent, and co-planar opposition of the black Other, or put differently, the precariousness of whiteness with respect to blackness, that a crow's eye view goes about its seeing of black Americans to the valley of the

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[26] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.

shadow of the Jim Crow South and, in its denial of mutual recognition, wrests whiteness from beholding black eyes leaving only its cold, precarious shadow.[27]

Yet, at the very same time that a crow's eye view separates the races into segregated planes of social existence, it also if counterintuitively brings them closer together. So close as even to warrant their consideration as the same. Some discussion of Emmanuel Levinas' understanding of the "same" will help to illuminate this last point:

> In a world which is from the first other the I is nonetheless autochthonous. It is the very reversion of this alteration. It finds in the world a site [lieu] and a home [maison]. Dwelling is the very mode of maintaining oneself [se tenir]…as the body that, on the earth exterior to it, holds itself up [se tient] and can. The "at home" [Le "chez soi"] is not a container but a site where I can, where, dependent on a reality that is other, I am, despite this dependence or thanks to it, free. It is enough to walk, to do [faire], in order to grasp anything, to take. In a sense everything is in the site, in the last analysis everything is at my disposal, even the stars, if I but reckon them, calculate the intermediaries or the means. The site, a medium [Le lieu, milieu], affords means...The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the way of the same.[28]

Thus, the "same" is the world exterior to the "I" which, as a consequence of its utter susceptibility to that which "I can" do, fails to distinguish itself sufficiently as other. The suffix the I claims in "can," expands the ontological category of the I to include the exterior world, which, in relationship to the I, is only at first other, but whose alterity is suspended in a "totality of egoism" in which the world is merely the site where *I can.*

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[27] We might understand the supremacy of whiteness to be realized precisely in the shedding of its precariousness, loose from which, whiteness may ascend the bluff even as its precarity falls upon the valley.
[28] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Springer Science & Business Media, 2012, p, 37.

Thus, if we were to address the I of Hegel's dialectical struggle to the death by its full name, it might go something like *I can(not) kill the other*. Or regarding the I of the interracial encounter in the Jim Crow South, *I can(not) oversee the other.* The other, in this sense, is merely the site of the expression of my capacity, however successful, to kill, or stand, or see, and, in this respect, not yet other, but *still* I. Even if the Other possesses faculties and powers superior to my own, he is still not rescued from the same for what suspends the alterity of the other is not the success of that which "I can" do, but the sheer fact of its possibility, the applicability and pertinence of my power to our situation. By "same," then, Levinas names everything subject to the disease of the I's canning; any apparent other potentially possessable by the I in (when I and the "same" are taken together) a "totality" of self-identification. It is in this sense that I contend that the black Other, as he is beheld by pupils perched atop erect spines, is still the same and, it follows, brought nearer even as he is excluded.

Simultaneous with the exclusion of the black Other from the plane of social equality, then, is his inclusion in the same. The operation of a crow's eye view may, therefore, be more precisely said to exclusively include black Others within the same, that is the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South. In spite of the fact that it preceded the era of Jim Crow by almost a century, in his speech during an abolitionist rally held at the storied African Meeting House in Boston, Massachusetts, Frederick Douglass offered a compelling portrait of this exclusive inclusion in the form of a parable:

> You meet a man on the sidewalk, in the morning, and you give him the way. He thanks you for it. You meet him again, and you give him the way, and he may thank you for it, but with a little less emphasis than at first. Meet him again, and give him the way, and he almost forgets to thank you

> for it. Meet him again, and give him the way, and he comes to think that you are conscious either of your inferiority or of his superiority; and he begins to claim the inside of the walk as his right.—This is human nature; this is the nature of the slaveholders.[29]

In a way, this parable narrates the maturation of the "I can." Adopting for a time Douglass' pronoun usage, "He" begins this series of sidewalk encounters with "You" by thanking You for the way. Yet, as the parable progresses, He is increasingly spared Your alterity—the sheer fact and friction that You are not He—and His taking of the way evidences each time less that He has encountered anyone other than himself until You are none other than the same. But even if You are included in the same, so that You and He together constitute one uninterrupted *I can take the way*, You are exclusively included since He is only able to rid Himself of the nuisance of your alterity by the implicit exclusion that is your inferiority, in relation to which he acquires the height necessary to rise up over the valley and overlook your alterity.

Still, in a discourse concerning the African slave's right to freedom, it is ironic that rights, namely "His" right to the way, appear only as a menace. As menacingly as we find them in Milam's confession when he declares, "And when a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin'. I'm likely to kill him. Me and my folks fought for this country, and we got some *rights*" (emphasis added).[30] In both these cases, the appearance of rights is simultaneous with the disappearance of the Other

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[29] Frederick Douglass, Philip Sheldon Foner, and Yuval Taylor. *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 1st ed. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999, p, 418.

[30] William B Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." *Look Magazine* 24 Jan. 1956: 46–50.

into the same, so that rights are precisely that which risks the Other's alterity by transforming him into the mere site and expression of my right to do what I can. I can do what I do precisely because I have the right to, because I have the right of way right away, before and without a genuine encounter with the Other. Thus, if rights are the object of the slave's struggle for freedom, they are also the ground that founds and gives rise to the "I can." And yet in spite of this menacing appearance of rights, we know by Douglass' constant appeal to the inalienable rights of men that he would not have us do away with rights entirely. Instead, what Douglass contests here are not rights in and of themselves, but the right of way, that is, the immediate assumption of a right before or without any earnest encounter with the Other apart from the same.

Yet, the crow's eye view, which presumes to neutralize the negative, violent and co-planar opposition of the Other by seeing the Other to a New Plane, overlooks another manner in which the Other is able to resist. That there is resistance apart from Hegel's "struggle to the death" represents perhaps the most valuable contribution of Levinas' interpretation of the encounter, which can be understood to rewind the encounter, all too frequently fastforwarded to the onset of a negative and violent struggle, to its primordial beginnings of positive, nonviolent resistance. This is the intervention named in Levinas' assertion that "War presupposes peace, the antecedent and non-allergic presence of the Other; it does not represent the first event of the encounter."

For Levinas, the first event of the encounter, before any dialectical struggle is set in motion, is one's confrontation with the ineluctable epiphany born in the Other's face:

> The alleged scandal of alterity presupposes the tranquil identity of the same, a freedom sure of itself which is exercised without scruples, and to

> whom the foreigner brings only constraint and limitation. This flawless identity freed from all participation, independent in the I, can nonetheless lose its tranquility if the other, rather than countering it by upsurging on the same plane as it, speaks to it, that is, shows himself in expression, in the face, and comes from on high.[31]

Here, Levinas distinguishes two versions of the encounter, the difference between the Other "upsurging on the same plane" and "showing himself in expression, in the face…from on high." Prior to a delineation of what precisely Levinas means by the face, it is necessary to gloss both. The former, what it means for the other to counter the I "by upsurging on the same *plane* as it," is what we have understood as the situation feared and evaded by the racial etiquette of the Jim Crow South. Within this conception of the encounter, Jim Crow understands the Other and his negative, violent and co-planar opposition as a scandal—one we have further elaborated as the scandal of white women in the hands of black men. The consideration of the Other's alterity as a scandal presumes, Levinas argues, the Other's de facto and tranquil existence as the same. By this same presumption, Jim Crow establishes a ground for the "I can" to stand as the original subject of an encounter whose normal conditions are realized once the I's canning—I can take the way, I can stand, I can see—has spilled into the world its leveling flood, so that that which appears as other is submerged beneath a tranquil, flawless, and uninterrupted sea of the same, which is what we must understand about this. (Figure 1) And this. (Figure 2)

[31] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Springer Science & Business Media, 2012, p, 203.

The water bursting forth from the fire hose resembles one long “I” as it baptizes black others in its canning, washes them white as same, irons the encounter of every wrinkle of alterity, smoothes out the way, unleashes its assault on posture, coerces inhabitation of the valley. The operation of the hose here is what we have previously understood as the function of the crow’s eye view; is the crow’s eye view lacking, and consequently, coercing black participation. The hose is not the exceptional punishment nor the negative-reinforcement of black resistance. Rather it is an illustration of how the encounter was always already understood to proceed, the spectacular exaggeration of an encounter already believed to transpire this way. Not the encounter aggravated, but the encounter resolved and at rest as it always was and should be. In other words, the Jim Crow South was always already inundated by the tranquil see of white supremacy, on the surface of which Till’s whistle reverberated wrinkles as unsightly as those constituted by the black bodies calling racial etiquette’s bluff before the fire hose, forcing the crow’s eye view and the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South to declare themselves visually, bringing them into focus, framing the frame.[32]

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of this water in a speech in which he claimed to have been to the mountaintop, in what was his final speech prior to his assassination:

> We are masters in our nonviolent movement in disarming police officers; they don’t know what to do. I’ve seen them so often. I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle there we would move out of the 16th street Baptist Church day after day; by the hundreds we would move out. And Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth and they did come; but we just went before the dogs singing, “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around.” Bull Connor next would say, “Turn the fire hoses on.” And as I said to you the other night,

[32] See, Judith Butler, *Frames of War*.

> Bull Connor didn't know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn't relate to the transphysics that we knew about. And that was the fact that there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. And we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were Baptist or some other denomination, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been sprinkled. But we knew water. That couldn't stop us.
> And we just went on before the dogs and we would look at them; and we'd go on before the water hoses and we would look at it, and we'd just go on singing, "Over my head I see freedom in the air."[33]

Till's murderers also knew a kind of physics. That a body jettisoned from a bluff dropped. That weighed in the water, children sank. They didn't know about the trouble God was going to bring, the "transphysics" King knew about. If they had, they might have chosen a different resting place for the boy. For when they cast him into the Tallahatchie River, impersonating the jettisoning toss of their slave-trading fathers, they baptized Till in a rejuvenating memory, one that ironically would resurrect him not only as the black face evaded by the crow's eye view, but all the more profoundly as the visualization of a theretofore unseen and unvoiced terror—the face of a drowned slave. (Until the famous display and trafficking of Till's face in newspapers and magazines across the globe, who had actually beheld this sight?) The murderers themselves beg this connection since, of all things, they believed the fan of a cotton gin (which they tied about the boy's neck) to be the anchor best suited for securing the body harmlessly below see level. Ironically, however, and in the manner we might imagine God to have made good on his promise to trouble the water, contact with the water set the blades of this

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[33] Excerpted from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Mountaintop Speech" collected in *Say it Plain*. See: Catherine Ellis, Stephen Smith, *Say It Plain: A Century of Great African American Speeches*, New York: Distributed by W.W. Norton & Co., 2005, p, 79-80.

looming signifier of American slavery a'revolvin', alchemizing an underwater black hole that contorted and collapsed space and time in such a way that brought Till ever closer to his *carabelas* (Demby among them). Thus, the very same fan intended to anchor Till in the water King insists "we knew," propelled him (now mobilized with the memory of a submarine host of middle-passing Africans) to the surfaces of newspapers and television sets, "set(ing) in motion this nation's profoundest political insurrection and resurrection, the resurrection of reconstruction, a second reconstruction like a second coming of the Lord."[34]

Many have recognized a thread of causality between the photograph of Emmett Till and the Civil Rights Movement. I want to agree with but also to refine this relationship by offering a possible name for this thread and submitting that they are related precisely by their non-violence. In other words, I submit that the transphysics demonstrated before the hose is born out of that which is conceived in the encounter with the face—Till's face—whose presentation, Levinas asserts, is "preeminently nonviolent." In this way, I want to call attention to the resistance which survives the crow's eye view, the fire hose, and even murder—all of which attempt to neutralize the Other according to the knowledge of a "kind of physics" that fails to relate to the transphysical faculties of an Other who resists not by physically "upsurging on the same plane" as Senator Eastland feared, but first and principally by "show[ing] himself in expression, in the face, and com[ing] from on high." Levinas writes that the Other

> opposes to me not a greater force, an energy assessable and consequently presenting itself as though it were part of a whole, but the very

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[34] Fred Moten, "Black Mo'nin," *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, New York: University of California, 2002.

> transcendence of his being by relation to that whole; not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: "you shall not commit murder."[35]

A greater or inferior power—such as the negative, violent and co-planar resistance that a crow's eye view perceives in the black Other—remains assessable to the I principally because the I also deals in this currency and is therefore able to comprehend it in greater and lesser quantities, the way a boxer is able to assess another dealing in the common currency of punches. The consequence of the common currency of resistance is, for Levinas, the establishment of the totality allowing for the emergence of the "I can." Yet, this is decidedly and exactly not the situation of our encounter with the Other's face. The face does not oppose the negative resistance that a crow's eye view anticipates by countering the I as a greater or lesser force. Rather, "It has a positive structure: ethical." Though it certainly resists me, it does not contend *with* me or deal in my currency. That which the "I can" do, like Bull Connor's physics, fails utterly to relate to the transphysical resistance of the face, which, coming from "on high" is "not of this world" and whose first words are the words of God, "Thou shall not kill."

Prior to continuing on to an explanation of how the face speaks in this way, it is important to pause and note what King's articulation of nonviolence shares with Levinas' conception of the face: namely positiveness and an appeal to the divine. Of the strategy of non-violence, King declared, "We aren't engaged in any *negative* protest and in any

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[35] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Springer Science & Business Media, 2012, p, 199.

negative arguments with anybody. We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people. We are saying that we are *God's children*."[36] Similarly, Levinas explains, first, that the resistance of the face "does not act negatively" and, second, that "The other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed."[37] With respect to their shared positiveness, then, both nonviolence and the face ~~op~~pose a positive resistance that does not threaten to subtract or negate, the way Milam understood Till's whistle to threaten how tall he stood, but rather adds, and adds an ethical imperative. Furthermore, what Levinas explains in a few words culminating with calling the face "the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed," King may be considered to have communicated more succinctly in the phrase "God's children." Children, though not incarnations of their parents, reflect and reveal their image. Of course, Levinas and King do not mean that God's children reveal God by some physical attribute. In fact, Levinas specifies that it is precisely because the Other is disincarnate in the face that it reveals the height in which God is revealed. Because what Levinas ultimately means by face, though finding sensible expression in the physical face of the other, is not a phenomenon of the flesh but rather that which transcends the physical, is transphysical and even spiritual. Nevertheless, something about the revelation and reflection of God posed by the Other, for both Levinas and King, endows him with a positive and indelible capacity to resist.

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[36] Catherine Ellis, Stephen Smith, *Say It Plain: A Century of Great African American Speeches*, New York: Distributed by W.W. Norton & Co., 2005, p, 78.
[37] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Springer Science & Business Media, 2012, p, 79.

That by which the disincarnate face of the Other reveals God, positively resists, and articulates the ethical commandment not to murder is alterity, the sheer fact and friction that the Other is other and not I. Helping us to understand this last point is the consideration of the implications of the encounter of the "I can" with what Levinas calls the "absolutely Other," who, it will be shown, quite literally "calls the naive right of [its] powers, [its] glorious spontaneity into *question*." Concerning the encounter with the absolutely Other, Levinas writes:

> The relation with the other—the absolutely other—who has no frontier with the same, is not exposed to the allergy that afflicts the same in a totality, upon which the Hegelian dialectic rests. The other is not for reason a scandal which launches it into dialectical movement, but the first rational teaching, the condition for all teaching. (203)

Thus, the implication of the I's encounter with "absolutely Other" is that the encounter, at least at its onset, does not yet fulfill the conditions of possibility of the "I can." Because it shares "no frontier with the same," the Other (at least initially) finds no place in the totality of identification upon which, Levinas insists, the Hegelian dialectic rests. Instead one confronts in the Other a complete rupture with the same, alterity absolutely in its sheer apartness from and infinite transcendence of not whatever is intended by "I" per se, but much more specifically the world in which *I can*. Referring back to our ocular dramatization of the encounter above, the revelation of the Other's absolute alterity is held in the tangle of looks that acquaints me with not only the other's looking, but precisely the other's looking upon my look. This is significant because only in this latter sense do I finally meet the Other as absolutely other, does the Other cease to be merely the site/sight where *I can (or even cannot) look as long or as short as I please* by

guaranteeing itself as other and not the same. Guarantees, because according to Levinas, perception alone is "always subject of some swindle, always possibly dreamt up." Put another way, perception is just as exclusively mine as a dream, and thus always possibly only an expression of that which "I can" see and not my having recognized the Other as such. Yet, in the moment the Other beholds not only me, but also and decisively my looking, the glory of the Other's alterity lets loose. For now that my looking has become the object of the Other's, I discover a blind spot where there was previously none. My sight itself is the object of the Other's look, and in this way exceeded by it. I can no longer understand my vision to be omniscient. Now, as one in the dark, I see what I cannot possibly see, that which infinitely exceeds my looking, what Levinas might call "the very *unforeseeableness* of his reaction," the Other's theory, impression and idea of my looking. The Other has left forever the world in which "I can" see. And by this I, as the ontological knotting of I and the same, am quite literally undone. Undone, because I, as "I can," confront the absolutely Other and must ask, "*Can I?"* Words, we can be sure were unheard by Till in his final moments of life. But words, had he the ability to hear and were it possible, he has almost certainly heard on the occasion of every posthumous encounter with his photograph since.

In this way, the alterity of the "absolutely other" (which is all that is really meant by the face) quite literally calls the subjectivity of the "I can" into question, into *Can I?*. This transformation is not, Levinas argues, my allergic reaction to the Other. Neither is it evidence of my having succumbed to some opposition by the Other of a greater, lesser, or like force, a canning of the same order as my own. Instead, it is my having learned what

Levinas calls a "teaching" and, furthermore, the "condition for all teaching." In other words, though the Other may eventuate into my allergy and our encounter dissolve into struggle, it does not have to, and does only when I fail to learn in the presence of the Other what is first a teaching. A teaching which I, now as Can I?—twice the pupil of the Other's alterity—am optimally positioned to learn. And the lesson I learn is ethics.

"You" have already made an acquaintance (though very brief) with *Can I?* in Frederick Douglass' parable. "He" is the one who begins the encounter by thanking "You" for the way. Although he takes the way, he never possesses it as his inherent right. Rather his taking of the way is all bound up with you, in the sense that you give it to Him, so that even as he goes, he goes *with* you. As the *Can I?,* he inhabits a world, not in which he can, but in which his canning is perpetually called into question by the presence of your absolute alterity, which, each time he confronts you, presents a friction to the wild momentum of what Levinas would call his "brutal spontaneity," that which he can whimsically do, his being at will. This is the same rendition of the encounter that C.T. Vivian, in his remarks about the Civil Rights (and nonviolent) Movement in the documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, insists upon in demanding that the interracial encounter be

> a clear engagement between those who wished the fullness of their personalities to be met and those that would destroy us physically and psychologically. You do not walk away from that. This is what movement meant. Movement meant that finally we were encountering on a mass scale the evil that had been destroying us on a mass scale. You do not walk away from that. You continue to answer it.[38]

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[38] Hampton, Henry. *Eyes on the Prize*. Vol. 1. Alexandria, Va.: PBS Video, 2006.

We might otherwise understand Vivian's definition of movement, that is, black Americans' injection of the "fullness of their personalities" into the interracial encounter, in terms of their assertion of their absolute alterity. Thus, the decisive object in not only Douglass' parable, but also the Civil Rights Movement, that which produces a friction, is alterity, the sheer fact that "You" are not "He" and in this pure sense you resist. Not by opposing to him a negative force superior or inferior to his own—and thus already belying your citizenship in the same—but simply by not allowing it to be "enough to walk" as it would be were you not there and is, Levinas argues, for the "I can" with whom you are acquainted by parable's end and whose maturation is coterminous with the erosion of your alterity. Simply because it is not enough to just take the way without your having something to do with his taking it, without somehow and first accounting for you, you do away with his spontaneity. It is the not already being enough of that which he can do, the more he'd have to do as a consequence of you being there that, even if he eventually does what he can, constitutes the implicit question asked of his powers. And this questioning of what he can do in light of you is, for Levinas, the original ethical moment. Whether he answers the question himself, or glosses over it completely, he could never deny the question asked. The other is not your right away, but a stop sign. Even if you choose to run it, you know that you have, and so, in acknowledging it, have already stopped, however imperceptibly.

Thus, although the organization of my argument may have suggested otherwise, it is important to note that the "I can" does not precede the "Can I?," but is rather that pupil of alterity which has grown dull to its teaching, who has elected to ignore the lesson of

alterity's implicit questioning of his powers and committed himself instead to his home-schooling, to being at home in his will wherever he may be as the "I can." Yet even in this case, the *Can I?* remains the foundation and "condition for all teaching" subsequent, either as that which is suppressed and buried, or openly received and learned from. But the ineluctable situation of ontology is that in either case, the edifice of the I is erected upon this question which you could never deny was asked: *Can I?*

Toward another clarification of order, you will also remember the irony of Douglass' parable: that in a speech ultimately asserting the right of African slaves to freedom, rights appear only as that which menacingly risks the Other to the same as the mere site of expression of that which the "I can" has the right to do (i.e. "His" right to the way). And yet, there is no denying that Douglass, like King a century later, is engaged in a struggle precisely for rights. Thus, even in offering a critique of rights, Douglass could not have wished to do away with them completely. There is, then, a distinction to be made between Douglass' right to freedom and "His" right to the way or Milam's right to kill Till. And it is found precisely in the explicit species of rights for which King contended, that is, civil rights, and in that exact order. Douglass would have had no part in a simple Rights Movement. Rather the rights which interested Douglass were to be found only *after* and with respect to an earnest encounter with the Other. This means, as Nicholas Mirzoeff has put it, "requiring the recognition of the other in order to have a place from which to claim rights and to determine what is right."[39] Levinas restates this

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[39] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011, p, 1.

requirement when he writes that "instead of offending my freedom [the face] calls it to responsibility and founds it," that is, founds the right to freedom after and not before a sincere encounter with the absolute alterity of the face.[40] Thus locating rights, Douglass renounces completely any notion of the right-away, the assumption of which is simultaneous with the emergence of the "I can" and the disappearance of the Other into the same. The point to be emphasized here is that we come to the thinking and conception of rights belatedly, unaware of the moment that has already passed. Aspiring "I can's," we fast forward to think rights from this ground, when, in point of fact, we're just a motley crew of "Can I's?," whose politics flow out of the questions we ask each other.

Thus, my encounter with the face of the absolutely other founds me as *Can I?,* alterity's implicit and ethical questioning of that which I can do. If I'm anyone, I'm this. And since the ultimate negative expression of my "brutal spontaneity" in relation to the Other is murder, the discourse of the face is preeminently: Thou shall not kill. A crow's eye view, then, is the worst of sinners to the extent that it sees black Americans to the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South as precarious lives wholly held up and consecrated to death, as lives that have left only to die physically in the consummation of a murder whose conditions were first conceived in a look. Nevertheless, Jim Crow's measures of neutralizing the encounter, extending even unto murder, abide by a kind of physics which ultimately fails to relate to and is utterly exceeded by the trans- or metaphysics of the face.

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[40] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Springer Science & Business Media, 2012, p, 203.

> The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. This mutation can occur only by the *opening of a new dimension*. For the resistance to the grasp is not produced as an insurmountable resistance, like the hardness of the rock against which the effort of hand comes to naught...The expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power.[41] (emphasis added)

The new dimension opened up by the encounter with the face is, for Levinas, metaphysics. We have already discussed how the fact that the face is disincarnate and not of this world reveals a height in which God is revealed and the resonances of such a formulation with what King means by "God's children" and their transphysical resistance. Now we are prepared to say that which opens up and offers a revelation of God is precisely alterity. For who is God but the preeminently Absolute Other. Our ethical encounter with an exceedingly transcendent alterity, then, is something like what it would mean to encounter God, and is the situation of encountering one of God's children. And both Levinas and King locate within such an encounter the pure and indelible resistance of non-violence, which as a sheer consequence of alterity, baffles the very power of power, including the power to murder. Levinas writes:

> Murder still aims at a sensible datum, and yet it finds itself before a datum whose being cannot be suspended by an appropriation. It finds itself before a datum absolutely non-neutralizable. The "negation" effected by appropriation and usage remained always partial...Neither the destruction of things, nor the hunt, nor the extermination of living beings aims at the face, which is not of the world…To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises a power over what escapes power. It is still a power, for the face expresses itself in the sensible, but already impotency, because the face rends the

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[41] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Springer Science & Business Media, 2012, p, 197.

> sensible. The alterity that is expressed in the face provides the unique "matter" possible for total negation. I can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyzes the very power of power. (198)

A crow's eye view attempts to neutralize the threat of the Other by banning him to a New Plane. Yet the resistance which triumphs in the case of Emmett Till is not the negative, violent, co-planar resistance white Southerners feared, but ironically and precisely a resistance born of a different plane, originating not from below in the valley and threatening to upsurge, but rather from on high. The neutralization of the black Other by a crow's eye view was "always partial." Partial because its strategies, culminating in Till's case with murder, know only of a physics that fails to relate to the positive, non-violent, and transphysical realities of the face. Though murder is a power, the grounds upon which it exercises itself are foundationally questionable, are the *Can I?*, the question I can never deny was asked of me by the Other's face. What we see in the photograph of Emmett Till, then, is the paralysis and survival of necropower by that datum which was absolutely non-neutralizeable, even by the obscuring waters of the Tallahatchie, which proved as futile in the neutralization of the pure fact of alterity as the waters we see here (Figure 3). And if, as King declared, black Americans went before the fire hoses singing of the freedom they, in spite of their bowed heads, saw impossibly above their heads—it is that freedom which was first seen by Till, however impossibly, above his own, on the occasions that we look at his photograph and are taught to ask, "What in God's name can I do?" And of course, there are occasions to look upon Emmett Till because Mamie Bradley decided to "let the world see what I've seen," so that what we see when we look at Till is a look, Mamie Bradley's black looking.

III. Black Looking

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good report. Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.
—Hebrews 11:1-3

Let the people see what I've seen.
—Mamie Bradley

One needs to contextualize the European Enlightenment as exemplifying "racialized reason."
—Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible*

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When the most recognized prophet of the Civil Rights Movement ascended to the mountaintop, he may well have seen Mamie Bradley on her way back down.

> Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to *know tonight*, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.[42]

If, as many have remarked, there is indeed some relationship between the photograph of Emmett Till and the Civil Rights movement (and I have argued that they are related

[42] Catherine Ellis, Stephen Smith, *Say It Plain: A Century of Great African American Speeches*, New York: Distributed by W.W. Norton & Co., 2005, p, 86.

precisely by the pure and non-violent resistance of alterity), then we might also expect some correlation between King's mountaintop vision of the promised land and Mamie Bradley's immaculate perception of the photograph of Emmett Till. In consideration of this possibility, I want to give King the benefit of the doubt and take seriously his claim to have seen the promised land. Of course, King doesn't do much to warrant our belief when he testifies that he "may not get there," which is also to confess that he has never in fact been there, and regrettably we know that he never got there. To the extent that physically being there is the most basic qualification of any eyewitness, of anyone testifying to have seen something, a literal belief in King's testimony as anything beyond mere metaphor is discouraged by our knowledge of "a kind of physics." But I have already chosen to believe. And this choice forces me to confront King's ocular conflation of, in the words of Nicholas Mirzoeff, "a 'real' that did exist but should not have" with "a real that should exist but was as yet becoming."[43] The latter is no more and no less the former than a barren field is the same exact field at harvest. By claiming to have seen the promised land without ever being there, then, King essentially (be)held the fruit of a promise before there was any physical fruit to hold. Still, he insists that he did and I elect to take him at his word.

What especially interests me about King's mountaintop speech is the peculiar kind of looking enabling him and his audience to "know *tonight*" that which—precisely because tonight offers little in the way of assurance that they will get to the promised

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[43] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* . Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. p. 26.

land—they can't possibly know for certain. What King purports to see and know in the poorly lit shadow of tonight, then, immediately raises questions of an epistemological sort: On what grounds can we claim to know something? And do some occupy a surer ground for knowing than others? At stake, here, is the historical foreclosure to blackness of vision as modern epistemology's most sanctioned and preeminent path to knowledge. A foreclosure whose inauguration Equiano once again alerts us to when he writes of the experience of Middle Passage, "We were all put under deck, so that we could not *see*." In other words, in the mountaintop speech we confront the knowledge claims of those whose grounds for knowing what they did were no less precarious than the frantic feeling for ground of feet suspended from trees or sinking to the depths of the Atlantic, those for whom knowing is the precarious endeavor to make a ground out of no ground. We confront a looking practice committed to the seeing and knowing of that which, given modern epistemology's conflation of vision and knowledge, could not be known precisely because it could not be seen.

We can make still another important observation about this looking as it is performed not only by King, but also Mamie Bradley, which is that they are all testimonial. What they see, they also testify to have seen. In order to fully attend to such looking, we must listen as well as look. How the sonic might supplement the visual is already suggested in our augmented assurance of having seen the promised land, in spite of the present visual evidence to the contrary, once we have also heard this look and, in so doing, ascended the steps hewn by King's quaking vibrato unto the lofty summit of vision. King's oratorical voice quite literally carries, bears us up to a view from which we

see not to the disavowal of the present realities of the Jim Crow South, but rather in a knowing ever attentive to their coming undone.

Having already detoured through the decidedly (un)real spatial and visual realities of the Jim Crow South, namely the ocular production of the valley by that mutation of oversight I have termed the crow's eye view, we return now to the inquiry which concerned us from the outset: how do we explain the company blackness keeps with the impossible? If King's mountaintop vision is any indication, then perhaps it does so with a look. However perversely expressed in the joke circulated by local Mississippians after the resurfacing of Till's body, if blackness indeed demonstrates a penchant for the impossible and does so by means of a certain manner of looking, then we have reason to reconsider that toward which the heads of black Americans are bowed in the Jim Crow South, the hostility for vision opposed by a valley we have heretofore understood to impart a functional and comparative (to the crow's eye view) blindness. Further provoking this reconsideration of the possibilities for looking in the valley is the term "oversight" itself and its alternative sense of an unintended failure to see something. Understood thus, the "oversight" bearing down upon the bowed backs of black Americans produces not only the valley of the shadow of the Jim Crow South, but also and unwittingly its own blind spot. That is to say, there is something the crow's eye view cannot see. Something that oversight unwittingly overlooks: namely, the vision of the valley I am labeling in this paper *black looking*.

What is meant by black looking, here, will undoubtedly bear some resemblance to the "black looks" that concern bell hooks in her collection of essays, *Black Looks: Race*

and Representation.[44] More a general mode of looking "in ways that move against the grain" and "push against the boundaries of the image" than the delineation of any singular function, "black looks" go by several names in these essays, of which "oppositional gaze" perhaps best encapsulates what hooks generally means by the term. Recalling that white slave owners "punished black people for looking" and suggesting "how this traumatic relationship to the gaze had informed black parenting and black spectatorship," hooks writes:

> Since I knew as a child that the dominating power adults exercised over me and over my gaze was never so absolute that I did not dare to look, to sneak a peep, to stare dangerously, I knew that the slaves had looked. That all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an *oppositional gaze.* By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: "Not only will I stare. I want my look to *change reality*." (180)

hooks' confidence that looking happened encourages and inspires the consideration of black looking to follow, which, like the "oppositional gaze," will also be shown to negotiate the denial, both juridical and epistemological, of "black peoples' right to gaze," especially as Mamie Bradley exercised this right during the murder trial of Emmett Till. No less inspirational is hooks' call—stemming from Foucault's insistence "that in all relations of power 'there is necessarily the possibility of resistance'"—to search the "margins, gaps, and locations…where agency can be found." Within the segregated sightscapes of the Jim Crow South, the valley embodies such a margin. And if we are not

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[44] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, New York: Routledge, 2015, p,

dissuaded from searching by what we imagine to be impossibly circumscribed view in the valley, we shall discover that a robust practice of black looking happens there.

Beyond these points of convergence, black looking most closely resembles "black looks" in what hooks describes as their capacity to "change reality" and, thereby, redistribute the "right to the real" that visuality, following Mirzoeff, works to maintain as power's exclusive right. To the extent that the impossible by definition defies the limits of reality, this particular capacity of "black looks" already suggests a penchant for the impossible to which, I will argue, black looking looks so resolutely in an enduring commitment to see what is not always visually available. Yet, if black looking is most strongly resonant with "black looks" in their capacity to "change reality," it is paradoxically with respect to this same faculty that black looking distinguishes itself most strongly. We shall better understand this last point after some consideration of what else hooks has to say about "black looks," specifically as they are performed by a black female spectatorship that interrogates, contests, and confronts white representations of blackness:

> Black looks, as they were constituted in the context of social movements for racial uplift, were interrogating gazes. We laughed at television shows like *Our Gang* and *Amos 'n' Andy*, at these white representations of blackness, but we also looked at them critically. Before racial integration, black viewers of movies and television experienced visual pleasure in a context where looking was also about contestation and confrontation.[45]

The words, "contestation," "confrontation," and "opposition" all imply that black looks desire to look precisely in the way denied to black Americans. In the context of the

[45] bell hooks, p, 182.

crow's eye view and the expectation that black Americans look down, this is what it would mean for black Americans to stand erect and defiantly return the looks of their white oppressors. In distinguishing black looking, however, I am less interested in the oppositional look back as I am the actual vision of the valley, less the looking in the manner denied to black Americans and more the looking from the vantage point created by the very structure of that denial. Although such looking certainly resists the crow's eye view and its imposition of blindness, it cannot strictly be said to oppose it. Instead and similarly to the pure and nonviolent resistance of the "face," black looking is of a categorically different order from the crow's eye view. It does not trade glances with "oversight" in the manner that boxers exchange blows. Rather it resists in the manner that the truth resists a lie, that is, by insisting upon itself. Indeed, in its most profound manifestation, when that which black looking has committed itself to see is not visually available, black looking can hardly be characterized as a look at all, at least in any conventional sense of the word. It is instead more approximate to a theological understanding of faith, a committed attention to "the substance of things hoped for" and "the evidence of things unseen." The Civil Rights documentary series appropriately named *Eyes on the Prize* chronicles looking such as this. By distinguishing black looking thus, I mean neither to devalue the significance of the "oppositional gaze" nor to glorify exploitative spaces such as the valley. Surely, if given the choice, we would all prefer that King not have needed to see the promised land in the manner that he did, that is, against and amidst the segregated realities of the Jim Crow South. Yet, we would just as soon never deny the significance of the fact that he did. In taking up black looking as it is

specifically performed within the valley, then, I hope to call attention to a mode of looking that, though occasioned by the valley, is nonetheless, as Moten has described the blues, a "part of the condition of possibility of the end of such extortion."[46] One we would seriously err to overlook.

So distinguishing this vision of the valley, I will argue that black looking operates whenever we behold "the broken face of Emmett Till" in each subsequent seeing event since the photograph's initial publication in *Jet* magazine. Yet, it is not we who bear witness to the photograph that are responsible for this looking. Black looking in fact precedes us. We are not its source even if we subsequently decide to swim in its *see*, to be baptized as its pupils, and yield to its current. Instead, on the occasions that we view Till, the origins of black looking are located there within the photograph, which we understand—from Mamie Bradley's decision to "let the people see what I've seen"—is itself a photographed look, is Mamie Bradley's black looking.

What Mamie Bradley testified to have seen, however evident, was nevertheless fiercely contested and ultimately decided to have been impossible during the 1955 murder trial of Emmett Louis Till. What follows is a discussion of the photograph of Mamie Bradley's black looking. Like King, the black looking she performed from the witness stand will be shown to have defied not only a kind of physics, but also a legal "complex of visuality" that, similarly to the segregated sightscapes of the Jim Crow South, maintained the "right to look" as an exclusively white one.

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[46] Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

ii. Exhibit 3

What Mamie Bradley saw she also testified to have seen after taking the witness stand during her son's 1955 murder trial, when Till's difficult photograph was introduced into evidence as "Exhibit 3" to her testimony:

> Q: Mamie, I hand you a paper, being page 19 of the CHICAGO DEFENDER, on the date of September 17th, 1955, which purports to be a photograph of some person. Will you look at that and state whether or not that is also a photograph of Emmett Till or the person who was shipped back to Chicago that you saw at the funeral home there?
> A: This is a picture of Emmett Louis Till as I saw it at the funeral home.
> Q: That is a picture of the body as you saw it in the funeral home in Chicago, Illinois?
> A: Yes, Sir…
> Mr. Breland: Now, if Your Honor please, we ask that this be marked Exhibit 3 to the testimony of this witness for the purposes of identification.
> The Court: All right.[47]

Straightaway, we must understand that what was thrown into question during the *Till* case was the "identification" of the photograph we know all too well as that of Emmett Till. The grounds for this otherwise unnecessary question are betrayed by exhibits one and two: both photographs of Till, which the judge (to whom the trial transcripts metonymically refer as "The Court") admitted into evidence for "the benefit of the jury, so that they may see a likeness of Emmett Till during this lifetime, and also a likeness of his body, as the witness states, as she saw it in Chicago after the body was returned." That which the exhibits exhibit is precisely the horrific discrepancy between Till's "likeness" in life and death, one cruelly appropriated during the trial in order to excuse

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[47] Emmett Till Murder Trial Transcipt, 201.

the jury's eventual ocular miscarriage of the son whom Mamie Bradley did not waver to also see in the third and most difficult exhibit to her testimony.

Importantly, this same photographic juxtaposition was also bared to the more than 50,000 people who attended the open-casket funeral services held for Till in Chicago; who, when they looked upon his broken face, were also confronted with three photographs of Till in life affixed to the open lid of the casket. Robert Elliot of *The Chicago Defender* explained that the 50,000:

> were thinking it is no crime for a boy to whistle at a pretty woman. They were thinking, "My son might do it—or yours." And thinking that, they suddenly felt "Bo" Till belonged to them. And they came to see him. Many of them talked to him. They all swore they'd never forget him.[48]

More than bared to them, then, the broken face of Emmett Till was born, as in carried, *by* them; they, so many affective parents to whom Till belonged in an enduring commitment not only to behold him but, pledging their memory, to never let go. And he was born *by* them precisely in the terrible chasm of the discrepancy in "likeness" opened up by the violence of Till's murderers, since, just like the twelve jurors, they too were confronted with "a likeness of Emmett Till during his lifetime." One by one the 50,000 filed past his body, rounding the aisles of the church the way we sometimes do when we give offering. Only in this instance that which they offered was precisely themselves, poured out in a mourning, beside and outside of themselves, as if into the difference, committing all to the recognition, in spite of the visual evidence to the contrary, of Emmett Till. Alain

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[48] Elliot, Robert. "Thousands at Rites for Till." *The Chicago Defender*. (Sep 10, 1955) p.1, col.8.

Badiou spoke of such commitment in terms of persevering in a truth, the demonstration of an "ethical consistency" expressed in what he calls "disinterested interest":

> If we define interest as 'perseverance in being'…then we can see that ethical consistency manifests itself as *disinterested interest*. It concerns interest, in the sense that it engages the motivating forces of perseverance…But it is disinterested in a radical sense, since it aims to link these traits in a fidelity which in its turn is addressed to a primary fidelity, the one that concerns the truth process….I am altogether present there, linking my component elements via that *excess beyond myself* induced by the passing through me of a truth. But as a result I am also suspended, broken, annulled; dis-interested. For I cannot, within the fidelity to fidelity that defines ethical consistency, take an interest in myself, and thus pursue my own interests. All my capacity for interest, which is my own perseverance in being, has poured out…[49]

If interest is indeed "perseverance in being," then the disinterest of the fainting mourners so powerfully impacted by seeing Till that they momentarily ceased to be, is clear. But precisely as this "disinterested interest" since in fainting, they do not cease to be so much as their being is recommitted in that "excess beyond [themselves]." And if that to which the ethical spectator is committed is the "truth," then, for the 50,000, it is precisely that truth risked in the difference between the photographs of Till in life and in death: that Mamie Bradley really saw her son.

The looking practiced by the 50,000 mourners at Till's funeral and "every Anglo-Saxon one of" the twelve jurors exemplify the two distinct clouds of witnesses that assembled around the photograph of Emmett Till during the murder trial. The distinction between their respective modes of looking, from which we may distill two distinct

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[49] Quoted in Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, p, 183-4.

notions of how we can acceptably come to know something, is made more explicit in the testimonial looking of those witnesses who, in addition to testifying from the witness stand during the *Till* trial, also looked.

That the witness stand is as much the site of looking as testimony is betrayed by the distinctly visual character of legality, the reference to evidence as *exhibits*, for example, or interrogation as direct and cross-*examination*, which all imply and privilege the activity of the eyes. Further revealing the visual character of legality, and more salient to our consideration of the witness stand in particular, is the word "witness" itself. Its noun form signifies "the action or condition of being an observer of an event." Similarly, its verb form suggests "to experience by personal (esp. ocular) observation; to be present as an observer at; to see with one's own eyes." Indeed, in legal contexts where hearsay evidence is denigrated while eye-witness testimony enjoys special privilege, the act of witnessing may be understood as *preeminently* ocular, the realization of testimony's highest and most credible form.[50]

In this way, the witness who witnesses is just as well considered the looker who looks, and such not merely in the recitation or remembering of a looking past, but in the performance of a present look unto itself, one that is supplemented by speech to different degrees and effects. This is especially true of the witnesses who testified during the *Till* case, who, above all, looked from the witness stand and did so according to conflicting notions of what there was to see in the photograph of Emmett Till and the acceptable means by which we may come to see and thereby know it.

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[50] Synnott, Anthony. *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Conceiving of testimony thus, I take the witness stand to be a visual technology that, in conducting the testimonial looking of the doctor and sheriff as witnesses for the defense on the one hand and Mamie Bradley as a witness for the prosecution on the other, functions respectively as 1) a *tripod* that provides an elevated and stable platform for the performance of "oversight" and its exclusive claim to be able to look 2) and a *darkroom* that overexposes the black looking of Mamie Bradley to the light-play of what Mirzoeff might call the legal "complex of visuality."[51]

iii. The Legal Complex of Visuality

By the legal "complex of visuality" (heretofore abbreviated as the LCV), I mean the spatial and procedural organization of a courtroom that, in maintaining the authority to object to or allow that which witnesses testify to have seen, sutures the looking determined as admissible by the court into a verdict determining, with respect to the *Till* case, the "real" and "true" account of what there was and was not to see in the photograph of Emmett Till. The individual components of the LCV may be delineated thus: the witness whose testimonial looking constitutes the raw material of the verdict, the lawyer who interrogates and objects to that which the witness purports to have seen, the judge who may overrule or sustain the lawyer's objections and, in so doing, ultimately decides upon the admissibility of the witness' looking, and the jury who interprets the sum of admissible looking and delivers the verdict. Delineated in this way,

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[51] Here, I extend Mirzoeff's notion of the "complex of visuality" developed in *The Right to Look* to the juridical sphere.

the LCV functions as a type of visual assembly line that manipulates, revises, and sutures the raw material of testimonial looking in order to produce the verdict.

Thus, if the witness stand functions like a *tripod*, it does so as a constitutive part of the LCV whose individual components jointly perform oversight (here, the crow's eye view). This is further suggested by the spatial organization of the courtroom. The judge occupies the bench's loftiest position and, as the title "Your Honor" also seems to indicate, represents the court's most privileged looker. This privilege is reflected in the fact that the judge maintains the authority ultimately to decide upon the admissibility of testimony. From his lofty position on the bench, the judge quite literally oversees the proceedings of the LCV: the witnesses and jurors, who occupy the elevated platforms of the witness stand and jury box, respectively, and the lawyers, who not insignificantly stand when most actively engaged in the ocular production of the verdict through direct- and cross-examination. Taken as a whole in spite of its internal differentiations, then, the elevated bench may be generally understood to provide a raised platform for the LCV's collective performance of oversight, which, as we are given to understand from the metonymic reference to the judge as "The Court" in the trial transcripts, is most fully embodied in the figure of the judge. However, in the instances that the looking of a witness is determined to be either inadmissible or, comparative to more "qualified" lookers, less reliable, as is the case with the denigrated black looking of Mamie Bradley, some internal differentiation of the bench becomes necessary. In this case, the witness stand is excluded from the court's collective performance of oversight and, as a function of its inferior spatial relation to the "The Court," is rendered instead a type of valley

which assumes the function of a *darkroom* that overexposes black looking to the light-play of the LCV.

Indeed, from his lofty position on the bench, "The Court" may be said to play with light in the precise manner that Till's murderers meant to while perched atop the 100-foot bluff, "shin[ing] the light on down there toward that water" in order to *see* Till to his proper place at the bottom of the Tallahatchie. I have already argued that the flashlight was indispensable to Milam's endeavor to "*show* how me and my folks stand" as the source of light that would enable that which he intended to show, namely a visualization of blackness as so profoundly inferior to whiteness as even to be *physically* excluded from an equal plane. The proper source of the LCV's light derives from its capacity to visualize, that is, to ocularly produce by oversight, a verdict that is generally presumed to establish the real, true, and just account of what there was and was not to see. Nevertheless, Giorgio Agamben insists that what the law produces is none of these, but rather and only judgement:

> law is not directed toward the establishment of justice. Nor is it directed toward the verification of truth. Law is solely directed toward judgement, independent of truth and justice. This is shown beyond doubt by the *force of judgement* that even an unjust sentence carries with it. The ultimate aim of law is the production of a *res judicata*, in which the sentence becomes the substitute for the true and the just, being held as true despite its falsity and injustice. Law finds peace in this hybrid creature, of which it is impossible to say if it is fact or rule; once law has produced its *res judicata*, it cannot go any further.[52]

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[52] Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Zone Books: New York, 1999. p. 18.

Latin literally for “a matter [already] judged,” the *res judicata*, the production of which Agamben astutely names as the “ultimate aim of law,” precludes the further litigation of a matter that has already been litigated. The consequence of this principle of legality is that it becomes possible to nourish a lie with the material privileges of reality while leaving the truth to starve. Thus, by the sheer “force of [the law’s] judgement,” the LCV may be understood to produce a verdict that not only stands in seamlessly “for the true and the just,” but is also able to withstand the assertion of either’s right to the real when the verdict is found to be neither true nor just. In this sense, the LCV may be understood to function similarly to historian Thomas Carlyle’s characterization of the figure of the Hero as a “living light fountain” or “natural luminary,” who, according to Mirzoeff, is able to visualize what is in turn also “felt to be right” and “aesthetic.” As naturally and neutrally as light, then, the LCV illuminates a verdict that incontrovertibly assumes the privileges of reality, and does so to the eternal exclusion and disavowal of alternative visualizations, however more just and true. Confronted with such a possibility, the urgency of black looking’s ocular relation to the impossible and capacity to “change reality” is suddenly made clear.

Agamben’s remarks regarding the *res judicata* are especially true of the verdict of the *Till* trial, whose unjust verdict of Milam’s and Bryant’s innocence could not “go any further,” even after the publication of their confession to the murder mere months after their acquittal. Significantly, the ocular production of this verdict was founded upon the defense’s absurd contention that Till was still alive and The Court’s visualization of the photograph of Emmet Till as that of a cadaver planted by the NAACP in a conspiracy to

"destroy the way of life of Southern people." An article published in the *Delta-Democrat Times* details how the defense based their argument

> mainly on the fact that the body after being shot, beaten and soaked in the muddy river for several days, did not resemble a picture taken some while ago, which appeared in a Jackson newspaper, and that it appeared to have been in the river a longer time. This defies the fact that the body was identified by relatives, [and] was accepted by the boy's mother. It defies also the evidence of the ring…someone would have had to have been killed before the boy was abducted, [and] the ring stolen from young Till and placed on the dead person's finger. Without the prior knowledge that Roy Bryant and his half-brother would kidnap young Till, as they admittedly did, such a conspiracy defies even the most fantastic reality.[53]

The power of the verdict of the *Till* trial to make Emmett, who was dead, live—in what is a truly baffling instance of what Foucault has called the bio-political power to "make live"—suggests the ways in which not only the politics, but also the legality of modern man "calls his existence as a living being into question." Such is the fantastic light-play of a LCV that will be shown to overexpose the photograph of Emmett Till or Mamie Bradley's black looking so as to render it both indistinct and impossible.

Having delineated the LCV thus, we now proceed on to a close reading of the testimonies of the doctor and sheriff on the one hand, and Mamie Bradley on the other, as both exemplify the two distinct clouds of witnesses which assembled around the photograph of Emmett Till. The former, I will argue, disinterestedly attend a humanity apprehensible only as an abstract and anonymous category and is exclusively attentive to the visually sensible, while the latter attends a humanity apprehensible as a singular fact, doing so often in the absence of visible evidence.

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[53] Christopher Metress, *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002, p, 39.

iv. Somebody, No One

We might understand the doctor's testimony to only slightly revise the police directive that Mirzoeff considers paradigmatic of visuality's "exclusive claim to be able to look:" "Move on, there is nothing to see here":

> Q: Doctor, explain to the jury—*and you may use medical or scientific terms*, if you so desire—but will you please explain to the jury and describe the condition of that body to the jury as you saw it at that time?
> A: This body was badly swollen, badly bloated…The skin and the flesh was beginning to slip on it. The head was badly mutilated. The right eye was protruding. And the tongue was protruding from the mouth…
> Q: Doctor, I want to ask this question: from the condition that you saw that body in, in your opinion, could anybody have identified any *particular* person as being that body?…
> A: I don't think you could. I don't think you could have identified that body.
> Q: Now suppose if the man had been another person's brother, could he have identified it, in your opinion?
> A: I doubt it.
> Q: Or if it had been a person's son, could a mother have identified that body, in your opinion?
> A: I doubt it.[54]

"Move on, there is *no one* to see here." Only we know that there is. We know because Mamie Bradley, the "mother" whose ability to identify Till's body the doctor discredits as "doubtful," knew first.

> A: I looked at the face very carefully. I looked at the ears, and the forehead, and the hairline, and also the hair; and I looked at the nose and the lips, and the chin. I just looked at it all over very thoroughly. And I was able to find out that it was my boy. And I *knew* definitely that it was my boy beyond a shadow of a doubt.[55]

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[54] Emmett Till Murder Trial Transcript, p, 299-300.
[55] Emmett Till Murder Trial Transcript, p, 186.

The doctor exercises his right to look, then, to the exclusion and negation of Mamie Bradley's black looking, by which she was able to behold a body protruding, however terribly, beyond the frames of family photos and the normatively identifiable and nevertheless recognize her son. In this way, the witness stand accommodates the doctor's looking at the body of Emmett Till in much the same way that we have understood the sidewalk to accommodate the crow's eye view, that is, by providing the doctor with an elevated platform for a performance of oversight that banishes Mamie Bradley's black looking to the functionally blind terrain of the valley, in which vision is thought impossible. By refining the question from "could anybody" to "could a mother have identified that body," the defense isolates the more a mother could know that would enable her to identify a body like Till's. Against the validity of this deeply personal and subjective knowledge, the doctor opposes the authority of objective, empirical knowledge. As do the lawyers who encourage the doctor to speak in "medical or scientific terms." Knowledge, competing understandings of what there is to know and the acceptable means by which we may come to know it, is at issue here. We have, therefore, not only to distinguish the methods of looking exemplified by these respective testimonies, but also to determine the viability of either given the epistemological preferences of a court that privileges the doctor's testimony over Mamie Bradley's.

To speak in terms of the court's epistemological preferences may perhaps seem an unnecessary over-complication of the more simple explanation for the court's distribution of its favor, especially since we know the jurors were always already decided about the innocence of Till's murderers, so that the case itself was little more than a show to, in the

infamous words of one juror, "make it look good." This predetermined decision, along with the simple fact that Mamie Bradley was a black woman in a courtroom supervised by white men, does much to explain the court's partiality. Nevertheless, because the juridical sentence is not spared the burden of grammar, because *due* process still has to foot its bill, so that it was not enough merely to declare the innocence of Till's murderers without the added nuisance of having also to argue it in a way that had not only to appear reasonable, but true, the aesthetics of this show reveal certain epistemic virtues to which the court understood that it could appeal in order to "make it look good." Indeed, I argue that the aesthetic decisions of the Court betray its fidelity to an Enlightenment philosophical discourse that disinterestedly adopts a notion of humanity as a transcendent category abstracted from the brute particularities of singular human events.

Alerting us to the aesthetic aspirations of the *Till* case is the request that the doctor supplement his testimonial looking at the body of Emmett Till with "medical or scientific terms," or what we might otherwise understand as the solicitation of the doctor's performance of what Michel Foucault has called the "clinical gaze":

> Over all these endeavors on the part of clinical thought to define its methods and scientific norms hovers the great myth of a pure Gaze that would be pure Language: a speaking eye. It would scan the entire hospital field, taking in and gathering together each of the singular events that occurred within it; and as it saw, as it saw ever more and more clearly, it would be turned into speech that states and teaches; the truth, which events, in their repetitions and convergence, would outline under its gaze, would, by this same gaze and in the same order, be reserved, in the form of teaching, to those who do not know and have not yet seen. This speaking eye would be the servant of things and the master of truth.[56]

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[56] Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p, 114.

On the witness stand the doctor speaks his eye; translates what pretends to be his pure look at Till's body—and pure precisely in so far as it is purged of Mamie Bradley's interest and subjectivity—"into speech that states and teaches" the Court the truth reserved to the doctor by his specialized medical language. "There is no one" to see in the photograph of Emmett Till, he says with an authority that does not at all require, and might even be undercut by, a personal knowledge of Till.

The credibility of the doctor's "clinical gaze" derives decisively from his ability to articulate what he sees, over, above and even *before* the physical act of seeing itself. The privileged claim of the doctor's "speaking eye" to the truth owes not merely to its eloquence, but the conflation of this eloquence with the act of seeing itself, so that in order to see meaningfully and authoritatively in the world, it is enough only to speak, but never only to see. It is enough for the doctor only to speak in the sense that, unlike Mamie Bradley, his testimony is unaided by any actual perception of Till. He testifies not that the body fails to resemble Till, which would imply at least some measure of personal attentiveness, but rather that the body resembles "no one in particular." What the doctor sees with his clinical gaze is the very impossibly of seeing.

If, as Foucault contends, the clinical gaze "saw sovereignty in a world of language whose clear speech it gathered up effortlessly in order to restore it in a secondary, identical speech," then it is aspiring to these sovereign privileges that the court solicits the doctor's use of "medical and scientific terms." It too "saw sovereignty in a world of language." It is not only light, then, but language that is at issue here.

Further clarifying the function of clinical gaze's eloquence is Foucault's description of the gaze's self-generating light, by which it alone can bring corporal opacities like the one confronting us in the photograph of Emmett Till, to light:

> At the end of the eighteenth century, however, seeing consists in leaving to experience its greater corporal opacity; the solidity, the obscurity, the density of things closed in upon themselves, have powers of truth that they owe not to light, but to the slowness of the gaze that passes over them, around them, and gradually into them, bringing them nothing more than its own light. The residence of truth in the dark centre of things is linked, paradoxically, to this sovereign power of the empirical gaze that turns their darkness into light. All light has passed over into the thin flame of the eye, which now flickers around solid objects and, in so doing, establishes their place and form.[57]

We might otherwise understand the light that the clinical gaze brings to the "residence of truth in the dark centre of things" to be its speech, the nominal powers which flicker around that which it articulates in order to sovereignly establish its real place and form. However, the light that the doctor's "medical or scientific terms" holds to the obscurity of Till's mutilated body brings Till's broken face to light precisely as an unknowable darkness. If the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness. With the lanterns of his clinical gaze alit with eloquence, then, the doctor plays with light in the witness stand in the same way Till's murderers planned to atop the 100-foot bluff "shining the light on down there toward the water," that is, to behold Till's illuminated descent below see level.

It is not just given that the aesthetic decision to illuminate Till as a body belonging to no one in particular could "look good." Indeed, beyond insisting she was

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[57] Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, p, xiii-xiv.

able to identify her son, Bradley also objected, “They didn’t try to explain *whose body it was*. It seems that bodies are pretty plentiful down there. And the only point that they were trying to prove is that the body, that I had, did not belong to me.”[58] That a body indifferently relieved of the *one* to whom it belongs does not at all “look good” to Bradley suggests that there has first to exist a pallet, if not appetite, for such bodies, that they are an acquired look.

That it is enough only to show that Till’s body doesn’t belong to him, that it is not also necessary to demonstrate whose body it in fact is, belies, what is for Mamie Bradley at least, an unallowable irresponsibility to the singularity of human being. This irresponsibility bears itself out in the testimony of the doctor and the sheriff, and the court’s valuation of the “pretty plentiful” number of bodies they have evaluated. We shall deal with their testimonies in turn.

> Q: Doctor during that experience, in your hospital training, and in your regular practice, and also your service in the Army, did you ever have occasion to examine any dead bodies?
> A: Yes, Sir, I did.
> Q: And Doctor, have you ever had occasion to examine dead bodies that have been in the air and also those that have been in water.
> A: I have.
> Q: Would you please tell the jury or give the jury some kind of estimate as to the number of those dead bodies you have seen?…
> A: I would say a large number.
> Mr. Breland: We submit, Your Honor, that he is an expert witness in his field.
> The Court: I think the gentleman qualifies.[59]
> …

[58] Davis W Houck, David E. Dixon, *Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, Baylor University Press, 2006, p, 144.

[59] The Emmett Till Murder Trial Transcript, p, 297-98.

> Q: What then, Mr. Strider, is your opinion based on your past experience in taking bodies from the river, as to how long this particular body that was removed from the water on August 31st had been in the river?
> Mr. Smith: We object to that, if Your Honor please. He is not a doctor, and he is not qualified to testify about that.
> The Court: He is not qualified as a doctor, but he stated that he has had experience with other bodies taken from the river from time to time. And I think he is qualified.
> Q: You may state your opinion on that, Mr. Strider.
> A: I would say at least ten days, if not fifteen…
> Q: Was that body recognizable to be that of any particular person's?
> A: Well, if one of my own boys had been missing, I couldn't really say if it was my own son or not, or anybody else's. I couldn't tell that. All I could tell, it was a *human being*...[60] (emphasis added)

Although his testimony lacks the same immediate and seemingly natural "right to the real" to which the doctor has sovereign recourse through his "clinical gaze," the sheriff is nevertheless endorsed by the court as a qualified witness because of the wealth of his experience pulling dead bodies from the river. Endowed with the authority of this endorsement, the sheriff is no less qualified than the doctor to stand against Mamie Bradley's capacity to look at Till's body and recognize anyone in particular.

That *other* experiences with *other* bodies sanction and qualify the sheriff's testimonial looking at *this* body, that they do so over Mamie Bradley's personal and intimate experience of *this* body indicates the Court's fidelity to an:

> Enlightenment philosophical discourse that invests itself speculatively in the concept of humanity; it abstracts the concept of humanity from the observed turn of human events, contracts itself and its audience to agree disinterestedly to recognize a transcendent category relieved from its entanglement in all brute particulars, and binds itself to honor that agreement (regardless of the singularity of any given case).[61]

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[60] The Emmett Till Murder Trial Transcript, p, 289-90.
[61] Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, p, 207.

Thus, the aesthetic decisions of the Court bespeaks its fidelity to an Enlightenment philosophical discourse that posits a notion of humanity as a transcendent category abstracted from the brute particularities of singular human events. Once again, Baucom is helpful here:

> For the humanity to which the Euromodern witness or third has attached itself over the course of the past 250 years is, in fact, dual. It is both a singular and historically particular humanity in extremis, a humanity apprehensible as what I will be calling a melancholy fact of history, and a humanity apprehensible as a speculative idea and a speculative (and regulatory) ideal, a humanity grounded in natural law and natural right, an abstract humanity called into existence by the discourses of the right of man and of human rights…"[62]

v. The Immaculate Perception

Perhaps the loophole in Harriet Jacob's crawlspace is the lens best suited to contour our look upon Mamie Bradley's *black looking*. Recalling the cramped spaces of the slave ship and anticipating Jim Crow's assault on posture, the crawlspace Harriet Jacobs inhabited for seven "dark years" was nine feet long, seven feet wide, and three feet high. There, she went "almost deprived of light and air."[63] We can hardly imagine more hostile conditions for looking. Still she was only *almost* deprived of light because in time she simply created her own. Upon finding the gimlet that she would use to carve her loophole, Jacobs joyfully exclaimed, "Now I will have some light. Now I will see my children" (175) Here, the caesura is impatient. No sooner does she create light than she is driven to thoughts of her children. It is as if, in this accelerated Genesis, light was not

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[62] Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic,* p, 180.
[63] Harriet Brent Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Boston: Pub. for the Author, 1861, p, 224.

good, at least not until light bared her children so that she might bear her children. The sun was only as good as her son. What was always already good, however, was her placement of the hole on "the side next the street where [she] could frequently see [her] children" (174). For Harriet Jacobs, then, the principle and impossible occasion for light and sight was motherhood. And however impossible we imagine it would be to raise children by simply looking at them: she laughed with them:

> At last I heard the merry laugh of children, and presently two sweet little faces were looking up at me, as though they knew I was there, and were conscious of the joy they imparted. (175)

(And this so powerfully and with such irreverence for anything like physics that they were almost conscious of her laughter, that they could even discern the general direction from which it came), she dressed and played with them:

> Grandmother brought me materials, and I busied myself making some new garments and little playthings for my children…I had the pleasure of peeping at them as they went into the street with their new suits on. I heard Benny ask a little playmate whether Santa Claus brought him anything. "Yes," replied the boy; "but Santa Claus ain't a real man. It's the children's mothers that put things into the stockings." "No, that can't be," replied Benny, "for Santa Claus brought Ellen and me these new clothes, and my mother has been gone this long time." (179)

She even kept the secret of Santa Claus. And when she had to (as she did on the occasion that her son, Benny, talked back to a white man)

> I told my grandmother of it, when we had our next conference at the trap-door, and begged her not to allow the children to be impertinent to the irascible old man. (175)

she disciplined them. Through the severely circumscribed vantage point of the loophole, Harriet Jacobs exercised an ocular motherhood with eyes that beheld her children through seven years of life. Hers is also the look of black looking.

It is through the lens of Harriet Jacobs' loophole and in the light of her ocular motherhood that we are prepared to consider Mamie Bradley's tender black looking upon the broken face of her son. In the documentary, "The Murder of Emmett Till," Mamie Bradley remembers her look:

> I decided then that I would start at his feet and work my way up, maybe gathering strength as I went. I paused at his midsection, because I knew he would not want me looking at him. But I saw enough that I knew he was intact. I kept on up until I got to his chin and then I—I was forced to deal with his face. I saw that his tongue was choked out. I noticed that the right eye was lying on midway his cheek, I noticed that his nose had been broken like somebody took a meat chopper and chopped his nose in several places. As I kept looking, I saw a hole, which I presumed, was a bullet hole and I could look through that hole and see daylight on the other side. And I wondered was it necessary to shoot him? Mr. Rayner asked me, he said "Do you want me to touch the body up?" I said, "No, Mr. Rayner, let the people see what I've seen." I was just willing to *bear/bare* it all. I think everybody needed to know what had happened to Emmett Till.[64] (emphasis and rendering added)

What we must understand about Mamie Bradley's looking is that she was with child. And this not merely in the sense that she was presently gazing into the broken face of her son, but also in the impossible sense implied by her willingness "to bear it all," to carry her baby boy. An immaculate perception.

This has everything to do with Mamie Bradley's unique rendition of ocular motherhood as it may be situated within the tradition of the poetic blazon, whose

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[64] See transcript of Stanley Nelson's *The Murder of Emmett Till*, Alexandria, Va.: PBS Video, 2005.

conventions include a piecemeal description whose sum constitutes a whole. The descriptive perils and deficiencies of the blazon's "inventory of fragmented and reified parts," particularly with respect to the female body, have been the object of much literary criticism.[65] Thus, to cast Mamie Bradley's ocular motherhood in these terms already gives rise to suspicions of her parenting, suspicions remembering the critiques of Mamie Bradley by those who claimed she raised a rude and insolent son, and others who complained that her lack of emotion dismissed any hope for a conviction. My own initial reaction to Mamie Bradley's looking somewhat resembled the latter. Where I anticipated the reflex of motherly grief, there was instead plan, method, and intention enough to unsettle me. Perhaps it was the way she decided to "start at his feet and work her way up" or her methodical itemization and narrative reproduction of her son's body. I didn't begin to suspect the miracle of what Mamie Bradley saw until she paused at Till's midsection, where she "knew he would not want [her] looking at him. But [she] saw enough to know he was intact."

Erupting, however briefly, in this caesura of Mamie Bradley's looking is an impossible exchange between a mother and her son, an exchange that is impossible precisely because her son is dead. We can presume that what Mamie Bradley knew, she learned the last time she looked on her son's nakedness and confronted his beautiful embarrassment—*Mama, don't come in yet. I'm not dressed*—beautiful because she

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[65] In her reading of Shakespeare's *Lucrece* (1594), Nancy Vickers examines the limits and dangers of the "inherited, insufficient, and descriptive rhetoric of the blazon. See, Vickers, Nancy. "'The blazon of sweet beauty's best': Shakespeare's Lucrece." *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*. London: Routledge, 2003.

would come to miss it. By acknowledging Till's bashful preference that she not look at his penis, even in death, Mamie Bradley demonstrates the symptoms of an encounter with the face and the pure resistance of alterity in that it is not enough for her to look. And could the lifeless eyes of Emmett Till have seen, above his head he might have glimpsed something like civil rights gleaming in his mother's eyes.

Still, if she paused at his midsection and did not look at his penis, what constituted the "enough" she saw to know "he was *intact*"? That Mamie Bradley would describe her son as "intact"—"not damaged in any way; complete"—conflicts with the blazon's fragmentation, by which we are given to understand that her son came home to Chicago in pieces. What do we imagine, then, constituted the "enough" that Mamie Bradley saw to know that her son was "intact"? Perhaps, it was what else she likely saw while pausing at Till's midsection and faithfully respecting his desire for her not to look at his genitalia: his navel.

Till's navel is the indisputable evidence that, as Edward P. Jones has put it, "he had once been somebody's baby boy, been a part of a real live woman who had been with a real man."[66] Restated from the perspective of Mamie Bradley, the navel bears witness to the fact that she had once been somebody's mother, been with a real man and bore a real live boy. The possibility that the navel was that which might have been "enough" for Mamie Bradley to know her son was intact, occasioned my turning to look again upon Mamie Bradley's method and plan to "start at his feet and work [her] way up." Reading this decision as an intentional one, it was by performing this specific vector of looking

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[66] Edward P Jones, *The Known World*, New York: Amistad, 2003, p, 192.

that Mamie Bradley supposed she might gather "strength as [she] went" enough "to deal with his face," which lay so unthinkably outside the frames of family photos and the recognizably human, and nevertheless not fail to recognize her baby.

That one needs a certain kind of strength to look at Emmett Till's mutilated face is understood by anyone who has experienced the phenomenon of having looked and looked away.[67] Not that this strength we are speaking of is measured by the duration of the look, but rather what the looker is able to see, and this as a function of what the looker is strong enough to bear. The strength Mamie Bradley needed to recognize her son was the ocular strength to break open the frames that fail to account for faces like her son's, frames contouring a particular kind of looking that argues too long with the discourse of the face before accepting its general and straightaway ethical premise: "Thou shall not kill." This strength, which Mamie Bradley intended to gather on her way up, I suggest was acquired in the break of looking, born in the pregnant caesura, the pausing at Till's midsection to first become the pupil of the discourse of the navel, whose first words are "Thou shall carry," "Thou shall bear." And since what we ultimately see in Till's photograph is Mamie Bradley's black looking, we also become pupils of the navel and its ineluctable command to "Bear life!" Ineluctable because, according to Roland Barthes, the very nature of the photograph induces this kind of labor.

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[67] Of this phenomenon Fred Moten has written: "If he seems to keep disappearing as you look at him it's because you look away, which is what makes possible and impossible representation, reproduction, dream." And later, "An image from which one turns is immediately caught in the production of its memorialized, re-membered reproduction. You can lean into it but you can't; the aesthetic and philosophical arrangements of the photograph—some organizations of and for light—anticipate a looking that cannot be sustained." See, Fred Moten, *In the Break*.

> From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.[68]

As the pupils of the photograph of Emmett Till and as the pupils of Mamie Bradley's black looking, it is not enough to just look. In fact, it is impossible to look without the often visceral acknowledgement of the implicit question the photo poses to our looking. And if in Till's face we confront the ineluctable and ethical lesson of alterity, we also confront the discourse of the navel and its imperative to "Bear Life!" To, just as if pregnant, carry the life of the other along the way, not as the same, but as the absolutely other with whom we share "a skin," to whom we belong. I wonder whether we all might have learned more that day if my English teacher had simply instructed us to touch our belly buttons, and remember, and k/now that regardless of what we do or do not see, Emmett Till had one too.

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[68] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, p,

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