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Abstract

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This dissertation, "History and Its Kind: The Charge of the Other in Black Gay Men's Literatures," examines understudied queer relational forms, arguing that black gay genealogies arise from non-identitarian forms of being in common. The project is organized around overlooked experiences of what I call "kind-ness," a term that intermingles erotic acts of affirmation with eccentric feelings of like-ness and belonging. I derive this formulation from Melvin Dixon's poem, "Blood Positive," which stages an intergenerational dialogue between the dead and the living: "We did nothing but worship our kind / When you love as we did you will know / there is no life but this / and history will not be kind." The challenge to "love as we did" offers an immersive yet open-ended expression of concern, and also of reading. Reading for a minor category of the embrace – that is, a romance, a fetish, a hunger – scrambles our original categories of belonging and calls forth new intimate publics. In chapters on Melvin Dixon, James Baldwin, and Samuel Delany, I analyze representations of affiliative practices that remain *minor* in that they have rarely themselves become the site of political organizing or identitarian formation. Whether in a fetish for waste and fingernails (as in Delany's work), or in an erotics of sibling and daddy play (as in Baldwin's, Delany's, and certain aspects of Dixon's), these authors exhibit an intense focus on relational forms that allows me to locate historically contingent strategies of survival that affirm black queer life. I show how this body of literature negotiates stylistic and attitudinal shifts brought about by various social movements across the late twentieth century, and, in so doing, alters our sense of black and gay belonging. Reading for such minor forms of kind-ness, I argue, allows us to experience black gay genealogies *otherwise*.

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Introduction: No Other Way into the Beloved Community

But perhaps someone, somewhere in the future, will dream our moment into life. Perhaps that is all that we are now and will ever be: the fragments and figments of someone's imagination, of someone's desire for us to exist.

- Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal*

I surprise myself sometimes with how involved I find myself with all these dead people and how they lived their lives. My supervisor says I should just try to accept everything and not judge anything. Maybe after I've been doing this a little longer, I'll be able to.

- Samuel R. Delany, *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*

"History and its Kind: The Charge of the Other in Black Gay Men's Literatures" re-examines literary genealogies of late twentieth century queer black male writers. The project is organized around overlooked experiences of what I call "kind-ness," a term that intermingles erotic acts of affirmation with eccentric feelings of like-ness and belonging. Analyzing texts which are situated between the mid-twentieth century and the speculative near future, I explore depictions of erotic outliers to call attention to minor categories of embrace that lie dormant within identitarian genealogies of black gay belonging. The writers I consider – Melvin Dixon, James Baldwin, and Samuel Delany– all depict historically contingent experiences of affirmation and belonging whose representations claim no easy place within their traditions. The interrelation between kindness and kind-ness (which is to say, likeness) that I argue for allows us to see how queer expressions of compassion and caretaking – of being with another – can produce intimate modes of assembly that are central to black queer flourishing. The diverse world-making practices I study, constituted by race play, waste play, and daddy play, represent an undercommons of motley desires that overflow essentialist or ontological distinctions. They produce collectives out of unnamed gods and slaves, out of snot-eaters and nail-biters and, often, out of fictive families based in sibling incest play and daddy play. I show how closing in on a stylistic tic, fetish, or romance can open out onto unexpected modes of affiliation.

My title is adapted from a poem by the black gay writer, Melvin Dixon, "Blood Positive," which stages an inter-generational dialogue between the living and the seropositive dead, offering a formulation for history, its alterity, and its agonistic relation to the present.
In the first section of the poem, "The Children Wonder," the subsequent generation – black, gay, both, we do not know – demand that the dead account for why they were not more militant when confronting their own erasure. Why, when the tune called for it, had they only "meandered and minced" when "the songs said to march" (58)? In reprimanding the dead for their indirection, the children become the unwitting objects of a clipped scorn, when, from within the titular second section, "The Dead Speak":

> Leave us alone.
> We did nothing but worship our kind.
> When you love as we did you will know
> there is no life but this
> and history will not be kind.
> Now take what you need and get out. (*Love's Instruments,* 58)

The repetition of "kind" suggests a double sense of historical rupture.[1] Any sense of having a forbearer is immediately complicated, for the declaration that history will not be kind not only situates the dead within a subaltern archive, but within a seemingly different type altogether. Whosoever would later arise to look back upon them would thus belong to a new kind altogether. The only relation that the children may claim to the dead is now one of genealogical rupture, a relation that leaves them with a positively spoiled bloodline. Framed as an intergenerational encounter, we must ask: if history has been unkind, then for whom? The worshipped kind mistreated and forgotten by it, or the next generation who come after them, looking for a mobilized past?

I use my reading of "Blood Positive" as a platform to make two key interventions within black queer studies and modes of reading. The first comes from a certain strain of black queer studies that argues that blackness is always already queer insofar as black life is always already being imagined in some degree of relation to excess if not lack (e.g., Cathy Cohen, Hortense Spillers, Aliyyah Abdur Rahman, Roderick Ferguson, Darieck Scott).[i] Such an approach takes into account the many perverse associations that the racialist mind projects upon black subjects, but also the creative ways that black subjects have either resisted or embraced these non-normative positions as queer ways of world-making. While many of the erotic and relational forms that I study take form within these very flows of racialization, I'm especially interested in oblique desires that exist at the margins of them. Often such desires leave us no easily positive or political position that we can mobilize in the present, and so they appear less germane for thinking about the ethics and erotics of black queer life. Note, for instance, how when the younger generation demands that the dead mobilize, the dead retort, "Now take what you need and get out." They respond to the need to organize with a clipped scorn, and turn their backs on the next generation to continue on in their self-loving worship. Rather than neglect these more tucked-away intimacies, I am interested in what it means to examine blackness and queerness from these margins.

The second intervention that I make draws upon foundational work in queer historiography that is best exemplified by such thinkers as Heather Love, David Halperin, and Christopher Nealon. Such work shows how lesbian and gay writhers and scholars in the present might approach the queer past looking for antecedents only to find the ways in which they turn away from us, refusing to allow us to *feel historical* in those terms in which we've sought them out.[ii] Rather than accept the dead's turning away from us as an act of absolute negativity, I'm interested in what it means to take up their challenge to "love as we did." Doing so, I contend, dramatizes how we might approach the past with a ready-made category of identity or identification only to come away with a different understanding of how getting together might look within that past. To that end, I engage three authors whose works have been hailed in some way as being important to the construction of a black gay past. Many of the moments that I study are intended to demo the varied ways in which black queer men were negotiating those more identity-based feelings of belonging that were being laid out both by and for many black gay men in the eighties and onwards.

Making room for other more eccentric models of desire and belonging is crucial, since Dixon, Baldwin, and Delany all depict figures who struggle to conceptualize themselves within those models of belonging that were being brought together in the late twentieth century under the heading of "gay." At the same time, their fiction and poetry offer up equally compelling accounts of what attracts them to figures of the same sex, and my hope is that examining black

gay history through these minor desires and identifications will allow us to tell different stories about how black queer men grappled with feelings of otherness brought about by both geographic and generational differences. In each chapter, I locate a particular sensory field – the aural, the visual, and the haptic – that establishes the possibilities for a counter-cultural black queer sociality. Each sensory field, in turn, unlocks something unanticipated or misunderstood about the author's aesthetic investments.

I take black gay men's literatures as my focus because of how strong the charge to love one's own kind is within its tradition. The first wave of black gay organizing in the 1980s gave rise to Joseph Beam's rallying phrase – "Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the 80s" – a mantra now for famous for its inability to reflect the unruly desires of Beam and many of his contemporaries at the time (189). Taken literally, Beam's expression of solidarity risks equating one's political commitments with one's erotic life. As Stefanie Dunning has shown, many black gay artists of this period onwards signaled their allegiance to black gay organizing by representing and staging failed interracial relationships with white men that made the need to return to one's own kind appear urgent.[iii] Concerning Beam's articulation of revolutionary love, Dunning points to its resurgence in Marlon Rigg's ground-breaking documentary on black gay life, *Tongues Untied* (1989), as offering to black gay men a trajectory of love and allegiance that is "relatively linear, moving from the crisis of intraracial homophobia and childhood, to racism in the white gay community, and then finally into the monoracial, same sex community of black gay men" (5). She points to the fact that Riggs died while loving a white man not so as to evidence a contradiction in this mantra, but to show how black gay men strategically represent their broken bonds with white men in order to signal that they are black men first and foremost ("*re*racination," she calls it), and to prove their unswerving fidelity to the race.

Whether in Riggs' documentary or in poetry by writers such as Essex Hemphill, Craig Harris, and Assotto Saint, black gay men created skeptical representations of interracial love that represented the need for black gay men to rethink their political consciousnesses in sexual terms. Early black gay oriented anthologies of the 1980s and 1990s had a special role in consolidating black gay men into precisely this imagined community, for they could structurally represent black gay men retreating from white spaces and banding together in an unprecedented volume, literally. I am speaking, of course, of the landmark black gay anthology, *In the Life*, that Beam edited in 1986 by, for, and about black gay men. In his introduction, Beam "called for a personal moratorium on the writing by white gay men" whose "words offered the reflection of a sidewalk" (xix). "There is no room for Black gay men within the confines of this gay pentagram," Beam states, and he presented his anthology as a genuine attempt at rethinking collectivity in terms that moved away from more mainstream articulations of gay community (xx). Because Beam had intentionally solicited writings for his anthology that linked black gay writers across multiple regions, experiences, and professions, he could narrate his volume as representing a kind of totality. In this, it could solicit from readers the feeling of belonging to a sovereign nation, a nation of black gay men writing, publishing, selling and reading works that finally reflected their own lives. Most importantly, even as the anthology aimed at diversity, its larger goal was to represent a concerted voice that would be reflected across the range of its materials. Beam frames his editorial role as being like a "confidant and friend to the brothers who submitted their work," and he notes how he "listened to their stories of failed love" so as to show all of the writers included in the volume are more or less intimately on the same page (xxi). Drawing upon the language of Assotto Saint's piece for the collection, "Risin' to the Love we Need," Beam concludes "We are risin' to the love we *all* need. We are coming home with our

heads held up high" (xxiv).[iv] By incorporating the language of others into his own, his voice accrues the feeling of commonality. It is inflected by the sense of a shared world, a shared aesthetic and a shared need for the love of other black men. Their turn inwards to one another has important implications for both coalition-building and intimacy: "Black men loving Black men is a call to action, an acknowledgement of responsibility," Beam writes, "We take care of our own kind when the night grows cold and silent" (191).

So there we have it – the worshipped kind finally turns toward one another, and they do so as a *re*turn to a black community whose traditions they are shown to have never forsaken. The anthology helped canalize feelings of rejection into a radical vision of homosociality, one which firmly centered black gay men back within black traditions, ontologies and spaces. Spatial metaphors often conveyed a rallying movement inwards. "Look around, brothers. There is rampant killing in our communities," Essex Hemphill writes in the foreword to *Brother to Brother* (1992), "We are a wandering tribe that needs to go home before home is gone" (xlii). Hemphill inflected the gay idiom of *the tribe* with diasporic dreams of returning to one's rightful kind: the black community.

But the revolutionary charge to love your own kind takes its wisdom from writers who were outside the category of black gay men. When I refer to anthologies as black gay oriented, I do not intend to suggest that such works signify a refusal to work with other minority groups. Rather, I suggest that they expressed a commitment to black gay men's political and creative autonomy first and foremost, and thus sought to reach and mobilize black gay men with the aim of addressing larger world struggles. Even as black gay anthologies were largely an enterprise among men, Beam drew much of his utopian vision of the homosocial from the work of queer women of color, who at that time had a larger public and publishing presence than men.[v] Audre Lorde's essay "Eye to Eye" was a key interlocutor for Beam, for in it she theorized the aversive relationships that black women occasionally had with one another as stemming from their absorption of harmful ideologies. Importantly, Lorde makes loving the black female self inseparable from loving the black female other in ways which Beam would take up. "We do not love ourselves, therefore we cannot love each other" (155), Lorde writes, and how much easier, she says, "to crucify myself in you rather than take on that threatening universe of whiteness by admitting that we are worth wanting each other" (153).[vi] But in order for readers in the present to learn to want one another, they needed models. Lorde looks to the women of Dahomey as proof of the "tenderness with which our foremothers held each other," offering "a tradition of closeness and mutual care and support" for women to recreate in the present (152; 151).

Such positive – and positivist – shows of homosocial concern serve as the foils of my project. Given how concerned many black gay writers were at the time with having proper "reflections" for black gay readers to see themselves in, many pieces feature writers turning to the past in search of ancestors. "Because of our homosexuality the Black community casts us as outsiders," Beam writes, "We are the poor relations, the proverbial black sheep, without a history, a literature, a religion, or a community" (xxii). Black gay men needed a tradition and a history that could easily supply them with lauded images of what it meant to take care of your own kind. As readers, they sought out representations of community and desire that could easily reflect black gay men within a longer legacy of witnesses, warriors, and radical lovers, all engaged in a shared project of truth-telling and world-making.

Black gay writers of the eighties were therefore helping the past to evidence a longer history of radicalism that future generations could carry into the present. Each of the writers that I discuss are made in this way to reflect larger social truths that they share with other black gay

men. Melvin Dixon functions as an exemplary witness in Darius Bost's book on black gay history, *Evidence of Being*; Baldwin continues to signify in his time-honored role as the nation's witness in Lyn Orilla Scott's *Witness to the Journey*; and even Delany, though a more slippery figure, is at the center of Joan W. Scott's canonical essay, "The Evidence on Experience." Each author is made to represent, and intentionally leave evidence for, collectives that they identify with at the level of a racial and sexual public. The vision of black gay history that Bost advances in *Evidence of Being* is one that makes black gay writings matter insofar as they offer black gay men reflections of themselves. They matter in Bost's argument because they attest to an undervalued form of life that was never supposed to be, and that was meant to be experienced as a kind of social death. What unites the black gay men in Bost's framework is thus their commitment to countering misrepresentation with representations that can better speak to black gay men. While I immediately recognize the truth and importance of those histories which Bost documents, I am also interested in what else black gay literature might do besides make itself into a reflection or a witness for the black gay world that needs it. Rather than insisting upon identity-based models of black gay belonging, I turn to queernesss to imagine a more supple tradition of intimacy and belonging that can sometimes sit, unmobilized and untapped, somewhere just outside the radical imagination.

Rather than dispute the fit of these labels, I dispute the rigid ways in which we imagine the shared charge that is raised by black queer literatures. When I say charge, I refer both to the unique sense of commitment that an author may feel towards a people, an aesthetic, or a tradition, but I also refer to the erotic experiences that such writers represent. As well-aimed minority subjects, black queer writers are often taken to be writing into a minoritarian public that easily shares their tastes and commitments. They are always dutifully leaving behind archives for black gay readers that can serve as mirrors for their present and future readers. This being the case, I would return us to José Munoz's claim in *Cruising Utopia* that it "it is important to complicate queer history and understand it as doing more than the flawed process of merely evidencing. Evidencing protocols often fail to enact real hermeneutical inquiry and instead opt to reinstate that which is known in advance" (27). Only when black gay literatures no longer have to evidence the love that we need, or an intimate world that black queer men effortlessly hold in common, can they become free to imagine other kinds of bonds and desires.

The difference between this shared charge and the more idiosyncratic one which I intend has to do with getting us away from frameworks that overdetermine how racial and sexual minorities belong within their respective traditions, and help to move us more in the direction of something like a minor literature, as defined by Gilles Deleuze. A minor tradition allows us to imagine how these writers might matter within traditions that have yet to fall into place. When we allow texts some breathing room from the larger demographics, experiences, and traditions that they have traditionally been made to evidence, we allow them to address intimate situations and worlds that we have yet to imagine, worlds which gradually begin to pull away from more familiar tropes, languages and traditions in which they once seemed to belong. My hope is therefore that we can make the black queer male writer out – again, in Deleuze's words – "to be a sort of stranger *within* his own language," a queer vision estranged from the very terms that most promised him his reflection as a racial and sexual minority (26).[vii]

When Omise'eke Tinsley looks for traces of queer desire in the Middle Passage, she arrives at a vision of queerness which nicely sets up my point of departure from Beam. She understands the word *"queer* not in the sense of a 'gay' or same-sex loving identity … but as a praxis of resistance. *Queer* in the sense of ... connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never

supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist" ("Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic,"199). But what does it mean to love one's own kind? Connecting in ways that you are not supposed to inevitably means connecting with kinds that may differ from your own. This meant that if the black gay anthology was to remain true to the intimate world that it sought to represent, then it would ultimately have to look outside the range of lauded experiences it had gathered and turn its attention to those roving desires that lead black queer men to stray outside the very beloved community that it most intended to address.

Taking all these concerns into account, I raise the form of the anthology because it neatly encapsulates both the problems and the possibilities that black gay men encountered as they sought to represent an inner life that they had in common. More than simply reflecting back to readers the sense of a shared sexual orientation, it became a device for orienting them towards one another and towards a past that they could all now be said to have in common. When either Dixon, Baldwin, or Delany are read against this collectivist backdrop that I have sketched, they have the potential to confront us with the queerness of their singularity. Each represent desires that occasionally fall away from those larger group frameworks, and they express feelings of belonging (or not belonging) that overflow any one demographic committed to loving one another. To that end, this section explores more fully the relationships that each of my authors had to those forms of collectivity that were coalescing into those collectivist frameworks presented within these early anthologies, most notably Beam's. I do so in order to expand upon how idiosyncratic experiences of desire and belonging can complicate those feelings of commonality that an anthology oriented towards black gay men – or a dissertation on black gay men for that matter – must ultimately strive to produce.

A lot of labor has gone into making a history and a lineage that black gay men can be said to have in common, and a key component of this has been the genealogical efforts of writers who not only publish but also republish and recirculate the works of those who come before them. Such accounts of the black gay past tend to get knotty, and here is one particularly poignant example. In his 2008 introduction to the reprint of *In the Life,* "And We Continue to Go the Way Our Blood Beats…," the author James Earl Hardy borrows the title of a famous James Baldwin interview with Richard Goldstein to frame his enthusiasm for Beam's work. Without going too far into Baldwin's sexual politics, I will simply note the irony of framing a black gay anthology's achievements using this particular interview of Baldwin's, given how often Baldwin tends to distance himself from gay organizing in it. Hardy eagerly frames his experience as a reader of the collection by subtly ventriloquizing the very words and experiences of the black queer men discussed or represented within it, including the words of Beam, Baldwin, and Dixon. By adopting the language of others – like Beam – he can ground his individual experience as a reader in a voice that immediately signifies as collective. In drawing upon other voices, he makes it appear as though a whole community of black queer men – past and present, real and imagined – are reading themselves. Discussing how nervous he was to first open the anthology back in 1987, he likens himself to the character in Melvin Dixon's opening short story: "I was 'The Boy With the Beer': standing outside the bar, anxious to go in but unsure of what and whom I'd find inside" (x). Identifying with Dixon's protagonist, Hardy likens his first reading to a long-awaited debut into the black gay community. He inserts himself into Dixon's short story, and even more importantly, he inserts himself into the symbolic place that Dixon's story holds within Beam's book. As a coming of age story, "The Boy with the Beer" is responsible for kicking off the first section – "Stepping Out" – which comes right after Beam's foreword, "Leaving the Shadows Behind." By framing himself in this manner, Hardy is thus able to position himself as anxiously

entering a gathering that holds both the promise of desire and identification. He is about to learn about the kind of people that he can afterwards be said to belong to.

Just as Beam frames himself as scavenging for black gay reflections – "I devoured *Blacklight* and *Habari-Dagtari* … How many times could I read Baldwin's *Just Above My Head* (xix) – Hardy reports that he too "devoured it [*In the Life*] in one sitting" (x). And just as Beam grew tired of having only Baldwin to turn to, Hardy is no less delighted to be able to now claim a vaster lineage that extends back to the Harlem Renaissance: "I learned of Bruce Nugent and Samuel Delaney [sp], confirming my suspicion that the black gay literary canon did not begin (or end) with James Baldwin" (x). The triumph that we glean in his account comes from how successfully *In the Life* has interpellated him into its vision of black gay kinship: "I was not just one of them but a *part* of them. Another black man, a congregation of black men who were not related to me, called me brother – and my soul *exhaled*. I didn't know any of them, but they *knew* me; they spoke my name. There *was* such a thing as a black gay community – and I was a member of the tribe" (x-xi). Hardy's soul "exhaled" so quickly that he perhaps forgets the initial feeling of uncertainty that accompanies his purchase of the book, a feeling of suspense which made him "anxious to go in but unsure of what and whom I'd find inside." The "but" reveals an underlying anxiety about what kind of tradition he will turn out to belong in. It exposes the irony that he is not, or at least not yet, in *In the Life; h*e must first open it, must open himself *to* it – but once he gets in there, he's regarded by everyone as having belonged in it all long.

The writers I have selected for this dissertation all have necessarily fraught relationships with those identity-based forms of belonging coalescing in the 1980s and upwards. Take, for instance, the unstable relationship that gay belonging has for Richard Bruce Nugent, who another editor upholds as the *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance.* While Hardy clearly read the piece about Nugent's being gay that was printed in the volume, he seems to have overlooked Nugent's fraught relationship to the word "gay itself," which Delany recalls in the interview printed just before the Nugent piece: "it was very easy to see the gay activism of the last of the sixties, and the early seventies leaving men like Bruce … behind. A number of times I heard Bruce say, in passing, 'I just don't see why everyone has to be labeled. I just don't think words like homosexual – or gay – *do* anything for anybody" (157). The fact that so many unwieldy identifications can be gathered together in such (a) volume allows us to tell more complicated tales about the ways in which black queer men had to negotiate such shared feelings of belonging; they could at no point be taken for granted.

The *other* that I refer to in my dissertation title is meant to point us back to feelings of desire and responsibility that do not easily come together in more conventional histories of black gay radicalism. In the most dramatic cases, such an "other" may refer to a figure who refuses the most operative terms of black gay organizing, as when a figure resists identifying with the very word "black" or "gay" itself. In other cases I am more interested in feelings of estrangement that are brought about by geographic divisions (as encountered by Dixon's diasporic travelers), generational shifts (as encountered by the older men of Delany and Baldwin's fictions), and taboo intimacies that rupture the conceit of a shared interiority and tradition. Rather drawing black queer writers together into a proud tradition of truth-telling, I am interested in texts that ramble, soliloquize, and diatribe their ways into feelings that are less shared and perhaps often of less immediate use to the black gay imagination. The eccentricity that I have in mind for each writer expands upon those tastes and desires that are most unique to each oeuvre. I draw upon such eccentricity in order to unsettle those scholarly accounts that depict these men as being representatives of a proud and unified black gay collective.

Of the authors that I study, Dixon feels the most amenable to those terms of belonging that were being articulated in the first wave of anthologies. His early poetry expresses a familiar melancholy at not being able to see himself reflected as a gay man within black histories, especially the regionalist histories of the American and the larger world of the black diaspora. And yet, while Beam and Hemphill mark the urgent need of black gay writers to return home (to black loves, black traditions and black communities), Dixon's speakers are restlessly and reclusively moving about, frustratedly trying to connect with their roots in the larger diaspora.] Rather than coming home, they wander as exiles. Rather than speaking with tongues untied, they stammer and gesture limply at all the things they cannot say. Unlike Dixon, Baldwin is important by virtue of his absence from the anthology form: he is always mentioned, but neither his works nor his interviews are themselves present within it. Many anthologies and periodicals after Beam would follow suit in claiming Baldwin as an ancestor regardless, but he remained skeptical of the possibility of gay organizing during his lifetime. While he may not have been willfully ignoring Beam's multiple written requests for him to submit to *In the Life*, Beam nevertheless took his silence personally. Letters in the Beam archive reveal Beam's frustration with Baldwin's unresponsiveness, which Beam experiences – perhaps not altogether incorrectly – as Baldwin's being disinterested in the work that he was organizing. Given how urgent the need to organize felt to Beam, he shifts his frustrations from the slowness of Baldwin's reply to a frustration with Baldwin's once beloved – now too belabored – style. After noting his preference for Audre Lorde's writings, Beam states, "she puts things out very simply so that everyone can understand them … It's there very simply, very beautifully. Unlike other perhaps convoluted writers, like James Baldwin, who don't say things as succinctly – it took him 112 pages to talk about the Atlanta murders, and I think in the '80s we don' have that kind of time " (31-31).[viii]

The biggest zinger to Beam's vision of collectivity comes from his interview with Samuel Delany, "The Possibility of Possibilities," which is printed within the anthology. Most importantly for my purposes, Delany associates reading Baldwin with deluding his own erotic experiences more than clarifying them. He recalls coming out to straight men during a group therapy session, telling them how "miserable, troubled, and such" he felt about being gay, only to double back when he got home and wonder "where had all the things I'd said that morning come from?" (149). Apparently, it came from reading a lot of bad kinds of books when he was young, books that made him forget how much he actually loved his gay experiences. Many of these books were psychological studies, but, he concludes, "Some, even, had come from Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*": "When you talk about something openly for the first time … for better or worse you use the public language you've been given. It's only later, alone in the night, you ask yourself how closely that language reflects your experiences. And that night I realized my experience had been betrayed" (150). Delany has been betrayed by reading Baldwin, our timeless witness! His anecdote may here point back to a distrust with the public voice – the shared voice – which the anthology mobilizes in order to help black gay men leave evidence of their shared being for another. Delany may be in the life, but he is not of it. His uneasy fit comes through most clearly in how he resists being folded into the public voice that Beam has likely planned for his submissions. During their interview, Beam asks Delany what one-minute long message he would address to the entire world if he had the technology to do so only to find that Delany chides him for harboring a "somewhat naive vision of the world as much smaller (and much more homogenized) than it can possibly be – a vision that *one* of my 'personal visions,' as you'll find it in some of my recent science fiction, is specifically and heartedly in contest with" (159-160). The world, for Delany, is simply too complex to be reached by any single aesthetic or

vision, and he resists using the anthology to broadcast a one-size-fits-all message to all the black gay men presumably buying them: "Look, I don't even know what I'd want to say to all the gay black males in the very small United states of America" (160). With this remark, the universalizing fiction of the anthology (as a synecdoche for the black gay nation) falls apart.

Or does it? By including this rebuff within his anthology, Beam's vision makes room for others that contradict his own. Whatever vision of totality the black gay anthology therefore aspired to represent is in this way provisional: Beam's anthology accepts that there was no one way to be in *the* life because it accepts even those visions which contradict its public, rallying voice. This dissertation is invested in how literature helps to represent these breaks in commonality. From these divisive moments, I hope to trace new forms of fellowship and belonging that led black queer men to yearn for connections with men for reasons that have little to do with their sexual orientations. It may be, as Beam says, that "[t]ogether we are making history," but black gay history can only be made by making strange, and occasionally reluctant, bedfellows of writers who sometimes had ambivalent relations to black gay identity in and of itself (xxi).

I turn now to the ways in which black queer writers negotiated the calls for a shared aesthetic that were rising up across the eighties and early nineties. Because clumsier black nationalisms of the 1960s onwards claimed gayness to be a negation of authentic blackness – a mere white man's thing – many black gay writers responded by firmly documenting same-sex desire within the most familiar and accessible tropes of a black tradition. Key among these is Charles I. Nero's seminal essay "Towards a Black Gay Aesthetic" (1992), circulated in Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill's anthology follow-up, *Brother to Brother* (1992). Nero's manifesto shares many concerns with those separatist black gay anthologies, chief among them being its concern for ancestor-claiming, coalition-building, and history-making.[ix] As a manifesto, it gathers the separatist momentum of the anthology into a single movement *towards* – an aesthetic, a history, a proud ancestry – that will help black gay men claim a rightful sense of belonging within a larger black past. He tasks writers to produce and study representations that respond to his central question: "How have black gay men created a positive identity for themselves and how have they constructed literary texts which would render their lives visible and therefore valid?" (290). His mandate for what black gay literature should do has been influential for a generation of artists, including Darius Bost who uses Nero's ambitions to help frame his own study on black gay men.

In order to rally the need for this counter-representation, Nero emphatically points to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as one text that delegitimizes black gay men's sexualities, claiming that the novel does a great "disservice to the complexity of men's lives. Her description reinforces a false notion of a hierarchy of sexual practices in which masturbation is only a substitute for intercourse. Morrison's description is homophobic because it reveals her inability to imagine homosexual relationships among heroic characters." (294). For Nero, Morrison fails to imagine the creative ways in which enslaved men might satisfy their drives and she therefore disappoints her black gay readers who most wish to see their sexual experiences represented well in literature. Her representation of the past merely confirms for Nero the limits of the *Beloved* archive: "our understanding of the sexuality of our slave ancestors is only fragmentary. We need to uncover more and to reread diaries, letters, and narratives to gain a greater understanding of the sexuality of our forebears" (297) Whatever my disagreements with Nero, his essay captures

the difficult work of dredging up a black queer past in ways that many black queer scholars today continue to acknowledge.[x]

What most interests me about Nero's readings of black gay literature is how aggressively he reads its authors into the canonical tropes and traditions, as if to legitimize them. Nero strategically uses "signifying" and "call and response," for instance, to quickly link Samuel Delany with Frederick Douglass. Compare his traditional readings of queer authors alongside Reid-Pharr's provocative aside in his chapter on Baldwin. When Reid-Pharr devilishly notes that he hopes "it is apparent that I am specifically attempting to avoid use of the term *improvisation,*" he intentionally refuses to use the trope that is most familiar to readers of black literary and musical tradition (108). He refuses to describe Baldwin's writing process as a form of improvisation because doing so, he reasons, would further help to naturalize the responsibility that the black queer artist has in carrying forward the expressive traditions of their past, starting with the slave spirituals. In *Once You Go Black,* Reid-Pharr consistently challenges the relationship that black queer authors can be said to have to those most conventional tropes of the black study. This leads to his larger point: "Once our tradition has been sullied, once they carry the taint of an all-too-modern homosexual funkiness, it becomes that much more apparent that we are continually in a process of choosing whether or how to continue those traditions" (108). Queerness is called upon to disrupt the most prized tropes that make up the black folk tradition. It allows us to interrogate how a black queer aesthetic might fit – or not fit – within those tropes, traditions, and most teachable moments that have helped to institutionalize black study. Indeed, it might even be an untoward aesthetic: meandering, crude, and occasionally bearing the most peculiar fixations that seem to belong in no tradition as we have conceived it.

We feel Reid-Pharr's critical thrust most in his exhaustion with tales of our heroic folk origins. Such tales often represent, for him, an attempt to reproduce our limited understandings of authentic blackness: "Blackness is perhaps the most tradition-bound product that his [the black intellectual] country manufactures" (3) and it is "subjected to the most basic, indeed the most exhausted, of readings" (3). From this vantage point, Nero's attempt to draw black gay writers together into so canonical an aesthetic just further reifies our understanding of what black expression should look like. It becomes, again, a trick of reracination. The genealogy and tradition that I am after in this study in many ways represents a queer swerve from the proud lineage that writers like Hardy was told he belonged to as a black gay writer and that Nero tells black gay historians that they must study. In this, I take spirit from scholars such as Nadia Ellis, who do "not insist on a traditional literary genealogy" but "the consideration of eccentric, troubling, or failed attempts to construct diasporic community that, by virtue of their being attempts, amplify the call for something even better" (10). I seek, like Stephen Best, "freedom from constraining conceptions of blackness as authenticity, tradition and legitimacy; of history as inheritance, memory, and social reproduction; of diaspora as kinship, belonging, and dissemination" (22-23). And I am empowered by Darieck Scott's turn to embrace a vision of blackness that does not begin with a proud line but with "abjection as historical legacy, as ancestral experience … as a resource for a political present" (6). Although these approaches vary, they make room for queer departures from the most dominant tropes and models of belonging that are used to weld black queer men into proud and coherent ancestries. I hope to take us back to the potentiality, to the moment before the triumphant emplacement of our ancestry had taken hold, and to the moment before we received the proud evidence of what loving our kind looks like.

"History and Its Kind" contributes to the recent wave of queer scholarship that mines seemingly incommensurate experiences for unlikely forms of commonality. This might be summed up in Michael Lucey's scholarship on subjects who do not write for any readily existent public but who exhibit, instead, "an experience of belonging that is based not on a shared categories but on a shared experience of misfit in regard to these categories (*Someone,* 213). In Lucey's readings, those experiences which most attest to the idiosyncrasy of the self can become nodes of unthought commonality. Hence his description of idiosyncrasy: "the particular combination of things that, when brought together, make someone distinct, peculiar, eccentric. The word contains within itself the suggestion that something idiosyncratic might be broken down into its component parts, parts that in and of themselves might be quite common, not idiosyncratic in the least (172). Lucey refers to both sexuality and literary idiosyncratic style in order to show how certain textual erotics have a difficult time locating an audience. His work allows us to see how seeming peculiarities inherent in an author's style might invite in or inspire unexpected forms of identification and commonality. The idiosyncratic breaks down even the most singular expressions of desire into lesser tracked forms of commonality.

Like Adam Philips, I am "intrigued about what kinds of pleasure our different languages make possible," and I pull from literary language the tastes and worldviews that have yet to sediment into a larger sexual culture (*Unforbidden Pleasures,* 23). I attend to my texts in ways that resemble Amber Musser's praxis of "empathetic reading" in that I attempt to align my reading practices with the melancholies, tastes and fixations that are unique to each author's oeuvre.[xi] I hope that my granular attention to distinctive style will allow me to tease out new strains of desire and belonging that sometimes miss the larger business of making history.[xii] Like, Peter Coviello, I turn to close reading as a way of doing history. He dilates "textual peculiarities" of each author he studies to seduce readers away from more familiar historical contexts. In doing so, we can "begin to write a different kind of history, one that involves us crucially in 'the study of details undignified by contact with History': intensities of sensory experience, unsanctioned affiliations, fantastic attachments … the very grammar and syntax, the peculiarities of form that characterize a particular author tell us immensely consequential things about that individual's relation to the notions, objects, and ideals that we will later come to think of as history; and second, that the peculiar intensities and obliquities of that relation are, again, not exterior to history but the conditions of its emergence" (18).[xiii] I too find that focusing upon peculiar investments in each author's stylized attentions create the conditions for imagining new models of history and subjectivity that we have yet to focus on in black queer men's histories. Their idiosyncratic investments offer us erotic visions that do not so easily pan out into easily shared feelings of belonging. Instead, they channel the flows of intimacy outwards into objects and spaces that are often passed over in traditional histories.

There always remain wayward pleasures that are less easily thought or mobilized at the level of a collective. As Kevin Quashie notes, "pleasure is contradictory to the assumed collectivity of black radical identity ... too individual and self-indulgent to be useful to collectivity" (Quashie, 70).[xiv] It is sometimes found in the most compromising positions, as Kathryn Bond Stockton, Matt Richardson, and Jennifer Nash argue.[xv] It is even sometimes found reveling in an erotics of racialization, as Darieck Scott, Juana Maria Rodriguez, and Nguyen Tan Hoang have shown, or in desires that seem revolutionary at the time only to prove backwards in hindsight, as Kadji Amin has shown. But by taking these wayward forms seriously, we make room for precisely those representations of black queer desire that are most difficult to triumphantly claim within what we have called our heritage.

Hardy points to the anthology as evidence of a tradition that "must be preserved and honored … For while the century, the identifiers, and the battlefronts may have changed, the need to be affirmed and the struggle to be seen and respected hasn't" (xiv). Similarly, Bost points to black gay texts as evidencing "creative practices that rendered black gay interior and social life visible and valid" (9). But as queer scholars such as Robert Reid-Pharr, Marlon Ross, and Darieck Scott have shown, there remain desires that push against this self-evident respectability, and which restricts the experiences that we can speak to within black gay literatures. As Sara Ahmed advises in *Queer Phenomenology*, "Following lines also involves forms of social investments" which make it so that we must "return the gift of the line by extending that line" in ways that make it appear "automatic that we reproduce what we inherit, or that we always convert our inheritance into possessions" (17).[xvi] If we are told that we come from an unbroken line of radical truthtellers, then we feel that is precisely the line that we must reproduce in our studies. In other words, remembering black gay writers within this tradition sometimes comes together in those ways sanctioned by narratives laid out by its forebears. Against this more readily scripted lineage, I want to bring back into view the anxious delight that Hardy first had, heading into a collection of black gay men without yet knowing what to expect. How are we to interpret texts by authors that fall away from this proud line that black gay men were busily retracing?

I hope to make black gay history seem so strange that many black gay men like myself will no longer be sure that we belong within it.[xvii] This may be because certain representations of desire are too inflammatory – reliant upon the delight in a certain slur, say – but it may also be because they leave their future no easily revolutionary love forms and objects that they can mobilize on their behalf. Instead, we get a sucked thumbnail, a tryst between brothers, or a stuttering desire for the diaspora that is vaguely ghosted by the father. I hope that these eclectic charges will offer us new ways to study black gay history. While they may occasionally carry us away from Beam's vision of revolutionary love, they nonetheless reflect Robert Reid-Pharr's belief, laid out in *Black Gay Man*, that there "is no way to arrive at the beloved community except through the sullied byways we have produced ourselves, no way to achieve utopia without getting one's hands dirty" (6). Sometimes, as Delany shows, getting dirty is even utopian in its own right. But even when it's not and when getting dirty turns out to be as challenging as it is for Baldwin's characters, it still allows us to imagine what it meant to experience affirmation, intimacy and belonging *otherwise*. May these sullied byways in this way detour us from the familiar history of black queer men all dutifully coming home to one another and replace it with so many wayward desires that we are no longer sure what it means to take care of your own kind.

Chapter 1, "Melvin Dixon: Echoes That Come," considers the diasporic tradition of name-calling as it is represented in his first poetry collection, *Change of Territories* (1987). This act of shouting out the names of the dead, I argue, calls forth open-ended ways of being together in loss that remain irreducible to black gay American yearning. The chapter opens with an oft-quoted remark made by Dixon in the year of his AIDS-related death, "I'll be somewhere listening for my name," which I then contrast with ancestral calls to Dixon from later scholars and poets, and from analogous figures overlooked within his oeuvre (1987-1992). Moving between his critical and creative works, and the local and the global south, I ask what it means to hear *Callaloo's* special issue "Calling (Out) Our Names" alongside a vodou mambo's withholding boast, "for you / we call out any names but the real ones." Rather than offering a recuperative refrain, I contend that Dixon's "somewhere" sounds out ways of being together within ongoing histories of abandonment, as present in his elegy for James Baldwin.

Chapter 2, "Baldwin's Most Familiar Estrangement," examines a romance of interfacial estrangement in Baldwin's fiction that, by his mid-career, critics were spurning as his cliché "ideology of love." Denounced as a mere "parody" of Baldwin's more visionary works, I turn to *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) to investigate how a work accused of "blindly going through the motions" can improvise new relational forms of intimacy that disturb queer appraisals of his vision. I compile and analyze multiple moments in which the sudden perception of an intimate as a stranger results in hasty acts of love undertaken in order to overcome this estrangement. I then show how this familiar relational imperative leads to a reparative form of sibling incest play, a queer act of concern that will later become illegible to history. If, as Baldwin says in his defense of *Train*, "the very people who clamor for new forms are also people who do not recognize them when they come," then to take seriously these historically contingent acts of survival is to attend to counter-cultural modes of being that are lost even to queer histories of Baldwin ("Looking Towards the Eighties," 104).

In contrast to Baldwin's desire to get beneath the other's skin, Chapter 3, "Samuel Delany's Grubby Hands," considers a yearning for its unwashed surface. Through Delany's mid-century adolescent journals and his pornographic works *Bread and Wine* (1999) and *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* (2012), I trace a lifelong fetish for dirty, chewed fingernails. While much scholarship on Delany examines his parodic delight in more legible forms of abjection, I turn to nail-biting as a potentially unclassifiable act that exceeds identitarian and ideologically based critical frameworks. What might at first seem too trivial a kink in fact creates the conditions of possibility for utopic relations. In the speculative near future of *Spiders*, a black gay utopia's flourishing depends upon various stigmatized groups that seek out black gayness as a sanctuary for other abject erotic practices: snot-eating, waste-play, and, importantly, (mutual) nail-biting.

The figures that I study are in no way meant to represent the full range of geographies in which black queer men are found. Instead, I examine the American authors that I do because they were important ancestors to the first wave of black gay organizing that took place in the 1980s. Although they all have lived in New York at one point or another, they both hail from and draw together different spaces across the globe. Dixon's trajectory begins in the south and travels across larger diaspora. While much work on Baldwin has discussed his cosmopolitan travels throughout Europe, I begin with a novel that takes place in New York but concludes with the tumultuous depiction of San Francisco in the late sixties. Finally, my chapter on Delany moves between New York and Georgia, both of which are made to represent bustling erotic utopias. I try not to hierarchize the kinds of intimacies represented within my study as might make one figure seem more queer or more radical than another. Instead, I hope that my reader will see that each author has his own way of grappling with feelings of otherness raised by race, gender, nationality, and sexual orientation. Whatever people, space, or object captures their affection does so in ways that are inflected by their understanding of race and sexuality as it existed within their particular historical moment.

Certain writers like Dixon draw upon the most well-established tropes of the black literary canon in order to mark themselves as belonging within its longer history. Others do not. This is because the aesthetics of black queer writers are as varied as their desires, and while some yearn to feel more grounded in those traditional canons which most excluded them, others seem to draw their aesthetic sensibility from more unconventional spaces. But whatever their loves and whatever directions they inspire in their work, I hope that all of the writers that I study will in

some way diversify our understanding of what it means to take care of your own kind, no matter who that kind turns out to be.

Chapter 1: Melvin Dixon: Echoes that Come

And the men that I come from, the men in this broken royal line of griots, and tall tellers, and story tellers, the men who I called to and who responded in these pages, can all retrace their blood and their inks in perfect literary lineage to Joe, to Assotto, and to Essex…

- Marvin K. White, "One Drop of Sugar"

Because the thing is, we are a resilient people. We are descended from fighters, and there is fight in us still.

- Tisa Bryant & Ernest Hardy, foreword to *War Diaries*

Within this environment of sexual and racial niggerdom, recovery isn't easy.

- Melvin Dixon, "I'll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name"

In his 1992 speech, "I'll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name," Melvin Dixon tasks his gay audience with what Heather Love would call an "emotional rescue" (34). Before dying from AIDS-related complications, he tells his audience to "preserve our literary heritage by posthumous publications and reprints" and leaves them "charged by the virtue of your health, and the broadness of your vision, to remember us" (78). [xviii] As the title of Dixon's speech tells us, remembering the gay dead requires a recitation of their names. For these reasons, Dixon's charge of remembrance has offered black queer studies "a nearly irresistible version of what queer subjects want to hear from their imagined ancestors," for it bids us to give them their rightful place within their genealogies (Love, 34). While many scholars have since cited Dixon's refrain so as to emphasize the important work of writing more black queer histories, fewer have examined the difficulty of describing what discharging this debt to the past looks like within Dixon's creative oeuvre, and particularly in those moments that depict figures calling out – or calling out for – the lost names of their kin. Doing so, I contend, would complicate the ways in which we might posit such a thing as black queer lineage, for Dixon deliberately obstructs both the feelings of ancestral connection throughout his work and the ways in which the past matters for its present. The history of the diaspora, I suggest, makes it difficult for black and queer subjects to retrace their lines in any straightforward sense. And when those who exemplify ancestry *do* turn up in Dixon's poetry, it is only to disrupt the very identity-based frameworks of belonging that bid his speakers to go in search of them. In honor of this difficulty, I want to make a counterintuitive claim as a black gay scholar that the difficulty of retracing our line may here pose its greatest resource for rethinking the terms of belonging that allow black queers to feel reflected in the larger world and its history.[xix]

I offer this claim as a marked departure from the first two epigraphs that I cite above, which are framing essays taken from black gay anthologies. Whether in Marvin K. White's recitation of his "perfect literary lineage" or Tisa Bryant and Ernest Hardy's confident statement of their resilient folk heritage, we find that black queer writers are articulated as descendants to a resilient history whose line they carry forward in their work. Rather than continuing to claim strong-willed and articulate ancestors as the basis of our line, I will adopt a line inquiry *and* descent that begins with markedly less confident feelings of belonging, beginning with Dixon's first volume of poetry. Dixon, as we will see, writes his first book of poetry in a moment before

these genealogies have been invented. Perhaps for these reasons his work represents the frustration of being unable to establish oneself within a longer and prouder genealogy. To this same degree, he troubles the ease of belonging within that longer diasporic history that most comes through in Essex Hemphill's image of exiled warriors proudly returning home.

Still more, the language which Dixon gives us to remember the gay past in 1992 requires us to make an uncomfortable transposition. "We are all the sexual niggers of our society," he says to his audience, making a claim whose faux-pas feels obvious for seeming to elide both the important differences and the no less important constitutive overlap between groups (74).[xx] Because of comparative statements like these, Dagmwai Woubshet and Darius Bost argue that Dixon's understanding of queer precarity and illness must be interpreted through that longer history of enslavement. Rather than occasioning feeling of historical rupture, they argue that AIDS merely compounds feelings of social abandonment which Dixon already experienced as a black subject.[xxi] So writes Woubshet: "by way of a single term, he forces us to think about AIDS and the discarding of gay lives not as an aberration or an exception, but as something that finds precedent in the long history of black death and disparagement. History encapsulated in the word, *nigger"* (Woubshet, 43).[xxii] Following from Woubshet, Bost argues that "for Dixon, black culture's historical intimacy with death produced not a feeling of disturbed time but a continuation of a black racial feeling of uncertainty regarding one's attachment to life" (115). Such claims draw upon how often Dixon cites slave spirituals in his work. As Woubshet notes, even his speech "I'll Be Somewhere Waiting for My Name" borrows from a spiritual that Dixon repurposes into a call for queer remembrance.[xxiii] Indeed, in the majority of his critical work, novels, and poetry, Dixon draws upon the most canonical tropes and traditions of African American study, and so both scholars are right to trace the connections that they do. But such readings of Dixon ultimately draw upon his work to advance modes of thought more recently critiqued by Stephen Best, wherein "the slave past provides a ready prism for apprehending the black political present" (63). I do not want to suggest that either Woubshet or Bost are wrong to read Dixon in this way (Dixon himself prompts it), but that they miss the challenge that diasporic blackness poses for linking the black queer present to an enslaved past in terms of continuity. Instead, what we find in Dixon's writings is a queer desire to experience a sense of historical continuity, a way of joining with the longer black past. For the black gay male writer, the attempt to experience this feeling of continuity is more challenging than Bost and Woubshet posit.

Dixon's turn to the slave past does not make it into a ready-made prism for queers in the present. Instead, he turns to this longer past as a foggy mirror at best, hoping that with some polish it might at least reflect a shared feeling of exile. This is certainly true of those queers represented within his poetry who labor to establish the grounds for having some precedence within the past, but this effort is only ever volatile at best. Rather what allows them to belong, I will argue, is paradoxically a shared feeling of nonbelonging: the shared striving to find and leave traces of oneself in a history that too often proves itself to be unkind to racial and sexual minorities.[xxiv] When Dixon challenges us to recover the past as our literary lineage, we should not forget that he also adds that "within this environment of sexual and racial niggerdom, recovery isn't easy" (74). To be made into a nigger is to be displaced. It is to be made to undergo a forced change of territory that makes finding your own kind difficult. To truly recount that lineage is to recount an engagement with rupture. To that end, this chapter takes Dixon's poetry into account in order to make an unprecedented stance regarding his place within black and queer studies. I introduce Dixon into this dissertation not so as to help forward his charge to

remember the black queer past, but rather to demonstrate the importance that failing to do so also holds within his work.

I add to Bost and Woubshet's readings of Dixon's just one more example that nicely relays Dixon's charge in ways that are important to my framing of this chapter. In his introduction to *The Limits of Black Queer Memory*, "Listening to the Archive," Matt Richardson grounds the difficulty of recovering black queer history by once more citing Dixon's charge. He acknowledges the difficulty of documenting black queer histories – "If no one remembers our names, then who will grieve our deaths?" (19) – and points to the palpable archival silence that keeps black queers from claiming representation in the past. He writes, "The Black queer ancestor is an unimaginable figure in mainstream diasporic memory … [to] speak of her, one has to be creative and seize the means of archival production while pointing to her absence in written history and memory" (14). In Richardson's formulation, seizing the archival means of production means that history can never be enough if history is alone defined by the historians: one must use fiction to excavate the voices of black queer subjects. His remarks about the necessity of black queer fabulation resemble those made by other diasporic thinkers made by such thinkers as Omise'eke Tinsley, Jafari Allen, and Ann Cvetkovich, all of whom insist upon fiction's ability to compensate for the limits of the archive by representing queers within the past (139). Importantly, Richardson, Woubshet, and Bost all turn to Dixon to frame their sense of a black queer past that is peopled with ancestors waiting for researchers to call out to them.

And yet where Richardson stresses the role that fiction has in granting voice to our black gay predecessors, I am struck by how often Dixon instrumentalizes the very failures of voice in his poetry. Dixon may indeed challenge black queer readers with his question "What kind of witness will you bear?" ("I'll be Somewhere," 74), or with his plea that "our voice is our weapon" ("I'll be Somewhere," 76), but he also does so when he instrumentalizes the failure of voice in order to suggest what black gay belonging feels like within difficult historical moments. He may say that "we alone are responsible for the preservation and future of our literature" ("I'll be Somewhere," 78), but he also puts great care into representing subjects who are so worn down by this responsibility that they at times cede it altogether.[xxv] When we go to listen to the past in his early work, we hear only a stuttering obliquity: ancestors who speak indirectly to their desires using dense metaphors of diasporic cuisine and landscape that more point us back to a desire for black history than any clearly communicated desire of men for men.

Heeding Dixon's directive, we must therefore look for the dead with a certain broadness of vision. This means that the dead that we must address only exist in relation to our ability to imagine them. They wait for their names in a "somewhere" that I suggest we have yet to fully imagine, and I propose that we can learn who they are – or at least how we must look for them – by returning to Dixon's first poetry collection, *Change of Territory* (1983).

I begin this chapter with a figuration of the black queer wandering in a state of exile from his beloved tradition. Wandering, in fact, sometimes requires us to turn our attention to other forms of life that exist in some symbolic proximity to queerness as it has been conceptualized in scholarship today (meaning, as non-normative). Rather than approaching this silence as if it contained a black gay subaltern, I see Dixon as luring us in to listen to these hedging expressions of the queer past only to perform a kind of bait and switch. He solicits a gay-specific reading of this silence which is later foiled by other associations. I think of this as a kind of bait and switch in that same way in which the word "switch" refers to a showy, effeminate way of moving that draws attention to the bottom. At numerous points throughout *Change of* Territory, stammering gestures and expressions allow us to glean a queer ancestor in the text. But when we attempt to

get to the bottom of what these gestures mean, the possibilities for who this ancestor might be begin to shift away from a hushed gayness making it so that we are no longer sure what kind of subjects we are confronting. My intentions in this chapter are two-fold. I read into Dixon's poetry the yearning to belong within the most conventional tropes, traditions, and topographies laid out by black diasporic scholarship during the period in which he wrote, but I do so in order to underscore the ways in which such feelings of belonging in these terms existed just out of reach for his queer speakers. Dixon's poetry volumes especially are always structured in such a way that the speakers are never able to experience the feeling of connection with their kind that the reader is so clearly made to see. Because his speakers are in this way kept from securing any knowledgeable relation to their past, they model a relation to one's kind that is premised in failure. Rather than getting to devour a black queer past like Beam had, they wander unreflected in an endless feeling of hunger.

By shifting our attention from Dixon waiting for us to call him to the way in which he represents this exchange, I intend, in Namwali Serpell's words, "a shift away from the embodiment of an ethics in an author figure and toward the reading experience his departure provokes, one shaped by the skeleton – the formal structure – he leaves behind" (50). In *Change of Territory,* Dixon leaves behind a text whose figures who call out and wait for names in ways that approximate Dixon's charge a decade later, but they never rightly manage to discharge their debt to remember their lineage. I begin with Dixon's first collection, *Change of Territory,* for two reasons. First, because it is both out of print and so rarely studied, it most indexes our failure to preserve our black gay lineage in those terms laid out by Dixon. Second, because its references to same-sex desire are more indirect, the place that its many instances of calling names within our heritage has felt less clear. I suggest that it makes queer feelings of unbelonging paradoxically central to what it means to think of belonging in the diaspora. Dixon's challenge to black queer genealogies, I will argue, thus stems from how often his poetry complicates the straightforward terms of belonging within a continuous ancestry and tradition. The call and response between the past is almost always foiled and this makes belonging within the tropes and traditions of the diaspora into a most difficult affair. When sexual minorities in Dixon's poetry attempt to *feel historical*, in Christopher Nealon's terms, they go to those sites and peoples that most represent the kind of heritage and tradition that they most aspire to belong in. The trouble with diasporic tropes of belonging is how it displaces feelings of belonging onto peoples and places that exist in the present.

Change of Territory, however, foils the attempts of its black queer speaker to belong within those most canonical traditions of black thought. Rather than seeking, as Best advises, "freedom from constraining conceptions of blackness as authenticity, tradition, and legitimacy; of history as inheritance, memory, and social reproduction of diaspora as kinship, belonging, and dissemination," Dixon's aesthetics turn towards them with a hunger (Best, 23). Like Dixon's academic monograph *Ride Out the Wilderness* (1987) and his first novel *Trouble the Water (1989), Change of Territory* attempts to navigate its queer present through the most established traditions, tropes and cosmologies that constitute the black literary tradition, from the slave spirituals on up. Dixon's monograph nicely illuminates what most concerns Dixon in these works:

> If the dominant society persists in making black Americans feel, as one song puts it, 'this world is not my home' and if, as Charles Gordone announced in the title of his contemporary award-winning play, this country offers *No Place to be*

> *Somebody*, then black writers, preachers, and political spokespersons as well as the anonymous originators of the songs would seek self-fulfillment in the landscapes they create … [they] wielded a verbal compass to discover where and who they were. (2)

His evocations of place feel straightforward yet complex in how freely they entangle issues of geography, language, and selfhood. Even a simple phrase like "landscapes they create" refers to both the physical act of place-making and the symbolic act of making it into a literary motif, a symbolic topography of mountains, rivers, mucks, and wildernesses. Dixon saw black authors as drawing upon and revising the symbolic geographies passed down to them by their traditions. A typical claim will feature authors "turning figures of the landscape into settings for the performance of identity" (6) and using those figures to "renegotiate the terms of their belonging to a specific community or culture" (6). Dixon shows that the singer and writer can only attain a sense of belonging by writing themselves into the landscapes that they were made to inhabit. By extension, this meant that the black author also had to cultivate the tradition in which they wished be read, otherwise no space would be given to them.

And yet such an easy depiction of genealogical succession goes over less smoothly when the black queer writer attempts to feel at home in this symbolic geography that he has inherited. I am talking about the black gay publisher of *Change of Territory,* Charles Henry Rowell, who was also the founding editor of *Callaloo,* the seminal journal for literatures and arts in the diaspora. The sense of voice and selfhood that Rowell finds working in the larger diaspora seems to come at the expense of cultivating his voice as a gay artist, let alone a gay man. Dixon honors Rowell for his editorial efforts in the poem "Silent Reaper," which appears in Dixon's second volume, *Love's Instruments* (posthumously published in 1992). He sees Rowell as invisibly laboring to make a black diasporic cultural field possible in ways that also stunted Rowell's creative and erotic life. I draw attention to Rowell and Dixon's relationship because it reveals two black gay men laboring within a field which granted them ambivalent feelings of belonging. As a silent reaper, Rowell hoped the journal would provide a platform to unite black thinkers across the globe and yet he felt that he had to silence himself in order to perform this labor. He describes these experiences in his 2003 interview for the Los Angeles Review of Books, "In Voluntary Solitude," which largely center upon his experiences as a gay man. The interview title refers to the way in which Rowell willingly quieted and cloistered himself in order to help grow the field of diasporic studies. He feared that consumers would not support his journal if it were produced by a black gay man: "I was not so much concerned about myself as I was the thing I have created, nurtured, and developed: *Callaloo*," he notes, and "to, protect *Callaloo*, I want to repeat, is the reason I have never before spoken of my sexual orientation in this kind of a public forum" (16). This means that one of the longest running journals dedicated to black diasporic study begins in queer erasure, with Rowell's "voluntary solitude." His journal may have helped produce a space in which other artists could find self-fulfillment and belonging in the larger black world, but it also left him, as a gay man, *no place to be a somebody.*

Despite his silence, Rowell thinks of himself as opening up the field of expression to black queer writers, and points to *Change of Territory* as being the first book that he published in the *Callaloo* Poetry Series. Dixon begins "Silent Reaper" with an epigraph from Jean Toomer ("*I have been in the fields all day*") that allows us to consider all of Rowell's unacknowledged editorial labor that he has performed within the field. According to Rowell, the editor's job is "classified at the bottom rung of the academic heap – at the lower order of the academy's pernicious stratification" (14). Dixon and Rowell share a queer hunger for diaspora that they

nonetheless have a difficult time conceptualizing themselves in. Dixon's poem portrays Rowell's efforts to cultivate the grounds of diasporic feeling, representing him with tenderness and a hunger that is never fulfilled:

> our wires grow thick with words of comfort,
> your fruit aching for the harvest pluck.
>
> No matter how safely you sink the seeds
> or scarecrow them into bloom, loneliness
> sprouts up quick as ragweed, choking
> the collards and okra we need
> for a callaloo cuisine.
>
> In the best of gardens anything can happen:
> tendrils and talk and the touch of hands
> working rows of promises. You weed
> and cultivate. No wonder
> you are back-sore and weary –
> a single hoe clawing for food
> and for the simple geometry of grace. (*Love's Instruments,* 33)

Because Dixon brings such a studied attention to the relationship between landscape and expression in his monograph, we can note the bitter irony of this moment. A black gay man is working in the fields – firmly rooting him within the longer black experience – and yet the heterosexist underpinnings of that field require him to mute himself. Put simply, the symbolic geography that Dixon praises in black literatures comes at the expense of the black gay man who cultivates it. Rowell produces that cultural field (figuratively growing its most staple foods), but only as its silent reaper. When Dixon laments loneliness "choking / the collard and okra we need / for a callaloo cuisine," we see the queer laborer exhausting himself to cultivate the field of diaspora. Both the journal and the vision of diaspora that it stands in for are built upon the silent black queer labor. Producing *Callaloo,* he satisfies the hunger of others even as he is left starved for touch. The work of editing (weeding and cultivating) leaves him "a single hoe" with his "fruit aching for the harvest pluck" (33). In order to supply "the collards and okra we need / for a callaloo cuisine," he lets his body go unplucked, unseen, and untouched in ways that illustrate his unmet desires.

Given how central loneliness is to the diasporic sense of belonging that Rowell makes possible as an editor, it is hard for me to read his words and not think of Essex Hemphill's own commemoration of Joseph Beam's work as an editor: "There was no one lonelier / Than you, Joseph" (Hemphill, 36). I'm struck most by the amount of sacrifice that he attributes to his working for the journal, which he describes as having "of necessity, silenced my creative and critical voices" to develop those of others ("Voluntary Solitude," 15) and also leaving him "alone, without a group of people as friends … I withdrew into a very private world I invented" (16). The chance at intimacy which Dixon marks as taking place within "the best of gardens" exists as but a possibility. I point to this exchange between Dixon and Rowell in order to evidence the silent labor that is expended in black queer belonging. Together, they dream up utopian spaces of commonality that are rooted in diasporic dreams. Rather than that experiencing that easy sense of continuity with the black past that Woubshet and Bost attribute to Dixon, Dixon's poetry depicts black gay men whose ability to extend themselves into this past are

compromised, more like "a swollen searching taproot" (*Love's Instruments,* 49) or a budding suspicion that "*there is no home / in wet words or this soil"* (*Love's Instruments,* 23)

The vision of black queer diaspora that I am insisting upon here accords with that version that is set forth by Nadia Ellis, wherein belonging is only ever possible through feelings of frustration, suspension, and deferral. While the ways that Dixon expresses this yearning will shift throughout the chapter (e.g., a preoccupation with roots, routes, rites) they best come together under the theme of rupture. Feeling back-sore and weary and nonetheless trying to tend to one's larger past, the black queer writer experiences, for Dixon, a feeling of the blues that points back to the "jagged edges" of a longer history of rupture. In order to describe this longer history of loss, Dixon repeatedly returns to Ralph Ellison's provocative description of the blues as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it" (264). Figured as such, the blues expresses a preoccupation with the telling-edges of one's rupture.[xxvi]

Insofar as *Change of Territory* is one of the earliest writings from the Black Gay Arts Movement, its represented search for black gay men in the past takes place before that ancestry evoked by White settles in. Bost nicely captures this sense of the period when he writes that Dixon was still discovering in the 1970s and 80s "how to be black and gay in an era in which gay identity and poetics were dominantly expressed through whiteness, pleasure, and pride" (107). His early writings were judged for only engaging sexuality indirectly. For instance, his publisher read his short story "The Boy with the Beer" and "directed him to be more assertive about his position on homosexuality" (Bost, 110). Scholar Hermine D. Pinser notes that *Change of Territory* was little different in that it left homosexuality "at the margins of the text," making only "intermittent and indirect allusions to it" (quoted in Macharia, 1264). Intermittent and indirect, Dixon's efforts to express black gay subjectivity come to feel something like a stutter – a fitful attempt at speech that fails to arrive at that which it most immediately wishes to say.[xxvii] Rather than arriving at a firm position, it flits between variously suggestive phrases that obscure its content.

The collection does, however, debut in the very year that Joseph Beam begins to seek out black gay men for his anthology. Where Beam frames himself as "fed by" (xix) and "devouring" (xix) the scant selection of black gay texts, Dixon's speakers have no way of seeing themselves reflected within black traditions and are consumed with feeling unprecedented within their line. Where Beam concludes his introduction by announcing "we are coming home with our heads held up high," *Change of Territory* begins with the banishment of "Hungry Travel":

> One man and I
> cautious as pilgrims
> return together.
>
> My father shoots up from the table
> away from my mother, quiet now, gray.
> His forehead creases, eyes hammer,
> turn back to the yams and greens
> as if we violated their ground of
> vegetables, children, dreams.
>
> My words gather into knives

slicing the hunger: “I’m still your son.”
As if the silent years between us
were reasons to forget, were reasons to forget. (11)

Black gay desire begins with the feeling of being uprooted. As pilgrims, the men journey to what should be a sacred place only to be turned away from the folk (tradition) that should nourish them. They yearn to feel grounded within a black folk tradition, but are rejected. A territory, after all, is a space that is owned. And the territory which the father owns (“their ground of vegetables, children, dreams”) is one which he rules over as if this made him the gatekeeper to a larger tradition. This means that when he looks to his yams and greens, he is actually claiming his preference for all that he determines to be natural, rooted, and traditional. The feeling of being ousted from one’s home and forced back into exile signifies the speaker’s uneasy relationship to the black folk tradition, at least as it is defined by the father. The father clearly has jurisdiction over those traditions – the *grounds* – in which black gay men would plant themselves. The moment at which they are exiled is tellingly the very same moment in which the father powerfully “shoots up” like a root to banish them from the traditional grounds – the most grounding traditions – that they sought to occupy. A shoot is what raises the fruits from the soil, and when the father shoots up, he gathers his roots to a point – an appendage – to banish them from his home.

A similar scene convenes *Love’s Instruments*, with a floating epigraph that repeats the couple’s thwarted moment of homecoming:

It ain’t right, that sortta thing.
What thing?
Just don’t come back here.
Me or him, Daddy?
It don’t make me no difference. (13)

The father’s slight – “It don’t make me no difference” – produces a feeling of commonality between the men through a show of exclusion. With this thwarted homecoming on our minds, consider the Dixon poem which Beam selects for *In the Life,* which comes from Dixon’s later work. His submission expresses one of the complaints most voiced by Beam pertaining to exile: “I cannot go home as who I am … when I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grow, but the entire Black community” (180-181).[xxviii] He selects Dixon’s poem, “Etymology: A Father’s Gift,” because it expresses this desire to belong in a black tradition in ways that are eroticized:

He surveys our gathering. He
searches the dictionary for clues
to what we say we want. His silence
hides the correct pronunciation,
the power of consonants, the meaning
he's found in words such as “beg”:

“To ask for as charity, to ask
a favor, to ask earnestly, entreat.
To insist in asking for something
to which one has no claim or right.”

The youngest daughter coaxes him

with a kiss, her lips returning empty.
The elder girl with the soft curl of dance.
My mother with her in premature grey
and nervous hands caressing space.
The third boy and I, at any stranger's crotch,
with a stuttering stuttering for the root. (100)

This poem neatly encapsulates the most pressing concerns of *Change of Territory.* Holding the dictionary, the father holds the patriarchal power of the word. While the female figures in the house are also courting the father's approval, the boys seem to beg for it by wandering in the greater world of men outside. For "the third boy and I," the father's gift is his ability to confer upon them a sense of belonging within his line. They fumble at self-definition in ways that lack the force of the father's consonants. With their desire for paternal acceptance displaced onto other men, their wayward movements lead them looking "in any stranger crotch / with a stuttering stuttering for the root," with root being a most loaded term in Dixon's cosmology.

Roots, as I mentioned, matters so heavily to Dixon's sense in place-making. The fact that the queer sons are stuttering for roots not only takes us back to the hunger for images of the black past ("The collards and okra we need") but also to the feeling of being silenced within one's tradition. Consider again his claim in *Ride Out the Wilderness* that "images of journeys, conquered spaces, imagined havens, and places of refuge have produced not only a deliverance from slavery to freedom, but, more important, a transformation from rootlessness to rootedness for both author and protagonist … [allowing authors] to change where they were forced to live into a home they could claim" (3). The father – a former sharecropper – may have claimed his home in freedom, moving from rootlessness to rootedness, but he lords it over his queer sons in ways that leave them uprooted in turn. His attempt at carving out his home – his territory – ejects black queerness from its symbolic foundations.

Given how this linkage between symbolic geography and life-affirming expression, it is unsurprising that those who suffer exile from traditional grounds become stutterers: Dixon suggests that they no longer have any easy center in the world. From this perspective, when the boys stutter for the root they mark a moment in which silence is beginning to shape itself fitfully into a voice. They *insist in asking for something* that exists out of the bounds. And without having any language for what this is, their expressions doubles back on itself. What matters for my purposes is that the inability to arrive at a more articulate sense of oneself leads the boys to cruising. They fumble towards any space, to any stranger's crotch, that can promise a fleeting feeling of belonging that never lasts. This is a tragic expression of sexuality at best, but their thwarted experience of belonging creates, too, a hunger that moves them out from the south and into the larger diaspora.

They are queered by their inability to rightly express themselves. Fitful and indirect, they lack the phallic hardness of the father's speech. As a description of cruising, stuttering for the root emphasizes mobility over settling. The stutterer may have his sights melancholically fixed upon what he cannot possess – as a tradition, as a lineage, or as a sturdily rooted sense of self – but the effects that such feelings have on his movements propel him onwards. Even without having to go to Freud, jealousy over the father's rootedness feels a lot like penis-envy. The figurative "root" lends to the phallus the elusive power to signify one's ancestry and origins. The phallus – the signifier for an idealized and unattainable state of wholeness – in this way becomes

a figure for the impossible project of black queer belonging: it makes the queer's attempts to replant himself back within diasporic traditions into a matter of his itinerant sexuality.

Read alongside "Hungry Travel," the speaker grieves being uprooted from his traditions as if it they were the sole conditions in which the meaning of his life would be made intelligible. At the heart of black gay melancholy is this feeling that he is being kept from his rightfully owed tradition. Declared unnatural, the black gay American son looks upon his father, as he soon will other men in the diaspora, with a kind of root-envy. He is jealous of how easily his father's expressions signify their belonging within a larger and longer black tradition. He feels that the root of the father's power – and the power of his father's root – stems from the world locked away in his *dict*ionary. When they come home, he shoots up, in a territorial display of rootedness, and the sons, denied the staples of his table, are left only with their hungry travel – "stuttering stuttering for the root" in any stranger's crotch. The erotic implications of this desire to belong return at the end of the chapter, but, for now, I want us to see what this hunger means for feeling historical. When we go to listen to the archive, we hear stuttering proof of black gay men laboring to belong within traditions that are felt to exclude them. This, after all, is what listening to queerness most means for the figures he represents in his poetry: stammering and thwarted communication. With this desire for folk traditions in view , I now turn to the poem which most explicitly frames the desire for same sex ancestors in the past – "Grandmother."

"Grandmother" is one of the strongest and expressions of black queer melancholy throughout *Change of Territory*. In it, the speaker similarly looks upon his grandmother's silence again as if it contained a tradition and a worldview that she willfully withholds: "we need words for the hills that feed us / we need bread from the grains you carry" (15). Note how often Dixon communicates the desire for tradition using the most regionally inflected foods: yams and greens, collards and okra, and now the grandmother's pastoral grains. There is always this need for ritual nourishment. Dixon so often has his speakers relate to the traditions of the black diaspora in the same way that Keguro Macharia does as a queer theorist of diaspora: "To seek sustenance where one has been told none might be found, to suck stones, hoping to find some life-giving moisture" (Macharia, *Frottage,* 33). The boy approaches his grandmother's silence as if it starved him and kept him from nourishing some larger collective. His appeal to her withheld memories ("we need bread from the grains you carry") alludes to the possibility that her withheld fragments might leaven into something that can nourish a larger tradition and collective. This is especially true insofar as the "grains" that the grandmother carries are yet another punning allusion to Ralph Ellison's sense of the blues as a reservoir for the black experience. They refer the careful reader back to the jagged, "painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness." The speaker thus looks upon her with the same hope that resurfaces later – "And the jagged grains *so black and blue* / open like lips about to sing" (52) – but she doesn't.

Macharia reads the poem "Grandmother" as evidencing "the many nameless ancestors buried under layers of heteronormative genealogies" (1266). The speaker yearns for proof of a black gay ancestor that will root him in his lineage. He accuses his grandmother of withholding proof of "others like me" by pointing out some kin that he imagines to be locked away and stuttering somewhere in his family line:

> You say you can't recall
> others like me: mute cousins
> or your sons' bachelor sons

stuttering in padded cells
their names to metal windows. (14)

The stutterer fumbles the testimony that would presumably offer black gay men proof of their longer lineage. The speaker is so preoccupied with his missing line because it foreshadows his own fate. His grandmother's question ("*What did you say your name is?*") suggests that she is already forgetting him (15). His melancholic desire to save his ancestor here accords with Heather Love's critique of the self-affirming turn to the past. In Love's account of queer historicism, the queer future looks upon its tragic antecedents and "promise to rescue the past when in fact they dream of being rescued themselves" (33). In fact, "stuttering for the root" and "stuttering in padded cells" form reciprocal images: one craves the withheld past, one craves to be remembered by his future kind. Read as such, the speaker's seemingly benevolent act is in fact constituted by a self-affirming wish to see his kind reflected within the past. His yearning for his lost line – which is inseparable from the feeling that he too will be lost from his future line – overdetermines his engagement with what stuttering could mean in the past. We can only assume the stutterer to be a gay subject by way of so many suggestive descriptions – stuttering, mute, bachelor – that evoke the single silence of the closet. Dixon thus frames him as a kind of *would-be*-speaker, for not only do we suppose that he would speak if he could, but we also assume that he would lend voice to precisely those experiences which the speaker feels to be most missing in his present. The stutterer tasks himself with a fumbling attempt at self-preservation. He calls his name because he suspects nobody ever will.

The stutter allows Dixon to represent some long-awaited name that remains stuck in history's throat. And because the lyric is so associated with the conceit of voice in literary studies, it easily dramatizes the precarious state of black gay literary expression as it is fretted over by the speaker. Consider how John Stuart Mill's famously characterizes the lyric as the solitary testimony that we come upon as if overheard. It sits on the page as if it were "feeling confessing itself to itself, in a moment of solitude," or "the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, we listening, unseen, in the next" (quoted, *The Lyric Theory Reader,* 12*).* Locked away and confessing his own name to himself in a cell, Dixon's isolated kin concretely embodies more than this feeling; he embodies what will likely happen to the speaker's own voice. Indeed, like Dixon, the stutter is depicted as residing *somewhere listening for his name*, but the stakes here are more dire. Not only does the poem's speaker not know the name of his ancestor that he must call, but the stutterer himself cannot even rightly speak it.

Given that Dixon equates literature with voice and remaining in print with survival, the inevitable disappearance of the speaker's voice is doubled by the loss of the collection *Change of Territory* itself: it is now sadly out of print. Though I purchased one of the final copies, my concerns for black gay voice were detoured by just how many other kinds of subjects he frames as being muted within their respective genealogies. When these multiple performances of thwarted speech are read within the larger collection, it undermines the presumption that the stuttering ancestor must function as proof of "others like me." The collection is peopled with stammering forms that resist being read as gay.

The speaker begins by questioning his forgetful grandmother in a way that conflates space and time: "You say you don't remember / those years. / But what will they answer when you run back / asking for more?" (14). He makes it seem as if time itself could speak and makes the need to remember inseparable from the need to "run back."[xxix] Ideally, by changing territories, one can turn back time. It is as if by returning to the grounds of our muted ancestry

we can force it to speak. The trouble is that the speaker's ancestral grounds refuse or else defer those words which the speaker most wishes to hear. When the speaker goes to his father's birthplace and calls aloud whatever name might repair "the silent years between us" (11) he is intentionally kept from hearing any reply:

> From the Pee Dee River
> upstream to the log cabin pines
> where my father was born
>
> I call our names the same name
> and listen for echoes that come. (16)

Shouting "upstream" is more of a temporal direction than a spatial one, for he is shouting at his source, attempting to join them back into a single and unbroken line. Why don't the years more immediately answer to whatever word he has projected upon them? Why does the poem end with the speaker merely waiting? The failure of the past to answer is an important aspect of the work, for every time connection is thwarted, it further stokes his hunger and therefore his ambitions to wander. In "Grandmother," this means that even as the speaker hopes for the years to recall, when he returns south to meet them, he is left waiting. Without this confirmation, he will likely be left stuttering – for a root, for a name.

We never learn that name which the speaker projects to repair this connection with his father, but Darius Bost's archival work on Dixon offers us one interpretation. Bost notes that in an archived diary entry from 1972, "Dixon discussed his mother's belief that his father had homosexual inclinations before they were married. She believed that Handy's distance from his son stemmed from his own fear of homosexual desire" (112). Is the name which the speaker then shares with his father, in a word, "gay?" I do not raise this biographic tidbit to answer the riddle of the poem, but rather to suggest the temptation to repair otherness by making it identical to the self. As I have suggested, Dixon baits these readings in order to thwart them. When the source "upstream" withholds its reply, it performs the ethics of belonging felt throughout the collection: the years keep from immediately echoing back whatever same-making term the speaker has projected into them. The years, like the poem itself, refuse to cede to its speaker the grounds on which sameness can be thought. It leaves its black gay speaker, not unlike Dixon in 1992, stranded "somewhere listening for my name."

The figures that we encounter during his travels belong together by virtue of their shared ability to navigate a landscape that only seems to promise exile. Dixon's dedication is telling in that he lists his parents among a few others, hailing them as "*navigators, all*." Rather than turning against his father, he seems as much to suggest that they correspond as black folk attempting to navigate a land that in some way refuses to allow them to feel at home in it (black folk who "wielded a verbal compass to discover where and who they are," in the language of his monograph). This same relationship allows him to route his thwarted desire to belong among the writers who most belong in the canon of black literatures. He draws the most canonical black authors into "Kin of Crossroads," figures who seem to exist as cosmopolitans, exiles, and migrants, all existing in liminal spaces: "In silence I wonder how many of us / came running fugitive / to drink this wine, seed this history … on ground we rake for kindling" (17). Yoda-like, the poem begins with a concern for how many of his kind are lost to silence and quickly proceeds to a feeling of being unified in their search for "kindling," a word whose roots trace back to offspring – one's *kind*. But the yearning to connect with one's kin across borders always

anticipates rejection. In "Going to Africa," the speaker fears he will be met with the rebuff, "Go home / Africa doesn't want fugitives" (30). He looks aspiringly upon Zora Neale Hurston as a figure who could join into customs and gather them together into a usable heritage from the spaces he moves throughout ("I just get in with the people / If they sing I take part / until. I learn all the verses. / Then, when it is in my memory, I take it with me wherever I go. / Now you, children, line by line, can take it from there") (37). He looks to Richard Wright, too, who also held his "ear / to twelve million black voices / still listening here" (20). In short, Dixon seems less to turn against the most canonical writings of black literature than to use them to frame his yearning for other queer voices within his ancestry. For these reasons, we should think of him as moving with and against his ancestry. The most canonical and well-traveled of black American writers become figures who help him to navigate his queer exile.

However much the speaker is meant to feel like an outsider, he belongs within a tradition he often can't see and more upon the grounds of his restlessness than anything else. This is true both by virtue of how the poems draw upon the most familiar tropes of black traditions – blues refrains, call and response, those geographic tropes that Dixon studies in his monograph – and an incessant form of citationality that sets his speakers in relation to the most canonical figures of black literature (Claude McKay, Richard Wright, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Robert Hayden). As a result, he may launch into soliloquies about uprootedness, exile, and estrangement, but they are always precedented within a larger symbolic shared geography that lands them squarely within a black tradition of movement. But the inspiration he seeks is always wobbly, for you never know whether or not the years will speak to you once you show up. The Jean Toomer epigraph is especially telling for leaving open-ended the question of what you can expect to gain from your travels: "When one is on the soil of one's ancestors, most anything can come to one…" (28). The ellipses in the epigraph replicate the feel of waiting "for echoes that come." It suspends us in an open-ended state of expectation that undoes the constative lurch of the quotation with a dreamy question. What, after all, might come to one? Ideas, memories, visitations? Nothing at all?

As I have been arguing, belonging is deferred throughout the collection in ways that foil rootedness and enable flight. To be a seeker of black and gay history, Dixon suggests, is to be held in this boundless state of yearning. And so, when the years refuse to answer his projections, they cue the change of territories. It may be the case, as the speaker tells his grandmother, that "your silence sends me south," but the "others like me" that he wishes to encounter there continue to frustrate his efforts to establish a sense of belonging within diasporic history. Instead, he is met with that truth of queer diaspora, as articulated by Nadia Ellis, "that diasporic consciousness is at its most potent when it is, so to speak, unconsummated," and "emerges out of desire (not its fulfillment), agonistic engagement (not easy familiarity), steady evasions of community (not incorporation into community), and imaginative yokings to very distant subjects and aesthetic modes" (2-3). His change of territories expresses a desire to experience a rooted feeling of having belonged back in those most traditional grounds – those most grounding traditions – that constitute black history. Instead, he is kept from regaining any easy feelings of kinship or belonging. Posed as a violation to these grounds, his craving is expressed by retracing – to use Ellis's phrase – "territories of the soul …those spaces that embody the classic diasporic dialectic of being at once imagined and material. They are … elsewhere: places that are most lively as horizons of possibility, a call from afar that one keeps trying and trying to answer" (3).

The collection regards the attempt to think across categories of difference with skepticism. *Change of Territory* after all centers the feeling of transpositions. Such exile might

refer to the transatlantic enslavement, but it also refers to a more ontological disconnect felt by queers, who are framed as violating their traditional grounds. In the poem, "Change of Territory," the speaker arrives in Madrid to conclude: "At customs I search for something / to declare. What is the Spanish word / for loss?" (29). Customs refers as much to tradition as to immigrations. To probe one's customs is to search for meaning within them. And the very word which comes to the speaker while raking through customs – "loss" – is a word that remains lodged untranslated in his throat, the poem emblematizes the very structure of the collection: everybody is declaring some loss that exists in a field and a language of its own. Everybody has something they have lost – something they are hoping to declare – only they can't get it out. This means that as we read the collection we seem to pass from poem to poem like the speaker moving across customs: we witness everybody fumbling for some word to name their loss, but we have no single way of bringing them together. The problem of imagining loss within *Change of Territory* (the collection and the poem) becomes a challenge of translation: how does the melancholy of a black gay man reflect or distort the melancholy of other people with other concerns of their own?

To answer this question, I wish in the remainder of this chapter to take more explicit interest in the geopolitics of the speaker's black gay hunger, specifically investigating those figures which most spoil his search for ancestors. I am interested in how Dixon balances the matter of gay belonging with a respect for differences that are naturally raised by time and space. So many of his poems draw upon idioms of travel that we must consider the problems that his desire to connect with others of his sexual orientation, as a shared way of belonging, poses for thinking queerness abroad. I consider Dixon's traveler as a fitting representation of black gay men's hope at the time for a larger history that might be expanded beyond the limitations of the nation-state. His scope pairs nearly with the ambitions of black queer scholars looking for ways to connect with figures in the south and beyond. The search for others like him begins in the south but moves along many routes which many of his black literary forebears traveled, ultimately leading him throughout the Caribbean and West Africa before going back to the South.

We are made to link his hunger for roots as inspiring his hungry travels, but such hunger is linked to his ability to *consume*. I think here of David Halperin's caution to sexual historians not to become "tourists in the archive," historians of homosexuality who conflate different cultural expressions of gender and sex variance as merely local takes on our own familiar lesbian and gay categories (60). In a collection that begins with "Hungry Travel," the search for "others like me" tempts us with stammering figures who lend themselves to being thought of as muted queers. I don't mean that they are all homosexuals, but rather that the speaker looks upon their own unique expressions as if they mirror his own incommunicable feelings of exile and thwarted speech. This is especially important as we get to such poems as "Sight Seeing" and "Voodoo Mambo: To the Tourist." In both instances, Dixon encourages this touristic gaze in order to unsettle it. Dixon arranges his collection in such a way as to force his speaker *and* his reader to navigate between alterity – of geographic, sexual, and historical difference – and sameness, toggling between identification and refusal.

I think there is, indeed, a place for recognition of sharedness in the collection, but rarely on any straightforward racially guaranteed terms. Namwali Serpell work on the ethics of uncertainty helps us find a way out of the stalemate between identification and alterity – self and other. Certain narrative structures, she argues, call for "an ethics of oscillation … [that] does not negate empathy or alterity, but neither does it synthesize them. Rather, oscillation moves

between them, thereby conceding the value of each, while heightening the ethical need of both … It is the fling of the gesture toward the other and the swing back that approximates ethics … [a] far-flung excursion into the world of the other, checked by an intermittent reminder of the temporal and ethical limitations of that identification … We move in and out of identification – with characters and with their identifications – and come to experience identification as an extreme, error-prone, ongoing projection… Reconfiguring the dyadic structure of self and other as movement" (72). In diasporic tropes of return, self and other gets translated into a movement that shuttles across territories, each time presenting the opportunity to experience belonging through a fantasy of sameness. The fantasy is that that you can restore difference to sameness simply by going back. By toggling between projection (calling "our names the same name")– and its failure to interpellate (the landscape's refusal to answer back) , I suggest that Dixon pulls us into this same uncertain interplay between a sense of historical belonging and its deferral.

Recall how the hungry traveler seeks memories – "bread from the grains you carry" – because he hopes he can take these fragments and make it so "the jagged grains *so black and blue* /open like lips about to sing" (52). The collection is structured around this hope. It takes those sons "stuttering in their padded cells" (14) and makes it seem as if they will speak in the proxy of another poem. In doing so, they would both grant the black gay speaker their rightful place within their lineage and help ensure that they have a symbolic lineage at all. Because the stutter evidences the failure of expression, Dixon adopts it as a fitting image for genealogical rupture through the collection. The stutter becomes an easy figure for a tragic silent queer, one who never arrives at the truth of his identity but remains stalled at a looped hedging. It may contain proof of "others like me, but however much I myself yearn for "others like me" – black, gay – I hesitate to ascribe to the collection's many stammering forms that shared orientation that led me to read Dixon in the first place." It is important to the argument of my dissertation that these forms frustrate our attempts to write a history of a single kind, for they make it possible to answer the call of black gay history in ways that baffle those experiences we feel most charged to look for within it. But I do not want to uphold this melancholic insistence upon a stifled gay ancestry – which seems a mere trick of the collection – but rather the ways in which the collection baits this interpretation only so as to let loose other conflicting ones. The very comportment that Dixon relies upon to embody the stifled queer past – stuttering, circling, and limply gesturing – links characters to one another in ways that often have little to do with a shared sexual orientation. The question from here is: if their stutters and silences are not structured by a single silence of the closet, then what function do they serve in the collection?[xxx]

In his reading of one of the longer poems, Macharia – who, as I mentioned earlier, goes on in his later work to liken the search for queerness in diaspora to sucking stones for moisture – makes queerness into the collection's structuring absence. My own approach to *Change of Territory* differs from Macharia's reading of the collection in my insistence that it intentionally never delivers up to us a black queer ancestor as can be easily said to have existed in the past. Macharia understands the collection as staging, and frustrating, "a black gay man's search for sexual and racial predecessors" for reasons I have made clear (1263). His argument is most convincing when it posits queerness as belonging within the collection through a diasporically shared relationship to exile. While Macharia is rightly attentive to the play of sameness and difference that frustrates belonging, he also interpellates its stuttering subalterns into a muted gay ancestry. To show this, I turn to the long narrative poem, "Bobo Baoulé" and Macharia's reading of it. I will take both the poem and Macharia's reading of it as a foil to make my larger point:

Dixon deliberately leaves the black gay desire to belong within a longer lineage and tradition in a state of suspension.

When the titular subject of "Bobo Baoulé" is captured by a slave ship, he gives his name to his enslavers – "Baoulé" - not only to have it corrupted by the slaver's innocent mishearing – "Bawlay?" – but also by the enslaver's further derisive addition – "Naw, boy. You Bobo now … Bobo Bawlay" (47). With his name stammering on "the edge of my breath" and his ears "aching" for someone to call it, he melancholically embodies a lost sense of history; "'I am afraid,' I call out everywhere / "I am afraid that we have lost our names" (47). This quick shift from *his* name to *our* name tells us that the loss of his name allegorizes diasporic subjectivity at large, for he calls it "for centuries" and across many geographies. While the poem indexes a melancholic relationship to a lost ancestry, it also extolls a somewhat happier belief in how ancestors and genealogies can come back together (even if nobody in the actual collection gets to see this happen, only the reader knows). The poem thus concludes with a letter from Baoulé's unwitting descendant, Bobby Bawlay, who journeys backwards across the Atlantic to end up "Among the Baoulé people" (47). He is back among his kind, though he doesn't realize it. And so, when he writes his mother that "crossing the Atlantic took longer than expected," he repairs a longer estrangement, evidencing how history can again make itself kind for those who feel most lost to it.

The rather heavy-handed way in which the ancestor is restored to his line addresses the way that belonging is deferred for both parties. Neither the ailing ancestor nor their searching kin are granted any direct proof during their lifetimes of having figuratively crossed paths with one another. If the lost subject does not realize that his name has made its way back to his homeland, neither does his long-off descendant realize that he too has found himself back among his kind. Belonging is only accomplished insofar as the reader is willing to believe that this return should make a difference to the dead ancestor, even if it has failed to happen in either in his consciousness or that of his kin. For lives made expendable, learning to wait requires a profound faith that you will be restored or even reclaimed by your kind in ways that you never expected to happen,.

Take the slave's declaration of loss ("we have lost our names") and put it beside Dixon's death ("I'll be somewhere listening for my name") and you can see how important this poem is for understanding Dixon's later relationship to loss. The poem tells us that whatever you are waiting for, and whatever it is you feel that you have lost, will return, eventually. This means that journeys deferred in life are completed in generational time, and though the lost seeker cannot see this, Dixon hopes that his reader can. Indeed, it is this same hope that allows him to tell his audience that he will be "somewhere listening for my name" and believe that he will be preserved after death. And it is just this structure, I suggest, that allows Macharia to make the poem evidence a gay ancestor submerged within its vision of ancestry. Effectively, he makes up a black gay ancestor for the speaker that stretches back even beyond his father. Without any proof in the poem, he takes Baoulé's originary status as an outsider in his village to stand in for a queer identity. From this, he concludes that "Dixon creates a space of theorizing and recognizing alternative sexualities within black historical records" that both "urges us to rethink the position of the black queer within black histories" and "challenges readings of the black homosexual as a racial scapegoat" (1271). Without going too much into the long poem, I want to point out that Baoulé is not, as Macharia suggests, originally cast into the waters by his people for any reason that has to do with his sexuality or his being in any way a scapegoated homosexual. Rather, the poem begins in a Jonah-like manner with a highly valued boy who is tossed into the waters in

order to please the gods, swallowed by a great fish and afterwards hauled out of the water by slavers, thus beginning the events that I describe above. There is simply no evidence that a queer is being scapegoated here. Such a claim can only be made if one makes this boy – as the collection may indeed inspire us to do – into precisely that black gay missing link that the speaker earlier petitioned his grandmother for. This is precisely the kind of appeal that Macharia uses the poem to make. He concludes his essay with a call for black gays scholars and artists to "insert black queer bodies into racial and nationalist histories" (1272). In so doing, he is able to make this ancestor who was so long ago surrendered to the waves ("Give up, give up what you value / most high") into a larger symbol for the ways that black queer voices are silenced today, and often for the sake of protecting a normative black collective and its vision of history (43).

It is not that Macharia's claims about the collection are unfounded, although perhaps they are for the poem. The trouble is that it invites us to make those universalizing claims that absorb important cultural and generational differences into a singular way of belonging. Not unlike the speaker of "Grandmother" who yearns for "others like me," Macharia's desires as a diasporic theorist lead him, as he later writes, to "seek sustenance where one has been told none might be found." As a result, he peoples the poem's past with others like him: black gay men who yearn to root their voices in ancestries and traditions that would otherwise leave them scapegoated and mute. As my point of departure, I value Dixon's collection precisely for its refusal to turn up a single gay ancestor. He gives us a queer vision of diasporic that is not grounded in feelings of commonality that can be easily posited at the level of shared identities. Instead, the queer's relationship to diaspora unfolds as a wobbly play of projection. Without any ingrained model for how he might belong within the larger diaspora, I find that the speaker's relationship to it leads him to rehash many of the concerns that queer of color scholars face while working in the field today. How can we document and analyze histories of gender variance and same-sex desire without doing so in U.S. centered terms? Rather than enabling such projections, I read the collection as thwarting them, and suggesting, instead, that the only position the queer has within black histories is one that remains ungrounded, held in a clenched anticipation. Rather than the conceit of giving voice to the past, the past is most real for the speaker as an unclaimed potential. It holds out before him some fleeting promise of sameness that most soon give way, returning him to his uprooted search. In other words, the only "space for theorizing" that the poem makes available to the black gay historian comes by way of its groundless itinerary, its rambling play of identification and rebuttal that defines the relation of the black queer to diaspora.

To that point, it matters that Dixon greets the black gay historian searching for kin with figures who frustrate or fail to identify with the object of his pursuits. More often than not, these are tricksters and they are set there to disrupt how we would listen for ancestors in the archive. I read *Change of Territory* as being in the company of such texts as M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2006), Nadia Ellis's *Territories of the Soul (2015),* Omise'eke Tinsley's *Ezili's Mirrors* (2018), Lyndon K. Gill's *Erotic Islands* (2018), E. Patrick Johnson's *Honeypot* (2019), and Roberto Strongman's *Queering Black Atlantic Religions* (2019). Such works frame the difficult project of black queer belonging with, its yearning for tricksters, ceremonies, and ancestors, through geopolitical questions of power. Alexander and Gill's work are especially important in this regard, because gay American mobility increasingly crosses paths with trade: with feelings of erotic and ancestral connection that depend upon uneven relationships across difference. I suggest that we read Dixon as forcing us to confront these same flows of power that divide the black gay American from the larger spaces of the diaspora. His hungry travel leads him to mix his homonationalist yearning for a past with heritage sites and ultimately trade.

I have been arguing that *Change of Territory* represents an attempt at black gay belonging that is paradoxically grounded in its deferral. The speaker feels that he is not reflected within the larger traditions of the diaspora, not only because of the mere fact of cultural difference, but because he melancholically looks upon his many encounters with blocked or strained speech as if they were reminders of the stuttering ancestors muted within his genealogy. Such melancholic projections are, again, contagious, for they also tempt the reader to conflate the many abstract representations of silence that we come across in our readings as if they contained a subaltern queer. For these reasons, the many stammering figures that he meets bombard us with the sense of a past that will not speak to him. Because space and time can in this way function so interchangeably, he believes that returning to his ancestral grounds will force the otherwise silent years to answer. Still, the work of the collection, as I have suggested, is to frustrate him and to keep him from making the connections that he most hopes to see take place.

The experience of reading the collection comes to resemble a stutter in how looped many of its representations of an silenced past come to feel. In the following poems, the limp, the gyration and the stammer all represent embodied forms of expression that thwart the black gay historian's attempt at "listening to the archive." The stammering individual is meant to allegorize the failure of historical voice, and given how such representations span the larger arcs of time and space, the collection looks upon diasporic history as if it were a form of traumatic repetition. As Victor LaBelle writes, the stutterer cumbersomely circles his intended word in ways that interrupt "the steady stream of words with an unmistakable gyration" (131). This happens when language – "stuttering stuttering" – doubles back on itself in failure.

Still, the attempt to depict the thwarted speech of our ancestors at times makes for problematic depictions of disability whose pejorative meanings, I will suggest, the collection also doubles back to unsettle. Disability is used to communicate the collection's frustration with the unspeaking years. In an important scene from the poem "Sight Seeing," the speaker makes autism into a mirror for his own stifled expression. The gestures of the "retarded son" are meant to embody a spasmodic failure of expression that are meant to return us to the speaker's thwarted relationship with his own father. As you read this amusement park scene, think of how neatly (albeit tenderly) it once more recapitulates the structure of the stammering son and the articulate father:

> Watching rides and pinball
> machines the boy gyrates
> limp, boneless hands
> in furious circles,
> trying to contain steel balls
> and magic lights.
>
> The father stops him,
> holds him, but his body
> keeps moving on its own
> electricity. (12)

With limp, circling wrists, the boy appears to be the apotheosis of the stifled queer expression: The poem relies upon the disabled body to signify its larger phobias about disrupted lineage and reproductive futurity. Disability scholars Melanie Yergeau and Therí A. Pickens are helpful here, for they both critique such phobic deployments of disability. Yergeau critiques how often autism

is made to signify ruptures in sociality and reason. Autistic people are "figured as a diffusion of drives, as impulses that unfold rather than intend" (35).[xxxi] The boy represents an "unwilled body" (Yergeau, 7). Building upon Yergeau, Pickens critiques how often the disabled body becomes a cautionary trope, a warning sign meant for somebody else to read.[xxxii] Indeed, "Sightseeing" easily in this way grants the hungry traveler a mirror image of his own queer impotence. The boy may not stutter like the bachelor in the asylum, but his compulsive gestures represent exactly that same queer swerve from speech just as surely as his limp, circling wrists index traits often attributed to gay men. It later connects, for instance, with the gay boys' recollection of rites from his own boyhood, how he'd wear his mother's dresses and "hang my painted nails as flags" (62).

Where reading the thematic structure of the collection first makes the boy's stammering body into yet another allegory for his exile, the larger structure of the collection later complicates this reading. Besides phobically personifying thwarted expression, he also is made into a fellow traveler within the collection by virtue of how emphatically he "keeps moving" despite his father's efforts to contain him.

By embedding him in a poem called "Sight Seeing," Dixon makes him into a spectacle that the speaker looks to for identification, and whose movements we are able to decode through the larger language of loss. By the time we arrive at the poem "Voodoo Mambo: To the Tourists," the reliability of certain significations for failure within the collection – circling, stammering, garbling names – are beginning to come apart. Stammering figures are no longer put in the service of the collection's structuring metaphors: they refuse to function as failed iterations of others like me. In the following address to the tourists, note how the mambo repeats many of the postures of earlier poems:

> Sifting flour onto the ground
> I draw their signs from memory.
> It's been done before. You want
> to recognize my prayer: *Gods,*
> *loa, ancestral guests*
> *we salute you. First with water,*
> *then rum, then fire.*
>
> Listen well. Those sounds
> crowding the night are gods
> Crossing the seas, reaching me.
> Watch those shadows lift into music.
> You want me to dance as easily
> or sing? Do not expect me to smile.
> I am not who you think I am.
>
> Do you think you can pay to know
> what I know? The soul travels quickly
> from a body touched by drums.
> Shadows burn and the breath
> stands still outside. And outside myself
> I see myself dancing, the dove limp
> in my grip until its head

drops free.

I circle, and I circle again
through blood and rum and limbs
no longer mine, nor this voice
of steel and drums crying:
my body drinks like empty
riverbeds I remember crossing.

Maybe I am Erzilie, that man
Ogun-Feraille, and others Agwé,
Baron Samedi, Damballah, Legba.
Our dozen feet rake back into the soil
what could have come alive
had we really given up ourselves
to pigeon blood, or wood coals on flesh.

For you we call out any names
but the real ones. Perhaps
this is how the gods become us. (35-36)

When the autistic boy is exposed to "magic lights," he "gyrates / limp boneless hands / in furious circles." When the mambo is exposed to those sounds from overseas: "outside myself / I see myself dancing, the dove limp … I circle, and I circle again / through blood and rum and limbs / no longer mine" (35-36). As she circles with her *limp* offering in hand, she becomes an unwilled body in ways that mirror the body of the autistic boy "moving on its own / electricity" in "furious circles." She transmutes former signifiers of failure into ecstatic feelings she will not share with her audience.

The mambo brings a disruptive force to our reading habits so far, for she refuses to perform the rite of calling names: Dixon's most prized act of remembrance. In a collection that is largely about the hunger for the ancestor's names, she denies her would-be consumers access to her worshipped kind. She sits rather willfully at the center of *Change of Territory*, listening to the collection's many cries arriving at her from overseas. She seems in this way to approximate the black gay speaker's act of "listening for echoes that come," but she just as much seems to block his efforts by refusing to let loose any names to her travelers. Because the speaker's desire for the names of his gay ancestors is ultimately what sets him traveling, her refusal to divulge any names to travelers comes as a rebuff to how we have read the collection. By refusing to call names, she maintains by extension his felt break in lineage and this refusal is ultimately what keeps him moving. For the reader who is looking to discharge their debt to Dixon, her refusal is especially disruptive. We felt he had peopled the past with figures melancholically waiting upon us to discover them – they are *somewhere listening for their name*. But when we arrive at this somewhere, they seem to carry on without us. Instead, they position us as outsiders whose yearning to devour the past overlooks those differences brought about by geographic, religious, and temporal variations.

Importantly, though, I want to hold off on conflating gays and gods even through the play of resonances tempt me to do so. Names function as placeholders, lending us spaces in which losses might be declared. What might a queer reading of the poem afford that does not insist upon the

names our "ancestral guests," as the return of lost human archetypes at all, but as the specific gods themselves? Rather than giving up the names of this sought out past, it is important that she positions them as sacred tricksters. Though it may seem to veer us from the collection's preoccupations with sexual and racial precursors for a moment, we should heed the particularity of the gods she claims in this moment. It matters, for instance, that she claims Legba, the *limping* trickster god of the crossroads. To make sense of why this is, I turn to Nathaniel Mackey and Nadia Ellis in order to better draw together those other forms we have found promenading throughout the collection. Read through the frameworks of Mackey and Ellis, once disparate gestures come together in a shared problematic that centers upon loss. In Mackey's reading of Legba, the limp and the stammer signifies – for black artists – a "telling inarticulacy" that stems from that lost state of wholeness which black subjects experience as a result of the Middle Passage (think of the moment when "Bobo Baoulé" begins to stutter): "What limping, staggering, and stumbling are to walking, stuttering and stammering are to speech" (Mackey, 42). Just as Legba's limp tells of his other foot planted in another world, the stammer attests to a lost experience of fluency and wholeness. In Nadia Ellis's reading of Mackey, this feeling of rupture stokes new dreams of connection that operate outside of one's given nationality. The diaspora, for Ellis, comes to a "embody a broken enabling," which makes rupture into a shared language for yearnings not grounded in the nation (148). The stammer may speak to "incessant search for lost kin" (176), but it goes about finding its way back to those it has lost through "strangely unlikely pairings" that privilege difference over sameness in how one goes about recovering one's kind (276).

The mambo deploys, as proof of her possession, only such signifiers that remind the speaker of his feelings of dispossession – limping, stammering, circling. Her possession takes place by embracing ambivalence – "Maybe I am Erzilie," she wonders, and "Perhaps this is how the gods become us" – which the poem enacts in its very form. Reread those lines: "Our dozen feet rake back into the soil / what could have come alive / had we really given up ourselves / to pigeon blood, or wood coals on flesh." Where the first line states that that the speaker is raking back something which presumably must have existed, the next makes it so that whatever it was they swept away only existed as no more than a possibility – something that merely *could* have come alive. And where the following line shows the mambo reflecting on all they could have brought to life had they given up their disguises ("had we really given up ourselves"), the very next line doubles back to replace this confidence with skepticism at the ceremony itself (had we really given up ourselves *to* pigeon blood). There is thus some ambivalence here about whether or not anything at all has happened. Have any of those misnamed gods actually shown up? Has anyone given themselves over to the ceremony? What kind of possession is this?

The breaks – the very line breaks – allow the poem to leave its possession in a state of suspension. It arrives at a feeling of possession only to circle once more back upon itself and reveal the return of this named entity to be, in true Legba fashion, no more than a trick. Each time she circles, she invites her audience to experience a sense of connection only throw them back into question in the following line. Her split between possession and dispossession; arrival and suspension, revelation and dissemblance. As a final point, her challenge to the audience must also come as a challenge to black gay readers who would make of her a fetishized vessel who base her spiritual practices in our secular needs. The poem, I insist, does not ever let the question of her dissemblance fall from view, and this means that she is never able to function as an unmediated signifier for black gay melancholy. To that end, I propose that we must heed how her possession may very well be just a performance, made to satisfy the tourist's hunger for

identifications. While she reflects back to the melancholic speaker a feeling of wholeness that is unbroken by diaspora ("I draw their signs from memory"), the transactional reality undergirding her performance makes it so that these gestures may very well be no more than exhausted acts of deference. For instance, her ability to embody a timeless ceremony ("It's been done before") may wilt into a kind of ennui that reflects how often she must perform this ceremony for the tourists. Her teasing phrase "I am not who you think I am" claims a self that is kept apart from her performance and that makes her disembodied state ("outside myself / I see myself dancing") seem more to capture how alienated she is from her performance rather than carried away by it. All of a sudden, she no longer seems to share or communicate the larger desires of the collection. Instead, she exists as its most defiant other. She does not allow the black gay traveler from abroad to recognize himself in her.

Or does she? Why turn to voodoo in a book about a black gay man's desire to be reflected within the past? [xxxiii] In Omise'eke Tinsley's work on Erzilie, she finds "queer artists turning to her as a figure of submerged, black feminist epistemology," especially "practitioners who embody and/or desire femininity" (16). Roberto Strongman furthers these connections by showing how Afro-diasporic religions like voodoo created a haven for sexual and gender variance: "Passive gay men share representational receptacularity with women … that allows both privileged status as the ideal vessels for the orishas" (116-117). The ability to be *entered* and *ridden*, he means, makes it so that the "gay man is presented as the ideal transcorporeal body since his liminal gendered status marks him as a receptive body in carnal and spiritual ways" (116). [xxxiv]

Is it then possible that the mambo – definitionally, a voodoo priest*ess* – could be a man? A *gay* man? Just as Dixon's writings on his father allows us to entertain the possibility that the speaker's own father could be homosexual, Strongman and Tinsley's allow us to entertain the fact that the mambo of "To the Tourists" could be a gay man finding shelter in a voodoo ceremony.[xxxv] (One thinks, for instance, of Assotto Saint, a contemporary of Dixon's, whose Haitian heritage leads him to locate his voice as a gay man by expressing himself in rituals and idioms of vodou, now collected in *Spells of a Voodoo Doll*).[xxxvi]But after having done the research – biographical work on Dixon, queer scholarship on disability, diaspora and its deities – making these connections hardly felt like the point anymore. The mambo's ceremony felt most compelling when she refused to give herself up to my readings as a gay man. The praxis of the collection is in this way little different from that of queer of color theory: when queers of color scholars run back asking the years for more – more on diaspora, more on enslavement, more on what was there *before* enslavement – they demand that queerness be more supple and more capacious in thinking across various categories of difference. It presents us with black gay history and its others: lost subjects who do not answer to the term gay but who have their own unique ways of thinking sex and gender variance within the idioms of their histories.

Given how elusive the archive feels for many black and queer scholars, is it surprising that those traits that most seem to refuse black gay belonging are repurposed as a language of connection? Whether claiming "recalcitrant disjointedness," "broken enabling," or "angular sociality," black queer critics increasingly turn to methodologies that embrace fragments, silence, and incompletion as legitimate feelings of black queer belonging.[xxxvii] For instance, Tinsley instructs readers of her monograph that "when you read the ruptures, breaks, breakdowns between sections and think, rightly, *this doesn't make sense to me* – please know this is because I am reaching for that other kind of sense… a language of gaps, fissures, and queer assemblage …

I'm asking you to wade through this recalcitrant disjointedness to bear witness to the difficulty of piecing together divinity from fragments of black queer life" (23-24). In *Erotic Islands*, Lyndon K. Gill, finds his queer interviewee representative in how she uses "a way around using any particular language to describe her sexual identity … [deploying] instead a language of ellipses that Trinbagonians use as effectively as the spoken word. There is an entire vocabulary for silences, ways to indicate with different kinds of noiselessness what it is exactly that is unspoken, ways to mention the unmentionable outside of language. During the course of the interview, I dared not offer 'lesbian' or 'homosexual' or 'queer' to fill the space … her hesitance to name that desire comes from somewhere other than self-denial; perhaps the available terms are not as effective as the silence" (116). Nadia Ellis also comes to value as queer that silence that most seems to obstruct dialogue with queer interviewees: "this is not so much a refusal of queer subjectivity as an indication to wait … He is speaking on his own terms ... the wordless sound that becomes the interview's clearest moment of testimony. 'I still can't find it [the documentation]…' these are literally the final words of the recording before it suddenly breaks off for good. They are fitting words to describe the open-ended effect of the archival search for black, queer subjects. What is found still waits, in a sense, to be found" (146). *Change of Territory* evidences this praxis in how it speaks to queerness in stammering forms that refuse to cede the grounds upon which belonging can be thought. Rather than Beam's proud message of homecoming, or Rigg's vision of tongues finally untying themselves, the collection claims its wandering and stuttering for the root as a queer erotics of the diaspora.

It may be the case, as Toomer says, that when one is in the land of one's ancestors, "most anything can come to one," but we cannot be certain what comes of this moment. These calls from overseas may deliver some hint of gratification for the gay grandson, the enslaved, or the devotee, but they may be nothing at all. That is the point: the collection is structured so that all readings feel permissible – almost anything can come to the reader, and so it does.

It is hopefully now clear that when Dagmwai Woubshet writes, on Dixon's behalf, that "Now we are called to look for our immediate forebears, discover all the losses they endured, and reclaim those losses as a formative part of our own identity," he invites us to assume an impossible relation to "our" past (24). Dixon, we have seen, confronts his black gay readers with so many representations of forlorn forebears who only ever take their place within our genealogies as the scene of its disruption. Rather than an easy framework for kinship or succession, Dixon only allows his speaker to experience foiled attempts at belonging, queer feelings of loss that he cannot translate back outwards into a larger community. This means that when the black gay male reader goes to remember his kind, he is only ever confronted by figures who refuse those genealogies that he most intends to gather them up in.

In order to look for those we call our "forebears," and to know what they knew, we must paradoxically recreate a feeling of belonging that only takes hold in what Stephen Best terms the "the anticipation of severance," the belief that the future will come as a break with past experiences (Best, 7). Instead they offer what Best names "pleasures to be found in a shared sense of alienation, a shared queerness, emerging from a shared blackness that is still understood, in the first instance, as an unfitness for the world and history as it is" (7-8). [xxxviii] The poem "Tour Guide: *La Maison des Esclaves*" stages this feeling of severance in its depiction of heritage tourism. A careful line break quickly replaces the feeling of a return to one's ancestral land with its negation: "Here waves rush to shore / breaking news that we return / to empty rooms" (31). The guide mediates the speaker's desire to belong, for his memory can fill the absence with the

feeling of presence: “The rooms are empty until he speaks. / His guttural French is a hawking trader. /His quick Wolof a restless warrior” (33). What he trades – a brief account of the middle passage – grants the speaker a transient fantasy of presence and belonging:

> He smiles for he has spoken
> of the ancestors: his, ours.
> We leave quietly, each alone,
> knowing that they who come after us
> and breaking
> in these tides will find
> red empty rooms
> to measure long journeys. (33)

Unlike the mambo’s clean refusal (“Do not expect me to smile”), he smilingly accommodates the traveler’s hunger for his past, but only as a transaction. And as Macharia notes, the tour guide’s willingness to speak of “the ancestors: his, ours” leaves ambiguous whether the comma welds the tourists and the locals into a single line of descent, or else marks the insurmountable division between them (33). The reference to “they who come after us” marks the speaker’s awareness that his visit is just one in a long chain of transactions, but it also marks him as belonging within a longer vanishing line. Has he not come after them – his ancestors – only to feel that they have once again eluded him? In the phrase “they who come after us,” the language of chase and the language of genealogical succession rub up against one another in looped cycles of disappointment. The poem leaves us with the feeling that the speaker’s imprint here will be no more likely to last than the past that he’s gone in search of.

It is the guttural voice of the trader, in fact, that returns in the erotic encounter that concludes the volume. Many of the descriptions that we have read so far return in the following quotation from the speaker, which articulates his itinerant relationship to the diaspora in the idiom of cruising. Descriptions that were used to frame his experiences while sightseeing repeat, orgasmically, when he now speaks of himself as:

> *Travelin’*
>
> Between North and South and a language
> of gutturals and sweet “ahh’s,”
> between thighs breaking open quick as a train
> pulling into Brooklyn from the Bronx.
>
> Across steel and the conversations
> of shoppers going home, the pain mounts
> in a conspiracy of limbs, and I can’t walk.
> Legs ache, stomach cramps up, and you
> just ride, ride, ride between my tracks,
> between metal and skin, right at the ‘o’
> of the body between you and me.
>
> Mint tea in Marrakech in a storm of sun:
> I should have asked his name, followed him
> out of the market and maze of wares
> stacked high. The guidebook says,

This is the tomb of Kings. This, the Mosque.
O Sinner man, where can I run to? (59)

Just as a devotee is mounted by a god, "the pain mounts in a conspiracy of limbs" indicating that the speaker has entered into a feeling of possession. It is as if he is being *ridden* by the pain that he shares with so many figures across the wider collection. The volume concludes with this cruising scene that Dixon firmly places within a blues tradition of itineracy, including train-bound lovers fleeing normative structures of belonging. Moreover, the reference to "gutturals" takes pleasure in that rough, throaty language that is earlier associated with a history of *trade*. Such attention to legs that "break open" revises the description of tourists who "come after us / and breaking" to suggest an attempt to connect with those men who geographically signify the speaker's lost roots. He desires to repair this feeling of fragmentation ("and breaking") by erotically connecting with other black men in the diaspora (breaking open his legs). This impersonal transaction momentarily closes, for the speaker, the rift convened by the trade of the middle passage to grant him a fleeting connection with his kind.

Though the collection opens with his father's suggestion that he has "violated their ground" (11) the speaker embraces this feeling of groundlessness: "Traveling, traveling / 'The hardest thing about it: a Masai elder once said, "Is leaving the ground" (23). Riding – trains, men – does not so much free him as suspend him in a fumbling and open-ended attempt to figure out his relationship to the larger diaspora. It allows him to rework a relationship to diasporic belonging erotically at the level of his body. Sex with men factors into a longer history of movement: "I divide in half / at the body's / equator / My hemispheres / lift into orbit" (60.) The language registers feelings of anal delight but also hesitation at the easy-rider he has become: "Beware all round shapes … the ridge of any man or woman / that can pull you in deep. / Beware the globes of the body / moving on an axis / of easy pleasure" (60). He has become a blues man of sorts. As his cheeky hemispheres lift, he experiences a transient feeling of erotic levity that mixes with that earlier yanked-out feeling of having been uprooted.

The volume thus concludes with restlessness and ambivalence. Beam's vision for black gay men may interpellate Dixon as "coming home with our heads held up high" but the final section of *Change of Territory* , "*Coming Home,"* concludes circularly with the anticipation of more flight. The son returns home to his unhappy mother with the suspicion that he cannot any more root himself in the local grounds of the south:

I can't answer for the years
away or how I've grown.
My face draws tight, cheeks
folding in like the corners
of an aging photograph.

"How long this time," she asks
"How long you staying?" (62)

To admit that "I can't answer for the years," is to admit that he may have learned little from the silent years that he had hoped would speak back to him in his ancestral lands. To that earlier question ("What will they [the years] answer / when you run back / asking for me") his answer hovers between an inability and a reluctance to answer. But he also expresses a split feeling of accountability to his unhappy mother who yearns for him to stay at home. The uncertainty of his rambling places him back in the tradition as spelled out by the two epigraphs which begins the volume: "I like the sensation of being a total stranger in a strange place and sampling the

strangeness of it until I find myself a little and get acquainted" (Claude McKay) and "I was leaving the South to fling myself into the unknown, to meet other situations that would perhaps elicit from me other responses. And if I could meet enough of a different life, then perhaps, gradually and slowly I might learn who I was, what I might be" (Richard Wright). We are meant, I think, to circle back to the original impetus to leave home. Little by little, the allure of being a bit lost – a stranger – comes to constitute a form of pleasure. And fingering the jagged edges of diaspora – its guttural tones, its breaking thighs, its conspiracy of limbs – less marks the trauma of fragmentation than the fraught pleasure of attempting to come back together differently.

As my argument in this chapter has shown, Dixon writes *Change of Territory* in order to grapple with his desire to see himself queerly reflected in diasporic tropes and customs. He does not advance a vision of other cultures that insists on their being any more or less homophobic than his southern American experience of exile. Instead, he dreamily represents cruising as being just as possible in the larger diasporic world. I hope to explore more fully in my future research the ways in which Dixon's representations of black queer intimacy and belonging shift in his later work. For now, I will conclude this section of the chapter by doubling back to Dixon's relationship with Charles Henry Rowell. Recall that in his honorary poem to Rowell, Dixon writes acknowledges how in "the best of gardens anything can happen: / tendrils and talk and the touch of hands / working rows of promises" (33). Tendrils are earthy appendages that reach out in the direction of whatever they can touch. Unlike roots, which look to deepen themselves into the soil, tendrils represent a kind of sociality that reaches out to whatever is closest above the ground. In this way, tendrils represent the *potential* for chanced connections between men who together help to cultivate the field of diaspora. What Dixon gives us here so beautifully here is a representation of his friendship with other black gay men that is forged through a common hunger to see themselves reflected in the black world at large. Rather than stuttering for the root, we are left with the possibility of hands reaching out to one another as tendrils, hands producing a larger symbolic landscape in which they could belong.

While Dixon honors Rowell in this poem, Rowell later honors Dixon after his death, using his work as an editor to fulfill his promise to Dixon and call his name. Rowell honors Dixon in the special issue of *Callaloo* which he dedicates to both him and Audre Lorde in 2000 – "Calling Out (Our) Names." The parenthetical play of his title toggles between sustained and thwarted feelings of connection. Either the names are *our* names (names that belong to all those who are present in the issue) or else they happen to be whatever names the editors have at hand (centering more the open-ended feeling of incompletion). In Rowell's words, calling names represents an "attempt to balance the ledger, a remembering of and an accounting for the many gone who left for us a rich legacy, a foundation on which to build a black queer discourse … let us not forget the debt we must pay by keeping the ledger in good standing; let us remember them and account for them. The many gone are somewhere listening for their names." (5). This foundation is built upon a struggle of the queer to belong within the dominant tropes of diaspora. This is not only expressed in the fact that Rowell first felt pressured to silence himself in order to cultivate cultural work from across the diaspora, but that he publishes a volume of poems which is working through a similar experience of non-belonging. Given that Rowell published Dixon's first volume, it is difficult not to hear in Rowell's proud declaration "Calling Out (Our) Names" the taunt of the mambo: "For you, we call out any names / but the real ones." We go to listen for the names of our gay ancestors within the larger diaspora, and are instead met with dissemblance and refusal.

But just as the reader of *Change of Territory* is able to establish connections across the traditions and peoples of the diaspora in ways that that the speaker cannot, Rowell feels himself to be connected to the larger diaspora by a similar fluke. Although the journal was first dedicated to black southern art, Rowell expands the scale to reflect work from the larger diaspora. Although the journal was not originally written with these larger diasporic horizons in mind, its latent scope was present in the title that Rowell chose for the journal itself. According to Rowell, he first heard the word "Callaloo" after describing his beloved southern gumbo to one of his fellow colleagues in the English Department during the late seventies only to be told that the dish he was describing wasn't gumbo, but callaloo, a word which captivated Rowell at the level of its foreignness. He remarks upon the curious sound and spelling of the word, which he has so often said aloud to himself with much delight:

> there are many vernacular words we use or hear over and over, but because they remain oral or unwritten, there is no exact or fixed spelling of them … I immediately realized how strange and fascinating and captivating it looked in script. I just knew I had to use it as the title of the Black South literary and cultural journal … I wanted something that symbolized or profoundly suggested, rather than aggressively announced, our blackness without having to say the word 'black,' or at that time, 'Afro-American … Back then I did not know the use of the word 'callaloo' in the Caribbean or in countries in West Africa or for a familiar kind of dished called 'caracú in Brazil, whose recipe eventually found its way to Angola, which already had a stew-like dish called 'calulu.' The ancestors too must have been responsible for that title, for the name has all kinds of suggestions for this, now African Diasporic journal …. Actually, when I selected 'callaloo' as the name of the journal, I was doing more than I knew. But the ancestors knew; they were guiding my hands, my eyes, my ears, my mouth – and now I'm convinced. ("In Voluntary Solitude")

The local dish of Rowell's southern childhood takes its place in a larger diasporic history. The delightful discovery of how the local fits into the global exemplifies the play of belonging which I have hoped to capture in *Change of Territory*. As diasporic scholars such as Lindon K. Gill, Roberto Strongman, Omise'eke Tinsley, and Gloria Wekker have shown, there does indeed exist a longer history of gender variance and same-sex desire within the diaspora, but it exists in its own regionally specific ways, and therefore in and on its own terms. It matters that Rowell first publishes this work of Dixon's because it mimics his trajectory as a publisher, moving from the local south to the global south. To that same end, Rowell credits Dixon with pushing him to embrace this wider geography in his work as a publisher. As Rowell tells Marlon Ross in a 2017 interview, "The first most dramatic change in *Callaloo* came as my very good friend, the late Melvin Dixon, advised me to extend the scope of the journal beyond its original focus: Black South literature. His advice was that I would not be able to maintain a strong journal by limiting the journal to the South … Identifying yourself as a Southerner then … did not carry with it a value or positive distinction" (111). From this perspective, *Change of Territory* aims at a change in value. The wish to belong in the diaspora also reflects a wish to escape from the pejorative meaning of one's southern roots in the larger American context. Toggling between these geographies, Dixon navigates an uneasy dialectic between local and global belonging. In so doing, he works alongside Rowell to help create the conditions in which black queers can imagine themselves as belonging within the larger black world, but also, and just as importantly, as belonging within the black south.

Conclusion: Jagged Peninsula Begging Geography

I began this chapter with Dixon telling us that "I'll be somewhere listening for my name" and charging us to call it. This "somewhere," Darius Bost argues, posits an affective continuity between the slave past and the black gay present given that Dixon appropriates the lines from a slave spiritual. Because the enslaved had so made this lyric into a "catalyst for fugitivity in their attempts to escape slavery," Bost insists that the "I' of Dixon's address expresses "the fugitive 'I' – that compels historical remembrance from some radical elsewhere" (4). I agree with the fact that Dixon issues his charge from an elsewhere, but I suggest that this "elsewhere" has no easily grounded relationship to the enslaved past, but rather hovers hungrily in a desiring proximity to it. As I have shown, the ability to attain a shared feeling of belonging within such an elsewhere is also continually thwarted. A speaker may seek out this elsewhere only to be told, "Go home. Africa doesn't want fugitives" (30). Rather, Dixon fondles the jagged edges between the here and there, the then and now.

Within the first wave of black gay writings, Dixon's early poetry represents in this way the strained attempts to connect with one's kind. His ambivalent tone is distinct from that of other representations of black gay belonging which Joseph Beam devoured, like *Yemonja* (1982), named after a queer water deity of the Yoruba traditions. This is because Dixon's poetry represents an ever obstructed attempt of black gay men to belong within those aesthetic traditions of the larger black world that black gay men were beginning to reclaim in the early eighties. Although *In the Life* reached no further than the south, it had its vision set on soliciting works from the larger diaspora: "I feared that there would be a few men willing to be so visible. I felt that maybe I was planning a party that few would attend" (Beam, xx). When Beam selects Dixon's poem about the black gay man "stuttering, stuttering for the root," he summons in a productive foil for black gay men who are otherwise proudly "making history" and "creating and naming a new community" (xxi) in order to "end the silence around our lives" (xxi). Instead, we are left with stammering wanderers who may never find satisfaction in the course of their lifetime.

The uneasy tone that Dixon's adopts within the collection seems to have had a lasting impact on certain black gay readers searching for easy depictions of black gay kinship. David Green's short 2014 commemorative essay on Dixon's contributions to *In the Life* begins with an optimistic hope for intraracial love that is quickly bookended by a feeling of its having been foiled within Dixon's poetry. He recounts having first read about the black male characters in Dixon's opening story, "The Boy with the Beer," feeling a sense of promise: "As a reader, I wonder if ever, Willis and Jerome experience Beam's 'revolutionary act' of 'black men loving black men'?" (212). But his hope is curved by Dixon's other poems detailing wearied depictions of cruising. He reads "Etymology: A Father's Gift" as suggesting that "We must address black love and our erotic politics if we are to survive as a people and if we are ever to move past superficial surface level notions of love within the Beloved community. We must all live 'in the life,' if we truly wish to survive this and future life" (217-218). Tellingly, by referring to Dixon's three short contributions as a "literary trilogy," he follows the short stories and subsequent two poems ("Getting Your Rocks Off" and "Etymology") as if they constitute a narrative arc that begins with a hopeful connection that is problematized by the end. His desire for such closure is frustrated by poems like "Etymology," which feature black gay men who were still only relating to one another at an impersonal level. Rather than finding a revolutionary portrait of black gay

men loving one another, Green points to the cruising scene as proof of black gay men's needs to develop more genuine and personal connections with one another.

In light of this thwarted connection, I want to return us to the easy sense of recognition and kinship that James Earls Hardy first had upon reading *In the Life*: "Another black man, a congregation of black men who were not related to me, called me brother – and my soul *exhaled*. I didn't know any of them, but they *knew* me; they spoke my name. There *was* such a thing as a black gay community – and I was a member of the tribe" (x-xi). Dixon's early work permits us no such easy feeling of being a member of a tribe, and Green is right to pick up on the ways in which Dixon's works put a certain strain on the idea of a beloved community held in common. He represents attempts to connect with men of the larger diaspora that are always foiled by the recognition of irresolvable geographic differences and power differentials. Most importantly, he represents in his earlier work the desire of black gay men to hear their names called in ways that are almost always foiled and deferred by the rejection of diasporic brotherhood.

I have focused upon *Change of Territory* in order to evidence how Dixon represents foiled attempts at belonging to a larger black world, and I want to suggest too that these yearnings continue into his later work in ways that still court and disappoint larger diasporic feelings of belonging. In his later poem "Hands" for instance, we encounter a speaker who feels exiled from diasporic brotherhood because of his genteel profession as a writer and an academic. Like Rowell, Dixon renders the poet as laboring to produce a space and a black tradition which, try as he may, he continues to feel excluded from. Note while reading the following poem how tensely the speaker desires the laboring, folk body. It is as if grazing the surface of the man's hand would permit him some kind of access to the folk tradition in which he so wished to belong:

> Once teaching English in the Ivory Coast
> you gave the ritual handshake all around
> and someone teased the texture of your palms:
> *Mais Monsieur, vouz n'avez jamais*
> *cultivé la terre*. And not until
> walking the road from Tiebissou,
> laterite caking the skin, did you
> contemplate the rain-forgotten soil,
> or the emptiness of your hands.
>
> When we met on the abused asphalt
> of Sheridan Square, our hands lost altitude,
> our eyes gripped hungrily to eye.
> I said 'I'm Handy's boy.'
> Already touched and tattooed. My blood
> is southern laterite, my cradle
> Connecticut, and my skin
> the color you've kissed before.
>
> Once rhyming English in Massachusetts,
> teaching metaphor and meter, I heard
> the veiled dissension: "But Sir,
> you have never worked the land."

Yet even then, trailing the Berkshires,
my legs brittle twigs among the trees
did my fingers cup on pine cones,
and the fixed solitude of winter.

Here in the fist of New York City
elbowing the Atlantic, or in Dakar,
jagged peninsula begging the geography,
these instruments of embrace between us
reach and reel and roll and reap –
these calluses are none but our own. (*Love's Instrument*, 19-20)

Whatever sense of belonging the ritualistic handshake might have earned the speaker is lost in the telling smoothness of his hand's texture*: You have never worked the land.* As with other poems in the collection, the haptic differences between their skins captures an insurmountable feeling of difference, one which foils the speaker's attempt at diasporic belonging. As with other cases where a speaker remarks upon a man from Senegal with "his hands / cracked open like the soil" or a voodoo mambo with "tree tough hands," his attention to the labor roughened body draws him back to his less confident feeling about his own roots – "my legs brittle twigs among the trees" (38; 39). Their thick skin establishes them as belonging with those folk traditions which the speaker cannot. Indeed, they have a relationship to the land which he does not. With his brittle legs and soft palms, the black queer poet feels frustration but also that familiar desire for those who more easily symbolize rootedness. It points us back to how the cruised crotches of men earlier allowed the stuttering brothers to momentarily experience those feelings of affirmation that they had been denied by their father. Recall that "Handy" is the name of Dixon's father. As "Handy's boy," the speaker is made to feel the pointed irony of his non-rugged labor, which punningly remarks upon his distance from his father. Still, he is able to position himself as a field hand in a difference and far more figurative sense: he makes himself handy as a poet, crafting traditions in which black gay men can exist. In other words, we are supposed to see, as we did with Rowell, how he has worked the land at the level of his language. He has been in the fields all day, troubling land, troubling water, and creating those landscapes in which he can find fulfillment.

But even as the poem insists upon the speaker's overlooked connection to the land, it concludes with his feeling rewarded by this unseen labor. The calluses which "are none but our own" proudly mark him as a kind of field hand himself, like his father, or like the man who so teased his palms. But this tease once again has an erotic touch. It leaves the speaker desiring more, and like a "jagged peninsula begging the geography," he takes us back to the word *beg* as defined in "Etymology: A Father's Gift." To beg, Dixon writes there, is "to ask for something / to which one has no claim or right." Begging for geography is no different than stuttering for the root. Both attempt to belong within a field, a line, and a larger worlding. And the object that he is beginning for is a peninsula. This peninsula refers to Cape Verde in Senegal, which —laid out on a map – New York looks out upon from across the waters. In the fist of New York, the speaker looks out upon the exposed, phallic shape of the peninsula. To put it crudely, New York is jerking off thinking of Senegal. To put it comparatively, New York is stuttering, stuttering for the root. Either way you put it, the speaker is begging to join with the symbolic geography that represents his roots. He wants to make a home and a language in its familiar idioms, but it continues to elude him.

As I now transition into my next chapter on James Baldwin, I want to briefly offer Dixon's commemorative poem about him, "Into Camp Ground," in order to demonstrate the way in which Baldwin helped Dixon balance his understanding of his sexual identity within a longer black tradition and spiritual topography:

> Hungers of the flesh, the timeless terror
> of our need, the barter of our liberty for lies,
> these were your watchwords and your witness,
> the steel of your surrender to our song:
>
> *True believer,*
> *I want to cross over*
> *into camp ground.*
>
> One fiery still November, not in Harlem,
> nor Paris, but in the woods up North,
> you seared my hands where the rocks cried out
> opening to your deepest room, Giovanni's, and mine. (*Love's Instruments*, 57)

Once more Dixon returns to a geography laid out in the spirituals in order to address the struggle of black queer men to belong. The title matters because it takes its theme and direction from a slave spiritual about stealing away. Camp Grounds refers to a fugitive gathering of slaves who come together to share the Word. Like other spirituals, the actual destination could have meant heaven, but it could also have meant the yearning for a literal freed state or a return to Africa. What matters, though, is that the line "*I want to cross over"* insists upon a journey that cannot be completed in life. It is as if Baldwin has finally found in death that sense of freedom and belonging that he never attained in his living flesh, and Dixon is looking ahead with anticipation to the moment when he can join him. What most matters for my purposes here is that this "timeless terror" and hunger that Baldwin first laid bare in the flesh points first to a universal human condition, which, by poem's end, comes to seem more like a timeless expression of homosexual desire "opening to your deepest room, Giovanni's, and mine." By conflating Baldwin the author with Giovanni the character, Dixon frames his reading of *Giovanni's Room* as permitting him to confront some more intimate knowledge and experience that he recognizes himself as sharing with Baldwin, one which he had for so long disavowed, given how terrifying it was. He describes the impact that this sexual awakening had on him by writing that "you seared my hands where the rock cried out," alluding once more to Nina Simone's song "Sinner Man," whose lyrics also concluded our reading of *Change of Territory*. In "Sinner Man," the line "O sinner man, where you gonna run to?" is quickly followed by the rebuffed plea to be hidden: "Please hide me, I run to the rock … but the rock cried out / I can't hide you." Reading between the lines, we can see how Dixon feels inescapably *read* by *Giovanni's Room.* He feels the erotic truth of his soul laid bare in its pages, as if the book itself cried out some awful truth that somehow linked him to Giovanni and to Baldwin. In the following chapter, I explore more fully the ways in which Dixon's traumatic relationship to Baldwin both emblematizes the relationship that many other black gay writers adopted to Baldwin, as a kind of gay forefather. Though claiming this kind of connection with Baldwin would likely have baffled him (given how Baldwin refused such notions of a timeless sexual essence), I want to suggest that it also would have intrigued him.

Chapter 2: Baldwin's Most Familiar Estrangement

…the one imperative a reading must obey is that it follow, with rigor, what puts in question the kind of reading it thought it was going to be. A reading is strong, I would therefore submit, to the extent that it encounters and propagates the surprise of otherness. The impossible but necessary task of the reader is to set herself up to be surprised.

- Barbara Johnson, from "Nothing Fails Like Success" [xxxix]

A stranger is a stranger is a stranger, simply, and you watch the stranger to anticipate his next move. But the people who elicit from you a depth of attention and wonder which we helplessly call love are perpetually making moves which cannot be anticipated.

- James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*[xl]

Beginning "Dear Sir, Dear Father," the black gay writer Thomas Glave addresses, in a letter to the late James Baldwin, the enchanting quality of Baldwin's difficulty. "Back then I found you elusive, sometimes elliptical: quantities which daunted and entranced me," he writes, affixing the Baldwinian power to enchant – to *terrify* – to a style that Glave now knows intimately enough to imitate. Whatever was so elusive about Baldwinian style back then returns now as a no-less entrancing fixation upon the very words, locutions, and punctuation that make Baldwin's style so familiar to us as readers.

> You were just beyond my reach in those younger days, and possessed a knowledge at times too terrifying (one of your favorite words) for me to occupy […] Yours was a rage that, for the longest time, I could not fathom (or refused to fathom), though I myself possessed it; it was a storm that I could not (would not) countenance, though its bloodfury cracked just beneath my skin, and especially beneath the skin of my more often than not smiling face... (123)

Glave assumes Baldwin's familiar yet elusive tone of retrospection not only so that he may look *like* Baldwin, as a matter of style, but also imitate Baldwin's highly regarded ways of looking *at* ourselves, or at the world. And so, parenthetically hedging, Glave converts "could not" to "would not" to "refused," intoning the familiar syntax of disavowal that we encounter as Baldwin's characters come face-to-face with those guarded truths they sought to repress.[xli]

Re-reading Baldwin is valuable, Glave implies, because it recovers a previously disavowed experience of sameness that he shares with Baldwin. The trouble with Glave's formative story of self-possession is that it assumes a relationship to the other – and to the self *as* other – that makes self and other fundamentally the same. That is, what was once traumatically Glave's – or even Baldwin's – own discrete experience, he now rather openly shares with others as the beginning of a black gay consciousness. His movement from ignorance to self-knowledge begets from a primal scene of Baldwinian estrangement, of all things, a father – a father whose once unfathomable experiences he now assumes as his own.

As Kevin Ohi beautifully surmises, the traumatic *content* at the core of Baldwin's rendering of experience often seems less important than the adhesive *effects* it has on other characters. The secret seems to occupy "a purely structural place … which gives the characters …. their coherence, and marks their unutterable sadness" – in every way an absent center – with a gravitas that pulls them into relation with one another (264).[xlii] Such formative yet unspeakable

rages, Ohi means, fuels their drives to satisfy an impossible knowledge of self *and* other that proves relationally productive. Like Ohi, I am less interested in what the substance of this traumatic knowledge *can be said to be* than in *what it makes possible as a kind of sociality*: black queer men linked to one another through a primal bond of loneliness that always begins with reading Baldwin. However elusive Baldwin's furious knowledge may prove, its resonant unutterability makes possible a "bloodfury" that affiliates him with Glave and others. The assumption of this shared trauma, I mean, welds together black queer genealogies. It makes them subject to – and subjects through – a shared feeling of self-estrangement. So writes Hilton Als: "Reading and re-reading those sentences — sentences that described looking and time and the loneliness endemic to both – Baldwin's strong rhythm burrowed its way into my bones."[xliii]

Glave's letter to Baldwin thus fittingly concludes – "But you didn't leave me / Fatherless, / Father, / nor without brothers," gesturing to Baldwin's genealogical role as father of the Black Gay Renaissance of the 1980s and onward. The terrifying absence centered in Baldwin's writings – like that which he, in dying, leaves behind – here creates the conditions of possibility for a fundamentally lonely fraternity. Assigning Baldwin this paternal function draws black queer men into a mutually traumatic relation to one another, as brothers, by assuming an intimate knowledge *of*, and shared relation *to,* that structuring absence posed by his terrifying, his elusive, yet his still somehow inheritable rage. Reading Glave, the elusive subject of Baldwin's rage, though unspoken, comes to feel always already spoken for – it is reclaimed, from that terrifying place of disavowal, as the primal scene of black gay consciousness.

In his monograph on Baldwin, Matt Brim addresses precisely the complexity of this paternal function: "If Baldwin was a forefather to the many writers of the 1980s (and after) who looked to him as such, it is also true, and not contradictory, to say that their 'looking to' Baldwin echoes with a procreative, fore-father-making energy" (33). Enshrining Baldwin as a forefather, Brim means, ensures "that others will be able to look to the past with a sense of familiarity" that affords black gay subjects a chance to both reproduce and recognize themselves within it (31). In so doing, they recursively beget a same-sex tradition that makes "black gay male experience legible to its future" by producing an ancestor who will have produced them. Brim allows us to see how such a fantasy ("Dear Sir, Dear Father") rests upon the belief "that we are enabled or even created by our desiring forebears (or contemporaries) and the traces they leave behind" (31). He reflects how another celebrated contemporary of Glave's, the black gay poet Essex Hemphill, attributes his debt to Baldwin in ways that mirror Glave's own: "Hemphill [suggests that he] sees *himself* thanks to the evidence Baldwin has left behind" (30). Not unlike myself, Brim is thus interested in how these stable, genealogy-welding identifications with Baldwin's same-sex past are unsettled by Baldwin's own category-dodging slippages. He substitutes such genealogy-forwarding "gay uses" of Baldwin with what he terms Baldwin's more "queer utility": the way in which Baldwin's elusiveness disrupts his relationship to the black gay past and functions, instead, as "an unstable signifier of an always-rupturing tradition" (27).

Brim thus concludes that the value of Baldwin's queer legacy also stands upon the belief "that you will know it *not* when you see and recognize it but when it surprises you and confounds you most" (3). This, I confess, leaves our relationship to Baldwin in a bit of a conundrum, for – as Glave has shown – we recognize Baldwin most in his attempt to estrange; are captivated by him most when he attempts to elude; and find value in this existential terror ("one of your favorite words," Glave adds) that reading him makes possible, for it has become so reliable that it is nearly consoling.[xliv]

Queer readings that value Baldwin for his strangeness must arrive at that same impasse which Barbara Johnson records in her essay, "Nothing Fails Like Success," written in 1980, when the unsettling promises of deconstruction were institutionally settling into a series of predictable critical maneuvers: "what can a reader who has felt the surprise of intellectual discovery do to remain in touch not so much with the content of the discovery as with the intellectual upheaval of surprise? How can the surprise be put to *work* in new ways?" (327). If, as Johnson writes, "the surprise of otherness is that moment when a new form of ignorance is suddenly activated as an imperative" – and if that sudden activation of otherness is meant "to lay bare some hint of an ignorance one never knew one had" – then the trouble comes when we seize upon this ignorance as if its latent content were the same for others as it is for ourselves (332). Johnson allows us to see how the trouble with Glave's approach to this "ignorance one never knew one had" is also the trouble of reading Baldwin's otherness: Baldwin may have "possessed a knowledge at times so terrifying" that Glave once "refused to fathom" its meaning, but when he finally apprehends it, it is as a static and submerged history of sameness – "I myself possessed it." In the end, the drama and the syntax of Baldwinian disavowal produces, for Glave, a black gay genealogy and consciousness – a black gay *coming-to-consciousness* – that makes the surprise of otherness in fact *inextricable from* the surprise of sameness. For the mature reader, past and present, like self and other, are somehow the same. The same-making power of this reading strategy even runs both ways: if Glave makes legible within himself an ignorance that he can now read for having read Baldwin, his recursive act also can be said to "lay bare some hint of an ignorance [in Baldwin] that" Baldwin himself never even knew he had: a latent kinship with a gay consciousness that he, consistently throughout his life, actively disavowed.

The problem with this kind of affiliative gesture, then, is that it allows us to too freely assume both knowledge and experience of the lives of others as if they were anticipatory expressions of our own, and as if they were forever promised to us by some formative logics of race and sex fixed across space and time. We acquire our rage, our grief, our knowledge in ways that scaffold in advance not only the dividing lines between knowledge and ignorance, self and other, but also the nature of what we can discover as we cross from one into the other.

As scholars of literature have long pointed out, the enchanting effects attributed to Baldwin's work – to baffle, to enchant, to estrange, and to surprise – here overlap with the pedagogical uses of literature.[xlv] Both call upon the literary to cultivate a surprising relationship to the past and present others by seeking out strangeness. I cite, as one example, D. Quentin Miller's scholarly collection *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (2000), in which scholars return to Baldwin's characteristically elusive style to find the "widely varied oeuvre of an experimental writer who was never content with retelling the same story, using the same voice, or speaking to the same audience" (2-3). The collection's focus on Baldwin's ever-elusive craft values him for a slipperiness that strikes me as too familiar: "Baldwin's fate in literary history is more complex … it rests upon his refusal to attach himself to any single ideology, literary form, or vision. Because he never let himself be labeled as a gay writer, black writer, a protest writer," and so on, "his legacy is not entirely stable" (4). This conceit of re-viewing – of seeing again – rests upon the familiar narrative of complexity that is linked to the infinite demand to be re-read. And yet, if Baldwin's complexity necessitates that he must always be re-read and re-viewed, it is only to ensure that this undiminishing sense of complexity can stay in place.[xlvi] What the collection *Re-viewing James Baldwin* has not itself yet seen – has, in fact, *refused* to see – is how much Baldwin *does* leave behind a recognizable voice and vision, which Glave, among others, can readily imitate.

What happens when the surprise of otherness, originally meant to confound, appears as that which is most recognizable? What can we learn from Baldwin's otherness when that which is openly claimed to enchant and to estrange seems to easily affirm that knowledge which we possess already? Finally, what might a reading of Baldwin gain from an approach that no longer attempts to couch his importance in his eternal estrangement, but rather in how familiar his effects of estrangement have come to feel?

I find as little value as I do truth in attempts to maintain, as Baldwin's legacy, the estimate of an author who is only as complex as his ability to predictably elude our fixed terms of identity. Indeed, Baldwin's exemplary abilities both to outwit categorization and to perform intersectional critique conform to the most recognizable ideal of the minoritarian subject. Instead, I engage one of Baldwin's worst-reviewed novels, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), so that we might see instead an author who frets about the ability of his works, and the artists depicted within them, to still baffle or enchant their contemporaries with their relentless complexity. *Tell Me How Long* is in many ways an autobiographical engagement with the perils of a celebrity artist aging out of radicalism and relevance. To that same degree, I value it not because it depicts a black artist who keeps pace with the new aesthetic and political turns of his present, but rather a black queer figure who strains to keep up with them. If the novel is in any way autobiographical, it is less because it depicts the black queer artist as a timeless witness than as a figure straining to keep pace with the radical present, while having to balance aesthetic innovation with political savviness.

Though Miller mourns in *Re-Viewing Baldwin* that "alas, [*Tell Me How Long*] continues to be overlooked in this collection despite my efforts to find someone to write about it," its exclusion in fact helps ensure the claims he makes regarding Baldwin's masterfully elusive legacy (5). Compare his sense of Baldwin's elusive craft with that of the novel's contemporaneous reviewers, like Eliot Fremont-Smith, who observes that "Mr. Baldwin seems to be blindly going through the motions, and the result is the worst and most painful parody of his better work," or, Robert Kirsch, when he writes that "Baldwin comes through in the novel dangerously close to a caricature of his own style and previous work" (F11). Reviewer J. Mitchell Morse goes so far as to declare *Tell Me How Long* a hackneyed attempt to write *Notes of a Native Son* in novel form, and recommends several other Baldwin essays that we might read to replace ever having to read the novel at all (529).[xlvii] What irks critics most of all is how Baldwin's agonizing love plots, recognizable for dramatizing racial differences, have left them, instead, with a gimmicky romance of otherness they feel they have read already.

My aim is neither to recuperate *Tell Me How Long* as a criminally underappreciated work, nor to advance from its neglect in Baldwin studies some old-new evidence for his unswerving complexity as a writer. Rather, in the reading of the novel that follows, I want us to see double: I want us to see the surprise of otherness that constitutes both an ethical and an erotic imperative throughout Baldwin's writings, but to see too the overly familiar nature of how he crafts for us that careful sense of surprise. Rather than enshrine Baldwin's later works for "refusing to repeat the styles and modes of inquiry that garnered critical acclaim for his early successes," I ask that we recognize the persistent nature of this most familiar estrangement, and how its unblinking fixation upon otherness charges characters to face, and, if possible, to overcome that ontological estrangement, in ways as familiar to us as they may, in other cases, prove perverse (Miller, 4).

If, as Brim tells us, black gay men seize upon Baldwin with a "fore-father making energy," it so that they can "look to the past with a sense of familiarity." Like Dixon's black gay sons "stuttering for the root," they hope to secure a place for themselves within a longer black

tradition. But one can grow bored with looking to the past with a sense of familiarity. As I have shown in my introduction, many black gay readers of the eighties turned to Baldwin with a sense of gratitude that was quickly on the brink of being exhausted. Both Joseph Beam and James Earl Hardy are glad to move the black gay canon away from Baldwin because they have read his most canonical works to death. Beam likely devotes himself to endlessly reading *Just Above My Head* because it is one of the few texts by Baldwin that sets aside interracial love to explore love between black men, and yet it is really *Tell Me How Long* that first performs this function within Baldwin's oeuvre. If Beam was looking for revolutionary depictions of black men loving black men as brothers, he could have gone no further than this novel. So why doesn't he? In it he would have found his own vision for black gay men – "We take care of our own kind when the nights grow cold and silent"(191) – reflected back to us to a most jarring effect: a literal act of love between two brothers.

If black gay writers of the eighties and upwards would not look to such a novel for buoying reflections of their past, neither did Baldwin's contemporary readers look to it as a sufficient account of their present. *Tell Me How Long* and the select moments from his other works that I read in this chapter were written during Baldwin's late phase, when his fiction was declared "irrelevant to current discussions of race," and proved, allegedly, his "irrelevancy to contemporary politics".[xlviii] Robert Reid-Pharr summarizes: "Late Baldwin is another matter altogether. Here we have an author whose laudable politics somehow have gotten in the way of his pursuing more-ambitious artistic goals … having succumbed to the tendency toward high-brow sloganeering … or, worse yet, having lost control of his craft" (*Once You Go Black,* 99). As reductive as any account of a "late phase" may prove, this distinction draws into focus Baldwin's concerns about his fading relevance and publicity from the late sixties onward that I find reflected in many of his narrators.

Attempting to serve as a witness to new political subjects, his narrators express anxiety about the capacity of his younger and seemingly more radical black counterparts to open themselves to feelings of wonder, estrangement, and surprise. If these later narrators feel distinct in any way, it is in how begrudgingly they attend to their contemporaries' diminished capacity to experience the sense of estrangement – be it bafflement, wonder, or surprise – that were once crucial to survival.[xlix] As these late narrators fret, bafflement no longer baffles, surprise no longer surprises, enchantment no longer enchants:

> "My white peers did not really baffle me," and yet "my black peers thought that my wonder was foolish." (*Tell Me How Long,* 119)
>
> "I think it's better to know that you don't know, that way you can grow with the mystery, as the mystery grows in you. But, these days, of course, everybody knows everything, that's why so many people are lost." (*If Beale Street*, 45)
>
> "Though they [the black militants] were young, they were old … they seemed to have made their discoveries already. It was this, though, paradoxically, which made them innocent and vulnerable: that they seemed to imagine that there was nothing to discover." (*Just Above,* 279)

If the inability to discover can leave one "vulnerable," and the inability to "grow with the mystery" can leave one "lost," the importance of these mental states shifts according to the race in question. Think of "the anxious paranoid imperative" famously described by Eve Sedgwick, wherein the minority subject avows that if the pernicious operations of prejudice "cannot be

definitely halted in advance, it must at least never arrive on any conceptual scene *as a surprise*" (133).[l] Must the minority subject not at times forfeit the surprise of otherness in order to survive? Do we not hear an echo of this in Baldwin's narrator's refrain: "I listen to what white people say and still more, to what they don't. I must: my life may depend on what I hear: I cannot afford to be surprised" (*Just Above,* 343). The declaration "I cannot afford to be surprised" guards its subject from having to regard in whites that surprise of otherness. Rather than growing with the mystery, wonder, and an openness to knowing that you don't know, Baldwin's later contemporaries seem to operate at a remove from the world-opening affects which were crucial to their survival and their development.

Whether or not they feel they can afford to be surprised, Baldwin still insists that it is invaluable for black and queer subjects. And whether or not they feel that they can still experience a sense of surprise in relation to the white subject, he still insists that one must, in certain situations, be prepared to experience exactly that. In *Tell Me How Long,* the ability to withstand surprise is something between a life-saving reflex and a honed skill: "People become frightened in very different ways," Leo says, and "the ways in which they become frightened may sometimes determine how long they live" (251). Leo first learns that the ability to withstand surprise is necessary for black survival in his encounter with the police, which he later applies to the theater: "I began to evolve a trick which was to help me, later, in the theater: Leo, I said, you can't know what's going to happen, and, until it happens, you can't know what to do. You're going to be surprised – so *be* surprised. That's the only way you'll be ready" (255). Certain narrators may question in the next generation their ability to discover and to feel, in bafflement, mystery, and wonder, an unbearable estrangement. But to live as if one has mastered the world, they advise, is also dangerous: "You're going to be surprised – so *be* surprised." And if surprise should prove this central for black survival, then the challenge of reading the novel is how to be ready for it when it comes. In Barbara Johnson's language, "How, then, can one set oneself up to be surprised by otherness" when the ways in which otherness arrives into Baldwin's texts are, as so many critics tell us, so recognizably familiar (333)?

As Reid-Pharr suggests, the shift from the "tightness and delicacy" of Baldwin's early novels to the "breadth and coarseness of *Tell Me How Long* … is best understood not as a failure on the part of the author but instead as one aspect of his attempt to come to terms with the changing social, political, and ideological realities of the universe he was trying to map" (*Once You Go Black,* 100). This attempt to come to terms allows us to see Baldwin grappling both ethically and erotically with two newly emergent subcultures – black militants, and lesbians and gays – each of which introduce new structures of belonging that pose a problem and a possibility for Baldwin's erotics of witnessing. Even while our narrator refuses any familiarity with newly emergent lesbian and gay cultures, he feels perplexed by the generational shifts in black life and politics – and this queers his familiar relationship to estrangement in ways that produce peculiar relational effects.

If prejudice can traumatically estrange one from oneself and from others, Baldwin's characters erotically labor to overcome it. And yet the mark of such strangeness for me lies no longer in the experiences that characters ontologically withhold from one another, but in the extremes to which they go to access them. Rather than maintain, in a state of abstraction, the charge that we must entertain Otherness to be considered ethical – cutting our teeth on an Otherness that generations of deconstructive critics have helped to set in place – I am interested here in the problematics of its more concrete enactments. The novel's attempt to resolve the traumatic difference of the other – the *brother* – leads to a confoundingly incestuous act that

mixes a hallowed, humanist creed with its more profane thrill. As an attempt to make oneself a loving witness for the other, it is a familiar gimmick, and yet its novelty comes from how such an act conflates, too, otherwise disparate categories – the reparative and the traumatic; the familiar and the strange; the brother and the other – in ways that make its most ethical charge so difficult to heed, given how inextricable the sexual remains to it. Demonstrating the lengths to which his traumatized subjects will go, Baldwin delivers that familiar charge of otherness in ways that elude his late-sixties readers *then*, but also his black and queer uses *now*: he embeds his revolutionary act of love in literal and figurative logics of incest that make it difficult to idealize. In this light, that gratitude which Glave expresses for Baldwin – "you didn't leave me … without brothers" – comes back to us in a most founding way, for where Baldwin's predecessors intend the phrase *Brother to Brother* figuratively, Baldwin intends it in this novel to come through in the most literal way.

If in this first section I thus begin by fleshing out the normative and familiar functions of Baldwin's charge of otherness (as an ethical mandate to know the stranger) it is only so that I might conclude by considering its more perverse enactment: when this getting-familiar goes too far. I show how the narrator's desire to overcome the alterity of his black brothers, literal and figurative, turns, rather confoundingly, to reparative depictions of sibling incest. I argue, then, that Baldwin's effort to execute his most familiar romance of otherness produces – at the interrelated levels of style, sense, and sensuality – an attempt at kind-ness (meaning similarity; meaning concern) that attempts to work through the tensions of his historical moment in ways that may, indeed, estrange us.

The moment that I refer to takes place when the narrator, attempting to soothe his brother from the trauma of prison abuse, reflexively lays his hand on his older brother's erection in an act that first leaves Leo "briefly surprised," but, not a moment later, admitting that "there was really nothing very surprising in such an event" (211). Leo eases into this shocking role ("so *be* surprised") as if it were a plausible and necessary shift in their relation to one another ("it was strange to feel that I was *his* big brother now") that makes the act appear crucial to their survival (209). Leo's relationship to his brother in this moment forces into sudden tension the usually assumed relationship between ethics and erotics in Baldwin. That is, he feels in the suddenly estranged face of the other – the *brother* – a certain traumatic charge of otherness which he must repair with an act of kindness that strikes many contemporaneous reviewers as excessive. If I may myself borrow Leo's language: while the fraternal scene left me "briefly surprised" when I first read it, I had to concede that there was little surprising in how such an act makes sense within Baldwin's fiction, for it represents a familiar way of confronting and repairing the trauma of otherness. As disgruntled reviewers note, rather than an aberration in Baldwin's idealization of love, this moment comes to seem more like its strange apotheosis.[li]

Before moving to the more jarring and unfamiliar intimacy between brothers, I will now raise a few moments from Baldwin's literature that are probably more familiar to us, at least in the ways in which they represent an attempt to behold the most wonderful and terrifying inner life of the other. The charge of the other in Baldwin sparks an impossible attempt to eliminate otherness.[lii] Under its sway, his tormented lovers approach one another with a terrible will to discover, or else a fumbling attempt to disavow, the disruptive truth of an other's experience. And yet as sensuously estranging as this romance of otherness feels for its characters, it is rendered through touches as stylistically familiar to its readers as the ethics it enacts. In order to overcome their lived differences, characters belabor the surfaces of one another's bodies,

experiencing, in Leviniasian terms, "an obsession by another who does not manifest himself," but who they must nevertheless strive to know (75).

Think, for instance, of those lovers from *Just Above My Head*, who often look upon one another with "eyes … wet and full of wonder" (245); "eyes … black with wonder" (333). The language always points us back to their "wondering, slowly, refocusing eyes" (292) – to "astonished eyes now searching mine" (372) – so as to rehearse how ceaselessly they probe their differences from one another. No matter how long they look upon one another, they can only ever glint truths that seem destined never to come to light, but which reside "in their fevered yet lightless eyes" (256). This recalcitrant otherness charges them with a recursive wonder that intensifies their connection to one another: "they looked at each other in wonder" (236); "They cannot stop looking into each other's eyes. They have discovered something" (191); "Crunch looks at him endlessly … as though he has never seen him before" (191); "[s]eeing him was always new" (379); it left one "astonished" (372; 377), "amazed" (377), and "surprised" (374). And yet the content of this wondrous knowledge is notably vague in description:

> "Something leaps in Arthur, something like terror leaps in Arthur: something in him sings … a wonder of sunlight exploding behind their eyes, everywhere, a great space opening before them." (191)
>
> "Something happened behind her eyes, something unreadable as he watched her." (256)
>
> "Something in her face had moved far beyond him … while his mind could not turn away from this mystery, neither could his mind grasp it." (278-279)
>
> "… something happened in Arthur's eyes." (321)
>
> "I watched something enter Martha's face." (323)

The true wonder of these faces is that they communicate to us no more than a vague shift or motion – a leap, a happening, a movement – that briskly gleans the plentitude of the other's life: "embittered bewilderment coming and going in his eyes" (103); "how there seemed to rush into his eyes all the wonder and pain and hatred of a life time" (282). Emotions – *whole lifetimes* – may busily enter and exit such eyes, and yet their color – "black," "lightless," "dark with wonder" – only ever seems to mirror, upon their surface, that more fundamentally "unreadable" space sunken "in" or "behind" them that marks them with an unrelenting opacity. Such passages tell us no more than "something" happened, which must be taken into account. To truly see the other, they suggest, is to witness in them the vague and elusive movement of an ever-undescribed "something," a something that, in moving, moves beyond all hope of knowledge or description, a "something" that enters to charge the face – the *text* – with a flash of otherness that it cannot disclose to us. In the end, we are confronted with the mere husk of happening, some knowledge moving, unreadably, into or out of the face of another that would permit us no further entry than this: something happening, yet withheld. This leaping, happening, entering, moving "something" charges the characters with a feeling of difference that they must struggle to overcome.

Recent turns in black and queer scholarship often reduce the complexity of the visual field to a single gaze that terrorizes the racial and sexual other with a reductive will to know, to categorize, and objectify.[liii] But I find in Baldwin's wonderous looks an unnerving tendency to

undermine expected flows of power with the sudden jolt of estrangement. You turn a rapt gaze upon the other only to find what – for being "unreadable," for being uneasily "grasped," and for residing in that "dark" and "lightless" space beyond the eyes – baffles with an endless fount of difference.[liv] The characters who return these glances, and the readers who diligently return *to* them, experience a certain looped charge of otherness that is nearly optimistic. It dramatizes a world that is forever capable of revelatory seeing, and which testifies to an endless oscillation between rift and reconciliation, between familiarity and estrangement.[lv]

Consider how bodies are once more activated by that certain "something" in *Giovanni's Room* (1956), which charges the body of the self and that of the other with a revelatory *feeling* of difference. Not far into the book, the narrator recalls how during his first erotic encounter with a boy, "something happened in him and in me which made this touch different from any touch either of us had ever known" – "Then, for the first time in my life, I was really aware of another's body, of another's smell … it was like holding in my hand some rare, exhausted, nearly doomed bird which I had miraculously happened to find" (7-8). In the post-coital panic that ensues, the narrator marks a vague internal shift ("something happened") that primes him to receive from his same-sex encounter the absolute charge of difference, a difference that traumatically divides the narrator not only from his sleeping partner but also from his conscious self:

> I was suddenly afraid. Perhaps it was because he looked so innocent lying there, with such perfect trust; perhaps it was because he was so much smaller than me; my own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire rising in me seemed monstrous. But, above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was borne in on me: *But Joey is a boy.* I saw, suddenly, the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists. The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. (9)

Set in a chiastic relation to one another, the rising erotic charge of their encounter produces, as its corollary, an agonistic feeling of otherness that the narrator must strive to overcome. That is, the shared elation of their sexual encounter ("something happened in him and in me") soon yields to a more private terror that marks within him a phobic disavowal ("how this could have happened *in* me"). Although the narrator is certainly referencing his phobically penetrated body, his wonder marks for us the very same gaps in his self-knowledge that not only make him function as a repressed other to himself but, indeed, remarks upon the phobic distance he keeps from all sexual others who follow. In order for the narrator to close this gap posed by the feeling of otherness (within the self, but also between self and other) he must reflect upon who he is in relation to others. And though the novel in this way most casually marks casual sex with the other as "dirty" so long as one "made love with only the body", such lovemaking can be redeemed – yes, it may even redeem you – so long as it sincerely strives to meet the other on their own terms.

I offer this moment to make the larger point that sex functions in Baldwin's work as a tool to confront, and hopefully reconcile alienating feelings of otherness. This requires a personal connection that is held apart from an erotics of cruising. As another Baldwin narrator thus tells us, "without love, pleasure's inventions are soon exhausted. There must be a soul within the body you are holding, a soul which you are striving to meet, a soul which is striving to meet yours" (*Just Above,* 318). To this same degree, sex is saddled with this unreconciled striving –a

romance of otherness – which attempts to overcome estranging feelings of difference, *especially* those which make you feel different from yourself. Accordingly, it is not enough that something simply happened *between* the characters, but that its happening made them look inside and interrogate their consciousnesses ("something happened in him and in me") in ways that require further reflection: from them, from us.

But we cannot understand how this "something works" at all without first understanding how it *feels* for the characters. Difference, I mean, is sensitized. It is everywhere felt across the body. As many Baldwin scholars note, it is the feeling of difference which most charges sex and, I'll add, most charges characters *to have* sex in his novels. For critics, sex thus becomes meaningful as a device to dramatize, and even fleetingly dissolve, the feeling of difference in a world of others:

> Michael F. Lynch: "For Baldwin, the committed erotic relationship entails the potential and the responsibility to save the other…" (64)
>
> Warren J. Carson "….sex is presented as a new route to empowerment, an act which makes them [men] stronger and more sensitive to the fuller dimensions of manhood." (*Re-viewing,* 220)
>
> George Kent: "sex, for Baldwin, is obviously a metaphor for the act of breaking one's isolation and, properly experienced, responsibly entering into the complexity of another being." (22; *Re-Viewing*, 220)
>
> James Dievler: "Baldwin asserts that all these [restrictive] categories are intertwined and most effectively transcended through love-based sex – sex that is itself taking place beyond the socially constructed senses of sexuality." (*James Baldwin Now,* 163)
>
> John Lash: "the search of man for self-realization comes ultimately to a point of genital cognition … in the naked moment of sexual confrontation between man and man are to be found truth stripped of hypocrisy and deceit." (48, *Re-Viewing* 221)
>
> William Cohen: "A 'genuine human relationship' or the 'liberating possibility of love' he [Baldwin] claims can transcend divisive conflict, for the 'suffering of any person is really individual' (202); Baldwin "celebrates it [sex] only when a vehicle for transmitting knowledge and love, and castigates it when motivated by anything else …." (209)

Scholars rightly take sex to be Baldwin's preferred vehicle for encountering the complexity of the other, allowing him to stage a kind of erotic existentialism in which characters either accept or defer responsibility for the self and the other.

The reparative relationship to the other in Baldwin's work is explored most thoroughly in L. Gibson's book length study on Baldwin, *Salvific Manhood* (2019). Gibson aptly demonstrates how Baldwin writes "the complex phenomenon of male loneliness, longing, vulnerability, and need into a doctrine of salvation" (16) in such a way that his characters "come to be scripted by the need and desire to be saved" (15). Gibson's reading addresses the role of sexuality in Baldwin as a tool for intimately cultivating selfhood and fraternal bonds in a world of others.

Yet I wonder if the ethical weight of this imperative to save the other does not yield to that more embodied pleasure that characters derive from their agonistic engagement with otherness. That is, the agony of wrestling with the problem of otherness in Baldwin is inseparable from the agonistic pleasures that characters get from wresting such an otherness from the bodies of both themselves and others. If we forget for a moment the ethical charge to transcend difference, there is something energizingly erotic about the surprise of otherness that the feeling of another's difference, however traumatizing, can call forth. The body of the other is felt to be meaningful – felt to surprise – insofar as it agonistically withholds a no-less agonizing sense of interiority that it can never communicate in words. If we before witnessed the pleasures of inter-facial estrangement, we find now that it just as easily energizes the orifices. For instance, a white character approaches a black woman's body as if it were "the entrance into a tunnel" (*Another Country* 174). She, praising his tongue, tells him, "You're just a deep-sea diver" (*Another Country,* 175; 174). This dream resurfaces when a black man, performing cunnilingus on a black woman, thinks of the "swimmer deep inside me, holding his breath … trying to lick the secrets out of her pussy …her breath becoming mine, mine hers … the slow, slow, slow discovery of the wet and seeking warmth inside her …. always astounded there could be so much" (*Just Above,* 390). It is there too when two black men, having sex, are "each astounded by the other's color – how many colors color has! What a labyrinth – as they descend into quiet places … coming closer to the edge … testing muscles, comparing discoveries … history knotted in the balls," each feeling a "[s]ense of mysteries overturned" (*Just Above My Head,* 484).[lvi]

Baldwin's romance of otherness actually compels characters to get into bed with one another. It ethically charges the surface of the other's body – their face, their eyes, their very orifices – with the promise of some withheld experience that one must labor to extract. In fact, we might say that insofar as difference charges sex with the other, it also charges them to have sex. It charges, in Baldwin's oft-cited words from *The Fire Next Time* (1963), "the relatively conscious whites and relatively conscious blacks who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others."[lvii] In such scenes we are made to witness – and what we are made to witness, over and over, is how sex, for Baldwin, is so familiarly charged with that exploratory thrill of being able to enter – to *really enter* – into the traumatized body of the other, as if into otherness itself. The body of the other is felt to be meaningful because it withholds an often traumatized sense of its interiority that it can never communicate in words. This, I mean, is the source of its coveted mystery. Good sex in Baldwin is thus saddled with the moral task of helping characters to develop – and to heal – from the multiple traumas that make them appear as strangers to one another. And because sex is crucial to his witnessing, it crucial to his politicized sense of *art*.

Sex has so thoroughly scripted characters to take charge of their own existence – has so charged them to take up the unimagined experience of the other – that we forget that Baldwin's ethical insistence often leaves behind, as its slightly more crude residue, an erotic charge that titillates its characters with the undiminishing allure of otherness. This consciousness-raising effort also arouses in characters a certain delight which they draw from wrestling with seemingly insurmountable feelings of difference.

In the remainder of this chapter, I'll be looking at those erotic acts of affirmation in *Tell Me How Long* that are difficult to affirm as acts of kindness, not only because their desires take form in scenes of racial trauma, but also because they represent erotic attempts to overcome this trauma in ways that will likely strike us now as both familiar and yet at the same time strange. As I mentioned, Baldwin's familiar charge to love the estranged other, leads to a scene of brother

love, an intimate act which Leo frames as being only "briefly surprising." This absence of shock nicely sets readers up to understand the place of love within Baldwin's larger work as I have considered it so far. It is in these difficult circumstances that Baldwin's familiar revolutionary gospel of love is to us made strange. The novel presents us with an act of affirmation whose attempt to love and lay witness – to take charge for the suffering of the other – are perhaps difficult for us to affirm. I think that's the point.

As readers of black gay history, we arrive at a kind of impasse, when, at novel's end, the narrator, Leo looks backwards over his life – all nearly five hundred pages of it – and says that it cannot be read in terms of those sexual cultures publicly organizing across the sixties. After having parsed, so carefully, his erotic relationships with his brother, his white girlfriend and his current, younger black militant boyfriend, he declares in a kind of Foucauldian stroke that his life cannot be thought in those sexual terms and categories most familiar to us. *Tell Me How Long*, in fact, is the only Baldwin novel which uses the word "gay," a term which Leo uses only once in that notably dismissive manner, referring to the word as an "incomprehensible vernacular" (453). Instead, he muddles the meaning of his sexual history in ways that are hard to interpret. After dismissing the term gay, he declares, "I could not even take refuge in any fear of what the world might call me. The world had already called me too many names" (453). And he insists, instead, that his life contains some opaque meaning that he circles in this vague, six-times repeated phrase "oh yes, something had happened to me" before concluding that "I was forced to suspect in myself some mighty prohibition of which sex might be the symbol, but it wasn't the key." The new generation approaches him with their terms of sexuality only to find out that he rejects them and even calls their vernacular incomprehensible. My task for us is to examine how we might make sense of this non-identification with gay culture and its larger place within the novel, but also within Baldwin's career. How can we begin to comprehend those most particular meanings that Leo's erotic life assume for him without falling back upon those now familiar terms of sexual subjectivity?

When George Kent thus describes Baldwin's turn to sex as "a metaphor for …. responsibly entering into the complexity of another being," he allows us to see the similar function that sex has to art. Simply put, if sex bears the symbolic responsibility of entering into another's complexity, then it is tasked with that same problem that Baldwin faces as an artist: how to enter into the other in all *their* complexity. Good art – like good sex– is charged with the task of probing otherness. This is certainly the challenge that Leo faces in the novel as a black actor, looking to step into the other's role. "We do not think that you have entered in the problems of the young taxi driver at all" (301), a director at one point chides him. It's as if his roundness – as a character, and as a diegetic person – fundamentally estranges him from those flatter roles which he is asked to play in the theater as a black man. "I couldn't find any way into the character at all. I didn't believe in his sorrows, and I didn't believe in his joys," he says at another moment (344). It is here that Leo's work as an actor and Baldwin's work as a novelist overlap: they both use (or hope to use) sex as a vehicle to enter into and to *create* the complex life of the other. The trouble is that Baldwin – like Leo – is open to these critiques as well: his characters cannot convincingly perform, for reviewers, the complexity which they experience during sex.

And so the problem that sex poses for Leo in the novel – of how to think it! – also seems to pose a problem for many of its reviewers. *Tell Me How Long* – one of Baldwin's most rushed, most understudied, and most serially derided works – was, after all, met with largely negative

reviews in its moment. So much of the heavy lifting that love is called upon to do is, for critics, too rushed and too jarring. So scoffs contemporary reviewer, Saul Maloff, "The world is so infinitely obliging. Phantoms slip in and out of Leo's various beds like figures in an adolescent fantasy of impotence" (94A). Such absurd fantasies of love, reviewers opine, are manifested in the structure of the novel. In their hasty attempts to convey, through love, their responsibility for the other, revelatory sex acts seem to precipitate out of nowhere. Reviewers mark, as insensible, their sudden escalations in mood and meaning – zeroing in on the example of Leo's sexual encounter with his white lover, Barbara, precipitated only by, "I simply had to warm my freezing little girl" (272) or on the intimacy that unfolds with the black nationalist figure, Christopher, who inhabits no more than a mere twelve pages: "when Christopher first met me, he decided that he needed me: that was that" (442). Reviewers point, above all, to Leo's sexual encounter with his brother, Caleb, prefaced by "I know what he needed. And I was not afraid to give it to him" (210). For these reviewers, the novel uses sex as a shortcut or shorthand for transmitting knowledge and love. And so, in outrage, Irving Howe writes that *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* sidesteps "the small business of the novelist, which is to convey how other, if imaginary, people talk and act. Baldwin seems to have lost respect for the novel as a form" (103).

I'm interested, though, in what this seeming loss of respect for the novel – and for how characters should behave in a novel – makes possible in Baldwin's erotics of laying witness to the sixties. Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman is especially helpful here for allowing us to see the overlapping functions that sex and art play for witnessing in Baldwin. In her monograph *Against the Closet*, she marks the reparative function that the lover's body serves for Baldwin and that makes the body into a vehicle for what I've been calling kind-ness. In other words, sex is crucial for both its reparative function, but also for attempting to excavate a fundamental condition of relation between characters that allows them to experience, however fleetingly, a feeling of being of-a-kind. They work to overcome those social differences that traumatically estrange them from one another. For Abdur-Rahman, the figure that is especially able to access the life of the other is *the actor*, for the actor, she reasons, is the figure who is best able to "occupy and understand a number of subject positions simultaneously" (106). It is therefore acting, she continues, that "empowers Eric" (the actor from Baldwin's *Another Country*) "to convey to others his own emotion, experience, and felt sense of complexity" (106). It is as a successful actor that Eric can cross over into the other's experience. And, just as important in her example, he attempts to inhabit the role of the other by recreating their homoerotic experiences.

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, though, throws one wrinkle into this argument. Leo's role as an artist – *or* as a lover – may allow him to imagine back in the complexity of the other's life, but only within certain limits. Not all subject positions, it seems, are worthy of being understood. While Abdur-Rahman and quite a few other critics make recourse to the world-opening power that love and art offer "gay men" in Baldwin's novels – Leo (not unlike Baldwin himself) has a difficult time wrestling his understanding of human complexity into those terms set forth by gay identity. For instance, when asked in a 1984 interview whether or not Baldwin felt like "a stranger in gay America," Baldwin professes "I simply felt it wasn't a word that had anything to do with me or where I did my growing up" ("Go the Way Your Blood Beats," 104). (I will return to this interview at the end of my chapter.) And Leo, in many ways experiences the same sense of estrangement from gay subjectivity in that scene I want to now read.

In an encounter lasting no more than a paragraph, Leo documents two *definitely* not gay strangers that he overhears talking.

> Two drama students, both male, were loudly disputing some point about the Stanislavski method, concerning which, as far as I could tell, neither of them knew anything. They hoped that I would overhear and genially interrupt and even, perhaps, find one of them attractive. Not that either of them was 'gay' – to use the incomprehensible vernacular; anybody mad enough to make such a suggestion would have been beaten within an inch of his life. But they were on the make, and what else, after all, did they have to give? Also, they were lonely. (451)

The Stanislavski method is important because its technique allows actors to imaginatively render the lives of other in ways that dovetail with the task set out for the novelist: to properly relay a character, one must step into their situation. The actors squabble over the very issue which most preoccupies Leo in this moment, as to whether or not he can rightly relay, as an artist, the lives, motives, and even the sexual identities of these men in his art (and, indeed, from but one passing glance!). And yet, what remains unthinkable, however, is that these younger students would ever identify as gay – a term which they too, Leo assumes, jettison from their world as a kind of "incomprehensible vernacular."

In fact, Leo remains so sure that these men are not gay that he even hastens to foreclose such a misreading of their sexual subjectivities by raising instead the possibility of violence: "anybody mad enough to make such a suggestion would have been beaten within an inch of his life." As Robert Reid-Pharr rightly reminds us in another context, while it might be the case that "[t]o strike the homosexual – the sign of chaos and crisis – is to return the community to normalcy, to create boundaries around blackness" – we find instead that the vision of black male normalcy that the novel in fact guards here, with its threatened bashing of any gay-sayers, is itself notably queer ("Tearing the Goat's Flesh, 104"). Indeed, it is not that one risks injury for expressing homoerotic attraction (all three of them freely ogle one another) but rather that one risks violence by marking their attractions to one another through that most incomprehensible word: gay.

The novel here maintains its categorical slippage (that prized quality of Baldwin's) and its hetero-flexibility through a ritual of gay-phobic violence that seems unchallenged in the novel, a matter that I will return to later. What Leo in fact guards against with this rather violent hypothesis is this strange new word that threatens to catalogue desire in essentialist terms. It is not so much same-sex desire that is policed here, but the very conditions under which one can reasonably expect to encounter a "gay" figure within a Baldwin novel. Violence, I mean, guarantees that the text will be read on its own terms. These incomprehensible beings calling themselves "gay" can thus only appear unto us in a kind of textual feint that names a gay culture that exists at very periphery of the text – waiting to be read into it –while at the very same time, frightening away anyone who'd dare approach them in such reductive terms as these.

This is especially important since Baldwin is in many moments writing in and about San Francisco in the late sixties, and during a time in which lesbians and gays were publicly organizing. This alignment with black militancy over gay organizing is important: the celebrity artist who critics mark to most resemble Baldwin here dis-aligns the theatrical and the homoerotic world alike from the newly arisen specters of gayness that are emerging to re-catalogue them. Two things are happening here. At the height of his career, Leo attests to his mastery as an artist by being able to securely enter into the minds of these two men, and yet, as he does so, he creates, in the novel, a shared sense of estrangement from the word "gay". This means that the success of Leo's technique, and so too his merit as an artist, is balanced upon how confidently he once more swaps (in a manner so familiar to Baldwin) the question of sexual identity with his doppelgänger loneliness. Not gay, he adds, just lonely. Recall, that is, how sex

is the symbol but it is not the key. The novel at this moment seems to foreclose any attempts to read same-sex desires into a lesbian and gay public sphere, leaving in its place this traumatic loneliness that everywhere drives characters into relation with one another. This is the same loneliness, we gather, that burrows its way into Hilton Als, Thomas Glave, Melvin Dixon, and so many other writers.

So far I have been describing the ways in which sex, for Baldwin, familiarly functions as a way of exploring and reconciling traumatic feelings of difference that estrange characters from one another. I have added to this both Leo and Baldwin's own estrangement from the word "gay" itself, whose cataloguing utility was experienced as a threat to the baffling and lonesome wonder of sex. I will now take up in greater detail what other kinds of relations are lubricated by this more traumatic estrangement that characters feel from one another. If "gay" is not their preferred term, then in or upon what terms might we understand the ways in which they still come together sexually? I intend to do so by examining the erotic scenes that unfold between Leo and his brother.

One thing Leo and Caleb share is a violent indignation about being turned into erotic objects which leads them to deploy a language of homophobic slurs that they deploy, often unchecked, throughout the novel. In Dwight McBride's essay, "Can the Queen Speak?," he suggests that Baldwin's recourse to self-effacing language regarding his sexuality may be symptomatic of that price which Baldwin had to pay to be taken seriously in the black nationalist onset of the late sixties.[lviii] In the novel's rush to adopt that tone of black militancy, it casts out the possibility of gay organizing so as to preserve the mysterious nature of love. The ease with which characters slip into homophobic language is meant to address the ways in which racialized experiences of one's sexuality are as weaponized as they are rehabilitative. This means that Baldwin's sense of the erotic evidences precisely that kind of racialized subjectivity that Darieck Scott describes in *Extravagant Abjection*. Both Caleb and Leo's encounters with racism attune us to "the historical process of racialization as sexual domination and sexual humiliation" (Scott 239). Black male characters' experiences are racialized through those sexual threats that men in power make upon them (for Leo, stop and frisk by a white cop, or the groping hands of white lead actors; for Caleb, the abusive taunts of prison guards). Because they are queered by violence, they adopt the revolutionary language of black men in their time (e.g., Eldridge Cleaver and LeRoi Jones) that rebuffs or calls out such sadistic abuses of power by deploying a language of faggotry and effeminacy that we should be skeptical of.[lix]

The tangled deployments of sex and sexuality begin with Caleb's own account of his abuses, since it illustrates most clearly the complicated relationship that sex has to addressing and healing the traumas of racialization. In the following readings, I examine the complex relationship between sexual threat, sexual rehabilitation, and sexual disavowal which ensues during Caleb's time in prison. As we will see, the threat of sexual violence poses a contradiction to how Caleb understands his black male identity. His fundamental inability to make sense of this reality leads him to problematically abject the unbearable specter of abuse onto the bodies of black women. I am interested in this scene for the difficulty that it poses to such claims as might regard the saving grace of brotherly love as an easily ethical act. Even as Caleb fears being queered by force, the masculinist vision of the black homosocial which he clings to seems to me no less queer, and even allows for the kind of rehabilitative intimate act which takes place between him and his brother. He thus articulates a vision of black queer fraternity, intimacy and radicalism that is supple and progressive in its treatment of men and staunch and phobic in its

treatment of women. Given this difficult admixture of violence and repair, it seems to have been left out of our understanding of black queer history because it is not blameless enough to peddle as a politics, but rather forces us to tarry in queer expressions that are damaging and reparative at once.

When Caleb is wrongfully imprisoned, he is marked with a tragically incommunicable experience, which leaves him feeling estranged from the world. We are also made to see this act as leading him to come and go in the novel, eventually returning many years – many hundreds of pages later – as a hypocritical pastor. The compromised forms that Caleb's manhood takes in the novel after his prison sentence are difficult to idealize. They are phallocentrically militant yet vulnerable, masculinist yet never easily in any heteronormative way. Caleb's prison experiences create what Stephen Dillon describes, in his work on prisons and black fugitivity, as a "forced queering," for it ruptures his accustomed relationship with heterosexuality.[lx] In prison, Caleb's body is forcibly marked – with urine, feces, and spit – in ways that render his black body abject. "Phew! Baby, I thought I'd never get that stink out of me," he tells Leo (234). And we can think of this stink – this funk – which blackness is here made to embody both in relation to Baldwin's familiar challenge to embrace the sordidness of the body (e.g., that "stink of love," which characters must embrace in *Giovanni's Room*) but also, comparatively, as bearing some relation to that problematic which we will find Delany more directly takes up and Dixon more humbly evidences in grappling with the erotophobia of the ill body. In such cases stink is racialized in ways that compound or defer certain erotic possibilities. Blackness becomes, in L.H. Stalling's terms, "stank matter" – and it struggles to matter within that framework. And while the attempts to affirm black life from within that debased condition look different to either author, they are united in how it necessitates a charge to love the other: to be with them in that sordid place that they've been made to inhabit.

But in *Tell Me How Long*, characters don't enthusiastically embrace funk, but rather grapple with the ways that it estranges them from their cherished notions of themselves and one another. It forces them to ask how they might love the racially marked body. Within their socially marked flesh, they grapple with what it means to be forcibly queered by those signs which (either by fantasy or coercion) are projected onto blackness. Furthermore, Leo claims that because Caleb feels spoiled by these funky feelings he has been seemingly ruined for heterosexuality: "even the girls did not take him seriously; a boy with an unspeakable past was a man with an unendurable future. He was good to look at … probably good to sleep with, but he was no longer good for love" (205). It is this brokenness, in fact, that brother-love is called upon to heal. And it is this brokenness – this funk – that also induces into Caleb a brutal and profound indifference to women, as we will soon see. This fundamentally incommunicable trauma renders Caleb's earlier talk, with his confident assurances of fraternal connection, powerless to close the rift between narration and experience. It is powerless too to ease the relational space between Caleb and Leo – the way that Caleb "flinched whenever my breath touched the open wound, from the distance between us, as though he were saying, '*Don't come near me I've got the plague*'" (202).

Commiserating while lying in bed together, Caleb recalls aloud how an overseer tried to orally rape him. While Caleb takes the threat of rape to be effeminizing, the masculinist rigidity he asserts in its place remains almost compliantly queer. He bases his idea of the homosocial upon an openness to sexual acts that one rather haphazardly performs, more from generosity than from desire:

> I'm a big boy and I know the score. Shit. You know. If it came down on me like that, well, all right, I'd suck a cock, I know it, shit, if I loved the cat, why the fuck not, and whose business is it? Like shit. You know. Ain't nobody's business. You know, like, man, I'd do anything in the world for you because you're my brother and because you're my baby and I love you and I believe you'd do anything in the world for me. I know you would. So, you know, it ain't that shit that bothered me. No. He made me feel like I was my grandmother in the fields somewhere and this white mother-fucker rides over and decides to throw her down in the fields. Well, shit. You know. I ain't my grandmother. I'm a man. And a man can do anything he wants to do, but can't nobody *make* him do it. I ain't about to be raped. (233)

How strangely consent is constructed here. Caleb's assertion of freedom moves between imagining male-male sex in a tight space ("if it came down on me like that") that is nonetheless distinct from the subject of feminizing surrender ("throw her down") that he attributes to female enslavement.[lxi]

We should be critical of Caleb's problematic address in this moment. Baldwin represents a toxic form of black masculinity, for Caleb naturalizes rape as something that is acceptable when it happens to women, but he is outraged at the thought of it happening to men. His outrage is thus built on top of a phobic history of raped women which he too casually passes over, not unlike the progression of novel itself. That is, even as Leo's voice often assumes the authority of an essayist in other places, he never does so to reflect upon, critique, or even really empathize with the specter of the raped black woman in the ways that he often does with men. On at least one level, this disinterest seems to reflect how Baldwin often wrote about women as if what happened to them only matters in relation to a world of men. For instance, in his interview with Audre Lorde, he is rightly critiqued by Lorde for only being able to relate to black female vulnerability as a slight to the black patriarch who is kept from protecting *his* woman.[lxii] In such a case, the grief of black women is subsumed *in,* and made the unbearable other *to*, the black male's unbearable feeling of emasculation. Still, the hasty, clipped, militant tone that Caleb assumes here is so different from Baldwin's voice (which is far more like Leo's) and it is more meant to channel the masculinist militancy of a generation whose radicalism estranges him. In other words, I think that we are meant to see how *broken* Caleb's masculinity is when he violently abjects his phobia of rape onto the category of womanhood at large. By making the black female into the absolute other, he ultimately abjects an important aspect of himself.

Vincent Woodard is helpful on this point, for his scholarship allows us to consider how Caleb conforms to familiar accounts of enslavement posed throughout the sixties that do "not complicate the reality of slave experience by exploring how a man could be a man and also be sexually violated" (Woodard, 23; 132). As Woodard argues, many black radicals of the 1960s could only make sense of interracial and homoerotic exchanges that took place between white and black men by framing it within the context of slavery's abuses.[lxiii] Though he does not examine this particular novel of Baldwin's, the implications of his study certainly extend to it. Since rape is only legible for Caleb as an act that is done to enslaved women, his vulnerability in prison more than feminizes him, it makes him feel the anachronistic pull of that history that threatens to sever him from his modern masculinity. And yet where Woodard asserts that a certain strain of black radicalism "conflates contemporary homosexual practices and identities with the sexual treatment of black men during slavery," Caleb does not respond by phobically reproducing this homophobic rigidity (Woodard, 217). However masculinist it may be, Caleb's attempt to hold this feminizing past at bay leads him instead to affirm a rather inviolate sense of

masculinity that includes expressions of male-male desire. Instead of closing himself off to the possibility of homoerotic intercourse, Caleb just tightens the conditions of signification under which such an act may take place: "I ain't my grandmother. I'm a man" (233). Feeling himself to be vulnerable to this unwanted and resurgent act from the slave past, Caleb bemoans the compromised agency which he had with men in the present. He therefore sees rape as a rupture with his accustomed experience of black brotherly modernity: that inviolate world of black men who, when the chips are down, undertake actions that go against not only their orientations but even their desires.

It is thus the phobia of being used *as* an enslaved woman that haunts and somehow emboldens his unique conception of brotherly intimacy: a happened-upon history of men who choose men (when it "comes down" on them) and whose business it can never be ours to judge.[lxiv] And while his understanding of the slave past indeed remains limited, and his sense of masculinity rigid in its horrifying lack of concern for women, his yearning to resume his homosocial life in the present nonetheless reconfigures our understanding of agency, violation, and desire within the black radical tradition as it would have existed at this time.[lxv] Caleb here exhibits from within his abjection that sense of alternative self-fashioning that Darieck Scott finds in depictions of homoerotic abuse in black men's literatures. Examining the formative effects that such feelings of vulnerability can have on men, Scott shows how "this historical subjection endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive black power" that enables men to "disarticulate blackness from its quest for successful masculinity" (11). However staunchly masculinist his vigor, Caleb's response to his vulnerability nonetheless expands the range of erotic choices that can be accommodated under the sign of black male identity.

When he emerges from prison, he sounds his ability to choose differently by taking up a blues refrain. Stating that it "ain't nobody's business," he responds to the threat of being feminized by claiming that particular blues woman's claim to freedom – from force, from judgment – to perform whatever actions he chooses, "if I loved the cat." His indignation about finding himself in prison and at risk of being raped ("I knew I didn't have no *business* there") – here lends a heroic nonchalance to his freedom to suck cock outside its walls ("ain't nobody's *business*") (235; 233). And yet the feeling of erotic agency that Caleb yearns to return to blurs the lines between freedom and consent. His right to choose is paradoxically attained within the felt circumscription of choice. He posits a freedom among men that is no freer than his suggestive phrase "should it ever come down on me." Such tight bonds between men depend upon their being tightly bound by less than ideal circumstances. Tellingly Caleb does not specify what forces make it urgent for him to suck off one of his peers, but rather leaves this to the imagination.

Still, why suck cock if you don't want to? Why, if not to address the unmet needs of another? This frank display of homosocial concern explains why the subsequent scene of brotherly love that takes place between Caleb and Leo is both surprising and anything but. Caleb's hypothetical act of cock-sucking slips, rather too easily, into the assurance that he makes his brother not a moment later: "like, man, I'd do anything in the world for you … and I know you'd do anything in the world for me." If love redeems sex, it seems that it does not discriminate.

In the following scene, Leo responds to the spectacle of a brother in need in exactly that way which Caleb has just so coolly laid out for us. Because Caleb is so traumatized and because Leo feels so distant from him as a result of this trauma, the reader is left to imagine that this might be one case where doing "anything in the world" is required. When Leo erotically consoles his

brother, he does so as if this were a humane, and even humanitarian, act. Together they commit an act of unthinkable kindness. Indeed, the novel positions such an act between brothers as something that guarantees rather than violates Baldwin's sense of love. Although Caleb cannot fully communicate his traumatic experiences to Leo in words, they are able to share in it through a redemptive act of love. So then does the following masturbatory act shared between brothers emphasize the embodied need to cross over into his unimageable experiences. Leo recalls:

> The storm began to pass, that is, out of him; and into me. I could not really see his face in the darkness, but I studied his face in the darkness of my mind … Never … would I ever forgive this world ... I would do something one day to at least one bland, stupid, happy white face which would change it forever … I fell into a stormy sleep, and awoke to find myself, like Jacob with the angel, struggling with a very different god, and one yet more tyrannical, the god of the flesh. My brother held me close, and he was terribly excited; his excitement excited me. I was briefly surprised, I was briefly afraid. But there was really nothing very surprising in such an event, and if there was any reason to be afraid, well, then I hope that God was watching … I knew, what my brother wanted, what my brother needed, and I was not at all afraid … I held my brother very close, I kissed and caressed him and I felt a pain and a wonder I had never felt before. My brother's heart was broken, I knew it from his touch. In all the great, vast, dirty world, he trusted the love of one person only, his brother, his brother, who was in his arms … I'll love you, Caleb, I'll love you forever, and in the sight of the Father and the Son and the fucking Holy Ghost and all their filthy hosts, and in the sight of all the world, and I'll sing hallelujahs to my love for you in hell. I stripped both of us naked … I was full of attention, I was full of wonder. My brother had never, for me, had a body before. And in truth, I had never had a body before, either, though I carried it with me and occasionally experimented with it. We were doing nothing very adventurous, really, we were only using our hands, and, of course, I had already done this by myself and I had done it with other boys: but it had not been like this because there had been no agony in it, I had not been trying to give, I had not even been trying to take, and I had not felt myself, as I did now, to be present in the body of the other person, had not felt his breath as mine, his sighs and moans, his quivering and shaking as mine, his journey as mine. More than anything on earth, that night, I wanted Caleb's joy. When his breathing changed and his tremors began, I trembled, too, with joy, with joy, with joy and pride, and we came together. (210-211)

Leo can declare "I had never had a body before" insofar as the body of the lover is activated by (and feels itself to be most charged by) its agonistic relationship to others. [lxvi] What lends to these characters the thrill of having bodies for the very first time is thus that feeling of *agony* that is brought about by the problem of otherness. They both achieve orgasm ("we came together") as if in a momentary fusion across difference. Interfacing pain and pleasure, Leo and Caleb labor to produce *joy* within the scene of violated, fraternal flesh. Although Caleb cannot therefore fully communicate the traumatic extent of his experiences to Leo in words, they are thus able to share in it through a redemptive act of love. Their mutual climax represents what Gibson describes in this scene as "the profound level of intimacy required for salvation – how close a person must be willing to get to another in order to save" (150). Lyn Orilla Scott echoes this point when she argues that "Leo, like other Baldwin protagonists, experiences self-recognition (or identity) as an

intersubjective, loving act. When Leo comforts and then makes love to his brother, he is rescuing Caleb from the effects of racism … through an act of brotherly intimacy. The restorative effects of this intimacy are revealed the following day … By figuring an incestuous homosexual act as repairing the damage of white homosexual rape (or threatened rape), Baldwin is challenging the homophobia in the black Nationalist movement that equated all homosexuality with signs of white oppression and internalized self hatred" (60).

Importantly, Leo notably does not take male-male sex to be noteworthy in and of itself (his other homoerotic experiences remain, to him, unremarkable) but rather he grounds his sexual awakening in a necessary agony, in an agony which the novel posits as the problem of otherness. Leo strives as a lover, a brother, *and* an artist "to be present in the body of the other person," and to make his innermost joy and suffering his own. His triumph in overcoming the distance between him and his brother is rendered in a way that more than exemplifies empathy. It exemplifies the great and terrible effort of recreating the traumatic experiences of the other within the self so that we might what they face. In order to fully empathize and console his brother, he must expose himself to the traumatized body and consciousness of his brother. While sexual contact is by no means the only way to soothe Caleb, the fact that identification takes place in such full-bodied terms makes sense given the way that sex often functioned as a Baldwinian trope for exploring or consoling the other. Notably, Leo's joy at being present in the body of the other in this way calls to mind his later complaint as an actor: "I couldn't find a way into the character at all. I didn't believe in his sorrows and I didn't believe in his joys" (344). Sex and art both provide vehicles for witnessing and connection. And, importantly, both Leo and Baldwin alike strive to use art to recreate such difficult experiences for their audiences. If sex offers Leo a way to make real the joys and suffering of the other person, he aims to reflect these emotions back out to the world as an artist.

And yet, as reviews show, the sexual attempt to resolve the problem of otherness here rebounds as a problem for the reader. Insofar as Leo uses sex to regain a degree of familiarity with his brother his actions nonetheless estrange him from his readers. Such an attempt to get into the body of the other has simply gone too far. The narrative attempt to expel strangeness thus produces, as its unsettling remainder, some still yet more exorbitant strangeness that stretches how we regard the place of love within Baldwin's works. This strangeness no longer resides in the perpetually withheld subjectivity of the other (in that ethically revered abstraction that we call "otherness," "alterity," or "difference") but rather, in this most concrete intimate action that these two brothers take to meet one another in their estrangement. Such an attempt at making familiar (making *kind)* may close the distance between brothers, but it cannot do so without making the character and his author into something of a stranger to us as readers.

I raise this point in order to show that however familiar Baldwin's attempt to witness the inner life of the other felt to readers, it also produced a certain shock of estrangement. What most irks contemporaneous reviewers is how Baldwin's romanticized need to overcome otherness allows him to bypass any pathological reading of the brothers' behaviors in this scene. So reviewer Eliot Freemont-Smith frets that the scene is "explicitly detailed, through a haze of romantic mush, as if homosexual incest were or could be only romantic" (27). So scoffs Saul Mauloff that "when Baldwin says love, he really means it: the brothers make love in the novel's most intensely felt and lyrically written scene. Baldwin has a disconcerting way of dropping in such elements matter-of-factly, almost casually, as if they required no psychological and dramatic work through" (94-95). What is missing from the scene, they suggest, is a psychological framework that would make the brothers' behaviors pathologically legible as

incest. The novel seems to take for granted that this is simply what one does for a loved one when *it* comes down on you like that: "I mean, I'd do anything in the world for you" – "I knew…what my brother needed, and I was not afraid" (210). I want to suggest, though that *Baldwin* actually intends this jarring effect for his contemporaries. It seems to jolt readers away from those depictions of love and salvation they were quickly growing accustomed to. Moreover, the difficult ways that ethics and erotics join together make it difficult for us to either idealize or easily identify with the ways that these brothers respond to suffering.

The depiction of brotherly love that Baldwin presents us with is meant to be difficult to process as an ethical act. It cannot easily evidence the saving grace of love that readers come to expect from him. Instead, it confronts them with rather "disturbing attachments." I refer to Kadji Amin's monograph and phrase for once revolutionary formations of desires that are difficult to take up within the idealizing bend of queer studies because they are mired in uneven power dynamics.[lxvii] Amin includes Baldwin in a passing list of figures whose representations sometimes uncomfortably draw their erotic charge from age differentials, noting that "even James Baldwin – participated in and, in some cases, wrote about age-differentiated same- sex erotic relations. This fact has not received the critical or theoretical attention it warrants, even in queer scholarship" (25). Indeed, while we might insist that there is a kind of horizontality present in this depiction of incest, given that it at least takes place between mutually consenting siblings rather than parent-child force, but the truth is that it is not so simple as that. The difference in age and experiences *does* matter to Leo, but only in the reverse. Recall that he frames this encounter by quizzically remarking to himself, "it was strange to feel that I was *his* big brother now" (209). Such careful framing on the part of the novel attempts to offset our automatic discomfort with the power dynamics latent in their exchange by instead foregrounding the ways that the younger brother takes the lead, and does so from a feeling of desire and responsibility. But the framing doesn't do away with the inter-generational thrust of their exchange altogether. Instead, it shows, as Amin notes, how importantly eroticized such power differentials can be in Baldwin's writings.

To better support this claim about how power dynamics come to matter within Baldwin's writings, I wish to note that Leo confoundingly takes up sibling incest as a language of attachment in other moments throughout the novel. As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, this not only occurs when Leo feels compelled to take up with his black militant partner, Christopher, because he looks to him like a young orphan. Take, for instance, how Christopher tells Leo, "You're *my* dirty old man, right? I dig dirty old men. I just do not want to be out here, all hungry and cold and alone. Let's not sweat it, baby. Love me." (443). This quick phrase ("let's not sweat it, baby") not only shrugs off how hasty and how contrived their relationship may appear to others, but it also shrugs off whatever hang-ups they might have had about the uneven power-dynamics that undergirding their exchange.[lxviii] And just as Caleb tells us that his relationships to other cats ain't nobody's business, and Christopher that his dirty old man should not sweat it, Leo strikes this same note of refusal in his erotic attempt to console his friend Barbara: "I had, then, to suspend judgment, and I suspend judgment now. We had no choice. We really had no choice. I had to warm my girl, my freezing girl" (272). Indeed, this cramped position of agency seems to be the grounds of redemptive love. Finally, no scene is more jarring than the way Leo and Barbara interact with one another. It may be good and well for Leo to announce, as he kisses Barbara's forehead, "Let me kiss you…like a brother," but it is somewhat more slippery when, immediately afterwards, "She kissed me, first like a sister and then on the mouth and we lay together a while" (278-279). If their kisses first observe the sanctioned division between sibling and lover, they soon pervert these clear boundaries in Barbara's more

teasing remark, “I hope you like having a sister – a white, incestuous sister. Doesn’t that sound like part of the American dream?” (275).[lxix] These moments all present readers with erotic forms of kinship that are crucial for each character’s survival. Tellingly, each moment is accompanied by certain fears that each characters express concerning whether or not they will be understood for loving as they do.

Such turns to incest, literal or figurative, are especially jarring given the vexed place that incest especially holds within the black tradition. As Christina Sharpe notes in *Monstrous Intimacies*, given how slavery replaces the logic of making kin with making property, white men committed incestuous violations without having to consider rape as violating any larger social taboos. Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman extends this history to consider how incest afterwards functions as a trope in black feminist literatures to represent the continuing degradation that black families suffer under abusive patriarchs, acting within crushing socio-economic pressures. While these representations provide a familiar context for what incest means within a black tradition, I’m struck by how Abdur-Rahman elsewhere finds representations that hold a more reparative signification, as when she reads representations of sibling incest in Octavia Butler’s works “not as evidence of extreme black psychical, familial, and communal deformation resulting from racial oppression; instead, sibling incest is figured as a faulty but innovative circuit of desire that carries the possibility of a fierce familial cohesion and an effort toward racial preservation” (118). Matt Richardson also finds a surprisingly reparative depiction of incest in another representation of black queer women’s intimacies when for two enslaved sisters “faced with mechanical and reproductive heterosexual interactions, incest appears as the only viable option to resist their complete disintegration into sexual abjection” (64). I take my cue from such scholarship because it illustrates a turn in black queer studies away from familiar depictions of right and wrong, trauma and repair, and locates us in a messier past of sexual representations. It also turns us away from more readily affirmative representations of revolutionary love as would have allowed us to look to the black queer past – in Audre Lorde’s words – for proof of the “tenderness with which our foremothers held each other” (151). Instead, such scholarship highlights reparative representations of incest to underscore compromised acts of love and affirmation that do not easily belong within the black tradition. Where Abdur-Rahman calls the queer turn to incest that she studies a “faulty but innovative circuit,” Richardson considers its expression to be an “improvisational, unpredictable, and irresolute” expression of what kinds of intimacies we sometimes can find in the black queer past (3). I am indebted to such scholarship because they represent – like Amin’s *Disturbing Attachments* – an interest in representations of intimacy that can fall away from black and queer history because of their taboo natures. Read from this perspective, Leo’s intimate life just as easily belongs in “an archive of Black queer voices ‘from below,” Richardson’s term for situational expressions of desire that tend to “emerge from specific economic and historical conditions that mitigate abjection as well as create communal bonds” (14). Within this framework, Baldwin’s turn to sibling incest also departs from conventional ways of writing black families, black love, and black survival in ways that surprised his readers then and are largely forgotten by his readers now.

As those aforementioned reviews have shown, there are many reasons that we might feel guarded about what it takes to get inside the body of the other at this moment, and about what it takes to make us believe in their joy and agony. It may be the case, as Caleb tells us, that these loving acts “ain’t nobody’s business,” but they still violate, as Irving Howe has told us, “the small business of the novelist.” “Baldwin seems to have lost respect for the novel as a form,” he

tells us, and to have lost respect for "how other, if imaginary, people talk and act." And yet against those who accused *Tell Me How Long* of such failure, Baldwin responds that the novel:

> doesn't change from the top, it changes from the bottom. If it's not an organic change it's simply a gimmick, and the only thing one can do is work within one's limits, one's own sights, and do the work one can do … I disagree about the general assessments of *Train's* … I think real changes in form just occur, and I doubt if one's contemporaries are able to see a change when it does occur. The very people who clamor for new forms are also people who do not recognize them when they come. Since this is only so, the only thing I can do is to work and see where my experiments lead me. ("Looking Towards the Eighties," 104)

For Baldwin, the seemingly erratic form of his novel is simply an *effect* that arises from the complex relations among its many parts and characters. Rather than beginning with "the novel" as an abstract form to be filled in and executed, he maintains fidelity to his characters by insisting that he begins at the bottom, in that relational tumult in which they are felt to live — and in his response to critics he suggests that readers might do the same. While critics connect the failure of the novel with the erratic behaviors of its characters, Baldwin takes the narrative form to be an organic expression of their lived experiences. To name such shifts as organic is to demand that we, as literary scholars, reimagine what constitutes an imaginable situation. This requires taking seriously those queer affiliative practices that may fall outside of normative black nationalist and familial categories of intimacy and relation – relational forms that leave us no easy models of revolutionary love or dutifully taking care of one's kind. That racial feeling of debasement which Caleb is forced to embody in that prison cellar not only makes his sexuality into the grounds of his subjection, but also into the fraught grounds upon which he might still yet wrestle into it his black body some joy – some fleeting experience of kindness – that has been stripped from him.

I will now shift gears to consider the aesthetic implications that are raised by these intimate tangles. Like Baldwin, Leo is concerned with how best to balance art and witnessing. As an artist, he confronts his audience with social truths that they must disavow because such truths threaten to overturn their sense of reality. Leo's hope, like that of the novel, is that his audience will see themselves reflected in surprising characters and experiences that they would never have thought to. In the case of his own life, he attempts to fold in his brother's experience of reality and to convey its pathos in art. An artist, he surmises, should in this way absorb the experiences of the world and relay them outwards so that "being filled by them" it becomes possible "to fill this theater with our lives." (137). And yet because the audience has a limited understanding of the range of experiences that can be reflected in black life and art, they prefer truths that reflect back their own sense of reality, or at least the reality that is most comfortable for them to imagine. They deny black characters the dream of roundness and complexity that Baldwin's novels most strive to bring about. It is here that Leo aims to shock his audience into seeing reality in ways that align him with Baldwin's own reflections on what it means to grapple with a new aesthetic form. Leo says:

> I don't think I'd have minded if I could have found a role which had some relation to the life I lived …. But I played waiters, butlers, porters, clowns; since they had never existed in life there was no conceivable way to play them … One was imitating an artifact … and one's performance depended not at all on what one saw … but on what the audience had come to see, had been trained to see … One had to change the beat: one had to find a rhythm which arrested the rhythm … for

> the audience had, after all, placed themselves in your hands by lacking the courage to imagine about you what you knew too well about them. (343)

To keep up with his changing reality, the black artist must change the beat, must break up accustomed modes of reception. But such novel approaches can be difficult to pull off, and Leo's reservations about his own performance also resemble Baldwin's own about the novel. During an audition for *Waiting for Lefty,* Leo worries about having to perform in so didactic form: "Well, now I was in the scene and so I couldn't know – it didn't matter – whether we were any good or not … it becomes really very propagandistic, and I had always been most worried about this long section, because the boy has most of the speeches, and because it's hard to speak propaganda while relating to love. But, this morning, it seemed to work" (294). Leo is right to be worried about long, propagandistic speeches about love. His readers quickly grew exhausted with it. They pointed to the novel as being similar to the very preachy works that Baldwin critiques in his most canonical essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949).[lxx] And yet in the space of the novel, Leo is able to easily bring the role to life by infusing its stiff lines with his own livening experiences. What matters for my purposes is that Leo recognizes himself as being caught up in an aesthetic form whose value he could not immediately know since he was himself *in* the scene. His commitment to working his own sense of the world into the stiff scene becomes a fitting figure for Baldwin's own aesthetic commitments to the novel. Like Baldwin, Leo sees himself as changing the beat – *the form* – in ways that his contemporaries miss.

I suggest that we read this aesthetic shift as Baldwin attempting to grapple with the erotic shifts in belonging that are taking place in his present. His attempts to change the beat on his readers makes it so that we are accosted with a familiar messages about love, but with the volume turned up. Leo's insistence that "one had to change the beat" matters because keeping the beat is precisely what Baldwin's works strive to do. As the readers and reviewers that I opened this chapter with note, we come to expect a certain representation of love from Baldwin. His depictions of love, like the very sentences in which he writes them, move according to the most familiar sort of rhythm. To repeat that wonderful phrase from *Another Country*: *"A nigger … lives his whole life, lives and dies according to a beat. Shit, he humps to that beat and the baby he throws up in there, well, he jumps to it and comes out nine months later like a goddamn tambourine*" (*Another Country,* 6-7). In this passage, Baldwin makes the beat into an experience that is steadily transmitted across the generations. It also becomes in this way a pervasive feeling of defeat that seeps into black intimate life: one fucks to it. To change the beat is to fuck with that expressive continuity which produces blackness in its most recognizable forms. It replaces the feeling of continuity with rupture in ways that can be jarring for its audience.

Ironically, even though it is Leo who most clamors for a new beat to arrive and arrest the rhythm, he is precisely the figure in the novel who is shown to be least able to comprehend it when it comes. For instance, when Leo first hears Ray Charles, he experiences the sound as Charles testifying on his behalf, as "playing my story for me," but doing it in a way that Leo could not understand (117). Not only is Leo estranged from Charles' sound, but from the very words that Charles uses to describe it:

> I have lived long enough to see my language stolen – I was about to say betrayed; but it has certainly been pressed into a most peculiar service. "Beat," in those days, meant something very different from what it has since come to mean: for example, our poor father was "beat to his socks," which meant that his hope was gone. And no one, in those days, desired to be "funky": funk was a bad smell, it

> was the invincible odor which filled our house, the very odor of battle … waged by the living in the midst of death. (117)

Leo is not only alienated from the sound of funk music but from *the very word.* It comes at him like yet another incomprehensible vernacular that marks him as behind the times. It matters that he feels as if his language is stolen and betrayed by those who embrace the words "beat" or "funk," because such feelings remain central to how Baldwin represents the struggles of the flesh. And because his writings stage so prominently the attempt to love the funky and beaten flesh of the other, imagining the moment in which they are accepted also requires imagining an end to that dialectic that most informs the beat of his own art. Through this fleeting reference to Charles, a sonic form arrives into the novel that Leo cannot yet fully recognize as bearing the truth of his own experiences.

Within the context of the novel, however, we must read the younger generation's bold embrace of funk alongside Leo and Caleb's waning struggle to embrace the funky meanings that their black bodies have been forced to signify. If it is hard for Leo to believe that anybody would want to be funky, it may stem from how he internalizes his brother's account of what happened to him in that prison cellar. "You had to shit and piss in a pail … and sometimes they made like they was going to spill the pail on you," Caleb says (237). Caleb's abject experiences in the prison cellar represent a seasoning ritual that the guards use to make his black body feel abject. Blackness is forced to embody all that stinks. And even worse than being spat on and being told "Nigger, you ain't worth shit" is the moment when Caleb is forced to repeat what they say about him (239). He carries this feeling with him long afterwards: "But that cellar, baby, I won't never forget that cellar … phew! Baby, I thought I'd never get that stink out of me" (234). Caleb's trauma is contagious. According to Leo, Caleb "did not want to tell me what his time away had been like … he flinched whenever my breath touched the open wound, from the distance between us, as though he were saying, "*Don't come near me, I've got the plague"* (202). Caleb's story thus "created a great wound in the universe" (239) that is figured as contagious and because Leo gets so near to the "open wound," it infects him. He mourns afterwards how soiled he feels in comparison to the rest of the world: "all, all were clean as I was not, as I could never be, and all – all – were as remote from me as they would have been had I been in my grave and drilled a hole through my tombstone to peep out at the world" (242). The hasty events that follow demonstrate how fully Leo has internalized his brother's funked up bodily sensibility. After Caleb decides to move away, Leo falls immediately afterwards into the company of tragic, one-dimensional lovers – all older men than him – who signify a low point: "I first smoked marihuana, in a cellar with some other older boys, and a very funky girl" (243). Being in the cellar returns us to the space in which Caleb was soiled, permitting him to further recreate his brother's imagined conditions.[lxxi]

I gloss these abject moments in order to show why being funky or beat so deeply confounds Leo. The soiled feeling which Caleb experiences in prison and which Leo contracts from his account of it provides the only model that Leo has for what it means to be funky and beaten. It explains why we find Leo earlier on in the novel shitting in a chamber pot between flashbacks, struggling with the heavy feeling of his black flesh: "I wanted to die – to drop my black carcass someplace and never be humiliated by it any more … I strained and sweated and my heavy stink filled the room. I put my hands to my woolly hair, that vile plantation and thought I would tear it" (68): "I wondered why humiliation seemed, after all, at bottom, to be my natural condition" (69). How jarring it must therefore be to hear from just outside this vile plantation the sounds of a younger generation now celebrating funk as positively *essential* to black life. Rather than

attempting to *Funk the Erotic* – to borrow L.H. Stalling's turn of phrase – Leo is looking to help recover his own black body from its funk. To that same degree, the charge of the other comes less from the funky appeal that is attached to the black body in and of itself than by the compassionate need to be with it in that stink so as to make it bearable. However much Leo is estranged from the sonic phenomenon of funk, it forces him to reflect upon the difficult impact of racialization. Funk represents a phenomenon that is both familiar to him and strange. It is familiar because he has spent his whole life running away from everything that makes him feel funky and it is strange because funk is being embraced as the new sound of blackness. This means that funk is embracing precisely those kinds of bodily experiences and expressions that he cannot bring himself to fully remember.

Given how deeply racial embodiment is suffused with such tragic feelings, it is difficult to locate any expression of desire that is not permeated by feelings of abjection. It is thus important to my sense of black queer history that Baldwin does not at any point allow sex to offer any utopian sense of erotic life to his readers. Rather, Leo and Caleb's relationship to their bodies (and to the bodies of one another) are so relentlessly mediated by those racial fantasies and aggressions that characterize the racial politics of America. Not only are characters' sexual experiences therefore difficult to disentangle from trauma, but the ways that they respond to this sexual trauma often draw upon homophobic language that we are right to critique. Baldwin turns to these homophobic expressions not so as to gain a kind of purchase with black militant politics of the time, but rather to explore the fraught formation of black men's sexualities under difficult conditions. Furthermore, the violence that white men visit upon black men makes them appear even less manly than they intend. Caleb remarks that the sexual power that the overseer lords over him only confirms that "he wasn't a man, I don't know what he was" (238).

Blackness becomes inseparable from acting out the sexual fantasies and curiosities that have most been projected upon it. As a result, black men develop over the course of the novel phobic relations to their sexual desires. To see this, I want to return us more directly to the language in which the overseer threatens to orally rape Caleb and the loaded way in which Caleb relays his own vulnerability to Leo. The overseer's threat takes the form of a riddle. He says, "Nigger, if my balls was on your chin, where would my prick be?" (233). The most immediate meaning of his threat is clear, but the way that Caleb describes it adds to the overseer's phrasing another layer which draws its more insidious meaning from surrounding scenes throughout the novel. What Caleb really communicates is his fear of being subjected to a white man's fantasies: "He was going to make me act out his question" (234). In a novel that is so attentive to *acting* and to being typecast, Caleb draws into focus the ways in which the black body can be erotically scripted into a state of submission. He is being made to act out yet another limited role, a submissive role which a white man in power here plays out to an erotic effect. This kind of language of being *made to act* resurfaces in other moments to a similar effect. For instance, Leo is earlier sneered at for entering a bar in the company of his white friends: "we were rather *too* queer" (133), he notes, and the bar patrons' "minds were like dirty windowpanes, and so we obligingly acted out their fantasies for them" (133). When Leo says that he acted out their fantasies, he means that he camps it up by parodically mirroring back to his spectators the stereotypes that he imagines they hold about him. Whether acting out a fantasy or a question, what these two moments have in common are racist projections. Set beside Caleb's account, we can see how acting out the question of a white man becomes yet another form of acting out his fantasy. In either case, black men are made to answer to phobic constructions of black maleness,

and whether they are framed as bestial tops or submissive bottoms, they are made to act out equally limiting scripts.

These moments of phobic projection importantly shape the erotics of the novel and, by extension, Leo's own response to funk, given how mixed up the black body becomes with funky racist fantasies. Not only do black men internalize these feelings, but they channel them outwards into necessarily fraught sexual forms. In the case of Leo's own sexual subjectivity, his feelings manifest in a violent or alienated response to the white world. Take, for instance the slippery erotics of power that take place during a scene of stop and frisk. Leo chalks the encounter up to sexual paranoia: "cops love frisking black boys, they want to find out if what they've heard is true" (251). White men are in this way haunted by their own projections that black men still have to answer to in various ways.[lxxii]

Because black men are so thoroughly made to embody these phobic projections, their erotic subjectivities are shown to be terribly bound up with the filthy fantasies that the world has projected upon them. This means that the awful denigrations that force black men to submit to white male power can also return in how they respond in turn to these threats: in many cases, they vengefully look to reestablish themselves as men using these very same sexual terms and techniques of denigration. The erotics of power is played out between the races as a game of tit for tat. Leo therefore draws upon the rhetorical structure of the overseer's threat ("nigger, if my balls were on your chin, where would my prick be?") in order to imagine what he might speak back to those cops who frisk him: "baby, if my prick was a broomstick, I'd sure make your tonsils know you had an asshole … Now come on, you faggot, and beat my ass" (256). In such moments Baldwin interrogates the way in which racism contaminates the sexual field of the novel. He does this to suggest that racism relies upon a phobically and libidinally charged interplay of othering that leaves whites and blacks estranged from one another. But just as importantly, he shows black queer men who are involved in these sexual forms of othering can just as easily deploy homophobic language as a phobic response to the sexual ways in which they themselves have been denigrated. As always, Baldwin less aims to idealize these figures than to interrogate the ways in which sexuality is formed within the nexus of complicated social forces.

For the reasons that I have described, the black queer men that Baldwin represents never seem to arrive at Beam's revolutionary love. Instead, they grapple with sex drives that are tinged with the treacherous play of desire that make them other to themselves. While Baldwin's writings often speak so eloquently to the ways in which white people, *not* black people, are dehumanized by racism, he also creates black characters who perform erotic acts that can be just as dehumanizing. He does so in order to suggest the ways in which even black queer desire remains inextricable from the twisting influence of its surrounding environment. To that point, Leo says that black people "saw themselves as others had seen them. They had been formed by the images made of them by those who had the deepest necessity to despise them. The bitterly contemptuous uses to which they had been put by others was the very beginning of their history, the key to their lives, and the very cornerstone of their identities" (189). Sex cannot be *the key* to decoding the novel because sex merely expresses the tangled and unbearable racial history that one has lived. It symbolizes the terror, the wonder, and the many ways in which we are estranged from one another.

I turn to these examples because they showcase the various ways in which sex is shot through with larger fantasies and phobias about race. Sex plays a great role in circulating and maintaining fantasies about racial otherness, but it is also used by characters in order to probe the limits of such fantasies and so too the possibility of genuine connection across the races. For instance,

when Leo has sex with white people earlier on his life, he does so in order to figure out what his body can mean to them. He "fooled around" with one of his white friends, he admits, without being able to rightly "say what was driving me. Perhaps I had to know – to know – *if* my body could be despised, how *much* it could be despised" (198). During the exchange he is preoccupied with the dialectic of black and white, self and other, thinking to himself: "I wondered if she recognized me" (198). He probes, too, the ways in which white and black people fantasize about one another: "I wondered if she, while I had been trampling through a meadow, had been clawing through a jungle, dreading the hot breath and awaiting the great stroke of King Kong" (199). As a primal figuration of black male sexuality, *King Kong* returns rather parodically in the next chapter, but in this particular instance it marks Leo's dread for the dehumanizing projection which he feels leads white women to desire him. On the flip side, his pastoral images of the white body make it so that his own fantasies are no less charged by racial scripts. In the end, they are both acting out one another's questions and fantasies about the racialized body of the other. And while Leo has many fears about what speaking aloud his own desires might mean (" If this broad could read your mind and know what a freak you are") he is just as interested "to see how much of a freak *she* is" (198).

Such troubling questions about the possibility of interracial desire spring up even in the otherwise perplexing minds of the younger generation. Towards the end of the novel, Leo's white ex-girlfriend, Barbara, confesses to him that she has just had sex with his current boyfriend, Christopher. Tellingly, the morality of the novel sets aside the question of infidelity to permit sex to be used to explore one another's consciousnesses. Leo responds to her frantic apologies with a shrug: "I don't feel – whatever you're supposed to feel when something like this happens. I just don't feel – *wronged*" (473). Baldwin allow his characters to live, unrebuked, as ethical swingers. They seem to pass one another around for the greater good of interrogating one another's consciousness. The erotic triangulation that takes place in this moment may not be the ethics of alterity that Tim Dean celebrates in Samuel Delany's cruising scenes, but it has similar non-monogamous effects upon his characters.[lxxiii] What motivates this action for Barbara, and what makes it forgivable for Leo, is that Christopher is merely using sex to answer an important question about whether or not it is possible for a white woman to genuinely care about a black man. Barbara's explanation of what she felt Christopher wanted from their encounter points us back to Leo's own phobias that he once himself had while fooling around with his white friend. According to Barbara, "I think he [Christopher] wanted to find out – if love was possible … I think he had to find *out* what I thought of *his* body, by taking mine" (474). Christopher, in short, wants to find out if a black man can be more to a white woman than a black ape. He "takes" her body so as to see whether or not whites and blacks can have a shared future together, and he is frightened when "he realized love was possible" (474). Given how little attention has been given to Christopher throughout the novel, this exchange feels rushed, and yet it is an important scene in how it draws together the mood of the novel as I have described it. Christopher has sex with Barbara so as to act out the question of whether or not coming together across race is even possible. If sex can be used to rigidify racial estrangement, it can also be used to loosen these differences and allow characters to relate to one another.

I have mentioned these scenes in order to show the ways in which sex is used to interrogate the collective consciousness in ways are nonetheless distinct from the more public sexual cultures developing throughout the 1960s. Rather than exhibiting sexuality out in the open, sex had to remain occulted. Left in the bedrooms, it could better serve Baldwin as a narrative device for probing the secrets of consciousness and its being for the other. While the novel does not

advocate cruising – too impersonal, too detached, too public – it does invest in the prospect of such experimental flings that are committed to understanding how intensely racialized subjects exist for others.

Such acts of affirmation should strike readers of Baldwin as familiar and strange, for though they carry out the sacred creed to love the other, they also throw this familiar saving grace into such unimaginable contortions. Whether discussing Caleb's phobic construction of women, Leo's homophobic construction of the police, or the freaky questions and fantasies that blacks and whites have about one another, these intimate lives of Baldwin's characters are difficult to idealize. They are meant to challenge us. Their complex erotic forms attempt to respond to feelings of bodily humiliation that are at the bottom of the black experience, at least as it was imagined by Baldwin. Furthermore, these racialized experiences determine the forms that love takes in the novel from the bottom up and the challenge of the novel is to embrace the other in exactly those cramped conditions of agency. As Leo says, "one must attempt to deal with what is, or else go under or go mad" (271).

But dealing with *what is* is difficult. The taboo ways that characters attempt to reach out to another in their unimaginable suffering only seem to drive home Leo's words that "it is hard to love the beaten. It means accepting their condition; whereas, precisely, one is asking oneself, *What shall I do to be saved*?" (205). But who would take up this love? To the claim that this is simply not how real people behave, Dixon's rebuke again seems most apt – "When you love as we did you will know/ there is no life but this." It is hard to love the beaten. They resist the neat terms which we've laid out for them, or the idealized terms in which we would ideally have them pursue their liberation and survival. Instead, what they leave behind is some fraught attempt at kind-ness, some surprising show of concern for one another that they have, somehow, in the end most perplexingly made our own.

Leo is no less baffled by the models of gay belonging than he is by the radical racial and sexual politics of the younger generation who wear their identities so brazenly. I have foregrounded such moments throughout this chapter that are meant to relay a character, and an author, who is baffled by the terms in which the younger generations express themselves. I have done so with an eye for foregrounding the kinds of sexual bonds that Baldwin is interested in representing and that resist coming together under the term "gay." Given the frequently traumatic and alienating feelings that make sex so meaningful for Baldwin's characters, it matters that this term "gay" comes up only one other time in the novel, in the form of *gaiety.* Leo and Caleb at one point move through streets "full of a noise like gaiety … But one realized that it could not be gaiety when one looked at the thin lips and flashing spectacles, the crisply toasted, curled hair of the ladies" (224). Leo sees through this veneer of civilization to insist upon its underlying horror. However strange the word "funk" or "beat" may feel as a prized description of oneself, gaiety is no different. American gaiety, for Leo, is tied to morbid acts that have often benefited from either neglecting or preying upon black life. As Leo says, "I had too often been the occasion of their fearful celebrations," likely referring to such incidents as the jovial banter that takes place between cops during stop and frisks, or else to the lynching outings that Baldwin writes about elsewhere (225). When Leo separates himself from the word "gay" he likely does so because the feeling that the word itself refers to is a far cry from his own feelings as a black man. Nevertheless, the novel captures quite beautifully how many moments Leo's pessimistic feelings of estrangement seem at risk of tipping over into an unwanted identification. To that end, I conclude by suggesting that Leo and Baldwin alike remain open to identifying with – or at least letting themselves in some way be identified with – a gay culture that they could not understand.

I conclude my reading of the novel itself with one final scene that explores this uneasy hinge between two disparate generations. One is loud where the other is reticent. One feels proud and exuberant where the other feels only that it must struggle with a traumatic past that it has disavowed. The scene takes place when Leo finds himself estranged from the jarring sounds of San Francisco's youth cultures. He is perplexed by the many styles of clothing ("I had never worn such costumes, surely, beads, robes, sandals, and earrings") but also by the people's no less showy intimacies, and how they "dared to embrace another in the sight of all the world" (480). The youths are flamboyant not only in their styles of dress but also in how publicly they embrace one another. They flout miscegenation taboos, but also likely those taboos surrounding more public sexual culture.[lxxiv] Immediately after remaking upon the noisy affections and affectations of this younger generation, Leo and Christopher go in to view a jarring and baffling piece of performance art whose description I will reproduce at length below. As we read it, recall Leo's earlier confidence that "one had to change the beat" (295):

> The stage held four or five of the loudest musicians in the world's history. It was impossible to tell whether they were any good or not, their sound was too high. But it did not really matter whether their sound was any good or not, this sound was, literally, not meant for my ears, and it existed entirely outside my capacity for judgment. It was a rite that I was witnessing - *witnessing, not sharing*. It made me think of rites I had seen in Caleb's church, in many churches; of black feet stomping in the mud of the levee; of rites older than that, in forests irrecoverable. The music drove and drove, into the past – into the future. It sounded like an attempt to make a great hole in the world, and bring up what was buried … On the wall were four screens, and, on these screens, ectoplasmic figures and faces endlessly writhed, moving in and out of each other, in a tremendous sexual rhythm which made me think of nameless creatures blindly coupling in all the slime of the world, and at the bottom of the sea, and in the air we breathed, and in one's very body …. I stood there a few moments longer, and tried to understand what was happening. (481-482, italics mine)

The clamor is connected somehow to the jarring spectacle that Leo has just witnessed on the streets. These two interlocking spectacles mark Leo's place within a new structure of feeling which he is trying to understand. Importantly, he feels both recognition and estrangement as he hears the sound, just as he earlier did with Ray Charles. Such a sound does not seem altogether unprecedented within the black musical tradition, it is only that the volume has been so dissonantly turned up. We are meant to compare its effect with Leo's own work as an actor, for just as Leo had "no idea what I sounded like" performing his propagandistic piece about love with Barbara ("it didn't matter … whether we were any good or not"), he claims that the loudness of the musicians' sound made it "impossible to tell whether they were any good or not." Instead, their riotous aesthetic speaks to an audience that does not include Leo. He registers their art as existing somewhere outside his capacity for judgment. It speaks to him in the most sublime sensibilities of a generation that has risen up some time way after he was formed.

When the musicians "attempt to make a great hole in the world, and bring up what was buried," they play out the intimate truth of the novel as I have read it. The language refers us back to how Caleb's testimony "created a great wound in the universe" (233). It also refers us back to Leo's response to this intimate history, and how he claims to be "in my grave … [with] a hole through my tombstone to peep out at the world" (242), and feeling like he could just "drop

my black carcass someplace and never be humiliated by it any more" (68). The sonic attempt to make a hole in the world digs up and claims the abject black self that Leo wishes to leave behind. In short, the musicians drudge up all that funk and play it so sublimely that Leo can scarcely begin to intuit its meaning. When we therefore watch the phantasmagoric specters on screen who "endlessly writhed, moving in and out of each other, in a tremendous sexual rhythm" (482), we get the sense that they are really set there in order to express the sordid and tangled intimacies that most preoccupy Baldwin as a novelist. Through them we witness the attempts of a divided country and consciousness trying to think itself, trying to make its way back into a single kind after the imposition of so many unsparing categories of difference.

When Leo tells us that sex is the symbol but not the key, he prepares us for this jarringly sensual moment that we are left to decode. This last performance instructs us to look upon the many sexual relations that we have read not as reflecting back some innate truth of sexuality, but, far more sublimely, as reflecting back to us the far more vast conundrum of what race has done to desire. What makes his description of lovers "blindly coupling in all the slime of the world" so powerful is that it allows no character any clean way to relate to one another sexually. The composer takes Caleb's feeling that "I'd never get that stink out of me" (234) and plays it as the larger truth of the world. The spectacle is meant to make us stand back in wonder. How could such a thing as "gay" ever climb out of this primordial muck with its slime, its nameless creatures, and claim such a word for itself as would jarringly make sexuality into a synonym for *happy*? How could such a word take all of the baffling and terrifying circumstances that produce one's sexuality and shrink it into a single claim that is put upon one since birth?

Conclusion: A Rite I Was Witnessing

Do you feel like a stranger in gay America?

In his 1984 interview with Richard Goldstein, Baldwin's answer to this question is characteristically dodgy. Full of re-directing clarifications ("Well, first of all I feel like a stranger in America from almost every conceivable angle"), he first draws attention to the word "gay" itself ("I never understood what is meant by it") and, even while claiming not to know its meaning, he seems to know enough about it to know it does little to capture his sense of reality ("I simply feel that it's a word that has very little to do with me"). Moving away from the word now to the people to which it refers, he speaks broadly of his alienation from the new gay public ("What I saw of that world absolutely frightened me, bewildered me. I didn't understand the necessity of all that role playing. And in a way, I still don't"), and when we think he has resumed that familiar lexicon of enchantment – frightened, bewildered – Goldstein offers if he perhaps feels "baffled by it," leaving just enough room for Baldwin to once more pivot and slip free: "I feel remote from it. It's a phenomenon that came along much after I was formed" (*The Last Interview*, 60).

I have concluded my reading of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* with this scene in the hopes that it might add to our understanding of how Baldwin negotiates his baffling sense of sexual estrangement in his own moment and in his accustomed role as the nation's witness. Given how often the reception of Baldwin today points to him as being the timeless witness to *our* times (consider the buzz around the Raoul Peck's documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*), I am refreshed by how belatedly he arrives in his old age to address – or even not address – the most pressing concerns of his moment. Not only does he not know what HIV/AIDS is when asked in

1984, but he declares one of the most pressing terms for the last two decades of organizing to be incomprehensible. How belated his once timely prowess feels at this current juncture! He appears slow to make himself into the witness that writers like Joseph Beam wished him to be. Rather than the well-oiled joints of complexity, his characteristic and comma-studded hedging seem more the stuff of a mind that is stiffly adjusting to speak to experiences on which he may have little knowledge.

Please understand that I do not point to this moment, as I once did, to indicate his failure as a witness, but rather to offer a more realistic model of what queer witnessing looks like.[lxxv] Here in 1984 we find the great intellectual working through his own ambivalent relationship to a people who had long ago claimed him among their ranks. (Think of Giovanni's Room – not the book, but the lesbian and gay bookstore that opened back in 1973's Philadelphia.) He may feel estranged from his new sexual contemporaries, but he nonetheless seems poised to adopt a supportive relationship to them. Whatever Baldwin's distrust of the word "gay," when the interviewer doubles back to ask him if he has feelings of "responsibility" for gay people, Baldwin's answer is telling: "Toward the phenomenon we call gay, yeah. I feel special responsibility because I would have to be a kind of witness to it, you know" (62). His language marks him as taking up his familiar role as a witness in order to overcome the shock that he feels at a manner of life that he feels to be so different from his own. Sure, he may claim for himself some distance from the "the phenomenon we call gay," but his reluctance to accept the terms of gay belonging allow him to serve as an ally but without having to cede his place as an outsider witness. Baldwin's relationship to gay people is therefore left in a state of suspension. He is less the all-knowing witness than he is the somewhat reluctant witness to a people – a phenomenon – who would now pronounce him to be their kin.

And so he is. It is in the middle of 1983 that Beam "looked around the well-stocked shelves of Giovanni's Room … where I worked, I wondered where was the work of Black gay men" (xix). Baldwin may not have submitted to the anthology when Beam approached him in 1984, but he is doubtlessly claimed within it. Baldwin's reluctant phrase for identification ("I would have to be a kind of witness to it") seems more prophetic of his semi-reluctant involvement in a movement that would leave him little to no choice but to be folded up into its ranks. Not only does the black lesbian and gay 1996 anthology *Go the Way Your Blood Beat* take the title of this very interview for its own, but Baldwin's works are often recontextualized within many other black gay anthologies, making his relationship to gay men anything but remote. (Think again of what James Earl Hardy writes in his 2008 introduction *In The Life*, "And We Continue to Go the Way Our Blood Beats…".) In effect, the interview preserves him in a kind of suspension: he is leaning in to become the witness to gay life that he never actually makes himself into as a fiction writer. Still, for just as many gay men his place as a witness is already a done deal: he was somehow documenting their inner lives all along.

When you read the selections from the anthology *Go the Way Your Blood Beats*, though, you realize that its editor Shawn Stewart Ruff was less interested in selecting works that fit under the heading of gay. Ruff instead includes selections from writers such as Amiri Baraka, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones, much of which does not even represent homosexuality outright, but rather speaks to themes that Ruff felt were somehow pertinent to lesbian and gay life. Rather what he takes from Baldwin he sums up in his commitment to representing a range of experiences that demonstrate "love, love choices and the human capacity to love," not just straightforward depictions of gay love (xxix). In this case, going the way your blood beats offered more truly a queer approach to the black literary canon that a singular focus upon same-

sex desire. Just as Glave identifies with Baldwin at the level of shared rage, the prolific black gay writer E. Lynn Harris opens *Go the Way Your Blood Beats* with a foreword that documents a similar feeling: "I read *Giovanni's Room* in a dim, dusty corner of the library, trying to find my place in the world …I remember thinking that I felt as though Baldwin knew me through his words, knew the feelings I had but did not quite understand" (xiii). Whatever disconnect Baldwin had therefore felt to have arisen between him and the younger generations, reading him permitted a younger generation of black gay men more of a feeling of kinship and similarity than anything else. The feelings of brotherhood which reading Baldwin makes possible here stem less from their shared feeling of being closeted than from shared feelings of alienation, loneliness, and rage. Such feelings help create the possibility of a black gay world they held in common. Whatever it was that had once so escaped the consciousnesses of the young black gay male writer, it always seems to come back years later in the guise of something that Baldwin himself already knew and experienced in their place. Rather than extending to them a way of coming out, Baldwin's novels seem to have been more powerful in extending to black gay writers a language of loneliness and disavowal that they can only speak to now after having read Baldwin.

In this chapter I have asked what reading Baldwin can give us other than the revelation of shared knowledge, especially any form of knowledge that refers us back to a single gay truth. By way of transition, we might compare such moments with Delany's own disappointed reading of *Giovanni's Room,* which thwarts his attempts to articulate whatever it was that was personally happening in him at the time of his reading it. Writers like Dixon, Glave and Harris may find their own bad feelings reflected in Baldwin's writings, but when Delany goes to speak to his own experiences, we saw that he feels betrayed by assuming Baldwin's views as his own. He attempts to come out using the "public language" that he's learned from *Giovanni's Room* only to find that his relationship to his sexuality did not in any way reflect the relationship that Baldwin had to sexuality. Under the powerful sway of Baldwin's words, reading *Giovanni's Room* more leads him to disavow than clarify his own experiences about what being with men feels like for him. Rather, what he is able to take away from Baldwin is the power of speaking to his own most irreducible truth. Writers like Baldwin, he admits, "at least, *had* talked about it. And however full of death and darkness their accounts had been, they'd at least essayed a certain personal honesty. And the thing about honesty is that all of ours is different. Maybe I just had to try my own" (150). What Baldwin bequeaths to Delany is a desire to testify to a range of intimacies that might better suit his interests as a black gay man. It may appear that he is shaking free of Baldwin's hold on his sexuality, but it may just as easily be that he draws from Baldwin his own courage to go the way his blood beats, and to make himself into a witness for his own erotic life.

When Leo thus refers to this sexual rite as one which he is "witnessing, not sharing," he adopts the same stance which Baldwin does in this moment when he looks upon gay people as an outsider and thinks, "I would have to be a kind of witness to it." He may not share in their strange manners of self-expression, but, as a phenomenon, it may at least have something to do with that sublime sexual rhythm which has so entranced him over the course of his career. And by referring not to gay people, but to "the phenomenon we call gay," he reduces this newly emergent sexual formation down to a mere emanation of a vexed and longer history, one which he, perhaps, feels in some way charged to think.

Chapter 3: Samuel Delany's Grubby Hands

The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.

- James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist*

Repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it.

- Gilles Deleuze, from *Difference and Repetition*

Samuel Delany jotted down in his teenage diary that what first made him notice the boy on the bus was that he "had good hands; I remember that's what made me look at him" (32). And yet what begins as bare attraction is soon turned into a scene of ethical reflection as the boy "spit up a handful of brownish fluid into his palm" and, humiliated, now fully vomiting, silently endured the disgust and the polite disavowal of the passengers, with "his hands filthy and all wrapped up in the dirty handkerchiefs" (32). Once soiled, the hands require a tender acknowledgement that nobody on the bus appears able to give.

This non-encounter (for not even Delany himself seems able to respond) triggers in Delany memories of an earlier boy who had once vomited on a subway, and a nose bleed that he himself once had on a bus, and how "[a]ll the people did was move away from me. Not one tissue was forthcoming, not one handkerchief, not even a newspaper" (33). When Delany exits the bus, he suddenly feels "an emptiness, a false emptiness however … as if it were hiding an inferno behind it, like the magician who flashes both sides of a silk handkerchief and says, 'See nothing at all,' while all the time you know that he will produce from behind that kerchief something mysterious and even a little horrible" (33). The withheld kerchief, no longer literal, now offers itself as a figure for that which it simultaneously veils and exposes: the pristine limits of empathy and recognition that render abject bodies beyond our concern. Back at his apartment building, Delany paces his hallway barefoot, still unhinged. He fears the janitor will see him: "The thing is the way janitors' faces don't know how to be anything but hard and grimy. Janitors should understand people because they know so much about garbage, but they handle so much crap that they resent it, they resent it in people. Anybody who resents crap in people is going to be disappointed" (36).

And so, once soiled, the boy's hands, which at first held nothing but the raw fact of desire – so beautifully were they shaped – are now filled with a more urgent meaning that the puke affords, and whose themes are everywhere present within Delany's larger corpus as it is discussed today. They reflect, that is, the intimate relationship between bodily abjection, social value, and contingent networks of care. As Delany writes in the previous entry, "the instant in which I learned what shit and filth were, i [sic] also learned what respect was – and that respect was merely the lie which enables us to cover up love without destroying ourselves" (24). What began then at seventeen as a casual encounter with good hands thus concludes with this reflection on the ability of people to be good to one another, and to forge a more capacious ethics of desire and recognition from within the soiled seat of abjection.

With such titles as "Delany's Dirt," "Excremental Ethics," "Debased and Lascivious," and "An Affinity for the Lumpen," Delany scholarship has done much to flesh out the connections between precarity, abjection, and desire. The 2017 release of Delany's journals, from which the

above incidents are taken, will easily affirm this way of mattering. And while such critical concern for that bodily waste which both coats and codes the boy's hand is indeed valuable, I find that my attraction to this scene begins with the mere erotic surface of the boy's hands, and how to make good with this bare flesh that first attracts Delany's gaze. That is, the more intimate I become with Delany's corpus, the more I develop a studied fascination with that nearly compulsive verve that everywhere characterizes his enamored descriptions of hands. As readers of Delany will know, he is far more likely to describe the "good hands" that we spot above in those terms attributed to janitors – as hard and grimy – than as befitting any manicured ideal. They evoke a touch that any reader knows intimately, as when Delany's memoir dotes on fingers "broad as broom handles and dirt gray, with knuckles big as walnuts," and, how what most "astonished…though I couldn't have told you why, was the big nails were as badly bitten" as those of any "inveterate nail biter" found throughout his fiction (*Motion of Light*, 40; 34). So when the debut of his journals notes that when a friend "bites his nail," "I become conscious of myself, feeling the present," we find once more, beside all that dirt, that this erotically heightened attention to hands still resonates across all genres of Delany's writings over half a century later, from science-fiction to pornography (69).[lxxvi]

The grubbiness that I refer to in my chapter title, then, does not refer alone to the tender grime of Delany's unique tastes, but also to how often this unrelentingly familiar touch tarnishes our fantasy of an author affectively removed from their work. Indeed, Delany's drive to express his erotic fixations at times displaces the aim of the finished work. His memoir states that by the age of ten he had "discovered a trade-off between writing and desire" wherein the fugitive thrill of erotic descriptions became an end in its own right:

> making my written account as complete and narrationally rich as I could, my own erotic response was much greater; the orgasm it produced was stronger, more satisfying, hugely pleasurable. But, once this had occurred, the fantasy was used up. It just became words on paper, at one with its own descriptive or aesthetic residue, but with little or no lingering erotic charge. I would have to create another. (57)

From this perspective, what we may read as a finished work would prove to be little more than the residue of a looped drive – the crude surplus of Delany's writing process – for if his singular erotic taste for dirty, bitten fingernails never fully recedes from his craft, neither does it leave us in possession of any more immediately useful meaning as a rumination on the dirt or puke that occasionally coats them. Unadorned, the bitten nails possess no ready-made meaning, and, still, they are everywhere felt to be meaningful. How then to read them?

As this chapter aims to show, there seems to be a difference between how these kinds of erotic descriptions matter within Delany's corpus, for the characters as much as the one who authors them, and for we scholars who labor to make them institutionally meaningful. Bearing in mind Delany's irreducible tastes, we might look again at the quotidian scene of transit with which we began and see how it is likely such a hand that first solicits Delany to spot its overlooked goodness, and to feel, even after it is soiled, a connection with it. Indeed, once adorned with waste, my meaning-making mind knew precisely what to do, but with the non-narrative goodness of the hands themselves, their likely value seemed the stuff of mere trivia. This differential treatment concerns our willingness to be affected by new objects of desire and study. How might this facet at once so dear to the author and so familiar to the reader matter within our discussions of his work? What might this tell us about the relationship of our reading

practices to unvalued, uncategorized, and uninstitutionalized forms of desire, and their imbrication within more legible structures of meaning, such as race, class, gender, and ability?

This chapter thus asks how we might attend the peculiar celebration that Delany's writings make possible, which, for me, is a question of how we might attend *to* them. Or rather, how can we affirm a queer desire that we ourselves do not share? In order to answer this question, the first half of this chapter rehearses the problem of incommensurable values raised by Delany's fetish by examining moments in which scholars and fans draw attention to bitten nails as fleeting objects of interest. I am there concerned with how Delany is able to sneak nail-biting into academic conversations by setting the act in relation to more pressing forms of disposable life in his graphic memoir, *Bread & Wine* (1997). While I open with how Delany's erotic fixation comes to matter within class-based concerns, I conclude with his sprawling pornographic novel, *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* (2012), as one instance in which Delany's passing descriptions of bitten nails signify their importance within more flamboyant scenes of race and waste play. How does the novel's self-declared "black gay utopia" occasion so eclectic a gathering of nail-biters, who come to dwell both in, and on, its utopian erotics of race? Chewing on these apparently minor concerns, I aim to show how the sociality of nail-biting, while situated outside the commons of intellectual concerns, nonetheless accretes a kind of undercommons around it that allows black gayness to matter differently. We find an incommensurable array of figures that gather around an otherwise missed form of appreciation, but whose minor fixations bring about the conditions of possibility and flourishing for otherwise abandoned forms of life: queer of color, impoverished, transient, differently abled, and so on. If this minor intimacy in *Bread & Wine* can occasion a black gay artist's and a white transient's coming together, it facilitates still more polymorphously perverse forms of inter-group identification in *Spiders*. Reading within Delany's erotics of nail-biting thus allows us to model how non-identitarian modes of desire can call forth queer experiences of kind-ness among different racialized groups.

As one such gesture of kindness from Delany's fan communities, the 2015 commemorative anthology *Stories for Chip: A Tribute to Samuel R. Delany* begins with an interview that is imaginatively written from a third person perspective that emulates the futuristic and pulp tones of Delany's own voice. The interview takes place at a diner and the cashier gives Delany a graphic illustrating a "grubby" figure with "rust under his gnawed fingernails" (Gunn, 15-16). It is the interviewer who sees the graphic – or who sees Delany seeing it – but the free indirect style leads us to believe we have momentarily assumed Delany's perspective. As such, the interviewer deigns not only to know exactly at what Delany is looking, but also the descriptive manner in which he would relay it. The piece thus serves as a sensual homage to the peculiar and erotic worlding power represented by Delany's craft. It takes a genuine interest in Delany's interests. What fandom here makes possible, then, is a way to appreciate and repeat Delany's free-floating fixation at the level of pure homage, and without having to tether the descriptive to any canned meaning. As such, the gnawed, noted hands here become what Roland Barthes would call the "reign of the irreducible," for affirming what seems to drift free of all paradigms (59).

In contrast, Delany's irreducible fixation often merits critical remark only when it performs ideology critique by being folded within more readily legible sites and intersections of meaning. Indeed, in scholarly discourse, Delany's fixation is now so well-known as to occasionally merit discussion, but only as a passing and peculiar aside, otherwise insulated from our sense of Delany's erotic worldview. For instance, in her article on the utopian worlding power of

Delany's graphic novel *Bread &* Wine, Ann Matsuuchi cites an interview between Delany and bell hooks that praises the graphic novelist, Mia Woolf, for her innovative visual treatment of genitals. hooks remarks, "we are still trying to figure out how we can create sexual images, images of the penis, that are loving and tender and not about domination," which she takes to be the memoir's winning achievement (qtd. in Matsuuchi, 271). "Drawing the penis in a way that conveys love rather than violence is no easy task," Matsuuchi affirms, adding that the true power of the co-produced text lies in its ability to afford readers "the chance to look through the eyes of a 'cock-sucker' so textually illustrated" (271; 274). For both readers, Woolf's illustrations of Delany's prose focalize the worldview of a cocksucker, an identity that has been forged and politicized by histories of insult.[lxxvii] In one subsection, however, Matsuuchi momentarily breaks from the phallocentric approach, shifting her focus to the many intimate depictions of hands "evidenced throughout his [Delany's] work," while praising Woolf's choice to "include every fold, wrinkle, and half-missing fingernail" in her illustrations (280). Still, Delany's illustrious desire for a half-missing fingernail never accrues the same utopic inflection as tender phalluses and dirty bodies do elsewhere in her article, wherein we find that the other-worlding power of these images lies in how traces of "dirt need not be predictable signs of abjection" (271). Because they do not dramatically invert any meanings themselves, as might make the hard phallus tender or resented dirt desirable, bitten fingernails can only be ornamental. If the article finds hands meaningful in any way, it is not because of their crude erotic allure, but their gestural expressiveness serves "as the primary signifier of affect." And still I wonder if studying these wrecked nails more closely might have wrecked too the comfortably phallocentric assumptions that we are simply looking through the eyes of a cocksucker, rather than those of some as yet unnamed – because largely unslandered – form of life.

Matsuuchi's article thus promises, as a queerly utopian alternative to familiar pleasures, what it never fully delivers. She acknowledges the potential for hands to gesture towards a different worlding of desire, and yet their impact in the end feels hermetically contained. It turns out such hands can only command our interest through their otherwise asignifying proximity *to,* and their entrenchment *within*, more widely intelligible intersections of meanings that reflect, parody, or else invert preexisting ideas of high and low. The article thus thoughtfully sets up what it stops just short of saying: by crafting a utopia for abject bodies and practices, the illustrations direct our gaze to a minor form of desire that otherwise would not – perhaps *could not* – emerge for us scholars an object of concern. We find ourselves once more back in that original scene of transit, wherein our eyes slip from "good hands" to that which now more meaningfully coats their surface with filth.

In another fleeting moment of critical attention, Michael Bucher and Simon Dickel conflate bitten nails with Delany's erotics of filth and homelessness, so that each may index and thereby augment the conditions of bare life at the periphery. In their reading of *Bread & Wine*, homologously abject features are combined into "class markers of homelessness" – "Eroticized are the dirt and the smell, the rags and the bodies, and particularly the hands" – in ways that unsettle our institutionalized reading strategies (Bucher & Dickel, 299). What Delany flags in the graphic memoir as a privately primal site of cathexis ("I told Dennis that since I was a kid, I'd been sexually attracted to guys with big hands who bit their nails badly") now becomes legible as a shared object of concern that is able to matter to a wider intellectual community (*B&W*, 8). Once bitten nails become interchangeable with other markers of filth, the "big hands, the bitten nails, and the dirt" simply become so many conceptually valuable conflations of stink-play (Bucher & Dickel 296).

Delany's inter-class tastes for dirt and stink are meant to lubricate an exchange between the academy and the homeless, with Delany standing in for all academics and the relationship he pursues with his transient lover allowing us to "listen to the thoughts and ideas of the homeless men" by proxy (299). So put, Delany's desire for filth more than orients him towards homeless individuals; it facilitates an otherwise unlikely exchange between academics and transient populations, permitting us access to their dissident knowledges. In this idealistic account of institutionalization, academics who take an interest in grimy bodies and their testimonies permit a "true recognition of the contributions of those at the lower end of the intellectual hierarchy," which "threatens the status quo of the university" (299, 300). "The subaltern … can speak, is listened to, and heard," the article cheers, securing for transient populations the ability to "influence members of the middle class [that] might indeed be powerful enough to threaten the status quo" (299; 301). But what knowledge transfers here, really? Can the subaltern really talk dirty and be heard? And what is it we hear represented in their speech? What contributions will we recognize, and how will any of this impact their quality of life?

It is important to recognize how we might flaunt a desire to trouble intellectual protocols, without in the end troubling our most intimate schemes of value. As Lindon Barrett writes in *Blackness and Value*, "Value must concern itself with the rejected and the anomalous and, comprising the very boundaries on which it relies to specify the rejected, and the anomalous, a significant, but necessarily unremarked element of these 'dealing[s]' must occur 'in the dark,' in that which is designated as dirt" (21). Examining the constitutive distance between the academy and "the street," Barrett turns a skeptical eye on the way that traditionally low-down, excluded subjects are taken up within high discourse. In his account, the value of the well-read institutional subject depends on the production of less literate bodies that serve not only as its underside, but also as new and institutionally regulated bodies of knowledge. [lxxviii] As outsiders, they become invaluable. Yet their irreducible desires mark what Barrett elsewhere calls a form of "institutional exorbitance," which dramatizes the incommensurability between an author or character's asignifying pleasures and our proffered form of intellectual significance.[lxxix] What, then, about our intellectual protocols changes in this moment?[lxxx] On that same page of *Bread & Wine* in which Delany admits to his nail fetish, he reports that he found his partner "attractive underneath (and, hell, just a bit because of) all the dirt," revealing a divergence from how much critics have invested in his relation to dirt (8). Rather than then democratically integrating this knowledge to reflect a pre-established discourse (one thinks of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva), I would agree with Timothy Griffiths' synopsis that "Delany's work hints at a hesitancy toward institutional forms of critique, favoring what a form of critique that operates outside what a cultural system can offer" (314).

Delany's oeuvre affords a sustained engagement with how Barrett's mechanism of valuation works. Delany not only reveals how the high depends upon the low, but also how that binaristic structure of affirmation and subversion, of acknowledgment and disavowal, can earn certain acts an immediately recognizable theoretical currency. While Delany's characters often espouse desires that invert binaries of abuse and pleasure (for instance, stating the desire to be slandered, dirtied, or roughed-up), their crude statements of desire nonetheless signify a second meaning that is far more discursively useful for critics. These more discursive meanings may strike us as intended at the level of writing, but rarely ever at the level of the consciousness of the character who expresses and performs them. But such "unwitting" statements, I would argue, in fact enable characters to control the signifying-potential of their bodies to otherwise more codified

bodies of knowledge, effectively allowing them to espouse those simultaneously crude and refined statements that grant them invaluable institutional recognition.

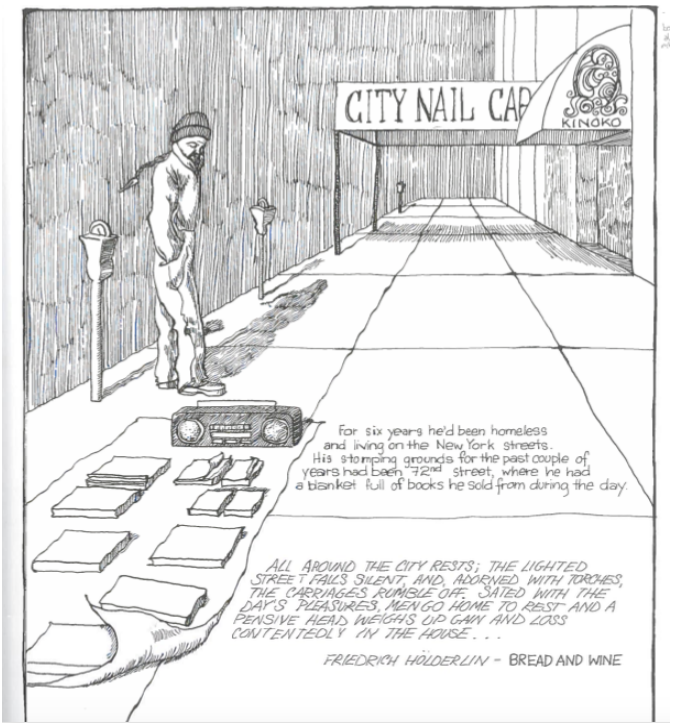
By manipulating their proximity to intellectually valuable discourses of meaning, characters position themselves so that they might matter in relation to more institutionally established sites of concerns. Absent any normative value, characters are thus able to petition their worth before the very bourgeois figures – the graduate students, historians, and institutionalized artists – that cruise the underworlds and margins of Delany's literary worlds. Abject characters can negotiate socio-erotic value where value, traditionally, is not. Or rather, we talk knowledge; they talk dirty. We get the meaning; they get the pleasure. As a result, their erotic acts go from being unreflected-upon, pure drive to productively demystifying, denaturalizing, or else affirming cherished institutionalized discourses. By anticipating and manipulating this proximity to higher discourses (i.e., the signifying power of filth), they thus merit inclusion – however fleeting – within conversations that would otherwise systematically exclude them. And so, no matter how low down they are*,* they always appear ready to be taken *up.*

What strikes me as "institutionally exorbitant," then, are those far more ephemeral moments when Delany's writing process yields, within his more legibly filthy acts, the ever as yet untaken-up residue of those nails, which we ourselves cannot so meaningfully chew on. When queer revaluations of filth have now become so abundant in academic scholarship, the institutionally exorbitant "dirt" that largely remains to be thought is that far odder surplus of pleasure that, as I noted, Delany terms the "descriptive or aesthetic residue" that results from the pleasures of writing itself. Indeed, the crudely fugitive delight that he takes in asignifying descriptions of nails is precisely that which we cannot so easily refine to reflect our more readily available meanings. If they are to matter at all, it is only through the commensurability of those more meaningful sites, only in the nexus of waste and identitarian forms of social abjection where the more legibly low down again becomes the stuff of high theory.

Like Barthes' slippery promise of the neutral, whosoever takes up this minor pleasure in fingernails therein "gives up speaking about the concept, that is, gives up the path that leads to philosophy," for in tracing these fixations, we seem only to fixate upon that which forever appears beside the point (Barthes, 72). We can only begin our most intimate appraisal by first turning away from any more socially loaded symbol – the phallus, the filth – as might otherwise overdetermine our encounter with these signature hands if we are ever to take up the private meaning of those who desired them.[lxxxi] Attempting, then, to dwell as Delany might, I become what D.A. Miller terms a "too-close viewer," "drawn to details that, while undeniably intricate, are not noticeably important – little particulars that, though demonstrably *meant*, never strike us as deeply *meaningful*" (51). And without my accustomed place of intellection – those "comfortable viewing practices we bring" to the work – I collect signs that, as of yet have no real value, and, "in consequence of this fixation, find myself exiled – alone, eccentric, 'touched' – from the community of spectators to which I had confidently belonged only seconds before" (33; 62). It is not that I have glimpsed a phenomenon that no one else has seen (it has too much cult value), but rather one that as yet has no interpretative community or hermeneutic in place for it.[lxxxii] At best, it sets me within a subcultural community of fans who have yet to become critical interlocutors. From here, the task becomes how to align my reading practice with the incommensurable drives of the fetish without rendering it interchangeable with such other ways of mattering that it helps to affirm.

To see how this complex process of mattering unfolds, let us now look at that very text which has drawn such critical attention to filth while at the same time setting bitten nails so tenderly beside them. How does *Bread & Wine* direct us to largely unshared interests in such ways that they appear easily beside – and, importantly, beside the point *of* – its more politically and intellectually valuable insights? Moreover, how might a character act upon a crude desire in a way that simultaneously retains its most privately singular meaning while offering up, through its contiguity to waste, potentially more valuable insights for otherwise unaffected readers? In what follows, I show how placing Delany's nail fetish in proximity to larger issues of waste, race, and labor power allows it to momentarily solicit our attention without ever explicitly centering them as a site for meaningful discourse. As with those "good hands" that opened our chapter, I will now show how such hands might emerge as objects of concern in a visual and textual field whose logics of appreciation differ so dramatically from those of its expected readers.

Bread & Wine opens with Delany's soon to be partner, Dennis, homeless and peddling books on a street corner (see figure 3.1). The unkempt debut of Dennis – with his downcast eyes and shoulders, and with his wind-blown blanket curling inwards towards the wavy pages of the book merchandise he exhibits atop them – are contrasted to the sharply neat lines of the city, with its rectangles of pavement angled back towards the vanishing point, and, above, the stiff, articulate shape of an awning that reads, "City Nail Car[e]" (1). Written in upright, nearly cutting lines that are both larger and bolder than any other on the page, the clean font of the sign signifies an official narrative distinct from the smaller, squigglier lines of Delany's narration beneath, as he introduces Dennis to us. "City Nail Care" thus demarcates the unruly bounds of statelessness, articulating the limits of urban care and inclusion that hope to groom away the kind of body that Delany finds desirable. In both form and content, then, this exclusive sign illustrates a state-sanctioned decree that positions Dennis – "a dirty guy in an even dirtier jumpsuit" – as an unruly figure, hiding his hands in his pockets (2; 3).



(Figure 3.1, *Bread & Wine:* Dennis with his merchandise)

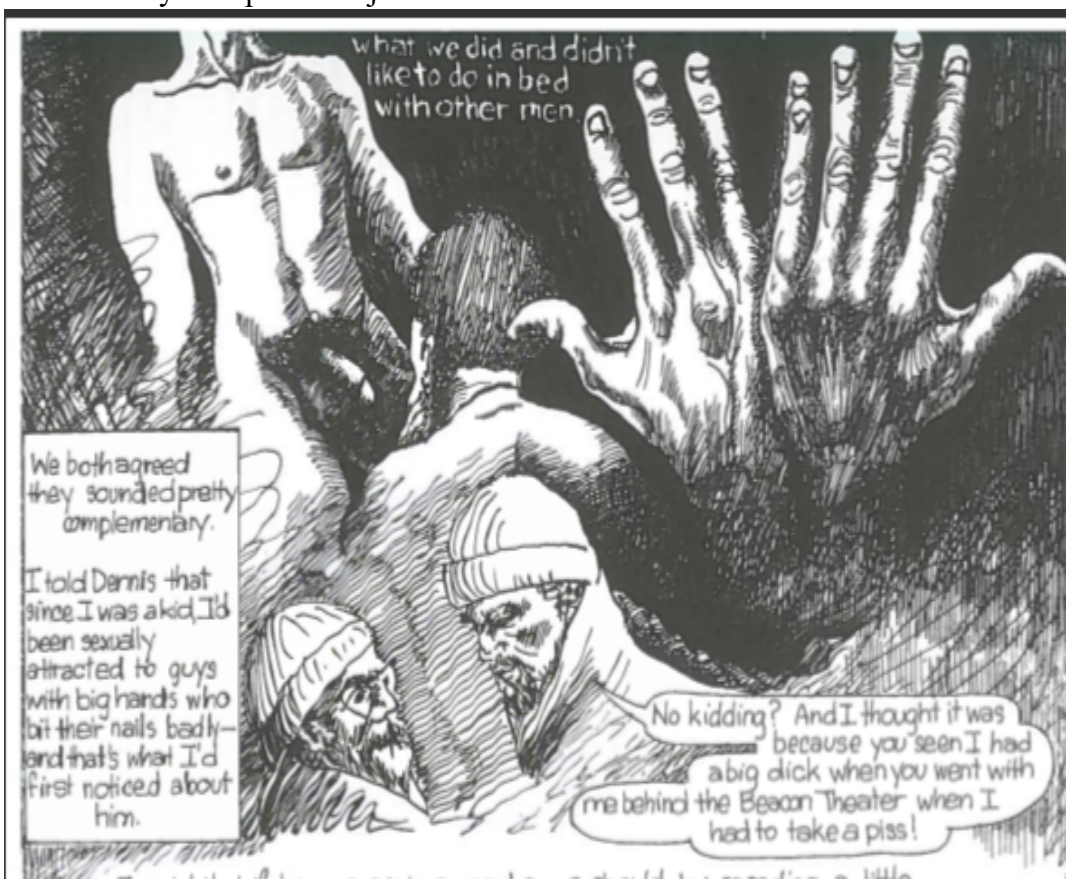
Beneath the groomed awning, Dennis's hands are interpellated into a binaristic relation with any number of competing categories, including state/stateless, care/beyond care, clean/filthy, ruly/unruly, and propertied/unpropertied. Indeed, this is the sharp irony of the sign: Dennis's inability to access sanctioned forms of care removes him from those of the passersby. Not only does his ruddy exterior confirm his position as an outsider, it also perpetuates it by disappearing him behind that figurative handkerchief I mentioned earlier. Since Dennis cannot afford to take proper care of himself, he is socially invisible. And though he might be abject to some, we find that Delany initially cares about Dennis, and later, cares for him, *because* of his nails.

Though the manicure sign only appears on the first page, it ideologically scaffolds our reading of later scenes in ways that are lost to the subjects transacting beneath it. Drawn as an aerial shot, the following page shows Delany alone pausing amongst the disinterested flow of pedestrians to observe Dennis's "big grey-black hand with bitten nails" (3). Vanished from this more intimate scene, the sign's semiotics remain in place as the characters air their private desires within a signifying proximity to its grander narratives. And so even as the sign invites multiple meanings from the pensive reader, and even as it doubtlessly structures the value system in which Delany and Dennis are placed, as characters, they appear unwitting of its larger frame. Its binaristic divisions simply accrete around them.

With what great stakes, then, do the two figures now air their desires, having been so carefully framed by discourses that elevate their analytical import. Posing objectification as a way to be taken care of, Dennis casually reflects that he "wouldn't mind if some guy wanted to keep me just for **my** body. Me, I'd think it's pretty cool!" (7, bold in original). This is the very proposition that Delany extends to him. Later in bed together, Delany recalls how he had always "been sexually attracted to guys with big hands who bit their nails badly – and that's what I'd first noticed about him" (8). The punchline of Dennis's response – "No kidding? And I thought it was because you seen I had a big dick" is visually rendered in the succeeding scenes of sexual play (8; see figure 3.2). Delany's peculiar desire heralds an unanticipated form of objectification, which shifts the object of cathexis from the dick to the uncared-for fingers in ways that run contrary to those phallocentric model of fascination familiar to critics. And so, beneath the sign of "City Nail Care," an alternative form of care emerges, which perceives value where value is otherwise not, and prompts an unexpected redistribution of resources. The fact that Delany cares so deeply for ungroomed nails, even more than for "a big dick," is precisely what allows Dennis to receive alternative forms of care.

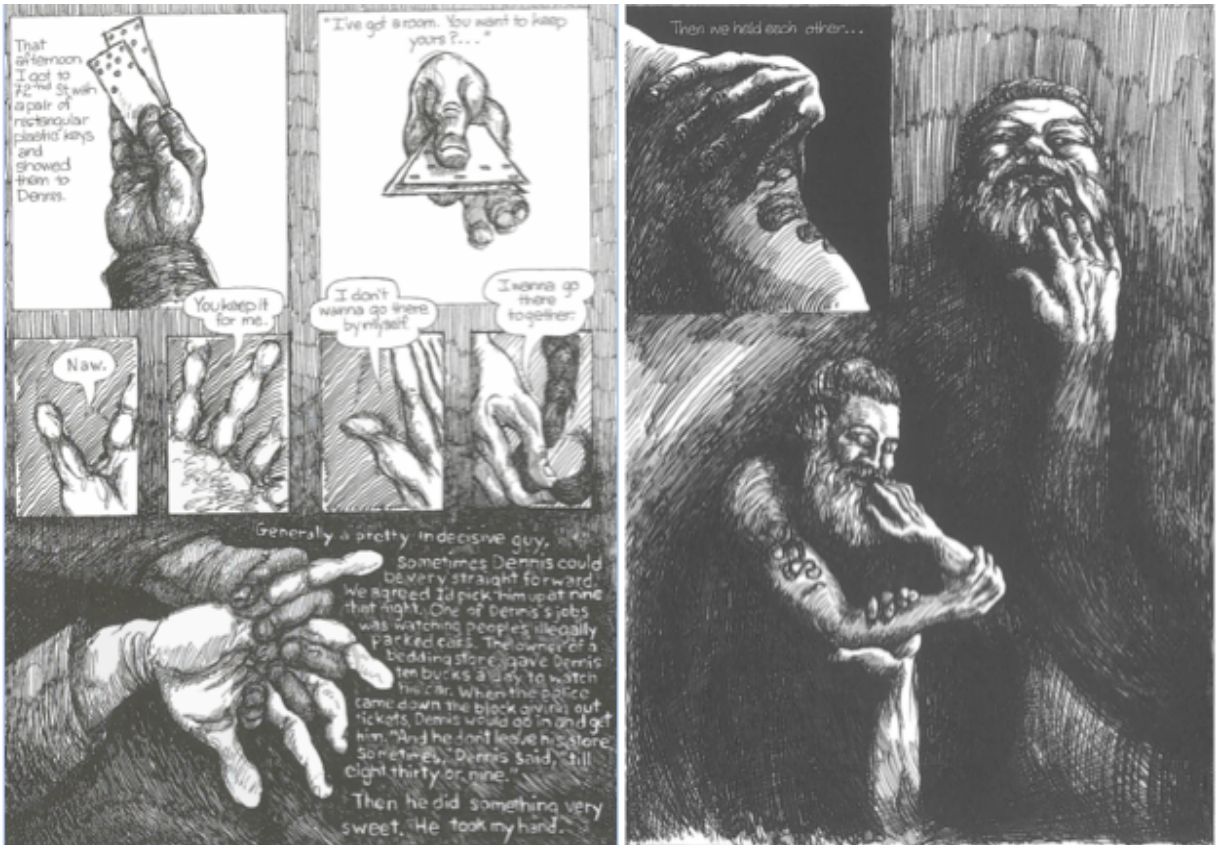
The subsequent illustrations further disrupt the phallocentric logics of the visual field with its kaleidoscopic depiction of three erotic acts (see figure 3.2). We see Dennis's and Delany's faces forming a heart as they gaze at one another; we see a very detailed drawing of Dennis's nail-gnawed hands fanned out; and we see the thumb of Dennis's left hand overlapping the back of Delany's head while he leans into oral sex. This last overlap of images works through a playful exchange of substitutions, for if the reciprocal gaze depicts a heartfelt moment of inter-personal intimacy, then it is also offset by Delany's gazing into a penis.[lxxxiii] This pairing especially compounds Denis's earlier pun as to whether or not Delany was drawn to his penis or finger, since both are both identically shaded and occupy parallel positions that slope downwards toward either side of Delany's head. The drawing fixates as much upon the scarcity of the thumbnail as it does the length of the penis. The drawings thus play upon this confusion of erotic interest by freely displacing accustomed objects of desire. As a result, they do not reproduce a

humanist insistence upon interfacial recognition – counter-posing, instead, eye-to-eye with penis-to-eye – but neither do they depict a singularly phallocentric form of tenderness, for its second pairing juxtaposes penis-to-mouth with head-to-thumb. In Amber Musser's words, "in this utopian vision, pleasure is not genitally focused but located in every part of the body," enabling a "proliferation of pleasures and… possibilities for relations between bodies and people" that creates "a new ethics" (12). Playfully reducing bodies to various erotic objects thus permits room for fingers and nails to emerge as objects of legitimate attention. By so focalizing Delany's queer appreciations, the graphic memoir installs a new visual grammar that reorganizes how we care about bodies, exceeding the binary between the impersonal, phallocentric aim of cruising and the romantic desire for full personhood. The visually playful transit between full personhood and the reduction to an erotically unexpected object scrambles our accustomed modes of attention.



(Figure 3.2: *Bread & Wine*: Kaleidoscopic depiction of Delany and Dennis's intimacy)

This is made more explicit in the following scene, which represents sex in a frenzied play of hands (See figures 3.3 & 3.4). Hands still function as hands – pulling shoulder, lip, beard – but also echo the off-screen movements of penises such that instead of seeing Dennis perform oral sex on a penis, we see Delany perform it on a finger. In the upper-right panel, a hand reaches up from below towards Delany's mouth, where Dennis is presumably giving oral sex. In the panel below, a linkage of hands is alternatively clasped and sucked, hiding their respective persons. All of this holding becomes a form of polymorphous perversity that, on the following pages, pans out into more familiar acts of kissing and fellatio.[lxxxiv] These two scenes are held in place by an ellipsis, which also suspends them; top left corner of the first page begins "Then we held each other…," while the bottom right concludes "…for a couple of days" (18-19).



(Figures 3.3 & 3.4: *Bread & Wine,* Close-up Drawings of Finger Play)

By allowing penis, face and fingers to playfully displace one another, Woolf's drawings engage in various acts of transposition that reflect Delany's pornographic syntax. Delany's spirited substitutions often eroticize the body through jarring comparisons, as when he records an adolescent fantasy in his journals in which a "shit eater grabbed Larry's free hand, and Larry tumbled to stub nailed fingers, in themselves like vast phalli," while an "ebony hand pumped, the fingers in furious ecstasy. The nail bitten fingers that closed about Larry's stiff prick kept the same rhythm" (11).[lxxxv] This isolation of bodily agencies anticipates Delany's 1973 novel, *Equinox,* which opens with a similarly exorbitant description of an erect black penis: "The color of bell metal: longer than a big man's foot, thick as a small girl's wrists … His fingers climbed the shaft … moved under the canvas flaps to gouge the sac, black as an overripe avocado: spilled his palm (it is a big hand), climbed the shaft again" (9).[lxxxvi] With seemingly no coordinating human subjects behind them, disparate body parts can engage in frenzied acts, or, even more abstractly, be dematerialized into so many qualities – a color, a length – that float free of the object they are meant to describe. Delany's syntax thus privileges body parts and sensations as grammatical subjects at the expense of the mind that would coordinate them into human agents. Woolf's drawings illustrate Delany's syntactical tendency to isolate disparate body parts in a frenzied play of displacement that makes room for new pleasures and fixations. Her willingness to distribute erotic attention among disparate body parts also allows bitten fingernails to matter in passing forms that do not monopolize our attention. Even while the text admits nails to be its most powerful fixation, this freeing movement across parts allows critics to note and thereafter set aside what everywhere exists alongside more accustomed objects of meaning.

But if *Bread & Wine* begins with a pair of hands positioned at the limits of the city's cares, it ends by centering their unique worlding power, with two gorgeously and roughly ornamented hands crossing freely atop an ice-blown world (see figure 3.5). These nail-bitten fingers, which – holding the world, holding each other – originally seemed to us to have held so little, are now embellished as objects of global importance. Together they intertwine somewhere outside of the world as it is given. Quiet as it's kept, we have been looking through the eyes of a nail-biter-lover all along, rather than those of any cocksucker. And if there is no less clumsy way to name this identity, it is perhaps because without the cocksucker's more spectacular claim to insult and reclamation, there is not yet any known category of sexual importance around the nail-biter. Indeed, such hands take up virtually any meaning that we offer them with one hand, while seeming to nonetheless refuse our proffered translation with the other. How little reason, then, to dignify this singular gaze with our concern, for if it is a worldview, it appears to look out upon nothing, and yet it challenges us who deign to look through it – to look it over, rather than look past it – to spy there, instead, some object of great, if perhaps unshared, concern.

(Figure 3.5. *Bread & Wine:* Dennis And Delany holding hands on top of the world)

Beyond the queer sociality of nail-biting present within the text, the process of creating *Bread & Wine* even encourages an external form of appreciation in its audiences that instills a "readiness to pay attention to something and be affected by it," which, in Jonathan Flatley's account of "liking," functions as "an implicit affirmation of something's existence" (4). For instance, participating in Delany's erotics of description, the graphic artist Alan Moore's introduction admires how Woolf's sketches "conjure the soreness on the cuticle, the hot sweat gland gathered at the webbing, all the soft mechanical push and give of interlacing fingers" (vii). With "sweat" and "glands," the allusive language of "pushing" and "giving" displaces genital sexuality, affording a new erotic and spectatorial position. Such erotic acts as Delany first performs and transcribes in his journals, and as are afterwards illustrated by Woolf, are here

transcribed back into sensuous words by Moore. This interdisciplinary form of receptivity is no less present in Woolf's reflection on her own process, which describes her pleasure in translating Delany's "piles of letters" and journals into graphic images: "Often the two will slur back and forth – something I've read or written becoming an image or my visual mental structure turning into words. And I really like bouncing off of someone else's word/picture brain" (52). All of this mechanical push and give – this "bouncing off" – reflects a pleasure of being affected by a formerly unshared erotic worldview.

The web of queer attachments that spring up around Delany's fixation suggests a far-flung community of readers so enamored with their author that they affirm his desire through a complex process of mirroring – through a commitment to looking alongside that creates, in its loose network of recognitions and reproductions, a narcissistic circuit able to affirm an otherwise unseen expression of desire. These hand-viewing homages by fans and artists might encourage us, in Rita Felski's words, to shift our concern from a fixed corrective ("What does this text undermine?") to its queer generativity ("What does this text create, build, make possible?"), since "[o]nly by making attachments and forging alliances are they able to make a difference" (182). The energetic transfers between artists "vibrate and resonate with special force when they hook up with our passions and predilections, our affectively soaked histories and memories," as we will soon see with race, so that "not only do we bring feelings to a text, but we may in turn be brought to feel differently by a text" (Felski, 178). This happens diegetically, as Delany's own narrators and characters affirm his unique fixations by mirroring his ways of looking, but also here extra-diegetically, as these points of fixation garner the recognition and wider support of fans, critics, and reviewers who reproduce them in the world at large, even if only on their way to other points. It is no wonder, then, that Delany dedicates his pornographic novel *The Valley of the Nest of Spiders* to Woolf, who has so lovingly drawn his private desires into the visual realm. Indeed, in this text to which we now turn, the creative perversity of cinephiles, race fetishists, and – in a playfully recursive act – garbage men, subtly offers its audience a queer mode of dwelling on bitten nails. This is made possible by dwelling within a black gay utopia, whose multi-racial constituents exemplify counter-intuitive ways of erotically affirming black and gay life.

Traversing the sweep of the twenty-first century, Delany's 2012 sprawling pornographic novel, *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*, gives us a confounding vision of black gay community. Although the book is ostensibly about a black and gay utopia called the Dump, many of its residents are not even black, but rather drawn together by abject desires that are somehow accommodated by black life. Such practices encompass everything from more legible kinks, such as race and waste play, to more uncategorized pleasures found in the desire to, say, chew on someone else's snot or nails. As one character says of desire, "It's different with different people" (195). But so much of the novel is caught up in the characters' endlessly looped drives – their eccentric fixations – that it doesn't attend to those greater historical shifts that unfold all around them.

Such short-sightedness, in fact, we find criticized in an Amazon review titled "in which we learn that perversity can be tedious," wherein one reader expresses their exhaustion with the protagonist's unique kink of eating snot, noting that the endless repetition has kept them from finishing the book: "the endless repetition is just tedious. Oh look, he's eating snot again. And Again. And Again. This feels like some kind of perverse fantasy written for nobody but the author." In fact, I would argue this self-indulgent boredom is intended as a formal effect of the

novel, for its diffuse erotic play challenges our sense of what constitutes a meaningful engagement with its perverse enactment of black gay community. For if the reviewer *had* finished the novel, they would have found their concern with the tedium of perversity is given to us as its most important lesson in community formation.

In a reflexive move, the novel concludes with a younger generation of queer anthropologists, who arrives on site to write a "group dissertation" on the "role of sexuality in gay community development" (777). It's a bungled history. Not only do their theories clearly overlook the complex drives that somehow belong within this community, but our protagonists even withhold the graphic range of their acts from being entered into this historical record. As Eric frets, "Even though her study was about sexuality, maybe it would be a little crude to go into all of that" (782). But this gets to the core of the problem because the novel *does* go into all that. Its form delays and distends as it allows its characters to indulge in their pleasures at the expense of advancing a plot. And its over-indulgence in dirty talk even at times poses a problem for its protagonist. We find him exhausted, for instance, with an early, transient figure who had so made the size of his cock "a topic of conversation (Monologue...?), it was...well, boring" – "jerking at it absently, and rambling on" so much that its protagonist, Eric, goes so far as to label it a "phallocentric filibuster" (10). How apt! For if we can imagine, in the phallocentric filibuster, someone bored at the other end of our point, then we can see how the novel's own rambling concerns – with snot-eating, say – revel in tediously digressive forms of speech that are never recorded in our anthropologists' histories.[lxxxvii] And what's more, the filibuster occurs in such scandalously self-racializing language that as he rambles on about his penis – "*An' you love to watch dis mule-dicked nigger play wid it, doncha white boy?* – he (mastu)baits our interest in race away from Eric's more dominant yet lesser shared interest in snot, or, indeed, Delany's rapture at the hands themselves (10).

The centrifugal nature of erotic attention, in fact, allows the novel to engage undervalued forms of spectatorship that seem to exist altogether at the margins of literary, cinematic, archival, and sexual history. The pornographically descriptive flourishes which offer up Delany's signature grubby hands, and which often suspend the plot in order to savor its writing process, more than mirror his own desire for them. They also project his formerly unshared model of attention onto so many narrators and characters who must now look alongside his fixation. Chewed nails thus command passing yet obsessive forms of notice in its narrative and visual economy that allow us to entertain new ways of being affected. Jed Esty's words on idling prose seem apt here insofar as this unique "kind of description has the effect of pausing or stalling the narrative" to "often luxuriate in long sumptuous litanies of descriptive detail, directing the reader's attention to sensory inventory rather than to plot, action, or even characterization" (105).[lxxxviii]

Consider, then, the mixed-up nature of Eric's erotic attractions as it lingers upon the shifting objects of his desire. During a sexual encounter with his partner, the white southern protagonist, Eric – an avid reader of Spinoza's *Ethics* – is surprised to discover a shift in his erotic tastes. Living in the Dump has mixed up his orientations. Once drawn only to black men, Eric finds himself attracted to his new white "daddy," Dynamite, and to Dynamite's "mulatto" "son," Shit – the three of them forming a perverse family. Pondering the fluidity of his fantasied desires, he is:

> surprised how quickly (within a minute) it became Dynamite, with Dynamite's irregularly toothed smile, Dynamite's thick fingers like gray sandpaper, Dynamite's nails gnawed three-quarters away and his deep knuckles shiny with

> cum that was two thirds nigger piss anyway. When Eric came he was leaning against Shit in the pickup, jerking off together, grinning at each other – because Shit had the same oversized hands, the same bitten nails ringed in black, the same knuckles, the same cock streaked with cum – its overhang not pulled back a week now as Eric went down on it, digging inside with his tongue, while Shit dug a middle finger in a nostril, then let Eric suck it... (89)

Desire moves analogically: the hands of one easily become the hands of another, while fingers and genitals yet again freely displace one another. With desires so mixed, it can be difficult to isolate any one part of the erotic tableau as the source of its resplendence. Is Eric's desire for some attribute of the hand itself – its thickness or roughness, or the fact that it is oversized and so recognizably nail-gnawed?[lxxxix] Or is it that which coats the surface of the hand – the snot, the cum, the piss, even the dirt that lines the nail? Or must we look further to see what lends these substances their residual charge – to the fact that these fluids spew forth from labor-roughened bodies, or from a daddy/son duo, or not from someone black, no, but from a "nigger"? Of course, it doesn't make sense to pick the description apart. Eric's pleasure is compounded by these many overlapping intersections of abjection, which allow "nigger" and the nail-biting to come together to produce a combined erotic thrill.

Yet, for all their shared splendor, Delany's signature nails feel so much less pressing than the instinct to take up those more meaningful attributes that would rhyme race with waste, by, say, coating the hands of the "mulatto" Shit with so many abject fluids. How much less symbolically charged do those same nails appear when we find them in a community named The Dump, built as a refuge for black gay men to revel in as garbage men? Still, the act of nail-biting nevertheless seems at the very least commensurable with these other signifiers of abjection, even earning an honorary mention in Julia Kristeva's catalogue of concerns in which "*corporeal waste*, menstrual blood and excrement, or everything that is assimilated to them, from nail-pairing to decay, represent – like a metaphor that would have become incarnate – the objective frailty of the symbolic order" (70). Within the inverted symbolic order of the Dump, bitten nails can exist within a sympathetic proximity to more socially loaded identities and practices found therein, since they index the still somewhat stigmatized act of nail-biting. This does not mean that they garner equal amounts of attention. Like those critics who consolidate filth, rags, and bitten nails into lists, nails take their place within the novel's explicit hierarchy of concerns only through, in Kristeva's terms, that assimilative act which renders them interchangeable by virtue of their shared expulsion from the symbolic order. They thus renounce that singularity that marks them as fetish to enter into a coterminous community of symbols, and the novel's trick, as we will soon see, is to think the relationality of this minor fetish without explicitly drawing it to light.[xc]

Whether crisscrossing hands or moving between colors, texture, and coating, what the inflammatory syntax that I raise above discloses, then, is a far more private meaning that the directionality of the sentences afterwards closes out. If, as Eric Hayot notes, you can "manage information *inside* the sentence by changing its location: to the right … to increase its importance, and to the left (toward the beginning of the sentence) to decrease it," then with Delany's bitten nails it's always to the left, where they needn't draw more attention to themselves (196). Set halfway through each of the baggy sentences, Delany's unshared desires are hidden in plain sight, for the very direction of the sentences momentarily draws close to the gnawed hands, reaching out at the halfway mark, only to recoil thereafter with their overblown attention to some more charged substance – cum, "nigger piss" – which are more easily, far more

flamboyantly indexed, within the explicit concerns of the novel. The phenomenological experience of such sentences thus hurries to redirect us to other acts and substances.

If we must then concern ourselves with snot at all, it is because the novel makes it fundamental to Eric's phenomenology of looking. If we do not see it at all – if we, without underlining, hasten our reading – it is because we who read for identity look past snot to those greater concerns having to do with blackness, gayness, and class. And yet the snot-eater's gaze affords a kind of double-vision within the text, prodding us to see both the focally charged snot, but also the nails whose importance the snot helps to camouflage. In such instances where "Shit was biting at his nails, and, a moment later picking his nose" and feeding it to Eric, we see how the novel playfully withholds its author's recognizable site of cathexis (264). Or rather, if at the first level the text encourages us to look at snot, it also allows us to look alongside it, to see what the act of looking for snot makes peripherally important: those digging-fingers most dug by the author himself. When we empathetically position ourselves as snot-eaters or nail-biters, we adopt an easily discarded worldview that ontologically exists within and alongside black gayness – even somehow *affirms* black gayness – but does so in its own irreducible way. These minor tastes create the conditions of possibility for that beloved community to exist.

The novel also slanderously plays with our gaze by making those snotty, bitten nails, so important to Eric, inextricable from its more racially inflammatory visual field whose engagement seems more pressing. For instance, the novel parodies the prodding eyes of the dinge queen (a white fetishizer of black men) who scans the surface of Shit's fingers to find traces of the race he so desires. Alluding to the pseudo-scientific belief that you can tell if someone is black by looking at their nails, he tells Shit, "I'd probably think there was a touch of the tarbrush about your nose and your hair – and you don't got no half moons on your fingernails – at least what's left of 'em that I can see" (249). The way in which the dinge queen here scrutinizes the bitten nails for hidden traces of race anticipates my own desire, now, to see and paint back in racial meanings that he makes possible in his casually dropped phrase. He, in fact, scripts our approach to how Shit's hands will be taken up. So scripted, the dinge queen looks at the racial markings of these nails, the critical race scholar looks at the racial marking of the scene, but I find myself, now, looking at what I feel the author to most desire: the bitten nails, barely there. And so, even as the novel trains our gaze upon the racial meanings looming beneath the surface, they smuggle in, too, that fond glance in which I feel the author wink. He sees me looking at what is left of the nails after they have been worked over once more by the broad strokes of a tarbrush. The character is looking to get off on blackness; the race theorist in me is looking to get at the racialization undergirding their exchange; but I feel I know what the author is looking at, and, as a matter of fact, now I am looking at it too.

And so, rather than spotlighting the nails, the momentum of Delany's sentences momentarily veer us towards them only to redirect us to some more loaded meaning that is either found caked atop their surface or else lies in the very color of whichever hand so happens to extend them to us. In this way, this structure of fleeting appreciation parallels our initial account of the boy on the bus, whose hands, so gripping for a young Delany, are only able to grab our attention and enter into narrative once soaked in the vomit that enables them to perform larger philosophical work. However counterintuitive then, in what follows, I look to understand the creation and sociality of a black gay community that is made possible by these snuck glances. I fixate upon the smaller agencies of nail-biters and (to a lesser extent) snot-eaters whose foundational place within this black gay utopia, I argue, we will overlook so long as we continue to restrict our attention only to the utopia's most nominal residents or to those spectacularly flamboyant acts of

race and waste play that overly script our engagement with the novel. The task becomes how then to read within the intimate logics of the novel so that we take seriously its explicit racialization of pleasure. We must ask how a utopia based in racialized desire can so sustain the minor pleasures of its many erotic outliers – can make them feel so at home within it – that they are welcomed into its many abject rites of affirmation, regardless of their otherwise misfitting identities.

If, in my dissertation, making kind thus asks that we recreate the experience of loving as they did, we are here faced with the task of – as Delany writes in *Time Square Red, Time Square Blue* – "fulfilling needs that most of our society does not yet know how to acknowledge," for seeming too minor a kink (90). But acknowledging such acts of kind-ness in *Spiders* is counterintuitive. Take, for instance, Eric's expression of gratitude for his mixed-race partner, Shit: "…no one had ever shared Eric's own 'perversion,' much less shared it with such enthusiasm. No one had ever been so generous with urine and affection, semen and [cock] cheese, with or without sex" (234). If generosity is marked here by sharing this most perverse need of the other, then the question I now pose to us as scholars is how we ourselves might begin to share in these perversions. In so doing, we would challenge our own reading habits, for *to pervert* – etymologically, to turn – requires that we redirect our attention to otherwise overlooked acts, and thus reconstitute our sense of black gay community. Or rather, a perverse approach to black gay community must here, counterintuitively, seemingly turn away from it. We must instead base our study in the polymorphous tedium, and indecency, of other people's desires.

Perhaps this is best exemplified by again turning to the end of the book, and one of the novel's most parodic scenes. As surely as our anthropologists of earlier have tried to grasp the strange history of the Dump, our now elderly protagonists attempt to come to grips with a picture of themselves exhibited in a library as members of a "black gay utopian community":

> "What's a 'Utopian Community'…?"" Shit laid a spatulate forefinger against the glass, all but nailess [sp]. Enlarged scar tissue knotted before the quick: he still chewed at them.
> "I think it's just a nice place to live."
> "The Dump…?" Shit glanced at Eric, incredulously. "Well, I guess it wasn't *too* bad." In their jeans and work shirts, half in peaked caps (completely unlike the one Shit now wore) and four of five with 'do-rags around their heads, clearly these men had been photographed forty or fifty years ago. Eric looked at the black men standing around, shoulder to shoulder, smiling out into the midst of the twenty-first century. (676)

The work of the novel has been to overturn this reductive description. Not only does Eric, our *white* protagonist, actually stand, miscategorized, at the center of this photo pronouncing him a member of a black gay utopia, but also the framing itself is reductive because it leaves out all of those tedious yet most formative perversions that exist out of frame.

I agree with Timothy Griffiths' reading of this scene when he argues that "Shit's scarred and nail-bitten finger marks the photo with a dirtiness that no stream-lined 'black gay utopia' can slough off or wash away" (305). Griffiths allows us to imagine two surfaces meeting one another, one archived, the other reaching – abject and unrecorded – from somewhere outside the frame: "Shit and Eric, while uncertain what utopia even is, have been involved in its creation, have been caught up in the documented history of utopia," Griffiths writes, and yet even while "Eric and Shit are complicit in its structural genesis," their specific roles that their unique desire

play are, in the end, forgotten (305). Though focusing upon Shit's filthy hand allows Griffiths to ask "what would happen if we put the abject at the center of utopia," I wonder if, with queer studies imagining more and more dirtily abject utopias, there isn't something else here that exceeds even this reading convention that focuses on filth?[xci] That is, while Delany scholarship rightly focuses upon the more readily abject filth that everywhere begrimes his familiar hand, I once more wonder if what really flips the script here is how Shit's "spatulate forefinger…all but nailess" draws us back to that most peculiar fetish which would otherwise lie, asignifying, beneath other more widely legible concerns? I contend, in fact, that the missed glamour of the bitten nail – as merely ornamental to Griffiths' argument as it was to Matsuuchi's – has covertly driven so many to abide and flourish within this black gay utopia.

While I agree with Griffiths' larger engagement with archival oversight, my glance falls away from the dirty fingerprint to yet again resume a fixation upon the nail-bitten finger that creates it, and whose imprint feels to me to be the invisible hand of the author resting upon the glass, looking over his own future history. Indeed, though perversions for chewing snot and nails have produced the conditions of possibility for a black gay utopia, they have fallen away from this identitarian frame. Take, for instance, Shit's own sordid reflections. Still gazing at the photo and thinking of his own toothless grin, he recalls his shock at what first drew his partner Eric to him: "You know, Jay had to take me aside there, sit me down and explain about how you was actually gettin' off on things like that about me and my dad, like the nose pickin' – only I wouldn't believe it at first" (677). In this instructive scene, the novel hopes to pervert our retrospective gaze. Being thus taken aside, we must turn our attention to what at first seems implausible – Shit himself says he wouldn't believe it at first – for it offers, in its unique way of getting off, a different way of getting together that exceeds the identitarian frameworks most legible within this black gay utopia. We are in this way made to pay attention to the formative role that these more out-of-frame desires play in the creation of a black gay past. The novel encourages us to perversely stray from those acts and categories – those beliefs – that earlier overdetermined how we sought to encounter the black gay past. It asks that we value what only ever seemed to get us off *track* from those histories worth telling. If the polymorphous tedium of snot-eating and nail-biting are, in this black gay utopia, to be anything more than crude, it is our task to assign them some meaning that can think the forms of black queer sociality that everywhere pass through them.

Rather than impeding meaning, sharing in these perversions produces non-identitarian feelings of belonging irreducible yet somehow essential to the novel's vision of black gay community. Indeed, although black and gay himself, Eric's partner, Shit, desires to live within such a community not out of a sense of racial belonging but because of his desire to express certain drives that abject fantasies of black gay life are felt to accommodate. In fact, he claims to have moved to the Dump "'Cause I like to bite my nails and pick my nose and eat it, like you – and beat off ... and some of the niggers who lived near us was the only ones who didn't gimme grief about it" – even "let me have some of theirs. I guess that's when it turned into sex" (234). The brisk syntax once more frames these minor acts as being meaningful, only to quickly write them out. The syntax forms a microcosm of that larger narrative of community-formation that each sentence will in the end have helped to record: one in which nail-biters and snot-eaters – while existing at the genesis of this community, and remaining well taken care of within it – nonetheless also exist less memorably alongside those more substantial identities, drives, and fluids far more likely to command our attention. That is, like the piss-stained "nigger" hands of

earlier – offering up their bitten nails only to rather immediately direct us away from them – Shit's account of moving to the Dump syntactically begins with snot and nails only to climactically conclude by centering sex and slurs.

Black gayness in this context is but a web – a sticky construct in which unexpected marvels are caught and glimmer forth. Creating a site for black gay men activates a tangled set of affinities that attract and affirm other less-stigmatized groups, like nail-biters, while simultaneously making their founding presence feel incidental within this larger history. From this we can conclude that though black, Shit's experience of belonging within the Dump bears an oblique relation to how we might have expected race and sex to orient his desire and belonging. And what lets us dig this nose, this point, and what here makes blackness and snot-eating so companionate is nothing less than that associative principle which so racializes – so *sexualizes* – black life as to render it as filth, as funk, as disposable life, so readily made to reflect back society's own sordid fantasies.[xcii] In his parodic way, Delany makes this perverse logic of association into a condition of possibility for fostering different kinds of life. If blackness in the novel signifies filth and perversity, then a black gay dwelling affords its characters strategic positions from which to dwell upon those many other stigmatized acts otherwise so subtle as to fall below the radar of our historical concern.

And yet, if minor tastes can help orient characters towards fixed identities, they can also reorient characters away from more naturalized identifications. From the very opening of the book, Eric feels most stigmatized not for being gay, but for being a compulsive snot-eater who yearns to be among others who might better entertain his stigmatized tastes. He recalls, for instance, how someone's father once counseled his own to simply leave the policing of such a nasty habit to his peers – "*His fren's gonna shame 'im out of it – Or he ain't gonn have no fren's"* – so as to discourage his way of life (28). Such friends as he finds in the Dump, however, everywhere offset this corrective shaming by meeting Eric's desire to eat snot with various degrees of tolerance and even enthusiasm. In fact, they accommodate his tastes in the same way that the novel accommodates Delany's own fixation upon the nail-gnawed hands of another: they enter into incommensurable erotic exchanges that nonetheless satisfy both parties in their own slippery way. That is, if, as Jonathan Flatley argues, liking something involves a "readiness to pay attention to something and be affected by it … [involving, therein,] an implicit affirmation of something's existence," then the nail-biter is affirmed in that same visual field which caters to the snot-eater and the dinge queen who scrutinizes black people's nails (4). They cultivate an unwitting preoccupation with nails that nurtures – again, unwittingly – Eric's own otherwise unshared attention to snot, for they allow his focalized gaze to draw near to his own sordid interest under the auspices of following and catering to theirs. This symbolic relation allows one perverse desire to accommodate another, enabling characters to be compassionate, or at the very least *companionate*, towards one another's more out-of-the-way desires while in some other way satisfying their own.

A like-minded community of snot-eaters, piss-drinkers, and nail-biters thus accrete around Eric and Shit because while their formative drives may each bear unique ends in themselves, they ultimately cohere in their mutually abject state. In this way, otherwise disparate acts can exist within concentric zones of affinity with other abject identities: blackness, homelessness, poverty, gayness, trashiness, disability, etc. Eric's stated desire to be in the company of waste lovers opens up unexpected points of contact, overlap, and entanglement.[xciii] These concentric zones of affinity are forms of spatial and ontological overlap, and so the attempt to carve out space for one community actively creates the conditions of possibility for the emergence of

others. Various erotic outliers are drawn to the space that black gayness makes possible. A hermeneutic that privileges black gay forms of life alone will therefore miss the complex flow of fixations that are constitutive of this very same space, and which the novel takes to be central to its utopian vision. While Eric is oriented towards these qualities well before journeying to the Dump, they are able to intensify there and come into new configurations in ways that affirm black gay residents, like Shit. His private desire to eat snot – no different than Delany's desire to dwell on his nails – is enthusiastically accommodated in his new black gay environs.

By mixing snot-eaters within its racial flows, the novel makes room for those minor orientations that exist to the side of our scholarly modes of inquiry, but which nevertheless ride on its coattails into a community that enables their desires. It is in this way that the Dump, though a black gay utopia, both names and affords the ideal social conditions for those who love dirty hands and bitten nails elsewhere scattered across Delany's larger oeuvre. Black gay men's socio-erotic position at the bottom makes possible unexpected way of worlding, opening up unexpected zones of contact for its minor, nail-biting affiliates.

Once we can navigate the novel's slippery and misdirecting syntax, we begin to realize how central nail-biting remains to those forms of fellowship that exist at the bottom of its communal ethos. For instance, just before moving to the Dump, Eric cruises a trucker in a rest stop, hesitant to ask to eat his snot: "With a thick forefinger, he [the trucker] reached up to dig deep in a nostril… Eric asked, 'Can I suck your... dick?' He blinked at the man's thick grubby hand" (35). From the ellipsis it is clear that Eric desires the snot, but defers to a safer performance of phallocentric desire. A snot-eater, Eric's request displaces its intended object of desire – for what is between the man's fingers – to assume the more ontologically familiar desires of the cocksucker. And yet, in the following passage, the richly textured descriptions of the man's hand reveals that his attention to snot is no less a kind of displacement, for he appears less fixated on the snot that the man holds than on fleshing out the grubby surface of his hand, savoring – descriptively and physically – the "broad, blunt forefinger in his mouth," the palm "hard as wood, as rough as rock" (36):

> Wide nubs bulged before the nails, outlined in black as with a ballpoint and gnawed well back of the quick. On the massive fingers, what was left of the nails were as wide as quarters (except the little, a nickel across) but, front to back, as narrow as half a dime. Thickened cuticle swallowed them. "Bitin' on 'em was the way we do, Mex and me – the both of us – is bad enough." He turned his hand over, lifted his fist to his mouth, and began to chip at what remained on the broad flesh with his lower teeth. "That's why I first got to be friends with Dynamite – when we was kids. 'Cause he did it even worse than me. So does Shit – but then, the boy comes by it honestly." (37)

While Eric longingly looks upon these hands as a snot-eater, there is a still more covert yearning operative within his gaze, which risks displacing the object of his unvoiced yearning (snot) with that of the author's (the nails that the snot hides). Unlike those other passages where syntax writes out this private matter, both form and content here freely dwell on the worked over surface of the man's nails. When nail-biting comes to the surface, it is with a socializing potential which converts the humble practice into an emergent site of fellowship, motivating them to enter into an entanglement with other stigmatized populations, figured through black gay life. It is a nail-biter who directs Eric towards the Dump and seems to be central to its founding.[xciv]

Eric's tastes, as a consumer, also disrupt racial economies of desire and identification entrenched throughout the novel. He sees gayness as spectacularly invested in whiteness and forms of respectability at odds with his own tastes. He frets that HBO show about gay life "didn't have *no* black guys on it," and so, Eric reasons, he himself can't be "*really* gay because gay guys are guys who … [w]on't eat their shit" (17). The homonormative representations of gayness available within popular culture foreclose Eric's identification with gayness. So, he quibbles, "I don't want nobody callin' me gay. I'd rather they called me a fuckin', cocksuckin', piss-drinkin', shit-eatin' scumbag…than fuckin gay! At least that gets my dick hard" (*Spiders*, 17). Dis-identifying with gays allows him to imagine a more capacious, less homonormative world of desire that is, instead, thought through blackness. By an inverse logic, he affiliates blackness with those forms of waste play that most interest him, and that eroticize snot, shit and stink play. That is, if, for Spinoza, "each of us strives, so far as he can, that everyone should love what he loves and hate what he hates," then Eric casts his lot with those who he believes share his desires – or at least those willing to exist in a certain unbothered proximity to them (87). In the novel's satirical logic, if Eric likes eating his own waste, and this abject act is more legible as black than as gay (given that gayness is spectacularly and respectably white), then Eric's desire to eat snot, or shit, in some ways facilitates his identification with "black people" over "gay people."

In taking this misguided etiology seriously I do not affirm this harmful stereotype, but rather attempt to think alongside the queer coalitional potential that it satirically makes possible within the novel, and which in fact reflects a well-established tenet of black queer studies: that blackness is, historically, always already queer.[xcv] That is, blackness is considered contiguous with imagined perversities that queer critics, after Cathy Cohen, increasingly use to imagine moving beyond normative and respectable genres of the human. Aligning ourselves with Eric's reasoning allows us to ask whether a desire for blackness can arise from the desire to eat shit, or, inversely, if a desire to eat shit can arise from a desire to be (with) someone black. Such questions follow from an ideological critique that we are far more apt to accept – that being a consumer of normative gay media can also make one *less* likely to take up with someone black, or, still more to Eric's horror, make one less likely to indulge in scatological play.

Eric's scatological taste for cast-off bodily matter – urine, snot, nails – thus not only, in Sara Ahmed's words, "get[s] stuck to certain bodies," but makes possible that principle of adhesion that allows Eric to feel at home in a black gay community, proving that "bodies can get stuck depending on what feelings they are associated with" (69).[xcvi] Black gayness is made sticky because it means being stuck to sordid associations.[xcvii] And although the identities of community members are otherwise incommensurable, they all feel at home in a complex play of racialization that, inversely, allows black gayness to matter to the same degree that it exists, expulsed, as the outside to the gay consumer's tastes. The conditions of possibility for a black gay utopia – or the history of its making – depend upon unimaginably perverse acts of consumption. The desire to be, to consume, or to live alongside forms of black gay life is usually mediated by a repertoire of minor tastes that escape our notice. Taking its emergence seriously is thus dis-orienting because it depends upon reading black gayness *otherwise*.

If indulging perverse tastes can halt queer consumers from identifying with white and homonormative representations, can it also disrupt those ideologies that groom viewers into docile consumers of other racist images? Can it circumvent altogether the hierarchical and racialist vocabulary of desire that undergirds the novel? In keeping with the novel's perverse

looking practices, I wish now to turn to the novel's more cinematic engagement with visual culture in ways that scaffold, I'll suggest, the way in which we should read the novel. That is, like the fan community I read into *Bread & Wine*, the fannish viewing practices that accrete around Peter Jackson's films – one of the novels' many titular allusions – attempt to pay homage to bitten nails through perverse forms of looking. It does so, moreover, by once more perverting our attention from the racialist gaze in order to invest in more neutral pleasures obscured by a black and white binary.

As hubs for cruising, Delany's representations of movie theaters have typically enacted how unlikely matter comes to matter in the most dynamic and even democratic ways. They evidence a diversity of rapt gazes that unsettle the monolithic fixity we associate with the visual field. In *Spiders*, though, the perversity of desire is evidenced more meekly, not in the sex acts that go on inside the movie theaters, but by those who *actually watch* the blockbuster films shown in them. Characters thus evidence their queerness through the strange play of their eyes over those objects on screen, whose latently racial scripts they both activate and circumvent. And like those complex viewing practices evidenced in *Bread & Wine,* they incite us, therein, towards still more queer receptions of the novel itself. They teach us how to desire differently in the face of more socially pressing and ready-at-hand scripts.

An early character, Bill Bottom, gives us the principle of the novel when he remarks that his last name, despite its more anal overtones, also meant "a spool" in Elizabethan English. The bottom, he declares, is "the great spool from which all tales are woven" (16). Like Kathryn Bond Stockton's work on the queer resonances between black and gay subjectivity in *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*, Bottom suggests that Delany's text is woven together from precisely these historically contingent relays of racial and sexual abjection that Stockton terms switchpoints. And yet, in order to get to the bottom of the text – or even to Bottom's pronouncement about it – we must sort through so many intertextual knots. Weaving together several allusions to the novel's title, Bottom appears before us in a gorilla suit, quoting William Blake's *Heaven and Hell* to Eric and referencing *King Kong*: "To be sure, the Road of Excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom, even when it takes you through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders. Just watch out for parasites. You really *wouldn't* suck off Peter Jackson's gorilla – wouldn't let it bone your butt?" (20). And yet, while the titular valley of Bottom's parable is a mere hassle to overcome, we have seen that the novel makes this low place into a pleasurable form of dwelling, letting its fannish characters erotically obsess over the scene in ways that do not advance plot.

Although *King Kong* spectacularizes heterosexist and racialist scripts, Bill's preference for the male gorilla over the white woman complicates the hegemonic force we might ascribe to the gaze (per Mulvey).[xcviii] So Bill rhapsodizes, "Have you ever thought that maybe our big black homeboy was giving Christine Daaé – or whatever her name was – some really good head, off-screen, with his wide, wet, expert tongue? I mean, think of all those native virgins he'd been practicing on…? That's *really* why she loved him" (20).[xcix] His mistaken reference to Christine Daaé from *The Phantom of the Opera*, like his more indirect allusion to Eldridge Cleaver – infamous for declaring that he "practiced" for interracial rape by first raping black women – refracts a singular white femininity into a panoply of black-white tensions. Bottom's knotty allusiveness weaves many intertexts into an indiscriminate binary of light and dark that panders to the prejudicial fears, or pleasures, sublimated within them. And yet, while the main tension between white woman and gorilla in *King Kong* readily serves as an allegory for the novel's erotic investments in race, Delany's title stakes its interest in the spider pit scene – monstrously dwelling in and upon the out-of-the-way pleasures found within it.

Kong may indeed sublimate these familiar anxieties, but *Spiders* – the novel and the scene to which it refers – constantly upstages these most spectacular scripts with its far more minor drama, which resists the black-white binary. A misnomer, the "spider-pit sequence" was cut from the original *Kong* of 1933 because its polymorphous array of horrors – "giant lizards, tentacles, over-sized crabs and, of course, a spider" – frightened the audience (Grams). When Peter Jackson recreates the deleted scene in his 2005 remake, he unleashes not only horror, but desire from its dyadic focus on white woman and black beast. Eric's desires, that is, turn towards a world teeming with formerly undesirable objects, recalling that when "the gorilla and the dinosaurs were all fightin' over that girl," he couldn't help but "think it would be easier to fall in love with all the dinosaurs and things… than with the gorilla. They were cool – even those giant bugs and stuff… I liked them best" (63). Outplaying the film's racial binary, Eric looks past the erotic ideal of white womanhood, but he also looks past her binary equivalent: the black beast. Moving from major to minor, he exits the more racially embattled position. He exits, I mean, that longstanding hierarchical antagonism in which the encounter between white and black – high and low – endlessly repeats. His desiring gaze thus moves from the stayed fixity of the film's two stars to its minor beastly plenitude. Let the lesser beasts of the film compete over that rarefied white womanhood; Eric wishes only that he might take up more indiscriminately with any of them.

Like, then, the novel's rejection of the gay consumer, Bill and Eric refuse to rightly consume films in the ways normatively intended for its audience. Rather than a docile reception of a film, they practice counterintuitive viewing strategies celebrated in queer cinema studies.[c] They model, for instance, Jack Halberstam's embrace of the horror film, celebrating "the monster as a remarkably mobile, permeable, and infinitely interpretable body" (21), through which "fear and desire seem to be produced simultaneously" (107). Rather than make Kong into a figure who "stands for a simple or unitary prejudice" (10) legible in black and white terms, queer desire unleashes the "multiplicity of meaning generated by the monster" (9).[ci] Nick Davis is also helpful here, for he points out that "though desire obeys firmly sexed, gendered, and object-oriented strictures in most films, this preponderance does not *define* desire or banish its queerer potentials from abiding even in films that superficially refuse them" (15). Rather than merely reflecting old desires, films *produce* new ones unanticipated by their original filmic and social scripts. The perverse spectator thus "brings new objects and relations into the world … rather than reprising known elements," and this queer lesson in viewing, I contend, is meant to inspire precisely those queerer readings of the novel that I have attempted above (16). Finally, I would add that the pleasure to be culled from hegemonic scripts also represent recent theories of black spectatorship advanced by Jennifer Nash. Rather than an engagement with visual culture that "limits black viewing pleasures to oppositional ones," Nash aims to make "spaces for multiple and complex viewing pleasures," arguing that just "because the world unfolding on-screen is not designed for their enjoyment," we should not "foreclose the possibility of black *pleasurable* spectatorship generally" (60-62).[cii] While Nash's work culls pleasure from porn's racialized visual vocabulary, and in this way maps easily onto *Spiders*, the spectatorial ecstasy that I chart here revels in more out-of-the-way fixations that – like Eric's yearning for snot – exist to the side of this visual vocabulary.

Although Bottom's allegories are so interwoven as to solicit from us race-conscious readings, they also beckon us to turn away from the novel's carefully prepared reception in order to make room for more aberrant desires that exceed its most likely audience: both the strawman represented by hegemonic viewers of the film, and the novel's more critical readers who

demystify its logics. These new spectatorial pleasures do not, to draw from Constantine Verevi's definition of minoritarian cinema, "represent (or address) an oppressed and subjected people, but rather anticipate a people yet to be created, a consciousness to be brought into existence" (Vervis, 165-166). I once more contend that the nail-biter enthusiast – invisible as a market – represents precisely this messianic and minoritarian sociality that we are called upon to imagine. The novel's viewing practices inculcate in us its perverse play of attention so as to make possible the queer way it wishes to be read. In other words, bitten fingernails can appear in Delany's world as a shared object of visual concern so long as we adopt the perverse forms of viewing that the novel everywhere facilitates.

Jackson's perverse centrality to the novel rebounds in a brief aside at the end in order to accommodate a new fixation on bitten nails. This fittingly takes place during the town theater's "week long retrospective of the films of Peter Jackson, … including "King Kong ('With the Deleted Scenes Completed and Restored')" (712). Given the novel's increasingly retrospective tone, it reflexively attends to its own revisionary nature by introducing a *deleted seeing* partially obscured by its own title. A now elderly Eric and Shit fixate upon ruddy nails in Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. They not only uncenter the allegorical centrality of *Kong*; they smuggle in their own curious way of looking that retrospectively illuminates the covert importance nails have held throughout *Spiders*.[ciii]

> …when the second film started, Caleb leaned over and whispered to Shit, "Gollum's hands look kinda like yours, Mr. Haskell. I mean that old blue fella bites his nails almost as bad as you do.
>
> On Shit's other side, Eric leaned over to add, "So does Frodo,' wondering if Shit was picking up on the way Frodo and Gollum were supposed to be two sides of one character, as Gollum himself was a divided soul.
>
> Looking up at the screen, Shit said, "Aw, neither of them boys know nothin' about how to get them things right. Me or my daddy, either one of us, coulda showed them a thing or two about *real* nail bitin'," which was true. He humphed. "Haystack coulda, too."
>
> […] Again, Caleb whispered, "Your hands – and your feet – are almost as *big* as his. Only you're a lot better looking than he is."
>
> "I should hope so," Shit said, Then, wonderingly he added, "This movie sure goes on a long time about ever'thing, don't it?" (725)

Once more the peanut-gallery flips the script by lavishing attention upon what the novel's dominant allegories of race have *helped* to frame as unimportant: a fellowship based upon the fussed over surface of one's hands.[civ] Set towards the end of Delany's baggiest novel yet ("sure goes on a long time…"), they preside over an erotic object that we have likely overlooked not only throughout the novel, but, indeed, perhaps across a whole career. After watching them watch *Lord of the Rings*, "the bitten nails ringed in black" seem so suddenly and unexpectedly precious that they foil the film's titular quest narrative itself – to lord over a single ring – by forging, instead, a horizontal appreciation for the filthy, gripping nails that would hold it (89). Especially in a novel so committed to thinking outside of possessive relationships motivated by scarcity, addressing what the black ringed-fingers themselves have in common overturns that embattled interest in a singular object – the ring – in ways that mirror Eric's move from black beast/ white woman to that beastly plentitude of objects evidenced in his reception of *King Kong*.

Whether gawked over or gnawed, nails induce forms of desire and attention that exceed – and even scramble – more entrenched racial desires and aggressions. For instance, it is through the

gaze of a nail-biter that the historically entrenched play of difference that figuratively marks Gollum as dark and Frodo as light loses its binarized charge. Their black-ringed nails instead grant them a minor resemblance to one another. And even beyond the relief that the gaze provides from interpersonal differences, it also dissolves more internal conflicts occasioned by race. That is, being biracial, Shit's attention to bitten nails foils not only the film's external conflict that makes Gollum and Frodo "two sides of one character," but also that *internally* imposed difference which still more marks Gollum with a "divided soul." (Fans will recall that the wickedly possessive Gollum exists in an eternal squabble with that remnant of his once benevolent, now split personality, Sméagol.) Slipping free of these oppositions, their homologous nails levels these differences into an affiliation.

Watching nail-biters, we are invited to invest in pleasures that are not premised upon high and low – topping and bottoming – or upon the endless affirmations and subversions that are made possible by the novel's erotics of racialization. Their chatter occasions a turn towards precisely those nebulous, not yet hierarchical modes of relation cited by Foucault in his essay on friendship, wherein, recast as nail-biters, former antagonists "face each other without terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them toward each other. They have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship: that is to say, the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure" (Foucault, 136).[cv]

Insofar as *Spiders* takes as its bookends two authoring allegories by Peter Jackson, it "invites the [title's] allegorical mode while simultaneously rebuffing it" (Anker, 192). It undoes its titular focus on the Valley of Blake or *King Kong* by briskly introducing *Lord of the Rings* so that it might better accommodate the gaze of the nail-biter-lover while still retaining their formative peripherality to the novel. Fixating upon Gollum and Frodo's hands provides a counter-allegory not because it destroys the principle of looking evidenced before throughout *Kong* – desire was no more black and white, and no more *fixed,* there than it is here – but because it perverts our attention once more, not just from one character to another, but now to a whole other film. It is not that we are reading *against* the novel, but (whether before the framed photograph of a black gay utopia or the spectacle of *Kong*) rather that this has been the perverse lesson of looking all along. What the novel teaches us in fact is how to stray from those very frames of looking that it has structured and taught us to hold in high regard.

Is this not what the novel teaches me to do, to pervert both my gaze and my reading of it to make room for less socially scripted desires? Is this not borne out in my reading experience of both *Bread & Wine* and *Spiders*? I went in search of my author because he was black and gay. Gradually, across many genres, I fell in love with him in ways that exceeded this first attachment. Yet, loving him, I found I could not leave out his fixation. I could not reduce it to some symbol, nor could I dissolve the difference that it made within some readymade identity or theory. I had to learn to make room for his fixation, and see it for itself. I had to do so, even if this came at the expense of plot, even if I found myself so fixated upon it that it was at times all I could see as I transcribed its familiar iterations into page after page of notes. Writing, I saw, suddenly, my own peeled fingernails, which my mother had always chided me for ever since I was a boy: the skin feathered and torn along the cuticles, which, on their worst days, I hide bleeding from the world. They became capable of hitherto unseen beauty – if not for me, then, perhaps, for the one I had gone in search of, and who has made an unexpected difference in a place of sameness. This subtle shift in attention is, in fact, a lesson in the power to be differently

affected by that which one has perhaps not yet loved, but which nevertheless gradually unfolds through a transference made possible by the loved object. As Spinoza writes, "very often it happens that while we are enjoying a thing we wanted, the body acquires from this enjoyment a new constitution, by which it is differently determined, and other images of things are aroused in it; and at the same time the mind begins to imagine other things and desire other things" (103).

I think back upon a particular passage from Delany's memoir, in which he recalls having once bitten down his own nails "so that I would know for myself what it felt like to have such wonderful hands" – "an experiment that fell somewhere between the erotic and the aesthetic" (*Motion of Light* 71; 83). I imagine those far-flung nail-biters across the wide universes of Delany's writings, who have yet to come into a larger sense of their beauty, and who have yet to discover that they are the world and the heavens boiled down to a drop, nor to see, in their hands, the affection of the one who authored them. In that most acclaimed novel, *Dhalgren*, for instance, the protagonist Kidd looks upon his hands with terror:

> I don't like what they look like … I don't like them: Like something vegetative, yanked from the ground, all roots and nodules, with chewed things at the end, like something self-consumed … on acid, they had actually terrified him … There were scabs along the places where he'd bitten to blood … the hands, of some aged and abused workman, he felt wronged by. They frightened people (they frightened him); still he could not believe, because it was their shape and their texture and their hair and great veins, that breaking, by force, the habit of biting and gnawing and biting would do any good … [once] he had rubbed his palms on the concrete, because he wanted to know what calluses would feel like when he masturbated: had that, that afternoon, triggered some irrevocable process in the skin which, still, after a few days of labor, left his hand horn-hard and cracking weeks, even months, later?). (439)

Kidd cannot see the very imprint of desire in this syntax that authors him. Dragging his palms along the pavement, he enacts an experiment that resembles Delany's own as a child, but fails to instill in himself a sense of "those wonderful hands."

This missed sense of wonder recalls an encounter from *Time Square Red, Time Square Blue*, when Delany praises the tough surface of a man's hands with whom he has gone home, and who now sits upon them in shame, replicating a childhood scene of discipline: a "mother [who] used to make me sit on them, for an hour, every time she caught me chewing on them" (100). "I think you have the most beautiful hands I've ever seen," Delany stammers, "They look like hands that have done something, put things together, taken them apart. You can look at them and see how they hold and heft their own histories – in a way that's… well, breathtakingly beautiful" (100). The belabored surface of such hands announces the history of their own making; reading a history of labor into them, Delany hopes to bestow some value upon them. "Movie stars should have hands like that," he offers. "Name me a movie star who bites his nails," the man demands. *(… Elijah Wood … Andy Serkis .)* "Brad Davis," Delany quickly responds. "And if you want some more heartthrobs, there's Andy Gibb and –" but the man cuts him off. The news has simply arrived too late in life. "Maybe," he says, "if we'd met when we were kids or something, you could've got me to like some of the things about me I just think are big and clumsy and ugly. I mean they're all things I was born with. I ain't never gonna get rid of them. But I think it's a little late for making me change the way I feel about them now" (*Times*, 102). So Delany's fixation becomes the scene of a failed gathering. The man's sense of disgust transfers from his hands to the one who desires them: "I don't even *wanna* like the things about

me that you think are just great! … I need a guy who just sort of ignores them, like I do." What role might this bleak moment play in the creation of the Dump as we have studied it? A place where blacks, and gays, and snow queens, and dinge queens, and masters, and slaves, and snot eaters, and piss drinkers, and pig fuckers, and shit eaters, and cocksuckers and, yes, even nail-biters alike all congregate together, and somehow manage to reach each other just in time under the auspices of forming a black gay community?

I conclude, then, with an earnest request from the author himself, in which he voices an unexpected affinity that arose decades back while looking at a craftsman "whose hands were large, work-soiled, and (to me) sexy." Delany overhears this man's wife declare that someday the man will likely "wash his hands, get them completely clean – at which point I'll probably leave him forever!" (129). This remark collapses a "petite, blonde wife" and a large, black gay man into a moment of unexpected sameness (129). It is, for Delany, a moment of ecstatic vulnerability that carries a glimpse of "egalitarian fetishism," and, on these terms, he approaches her:

> I was still trying to understand my own sexuality in these matters … we spoke in some detail about her own attraction for men's hands soiled from work, and how this attraction had been – and currently was – constituted into the range of her sexual life: we exchanged childhood experiences, jokes, and current behaviors. Granted that there were idiosyncratic differences between her object and mine, nevertheless, by the end of the conversation I simply had to say: if I had a fetish, then so did she. (129)

This conclusion is at once straightforward and opaque. What was stated one paragraph earlier with a matter-of-fact acceptance ("nor do I have any problem analyzing my particular perversion [for bitten nails] *as* a fetish") is here hurled outward into sociality. It is as if, by amassing more like-minded fetishists, the fetish would no longer be an isolated and isolating feature of an overly particular self but, instead, the expression of a growing public – the scene of an unexpected coming together (129).

Even more interestingly, for its runs so contrary to the mystifying strain of queer studies, is how the fetish, for Delany, issues forth a yearning for visibility, appreciation, and study. In this, the fetishist resembles the bad subject of Foucauldian confession, who left so small a place for discursive affirmation in what would become queer studies. Delany says that he offers this anecdote about dirty hands as "the place from which to start further, operationalized investigations … Certainly I would like to see such operationalized study begin. And my utopian hope is that in such stories as these such study might begin. That is why I've told the tales I have" (129). The utopia of the Dump is one such place where such stories can be interwoven along the bottom to produce and affirm unexpected communities-of-difference from black gay life. For us, his grateful readers, who first sought him out for the black gay – black queer – futures he opened up to us, and that we took ourselves to be creating, the measure of love changes. We must now help to realize this unexpected utopia that we, somehow, have discovered ourselves to have been dwelling in all along, as the very result of our love. Our task becomes how best to take up those grubby hands that hold forth as yet murky meanings, but which seem to place, with great hope and pleasure, the selfsame author back within our grasp.

Conclusion: Beautiful Violations

By way of conclusion, I want to spend some time on one of the final scenes of the novel, when Shit and Eric have a bad sexual experience with one another:

> A few times, there, Eric had said to Shit, who was still breathing hard on top of him, 'Hey – don't work yourself into a heart attack. I ain't ready for your nigger ass to drop dead on me…" Then he reached up to pat the puffy hair on Shit's beard; and Shit reached down to run his finger through Eric's.
>
> One day, instead of making a joke about it and calling Eric a dumb nigger back, Shit had said, "Don't worry. I ain't plannin' to kill myself fuckin' some damn white man to death! Even you!" For the first time, the racial slur sounded as though it had been intended to wound. Eric reached up and put his hand over Shit's, still holding his shoulder. He felt the scarred and broken pits where the nails should be. (How did one learn to find such violations beautiful…?) (757)

The subject of beautiful violations could refer to the familiar delight that both of them take in racial slurs, but it could refer just as easily to the transgressive pleasure that they both take in *stating* how much their exaggerated racial differences from one another turn them on. As my introduction has shown, the fact of a black man openly enjoying his desire for a white man violates Joseph Beam's most revolutionary creed that black men should love one another. However, as you may now have gathered from my argument in this chapter, I would not have us base such beautiful violations in such racial matters alone, but also in the more trifling and curious love of the bitten nail. Whether we are marveling at their delight in race play or at the snuck pleasure of their nails, such a passage forces us to stop and wonder at the unlikely history that can create such counterintuitive forms of value. This feeling of wonder takes us back to "The Possibility of Possibilities," Delany's interview with Joseph Beam. For a moment, Delany stretches our mind to ponder how all these strangely braided relays of shame and desire can so come together to allow such a thing as bitten nails to matter so deeply within a black gay man's personal history.

While holding Shit's fingers, Eric asks a question about beauty, social influence, and perception, that should matter to us as scholars of black queer literatures. In the mere aside of the parentheses, the novel stands back, as if in awe, over its own confounding aesthetics. Let me explain. By referring to Shit's nailbeds as "scarred and broken pits," Delany makes his familiar way of describing nailbeds into a pun on unshared value. The pit, as a low place, is but another stand in for the titular valley. He makes the ability to appreciate a pit or a valley into a matter of differing aesthetics. To see this pun, we need to skip back just ten pages earlier to when Eric (not unlike Baldwin's Leo) has just stumbled upon a most baffling piece of conceptual art created by the younger generation. Now well into his old age, Eric has just run into a very youthful queer art commune whose members delight in the scandal of identifying as "sexually psychotic" (746). They intentionally flaunt their lewd language and boast of their sexual experiences in order to trigger in Eric feelings of intergenerational shock. The artist, Deena, therefore describes her friend as someone who "basically just likes to say things that shock people" (746). The irony, of course, is that they presume Eric to be more sexually conservative simply because of his age. While they smugly speak of fucking elders and animals, they cannot see how very much at home their versatile desires feel in the novel as we have read it. It is at this moment that Deena directs Eric to a holographic work of art that she has produced, which he finds "bewildering," unlike the group's more intentionally scandalizing talk. "The working title

is *The Valley*," she says, making the artwork into a double for the book that we have been reading. I will repeat her description in full:

> Doesn't it look *less* like a valley…than anything you can think of? … I mean, valleys are depressions, but my sculpture is all outside. A sphere – and things coming off a sphere. So you have to think real hard to figure out any way at all that it's like a valley – and even think about all the ways it *isn't* like a valley. Which means you have to think about a valley and what makes something a valley even more. And what about this is different. (747)

This conceptual piece of art plays upon the perceived differences between lack and abundance, deficit and surplus, high and low. Above all, it refers the reader back to the title of Delany's novel and to the perverse delight that his characters draw from the spider-pit sequence of Peter Jackson's *King Kong*. After hearing Deena describe her artwork, we are made to understand how a formerly deleted scene that was meant to be a mere aside in *King Kong* can queerly take center stage. Her juxtaposition between valley and sphere is thus meant to allude to the ways in which a seeming depression, low place, or absence can become a sphere – a bustling *world* – in ways that make depth, value, and vitality into a matter of one's perspective.[cvi]

We can find Delany in this moment, standing back from his craft and marveling at the peculiar history that has led him to find such things beautiful. By making this fictional artwork into a double for the novel, he is once again teaching us how to read his oeuvre. His reference to Shit's "scarred and broken *pits*" repeats Deena's pun on unshared investments. This means, by extension, that when Eric asks how one came to find these broken pits beautiful, he imagines the wonder of a person's finding any value in its seeming negation. And though the descriptive language of "scarred and broken" feels pejorative, we now know that getting the chance to use these words actually brings great joy to Delany: what might strike one person as being the absolute pits can still be, for another, the stuff of a world.

This scene has high stakes for how we have been reading Delany's literary worlds. It rather explicitly asks us what worlds we might now spy within cruder subjects that we have passed over as being beneath us. This question is posed most directly to us in Delany's intergalactic novel, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984). One of the central characters, RAT Korga, has just been restored to consciousness and informed that his planet (a world replete with nail-biters) has been destroyed. After receiving this news, he "stood, for the world (the world…? which world?) like someone waiting" (147). His initial question to the scientists that have revived him ("What world will I have?") soon slips into the command that "now you *must* give me a world" (164). Importantly, he makes this demand while chewing on his fingers, which are relentlessly described as he talks: "You have taken away my world …. This…this is not my world. On what world are we?" (162). "It's not a world at all," he is told, "It's a moon … Then she [the scientist] frowned, because that pitted face remained unchanged" (163). "While Korga chipped and bit" at his nail, he continues: "I had a world. But it's as true to say I never had a world. You have given me…' He paused to gnaw again while agate or garnet [rings] obscured a word, '…possibility of a world. What world will you give me?...Still biting, still chipping, now at the thumb" (169).

It matters that Rat Korga's face is described as pitted, like a moon, for a moon is a mere satellite. Rather than a world, it is only ever defined in relation to the world that lords its gravity over it. Questioning his researchers as he bites, he forgets his place and has to be told that he has mistaken the moon for a world. But the central thrust of his question ("what world will you give me?") demands that we knowledge producers must reconsider exactly what *counts* as world.

What worlds might we resurrect – might we give back – to those beings who look back at us from the past? In this way, Rat Korga's pitted face – like Shit's "scarred and broken pits" – poses an intimate and aesthetic challenge to the normative ordering of the world. Delany's queer fondness for such minor trifles forces us to regard the world from a hitherto unimaginable perspective. The joke here is that the pitted face – like the somehow beautiful nails – functions as a lesser tracked form of beauty. Earlier we even find the narrator glancing at "scars there, from the epithelial herpes" while admitting that "I find the pits and texture rather attractive" (35). Such pitted marks also show up later in "the scars of a very rare disease called acne … When I was ten, I encountered a population where it was rife. On that moon, in fact, both the males and females considered it a mark of great distinction … I've always agreed" (148). On such far off moons as these, former signifiers of wear and debility can claim a sense of aesthetic value and distinction that they are rarely accorded in the larger world. Such a most particular taste for scarred and broken pits may seem minor – may seem to only orbit the greater concerns of the world – but it marks a hitherto unparsed form of beauty that most represents Delany's black queer aesthetic. Chewing on his nails, we are made to ask a fundamental question: might there not be in these pits, these scars, and these lowly seeming places, some resources for another world?

Epilogue

I relish this mixture of styles, which are as wide-ranging as our concerns. The myths, metaphors, and mundaneness of our black gay community, like those of any other community, broaden and deepen everyone's knowledge of what it means to be human.

- Assotto Saint, introduction to *The Road before Us: 100 Black Gay Poets*[cvii]

I want to hear the story crafted from languages that sound foreign outside of bars and balls or chat rooms. I want writing to start doing the work of holding up the mirror to me … I am still looking, reading, hearing, fabulously. I am waiting for what our prancestors readied us for.

- Marvin K. White, from "Sugar in the Blood" [cviii]

Throughout "History and Its Kind," I have emphasized various relational forms and intimacies that overflow the shared terms of belonging that were most commonly relayed throughout black gay anthologies in the eighties and early nineties. I have done so with the hope of multiplying the concerns – and the manners of expressing concern – that constitute the proper objects of black gay study. I feel that my research succeeds best when it most disrupts the accustomed objects and desires that command our attention in black gay study. While I want to be careful not to make it appear as if any one author is more queer or more radical than another, I do want to point out that the trajectory that my chapters follow – moving from Dixon to Baldwin to Delany – move from more conventional histories of relation to the more eccentric kinds that I hope to study more in my later research. Whether black queer men are stuttering for larger roots in the diaspora, biting their nails in the south, or straining to get into the traumatized body of a beloved brother, their wayward attentions challenge the most conventional understandings of black queer male intimacy.

To that end, I wish to end where I began: with the expansive promise of belonging represented by black gay anthologies, only this time I want to begin by approaching the anthology from a more personal level. A few years back, I was solicited to write an essay for the commemorative anthology on Joseph Beam, *Black Gay Genius: Answering Joseph Beam's Call* (2014), edited by Steven Fullwood and Charles Stephens. When I finally received my copy as a graduate student, I experienced a shocked feeling of interpellation upon reading its foreword. In it, I was framed as being an on-the-scene witness to an earlier generation of late black gay artists that I had only recently learned about at that time of my writing the piece. I felt like an imposter. I knew that the editors, like so many of the contributors, had come from a generation that knew these men personally and had lived through shared traumas which I had not. Even still, I was framed as testifying to an intimate legacy and an experience which I had only come to rather belatedly and indirectly. I read about my relationship to this history through the most eloquent and collective voice that Fullwood and Stephens made possible in their introduction: "Our ears ringing with grief, we are suspended in place by this trauma, our fingers deep in the grime of this rubble, unburying our dead, our memories, our futures" (Fullwood & Stephens, 14).

I was certainly touched, but I would hardly describe myself as "suspended." I had only come across Beam in a rather circuitous manner two years earlier. Heading into my senior year at Hunter College at the time, I had happened across Rodney Evan's film *Brother to Brother* (2004) at the local library. Rodney's film depicts a budding friendship between the elderly Richard Bruce Nugent (played by Roger Robison) and a younger black gay artist (played by Anthony Mackie). Nugent's occasionally crotchety recollections help initiate the youth – an

undergraduate, just like I was – into a longer gay history that stretched back to the Harlem Renaissance. Nugent in this way helps the youth to expand his sense of the black gay past beyond his original mid-century touchstone, James Baldwin. Importantly, it wasn't just the youth who was being initiated into a longer lineage; so was I. By the end of the film I too had discovered a black gay predecessor in Nugent, and because the black gay anthology *Brother to Brother* shared the title of Evan's film, googling the film quickly brought me to Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill.[cix] All of these chanced connections led me to my proposed term paper on Beam, and by extension, to Steven Fullwood, who happened to be hosting a talk about the work. When I told him that I was doing a paper that focused just on *In the Life,* he said something like, "see, I have a problem with that." According to Fullwood, a lead archivist of the black lesbian and gay archives for the Schomburg at the time, I couldn't simply study the work in isolation but had to know what black gay men were up to more broadly during that period. He was right. For months afterwards, I would volunteer at the Schomburg Center and Fullwood would give me more journals and anthologies that better helped to orient me within the tradition. With each addition the project became more urgent and more unwieldy, something more feasible, I'd hoped, at the graduate level.

I recount the origins of this project so fully because they represent my interpellation into my "literary heritage" (to quote Dixon again) as a black gay man. In this regard, Fullwood and Stephen's anthology had helped to sediment my place within this heritage. It held me jointly responsible for carrying forward the weight of this past, but it also left open the ways in which I might do that labor:

> How do we honor him [Beam] and that generation of black gay men? How to handle his legacy, so heavy with ambiguity? …How do we excavate the site that Joe occupied and conquered so brilliantly, we who inherit his courage and his loneliness …. How do we create a project in conversation in an incompleteness? The beautiful and tragic isolation he felt and expressed. The community that he tried to create that he ultimately did not believe could love him through it. We are the product and the descendants of the years too traumatic to remember and too traumatic to forget. (13)

In order to discharge this debt, I first had to be taught to see myself within this collective. I had to assume my place within a longer line of witnesses who had helped make the conditions of possibility for my life and for my research as a black gay thinker. This narrative of descent, as I have shown, has been tenderly preserved and passed down by many anthologies that have come after Beam's. This means that the many ways that black gay writers understand themselves as belonging to a larger kind continues to be framed by the public voice of the anthology. What we pass down to one another as black gay men are stories of how we relate our own desires back to one another, and to those figures who we are told came before us as kin.

Throughout this dissertation, I have addressed the ways in which the public voice of the anthology can often sideline more eccentric expressions of loving and belonging in order to forefront belonging to a shared kind. This is often because they are less useful to the ways in which earlier generations had strategically needed to imagine black gay men organizing. Although my work originally focused on the most pressing and familiar ways of telling this story, I was just as taken with those more wayward relational forms that I hadn't expected to belong within black gay history. I wanted to grant black queer male writers a certain reprieve from having to represent a vigilant and revolutionary black gay world in common.

Given the role that black gay anthologies have in both disseminating and disrupting standard accounts of black gay lineage, I think it fitting to conclude with a glance at the 1996 black gay anthology *Shade* because it best evidences the feel of a black gay gathering that is always on the brink of producing its own outliers. Edited by Bruce Morrow and Charles Henry Rowell, *Shade* reunites many of the figures that we have come across in my dissertation. It is dedicated to Melvin Dixon, framed by epigraphs from James Baldwin and Joseph Beam, and begins with an introduction by Samuel Delany. But where Beam celebrates black gay men as "Leaving the Shadows Behind," Delany frames *Shade* as a kind of shadowy respite: "Find some shade, sit down, relax – and read…" (xx). His introduction begins with a playful definition of "shade" that is less interested in what black gay writers are saying as a collective than upon the many distinct and shocking ways in which a thing might be said:

> It gives relief from the sun.
>
> And when one queen casts it at another – or at a straight heckler – it raises eyebrows and makes the corners of the lips twitch. You might say shade's a subtler form of dishing, a mode of repartee with a black accent whose connotations are more ironic … shade is shot through with the idea of irony … the aspect of those phrases and rhetorical figures which we are not sure *how* to respond to – where language opens up, through a moment's hesitation, into an explosion of potentialities, some appalling, some unimaginably wonderful, and all of which seize power for the speaker and, however momentarily, articulate wildly subversive possibilities.
>
> "He *couldn't* have said what I *thought* he said…?" That, I suppose is the benchmark response to the casting of shade. Well, the writers here, without exception, *are* saying it. (xvii)

The question of what *it* is that these writers are saying is left so open-ended that it hardly seems to refer to any shared subject like homosexuality at all. Rather than having black gay men pronounce a single, shared truth, Delany celebrates the works for expressing tales that return the world to all its scandalizing potentiality. His delight in those "wildly subversive possibilities" points back to the mood and theme of the 1986 Beam interview – "Samuel R. Delany: The Possibility of Possibilities" – where Delany first raised his distrust of a public language. Under the idiom of "shade," Delany lets go the spectacle of black gay men uniting to speak one another's truths and instead frames their accounts as a shocking production of difference: a side-eyeing spectacle of black gay men one-upping and outdoing one another in ways that flex the limits of what can be spoken or afterwards held to be in common.

I am struck by the ways in which Delany is able to cite black gay writers as working within a tradition – a very familiar one – while tonally signaling his disinterest. Falling somewhere between indebtedness *and* exhaustion, he recounts black gay history as if responding to a now overly familiar question:

> The history of black gay men writing about ourselves and our situation? The general wisdom over these things has it that the first such tale in the United States was Bruce Nugent's … After that, the field appears fairly bare till Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* in 1956. Baldwin's narrator is also famous for being tall, blond … It was only with the more loosely structured *Another Country* in 1962 that Baldwin – working all but alone – could begin dealing with homosexuality as part

> of the black community. In the late 1980s, a group of energetic young black gay male writers got together to form the Other Countries Collective. Along with the Joseph Beam anthologies *In the Life* (1986) and *Brother to Brother* (1991), the collective signals a formal acknowledgment of black gay writing as a range, a force, a field of endeavor and enterprise, literary production – a formal acknowledgement that will, doubtless, initiate a search for a past and other precursors (for not only *are* we here, we have been here since black men and women have been writing). But this is the contemporary range, field, and force which *Shade* harvests, develops, and sends outwards. (xviii)

While Delany firmly locates himself in "our history," he admits that it has only become ours by way of "general wisdom." The rote and nearly automatic way in which he recites "our situation" starkly contrasts with the open-ended feeling of shade as he so playfully describes it, where "language opens up, through a moment's hesitation, into an explosion of potentialities." It is not our ability to confidently recite this general wisdom that allows new truths to emerge, but rather the moments that make us hesitate – the moments that explode history into shockingly new directions. Because earlier anthologies have so diligently worked to compile black queer men together into a usable ancestry, Delany is able to draw upon them in *Shade*, but only as a force that each writer scandalously "sends outwards" in ways that carry the field forwards.

Beginning with Richard Bruce Nugent and Wallace Thurman's "stories about shocking and salacious topics," he chronicles texts that push the limits of what can be represented within black gay literature. His delight over Darieck Scott's erotic short story emphasizes how Scott "simply and scarily casts questions in every direction we might look" (xix). Casting questions in every direction draws us back to the "explosion of possibilities." And yet, Delany's delight in this explosion rub ups against Rowell's unifying vision as an editor. In the afterword, "Signing Yourself," Rowell writes: "To be black and gay in the United States is to …allow yourself to be forced into the shadows, onto the margins, or within some other site that renders you invisible, unseen, and unheard" (336). He intends *Shade* as yet another way of stepping out of the shadows: "Who in the Black World is willing to sign or identify himself as a gay writer?" (338). Whereas Rowell values the anthology as a space for writers to sign themselves to it as black gay men, Delany leaves open the question of what black gay men are saying. "The writers here, without exception, *are* saying *it*," he says, but whatever it is that they are saying matters less to him than the fact of how differently and disruptively they are saying it. However, I do not wish to elevate Delany's slipperiness over the unifying efforts of yet another black gay editor. Instead, it is more accurate to say that they both are invested in the idiosyncratic production of a black gay world that is also forged in the awareness of their differences. In short, they are simply doing together that dialectically consolidating and disruptive work that these anthologies have always helped to do. Indeed, Rowell applauds the anthology for its "variety of linguistic and structural experimentation – a polyphony" (338). The relationship that exists between Delany and Rowell – like the earlier relationship between Delany and Beam – is thus a fitting conclusion for my dissertation because it represents that dialectical play between belonging and estrangement, sameness and difference, which I have attempted to foreground in my readings.

E. Lyn Harris later cites *Shade* in his foreword to the black anthology *Freedom in this Village* (2004). He holds it up alongside *In the Life* as work that has "showcased, advanced, and honored our body of writing" (xv). Harris is especially concerned with how many black gay anthologies have gone out of print, and how many more remain "virtually unknown to the new generation of readers," existing now only as proof of "our neglected past." He hopes to honor

this lineage in the thoughtful layout of his anthology in ways that tether the new generation back to the old:

> beginning with James Baldwin, the spiritual father of contemporary black gay men's literature, followed by men whose works are closely associated with the birth of the AIDS era, then onto the current scene of younger writers such as James Earl Hardy …[then onto] stories and essays from more recent but unavailable black gay anthologies. Lastly, I've included a handful of unpublished short stories … from books that will be released soon … Preserving and documenting our literary heritage is of crucial importance to black gay men. Indeed, it is our mandate. No one made the point better than Melvin Dixon … This book is dedicated to their memory, as well as to their promise of a bold, new black gay literary future to come. (xv-xvi)

What should strike us is how dutifully the recitation of our lineage continues, and how these anthologies have helped weld together and extend a stable tradition, even as they go in and out of print. You'll notice how many of these anthologies recite the most familiar genealogies, even drawing their titles from the quotations of their forebears. We can thus hear an echo of Dixon's charge to remember the past in Harris's "mandate" to preserve. But as with Fullwood and Stephen's question of how "to handle" this legacy, the question of how we might answer this charge is left open. What experiences can belong within this heritage? What does it mean – in Beam's words to" begin creating ourselves" and "to tell our stories of men loving men" (xxiii)? What does it mean to "take care of our own kind when the night grows cold and silent" (191)?

In this dissertation I have hoped to rise to this charge in such ways as might disrupt our understanding of what experiences most deserve to be represented within this tradition. As Dixon and writers after him have shown, taking care of your own kind, for the black gay reader, is also a matter of taking care of the literary past that you are told belongs to you. But as for the people, the concerns and experiences that come to matter most within that past, well, that is left up to you.

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[i] Such texts include Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" (1992), Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black* (2004), Aaliyah Abdur-Rahman's *Against the Closet* (2012), Kathryn Bond Stockton's *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* (2006), and L.H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic* (2015), Siobhan B. Somerville's *Queering the Color Line* (2000), and Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection* (2008).

[ii] I refer to Christopher Nealon's work on "historical feeling" in *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (2001), which examines the attempts of lesbians and gays to create a sense of themselves as ethnic subjects with a longer history and ancestry of their own. Approached affectively, Nealon allows us to consider the role that writers had in crafting the feeling of a longer history and lineage central to early twentieth century queer self-fashioning. And yet, as Heather Love shows in *Feeling Backward* (2007), there remain subjects who seem less amenable to the recuperative projects of lesbian and gay histories, and who resist what is widely spurned as triumphantalist narratives. Love's contribution to queer historiography is to account for those moments in which the past seemingly refuses to come into alignment with the present that wishes to redeem, instrumentalize, or identify with it.

[iii] See Stefanie K. Dunning, *Queer in Black and White: Interraciality, Same Sex Desire, and Contemporary African American Culture*. Indianapolis, Indiana University Press: 2009. Dunning says that she is "arguing that interracial '*re*racination' of the black gay subject" requires the representation of black men breaking intimate ties with white men (22).

[iv] Beam adopts the title of the black gay artist, Assotto Saint's theater piece, "Risin' to the Love we Need," which he includes as the final piece in the volume. It is important that Saint's piece has the last word in both the introduction and the layout because it represents Beam's attempt to infuse the voice of the collective into his own editorial subjectivity. Just as Saint's message indexes a community feeling, Beam borrows its title to write from a collective voice.

[v] Barbara Smith's *Kitchen Table Press* especially inspired Beam's dream of publishing conducted autonomously by and for black gay men.

[vi] Lorde already knowledges the problems of basing utopian commonality upon a shared context of oppression in her complaint: "As Black women, we have shared so many similar experiences. Why doesn't this commonality bring us closer" (153).

[vii] In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,* Deleuze gives an inspiring definition of minor literatures as granting an author the "possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (17).

[viii] In "Joe Beam Speaks a Smorgasbord." Black/Out, 1989. 30-35.

[ix] Such a list of journals and anthologies must include *In the Life (1986); Other Countries: A First Volume* (1988); *The Road Before Us:100 Black Gay Poets* (1991)*; Here to Dare: 10 Gay Black Poets (*1992); *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993); *Milking Black Bull: 11 Black Gay Poets* (1995); *The Pyramid Periodical* (1998); and *If We Have to Take Tomorrow: HIV, Black Men,& Same Sex Desire* (2006).

[x] In *Delectable Negro* (2014)*,* Vincent Woodard writes about impossible subject of enslavement: "the dearth of historical documentation, and the lack of theoretical models with which to excavate homoeroticism from extant historical documents have all contributed a lack of substantive information on the subject of homoeroticism … I have attempted to respond to the call for the excavation of materials on the subject of homoeroticism during slavery" (24-25). In *Territories of the Soul* (2015), Nadia Ellis reflects on reading silence that obstructs black queer interviews: "…this is not so much a refusal of queer subjectivity as an indication to wait … He is speaking on his own terms ... the wordless sound that becomes the interviews clearest moment of testimony. 'I still can't find it [the documentation]…' these are literally the final words of the recording before it suddenly breaks off for good. They are fitting words to describe the open-ended effect of the archival search for a black, clear subjects. What is found still waits, in a sense to be found" (146). In *None Like Us* (2019), Stephen Best writes, "I have often felt undone by the archive, unable to find the subjects (the precursors that I seek). Time and time again, I would set out to recover something from the archive and fail in the attempt … I am inspired to craft a historicism that is not melancholic but accepts the past turning away as an ethical condition of my desire for it (20). In *Frottage* (2019)*,* Keguro Macharia writes on the difficulty of conceptualizing queerness within archives of the larger diaspora: "To read with and against the grain. Again, or deeper still … For the homosexual and desire. To read for the first time is to read for one's interests – and perhaps, survival. To seek sustenance where one has been told none might be found, to suck stones, hoping to find some life-giving moisture" (33). In *Afro-Fabulations* (2019), Tavia Nyong'o draws upon the work of Saidiya Hartman and Heather Love to suggest: "Every attempt at getting closer to the historical truth by way of its archival remains leads to more dead ends and diversions: in the process of establishing the truth, we repeatedly lose the plot. The critical thrust of Hartman's and Love's work has been to ask whether we should even be working to resolve this aporia. Must we fill in the blanks left by a history of injury, stigma, and violence with a retrospective conferred plenitude? Or would that be a kind of doubled violence done to the historically erased, violating their wish not to be found, recovered, or represented on our contemporary terms?" (61-62).

[xi] A number of queer of color feminist scholars are crucial for my thinking here. In *Sensational Flesh,* Amber Jamilla Musser records the simple yet powerful truth that "each body reacts differently," making the way that racialization feels for each subject unique (22). Amber Musser considers how flesh is embedded in racial logics that sensually activate the body and produce feelings of pleasure, or pain, by inhabiting historically produced feelings of race. Similarly, in *Funk the Erotic,* L.H. Stallings thinks of black literature as extending to us a different sensorium of pleasures whose sordid and pungent pleasures that stretch the limits of humanism. She refers to these pungent pleasures as "stank matter" (28). In *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* Jennifer Nash exhorts that we must "make space for varied black pleasures," insisting on the ways "blackness electrifies, excites, titillates, arouses, and generates intensities, some of which might make us politically uncomfortable even as they

make us sexually excited" (Nash 151). Black feminist thinkers such as Stallings, Nash, Musser and Ariane Cruz (*The Color Of Kink)* allow us to see how the racial zone of subjection can also, counter-intuitively, be a zone of queer pleasure.

[xii] In *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (2004), Namwali Serpell nicely summarizes the ways in which literature is made to serve as a tool of refinement: "the struggle of reading – the difficulty of grasping literature given its persistent slipperiness – conveys the feeling that we are grappling with another (or an Other), whose projected existence implies a will to which we are responsible" (17. Deborah McDowell also documents this ethical and agonistic account of reading in her essay "Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin – *Sula" (1988*): "Recent theories of the act of reading have enriched and complicated – for the good – our understanding of what takes place in the act of reading. They have described the reading process as dialogical, as an interaction between a reader (a SELF) and an OTHER, an interaction which remains the same … we can conceive the act of reading as a process of self-exploration" (110).

[xiii] See Peter Coviello's *Intimacy in America* (2005) or *The Parties of Tomorrow* (2014).

[xiv] In *The Sovereignty of Quiet,* Kevin Quashie writes, "Quiet is antithetical to how we think about black culture … So much of the discourse of racial blackness imagines black people as public subjects with identities formed and articulated and resisted in public. Such blackness is dramatic, symbolic, never for its own vagary, always representative and engaged with how it is imagined publicly" (8).

[xv] See Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, and Matt Brim*, The Queer Limits of Memory.*

[xvi] Elizabeth Freeman, like Sara Ahmed, takes interest in how certain queer experiences are figured as unproductive. In *Time Binds,* Freeman argues that "the past seems useless unless it predicts and becomes material for a future. These teleologies of living, in turn, structure the logic of a 'people's inheritance ... inheritance becomes the familial and collective *legacy* from which a group will draw a properly political future – be it national, ethnic, or something else" (5). Sharon Patricia Holland makes a similar point in *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000): "The relegation of queer subjects to the unproductive end of black literary production places them in a liminal space. Such disinheriting form the procreative process contradicts a communal desire to bring back (all) black subjects from the dead, from the place of silence" (107).

[xvii] Within the field of black gay literatures, this feeling of otherness is best captured by "The Shock of Gary Fisher," both the experience of reading the titular black gay writer's journals *and* Robert Reid-Pharr's reflections on it, captured so beautiful in the essay title I quote above ("The Shock of Gary Fisher"). A black gay man, Fisher left behind his diaries after dying young from AIDS complications which were afterwards published by Eve Sedgwick. Scholars such as Dwight McBride, Phillip Bryan Harper, José Munoz have grappled with the boldness and difficulty of Fisher's writings, much of which depict an erotic life bustling fantasies involving race, rap, and waste play, and often centered around fantasies of white men in positions of power. As Muñoz notes, Fisher poses a problem for thinking about incommensurability, for his shocking desires hardly seem to be the familiar stuff that is upheld within black literary traditions. Fisher is, in short, the other of black gay men's literatures. He becomes a difficult mirror that certain other black gay men are reluctantly able to see themselves in.

[xviii] In the fuller quote, Dixon says: "If we don't buy your books, they won't get published. If we don't talk about books, they won't get reviewed. If we don't write our books, they won't get written"(*Love's Instruments,* 78).

[xix] Other examples of calling names appear across his oeuvre. In his first novel, *Trouble the Water* (1989), a dying grandmother is described with "eyes pleading now for a place in their memory, a place in which she would live forever, be remembered by name and deed" (224). Before dying, she says, "You done saved me. Know me, chile. Remember me. It ain't too late … Call my name in the nights. I'll hear you" (224; 223). More interestingly, an instance appears in Dixon's academic monograph, *Ride Out the Wilderness* (1987), in the chapter "Keep Us From Sinking Down," which recounts the importance of Alice Walker recovering Zora Neale Hurston's unmarked grave in terms of calling names. Dixon describes Walker as having "called Hurston's name several times and landed upon a rectangular depression in the ground. Walker acknowledged her kinship concretely … Saving Hurston from sinking down … and ended Hurston's obscurity" (94). Like Dixon's speech "I'll be Somewhere Listening for My Name," this chapter title ("Keep Us From Sinking Down") is also borrowed from a slave spiritual. Lastly, in his essay "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," he cites Toni Morrison's famous lines from *Beloved:* "Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name?" (quoted, 274). In *The Limits of Black Queer Memory*, Matt Richardson actually joins together this quote from *Beloved* with Dixon's speech "I'll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name," in order to address black queers as the ultimate dismembered subjects.

[xx] When Dixon tells his audience that they are charged by "the possibility of your good health," he asks them to consider health as a possibility that depends upon array of factors, social and institutional, that mediate our flourishing. Whatever institutionally health we enjoy shares some relationship to other disinvested forms of life, and this means that whatever forces have made my life possible have also made impossible the lives of so many others. Dixon allows us to consider health through the socio-institutional array of forces that momentarily allows us to flourish – ACT UP and the media coverage it gained; the health and insurance policies; the improvised or institutionalized networks of care; even, the very cells the immune system that comprise our bodies. My thinking here is informed by Cameron Duff's work, *Assemblages of Health: Deleuze's Empiricism and the Ethology of Health* (2014) and Alison Kafer's work in *Feminist, Crip, Queer* (2013), both of which move us away from locating illness in the body of the individual and towards thinking health within the larger milieu of social and environmental causes that condition it.

[xxi] Dixon's phrase "sexual niggers" may be drawing upon terms that black gay activist Bayard Rustin used in his 1986 speech. In that speech, Rustin declares that "blacks are no longer the litmus or the barometer of social changes" because they have allegedly gained institutionalized protections which gays have yet to be given. This leads Rustin to surmise that "the new 'niggers' are gays" (Rustin, 275). "If you want to know whether today people believe in democracy," he writes, "the question to ask is 'What about gay people?'" (275). Like many other queer of color theorists, I disagree with the facile logic which undergirds this comparison. Rustin here participates in a form of homo-nationalism that is rightly critiqued by Jasbir Puar in her seminal text *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), given how quickly he shifts attention away from racial minorities to sexual ones. Unlike Rustin, though, Dixon shows that he is aware that sexual minorities also benefit from white supremacy, and he immediately afterwards draws his audience's attention to how pervasive racism in within the gay community. See Bayard Rustin's essay "The New 'Niggers' Are Gays," which appears in collected works, *Time on Two Crosses* (2015).

[xxii] In *The Calendar of Loss,* Woubshet writes that Dixon did not perceive AIDS "as an isolated calamity, but rather … as one in a series of calamites that characterized their people and their country" (Woubshet, 44).

[xxiii] Concerning Dixon's appropriation of the spiritual, Woubshet notes that, "Dixon translates a spiritual to figure his immediate world, drawing on the insight into proximate death and proleptic mourning that the spirituals provide. At the same time, he withdraws the authority of 'calling' that the spiritual endows to God – 'When *He* calls me, I will answer / I'll be somewhere listening for my name' – and transfers the power to a worldly audience. After repeating 'I'll be somewhere listening for my name' six times in the course of the essay … Dixon charges his audience with the responsibility and power of calling the dead, and he powerfully illustrates how one goes about doing that. He starts calling out the names

of the dead … As he calls the names of the dead, Dixon positions himself among their company. Although alive, he speaks retrospectively, in a posthumous mood, from an anticipated world of the dead" (48-49).

[xxiv] Such examples include Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother,* which refers to the Caribbean "people for whom history had been a big, dark room, which made them hate silence" (Kincaid, *Autobiography*, 61-62); Aimé Césaire's similar "Eia for those who never invented anything, for those who never explored anything, for those who never conquered anything," and "who have known voyages only through uprootings" in *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (35) (32); and Saidiya Hartman's account of the archive of the enslaved as "a death sentence" in "Venus in Two Acts," revealing to researchers only "precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance" (12).

[xxv] I am thinking alongside a number of queer scholars who regard our culture of productivity with skepticism, such as Robert McRuer's "Composing Bodies; or De-Composition: Queer Theory, Disability Studies, and Alternative Corporealities" (2004). I think, too, of the disability theorist Alison Kafer's definition of queer resistance as what "bucks American ideals of productivity at all costs, of sacrificing one's body for work" (39).

[xxvi]Dixon also refers to this line in his 1992 address, citing his audience into a melancholic orientation with a past that they are tasked with preserving. When he speaks to them, he draws attention to his emaciated body, and references his hope that they might help give the "jagged edges of his experience" some meaning.

[xxvii] The stutter points back to what Brandon LaBelle in *The Lexicon of the Mouth* refers to as "language as it lives inside the mouth" (135). Labelle brings to the stutter his attention as a phenomenologist who documents what it feels like to express oneself in difficult circumstances. Labelle argues that the stutter exposes us to "the initial gap, when the words held themselves back in search of form," evidencing therein "a subject under duress by the force of a linguistic order" that inhibits their expression (129; 131). Stuttering here becomes a confrontation with the world as it is given. Such an account also mirrors Amy Robbin's description of what the stutter meant to the poetics of Susan Howe, as a "mode of halting and uncertain articulation coming from a marginal subject who attempts to tell a story hitherto unauthorized by the dominant culture," (Amy Moorman Robbins, 48)

[xxviii] Such a poem naturally assumes new meanings within the collective scope of an anthology. Beam prints "Etymology" in section dedicated to thinking about family ("Brother/father/lover/son"), making it so that when the father "surveys our gathering," he looks upon the exiled sons in the context of a larger volume (the anthology) that speaks back to their feelings of exclusion using a language of fraternity and homecoming.

[xxix] Like Nadia Ellis's reading of a Burning Spear verse – "History can recall" – "the line's grammar positions history as the acting subject, recalling for itself" (162).

[xxx] As Roland Barthes advises in his published lectures on *The Neutral,* "the game of speech and silence need not be systematic: that, to oppose dogmatic speech, one not produce an equally dogmatic silence" (28).

[xxxi] Yergeau critiques how frequently the autistic subject is designated as non-rhetorical and of incapable of sharing meaning. Autistic people are commonly made the subject of other people's stories and are in this way framed as being incapable of crafting narratives and meanings for their own lives.

[xxxii] In *Black Madness: Mad Blackness,* Pickens writes that "black madness then becomes revelatory for the rest of the world and the black mad folks --- real or imagined -- stand in for an examination of what is happening" (62).

[xxxiii] Dixon returns to the mambo in *Wade in the Water* and his second collection, *Love's Instruments*, further making her into a figure who presides over the ceremonies and feelings of ancestral connection. Furthermore, as Darius Bost tells us, HIV/AIDS was increasingly associated with this practice. Haitians' "contraction of the virus led US scientists to ascribe their illness to the deviance of black culture, especially as regards vodou practices," effectively leading Haitians to be deemed "AIDS carriers" (114).

[xxxiv] Against the familiar narrative that America serves as a sanctuary for sexual minorities, Roberto Strongman examines how Afro-diasporic cosmologies granted western subjects some "relief from their sexual marginality by immersing themselves in the cosmological view of African diasporic religions" (231). In such cases, "Vodou function as a queer space in an otherwise intolerant society," opening up "a plethora of gendered options visible in Haitian Vodou ceremonies" (73).

[xxxv] Like Strongman, Tinsley also documents gay male identification with Ezili, but insists upon the multiple genders that Ezili inhabits, making identification more labile. This means that throughout her monograph, she leaves open ended the kind of gender identifications which can be forged with Ezili. In one particularly helpful aside, she notes that "Men would rather not go into trance: male pride. Men do not like to lose control. Women are freer! The homosexual's spirituality directs him toward religion, and certainly towards the Vodou religion. Many manbo are bisexual or lesbian" (9). Similarly, Strongman emphasizes how possession confounds the ways in which we locate gender in the possessed body of the mambo. For instance, he points out that a man who is possessed by a female spirit unsettles the question whether or not the man is male, female, or a mixture of the two.

[xxxvi] In his essay, "Haiti: A Memory Journey," Assotto Saint recalls: "Having seen, so many times during the AIDS crisis, Haitian doctors and community leaders deny the existence of homosexuality in Haiti; having heard constantly the afflicted male cases in Haiti were not homosexual, but alas, poor hustlers who were *used* by visiting homosexual American tourists who infected them and thus introduced the disease into the country; having felt outrage at the many excuses, lies, denials, and apologies – I am duty-bound to come out and speak up for the thousands of Haitians like me, gay and not hustlers, who, for one reason or another, struggle with silence and anonymity yet don't view ourselves as victims" (229).

[xxxvii] In *Black Queer Fabulation,* Tavia Nyong'o investigates what can "become possible when we work through hard feelings without trying to transform them into something else" (46). Rather than a reparative approach, he values in the past those moments that are most "filled with incommensurabilities, traces of a past life untranslatable into our own" (47).

[xxxviii] I draw this sense of abandonment from queer scholars writing histories of AIDS, such as William Havers, Tom Roach, and Tim Dean, all of whom reference ill subjects as experiencing a radical embrace of their finitude. Finitude is defined as an embrace of mortality. For Roach and Havers especially, it is only in feeling abandoned and in having no models for what living and dying looks like that queer subjects living with AIDS are said to invent new relational forms to support another. See, also, Julia Kristeva's remarks in "Disability Revisited," in *Corporeal Hermeneutics:* "The person in the situation of disability lives with the work of mortality in him or her; it is the companion of his or her solitude" (122). Roach argues that those living with AIDS experience an "abandonment to finitude," which is experienced as a "disavowal of any and all flights into transcendence, be they religious, New Age, or philosophically dialectical" (116).

[xxxix] Johnson, Barbara, from "Nothing Fails Like Success." In *The Barbara Johnson Reader: The Surprise of Otherness,* pg. 331-332.

[xl] Pg. 376-377.

[xli] For instance in a 1963 letter to *Grove Press*, Baldwin discusses the triumph of John Rechy's descriptions of cruising in *City of Night*. Despite Rechy's clear difference in his ethics and ambitions as a writer, Baldwin's praise makes Rechy into more like a surrogate for Baldwin's own ambitions as a writer : "Rechy is the most arresting young writer I've read in a very long time. His tone rings absolutely true, is absolutely his

own … He reminds us of what we do not know, and even more, perhaps, of what we do not want to know, and this is a most humbling and liberating achievement" (xi).

[xlii] Ohi continues: this "incommunicable secret attests to a traumatic opacity, as incommensurable as it is inconsolable and as incomprehensible as it is essential, at the center of their experience*"* (264).

[xliii] So too Ernest L. Gibson III notes in his monograph on Baldwin that "a critical reader of his work will find a textuality capable of touch, where the words, almost literally, hold and hug tightly like struggling sons to the memories of absent fathers, like lonely expatriates to the memories of their homelands" (Gibson III, 11).

[xliv] Baldwin's allure may depend less upon his power to baffle or even to prophesize, and more upon the familiar textual effects of his elusive presence. For instance, in Glave's closing encounter with Baldwin in a dream. Baldwin no longer appears as a visionary prophet but rather as one whose enchantments derive from Glave's familiarity with his elliptical, deconstructive dodges: "But all the things you told me in the dream you had told me before, years ago. I remembered. Still … I needed you to tell me again all that you had told me in dreams years before, (125). Hilton Als similarly recalls feeling as if Baldwin were a father figure to him at thirteen, and recalls that Baldwin's voice (like Glave's heard cheer: "*Go on, child*") pushed him onwards: "Hadn't Avedon and Baldwin told me to go further? In my mind? And to seek loving examples like them in order to go further?"

[xlv] Surprise is valued for its ability to re-enchant one with the world. In literary studies, it freshens the text with new interpretations that the reader is assumed never to have expected. The following is a list of theorists who value the ability to still feel surprise while living and reading. Silvan Tompkins values surprise as "momentarily renders the individual incapable of either continuing whatever he was doing before the startle or initiating a new activity so long as the startle response is emitted" (107). Françoise Dastur writes: "The event, in its internal contradiction, is the impossible which happens, in spite of everything, in a terrifying or marvelous manner. It always comes to us by surprise, or from that side whence, precisely, it was not expected" (Françoise Dastur). Other renowned thinkers ask us how we might remain open to deconstructive otherness (Barbara Johnson), "become worthy of the event" in all its all its virtual promise (Deleuze and Guattari), and "live so that we are perpetually susceptible to being surprised" (Kate Stanley). See Silvan Tompkins, Shame and its Sisters (1998); Françoise Dastur,. "Phenomenology of the Event: Waiting and Surprise." Pg. 183. Hypatia, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2000): 178-189. *JSTOR;* Deleuze & Guattari, *What is Philosophy,* pg.160; Kate Stanley, "Henry James and the Syntax of Surprise."

[xlvi]For instance, in her essay "Stranger at Home," Cheryl Wall argues that "Baldwin's 'troubled eloquence" largely relies upon "uses of the words 'strange,' 'awe,' and wonder' as riffs on … the existential homelessness of the African American subject" (*The Will to Adorn,* 126). Ashon Crawley values the ability of Baldwin's writings to leave him: "Stupefied, stumped, staggered. Then released into a new place, new time, new thought" (*Black Pentecostal Breath,* 245).

[xlvii] Morse, J. Mitchell, "Masters and Innocents." *The Hudson.* 1968: 522-540. *JSTOR*.

[xlviii] Conseula, Frances. *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963-2010*, pg.115 -116.

[xlix] *Giovanni's Room* may be interested in the relations among its white characters, and *Another Country* in its many interracial crisscrossing, but Baldwin's final novels, *Tell Me How Long* (1968), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1978) are more interested in intraracial romances.

[l] For Sedgwick, a paranoid reading prioritizes above all "the impossible but also the supposed necessity of forestalling pain and surprise … as the only and inevitable mode, motive, content, and proof of true knowledge" (*Touching, Feeling*137).

[li] In Fremont-Smith's review, he complains that the scene between Caleb and Leo is "explicitly detailed, through a haze of romantic mush, as if homosexual incest were or could be only romantic" (27). Irving Howe frets that "Baldwin has always been helpless before the mysteries of heterosexual love, and when he turns to homosexual love he usually drops into a whipped-cream sentimentalism" (100).

[lii] Such a loving insistence upon knowing the other would be an example of what Tim Dean disparages as the "ethically exemplary" "attempt to eliminate otherness," an ethic that he opposes to the more impersonal investments of cruising that he upholds in his study, *Unlimited In*timacy (180).

[liii] For instance, in their jointly authored piece "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violence of the Social" Kadji Amin, Amber Musser, and Roy Pérez write, "For our purposes, queer form means challenging the primacy of the visual, which has too often been a site for pernicious power relations. As theorists such as Michel Foucault, Simone Browne, Nicole Fleetwood, and others have argued, visuality has long been imbricated in technologies of domination" (232). Jenifer Nash also summarizes the general atmosphere of skepticism towards the visual field that she finds to be rehearsed in much black feminist thought. In such cases, the visual field is made in to the primary scene of wounding for black women. See Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* particularly the first chapter, "Archives of Pain: Reading the Black Feminist Theoretical Archive."

[liv] I think, for example, of such passages that passages that belabor the face whose experience of estrangement and familiarity moves with a kind of temporal complexity: "Arthur gave Jimmy a look … [which] was also genuinely amazed. He was seeing Jimmy for the first time. He was seeing a stranger who might become a part of his life in quite another way than he had been until now" (377); "This smile, too, was new. It came from a new place, and it held a new sorrow" (255). "His deep-set eyes were larger than, at first glance, they seemed, and when one realized this, his whole face changed becoming, at once, more vulnerable and more determined" (417); "Her face, then, became a face I did not yet know but was to come to know – to meet – in the years stretching before us" (323).

[lv] As Silvan Tompkins writes, "Since the face is the site of affect, mutual looking becomes the tabooed," leading him to deduce how, given "the extreme contagion of affect in the shared interocular exchange, taboos arise lest affects not only occur but spread. Finally, such affective contagion occurring through the interocular exchange leads to escalation … so that the control of affect is seriously undermined" (145).

[lvi] Such folds and orifices offers up what Gaston Bachelard calls "a labyrinthine dream with all its dialectics of anguish and delight," for "the oneric labyrinth has no corners; it only has bends, deep bends that draw dreaming forward as though they were dreaming matter" (174; 157). For Bachelard, one who writes and dreams of labyrinths is one who expresses a will-to-depths, an ever-replenishing reservoir of interiority.

[lvii] The *Fire Next Time,* pg. 105.

[lviii] Dwight McBride writes, "as we see in the case of James Baldwin, when black gays and lesbians do don the racial representational mask, they often do so at the expense of effacing (even if only temporarily) their sexual identities" (273).

[lix] While black nationalistic rhetoric informs Black Christopher's many calls for black political autonomy, it comes through most clearly at the vernacular level, as when the incessant jive talk of "white motherfuckers" and "cats" relay larger feelings of solidarity and hostility that separate white characters from black.

[lx] Stephen Dillon adopts this term from Sara Haley's essay, "Like a Man: Chain Gangs, Gender, and the Domestic Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia" (2013).

[lxi] I am grateful to Namwali Serpell for pointing out the rhyme that take place between "came down" and "throw her down."

[lxii] For James Baldwin's interview with Audre Lorde, see "Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin."

[lxiii]On the subject of Eldridge Cleaver's homophobic readings of James Baldwin's fiction, Vincent Woodard writes, "It did not occur to Cleaver or to many of his compatriots in the 1960s that a sexually receptive black man during slavery might have absolutely nothing to do, historically speaking, with a self-declared cosmopolitan homosexual man living in the 1960s or 1990s" (23).

[lxiv] I am thinking of recent work in queer studies that examines how many sexual cultures that refuse to self-identify as lesbian or gay are phobically marked as ignorant, backwards, and frozen in a state of denial. For instance, in *Nobody Supposed to Know* (2014), C. Riley Snorton refers to how figures on the down-low (black men who have sex with men, but refuse to identify as gay) are spectacularly represented as lagging behind sexual modernity. A similar phenomenon is studied in the prisons of Regina Kunzel's *Criminal Intimacy* (2008), or in the frat houses and military bases of Jane Ward's *Not Gay* (2015), or in many moments throughout Khaled El-Rouayheb's *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World* (2005). In queer studies, such refusals to identify as lesbian or gay are held up as ways of resisting the imposition of dominant frameworks of sexual identity that have been increasingly associated with neoliberalism. In this regard, I see Leo and Caleb's resistance to gay identity functioning alongside these others.

[lxv] As a particularly male experience of homosocialism, Caleb's remark seems to encompass, too, the representative limits of Baldwin's fiction, given how Baldwin never imagines a correspondingly affirmative form of female homosocialism. In Baldwin's fiction, women live only to affirm and, less frequently, to be affirmed by their men, and so they have little homoerotic interests in one another.

[lxvi] Consider again the revelatory language of *Giovanni's Room*: "for the first time in my life I was really aware of another's body" (9), or that of *Beale Street*, "It's astounding the first time you realize that a stranger has a body – the realization that he has a body makes him a stranger. It means you have a body too. You will live with this forever, and it will spell out the language of your life" (52).

[lxvii] See Kadii Amin's *Disturbing Attachments.*

[lxviii] Writing on the relation between daddy-play and queer culture, Juana Maria Rodriguez highlights a repertoire of erotic acts which "play unabashedly with the themes of fantasized incestuous seduction and abuse" and exhibits therein a "perverse sociality of a coerced intimacy that creates the narrative possibilities for submission or domination in consensual adult play" (54; 55). See *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures*.

[lxix] Incest is a confounding metaphor because it signifies, at once an allegedly universal taboo marking and founding the limits of civilization; an intra-familial form of abuse; and an intra-familial form of intimacy that may not necessarily be synonymous with abuse. As Christina Sharpe has convincingly argued, incest also carries in antebellum history the memory of how many incestuous violations were perpetuated and subsequently disavowed under the guise of increasing one's property (if the master looks upon his daughter as a slave rather than a daughter, then he does not consider the taboo significance of his actions). Because the term is thus synonymous with abuse, it is difficult to understand Baldwin's interest in it here and elsewhere as circumstantially fraught expression of love that productively links together confluences of power and responsibility, projected difference and its disavowed underlying sameness. Similarly, Sharon Patricia Holland argues, that "incest is frequently miscegenation in the Southern imaginary" (Quoted in Heintz, 228). In another analogical permutation, Jasbir Puar names incest as phobically linked to terrorist bodies: "terrorist masculinities: failed and perverse, these emasculated bodies always have femininity as their reference point of malfunction, and are metonymically tied to all sorts of pathologies of the mind and body—homosexuality, incest, pedophilia, madness, and disease" (*Terrorist Assemblages,* xxiii).

[lxx] Even as Robert Kirsch does not mention "Everybody's Protest Novel," the bite of his review of *Tell Me How Long* seems to draw upon Baldwin's famous critique of Stowe when he notes that "stereotypes lose none of their distastefulness for being reversed" and the novelist's first "business is individual character, persona" which was why "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a flop as a novel" and more akin to a "tract" (F11). Similarly, in " Baldwin and His Cardboard Lovers," Mario Puzo's writes that the voice of "critics and moralists and other saintly figures" have no place in the novel and that Barbara is glorified as a "sexual Uncle Tom (5; 34). Given that Baldwin critiques *Uncle Tom's Cabin* so thoroughly in his essay, such critics ironize their disapproval by using Baldwin's critiques about Harriet Beecher Stowe in their critiques of his work. Irving Howe gives this critique most directly in the fuller quotation: "the eloquence which served him so well in his later essays…is a style almost certain to entrap a novelist. For if you sound like the voice of doom, an avenging god proclaiming the fire next time, then you don't really have to bother yourself with the small business of the novelist, which is to convey how the other, if imaginary, people talk and act. Baldwin seems to have lost respect for the novel as a form, and his great facility with language serves only to ease his violations of literary strictness (103).

[lxxi] Leo and Caleb's experiences of being soiled draws to mind Toni Morrison's account of being dirtied in *Beloved:* "That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up" (*Beloved*, 295-296).

[lxxii] The discourse of black men's mythic penises is a recurrent topic in Baldwin's writings, but hardly begins with him. It is most commonly grounded in Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Mask.* Leo mentions Fanon once in the novel when he describes the books that younger black men were now reading.

[lxxiii] See Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (2009), particularly the last chapter on Samuel Delany, "Cruising as a Way of Life."

[lxxiv] Speaking of San Francisco in the late sixties, Baldwin's shock at how the younger generation "dared to embrace one another in the sight of all the world" reflects how jarring the shrinking divide between private and public displays of affection may have been for him. As one example, Baldwin often associated the miscegenation protests of blacks and whites kissing one another in the street as a useless and even dishonest form of protest. During one interview, he even advised that these new kinds of protestors would do more for the revolution if they stayed in their rooms and worked out their vexed relationships to one another. (These moments appear throughout *Conversations with Baldwin*). Baldwin's oft-mentioned regard for the privacy of sex may therefore have kept him from embracing the new terms of gay organizing and intimacy that coalescing at the time. To this same degree, I would argue that it matters that Baldwin links the jarring performance of the musicians with the bafflingly and revolting intimacies of the young (I meaning "revolting" in the sense of protest, but I also mean for it to be lightly tinged with a feeling of disagreement).

[lxxv] For my earlier and more critical reading of Baldwin's relationship to gay politics, see my essay "The House that Beam Built," which appears in *Black Gay Genius.* In that piece, I expressed a disappointment with Baldwin's sense that it was futile to organize around sexual identity, and pointed to Joseph Beam and other black gay men as proof of the future that Baldwin had missed.

[lxxvi] As Robert Reid-Pharr summarizes, Delany's oeuvre offers "infinitely pleasurable explorations of the ways in which language allows access to ideas, images, and forms of consciousness that break with social and syntactical norms" (680). See Robert Reid-Pharr's "Introduction" to *American Literary History* 24.4 (2012).

[lxxvii] I am specifically thinking of the gay manifesto "Cocksucker" that appears in *Fag Rag* in 1971, and similar articles that appear across other periodicals like *Gay Sunshine* and *Sebastian Quill* throughout the late 1960s through 1970s.

[lxxviii] The cautionary words of Roderick Ferguson regarding the "will to institutionality" (226) and the management of difference in *The Reorder of Things* are especially useful here because he argues that power also works by absorbing and domesticating formerly dissident positions. In

Death Beyond Disavowal, Grace Kungwon Hong also advances Ferguson's insights by further theorizing the fraught relation between newly valued (because institutionalized) minority subjects and that disrespected and disposable underside which conditions it.

[lxxix] In "Identities and Identity Studies: Reading Toni Cade Bambara's 'The Hammer Man,'" Barrett writes, "this institutional exorbitance creates a situation in which the very protocols for situating newly reckoned lives in academic paradigms and archives may ironically constitute an unconsidered dimension of the larger cultural politics effacing and making these lives abject in the first place. The categories themselves are never called into question" (182).

[lxxx] As Susan Sontag writes in "Against Interpretation," "For decades now, literary critics have understood it to be their task to translate the elements of the poem or play or novel or story into something else" (5).

[lxxxi] As Alan Palmer writes in *Fictional Minds*, "it may be the character who sees, but it is the narrator who sees that the character sees" (51). In the same way, whenever Delany's narrators observe a character seeing somebody else's chewed fingernails, it is often the author that I see hungrily looking over the procession. This mirroring thus shares out a once private appreciation in a number of ways, since whenever a narrator finds a character savoring bitten nails as noteworthy, I find Delany's own desires reflected within them.

[lxxxii] Miller's words on cults of appreciation here may very well also apply here: "The effort of what I've called his secret style is to create – discretely, for true initiates – an alternative universe in which celebrated storytelling, suspense, and entertainment of the manifest style all get derailed" (51). What we experience in such moments is an "*undue intimacy,*" which, for the cult fanatic, expresses a desire to become incredibly close to the work and to the one who authored it.

[lxxxiii] Whether one is raising the matter of building, a finger, or, indeed, even the "phallic investment in faciality," phallocentric descriptions pervade our ways of seeing how power is played out. See Michelle Ann Stephen's *Skin Acts*, pg. xi.

[lxxxiv] This push affirms the one made by Foucault in his interview, "Friendship as a Way of Life": "What we must work on … is not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure … We must escape and help others to escape the two readymade formulas of the pure sexual encounter and the lovers' fusion of identities" (137).

[lxxxv] See Samuel Delany's published in *In Search of Silence*, pg. 11.

[lxxxvi] Especially toward the end of this first published volume of Delany's journals, many entries feature Delany drafting excerpts of soon to be novels, including *Equinox*.

[lxxxvii] I think here of D.A. Miller's account of how tedious the lecturer's close-readings now feel to theory-driven audience of today. In Miller's account, the audience members faces seem to fret "the resounding impatience that he get to the point, to the paradigm, which has become the only object of their preemptory, poverty-stricken desire" (*Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*, 57).

[lxxxviii] Esty is here describing Wilde's hovering description on ornate in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray.* See *Unseasonable Youth,* pg. 105.

[lxxxix] As Spinoza writes, when the body is subject to multiple forces, at times the ontological distinction between affective forces give way to a common, undistinguished feeling, as when "the mind can imagine neither slight differences of the singular [men] (such as the color and size of each one, etc.) nor their determinate number, and images distinctly only what they all agree in, insofar as they affect the body" (56). Rather than parse the distinctions between causes, Spinoza takes them to be united by their capacity to affect the body. Insofar as this is true, the power of having been affected is such that one accumulates new associations – new erotic charges: "if the human body has once been affected by two extern bodies at the same time, then afterwards, when the mind imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the other also, that is, it will regard both as present to itself unless causes occur which exclude their present existence" (59). Or, "If the human body has once been affected by two bodies at once, then afterwards, when the mind imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the other also" (78).

[xc] Since the time of writing this, Alexis Lothian's *Old Futures* (2018) has written a chapter on Delany that addresses in her conclusion Delany's attention to nail-biting in Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* in ways that shares my position here. Lothian notes that one character "takes pride in the sexual minority status afforded by his fetish for bitten nails, stating the world in which he lives is 'wondrous and more exiting because no one has written poems and built sculptures to indicate the structure of desire I negotiate every day as I move about in it'" (156). The character here experiences a manifestation of desire that is contingent upon a world that no longer exists; it does not then appear that others of that bygone world necessarily share his fetish as a socially legible erotic position, but that it was only able to come about in that unique yet now vanished gestures native to that social configuration.

[xci] See L.H. Stallings *Funk the Erotics,* Letica Alvarado's *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Producction* (2018). I am also thinking of a recent panel proposed at MLA "Reading for Filth: Gross Methods in Literary Studies" (2018) by Omari Weeks and Mary Zaborskis, as well as a graduate symposium hosted at Riverside "Read for Filth."

[xcii] Delany here allows his characters to revel in that stank matter at the underside of the human, which L.H. Stallings terms in *Black Funk*.

[xciii] This question echoes, in its logics of affiliation, that important attempt to restructure the field of imaginable relations that Cathy Cohen sets out in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," as unacknowledged zones of affiliation from which to rethink coalitional politics.

[xciv] The novel marks this moment as an important transition by abruptly shifting how it chronicles its subsections: the first subsection of *Spiders* begins with "**[G]"**, and every subsequent section scales backwards up the alphabet until finally reaching, on page 32, "**[A]**" – the moment in which the above scene occurs. After this section concludes on page 38, the catalogue shifts to "**[0**]" –a new re-beginning – after which each section dutifully begins counting upwards.

[xcv] The claim that blackness is already queer takes its roots from such Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Daggers and Welfare Queens" (1997); which serves as the basis for recent works, including Roderick Fergusons *Aberrations in Black* (2004); Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection* (2010); Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman's *Against the Closet* (2012); Matt Richardson's *The Queer Limit of Black Memory* (2013);); Vincent Woodard's *The Delectable Negro* (2015), and Stephen Dillon's *Fugitive Life* (2018).

[xcvi] Written in *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed is here describing how the attribution to bad feelings to minority subjects, such as anger to blackness, can have material effects upon their ability to flourish. In the case of the Dump, the attribution of pleasure or repulsion to marginalized bodies, here epitomized by a black gay working class, has a mixed yet material effect upon their social and spatial positioning.

[xcvii] If, as Mayra Rivera writes in *The Poetics of the Flesh*, "inappropriate passions become associated with marked identities," and "identities mark bodies and shape the flesh of the world," then black bodies are, as Hortense Spillers has also shown, pornotropically enfleshed in ways that render them available to all kinds of sordid imaginings. See, pg. Rivera, 40; 58.

[xcviii] This viewing experience resembles that process which José Muñoz refers to in *Dissidentifications*: "Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentifications is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentificaiton, utopianism), this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance" (11-12). While the viewing experiences seen within Delany are less intentionally and therefore strategically transformative for the characters, they nevertheless enact , through writing, a similar aim, which allows queer of color subjects to

rework an affirmative identification with a cultural text that seeks to erase or elide their existence. “We thus disidentify with the white ideal. We desire it with a difference. The negotiation between desire, identification, and ideology are a part of the important work of dissidentification” (15).

[xcix] Among the number of allusions that here open up, Bill’s remark depicts *Kong* in ways that resemble the black nationalist Eldridge Cleaver’s account of himself as a rapist in his essay “On Becoming”: “I became a rapist. To refine my technique and *modus operandi*, I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto – in the black ghetto where dark and vicious and deeds appear not as aberrations or deviations from the normal, but as part of the sufficiency of the Evil of a day – and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey” (*Souls on Ice,* 33). Bill’s confused insertion of Christine Daeé, however, compounds this drama by alluding to *Phantom of the Opera*, in which the heroine, Daeé – always draped in the purest white – is drawn to the smooth voice of a masked and disfigured ghoul – always cloaked in black – and whose allure she must be saved from by a more normative bodied character. In either allusion, Bill thus reads *Kong* into a longer twentieth century literary, theatrical and cinematic engagement with an erotically charged binary between white and black, whose monstrous masculinities occupy a flimsy place of terror and attraction.

[c] The most cited example here would be José Muñoz’s theory of queer of color spectatorship in *Dissidentifications* (1999), but other examples of perverse, queer, and resistant spectatorship include Alexander Doty’s *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993), Jack Halberstam’s *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), Andrew Scahill’s *The Revolting Child in Horror Cinema: Youth Rebellion and Queer Spectatorship* (2015), Andre Carrington’s *Speculative Blackness* (2016), Eliza Steinbeck’s *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (2019) and theories of “queer viewership” in Alexis Lothian’s *Old Futures* (2018). Read more broadly, they might also include, however, such against-the-grain readings that engage the camp sensibilities, like that of Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004), or the reparatively minoritarian and counter-intuitive reading ethos as Jennifer Nash’s *The Black Body in Ecstasy* (2014). In such cases, marginalized figures read cinematic texts in counter-intuitive ways that afford identification and esteem where they would otherwise be foreclosed. With the exception of Edelman, all of these texts also invest in popular and often b-rated films.

[ci] Halberstam here repeats and affirms one aspect of Žižek’s reading in his essay “Grimaces of the Real Or When the Phallus Appears.” See, Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995).

[cii] See Jennifer Nash’s writing on pornography, in *The Black Body in Ecstasy (2014).*

[ciii] My use of the term “smuggling” alludes to Eve Sedgwick’s gorgeously precise essay, “Queer and Now” from *Tendencies* (1993), and which became the prototype for what later critics would refer to, in Sedgwick’s honor, as “perverse reading.” Sedgwick writes, “I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love” (3). Such a counter-intuitive, “against the grain” reading of a standard text is one that I take to be represented in the cinematic encounter with *King Kong* and *Lord of the Rings* throughout the novel, and, whose shift as represented here (from *Kong* as my ur-text, to *Rings*) represents the desired survival of a community of which I am not apart: that mysterious and ever elusive fellowship of nail-biters that exist within and at times spring from without the long career of Delany’s writing.

[civ]The weak linkage expressed among nail-biters, like that larger network in which they are concentrically enmeshed, calls to mind Erving Goffman’s remark: “What one does find is that the members of a particular stigma category will have a tendency to come together into small social groups whose members all derive from the category, these groups themselves being subject to overarching organization to varying degrees … Further, in being a member of the category, an individual may have an increased probability of coming into contact with any other member, and even forming a relationship with him as a result. A category, then, can function to dispose its members to group-formation and relationships” (23-24). From *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity.*

[cv] “Friendship as a Way of Life” captures the promise of some nascent fellowship that Foucault gleaned within a newly emergent sexual subculture of the sixties: a utopian possibility arising not from one’s *being* gay but from *becoming* gay; from restlessly experimenting with new relational forms. We have seen that becoming gay – or becoming black – is so relentlessly inventive within the novel that living up to one’s desires may require even *unbecoming* gay, or becoming a nail-biter.

[cvi] Her artwork makes that same “nigger’s joke,” which Toni Morrison refers to in *Sula,* wherein the bottom becomes the top. This seems intention insofar as Kathryn Bond Stockton makes this question of the beautiful bottom into the subject of her book on black queer intimacy, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*.

[cvii] pg. xvii-xviii.

[cviii] pg, 14.

[cix] Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989), easily came up, After all, Evans’s protagonist, after all – like Joseph Beam, James Earl Hardy, and admittedly now myself – all had to discover that there is more to black gay history than Baldwin (and less of Baldwin in black gay history than we’d originally thought. and *Brother to Brother* had an essay by Marlon Riggs in it, which lead me to *Tongues Untied* (1989) and so on.