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Interiority and Counter-Interiority in 19th and 20th Century U.S. Literature and Culture

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Graham Hall

June 2021

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Susan Zieger, Chairperson

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Dedication

To my parents. Thanks for sticking by me.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Interiority and Counter-Interiority in 19th and 20th Century U.S. Literature and Culture

by

Graham Hall

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, June 2021
Dr. Susan Zieger, Chairperson

In this dissertation, I analyze “interiority,” which refers to a particular mode of conceptualizing and living in space, as well as a mode of understanding and forming senses of subjectivity and agency. I argue that a unique understanding and practice of subjective and spatial interiority manifested and evolved in a post-Romantic cultural formation in the 19th and 20th century U.S. The interiority that I’m interested in involved an understanding of the subject as hermetic, autonomous, and relatively autochthonous, and an understanding of space as something to be fashioned as a neatly demarcated, insulating, and comforting enclosure. Furthermore, it mutually defined both space and subjectivity through resonances between these understandings and practices of what it

meant to be “inside.” This subjective and spatial interiority, as I’ll show, both called for a movement inward and demanded a transcendence of interior spaces and subjectivities, and this ambivalence had real stakes for narratives and practices of freedom, mobility, and agency. I examine this interiority in the writing of authors like Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and David Foster Wallace, and in the cultural practices and discourse of suburban white middle class Americans. I also outline a resistance to this mode of spatial and subjective discourse and practice that I call “counter-interiority,” which involve alternative articulations of and orientations to subjective and spatial interiors. I’ll show how this counter-interiority, which emerged in the work of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Bob Kaufman, and William S. Burroughs, and in the discourse and practice of post-suburban punks, threatened interiority by encouraging the cultivation of practices and understandings of space and subjectivity that favored discomfort, fragmentation, and an interpenetration between inside and outside.

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Preface

Though part of my objective in pursuing this project was to move away from an inward looking writing practice toward a counter-interior writing practice geared toward openness, discomfort, degrees of selflessness, and transversality, it would be disingenuous – and against the principles of this project, in fact – not to confess that there is inevitably much of my self and the spaces I’ve dwelt in suffused throughout the writing that follows. On these pages there are traces of suburban bedrooms and share-house closets, warehouses and halfway houses, and myriad other interiors that I’ve treated as trap and refuge over the years. However, this is not necessarily a detriment. Walter Benjamin said that the truth of history can only be arrived at from within a historical position, and – though I must confess I’ve wished this project was a collaboration on many occasions – as a middle-class white boy who spent the first part of his life moving from interior to exterior back to interior with delusions of grandeur, it is perhaps appropriate that I should be the one to write this story about the relationship between interiority, transcendence, and myths of singular individuality, and even to ask what it means to resist them. It has felt important to pursue a project like this not from a posture on the outside – as though from the objective stance of some transcendent intellectual – but also not entirely from a self-absorbed posture on the inside either. I hope that I’ve proven equal to that more daunting task.

Introduction

What Does it Mean to Be Inside?

Gaston Bachelard quipped in *The Poetics of Space* that “we bring our lairs with us.” In his *Arcades Project* Walter Benjamin observed that our lairs bring us with them too. However, perhaps most importantly, each of these thinkers clarified to an extent that our lairs make us as we make them. The purpose of this study is to plot the ways that, in dwelling, “the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to its shelter” (Bachelard) just as the shelter gives perceptible limits to the sheltered being. Philosophers like Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, and Peter Slotterdijk help us think about “dwelling” as an ongoing production of subjectivity in tandem with sociospatiality, while nonetheless participating in the production of modes of dwelling themselves. In his work on space, Henri Lefebvre refines earlier accounts of dwelling by analyzing the production of “spatial codes,” which involve the ongoing incorporation and inscription of both “concepts” and “experiences” of space. For Lefebvre, these cultural codes allow for the very production of space – alongside culture – as a thing to be experienced by a distinct body and subject.

My goal is to understand the particular way that what I’ll call “interiority” emerged as a mode of dwelling in the literature and culture of the United States in the 19th century, and became the dominant set of spatial concepts and practices that inflected freedom and power along axes of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Likewise, I hope to map how resistance to this mode of dwelling emerged as what I call counter-interiority. Interiority, I argue, demanded the production of subjective and spatial interiors as both

refuge and trap to create the supremacy of white propertied men, by first consolidating wealth and privilege in the space of the interior and then disavowing the advantages of this consolidation through postures of transcendence. However, counter-interiority, as I'll show, emerged as a potent rejection of interiority as an organizing social principle and instead demanded an embrace of mutuality and interpenetration.

Though my project tracks interiority and counter-interiority through American literary and cultural figures like the transcendentalists, early Black American autobiographers, the Beats, the punks, and postmodern authors, I consider this constellation a "post-romantic"¹ formation because its most relevant ancestors are probably Thomas De Quincey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The closest thing that interiority has to an origin story is actually two stories: De Quincey's recollection of time spent at Wordsworth's Dove Cottage and the highly mythologized story of the inspiration of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." Each of these involves a poet having escaped a fraught urban environment – where they were exposed to discomfort and disease – to a cozy and isolated rural interior. De Quincey's time at Dove Cottage was an escape from urban destitution, which he referred to as a "hurricane and perfect hail-storm of affliction" (7). Coleridge's retreat, on the other hand, was caused by an unspecified illness. The comfort

¹ As will become clear, the figures I'm interested in are all inheritors of a Romantic tradition that lauds the beauty of a sublime that seems to exceed its ability to be represented or "captured" and critiques organized life in an industrial society as a kind of "trap." This tradition paradoxically nonetheless prided itself on giving voice to – i.e. representing – that sublime and finding comfort in the fruits of industrial society in cozy cottages. I specifically have in mind De Quincey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth here.

of the dwellings they each escaped to was supplemented in both cases by opiates and by a juxtaposition of this comfortable inside with its inhospitable outside.

De Quincey explicitly represented the warmth and comfort of the interior by setting it against the cold and harsh exterior of “winter in his sternest shape.” He notes that he can abide rain but only if it “rains cats and dogs,” because the interior is made what it is – quiescent, comforting, warm – through its juxtaposition with and amplification by a harsh exterior. Importantly, De Quincey’s description of the distinct pleasures of a warm house in winter is echoed by Bachelard in his theorizing of the interior as a mediating space between the womb and a cruel exterior world one is always supposedly thrown into upon being born. For Bachelard, this interior space allows one to achieve “well-being” as opposed to simply “being.” Bachelard uses De Quincey here to participate in the philosophical thread of this romantic production of interiority. He operates in a Heideggerian tradition in which to dwell is to find a kind of contentedness in the world, a supposedly essential feature of human existence that encompasses – and in fact produces – architectural space and personal space. In *Bubbles*, Peter Slotterdijk makes explicit what is admittedly nebulous in Heidegger, namely that dwelling does invoke interiority, and that the interiority of the buildings we dwell in is merely a manifestation of a broader movement toward interiority that extends to our experience of subjectivity as well as personal and interpersonal spaces of privacy and comfort not limited to architectural space. This broader interiority is what we invoke when we think about our “personal bubble” or “personal space.”

For both De Quincey and Coleridge, the subjective and spatial interior was paradoxically a space that facilitated flights of imagination into vast seemingly exterior spaces. The insulating spatial interiors they cultivated, worked to buttress rich and capacious subjective interiors, and together, these interiors allowed a greater mobility into exterior spaces and subjectivities. Coleridge, as the story goes, did not so much write “Kubla Khan” as transcribe it following a dream of Orientalist visions inspired by an early travel narrative. While dreaming “he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or conscious effort” (Holmes). Here, Coleridge’s cozy rural escape, supplemented by opiate induced sleep, produced a flight into another world and an opportunity to perform transcendent artistic inspiration. Likewise, De Quincey’s opiate dreams involved flights through labyrinthine expanses and the “unimaginable horror” of Orientalist scenes. In one of his many “dreams of Oriental imagery” De Quincey explains that “The Malay has been a fearful enemy for months. I have been every night, through his means, transported into Asiatic scenes.” He continues “If I were compelled to forego England, and to live in China, and among Chinese manners and modes of life and scenery, I should go mad” (56). However, it seems neither De Quincey nor Coleridge had to leave the comforts of their interiors to nonetheless go far into the exterior.

Despite their flights into these exotic and supposedly frightening destinations, these poets maintained the privileges of their interiority, and begrudged intrusions into their spatial and subjective interiors. Coleridge’s genius artistic vision was notoriously

interrupted and lost forever due to a knock at the door by a man from the town of Porlock. Likewise, when De Quincey receives a visitor – the “Malay” that later haunts his dreams – he sends the man off abruptly. De Quincey sought to maintain a distance from the city, which he imagines seeing from a window, inside looking out. He hoped to remain “aloof from the uproar of life; as if the tumult, the fever, and the strife were suspended; a respite granted from the secret burthens of the heart; a sabbath of repose; a resting from human labours” (37). It is the distance from these human labors and “the uproar of life” that gave De Quincey and Coleridge the freedom to pursue their artistic flights from the interior, yet these flights nonetheless depended on the labors of the exterior and exoticized exterior locales and subjectivities. They were both able to leave behind the constraints of their provincial selves and dwellings without actually going anywhere or giving up anything.

Sarah Jane Cervenak proposes that “The momentary renunciation of claims to self and subjectivity, made possible through a peripatetic “stepping outside,” enabled a freedom from the moral and rationalist hazing of the hegemonic Enlightenment. This repudiation of claims to self, which has meant (among other things) taking a reprieve from reality, life, [...] has historically been predicated on racial and gender privilege” (21). De Quincey and Coleridge, like many of their descendants in the post-romantic formation I’ll analyze, “could surpass the limits of self and achieve momentary transcendence, because they were not bound by the constraints of spectacular Otherness” (21) that defined the Orientalized figures through which they mapped their artistic genius. Following Celeste Langan, I would extend Cervenak’s argument to suggest that this

“momentary transcendence” depended on a peripatetic “stepping outside” of not just self and subjectivity, but private and personal space and possession. Langan suggests that an often imaginary oscillation between possessions or privacy and ascetic wandering allowed Romantic figures to embrace a paradoxical freedom they assigned to the vagrant. For early Romantic poets, Langan contends, the vagrant was thought of as free because of his mobility, but this mobility involved a freedom that results from not having possessions and not being constrained in one’s movement by a space of one’s own. Of course, the vagrant lacked the freedom to do much of anything other than wander and talk, which is why the Romantic engagement with vagrancy involved more of a peripatetic oscillation than an actual commitment (13-35). As we’ll see, this strategic orientation to transcendence and freedom, as well as subjective and spatial interiority and their material predicates, is central to the struggle between interiority and counter-interiority in the post-romantic formation this project focuses on.

Before we turn to that post-romantic formation, it is important for us to highlight two other seminal figures in the theorization and production of the interior mode of dwelling: Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud. For Benjamin, the interior becomes relevant when “the private individual makes his entrance on the stage of history” (“Paris” 8). This private individual, in an attempt to isolate from the social world, produces a “place of dwelling” that operates like “a box in the theater of the world” (9). Though the private individual must “deal with reality” in the office, he “needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions” (9). Benjamin here seems to be referring to the illusory nature of a clean separation between private and public or individual and social. He

outlines this effort at separation further when he writes about the private individual's response to poverty and the city. For Benjamin, the development of technological comforts in modernity coincides with a "poverty of experience" that is "a part of that larger poverty that has once again acquired a face – a face of the same sharpness and precision as that of a beggar in the Middle Ages" ("Experience" 732). For Benjamin, the private individual's general orientation toward an experience of the world in modernity became synonymous with what was, before modernity, a singular and vivid encounter with one real person living in poverty.

The modern world, Benjamin seems to suggest, is that one face struck by poverty, and private individuals "long to free themselves from experience" because of the social face their experience forces them to encounter. The retreat to the interior then, is an effort to have private "well-being" in the face of public depravity. The private individual's retreat from experience, is a retreat into the private interior comforts offered by the same technological modernity that produced an exterior social world worth retreating from. Benjamin's understanding of experience here dovetails with his explanation of the "shock experience." For Benjamin, the experience of the pedestrian in the city is one of reeling from shock – often of contact with other bodies, but also of exposure to a busy and overstimulating technological urban environment – and retreating to a private interior. Benjamin draws on Freud's discussion of shock to understand the pedestrian as a figure who automatically filters out shock without any ability to reintegrate shock as "lived experience."

For Benjamin and Freud alike, the retreat from the social world into a spatial interior overlaps with the retreat into a subjective interior. However, for Freud, the spatial interior that the private individual retreats into is mapped more by the womb than the domestic interior, though these seem to be analogous at points in his thinking. Beyond conceptualizing the mind as a kind of house with many rooms and conflicting impulses toward pleasure and restraint – a drama, of course, unfolding within the domestic interior occupied by the Western European nuclear family that Benjamin is historicizing – Freud also thought of the mind as defined by conflicting impulses between death and life. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and his writing on the uncanny, he suggested that the impulse toward death, paradoxically involved driving for a return to the interior of the womb, a drive which produced anti-social and potentially self-destructive patterns of behavior like the retreat from sociality and the development of addiction. The interior, conceptualized as a comforting womblike space of retreat from the social, becomes an ambivalent recurring motif in the discourse and practice of interiority, in which embracing comfort is both a means of transcendence and a practice to be transcended.

*

In the American post-romantic formation I analyze in what follows, the resonating narrative of interiority I've been mapping so far emerges over and over again as a dominant concern. This narrative involves the spatialization of subjectivity in relation to that of built social spaces, each of which is only able to be fully conceptualized through the other. In this process of spatialization, the interior is a figure by which people come to understand both subjectivity and dwelling spaces as coherent, comfortably hermetic,

and livable. In the “post-romantic” narratives of transcendence I’m concerned with, the interior is also frequently refigured as a trap. In these narratives, transcendence – not to be understood in opposition to interiority – functions as an escape from either the shock of a threatening outside space or the constraints of a stifling interior subjectivity or dwelling. This is to say that the narratives I’m interested in are characterized by two movements. On the one hand, I’m interested in the transcendent embrace of interiority as a consoling and consolidating refuge from the object, from shock, from the social, from the mob, etc. And on the other hand, I’m concerned with the effort to transcend that interiority when it is refigured as a trap that must be escaped, as it is when we think of “getting outside of our own heads” or leaving behind a feminized domestic home for the wide open world outside. It is important to note, however, that in these “escapes” the advantages the interior offers are almost always surreptitiously brought along, and a return to the interior is almost always on the table. What I find most interesting about these narratives is that they involve transcendence as a freedom to shuffle between interior and exterior at will.

We can think here of Kerouac having escaped a stifling domesticity on the open road, wiring home to his mother for money when his life in that inhospitable outside becomes too uncomfortable. In fact, we often see these two kinds of transcendence – into and out of the interior – in the same people, and it seems that an access to both is necessary for what we think of as “freedom” in America. Simply being able to escape the interiority of being a subject, for example isn’t enough. As Fred Moten observes, many slaves accomplished being “outside” modern subjectivity easily enough, given

that this kind of interiority was never on offer for them (96). Being able to escape and then return at will, however, is the crux of an American freedom that seeks both frontier and suburb. It is also what exemplifies, for example, the freedom of a white man posturing at the ways he has annihilated his own subjectivity in some paradoxically self-aggrandizing artistic project, as we often see in the post-romantic formation we'll soon turn to.

The figure of the interior as both refuge and trap is fraught with political significance that requires turning our attention to the myths of liberalism and the evolution of capitalist urban geography. Narratives of interiority and transcendence served to consolidate power and naturalize a universal liberal subjectivity. Sadiya Hartman draws our attention to the ways that in liberal subjectivity, a hermetic subject with the interiority of conscience is a “blameworthy” subject who has been conceptually isolated from the context that created the position for which they might be blamed. She is specifically concerned with the recently freed slave who, within the logic of liberal subjectivity, suddenly must be thought of as the product of their own efforts, and blamed for their shortcomings, despite the violent dispossession and exploitation that defined their lives up to that point. However, we can easily see how these myths of liberalism – tied to the hermeticism of an interior subject – track to modern anti-welfare narratives for example. We can see then how, as a coherent spatialization of subjectivity, the interior often functions as a kind of shelter for liberal subjectivity. Likewise, as a disavowal of the inescapable power effects of race/class/gender/sexuality, transcendence has often been an alibi for efforts to escape a responsibility to the social

and to consolidate white masculine bourgeois power. On the one hand, transcendence allows white supremacy to point to the exception and say “look, context does not have to constrain!” And on the other, it allows the suburbanite to imagine that they can escape indoors from the crime of the city when black and brown youth somehow fail to transcend their contexts.

*

In the spirit of recent critical interest in the *longue durée*, this project spans the 19th and 20th centuries. I’m particularly interested in Ian Baucom’s talk of a “long twentieth century” – following the work of Giovanni Arrighi – that paradoxically begins in the late 18th century, runs parallel to the long 19th century of Benjamin’s analysis of the Parisian Arcades, and culminates in our current moment of highly speculative capitalism. Understanding Baucom’s Benjaminian account of history will help illuminate how my somewhat zoomed out historical focus is nonetheless warranted from a historicist perspective. We should note first that Benjamin’s concept of time isn’t linear, or even dialectical in the traditional Marxist sense. There is a kind of mystical dialecticism in Benjamin, one that seems to have time move in two directions. Baucom paraphrases Benjamin and Arrighi as believing that “Time does not pass, it accumulates” (24). What this means for Benjamin is that the object of analysis defines how we see history more than some empty time that the object occupies. Furthermore, Benjamin believes that to understand the truth of an object in history, we have to understand that the object is informed by not only the time that went into its production but the time that passed after it was produced (Baucom 25;

Benjamin *Arcades* 391).

For Benjamin historical analysis is not just about understanding the historical moment that the object was produced in. He claims that “it is just as much a matter of doing justice to the concrete historical situation of [our current] interest taken in the object. And this situation is always so constituted that the interest is itself preformed in that object and, above all, feels this object concretized in itself” (*Arcades* 391).

Benjamin seems to be saying “of course the arcades are what interest me, because they brought me to this place where I am interested in them, and in turn my interest makes them what they are as an object of interest.” And I would follow him and say of course an interest in interiority animates my study, because interiority animates our current mode of study, and to understand how interiority animated 19th century fugitives, intellectuals, and poets means understanding how it has animated abolitionism, intellectualism, and poetry to this point. With interiority, seeing any tree demands seeing the forest.

Though Baucom’s analysis is interested in an 18th century document – a document that includes an accounting of laborer and slave life and limb (literally) in speculative financial terms – that he uses to understand the nature of finance capital and the commodification of labor and life today, my analysis is interested in books, zines, films, songs, houses and even dances. And the time stored in the voices in these objects is a time that came before them as well as the time that has since passed. To understand what interiority meant then is to understand what interiority meant after then and up to this moment.

*

As I've hinted, the story of the interior, both subjective and sociospatial, is a story about freedom. What it means to be free, particularly in the United States, has necessarily involved thinking about the property – including the inalienable rights – of human subjects with conscious depth and autochthonous wills, which is to say, subjects that have interiority. This property, however, necessarily extends beyond the possession of the interior self and its rights, to the spaces around subjects that contain other possessions, including space itself. This space is also the space of the interior, and though it is often architecturally or geographically demarcated, as mapped by thinkers like Walter Benjamin, the spatial interior of dwelling also emerges in a subject's mind, though this is also to say specifically in tandem with minds, or the idea that there are subjects with interior minds. Despite the fact that thinkers like Heidegger, Bachelard, and Benjamin were generally oblivious to the ways subjectivity and dwelling are produced and experienced differentially according to factors like race and gender, their ideas provide an important jumping off point here for us to think about the relationship of subjective and sociospatial interiority to freedom. However, I'm going to extend this tradition of thinking about interiority with the help of more contemporary scholars like Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, and Sarah Jane Cervenak, who map out a kind of Black counter-interiority.

This Black counter-interiority tried to cultivate alternative paths to freedom by refusing the privileges of interiority that were initially – and often still are – refused to Black people, to borrow a formulation coined by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. In *The*

Undercommons, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten understand the “refusal of what has been refused” as a way toward dwelling in common that seeks neither “self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other” (96). I noted earlier that Baucom tracks the commodification of the body and every facet of life in speculative finance capitalism to the slave trade. In this same vein, Harney and Moten focus on modern logistics and financialization, when they claim that “for capital the subject has become too cumbersome, ... too controlling” (87). They track this disposal of the subject to “the first great movement of commodities, the ones that could speak” (92). However, instead of setting their energies to salvaging the refused subjectivity that define both the slave trade and modern capitalism, they find in this resonance something hopeful. They gesture at the kinds of community that were formed in the hold of slave ships and after, and that were even facilitated by the kind of suffering and denial of subjectivity that defined life in the hold of a slave ship and in the slave life that followed. Importantly, this life was also characterized by a complete lack of a space of well-being in which to dwell.

As Sterling Stuckey has meticulously researched, the slave trade surprisingly facilitated the growth of a kind of uniform American slave culture, that blended elements of several different West African cultures and languages, and that emerged without centralized forms of interaction or communication (10). In keeping with Stuckey’s ideas, Harney and Moten argue that this shared culture and sense of community began in the hold without an opportunity for – and in fact in resistance to – the interior subject and a space in which to dwell. They hope that this means that we can resist the totalizing and desubjectivating logic of modern capitalism, by drawing on a counter-interiority that

emerged in the slave trade and that survives to this day. It is a counter-interiority that actually doubles down on what is refused by capitalism.

Counter-interiority as it emerges in Harney and Moten involves a “fugitivity” defined by “being together in homelessness” (96). This collective refusal of the privileges of interiority destroys and reconfigures social relationships around new modes of spatiality and (de)subjective well-being that do not depend on the consolidation of interiors at the expense of what is exterior, or a playing up of exteriority that merely masks the lingering privileges of interiority in the exterior. It is important to note that this counter-interiority involves a genuine refusal of the interior, rather than a mere posture of refusal that both maintains the privileges of the interior in the exterior and that holds out the possibility of a return to the interior.

*

Contrary to what we might imagine when we think about the dichotomy between freedom and slavery as I’ve described it above, much of the freedom that white subjects experience has historically involved desubjectivation and a movement beyond conventional spaces of well-being. However, this has always been a desubjectivation that permits resubjectivation and a movement beyond dwelling spaces that allows a return to dwelling or that carries dwelling with it surreptitiously. As Sarah Cervenak notes in *Wandering*, her work on freedom and movement, the interior of the post-Enlightenment subject emerges not only from a spatial delimiting, but also from a necessary spatial wandering outside of limits. She suggests that post-Enlightenment white masculine subjectivity – masquerading as a universal subjectivity – is defined by a movement in

which a limit operates hand in hand with transcendence, to construct not only the boundaries of a subject, but to construct a subject convinced of the richness and depth of its own interiority and the autochthony and singularity of its will (33).²

In this mode of subjectivity defined by interiority, freedom demands overcoming a containment, and a movement into the outside. It also involves exercising dominion over both interior and exterior. It is this construction of an inside and then supposed movement outside of it that characterizes white interiority and performances of transcendence. These performances construct freedom for white subjects who are able to disavow their relationship with the law or the social and attain a kind of mobility that demands “exceeding” – and, in practice, actually expanding – the reach of social and legal privilege, while still benefiting from their protection.³ In the 19th century U.S., this necessary transcending of limits in post-Enlightenment subjectivity manifested itself in white discourses and practices of interiority that depended on transcendence to undergird liberal subjectivity at great expense to people of color. Interiority is crucial to the 19th century project of liberal subjectivation, insofar as the liberal subject is essentially an interior. Liberal subjectivity involves imagining a subject with an autochthonous will that is hermetically sealed off from its environment.

During this period, for propertied whites a liberal project of individualization and interiorization is ultimately empowering, because it erases the favorable circumstances

² For example, Cervenak observes that both Kant and Rousseau move between establishing laws necessary for freedom and pontificating about the impossibility of freedom within the boundaries of law (33).

³ For more on this see David Lloyd “Race Under Representation” and Michael Warner “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject” from *Publics and Counterpublics*.

that produce white supremacy and instead turns white supremacy into merely a product of a collection of individual wills. Liberal subjectivity works by enforcing the notion that the source of freedom is individual, and to an extent a product of an individual's relationship with an abstract homogeneous national body, rather than a product of specific contexts and social forces that operate beyond the subject's control (Hartman 115). We can track this trend from the liberalism of the 19th century, to the neoliberalism of the 20th century, in which praise for "self-made men" and expectations for the urban poor to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" alongside movements to avoid taxes and to consolidate wealth in suburban enclaves relied on the same myths of liberalism. A basic denial of any debt to the social, operating alongside a disavowal of private profits made at the expense of the public – and those who have been refused the interior, in particular – depends on deft deployment of the interiority and transcendence I've been unpacking so far.

*

This study will try to put modern liberal narratives of/struggles for transcendence and interiority into dialogue with figures for whom the stakes of being inside and getting outside are rather different, and for whom such projects are both – at different points – in tension and resonant with modern liberal transcendence and interiority. To begin to think about what interiority and transcendence look like for black subjects in the 19th century, I will look at 19th century black narratives of slavery and freedom in my first chapter, "Shelters of Enslavement: White Interiors, Transcendence, and Black counter-interiority." I'll specifically discuss how *Incidents*

in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs and *The Heroic Slave* by Frederick

Douglass develop the kind of black counter-interiority I've begun to outline above, by constructing penetrable interiors, orientations toward discomfort, and conceptions of freedom in which it is impossible to be free alone.

I will put these authors into dialogue with canonical white transcendentalist authors like Walt Whitman and Henry Thoreau in order to suggest that, despite their pretenses at anti-interiority, these authors were involved in a project of interior expansion, which is to say an expansion of the capaciousness and depth of the white subject, as well as an expansion of the spaces of white well-being. I will argue that white authors of the time depended on a conceptual and physical movement into a racialized exterior to perform their own freedom. For Whitman, this movement involved pretending to “get outside” of the boundaries of his own subjectivity by posing as a representative of Black and Indigenous people, in what was often in fact a self-aggrandizing gesture. For Thoreau, this movement involved pretending to live outside of the modern comforts of interior dwelling to such an extent that his home was the outside. I'll explore the ways this outside movement was often merely a disavowal of the interior rather than a genuine refusal of it. These two postures of exteriority and expansions of interiority – of the subject and of the space of well-being – in contrast to Black counter-interiority set the stage for the analyses of the following chapters.

In Chapter 2, “‘Looking for an Out Place’: The Beats and the Racialized Freedom of the Outside,” I take a look at Thoreau and Whitman's children, as it were, and ask

which of them inherits the transcendentalist tradition of surreptitiously extending the interior under the guise of a refusal, and which of them genuinely embraces the kind of refusal and counter-interiority that we can see in Jacobs and Douglass. The verdict of the chapter is that Kerouac and Ginsberg produce a racialized exterior full of romanticized hobos, jazz infused vitality, and “negro streets” in which the authors get to have their interior and leave it too. They each embark on a project of artistic self-aggrandizement by living semi-homeless lifestyles, in which they strategically move between states of deprivation and comfort, in order to appreciate two freedoms: one provided by material property and the comfort of domesticity and the other provided by a life unencumbered by property or responsibility to family. In contrast, I’ll argue that Bob Kaufman – “the Black Beat” – cultivates a kind of Black counter-interiority by genuinely refusing artistic self-fashioning and subjectivation, embracing precarity, and refusing the comforts of the interior that were refused to him.

Chapter 3, “‘Home is Where We Hide’: Post- Suburban Punk as a Rejection of the Interior,” examines the posture of early Los Angeles and Orange County punk toward – or perhaps more appropriately, away from – the interior. I specifically focus on the interiority explored by Benjamin in his writing on the emergence of a middle-class impulse toward isolation, and by Martin Heidegger in his writing on dwelling, which claims that space must always be made a kind of livable inside before it can be lived in. Taking into consideration the emergence of post-suburban formations and their impact on the culture of Los Angeles and Orange Counties, I historicize these writer’s thoughts on interior dwelling in an analysis of how and why punks attempted to reject the interiority

of livable space. I argue that post-suburban formations gave lie to the suburban belief that it was possible and necessary to retreat from the crime and poverty of the city and consolidate wealth and comfort in supposedly isolated enclaves that nonetheless depended on the vitality and dynamism of cities. I analyze the ways that post-suburban punk was a subculture generally united in resistance to this impulse toward interiority. This involves an examination of punk discourse on the home as a failed interior – found in song lyrics, interviews, zines, and video zines – and punk practice observed in chaotic yet communal high contact modes of dance and performance and the constitution of unconventional counter-interior spaces for "not living." I conclude that, through these postures away from the interior, post-suburban punk obliquely disrupted hegemonic maps of meaning and affect that relied on the ideal suburban home as a means of neatly splitting inside and outside, private and public, stability and crisis, order and disorder, safety and risk, progress and decline, existential fulfillment and depravity, and not coincidentally, white and black. Though this chapter does not attempt to neatly align the counter-interiority crafted by predominantly white and Latinx punks with the Black counter-interiority I map in chapter one, it does offer this punk counter-interiority as often implicitly – and sometimes even explicitly – in alliance with the kind of Black counter-interiority I unpack in the preceding chapters.

Whereas Chapter 3 spends much of its focus on the interior of space, my fourth and final chapter, “‘Are You Immensely Pleased. [sic]’: David Foster Wallace’s Postmodern Interior,” shifts our focus back to the interior of the subject. In this chapter I analyze David Foster Wallace as the inheritor of a tradition of “literary genius” typified

by white male postmodern authors. As I will argue, however, this literary genius is not a genius that finds itself applied to anything else. It is, rather, a genius for its own sake. It is often nothing other than a performance of the grand capaciousness of a subjective interior that is achieved through a relentless and characteristically postmodern inward-looking reflexivity. As a kind of gold medalist in the meta-Olympics, Wallace demonstrates his genius through a self-analysis that deals with anxiety about his place in this postmodern white male lineage, and that attempts to escape the boundedness of his subjectivity in order to connect with other people. However, as we'll see, Wallace can't help but feel that his reflexive and analytical effort to escape the boundaries of his subjectivity, not only as a subject but as a particular kind of subject, that is to say a white male postmodern author, is merely a postmodern reiteration of the trap of that subjectivity, which sends him into ever more dizzying and inward looking performances of his own interior capaciousness and postmodern genius. I'll examine how, in the course of this performance, Wallace misses the opportunity to offer sincere critiques of the racism and sexism he represents in his writing, and instead troublingly struggles to assert his agency as a literary figure in a literary landscape increasingly paying attention to the voices of women and people of color and responding skeptically to the automatic association of white masculine intellect and artistic relevance.

Each of these chapters represents an important node in an effort to map the historical truth of interiority in the long twentieth century. They track moves and countermoves in a struggle over the meaning and practice of freedom, against a national historical backdrop intensely invested in the term. Furthermore, the writing that follows

aims to clarify the stakes of that struggle, and the dependence of everyday practices and thinking in its outcomes. Though I only focus on a selection of texts, cultural artifacts, and practices, the subject of this study expands beyond the boundaries of what may seem like its neatly cultivated interior. Ultimately, my hope is to offer a study that is as much a documentation of the history of this mode of dwelling as it is a guide for reimagining what it means to be inside.

Chapter 1

Shelters of Enslavement:

White Interiors, Transcendence, and Black Counter-Interiority

During the 19th century antebellum period, white abolitionists faced a bind that they may not have been consciously aware of, but that nonetheless informed their thinking and writing about their own subjectivity and freedom as much as it informed their thinking and writing about the subjectivity and freedom of slaves. As Christopher Castiglia explains, there was an inevitable tension at this moment between “expansive liberty and restrictive subjectivity” (102) that abolitionists saw operating hand in hand in their quest to free slaves. Paradoxically, freedom demanded imposing certain boundaries of selfhood in relation to the state and of civic obligation. Sadiya Hartman calls this contradictory freedom for slaves a “burdened individuality of freedom” (115). To be free meant taking on the burden of certain civic “virtues” of a liberal subject, and these virtues included taking personal responsibility for your own material circumstances whether or not they were a product of your previous social dispossession and oppression. In response to this same bind freed Black writers were working through these contradictions in their own thinking and writing. The contradictions of liberal subjectivity actually seem to have simultaneously produced two conflicting orientations toward the interiority of both subjectivity and livable space: an ambivalent and expanding white interiority, that attempts to swallow the exterior, and a suspicious and resistant Black counter-interiority, that refuses to disavow the interpenetration of the exterior and interior.

This chapter extends a Heideggerian, Bachelardian, and Benjaminian tradition of thinking about interior dwelling – that is, the relationship between the boundaries of the subject and its sheltering space – using contemporary Black feminist scholars like Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, and Sarah Jane Cervenak, among others, in order to understand freedom and enslavement in the U.S. antebellum period. In this chapter I argue that during the antebellum period, white masculine narratives of space and subjectivity involved efforts to construct and expand subjective and spatial interiors under the guise of performances of transcendence and exteriorization. This project of interior expansion enabled safe mobility and freedom for white men at the cost of ironing out or otherwise strictly delimiting the interiority of subjectivity and space for Black and Indigenous subjects. I’ll show how, in response to the power effects of this white interior expansion, Black narratives established a kind of counter-interiority that used compromised and penetrated Black subjectivities and spaces to foreground the dubiousness of interior/exterior demarcations and fight their pernicious power effects. This Black counter-interiority tried to cultivate alternative paths to freedom by refusing the privileges of interiority that were initially – and often still are – refused to Black people, to borrow a formulation coined by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (96). As I’ve suggested, Harney and Moten’s work crucially outlines a productive orientation away from the interior subject that relies on an orientation away from neatly demarcated interiors of livable space. For them, the “commons” by which a public might actually *live together* in a utopian sense is paradoxically modeled after the hold of a slave ship – in that underneath space in which no livable space of one’s own is provided – and marks

specific allegiance with those who have been marked an “underclass.” It is an “undercommons” in which no one gets left behind, because those who might consolidate a subjective or spatial interior that would provide comforts that others lack and that might separate them from others refuse to do so out of allegiance to the undercommons.

My analysis uses Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* to understand the way a performance of transcendence and exteriorization in white masculine liberal discourse undergirded and elided a project of interior expansion and its attendant power effects. I then look at Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave* and Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in order to unpack a Black counter-interiority that emerges in the efforts of the fugitives in these texts to resist the immobilization, isolation, and objectification of Black people by making strategic use of compromised and penetrable interiors to pursue projects of collective freedom making.

As Sarah Cervenak notes in *Wandering*, her work on freedom and movement, the interior of the post-Enlightenment subject emerges from a spatial and subjective bounding of limits that are then overcome and revisited through a kind of physical and epistemological wandering. In this post-enlightenment mode of subjectivity defined by interiority, freedom demands overcoming a containment, the fruits of which are still nonetheless readily available. During the antebellum period, whites who recognized the bind between “expansive liberty” and “restrictive subjectivity” that Castiglia maps opted to have their cake and eat it too by moving freely between interior and exterior. To appreciate the fruits of liberty and interiority without contradiction they continually constructed comfortable insides and then postured at their movement outside of these

insides, a movement that typically merely expanded the inside. As I've suggested, this liberal strategy of interiorization and transcendence characterizes white interiority and performances of freedom in the long twentieth century. This form of liberal subjectivity allowed propertied whites to not only perform their freedom by expanding their interiors – sometimes so much that they seemed to swallow up the world outside of them – but it allowed them to disavow their debt to a world outside of them that continually reproduced their white supremacy and pretend as though they were merely the products of their own efforts *ex nihilo*.

On the other hand, for slaves and recently freed Black people, the frame of liberal subjectivity – when it was eventually offered to Black people who were otherwise generally treated as objects – served to erase the external sources of Black dispossession and merely saddle Black subjects with the burden of self-possession and the encumbrance of individualized responsibility for socially structured asymmetries of wealth and power. In *Scenes of Subjection* Saidiya Hartman aptly calls this encumbrance the “burdened individuality of freedom” to foreground the ways freedom and individuality actually worked to further dispossess freed slaves (115). For such subjects, the boundaries around the interior of the liberal subject effaced the exterior surrounding and defining the interior. As Moten and Hartman both note, the liberal humanist move toward offering Black people their own interiors with their own autochthonous wills was a trap, because it included a disavowal of the violence and dispossession that is wrought before the demarcations of liberal subjectivity and private space are drawn.⁴ It is in this sense that

⁴ See Moten and Hartman's discussion “The Black Outdoors.”

the often well-meaning gestures toward equality of individual treatment in an enduring liberal humanism, the likes of which we can see in both Whitman and Thoreau, hamstrung – and continue to hamstring – efforts to achieve social justice for people of color in the United States in the wake of the Civil War and the abortive period of Reconstruction. When neither an acceptance of the non-interiority offered by a slaveholding society nor an aspiration toward the interiority offered by a well-meaning white liberalism seemed like viable options for attaining Black freedom, Black narratives of the antebellum period cultivated a counter-interiority in response to the white modes of interiority that were predicated on and perpetuated Black enslavement.

“I contain multitudes”: the abolitionist liberal subject *contains* “long dumb voices”

In his poetic practice Walt Whitman seemingly attempts to resolve the asymmetries and tensions of the antebellum U.S. by creating a poem for all, written by a poet for all, to represent a nation for all. In the preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855) Whitman claims “An individual is as superb as a nation when he has the qualities which make a superb nation. [...] The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (17). Despite pretenses of selflessness, Whitman hopes to pacify the nation by universalizing its liberal democratic principles through an extension of the boundaries of his own subjectivity, by absorbing and bringing the nation into himself as it were. Whitman’s openness to penetration and absorption is actually typically a subtle expansion of his own boundaries as a container masquerading as a

transcendent opening up and exteriorization of the self. “Song of Myself,” the poem that dominates the first edition of *Leaves*, begins

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Whitman’s writing involves nested synecdoches that suggest that because of his transcendent vision – in which the boundaries of the self are supposedly dissolved – Whitman and his poetry can contain and speak for everyone and everything within the nation. However, despite Whitman’s anti-slavery stance, the Romantic performance of transcendence in his poetry works to assuage white anxiety and guilt, disavow the injustice necessitated by U.S. nationalism, and elevate Whitman to the level of the universal liberal subject. As a result of its interior expanding moves, Whitman’s poetry radically fails in its efforts to rectify the injustice that leads to national asymmetries and tensions. As I’ll show, his claims to represent silenced slaves and Indigenous people are in fact one of the preconditions of their silence. What Whitman contains as a container, which is to say as an interior himself, is also what much of the country saw as desperately in need of containment.

Though psychic interiority of course predates modernity, the interiority that I’ve been unpacking involves a number of unique interactions between the social and the subjective interior. One of these interactions that Castiglia unpacks involves the interior of “an individual’s ‘private’ realm of desires, affects, and appetites” becoming “a realm of disruption and attempted order that, mirroring the often tense struggles between

popular demand and juridical control, may be called an interior state” (3). It is precisely as this kind of “realm of disruption and attempted order” that we see Whitman attempting to reconcile not the conflicts between the law and the populace, but the conflicts within the populace itself and the asymmetric application of the law in ensuring the well-being of the populace. As This attempt for Whitman involves using his own expanded interior to iron over those conflicts with a hopeful but misguided vision of harmony.

The tension wrought by slavery in the antebellum U.S. consistently led to white anxieties about the potential for threatening and violent intrusions into the cozy white domestic – and for that matter bodily – interior. The Haitian Revolution led by Toussaint Louverture from 1792 to 1804 and bloody rebellions like those led by Nat Turner in 1831 and later John Brown in 1859 continually brought these anxieties to life, and texts like Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855) played on such white fears with subtle political effect by suggesting that under the surface of any seemingly placid slave holding enterprise lurked the potential for a dramatic subversion of white comfort and security. Harriet Jacobs spoke to these tensions when she quipped that the fact “their master’s sleep in safety is owing to [slaves’] superabundance of heart” (121) rather than their weakness of resolve or inherent passivity.

However it was figured, the recognition that the white interior was never completely safe from the intrusion of a threatening Black exterior, elicited a number of responses, typically oscillating between efforts to pacify slave populations with false comforts and acts of extreme violence and racial terror meant to subdue Black people (Hartman *Scenes* 30-33). Rather than merely involving efforts to annihilate and/or cast

out Black figures, a dominant impulse of the period seemed to consistently involve a desire to make the threatening Black exterior a manageable prop in a white interior. We can see this impulse not only in abolitionist literature and discourse but also in more broadly popular artforms of the antebellum period like blackface minstrelsy, which sought to paint Black people as witless and jolly figures whose cunning merely amounted to a harmless trickster practice (Hartman 30). As I'll argue, the writings of Thoreau and Whitman are actually salient – though likely unaware – manifestations of this impulse to make a threatening racialized exterior into part of an interior that extends white comfort, safety, and mobility while immobilizing people of color and erasing their interiority.

In “Song of my Self” Walt Whitman presents a kaleidoscopic vision of a nation defined by difference yet unified and made indivisible in his poetic practice. Whitman represents an Indigenous child's marriage/sale to a trapper as a sublime scene alongside other sublime scenes of American life:

On a bank lounged the trapper he was dressed mostly in skins his
luxuriant beard and curls protected his neck,
One hand rested on his rifle The other hand held firmly the wrist of
the red girl (23)

In this scene “the red girl's” family looks on “dumbly smoking” as she sits passively held by the trapper as a compliment to the piece of property in his other hand. Theirs is a relationship that obviously does not favor her, but for Whitman they are equal, unified, and indivisible here in the fabric of the nation.

Whitman describes the intended effect of his poetic practice as follows:

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand nor look
through the eyes of the dead nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me (18)

Here Whitman not only hopes to transcend the boundaries of his own subjective interiority through poetry, he hopes to sidestep all mediation and construct a plane along which language and subjective interiority no longer divide people. However, in his effort to construct a transcendent vision in which the poet, the trapper, and the red girl escape the divisions of their own subjectivity and the mediation of language, Whitman disavows the ways subjectivation and mediation are inevitably inflecting power to the disadvantage of the red girl. If, for Whitman, what is important is that neither the trapper nor the red girl should be constrained by their positionality as demarcated subjects, Whitman fails to grasp that the erasure of subjective interiority he hopes could equalize and unify merely obscures the ways their subjectivity nonetheless persists along racialized hierarchies in which the trapper's interiority is assumed and the red girl's is not. Here Whitman's efforts serve to make a national interior defined by asymmetry comfortable for white subjects that would rather not be confronted by the tensions and inequalities that emerge when some are granted the interiority of subjectivity and property and others are not.

The marriage of the trapper is immediately followed by a scene in which Whitman shelters a "limpsey and weak" runaway slave and nurtures him back to health inside his home, a favor which the slave receives unknowingly with eyes "revolving" in his head and a general "awkwardness" in his way. This scene, in which a Black object is brought into the white domestic interior as prop for white hospitality, is a literal

performance of the desire to reconcile national tensions by flattening out Black subjectivity and bringing a potentially threatening Black figure into the fold of a white national interior. Ironically, the act of bringing the runaway slave into his dwelling illustrates what is troubling about Whitman's performance, namely that his self-transcendence is more a self-expansion, a movement of the boundaries of his self outward to the boundaries of the nation and then the cosmos, and a universalizing of the particularity of his experience. He portrays himself as a mouthpiece for all through a sleight of hand in which he disavows his own selfhood in a poem titled "Song of *Myself*." He specifically claims to give voice to many "long dumb voices / voices of interminable generations of prisoners and slaves" (33). His poetic practice attempts to use the transcendence of self to unify and represent everything through a synecdoche of poem/poet/nation/cosmos, in which the poet Whitman "contains multitudes." In this vision "the call of the slave is one with the master's call, and the master salutes the slave" (75). Rather than making the slave and the slave master of one voice, Whitman merely obscures that when the univocity of voice is supposedly erased by a Romantic move toward transcendence of the interior of self, the voicelessness of the silenced remains.

We can unpack this phenomenon by looking at surprisingly similar elisions in dominant postmodern theories of subjectivity. In *Thought from the Outside*, Michel Foucault outlines the ways in which the voice of a subject is something of an illusion that produces an imaginary interior for thought. For Foucault this is a recognition that the inside place from which a voice might emerge or arrive never fully exists, because, as a subject of enunciation the interior origin is always being carried outward and manifesting

as an enunciated subject. For Foucault, the I that says “I” doesn’t actually preexist the “I” in any coherent way as a delimited contained thing, that is, as an interior. Instead, the I that enunciates is merely a “grammatical fold” in which what is spoken folds back to create the speaker, though grammar here refers to something more than just language (11-13).⁵ However, an important part of this folding grammar and its enunciations – something that Foucault fails to recognize – is the ways in which the interiority of subjectivity is racialized and gendered, that is to say the way that in the enunciated “I” there is embedded a subject of enunciation, an original voice coming from an interior subject, however unreal, in white subjectivation, that suggests a greater interiority than the missing or at best muddled subject of enunciation embedded in the enunciated Black feminine subject.⁶

This elision of Black voicelessness in Whitman legitimates the principles of liberal democracy in which unruly differences are ironed out within a republican national interior buttressed by the capacity to incorporate the wills of the collection of individuals that make it up. Whitman aims to place all on an immanent plane within a just liberal democratic nation while failing to recognize the manifold ways this egalitarian vision is inevitably failing in his historical moment. It is appropriate that Whitman claims to “contain” multitudes, rather than, for example, be scattered across multitudes, because his

⁵ This theme of the fold reappears in the work of Deleuze where it also relates to the intrinsic exteriority of the interior subject. As at least Deleuze would be the first to admit, the way the subject “actually” works is itself a contested enunciated discursive terrain vulnerable to a power inflected by capitalism and race (though race is strikingly absent from his work).

⁶ For more on this see Hortense Spillers “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” pp. 66-67, 72-73.

vision of transcendence belies the insidious logics of containment and mobility that constitute freedom.

We can see this expansion of white interiority at the cost of Black interiority manifested later in “Song of Myself” when Whitman portrays another Black man at work:

The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses the block swags
underneath on its tied-over chain,

The negro that drives the huge dray of the stoneyard steady and tall
he stands poised on one leg on the stringpiece,

His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens over his
hipband,

His glance is calm and commanding he tosses the slouch of his hat
away from his forehead,

The sun falls on his crispy hair and moustache falls on the Black of
his polish’d and perfect limbs.

I behold the picturesque giant and love him (24)

Here Whitman paints a picture of a beautiful “picturesque” Black object whose labor is merely a secondary aesthetic flourish. I use the term “paints” here advisedly because the “picturesque” Black man is captured by Whitman, as though within the boundaries of a framed painting, with his interiority flattened onto its surface. He is a figure composed of beautiful disaggregated body parts – a neck, a breast, perfect limbs – by which we might

come to grasp the beauty of the nation. We need to unpack here what it means for a man to be picturesque – an at first strange suggestion – in the context of Whitman’s poem.

William Gilpin, who developed the concept of the picturesque in his *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty* (1792), claimed the picturesque was that which is most readily rendered in painting as beautiful, in contrast to things which are beautiful in themselves. He explains that nature is picturesque because of its roughness, and that for this same reason the picturesque is more the domain of animals than humans. However, what is truly picturesque is that which tames roughness by “uniting in one whole a variety of parts” (Gilpin 19). Importantly, the picturesque refers to a unified interior that is composed of “inequalities” that “catch the light” and “the interruption of [...] smoothness by a variety of shades and colours” (21-22). The picturesque is less about the absence of smoothness than it is about an “opposition” with roughness that creates proportion. In this sense, for Whitman, the Black man is not what is picturesque, as much as he is the flattened object – the rough nature/animal – that is brought into a picturesque interior that stands in for a pacified national interior made safe for white subjects. The picturesque Black giant is an inequality and difference – a racialized exteriority – that is captured and tamed in a unified poetic composition that operates as a synecdoche for a national body in need of pacification.

Here the picturesque is a part of a broader performance of transcendence and poetic genius in which Whitman pretends to exceed his own limited subjectivity, construct a capaciousness of his own interiority, and embody a unity and equality of everything with everything. When Whitman pretends to speak from outside of himself he

obscures the way his speech is colored by a particular rather than universal experience of the world and the asymmetric material relations – including the dispossession of the silenced he claims to represent – that make it possible. What is troubling about this performance of poetic genius and transcendence is not simply that it misuses oppressed “long dumb voices” in a self-aggrandizing project, but that this performance actually (re)produces these figures and their silence in order to achieve this project. Despite being vocally anti-slavery, Whitman needs slaves to make a wild, beautiful, and threatening outside space that he can then incorporate into his interior as national poetic genius. Whitman doesn’t grasp that not only is his poem not avoiding the mediation of language to cut across the divisions of subjective interiority, but it is in fact using the very language by which subjective interiority is refused to Black people to begin with. Here his Romantic moves toward transcendence obscure a liberalism in which he is universalizing his own white subjectivity and buttressing and expanding the security and comforts of white interiority.

“I ran alike from fire and from slavery”: the Black counter-interior as a refusal of comfort

Three years before the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Frederick Douglass published his only work of fiction, *The Heroic Slave* (1852). In it, Douglass begins to map a Black counter-interiority that attempts to marshal a refusal of comfort and security to impel Black people toward freedom. In *The Heroic Slave* Douglass writes about a fleeing slave named Maddison Washington – inspired by a real runaway slave who led a

slave mutiny – making his way North across open terrain in the middle of a storm, desperate for shelter from the storm and his pursuers. In his journey he happens upon a cabin inhabited by an abolitionist family. The scene Douglass's escaped slave intrudes on warrants quoting at length:

[I]n the winter of 1840, Mr. and Mrs. Listwell sat together by the fireside of their own happy home, in the State of Ohio. The children were all gone to bed. A single lamp burnt brightly on the centre-table. All was still and comfortable within; but the night was cold and dark; a heavy wind sighed and moaned sorrowfully around the house and barn, occasionally bringing against the clattering windows a stray leaf from the large oak trees that embowered their dwelling. [...] A whole wilderness of thought might pass through one's mind during such an evening.

In this scene we're introduced for the first time to a happy abolitionist home, a comfortable domestic scene in which a mother and father relax by the fire, and in which their comfort is defined by its contrast with the threatening winter weather kept at bay outside and the wilderness of trees that demarcate their dwelling. Beyond simply allowing us to understand their inside space as a comfortable interior by virtue of this contrast, the exterior of this cabin works as a tool by which to map the depth and expansiveness of the abolitionists' thought – a whole wilderness of it – in tandem with the interior.

In his classic account of interior dwelling, Bachelard draws on Thomas De Quincey's Romantic scene of warm opium enriched cabin dwelling in the midst of a

winter storm to claim that “we feel warm *because* it is cold out of doors” (39), and although this is meant to take part in a universal account of interior comforts, the universality of the weather as an outside here actually belies the often racialized and gendered process – processes made evident by De Quincey’s orientalism – through which exteriority gives the interior its hue. Just as De Quincey’s cozy shelter from the storm provides the demarcated space from which expansive and labyrinthine orientalist visions unfold as the mind wanders in its transcendent performance, the abolitionist’s cozy interior works as a backdrop for a sprawling “wilderness of thought,” that is, an interior of thought defined in its richness and depth by what is initially excluded in its exterior, in this case both the wilderness and the suffering slave to be pondered on, pitied, and saved.

After knocking on the door of this cottage in desperation, Madison Washington is baffled and wary when he is offered a place in Mr. Listwell’s best room, as Mrs. Listwell adds more wood to the fire. We’ll see that fire becomes an organizing metaphor for how what comforts can also be a threat to a slave in *The Heroic Slave*. Madison Washington explains to Mr. Listwell that he had no intention of seeking shelter for the night, but was forced to by the winter storm, and only desired to sleep in the barn. Washington’s initial requests to merely sleep in the barn to weather the winter storm reflects a more general counter-interior spatial practice he’d developed on his path to freedom. I’d like to understand Washington’s hesitance to seek shelter by looking at his practice of petit marronage.

Though petit marronage refers generally to the smaller scale practice of escaping slavery strategically and often temporarily without setting up an independent maroon

society – the practice of grand marronage – Washington’s petit marronage involved escaping slavery by remaining within the boundaries of the slave plantation yet nonetheless still outside its grasp. Upon first escaping slavery, navigational problems leave Washington back on the outskirts of his master’s plantation thoroughly exhausted, injured, famished, and tormented by the elements. He explains that

In this extremity I approached the quarters. I did so stealthily, although in my desperation I hardly cared whether I was discovered or not. Peeping through the rents of the quarters, I saw my fellow-slaves seated by a warm fire, merrily passing away the time, as though their hearts knew no sorrow. Although I envied their seeming contentment, all wretched as I was, I despised the cowardly acquiescence in their own degradation which it implied, and felt a kind of pride and glory in my own desperate lot. I dared not enter the quarters — for where there is seeming contentment with slavery, there is certain treachery to freedom. (Douglass, *Heroic* 15)

His decision to dwell inside the plantation’s boundaries yet outside his master’s grasp is defined by a tension between the temptation to return to his master’s housing, along with the comforts of warm shelter and food, and the necessity of his continued suffering outside in the hopes of attaining freedom. Here the warmth of a comforting fire in a shelter, is more threatening than the elements outside.

As Hartman notes, temporary comforts and pleasures offered to slaves in the form of allowed periods of celebration and allotments of alcohol were a master’s greatest tool

for keeping his slaves from fleeing (*Scenes 45-48*). In his *Life and Times* Frederick Douglass unpacks the logic of small comforts and pleasures in the slave system:

These holidays were also used as conductors or safety-valves, to carry off the explosive elements inseparable from the human mind when reduced to the condition of slavery. But for these the rigors of bondage would have become too severe for endurance, and the slave would have been forced to a dangerous desperation. Thus they became a part and parcel of the gross wrongs and inhumanity of slavery. Ostensibly they were institutions of benevolence designed to mitigate the rigors of slave-life, but practically they were a fraud instituted by human selfishness, the better to secure the ends of injustice and oppression. Not the slave's happiness but the master's safety, was the end sought. (182)

In Douglass's understanding of the tension between slavery and freedom, contentment and comfort become the means of unfreedom for a slave. In this context, the only way for Washington to continue to move toward freedom is to stay uncomfortable and open to the elements. He must accept a counter-interior as his interior, one without the comforts of a warm hearth and regular food. "In the dismal swamps" he remains for "five long years." He chooses a cave as his "home" and "dwelling place" with "beasts" because he has been denied mercy by his fellow man.

Though it is tempting to suggest that Washington's "heroics" are simply a re-articulation of a liberal narrative of an individual's rise to freedom, as has been suggested of Douglass's *Narrative*, in *The Heroic Slave* Washington's quest for freedom is defined

by a necessary mutuality and collective interdependence.⁷ As Maggie Sale observes, not only does Washington's ultimate freedom depend on shared participation in a mutiny that could not have succeeded without the strength of numbers, his survival in a state of petit marronage and his eventual recapture depended on his relationship with his wife.⁸ Susan brings Washington food and makes his survival on the outskirts of the plantation possible, and there is an intense honesty about the necessity of collectivity for life and freedom to flourish in this act. *The Heroic Slave* acknowledges a paradox of petit marronage, namely that it doesn't involve a total separation from slaveholding society, but instead demands using the slave plantation to survive and ultimately achieve a kind of freedom.⁹ This survival and movement toward freedom within the boundaries of a racist slaveholding state involves refusing to accept the interiors the state depends on, while nonetheless remaining *within* the state. This paradox is precisely what Harney and Moten are getting at when they talk about fugitivity, which involves moving toward freedom through the very fact of a hapticality found *in* the various "holds" of enslavement. The hapticality of this being together *in* the hold disrupts interiority and ultimately undermines the capacity of the hold and the state to contain as interiors (Harney and

⁷ And without a doubt, the text's nationalism does attempt to turn the discourse of liberal democracy against the slave holding state that depends on it, and in many ways rearticulates some of its patriarchal ethos. See Krista Walter for more on this.

⁸ It is important to note, as Sale does, that despite Washington's dependence on his wife, she never plays a truly active role in plans of escape, and the story generally elides potential reasons for this, like for instance her role in caring for children. This attention to the gendered possibilities of freedom is a crucial difference between the operation of collective freedom in *The Heroic Slave* and *Incidents*.

⁹ This is precisely what Hartman finds so alluring about petit marronage as compared to grand marronage, which she suggests typically involves making more damning compromises with slave holding states. See "The Black Outdoors."

Moten 96). The counter-interiority of this being together in the hold defines

Washington's quest for freedom at almost every step.

Having refused the warmth of the slave quarters, it is all too appropriate that when Washington is forced to flee from his petit marronage dwelling on the outskirts of the plantation, it is a literal forest fire that chases him away. He tells the Listwells that he was not alone in his flight: "Many a poor wandering fugitive, who, like myself, had sought among wild beasts the mercy denied by our fellow men, saw, in helpless consternation, his dwelling-place and city of refuge reduced to ashes forever. It was this grand conflagration that drove me hither" (18) to their doorstep. He claims that he "ran alike from fire and from slavery," and the text hints at an uncanniness to his presence next to the fire fueled by Mrs. Listwell as he tells his story. Up to this point, for him running from the fire of the hearth and running from slavery have had a certain symmetry, and his counter-interiority was what led him to freedom up to that point. And though he ultimately attains his freedom by succumbing to Mr. Listwell's interior, he has perhaps been captured in another way, in a white abolitionist's interior, as a passive Black presence in a story to be told, or a "noble" spectacular prop without interiority in someone else's moral apotheosis and consolidation of self.

Mr. Listwell's moral interior depth emerges through an identification with and an effort to alleviate slave suffering that was typical of antebellum white abolitionism. As Hartman notes, despite its efforts to argue for Black humanity, white abolitionism involved not so much a construction of Black interiority as it did a consolidation of the morality and righteousness of white interiority through the incorporation of Black

suffering (*Scenes* 21). Abolitionist sentiment and literature of the period was often more about the humanity of white people who could see the barbarity of slavery than it was about the humanity of Black people.¹⁰ And when abolitionists did dwell on the interiority of Black people, it was often nonetheless more often about exploring a universal civic depth that white people sought to embody.

Castiglia argues that in their effort to show that African Americans were capable of citizenship and “embodied [...] a compendium of virtues emanating from a *civil interiority* [...], white abolitionists imagined themselves as black in order to assume a civic depth that white citizens, passionate and prejudiced, were assumed to lack” (Castiglia 8). Within this abolitionist sentiment, the freed slave embodies a kind of explorable interior outside of white consciousness, that nonetheless serves to expand the depth of that white interiority. In fact, as Castiglia notes, without this exploration white interiors were sometimes thought of as lacking in civic depth. “White reformers,” Castiglia continues, “took on blackness not on the surface of the skin, but as a suffering interior, a civic depth. With an inner experience of black suffering, white reformers claimed a public authority that differentiated them from other whites even while it maintained an affective difference from persecuted blacks” (103).

In this same vein, Hartman explores the ways Black suffering becomes a spectacle through which white subjects can pursue a project of transcendence and self-exploration/expansion. She suggests that white abolitionists became imaginary tourists in Black suffering through narrative and abolitionist sentiments that elided the actual

¹⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a prime example.

sufferer by making suffering only understandable when translated into a white interloping lens. This white tourism not only failed to fully imagine the reality of Black suffering, it erased the slave's interiority at the very moment it was promised and replaced it with a white interior that had attained a new moral depth by contemplation. While the humanity and interiority of the white abolitionist was reaffirmed and expanded through the contemplation afforded by this quick substitution, the humanity and interiority of the Black object of contemplation the abolitionist aimed for was lost as in a shell game (18-20).

We can perhaps see this kind of moral apotheosis in Mr. Listwell's interactions with his wife after letting Washington in and helping him in his quest toward freedom. Mr. Listwell "went to his home that day with a joy and gratification which knew no bounds. [...] [I]n proportion to the odds against his righteous deed, was the delightful satisfaction that gladdened his heart. On reaching home" Douglass informs us, "the cup of [Mr. Listwell's] joy was shared by his excellent lady" (26). Here Mr. Listwell's moral depth is only matched – and in fact overflowed by – his self-satisfaction. Though Douglass frames his white abolitionist allies generously in *The Heroic Slave*, acknowledging their good faith efforts to express shared humanity, he still portrays a white subjectivity that defines its capacious self-righteousness and boundless joy by way of alleviating slave suffering. In the same way that Whitman performs a self-exploration and self-expansion through momentary sympathy with Black suffering, here Mr. Listwell exhibits what in reality is at best the bare minimum of decency against the backdrop of national atrocity as a means of self-affirmation. The uncomfortable presence of the fire by Washington as he

narrates his story for the Listwell's in their cozy interior operates as a synecdoche of slave narration as political practice for Douglass, and perhaps hints at a growing wariness and doubt about the effectiveness of white sympathy and white appropriation of Black narratives for achieving social justice, a doubt reflected in Douglass's shift towards the potential for violence as a means of Black resistance and liberation in *The Heroic Slave*. Beyond simply unpacking the dangers of being Black in a white interior, it's important to remember that these close readings of Whitman and Douglass help us think about the appropriate relationship to interiority itself. As Douglass's counter-interiority shows us, a cultivation of an interior at the expense of an exterior inevitably moves us away from an anti-racist freedom.

"A more populous house": Thoreau's freedom of white dwelling in nature

As an author intensely concerned with the relationship between freedom and dwelling in outside spaces, we might be tempted to think about Thoreau as a kind of peer of Douglass's. However, when we examine Thoreau's orientation to interiority more closely, his divergence from the Black counter-interiority I've begun unpacking becomes clear. For a book supposedly primarily about the outdoors, Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) spends a remarkable amount of time describing and pontificating about a house, specifically Thoreau's house in the woods. This house becomes the crucial spatial node through which Thoreau ostensibly transcends the interior of his urban social positionality. However, to say that *Walden* is primarily about a house isn't to say that *Walden* isn't

primarily about the woods or a pond, because as we'll see, it turns out that these are all Thoreau's house in *Walden*. On first reading it may seem as though Thoreau is mostly concerned with getting *outside* of white habitations, transcending the interiority of social life in the city, and merging into a vital plane with "nature" through various modes of ascetism and self-denial. His practice, however, is actually one that involves the accumulation of space and things rather than their abandonment, and a self-aggrandizement and greater self-possession and mobility through this performance of transcendence.

Thoreau frames his time in the woods as a period of bare necessity and solitude, in which he lived alone for two years in a house he built by himself. Like Whitman in "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" (1865), Thoreau suggests that "It would be well perhaps if we were to spend more of our days and nights without any obstruction between us and the celestial bodies" (24). He suggests early on in the text that "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind" (14), and he claims to have achieved this elevation not only through asceticism but also by abandoning a feminized interior. He spends the early parts of *Walden* expounding upon the foolishness of those who labor and allow themselves to be turned into machines, when one can supposedly survive on little to no labor. In fact, inheriting property is a "misfortune" for Thoreau, and it would be better, he argues, to have been born in nature and "suckled by a wolf" than to live within a structured society with distributed labor. This fascination with a life in nature is largely an actualization of the fantasy of the liberal subject, sealed off from social forces, able to

act with autochthonous will. Here the ideal liberal subject transcends social interiors to buttress its own interiority, yet this transcendence is paradoxically coupled with an expansion of the interior dwelling space, a bringing of the comforts of society into that space supposedly outside of the social.

When he finally leaves his cabin in the woods for good, he refers to himself as a “sojourner in civilized life again” (6), but we have good reason to believe that his time in the woods was the real sojourn. Far from being the isolated, self-contained, and self-sufficient operation he initially represents, Thoreau’s dwelling in the woods was built on private land, using borrowed tools, and was supported by the labor of urban workers. We know, for example, that Thoreau used his proximity to town to supply himself with food and laundry services (Schulz 1). Furthermore, when he finally admits later in the text that “Every day or two I strolled to the village to hear some of the gossip” (125), and confesses to a flaneur-esque fascination with the people and carts in the streets as much as the trees in the woods, it becomes apparent that Thoreau is being somewhat disingenuous about the degree of solitude he lives in. Curiously, Thoreau brags that he lived a mile from his nearest neighbor, though even before modern transport this is not a significant distance. Despite its pretenses, his dwelling is more suburban than wild.

Thoreau’s sojourn into nature is far from an innocent masquerade: it comes at the cost of acknowledging the systematic dispossession of people of color that appears momentarily on the surface of the text. In *Walden* the US mythology of manifest destiny – in which a natural space without social history emerges for liberal subjectivity to unfold in – comes up against its attendant obscured genocide and dispossession. Thoreau uses

private lands in order to pontificate about freedom through mobility in nature, though he acknowledges the land he inhabits was once inhabited by others, among them a number of slaves and freed Black people. He briefly details the circumstances of Cato Ingraham, a slave with a house built by his master and a plot of walnuts, who was eventually displaced by a “younger and whiter speculator.” Zilpha, a “colored woman” who “spun linen for the townsfolk,” Thoreau explains once had a small house adjacent to his field, though it was ultimately burned down by English prisoners of war on parole during the War of 1812 (192). He lists further similar past inhabitants, but finally, all he can offer is “How little does the memory of these human inhabitants enhance the beauty of the landscape!” (197).

In spite of his recognition that this land was once inhabited by others and his admission that he is in fact on private land, Thoreau’s philosophy constructs nature as a blank space – a supposedly universal transcendent inhabitation for all – without addressing the asymmetries that necessarily structure power and dispossession beyond the individual. After noting that a good number of the land’s previous inhabitants were enslaved or recently freed Black people who lost their property in one way or another, Thoreau wonders without insight: “this small village, germ of something more, why did it fail while Concord keeps its ground?” (196). It seems as though even though he acknowledges individual instances of dispossession, Thoreau cannot see the racialized forest for the trees if you will. Thoreau somehow doesn’t imagine that his dwelling depends on specific privileges of access, property, and legal recourse or that the exterior world of “nature” is a less hospitable dwelling for some than for others. As a result his

fantasy of individual freedom in nature stands in the way of freedom for people whose unfreedom is not limited to the demarcated boundaries of their plots and their individuality.

Beyond erasing the collective operation of power and dispossession through myths of liberal subjectivity, Thoreau's white interiority also involves an objectification of people of color. However, as we'll unpack further, it is from this side of unfreedom, before the trap of liberal subjectivity, that Moten and Hartman identify the greatest potentials for something akin to freedom for Black people. Cervenak unpacks how the freedom of the post-Enlightenment European self depends on the other as an outside for wandering through. She explains that white men like Thoreau "could surpass the limits of self and achieve momentary transcendence, because they were not bound by the constraints of spectacular Otherness" that their transcendence depended on (21).

Thoreau's transcendence is initially figured against the backdrop of Indigenous cultures evacuated of their sociality. For Thoreau, the outside of society is a nature defined by the inhabitation of animals and people of color, who are frequently conceptualized analogously in the text: "the birds of the air have their nests, and the foxes their holes, and the savages their wigwams" (25). Thoreau uses the example of various Indigenous people – the Laplander who "will sleep night after night on snow" and the Indian whose wigwam was sparse and mobile (24) – to illustrate an alternative minimalist exteriorized mode of dwelling that he then implicitly emulates in his ascetic transcendence into the outside (24). However, Thoreau most importantly draws on the escape from slavery to understand his own project of transcendence. The outside is notably for Thoreau, the

space *of* rather than *for* the escaped slave, and in his critique of socially organized labor and consumption, Thoreau figures his transcendence from social life as an escape from slavery. He famously claims that “It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself” (9). Here he simultaneously effaces the horrors specific to slavery while using a flattened out universalized slave as a figure by which to construct his own self-aggrandizement through a performance of transcendence.

As Iyko Day suggests, Romantic moves like Thoreau’s “attachment to a pure and revitalizing construction of nature, in contrast to the alienation attributed to capitalist modernity” often involve “a mode of white settler identification” with Indigenous and enslaved Black figures that “functions to cover over colonial invasion and reimagine a natural affiliation to the land.” For Romantic settlers like Thoreau, “the Native, whose alignment with a state of nature is perceived to be wholly removed from the sphere of capitalism, represents the idealized figure of this symbolic pursuit.” As Day likewise suggests, for Thoreau the enslaved Black object operates – and is re-inscribed – as an exterior of capitalist modernity by which transcendence and reconciliation might be more compellingly imagined (117).

Thoreau’s writing also generally evinces a disdain for the domestic labor and reproductive labor he depends on. He represents these as stifling women’s work which he relegates to the inside of society and the over-decorated and over managed domestic

interior (24, 27).¹¹ For example, to avoid the need for a “housewife” to sweep the dust from his house, he claims he’d rather stay outside, because “no dust gathers on grass” (29). However, his move outside of a feminized domestic interior actually involves reconstructing the outside as his interior, a space in which he has “my horizon bounded by woods all to myself” and “my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself” (98). Consequently, Thoreau’s performance of transcendence not only exteriorizes people of color only to eventually bring them within the fold of his expansive interior, it denies the possibility of freedom to middle class white women, who are doomed to labor in a claustrophobic interior space.

It seems Thoreau lived just far enough away from town to insulate himself by space, and he writes about space as a resource he prizes. Thoreau doesn’t give up possessions as much as he simply has a different set of values about what is worth possessing. *Walden* is about property masquerading as asceticism. Space, and avoiding penetration by intruders and general crowding, is more valuable than material possessions for Thoreau, who would “rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself, than be crowded on a velvet cushion,” (30) and who seeks to avoid “noisy neighbors” (39). He relishes that at night no traveler passes by and no one knocks on his door any more than if he were “the first or last man” (98). To Thoreau, nature makes human company generally unnecessary (99). Yet Thoreau is not entirely resistant to the company of others.

¹¹ Furthermore, his critique of labor eliminates a necessary reproductive labor by assuming that the laborer is typically merely laboring to sustain himself.

At moments Thoreau makes explicit who is capable of joining him in this quest to transcend the self-imposed slavery of social life. When discussing who is welcome in his dwelling space, Thoreau says “all honest pilgrims, who came out to the woods for freedom’s sake, and really left the village behind, I was ready to greet with “Welcome, Englishmen! Welcome, Englishmen!” for I had had communication with that race” (115). People of color cannot transcend a social life they were never understood to inhabit to begin with. Meanwhile, in his discussion of welcome visitors, the presence of “One real runaway slave, among the rest, whom I helped to forward to the northstar” is somewhat awkward. It’s as though this “real” slave were merely a supplement to “the rest” of his metaphorical runaways and true guests. He merely points his real runaway on his way, presumably because “objects of charity,” as he quips, “are not guests” (113-114).

Despite his concern with crowding and his desire to find solitude in his house in the woods, Thoreau importantly muses

I sometimes dream of a larger and more populous house, [...] which shall still consist of only one room, a vast, rude, substantial, primitive hall, without ceiling or plastering, with bare rafters and purlins supporting a sort of lower heaven over one’s head [...], a house which you have got into when you have opened the outside door, and the ceremony is over; where the weary traveler may wash, and eat, and converse, and sleep, without further journey; such a shelter as you would be glad to reach in a tempestuous night, containing all the essentials of a house, and nothing for house-keeping; where you can see all the treasures of the house at one

view, and everything hangs upon its peg, that a man should use; at once kitchen, pantry, parlor, chamber, storehouse, and garret; [...] A house whose inside is as open and manifest as a bird's nest, and you cannot go in at the front door and out at the back without seeing some of its inhabitants; where to be a guest is to be presented with the freedom of the house, and not to be carefully excluded from seven eighths of it, shut up in a particular cell, and told to make yourself at home there—in solitary confinement. (182)

This is a description one of the “mansions of the universe” Thoreau references earlier; it is his thinly veiled vision of the world itself as a massive interior set off against a stormy night, the interior as he would have it, without the women's work of house-keeping and without impinged mobility for white men searching for freedom within the inside or between the inside and the outside, and in which everything hangs in its appropriate place. Thoreau explicitly references William Gilpin in his own discussions of the picturesque in *Walden*, and despite the fact that this scene is entirely inside, it is perhaps Thoreau's most picturesque moment in *Walden*: it is where Thoreau imagines everything taking its place on a peg in an ordered, cozy composition that here more explicitly makes the outside feel as though it were within the boundaries of a comforting interior. Importantly, Thoreau models this greater interior after his own interior, which he compares to the cottages of “picturesque” paintings that serve as “shells” for the “lives of their inhabitants” who he also refers to as “indwellers.”

Though at first seemingly concerned with annihilating the inside and replacing it with the outside, in *Walden* Thoreau is actually most concerned with fashioning the outside as *his* inside, or perhaps more specifically as an inside for any white man seeking transcendence and freedom from social ties. This is perhaps nowhere more literally manifest than in his description of cleaning his cottage, in which he moves his household furniture temporarily outside, and observes

It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, making a little pile like a gypsy's pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amid the pines and hickories. They seemed glad to get out themselves, and as if unwilling to be brought in. I was sometimes tempted to stretch an awning over them and take my seat there.

This scene, in which Thoreau indulges his desire to furnish the outdoors as a cozy space for him to dwell in, is merely a literalization of what is happening elsewhere in *Walden*: Thoreau is performing a transcendence from a feminized interior into a racialized exterior, that he then populates with his minimal furnishings and fashions as a broader interior for white men in search of freedom.

Like Whitman's interior, Thoreau's interior is also a national interior, and his effort to expand and reconfigure the interior is also an effort to reconfigure a national interior that he sees as "cluttered with furniture" and "ruined by luxury and heedless expense" (69). His massive dwelling hall, simple and minimalist with everything in its proper place, is his ideal national interior. Thoreau aligns his logic of expansion with the

figure of the nation when he complains that his small house lacks the interior space for thought to truly unfold, and he decides that “Individuals, like nations, must have suitable broad and natural boundaries” (105-106). It is in this spirit that he claims his “best room” is actually the woods behind his house, that are tended by a natural housekeeper (106).

Part of Thoreau’s tourism in discomfort involves his efforts to foreground his exteriority through exposure to the elements, but the truth is he is able to modify his exposure to suit his comfort. For Thoreau, all that is truly necessary is that which maintains vital heat, and a house is only necessary insofar as it achieves this function. However, as we’ll see the line between the necessary limits of vital heat and the requirements of comfort is easily obscured. “The poor man,” Thoreau suggests, “is wont to complain that this is a cold world; and to cold, no less physical than social, we refer directly a great part of our ills” (13). Here Thoreau draws on the classic narrative of the interior we see in Bachelard to align social cold, that is, precarity and suffering resulting from the social organization of labor, with physical cold, and he suggests that the solution to both is the same: opt out, go ascetic. He suggests that the story we tell about the absolute necessity of a comforting interior in the face of a harsh exterior is a lie, and that the exterior is more welcoming than we realize. In line with his Rousseau-esque theory of necessity, Thoreau suggests the rich are kept beyond comfortably warm, and that primitive man in nature is able to stay comfortable even without fire (24).

Thoreau brags that the closest thing he had to a house before living in Walden was a tent, and his minimalist cabin in the woods actually represents “progress toward settling in the world” (65). Despite this progress toward an enclosed inhabitation,

Thoreau insists “It was not so much within doors as behind a door where I sat, even in the rainiest weather” (65). His insistence that he remained open to the exterior through his vulnerability to the weather in his dwelling is given lie to by the fact that he has the resources and freedom to insulate himself as cold weather intrudes, which he does by pitching and insulating the walls of his cabin and preparing a fireplace (which later becomes merely a “cooking stove”). Just like the sympathetic abolitionist interloping in Black suffering to affirm their morality, Thoreau is merely a tourist in the kind of suffering endured by those attempting to escape true slavery.

The specifics of Thoreau’s Rousseau-esque philosophy of necessity ignore the classed, gendered, and racialized character of what he determines to be bare necessity, and belie an unwillingness to engage with asymmetries of power that bear on one’s ability to not only meet necessity but exceed it and find comfort in a society. Not least among these asymmetries, is the disjunction between the comforts available to fleeing slaves and those available to philosophizing bourgeois white men, a disjunction made significant by the racialized frame through which Thoreau conceptualizes his transcendence. *Walden* continuously foregrounds Thoreau’s desire to forego the *comforts* of a social interior – the inside of society, and the inside of a feminized domestic space – yet the text meticulously avoids acknowledging the ways Thoreau moves the comforts of these interiors into a space where he can perform the absence of comfort without fully living it. Just like the white abolitionist sojourns in Black suffering, Thoreau’s moments of discomfort and deprivation in nature are merely a form of interloping in suffering that buttress his liberal white interiority by establishing his individual separation from

external social forces. And like the modern traveler imagining they are truly escaping to exotic locales only to find they've brought capitalism with them, these moments for Thoreau simultaneously work to expand the interior spaces he had imagined he was escaping in the consolidation of his subjective interior.

"I was not comfortless": the comforts of collective freedom-making in the Black counter-interior

As Wolfgang Kemp notes in his "A Room with a Temperature," Thoreau's *Walden* is actually participating in a 19th century shift in discourse about an ostensibly different kind of interior: the garret. In the first half of the 19th century, the Western literary and artistic trope of the scholar in his attic evolved in tandem with the discovery of new energy laws to represent a new Romantic figure: the poet in poverty residing in his garret with merely a stove for warmth, above the world, separate from the fray, and self-contained. In the face of a cold exterior world, this poet becomes his own source of energy and heat even when the stove fails.¹² Kemp's treatment of Thoreau's dwelling as a manifestation of this trope of the transcendent artist insulated in his garret is of particular interest because it points us to a wholly different garret defined neither by transcendence nor insulation. I'm referring here to Harriet Jacobs portrayal of herself – as the pseudonymous Linda Brent – dwelling in her grandmother's garret in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Whereas the comfort of the interior works as a sort of

¹² See, for example, Carl Spitzweg's *The Poor Poet*.

threatening “safety valve” for Douglass, whose counter-interiority primarily involves a resistance to going inside, Harriet Jacobs spends more time crafting explicitly counter-interior interiors – mirror images of their white interior counterparts – that impel Black subjects toward freedom. For Harriet Jacobs, it is Black interiors that are vulnerable to forcible penetration and shock from the outside – that ultimately contain the seeds of a collective freedom.

In her effort to escape slavery, Jacobs spends seven years constrained in a crawl space she calls a garret. Only with the help of her grandmother and other relatives is she able to survive hidden for seven years before finally escaping to the north. In contrast to Thoreau, throughout Jacobs’s narrative she consistently foregrounds and expresses gratitude for the efforts of others that enabled her to survive. Likewise, she clarifies that during those years her motivation to remain hidden in spite of great suffering was less her own potential freedom than it was the future of her children. In this garret, Jacobs enacted a thoroughly different spatial practice from Thoreau, one that offered alternative models of both subjectivity and dwelling from those that defined the interiority of white abolitionism and liberalism. In stark contrast to this white interiority, Jacobs introduces us to a meticulously crafted Black abolitionist counter-interior dwelling space in which true refuge is impossible, but through which collectives of freedom might emerge nonetheless. In fact, as Jasmine Syedullah’s work on Jacobs contends, Brent’s freedom only can emerge collectively. In her talk “Moving Harriet Jacobs: Beyond the Slavery of Freedom,” Syedullah echoes both Moten’s and Hartman’s belief that liberal subjectivity is a trap in a quest for Black freedom, because of the ways it necessarily disavows the

sources of Black dispossession and unfreedom. Simply put, whereas human company is an encumbrance to freedom for Thoreau, for Jacobs freedom is impossible without the company of others.

In her work on Black feminist geographies, *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick observes that Brent's garret dwelling bears an obvious symmetry with the "human bondage and racial-sexual hierarchies, imminent and actual rape, [and] the links between property ownership, and racist-sexist punishments" (40) Brent encounters in her life before retreating to the garret. However, as McKittrick points out, far more than simply operating as a synecdoche for the constraint and oppression of slavery Brent encountered in the outside world, the garret embodies the ways Brent's constrained position within slavery produces a subversive subject-knowledge and a new sense of space in which inside and outside are not only not clearly demarcated, but in which interiors are defined as much by exteriority as interiority. It is through this subversive sense of space and subjectivity in the garret, that the openness and precarity of Brent's architectural, bodily, and subjective interiority manifest new opportunities for a freedom that emerges collectively rather than individually, as in traditional narratives of liberal subjectivity and white masculine transcendence. Brent repeatedly explicitly frames her freedom as not individual. In the midst of her suffering in her garret she clarifies "I tried to be thankful for my little cell, dismal as it was, and even to love it, as part of the price I had paid for the redemption of my children" (158). The near prospect of securing her children's emancipation – after convincing their father to secure them from her former master – is as important to her comfort as her own freedom. It is as though she

experiences a kind of freedom by proximity to her children, whom she is able to watch through a hole in the wall of her garret.

Whereas for Thoreau – and many before him – the interior is given shape by its ability to keep weather out, for Jacobs her counter-interior is defined by its utter penetrability and openness to the weather. Rain comes through the roof, wind and cold pierce the walls, and in the summer “nothing but thin shingles protected me from the scorching summer’s sun.” In her garret dwelling rats come and go freely and run over her as she sleeps, and she is tormented by “hundreds of little red insects, fine as a needle’s point, that pierced through my skin, and produced an intolerable burning” (150). The space itself is so small that she comes into contact with the walls and ceiling when she attempts to shift her body. Not unlike the hold of a slave ship that motivates Harney and Moten’s concept of an undercommons, Jacobs’s garret is a space of total crowding and penetration. Because of the clandestine nature of her dwelling, Jacobs is unable to maintain her “vital heat” by means of fire and ultimately gets frostbite in some of her limbs. Here, what Thoreau understands as the boundaries of homeostasis and the bare necessities of life don’t even extend to all limbs, and Jacob’s perseverance in the face of these conditions gives lie to the performance of ascetism Thoreau’s interior is meant to evoke.

For Thoreau, bodily boundaries and integrity of self are taken for granted: the body either maintains its vital heat, or it does not. In fact, Thoreau suggests that in the absence of shelter the animal – as well as the primitive man, and the transcendent liberal subject who has absorbed these passive objects of nature into his interior in his quest for

freedom – simply insulates itself and its body becomes its shelter. Here the myths of liberal subjectivity naturalize a bare necessity in which the boundaries of the individual are supreme. Of course, Thoreau’s vision of animal and primitive survival without shelter evinces an obvious lack of real experience living outside in even mildly remote or unforgiving locations. Even a subpar shelter in a relatively forgiving climate leaves Brent with drenched clothing and bedding, clinging to life. In spite of failing to meet the bare necessities of sustaining life itself, however, Jacobs clarifies “But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow. [...] I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one; and it was so compared with the fate of others.” (149). Rather than emerging within neat interior boundaries, for Jacobs comfort emerges from a relationality and collectivity that boundaries work to inhibit.

When we take into account that even the interior of the body is penetrable in Jacob’s counter-interior dwelling, we begin to see the way white masculine transcendence is always hiding the interiors men carry with them in their performances of transcendence. That the penetrability of interiors is a matter of more urgency and immediacy for Black women than it is for white men should not come as a surprise. Even before her retreat to the garret Brent was dealing with the constant threat of bodily penetration from rape. Whereas for Thoreau, nature is a neutral exterior space for ostensibly all – though in practice primarily white men – to exercise their freedom, for Brent, nature is a space of vulnerability and flight from the threat of rape. As Cervenak suggests, “Jacobs’s minimal freedom to be alone in nature, at her parent’s grave and at

other places of solitude and reason, is continually undermined by the master's endless pursuit. Meeting her “at every turn,” Flint enacts a bodily surveillance that escalates into fantasies of incarceration. His attempts to regulate and contain Jacobs's movement are the conditions of possibility for his own private desire” (65). This dynamic illustrates how white freedom is achieved not only through empowering white mobility in exterior spaces but by controlling the mobility of people of color in the exterior, and organizing this mobility around the needs of white interiority. In the face of this forced constraint Brent constructs constraints of her own choosing, and the shelter from rape that Brent ultimately finds is just this kind of strategic constraint.

In her effort to avoid rape Brent turned to another white man to construct what Cervenak recognizes as a compromised sexual-spatial interior. Jacobs attempts to persuade those “whose purity has been *sheltered* from childhood” (emphasis mine) that her efforts to construct her own shelter from Flint by turning to another white man should grant her an integrity and possession of self that is still worthy of freedom. Here she is attempting to speak to a liberal white audience on its own terms. According to Hartman, the space that Brent attempts to enact between her and the eventual father of her children is “a space of desire defined neither by white dominance (‘a lover who has no control over you’) nor by coercion, but by kindness and willed exchange (‘it seems less degrading to give one’s self’)” (110). However, this comforting relational interior defined by mutual liberal agency and self-possession is obviously impossible in a context where white desire is always weaponized, to borrow a phrase from Frank B. Wilderson III

(“Theorizing Antiracism”).¹³ Instead, what Brent ends up with is a strategic counter-interior, in which she protects herself from one form of violent penetration by accepting another softer violence that bears possibilities for freedom. By turning to a relationship with another white man Brent effectively shields herself from the undesirable advances of her master. Like her garret, the interior in which her purity is “sheltered” is inevitably but not totally compromised. For Cervenak drawing on McKittrick, Jacobs’s practice is paradoxically one of mobilizing constraint, a way of turning the strictly delimited plot of space – conceptual or material – offered to a slave, into a plot – as in a plan – by which movement beyond the plot may be secured, or in which movement within the plot allows a slave to go so far in that they are out. Brent’s counter-interior – in which her escape from white rape is found in the problematic embrace of another white man – produces for her a collective transgenerational opportunity for freedom through her children.

In her “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers outlines a black feminist abolitionist response to mass rape that consists of establishing transgenerational communities of witness and subterranean communication. For white men interiority is often about a return to the womb and control over female sexuality, and for black women like Jacobs, interiority is about control over the womb and intrusions into the womb, as well as a control over naming, which is in the end a struggle for control over subjectivation and social reproduction in the face of paternal uncertainty for men (Spillers 66, 77-79). As Spillers suggests, this struggle over control of the feminine interior has resulted in the penetrability of feminine interiors (67-68).

¹³ For Wilderson all white desire is still weaponized against Black people.

However, I would follow Spillers in suggesting both the penetrability and flattening out of Black women's interiority has produced a counter-interiority that provides unique opportunities for the emergence of subterranean collective freedoms (72).

Spillers outlines the ways the folding grammar of subjectivity differentially produces the interiors (or lack thereof) of racialized subjects, though against the backdrop of a more oppressive flattening out of black women's subjectivity that is replaced with pure fleshliness. The exteriorized Black feminine object has historically been – and still is – more vulnerable to sexual violence because, as Hartman notes in her discussion of Jacobs, Black women were not thought capable of nonconsent for a number of reasons, not least of which was their animal lasciviousness and lack of interior volition (86).

However, what is productive about the recognition of an exteriority of subjective interiority for Foucault is still productive for Spillers. This exteriority and fleshliness for Spillers provides an opportunity for a kind of subterranean enunciation, communication, and collectivity building she calls a “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (72). In this schema, the lack of an explicit voice becomes a strength by which Black women speak through the flesh, by maintaining the troubling presence of their absent enunciation across generations, that is through reproduction. Through this “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” Jacobs's counter-interior spatial practice refuses a refused Black feminine interiority to construct a greater collectivity across space and time.

Brent's subversive spatial practice, in which in a space of unfreedom the only way to find freedom is to go so far *in* that you are almost *out*,¹⁴ resembles the petit marronage

¹⁴ Moten and Hartman deal with this in greater detail in their “The Black Outdoors” talk.

practiced more broadly by slaves and which we see in *The Heroic Slave*, when Madison Washington realizes that his best hope for sustainable freedom is to actually stay within the boundaries of his master's plantation. However, for Brent, petit marronage consists of an even deeper interior movement that nonetheless belies its exteriorizing force. Unlike Thoreau's dwelling spaces, Brent's garret is a tightly bounded space for thought to find a freer movement and for collectivity to offer something akin to freedom. The feminized interior – a womblike enclosure practically the size of a tomb – becomes a Black feminist counter-interior by which a collective freedom that includes the family and beyond might be achieved through a rhizomorphic mobilizing spatial practice. This demands a spatiality in which being inside is always being outside and in which the freedom of the self is only possible through a recognition of the self's exteriority and collectivity. Here, the logic of capitalism is flipped on its head: you can only help yourself by helping others, you cannot free yourself before others, and mobility – economic and otherwise – is impossible alone. Rather than depending on the unfreedom of others for a mobilizing performance of transcendence, as does the white liberal narrative of the interior and the exterior, this Black feminist counter-interiority depends on the freedom of others for enacting mobility.

In the antebellum U.S. this mode of Black abolitionist counter-interiority emerged in response to an impasse between the compromised promise of liberal subjectivity and the constant threat of penetration and objectification. Whereas for figures like Whitman and Thoreau, the assurance of social comforts and private property as well as the interiority of liberal subjectivity offered a freedom to ostensibly explore beyond the limits of the interior through performances of transcendence – though in practice this merely

amounted to extending the boundaries of their interiors – for Black less than-subjects-more-than-objects like Harriet Jacobs’s Linda Brent and Frederick Douglass’s Maddison Washington, freedom was a more precarious prospect that could only emerge through exteriorized and compromised interiors. Though the interior seems a tempting shelter and strategic transcendence may offer promise for the privileged, equality cannot emerge in the context of bounded individuation, and freedom begins to take shape only outside of white interiority.

Chapter 2

“Looking for an Out Place:”

The Beat Poets and the Racialized Freedom of the Outside

The popular American literary imagination of freedom since the Transcendentalists has seemed to demand tracing the path of all seemingly solitary wanderers of space and thought back to Whitman and Thoreau. The writers of the Beat generation, whose rebellion against “square”¹⁵ suburban life led them wandering in crisscrossing paths between the coasts of the United States and abroad, on busses and in borrowed – sometimes stolen – cars, are clear inheritors of the Transcendentalist tradition. Such tracings for the Beats abound in literary criticism, and in fact the path is right there in the writing. No one who has read Allen Ginsberg’s “America,” for example, wherein Ginsberg writes “I am America,” can deny that Whitman lives in those words. And no one who confronts the anti-conformism and asceticism of Jack Kerouac in his road novels can ignore the presence of Thoreau in the backseat, as it were.

John Tytell wrote that “the Beats proposed a creed of individuality and commitment to the life of the spirit with a passion that recalls the struggles of the American Transcendentalists” and much of what follows is concerned with what it means to commit to a life of “the spirit” and to encounter struggle in so doing. The spirit is, after

¹⁵ The term square was used by Jazz musicians – idolized by the Beats – to refer to those who didn’t appreciate the spontaneity and freedom of Jazz and instead preferred the order and structure of more conventional forms of music. It undoubtedly also evoked the structure and even architectural/urban-geographical organization of suburban life. To be square, then, was to accept the containment of a literal square and its ordered and predictable boundaries as the boundaries of your sense of self and your life’s movement (OED).

all, that which needs a body or dwelling – a spirit is typically someone or something’s spirit – yet which also has the freedom to traverse the astral plane and move without constraint. The contradictions of this life of the spirit animate much of the poetry, prose, and lives of the Beats. I can’t deny that the writing of the Beats is full of moments of beauty and collective joy, and their work has spoken to my suburban rebellious streak throughout my life. However, I also must acknowledge that the story of the Beats has a counter-story, of people of color and women, and of a spirit that has greater trouble leaving its uncertain dwelling. Despite my lifelong admiration of the Beats, that second story is what motivates this chapter.

Following the transcendentalists, the Beats often operated within a tradition of what Celeste Langan calls “romantic vagrancy.” For early Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Langan contends, the vagrant was thought of as free because of his mobility, but this mobility was a kind of negative freedom. It was a freedom that results from not having possessions and not being constrained in one’s movement, but it necessarily entailed a lack of certain positive freedoms, namely the freedom to do much of anything other than wander and talk. The vagrancy of the wandering train riders Kerouac encounters in his freewheeling travels, for example, is often a vagrancy of necessity, and in many ways a kind of constraint that Kerouac reimagines as a sublime freedom. But those marginal figures who seem free to go anywhere, unencumbered by possession, are also too often free to go hungry, free to fall ill, and free to die. Yet this freedom of precarity is one that romantic vagrants like Kerouac always seemed to have a “safety net” set up to avoid.

Seeming to echo Theodor Adorno's assessment of suburban privacy, Langan suggests that "the privacy newly discovered by the solitary walker is interrupted by the recognition that privacy may be experienced as privation" (35). The Romantic poet valorized this kind of negative freedom, but paradoxically imagined it as a freedom halfway between the freedom of the bourgeois socio-economic subject – defined by the welfare that comes from social position – and the pared down political subject, defined by the freedom that comes only from rights. The vagrant was paradoxically imagined as a figure that could have his cake and take it to go as well, if you will. Langan suggests that the Romantic subject embraces the vagrant to reconcile the contradictions of liberalism's emphasis on both property and freedom (13-35).

In this chapter I'll argue that the true inheritors of Whitman and Thoreau's orientation to the interior – Beats like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg – embrace the contradictory freedom of this Romantic subject, shuffling between freedoms of interiority provided by material wealth, the disavowed labor of women, and advantageous social positions, and freedoms of the "outside" typified by mobility, an unencumbered life free of responsibility, and postures of precarity and asceticism. This shuffling also necessarily involved typically disavowing the material conditions that offered these Beats positive freedoms while denying them to others, since the drama of this move into the outside demanded rendering people of color as a flattened spectacle in order to characterize white Beat precarity – and more generally, exteriority – through reference to this spectacular otherness. In the work of both Beats, white mobility is ostensibly defined by the freedom of other races, though it in fact depends on the immobility of people of color, who must

be captured as an image of exteriority, rather than a rich interior unto themselves. To unpack this, we'll look at how, in *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac's seminal novel about leaving behind the constraints of a feminized domestic world and finding freedom through travel and male comradery, the space of transcendent freedom outside the domestic is a space defined not only by the poor, but also primarily by people of color. Likewise, we'll examine how, in his much-lauded Beat elegy "Howl," Allen Ginsberg performs the transcendence of his white peer group via their proximity to a racialized underclass. However, we'll also study the way the Black counter-interior emerged when Black voices took up the call of the transcendentalists and forced it through a darker lens. To do this, we'll specifically, address how, for Black Beat figures like Bob Kauffman, "living the life of the spirit" meant negotiating the precarity of an always somewhat compromised interior – of dwelling and self – and an exterior that was defined by often inescapable danger, racism, and segregation.

In contrast to Beats like Kerouac and Ginsberg, who explicitly sought out literary respect, Bob Kaufman supposedly claimed that his greatest ambition was "to be completely forgotten" (*Ancient ix*). Kaufman doesn't seem to have wanted to become a well-known prophetic Beat figure, and that's probably why he isn't one. He has been largely forgotten in popular discourse about the Beats, and in his life his published work apparently found more success with a French audience. Kaufman's poetic practice reflects this ambition to be forgotten: he didn't write down or save many of his poems for posterity, which seem to have often been one off fairly spontaneous performances that were only published because of someone capturing them on a tape recorder, or because of

his wife Eileen's urging, and he would apparently leave poems as notes, anonymously, for strangers to stumble across (*Ancient* ix; Rice 405). In fact, strange as it may seem for someone whose vocation foregrounds the voice, Kaufman supposedly took a vow of silence for a decade, though some have suggested that his alcoholism and addiction to amphetamines and heroin led to him meeting mixed success in this somewhat mythologized endeavor. Nonetheless, I'd like to suggest that we not only look at Kaufman's spoken and recorded poetry, but also his gestures at silence, in order to understand his orientation toward the interior of self and society and his moves toward the exteriority of "the out place." In my discussion of Kaufman, I'll also draw on the writing of Beat contemporaries William S. Burroughs and LeRoi Jones – later known as Amiri Baraka – to illuminate Kaufman's writing in the context of other Beat writers who seem to have had a similar orientation toward interiority.

When I refer to the immobility of people of color in the schema of white Beats like Ginsberg and Kerouac, I'm referring to the ability of people of color to be captured and held up as a representation or icon of some ideal sublime exterior, a space beyond the limits of the self that white figures can temporarily transgress into and then return from with knowledge and a display of freedom. Sarah Cervenak tracks this phenomenon back to the Enlightenment and explains that "repudiation of claims to self, which has meant (among other things) taking a reprieve from reality, life, [...] has historically been predicated on racial and gender privilege. In other words, white men [...] could surpass the limits of self and achieve momentary transcendence, because they were not bound by the constraints of spectacular Otherness" (21). This spectacular Otherness involves the

Other as the spectacle by which the outside of the self is understood before it can be performatively transgressed into. This mobility is a means of constructing white interiority and freedom, but it depends on an assumption of a flat non-interiority for people of color. For the Beats, this performative transgression of the boundaries of the self often mapped neatly onto a transgression of the boundaries of suburban domesticity that their identity supposedly consigned them to. The movement outside of the home and the movement outside of the strictures of a stifling white identity were nearly one and the same.

The white identity Beats sought to escape from was paradoxically an identity defined by escape. As Elaine Tyler May explains in her work on suburbanization and containment culture, following the progress of women's rights and the loosening of social mores during the early jazz age of the 1920s and 30s, the 1940s and 50s were a period of a resurgence for the traditional nuclear family with its neatly defined roles. These roles placed women in the position of fulfilling domestic responsibilities like maintaining and reproducing life, while men took up a strategic movement between work in the city center and life in the suburban home that sheltered the nuclear family from the city's danger and corrupting influence (10). Rather than performing an escape from the people of color and crime associated with the city center and a return to a comforting feminized domestic interior, the Beat escape was an escape that gestured at doing the inverse, while in practice still accepting white suburban predicates: that the area outside of the suburb and the nuclear family home was a dangerous space defined by crime, people of color, homosexuals, and communists, and the space of the home was where they could return to

comfort and women. They then drew on those predicates to perform a white escape that nonetheless maintained much of the comfort that suburban escape was intended to cultivate. We might think of the main difference between suburban escape and Beat escape as one of inverted desire: Beats sought the outside but made necessary forays to the inside.

This is not to say that the interior that Beats relied on was an exclusively suburban interior, but simply that interiority and exteriority operated along the same axes of race, gender, sexuality, and class, for both white Beats like Kerouac and the typical white male suburbanite. Likewise, though the Beat movement from inside to outside wasn't as clearly delineated as the movement between suburb and city – nonetheless it often did take the form of such a movement – their movement from the inside to the outside bears a certain parallelism with the strategic appropriation of wealth and comfort through movement made by white suburbanites. Much like the white male suburban commuters who were able to profit from the economic dynamism of – and often tax subsidies from – the urban center they drove into and out of while avoiding what they saw as the drawbacks of city living, Beats were able to “commute” into an exterior racialized space for their strategic benefit. This exterior provided them with a sense of existential fulfillment and freedom, without forcing them to embrace the precarity of that space or work towards a collective freedom that included those who they saw as defining that space, because they either brought the comforts of white interiority with them or had white interiors they were able to easily retreat to.

The trope of the outside lining up neatly with blackness, indigeneity, and foreignness in the quest for freedom and sovereign selfhood, is by no means limited to *On the Road* in the Beat oeuvre. It's important to clarify that for beats like Kerouac and Ginsberg, the outside being a Black and brown space does not mean that the outside is a space for Black and brown freedom, any more than the domestic interior being a feminine space makes the interior a space for women to perform and expand the richness of their personal and mental interiority. In the same way that, for Thoreau, the woods are more a space *of* rather than *for* people of color, we might say that for Beats the outside they aim to transcend into is a space *of* rather than *for* Black and brown people, where being free in the space and being the objects that ornament the space are mutually exclusive.

This, however, brings up an interesting conundrum for any study of Bob Kaufman, "the black Beat": what does it mean to already be not only "out of place" among Beats "looking for an out place," as he puts it, but to in fact *be* the "out place" (20)? I want to use the following pages as an opportunity to not only explore the nuances of the racialized and gendered spatialization of freedom for the canonical beats, but also to understand how Bob Kaufman subtly navigated and ultimately reworked this racialization of freedom in search of something like freedom for himself. Before discussing the role of race in constructing the outside for Beats, I'll briefly address the role of gender and desire in constructing the inside. Finally, after mapping white freedom and selfhood in the work of Kerouac and Ginsberg, I'll unpack Kaufman's development

of another kind of Black counter-interiority in the self-effacement, silence, and anti-messianism of his poetic practice, and in his strategic mobility and dwelling.

“Girls, Visions, Everything”

At the risk of betraying my 17 year old self, if I had to concisely characterize *On the Road* I'd say that it's a thinly veiled roman-a-clef about some very libidinous young men escaping domestic interiors – where women perform the labor of sustaining their lives – in order to travel in search of an unattainable outside space with new women and new experiences, only to wind up circling back to the same domestic comforts they fled. Of course, the text has its inspired moments, but I'm primarily interested in the way those inspired poetic moments are part and parcel of an effort to build an interior by transcending it and then returning to it. The very basic tropes of frontier exploration and self-reliance in this text belie a more complex concern with self-construction, freedom, and comfort. *On the Road* opens with an unsatisfied Sal Paradise¹⁶ languishing in a suburban New Jersey home with his aunt,¹⁷ making periodic escapes from the stasis of suburban life to the mobility of a dynamic New York City.

When the frenetic and oversexed Dean Moriarty¹⁸ enters Sal's life he becomes the catalyst for Sal to set out on the road without a rigid plan or a clear-cut means of travel,

¹⁶ A stand-in for Kerouac

¹⁷ A stand-in for Kerouac's mother, whom he would return to throughout his life as a kind of hearth in the storm (*What Happened to Jack Kerouac*).

¹⁸ A stand-in for Neil Cassady.

heading for the West coast in search of “girls, visions, everything” (7). However, every time Sal or Dean find a girl – what they were ostensibly searching for – in this outside place, they begin to feel stifled, restrained, and trapped inside, until they run from their women “back to life, that is to outside life, streets and what not” (28). For Kerouac, real life doesn’t happen in the spaces where life is maintained reproduced. Those spaces restrain and demand commitment. They limit the mobility and the expansion of comfort – under the guise of embracing precarity and asceticism – that is synonymous with freedom for the Beat children of Whitman and Thoreau.

Despite his persistent drive to travel and get away from domesticity and back to “outside life,” Sal says things like “I couldn’t meet a girl without saying to myself, what kind of wife would she make?” and “I want to marry a girl [...] so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old. This can’t go on all the time – all this frantiness and jumping around. We’ve got to go someplace, find something” (74). Here we can see the contradiction in Kerouac’s relationship to traditional white values. He has to be both on the move and heading towards a settled place, and women define this contradiction for him.

In one characteristic scene, in which Dean hounds after one of many women, Kerouac describes him as “beseeching at the soft source, mad with a completely physical realization of the origins of life-bliss; blindly seeking to return the way he came” (84). Kerouac is clearly aware that there is something a little Freudian going on with his flights away from and back to the interior. For Kerouac, the pursuit of the outside is a pursuit of heaven, but also a pursuit of a womblike interior space of total comfort that is only

replicable by death. The pure outside of death, however, is represented for Kerouac as a typically Orientalized figure, and heaven is a “Protective City,” a paradoxical space that includes both the dynamism and danger of the city and the protection of the suburb.

Kerouac recalls his dream

about a strange Arabian figure that was pursuing me across the desert; that I tried to avoid; that finally overtook me just before I reached the Protective City. [...] Something, someone, some spirit was pursuing all of us across the desert of life and was bound to catch us before we reached heaven. Naturally, now that I look back on it, this is only death: death will overtake us before heaven. The one thing that we yearn for in our living days, that makes us sigh and groan and undergo sweet nauseas of all kinds, is the remembrance of some lost bliss that was probably experienced in the womb and can only be reproduced (though we hate to admit it) in death. (79)

As I’ve been suggesting, the pursuit of the freedom of the outside is a contradictory pursuit of both inside and outside for Kerouac. This pursuit of freedom demands a racialized outside, here an Arabian figure and a desert with the miragelike oasis of an always out of reach city. The easy movement between inside and outside here is mediated by race in a way that allows Kerouac to easily call upon spectacular Otherness to evoke pure exteriority without addressing the way race constructs the means by which he as a white man is able to move around in the “outside” world and to shift so readily between the spaces of the outside world and the comforts of the domestic interior.

This escape into the womblike bliss of death maps onto the endless pursuit of women in *On the Road*. This symmetry for the Beats between the search for freedom, the search for women, and the search for death, is given a particularly explicit description in the work of Kerouac's contemporary and fellow beat, William S. Burroughs. Burroughs comically writes that "Death is orgasm is rebirth is death in orgasm is their unsanitary Venusian gimmick is the whole birth death cycle of action" (*Ticket* 32). Here, Burroughs produces a science fictionalization of Freud's death drive, in which "Venusians" are stand-ins for women, and in which heterosexual desire is connected to a search for the origin of the womb, which is also a search for the quiescence of death. This searching results in a repeating pattern of behavior that, for Burroughs, is inextricably tied to the nuclear family and the domesticity of the suburbs, which he referred to as "suburban concentration camps" (*Nova Express* 53). For Burroughs, this repetitive cycle is a potent means of social control, and his escape from this control takes the form of a kind of militant homosexuality in his writing.

Unlike Burroughs, Kerouac's Sal found himself unable to break the spell of the feminine flesh, since his escapes from women nonetheless always brought him back to women. Likewise, in spite of also being homosexual, Ginsberg couldn't avoid indulging in his own version of this death drive/womb phantasy in his transcendent seeking. In "Song" he wrote "yes, yes, that's what I wanted, I always wanted, I always wanted to return to the body where I was born" (149-50). However, in contrast to Burroughs, for Kerouac and Ginsberg alike this cycle is less a means of social control than it is a performance of freedom. For Ginsberg, the drive back to the quiescence and comfort of

the womb is the very definition of the love he seeks in his transcendent flights. In *On the Road*, the escape itself is always one funded or otherwise supported by women and the interior havens that the Beats are supposed to be escaping from. Ultimately, their escape is less an escape from the comforts of the interior than it is a taking of those interior comforts on the road. In one characteristic example, Sal “went to see a rich girl [he] knew. In the morning she pulled a hundred-dollar bill out of her silk stocking and said, ‘You’ve been talking of a trip to Frisco; that being the case, take this and go and have your fun’” (113). Here Sal magically overcomes one of his financial roadblocks by stopping by an interior haven and sleeping with a woman who is happy to support his quest for freedom and self-actualization through mobility. We learn nothing else about “rich girl.” Rather than abandoning the interior, Sal cultivates little interiors he can stop into throughout his travels, in both cities and suburbs, that both facilitate his travel out into the exterior and provide a comfortable haven for retreat.

Meanwhile, Sal literally quits every job he finds, sometimes after one day. At one point he decides to leave his job – which he describes as “chores” – and only needs to send a postcard to his aunt before he’s back on the road, fully funded. If it weren’t for all the drug use and sex, there would be something Rockwell-esque about Sal eating ice cream and apple pie as his staple meal while he gets driven across the country and wired money by maternal figures. For Kerouac, it isn’t so much the possession of an inside that grants freedom, as it is the movement between inside and outside, a movement that seems to involve the superimposition of the comforts of a consistent home with steady income and the excitement of continuous travel and new experiences in new places,

unencumbered by the weight of possessions or responsibility to family. This movement was of course supported by a continual yet disavowed domestic labor that allowed Kerouac to expand the comforts of the inside into the outside.

Joyce Johnson, Kerouac's girlfriend during his rise to fame, remembers that the Beat's lack of respect for the creative inner lives of women was merely a reflection of the broader cultural milieu. She recalls being taught that if women "really wanted to be writers, [...] they'd be out in America hopping freight trains" rather than living "boring little lives" at home. Though she got encouragement from Kerouac to write, she remembers him asking why she wasted time working the job that supported her: "why didn't [she] go for broke the way he had, see the world, [...] try to become great." The answer, which she never shared with him, was that she "didn't see how [she] could survive without a safety net" ("Beat Queens" 42). This answer is telling, especially when we ask how the male Beats survived without a safety net. The short answer is, they didn't. Women were consistently the safety net they fell back on when their forays into the world and greatness left them wanting. We can see this too in the role of Hettie Jones, the wife of LeRoi Jones, who worked a day job before coming home to do most of the behind the scenes work producing the essentially handmade Beat magazine *Yugen*, only to be told years later that her role was "insignificant" and that she was "just the typist" ("Babes in Boyland" 51). It seems clear that, if the Beats were reluctant to encourage women to cultivate the interiority of their own artistic geniuses, it was because they needed women to cultivate the interiors that allowed for the expansion of male interior comforts and artistic genius.

Contemplating Jazz, The Well-Equipped Pad, and Beat Tourism

The story of the Beats is one ostensibly about urban roaming, highway driving, hitchhiking, and apothecic flights of imagination. However, as I've been suggesting, it is also a story about cozy interiors. After all, the origin story of the Beats typically involves Ginsberg and Kerouac meeting in Burroughs' apartment, and some of the more memorable moments in *On the Road* involve Carlo and Dean¹⁹ spending nights inside on amphetamines talking endlessly in search of arcane knowledge, and Dean manically running in the course of a day between the different hotel rooms and apartments he has women waiting in. As I've suggested, these cozy interiors are important parts of Beat freedom and self-construction. However, the Beat interior often offered both comfort and transcendence only by presenting flattened out lives of color.

For Allen Ginsberg, the hipster minds of the Beat movement are the "best minds of [his] generation," so deep yet overflowing in their interiority that they are able to "disgorge" their "intellects" for "seven days and nights" without stopping. The necessary backdrops, against which they perform their search for a sublime "ancient heavenly connection," are the "negro streets" and clubs that provide spaces for "contemplating jazz" which he associates with a kind of transcendent "floating across the tops of cities" in "Howl" (162). The paradox here is that to be the best minds, to truly demonstrate the richness of their interiority, these hipsters must be "expelled from the academies," and

¹⁹ Stand-ins for Ginsberg and Cassady.

“burn their money.” They must leave the interior halls of the Ivy League and the comforts of their white upper-class privilege and venture out into spaces of color and experiences of poverty. However, this is a movement out and back again that, rather than abandoning the comforts and privileges of interiority, expands those comforts and privileges. These Beat figures leave the academy so they can start their own academies. They burn their money so they can make livings as artists, that is to say doing exactly what they want to do. The important takeaway here is, just as for Thoreau it is necessary to have been a member of society to perform your freedom by transcending society, for the Beats it was necessary to have “cash to burn” – often on gas or bus fare for discretionary travel – and by burning it attain even greater social mobility. This will be an important point of contrast for Bob Kaufman’s poetic practice, in which the thing to burn is simply yourself.

Ginsberg’s use of jazz as a part of a movement outside of white suburban “square” life bears expanding on. Ginsberg and Kerouac both had an intense respect for the Black pioneers of Bop – Charlie Parker, also known as “Bird,” in particular – and thought of this new form of jazz as a kind of parallel for their quest for freedom. Indeed, many in the Beat generation idolized Charlie Parker. In his writing on Jazz, Ralph Ellison shares an anecdote in which Art Blakey, when asked about “Parker’s meaning for Negroes,” replied “They never heard of him” (228). As Ellison would have it, Parker’s “greatest significance was for the educated white middle-class youth whose reactions to the inconsistencies of American life was the stance of casting off its education, language, dress, manners and moral standards: a revolt, apolitical in nature, which finds its most

dramatic instance in the figure of the so-called white hipster,” a seemingly critical reference to Norman Mailer’s description of the Beat as a “white negro” (228).

Parker and his contemporaries were apparently “flattered” but “bewildered” by the attention of the Beats, who “misunderstood both the music and the musicians who made it” (*Jazz*). Bebop, a kind of avant-garde articulation of jazz, “was intricate, sophisticated, demanding. Only the most highly skilled musicians were capable of playing it. Yet the Beats insisted it was simple, spontaneous self-expression. Anybody could do it!” Ginsberg claimed that “Jazz gives us a way of expressing the spontaneous motions of the heart. It’s like a fountain of instantaneous inspiration that’s available to everybody. All you gotta do is turn on the radio, put on your record, or pick up an axe yourself and blow” (*Jazz*). Here it seems that this Black cultural production is simply a means of conveying some philosophical and artistic insight for Ginsberg, seemingly without due appreciation for the actual lives and talents of the people who created it.

What Ellison identifies as the apolitical character of the Beat revolt – at least insofar as it applies to the rights of people of color²⁰ – is important because it allows the inconsistencies of American life to emerge as inconsistencies in the revolt itself. However genuine their appreciation of Parker’s musical efforts, and the musical dynamism of Bebop more generally, their appreciation was part and parcel of an

²⁰ I disagree with Ellison that the Beats were entirely apolitical, though their failure to speak more loudly and clearly about racial injustice given their affinities seems inexcusable. Kerouac seems to have been a fairly ignorant Catholic, anti-Marxist, and antifeminist. However, Allen Ginsberg was vocally political when it came to the anti-war movement early on and became involved in a variety of political causes in the sixties. Likewise, Gary Snyder, a West Coast Beat, was a committed environmentalist.

“apolitical” effort to find freedom in stepping out of the mold without necessarily putting work into finding a collective freedom that included figures like Charlie Parker. In fact, as I’ve been suggesting, these efforts not only neglected to move people like Parker toward freedom, but in many ways immobilized Parker as a kind of backdrop: the virtuosity, experimentation, and boldness of Charlie Parker was paradoxically the soundtrack to a new kind of white freedom.

Kerouac seems to have understood the ways this exploration of musical freedom for men of color at the time reflects a recognition that they were “misplaced in the white nation” and “misnoticed for what they really were,” but the best he can do when discussing the misplacement and misrecognition of their social position is to call it a “goof of life” (“History”). But he also seems to have needed to idealize their not belonging as a part of his journey toward freedom. He saw them as figures whose dispossession made them literally monk-like – seeming to trade Thelonious’s birthname for the angelic position he reserved for Bop artists – and he imagined them as “witch doctors” saying “everything belongs to me because I am poor” (“History”) as though they were the exotic minimalist figures by which he could model his own quest for ascetic freedom. Alongside these figures he perhaps appropriately saw the increasing speed, improvisation, and energy of Bebop relative to Swing as analogous to the kind of frenetic dynamism he embraced in his travel, conversation, and writing.

In fact, he explicitly associated the improvisations of Bop with exteriority and precarity, noticing in a version of “All the Things You Are” played by Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk that they “changed the placing of the note in the

middle of the harmony to an outer more precarious position where also, its sense of not belonging was enhanced by [...] everyone exteriorizing the tunes [*sic*] harmony” (“History”). Here Kerouac notices a symmetry between the boldness of Bop and the precarity of Black life in America. But whereas we might say that the increased energy and bravery of Bebop came from a place of exposure without easy escape – a pinballing about the world trapped outside of white American suburban comfort – the dynamism of Kerouac’s freedom specifically involved a much safer movement between white American suburban comfort and the spaces of precarity and monkish ascetism that he saw Bop artists as typifying. As I’ll expand on, this movement evokes for me a kind of self-aggrandizing tourism.

The Beats never seemed to have grasped the sad irony of the fact that, for these Black figures in jazz who supposedly typified the freedom from square life that Beats found in mobility, there was no such freedom of mobility. It is appropriate that, upon first traveling to Europe, Miles Davis remarked that he had for the first time experienced “the freedom of being treated like a human being” (*Jazz*). It is this very basic freedom that the Beats took for granted when moving about the world, and it is the denial of this freedom to Black people that they disavowed when they evoked Black jazz figures as icons of the freedom they were exploring. However, not only did Beats miss the fact that their freedom was predicated on a privilege to move more freely and safely than Black people, they missed the fact that their treatment of Black people as the icons of a freeing outside space had the potential to reduce these Black figures to interiorless ornaments in stories of white movement and interior expansion.

Kerouac's tourism into an exterior Black precarity seems to give voice to a Beat desire to be black without being black. Sal narrates "At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night" (112). "I wished I were a Denver Mexican," he continues, "or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned." He imagines that the "the dark porches of Mexican and Negro homes" he passes reflect simple, authentic, happy lives within the interiors of these homes, a simplicity that his white ambition keeps him from. When a young black girl confuses him for a friend named Joe, Sal bemoans his whiteness again: "I wished I were Joe. I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad, strolling in this violet dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" (113). His characterization of Black life here seems not far removed from minstrelsy, and his view of their homes and lives is so surface level it denies the richness of Black interior lives, and the complexity of their own emotional lives, existential dilemmas, and thwarted ambitions. Kerouac instead uses them as a prop to meditate on the depth of his own inner suffering and efforts to transcend the constraints of his identity.

Ginsberg's "America" offers an at times hilarious critique of American society, for example, mocking that the greatest ambition of white American progressivism at the

time seemed to be to elect a Catholic president.²¹ However, if we use “America” to track the influence of Whitman in Ginsberg, we can see some traces of the same tendency to utilize silenced and marginalized figures to construct a more expansive subjective interior. In the same way that Kerouac bemoans his ambition for transcendence, which he associates with whiteness and the inability to have the simple authentic life he associates with Black people – though also, in his awkward fashion, with people of color more broadly – in “America” Ginsberg seems to bemoan that America “made me want to become a saint.” Like Kerouac, here Ginsberg is disappointed by an inability to simply be one of the simple, marginal figures that make up the backdrop for much of his most well-known poetry.

“America” seems modeled after Whitman’s project to present a vision of a unified America represented by his poetic voice and expansive self. However, rather than attempting to present himself as the representation of a unified America, Ginsberg utilizes the troubled yet mystical expansiveness of his subjective interior – when he complains “I can’t stand my own mind” and claims to “have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations” – to represent an inconsistent and insane America. He clearly evokes Whitman after this when he claims “It occurs to me that I am America/ I am talking to myself again” (182). However, this allusion to Whitman involves a joking critique of both Whitman and America. It observes that any effort to contain and represent its multitudes – mediated by their representations on television, at this point – results in a

²¹ “America” was written before John F. Kennedy was elected the first Catholic President of the United States.

kind of insane multiple-personality, but seems to simultaneously say “my insane mind turns out to be a perfect representation of this America.” In this respect Ginsberg is far more self-aware than Whitman was. His poetry here packs far more critical punch, yet his poetic practice nonetheless adopts nearly the same posture of transcendence and representation that Whitman’s does. Furthermore, the self-aggrandizing Whitmanian transcendent move that Ginsberg makes does demand pulling marginal figures like those in “mental institutions” and “prisons” along with “millions of underprivileged” into the fold of his expanded poetic interior. When he claims that “I am the Scottsboro boys” he is referencing a group of nine Black teenagers who were falsely accused of raping two white women and sentenced to death.²² When he seems to critique America’s posture of innocence in the face of Soviet Communism he mockingly offers that “Him make Indians learn read. Him need big black niggers” (182). Here Ginsberg must absorb some of Whitman’s “long dumb voices” into his poetic voice in a way that still fails to adequately deal with their silence almost a century later. Though his poetry is far more usefully critical, the lines between critique and the self-aggrandizing project of becoming a mouthpiece for America in the Whitmanian tradition are blurred here.

As I’ve suggested, Kerouac’s artistic genius involves the same transcendence via “negro streets” imagined by Ginsburg in “Howl” and subtly present in poems like “America,” yet it is an even more explicitly self-aggrandizing move that more fully effaces the material realities of Black life in states of precarity. For Kerouac, white life is

²² Their sentences were overturned and they were retried multiple times resulting in a variety of acquittals and differing sentences.

boring and suburban, while Black life is exciting, urban, mobile, and unencumbered. Like Wordsworth's Romantic vagrant, the Black man in a state of precarity is drawn on as an object by which Kerouac imagines a state of freedom that involves both the comforts and security of material wealth and suburban refuge as well as the sometimes forced mobility of poverty and urban dynamism.

For Beats like Kerouac, the car seems like the organizing figure for this contradictory relationship with exteriority. It is the means by which a Beat can literally take the interior on the road. Whereas the experience of hitchhiking was inevitably a more limited and dangerous affair for people of color in the mid-twentieth century, the white Beat on the road was able to play at precarity while nonetheless appreciating privilege. The performance of hitching and carpooling is also an important means by which, this Beat relationship with vagrancy operates along class lines. As Jennifer Forsberg notes, Kerouac puts on a kind of "hobohemian" performance that "embraces the appearance of the American working class to forge agency" (3). In these cases, Kerouac draws on the enforced mobility of white migrant labor to assert a kind of freedom and agency for himself that was limited for the working class and underclass figures he emulated.

As we'll see in his moments of Mexican interloping as well, Kerouac's identification with people of color is defined by his ability to end his experimental forays into the sublime madness and beauty of precarity at will. However, it is important to note that in Kerouac's schema, for Blacks this precarity is more often defined by danger and homelessness, whereas for Mexicans precarity is more often defined by hard labor. On

one of their nights out, when Kerouac and his white peers “went mad together again” and “got in the car and drove all over Richmond across the bay, hitting Negro jazz shacks in the oil flats. Marylou went to sit down and a colored guy pulled the chair out from under her. The gals approached her in the John with propositions. I was approached too. Dean was sweating around. It was the end; I wanted to get out” (112). Here the Beats find their comfortable interiors intruded on in their touristic foray into Black spaces. They face pranks and propositions for sex and drugs – likely no doubt, due to the obvious socioeconomic asymmetry they presented in that environment – and find themselves overwhelmed and uncomfortable. As soon as their moments of transcendence are interrupted by the roughness of material realities in the neighborhoods they tear through in their cars, they make their escape with ease but bring with them the feeling of having inherited some kind of sublimity by proximity. As fellow Beat poet Gary Snyder²³ recalled, he and Kerouac used to sit in San Francisco alleys drinking wine and “play[ing] that we were destitute” before going back to Marin county at the end of the day (*What Happened*). Their freedom to come and go in the outside space of blackness and poverty involves disavowing that some must stay there, and that their life there is not one of transcendence. For Beats like Kerouac and Ginsberg, the Black space is a space of transcendence but also a space of precariousness that they choose not to fully embrace when choosing their spaces of dwelling.

In “Bob Kaufmann and the Limits of Jazz,” William H. Rice draws his reader’s attention to an image from a 1959 *Life* article on the Beats. The image is titled “The

²³ Japhy Ryder in Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*.

Well-Equipped Pad,” (Fig. 1) and Rice observes that the pad is indeed “well-equipped” by a curious ornamentation supposedly particular to Beat types of the time. Though the articles on Beat culture in magazines like *Life* were widely criticized by Beats for misrepresentation, in the case of the well-equipped pad *Life* seems to have produced a kind of unintentional parody – think “here we see the wild Beat poet in his natural habitat” – of the Beat orientation toward interiority. Rice notes that “The young couple in the picture is white, but ironically all the art in their “pad” is from African Americans.” This art includes albums by Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, and Bob Kaufman’s *Abomunist Manifesto*. “Despite the art that dominates the contrived picture,” Rice continues, “most of the article that follows focuses on white male beat writers, such as Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, and McClure, the usual suspects” (403). The man’s distraction, the woman’s forlorn gaze, and what appears to be a baby lying face down on the ground, all seem to signify the lack of commitment to traditional family values embodied by Beat bohemianism.

This picture is emblematic of a kind of ornamentation of the Beat subjective and spatial interior with people of color who have been historically cast into socially exterior spaces by force. In the instance of the well-equipped pad, the white Beat is able to perform their exteriority by drawing on these ornaments even in their interior spaces of dwelling. Here, as in Walter Benjamin’s interior, the Beat “living room is a box in the theater of the world” (“Paris” 9). Yet, this theater requires the lives of people of color to work as both spectacle and ornament. The content of interest in the *Life* article, and in much of the discourse on Beats, is white life and transcendence, but one of the vehicles of

that transcendence is an exploration of the abject and the marginalized. The Black figures on the record covers and pages in the pad are made into window dressing, their interiority left unexplored. They are quite literally objects by which a richer and expanded subjective and architectural interiority might be developed for white Beats. Whereas in many scenes the Beat interior is constructed by the disavowed labor of women, here the interior of Beat dwelling is literally made what it is by flattened out people of color.



Figure 1: Beats in a “well-equipped pad” (*Life*)

As Rice also observes, the *Life* article claims that “The Negro . . . is a hero to the beats (as are the junkie and the jazz musician). . . . The thing the

Beat treasures and envies in the Negro are the irresponsibility, cheerful promiscuity, and subterranean defiance which were once enforced on him during his years of bondage” (403). By bringing up this “once enforced” defiance, the article curiously leaves out the ongoing struggle that defined Black life in America at the time, as does much Beat writing. In fact, much of the Beat enthusiasm with the simplicity, happiness, and spontaneity – i.e. lack of forethought and planning – of Black life and jazz bears an uncomfortable resemblance to minstrelsy’s rejection of Black subjective interiority. In the same way that white audiences of minstrelsy disavowed the inner emotional life of Black people in favor of a joking, cheery, satisfied exterior that made whites more comfortable, some white audiences of jazz seem to have disavowed the genius – requiring a staggering understanding of musical theory – and work ethic required to “spontaneously” improvise in jazz forms like Bebop.

We can see this kind of flattening out of the interiority of people of color in Sal’s travels through southern Texas and into Mexico in *On the Road*. As he and Dean drive, they engage in a kind of voyeurism as they gaze into open houses in a Mexican community and make a spectacle of young Mexicans at play. They relish the domestic interior scenes laid bare for them as they pass with what at points feels like a kind of anthropological gaze. However, whereas the anthropological gaze of “the well-equipped pad” in *Life* foreground a kind of reflective – if objectionable – and somewhat impenetrable poetic or academic interiority for the white male lounging and reading, the anthropological gaze of the Beats seems to foreground the extreme penetrability of Mexican interiority. Whereas Black interiors seem to be somewhat flattened by the Beats,

Mexican interiors are accepted as interiors by the Beats, though these interiors cannot help but strike the Beats as not only transparent in their simplicity, but also “cute” for lack of a more appropriately patronizing word.

In San Antonio Sal and Dean “cut around and get these streets dug – look at those houses across the street, you can see right into the front room and all the purty daughters layin around with True Love magazines. [...] Innumerable houses hid behind verdant, almost jungle-like yards; we saw glimpses of girls in front rooms, girls on porches, girls in the bushes with boys” (171). After entering Mexico proper, the transparency of the Mexican interior becomes more explicit. Dean declares in wonder

I am digging the interiors of these homes as we pass them – these gone doorways and you look inside and see beds of straw and little brown kids sleeping and stirring to wake, their thoughts congealing from the empty mind of sleep, their selves rising, and the mothers cooking up breakfast in iron pots, and dig them shutters they have for windows and the old men, the old men are so cool and grand and not bothered by anything. There's no suspicion here, nothing like that. Everybody's cool, everybody looks at you with such straight brown eyes and they don't say anything, just look, and in that look all of the human qualities are soft and subdued and still there. Dig all the foolish stories you read about Mexico and the sleeping gringo and all that crap – and crap about greasers and so on – and all it is, people here are straight and kind and don't put down any bull. I'm so amazed by this. (174)

Despite his resistance to the traditional racist narratives about Mexicans, here Dean is rearticulating the simplicity and happiness of the lives of people of color with a twist. Not only are their authentic lives something to be emulated, but their interiors are made transparent and legible in order to imagine this other authentic life. But this transparency is troubling. The interior lives of Mexicans supposedly aren't defined by any of the "bull" that makes up white life in America. The self and thoughts that emerge from "the empty mind of sleep" for these Mexicans are "cool" and "not bothered by anything." The Beats see an interiority here, but it is an interior into which they project an image of an ideal Beat simplicity and stoicism that they are denied because of the complexity of their white lives and white ambitions. In order to claim "We had finally found the magic land at the end of the road and we never dreamed the extent of the magic" (173) these Beats have to turn other peoples' lives – often defined by true precarity and a complex emotional relationship to white people that almost certainly isn't best described by "no suspicion" – into magical heavens they can escape into.

Kerouac acts as though Sal and Dean are giving the reader a glimpse into Mexican life, looking into windows, but they are instead primarily looking out of the windows of their own, safe interiors, protected by their nationality, class, and gender – and often their cars – from the openness and vulnerability they see outside and attempt to emulate as a kind of simple and sublime life. They hope to become one with the culture they witness, but their forays into local bars and brothels are a part of their own project of interior expansion, rather than a self-effacing embrace of alterity. While "digging"

Mexican life Sal is appropriately reminded of “Terry,” the Mexican girlfriend he adopts on one of his trips to California.

Beat transcendence via tourism takes on a different dimension when Sal adopts this temporary Mexican girlfriend – and her child – and becomes a migrant laborer for kicks. In his early time with Terry he constructs her inner thoughts for the reader, which he places “in her simple and funny little mind” (54). This echoes his efforts at constructing transparent and legible interiors during his trip to Mexico. Importantly, a portion of his time with Terry was spent dwelling in a tent that might seem like a counter-interior of sorts. “There were a bed, a stove, and a cracked mirror hanging from a pole” Sal reports, adding “it was delightful. I had to stoop to get in, and when I did there was my baby and my baby boy” (61). In contrast to the ornamentation of “the well-equipped pad,” here Sal seems to have chosen actual people of color to ornament an interior that foregrounds his own escape from a stifling white interiority. However, as we’ll see, this posture at counter-interiority is paradoxically an escape with an easy escape.

During his tourism in the precarious labor of migrant workers, Sal of course decides to resort to picking cotton, which he initially sets out to do on his own, only to be shown how to do it properly by Terry who immediately outworks him. In what is clearly another effort to set up a kind of symmetry between himself and the marginalized, he notes that they pick alongside “an old negro couple” who “picked cotton with the same God-blessed patience the grandfathers had practiced in ante-bellum Alabama.” He later describes himself “sighing like an old negro cotton picker.” Here he aligns himself with past slaves – while appearing to somewhat glorify and legitimize slavery – and at the end

of *his first day of work* he “looked up at dark sky and prayed to God for a better break in life and better chance to do something for the little people I love” (62). His desire for a “break” in life reflects the character he is playing: someone trapped by precarity, rather than someone simply dropping in to visit. Despite his initial incompetence as a field laborer he has an opportunity to develop a sense of community with Terry and her family from their labor camp tent in Sabinal. Over time he becomes “a man of the earth” and even a Mexican “in a way.” Here we can see him both posturing as a marginalized figure while simultaneously keeping his distance from these “little people” he loves.

However, as winter looms Sal decides their tent won’t do, and wires his aunt for money to return home and leaves Terry with her family in the “four-room shack” they live in. To describe the shack, he writes “I couldn’t imagine how the whole family managed to live in there. Flies flew over the sink. There were no screens, just like in the song, ‘The window she is broken and the rain she is coming in.’ Terry was at home now” (64). This penetrated dwelling seems scarcely more comfortable than the tent he has opted to escape from. After getting his breakfast from Terry, he picks up his money from his aunt, and hits the road. However, here Sal’s venturing back onto the road is actually a retreat from the discomfort of migrant laborer life, back to his aunt’s house on the east coast. He has escaped his escape. He tells us that upon arriving back home he “ate everything in the icebox,” adding that when his aunt sized him up she said “Poor little Salvatore, [...] You’re thin, you’re thin. Where have you been all this time?” Having arrived back home, he finds a shelter from the precarity that Terry continues to live in, and his sojourn in suffering is over until he sets back out for a new adventure.

As John McClure notes, Kerouac isn't entirely oblivious to the negative effects of pure mobility and freedom without commitment. This, as I've pointed out, is evidenced in his observations about the vacuity of his and Cassady's ceaseless wandering after nothing and the cyclical nature of his flights and returns to feminized domestic interiors. Ultimately it would be unfair to say that *On the Road* offers no relevant self-critique. When Kerouac bemoans that his "white ambitions" were "why [he'd] abandoned a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley," he at least recognizes there is something wrong with an ambition that encourages someone to abandon the people he depends on for love. However, he fails to fully grasp the contradiction of his ambition and quest for freedom, which depends on both having an interior – with emotional and material support – and strategically leaving it behind. Ultimately, this contradictory freedom merely serves as an expansion of the comforts and white privilege that are supposedly stifling to freedom. What is perhaps worse is that the contradictory freedom of this interior expansion depends on carelessly interloping in, simplifying, and flattening out the interior lives of people of color, and demands being free while others are not.

"The Silent Beat"

In his poem "Hollywood," Bob Kaufman references "San Francisco poets looking for an out place, looking way out of place," and in his "Abomunist Manifesto" he writes that "Way out people Know the way out." It's clear he's talking about the Beats, and that he saw himself as a member of that group. However, his relationship to "the out place"

seems to have been fundamentally different from that of Beats like Ginsberg and Kerouac.²⁴ People of color and their marginality aren't props by which transcendence can be sought for Kaufman. Black precarity is the state of his existence and he must negotiate what transcendence means not by moving freely between that state and some other more comfortable state. For Kaufman, "the way out" involves refusing the interiority that was refused to Black people. To do this he cultivates and embraces a penetrable and fragmented interior sense of self and a precarious dwelling practice that had no easy retreat.

Kaufman's peer, the poet Jack Hirschman, observed that "Bobby was a provocative guy. [...] Ginsberg could be provocative in his words [...] but Bobby was a street poet. [Over time] the Beat movement began to be accepted, but the street is something else" (*And When I Die*). Rather than using representations of "negro streets" in an effort to escape precarity and come in from the cold to mainstream acceptance, Kaufman embraced those streets and the precarity they represented. Rather than bringing the comforts of the interior out onto the exterior of "the road," or using the spectacular otherness of the streets to craft an expansive poetic interiority posturing at transcendence, when he wasn't on the streets Kaufman seems to have brought the discomfort of the streets into what could have been a comfortable subjective and spatial interior. LeRoi Jones – later Amiri Baraka – is said to have called Kaufman "the maximum Beatnik" because of his total refusal to accept any of the comforts of bourgeois culture (*And When*

²⁴ Though, as I'll clarify, he would have at least shared Burroughs' interest in the politics of silence.

I Die). Whereas Kerouac, Cassady, and Ginsberg's sojourns in the discomfort of the street are merely accents to a life spent bouncing between comfortable interiors, there is a kind of radical Black counter-interiority in Kaufman's poetry and life.

Ginsberg's relationship with dwelling, for example, is one in which the New York "cold water flats" – that is to say, barebones apartments without heat – that he and his peers live in are a means of transcendence, or "floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz." Here Ginsberg comes closer to the type of counter-interiority that I'll analyze in Kaufman, yet as I've suggested, the dependence on jazz and "negro streets" gives away a broader dependence on a flattened out vision of Black joy and suffering going on outside of these interior flats. This flattening reimagines the reality of Black life as a kind of hip exteriority that is explicitly racialized. The racialized dwelling and transcendence in Ginsberg's writing is one that gestures continuously at heaven and the search for holy comforts. Kaufman, on the other hand, tells us in "Unholy Missions" "I want to expose Heaven as an exclusive sanitarium filled with rich psychopaths who think they can fly" (*Solitudes* 8). In "High on Life" Kaufman narrates himself

Spiraling in hollowed caves of skin-stretched me,
totally doorless,
Emptied of vital parts, previously evicted finally
by landlord mind (23)

Here he portrays himself as a body without even a door to hide behind, whose flight from the interior is the result of an eviction. His mind is not what wanders, but what evicts, or to put it differently, his mind is the landlord he must flee from. Rather than exploring the

luxury of flight from the interior in his poetry, here Kaufman struggles to make even his body into a “nerve-lined living space” for his “sleepless soul” (23). Whereas Kerouac and Ginsberg’s dwelling practice takes the white body for granted as a kind of safe interior, and explores ways to craft the world outside of the body into an even more expansive interior for white comfort and freedom, Kaufman cannot and does not try to take the Black body for granted as an interior. His relationship with his own body and mind has a kind of symmetry with his precarious relationship to broader spatial dwellings in the face of evictions and racist landlords, and his refusal of the comfort of dwelling is also a kind of refusal of bodily comfort.

Whereas Kerouac and Ginsberg’s sojourns were a kind of striving toward transcendence through tourism in the outside, Kaufman’s orientation towards the outside was such that he felt the need to perform a kind of tourism into the comfort of bourgeois white interiority when he felt himself being made an object of spectacle. He organized a tour of the “bourgeois wasteland” of San Francisco in reaction to tourists traveling to North Beach to “dig” the Beats. Though it wasn’t explicitly directed at white Beats, the tour was explicitly a protest against being made an interiorless object by white middle class tourism. In a stunt that prefigured the protest of punk public antics, Kaufman and a busload of other North Beach residents spilled into downtown San Francisco with cameras and signs reading “annual squaresville tour” (Fig. 3) and “Hi Squares! The citizens of North Beach are on tour!” (Fig. 2) to the bewilderment of white middle class San Franciscans. However, rather than simply inverting what he felt was being done to him, by positioning himself as though he were looking out from his own comfortable

interior using an anthropological gaze, Kaufman maintains a posture of counter-interiority since the milieu he performs the role of tourist in is middle class interior comfort itself. He becomes an interloper in white comfort and still performs his own counter-interiority (*And When I Die*).



Figure 2: North Beach Beats “on tour” (*And When I Die*)



Figure 3: North Beach Beats in their “tour bus” (*And When I Die*)

Kaufman’s search doesn’t demand the kind of searching for heavens on the backs of other people’s hells we see in Kerouac and Ginsberg. In many ways his search involved burying himself in a hell of his own and finding a way to the outside through the discomfort of self-fragmentation and insecurity. To echo Hartman on slave dwelling practice, Kaufman finds an enclosure that cannot be enclosed (“The Black Outdoors”). As we see in the petit-marronage of Madison Washington in *The Heroic Slave*, in the search for freedom it sometimes becomes necessary to craft modes of dwelling that refuse the comfort of a dwelling, in order to avoid the “treachery to freedom” that comes from contentment with the status quo (Douglass, *Heroic* 15).

Though reliable details about his life are somewhat difficult to come by, it seems clear that Kaufman’s life was tumultuous and characterized by struggle. Daniel

Pinchbeck concludes that “Kaufman’s life story suggests a certain chaotic helplessness” (“Children” 384). Though no definitive biography of his life exists, and the oral histories of his life seem to be marred by contradiction and uncertainty, we know that he was probably addicted to amphetamines, heroin, and alcohol for much of his adult life, and that he married, separated from, renewed vows with, and then separated again from the same white woman – Eileen – who encouraged and supported his artistic efforts. He had a daughter from a previous marriage, whom he did not have a relationship with throughout most of his life. Though my intention is to contrast the artistic practice and life of Kaufman with that of Kerouac – and to a lesser extent Ginsberg – here, he was by no means a mirror opposite of Kerouac or Ginsberg. Like Kerouac he was an absentee father who “wasn’t there much, by design” (*When I Die*) in his first marriage, and his son Parker from his second marriage recalls him being vacant whenever he was there (Pinchbeck “Children” 384). Likewise, he was a close friend to Ginsberg, who he published the magazine *Beatitude* with and who he wrote one of his more well-known poems about. His politics weren’t necessarily at odds with Ginsberg’s, though he was more active politically in the 40s than either Ginsberg or Kerouac. And though, like Kerouac, he worked as a merchant marine, in contrast to Kerouac’s anti-communism Kaufman spent his early adulthood as an organizer for the National Maritime Union, a union composed of radical Marxists and unique in its promotion of the interest of Black and Latino workers. At the start of the Red Scare in 1948, the NMU collapsed and Kaufman was fired as a merchant marine for his communist affiliations. He was surveilled by the FBI for some time after (*When I Die*).

In contrast to the relative ease of retreat that defined Kerouac and Ginsberg's relationship with the outside, Kaufman did not have an easy escape from his escapes, because his relationship to the interior wasn't one of escape at all. Instead, his relationship to the interior was a "refusal of what has been refused" (Harney and Moten 96). One clear indication of his refusal was a commitment to "unruly antics" that supposedly led to ongoing "beatings and harassment by the city police" among other forms of insecurity (*Ancient* ix). "During 1959," Rice explains, "Kaufman was arrested a stunning thirty-nine times by North Beach police on disorderly conduct charges" (Peditto ctd. in Rice 405). His presence in public seems to have presented such a threat to white comfort – that is, the interior they hoped to bring with them into the exterior – that his bodily freedom had to be sacrificed to preserve the feeling of expansive comfort that defined white freedom. When he moved to New York, Kaufman was arrested for walking on grass – apparently this was interpreted as a kind of public indecency by the police – and after being assessed by the U.S. criminal justice system he was given involuntary shock treatment for an unspecified mental illness (*And When I Die*). Kaufman's vagrancy was far more threatening and dangerous, undoubtedly because of his Blackness. Paradoxically, the outward manifestations of his counter-interiority led to efforts to neutralize the threatening mental – that is, interior – origins of his refusal of interiority.

In *Wandering*, Sarah Cervenak addresses the criminalization of Black mobility – in which both moving too little and too much are considered suspicious – and maps out the "larger belief system that figures blackness as incapable of rational comportment." For Cervenak, whereas white mobility is a means of solving intellectual problems, "black

movement is, more often than not, read as disruptive physicality, a philosophical problem to be solved as opposed to that which resolves philosophical problems” (5-6). However, it is not simply Kaufman’s movement that subjects him to criminalization. It is his relationship to interiority, or as Cervenak might put it, his relationship to physicality and mentality.

In his work on public behavior, Erving Goffman analyzes the ways “the underlying general sentiment possessed by the individual [...] give[s] way to the requirements” of a social situation or space (12). Goffman treats rational comportment as a kind of shielding of the interior: when we recognize we are no longer in private, we are supposed to sit up, conceal our inner feelings and desires, and make ourselves decent for public life. We are supposed to lower the blinds of our personal interiors, or at the very least tidy the place up, so to speak. Our physical appearance should generally reflect a coherent self and an organized mental state that is compatible with the sentiments of the social world around it (41). Kaufman’s public “unruliness” was both a refusal to enclose his interior by way of physical comportment, and a refusal to present a legible and coherent – that is to say, acceptable – interior self. At the same time, as Goffman also observes, “in many situations certain categories of persons may not be authorized to be present, and [...] should they be present, this in itself will constitute an improper act” (11). In this sense, being Black is often a kind of violation of proper behavior in public places. Kaufman’s Blackness was already a kind of unruliness, which turned something as simple as walking in the wrong place – the grass – into a crime deserving of a kind of forced comportment through electro-shock therapy.

The extent to which his silence in later life was a product of this shock treatment is unclear. Regardless, in light of this treatment, it is perhaps not surprising that Kaufman's "unruliness" appears to have been complemented by a kind of meditative silence, especially in his later life. Kaufman's silence took its most extreme form in a decade long vow of silence that was tied to his practice of Buddhism, and which was apparently in response to the death of JFK. Beat figures tended to flirt with Buddhism and Buddhist texts: Ginsberg explicitly adopted Buddhist practice and Gary Snyder, perhaps the most conspicuously Buddhist of the Beats, used to translate the poetry of Han Shan ("Cold Mountain") to Kerouac, who adopted a Buddhist identity for a time before sloughing it off in his later life. This too seems to have been a kind of tourism for Kerouac. However, there is a tension between the self-effacing goals of the Buddhist practice and the stream of consciousness of Beat poetic practice. As we'll especially see in Chapter 4, the poetics of the white genius transcendence seem to typically involve offloading the contents of consciousness – "whole intellects disgorged in total recall" as Ginsberg puts it in "Howl" – as a movement towards something ostensibly beyond the self, but also as a crafting and expansion of a self with a rich interior full of much to disgorge. In contrast, in Buddhist practice, the stream of consciousness is the fiction we tell ourselves about being a self. For Buddhists, our inner dialogue and outer expression of it – specifically when dialogue is continuously self-absorbed or self-referencing – are ways of convincing ourselves that we are something other than "experience," to put it simply (Harding).

If, for example, I can't shut up, it's because if I do I'm afraid I might cease to exist, or other people wouldn't be able to see me performing the depth of my psychological interiority. This performance of interior depth involves talking at length or performing self-reflexivity in dialogue with others – for example, by critically engaging with something you've just said – in order to show the capaciousness of your interior, or, to put this another way, to show that it contains multitudes. This performance of interiority in the offloading of consciousness is also part of the struggle toward transcendence. It dramatizes an effort to escape this interiority: the white genius can't stand his own mind, as Ginsberg has it in "America." In contrast to the frantic flow of language in much of Ginsberg's poetry and life, and the ceaseless talk coming from Kerouac and his compatriots in his work, there is a kind of slowness and paucity in the poetry of Kaufman and, as I'll show, he set himself up as "the silent Beat" (Kohli).

We should read Kaufman's silence and ambition to be forgotten against the "white ambition" of self-aggrandizement and transcendence that Kerouac and Ginsberg find themselves simultaneously performing and struggling to escape. As I'll unpack, the self-aggrandizement and projects of self-construction attached to Beat transcendence of Kerouac and Ginsberg are in stark contrast to Kaufman's quest for anonymity and his embrace of self-fragmentation, penetrability, and self-effacement. Even though his work bears similarities in style and even content with the other Beats at times, whereas Kerouac and Ginsberg often deify themselves and their peers, Kaufman's project is one of self-annihilation. For obvious reasons, blackness isn't the outside by which Kaufman comes to understand his escape. Whereas Mailer in *The White Negro* described

Kaufman's white contemporaries as staging their revolt by strategically drawing on "the danger felt by the black man every time he walked down an American street," as a Black man, Kaufman could not dip his toe in his own experience of danger (Tytell 64).

Kaufman understands his self as operating in a precarious state of exteriority, fracture, and penetrability, but he also embraces that exteriority and penetration and constructs a kind of Black counter-interiority. In "Would You Wear My Eyes" Kaufman says "the whole of me is an unfinished room" (*Solitudes* 32), that is to say the interior that isn't wholly interior. He defines the interior of his self by the same architectural metaphor that often organizes coherent senses of self in the Western canon, yet his room is fractured and unfinished. He seems content that his

body is a torn mattress,
Disheveled throbbing place
For the comings and goings
Of loveless transients. (*Solitudes* 32)

Contrary to Raymond Foye's suggestion that Kaufman "seeks to reconstruct the battered psyche of the Black man through poetry," Kaufman's poetry and poetic practice doesn't seem particularly interested in constructing an identity or sense of self, or even in participating in efforts at the time to broadly construct a more vocal Black identity.

This is not to say that Kaufman's poetic practice was not intimately connected to his Blackness. We might briefly turn to LeRoi Jones to see how this same impulse toward an open and penetrable interior emerged simultaneously in the work of a Black Beat peer,

who nonetheless later became far more involved in that project to construct a Black identity. In “An Agony. As Now,” Jones writes

I am inside someone
who hates me. I look
out from his eyes.
[...]
This is the enclosure (flesh.
[...]
It burns the thing
Inside it. And that thing
screams.

The “thing inside” screaming, is a self that cannot feel at home “inside” itself. The parenthesis before “flesh” is never closed in the poem, to evoke a sense of not only psychological but also bodily openness. Jones refers to eyes as “slits in the metal, for sun” and refers to “cold air blown through narrow blind eyes” in order to evoke this sense of openness and penetrability. The powerful images of estrangement from self, openness to the outside, and pain, all speak to the predicament of being Black and exposed to the potential racial violence and the constant disrespect of being called “boy” as a grown man, among other indignities, in a mid-century America preoccupied with selfhood and containment. Clearly, Kaufman’s Blackness spurred a similar feeling of compromised interiority that fueled his life and poetic practice.

Instead of seeking to promote the enclosure of a Black identity, as Jones later would, Kaufman seems to be more interested in spreading his sense of self-fragmentation to others as well. In contrast to Whitman's paradoxical demand in his poetry to present his reader with a truth unmediated by his own subjectivity – "you shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me" (50) – when Kaufman asks "would you wear my eyes?" he is pleading with the multitudes to make use of his eyes, not so that he can contain these multitudes within himself, but so that he can spread his fragmented self among the multitudes. And unlike Whitman, Kaufman does not take it for granted that the reader will accept his offer. This offer embraces a kind of exteriority and penetrability that encourages the self-effacing move of refusing the self that has been refused so that the selfless might be "together in homelessness" (Harney and Moten 97). He speaks to the necessity of collective freedom and a refusal to accept cellular boundaries in "Jail Poems," where he writes "In a universe of cells – who is not in jail? Jailers" (*Solitudes* 52). His poetic practice of exteriority and penetrability involves being, as Harney and Moten put it, "at rest with the ones who consent not to be one" (96-97) in order to refuse a freedom that is not offered to all.

In moments that echo and adapt Whitman's "Scented Herbage of My Breast," in which Whitman extrudes leaves of grass from his chest, Kaufman has "Bitter raisins drip haphazardly from my nostrils/ While schools of glowing minnows swim from my mouth" (32). Yet whereas Whitman's extrusion and opening of the self always folds back into a vision of nationalist unity that he hopes to represent through his openness, Kaufman's extruding body has a face "covered with maps of dead nations" and "Long-forgotten

Indian tribes fight battles on [his] chest” in a way that foregrounds the wreckage of empire that national unity was built on. When he makes himself the map of a nation as Whitman does, it is instead a map of the “dead nations” that make up our nation. Rather than attempting to disavow the conflicts and histories of dispossession that contribute to national disunity in order to present a hopeful image of unity, as Whitman does, Kaufman foregrounds the disunity of the United States in an embrace of fragmentation that moves all the way down to the level of the self.

When Kaufman says “I can’t go out anymore” toward the end of “Would You Wear My Eyes,” it both suggests the immobility that his precarity imposes on him, and the total exteriority he has adopted: he literally means he cannot be “out” any more than he already is. As I’ve been suggesting, Kaufman’s refusal to be a coherent self is consistent with the kind of Black counter-interiority I’ve been mapping so far. In “The Black Outdoors,” Fred Moten muses that, in a sense, the less sure you are that you are a singular self, the more possible it is to be in a true community. On the other hand, the kind of spiraling reflexive interiority we see in narratives and performances of white genius tend to lead toward a kind of inward-looking orientation defined less by listening and accepting and more by talking and proposing. This orientation is in many ways harmful to community formation. The foregrounding of disunity and fragmentation we see in Kaufman, paradoxically has more potential for community building precisely because of its refusal of the singular self as the logical unit of organization.

Silence is inimical to the narrative of transcendence as self/interior-construction I’m talking about. Silence is the difference between solitudes crowded with multitudes

and solitudes crowded with loneliness, to draw on the title of Kaufman's most well-known collection. This is why Kaufman's silence is just as important as his poetry. To unpack Kaufman's relationship to silence I want to briefly turn to another Beat, William S. Burroughs, for whom the relationship with words and interiority was a fraught one, not only because of his sexuality but also because of a more general pervading concern with social control in post-war bureaucracies. For Burroughs, words were an important part of the trap of a social inside that needed to be escaped. He sought to break the spell of the control that defined this inside using his famous "cut-up" method, developed with Brion Gysin. They wrote

the word has been in for a too long time

you in the word and the word in you

we are out

you are in

we have come to let you out

here and now we will show you what you can do

with and to

the word

the words

any word

all the words

Pick a book any book cut it up (Burroughs and Gysin 23)

For Burroughs language was the node of intervention because control needs a self, and discourse involves convincing the self that there are words that belong to us and that we are coherent. He puts this quite simply when he suggests “you” are in the word because “the word” is in you. Cutting up the word became a way to break the spell of language for Burroughs.

Beyond the cut-up, however, Burroughs also found a kind of dark hope for freedom in silence. As David Ayers clarifies, Burroughs’ conclusion to the cut-up novel *The Ticket that Exploded* (Fig. 4) signifies a broader move in his writing toward a kind of deferred silence that might offer a final liberation from the control of the word (236).

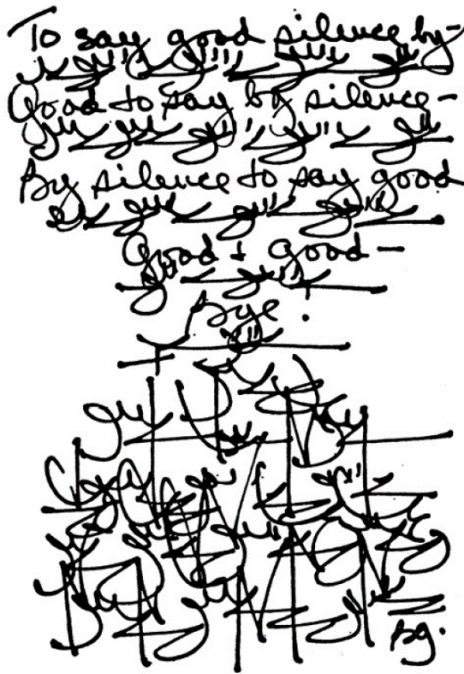


Figure 4: Closing image of “silence to say goodbye” (*Ticket*)

Here, Burroughs literally turns away from words in his novel and allows different cut up iterations of the phrase “silence to say goodbye” to turn into a series of lines that

resemble language yet exceed it as a kind of archaic semiosis. With his cut up, his archaic semiosis, and his silence, Burroughs is actually working within language – even recognizing silence as merely a deferral of the next word – to resist a society that sought to control his sexuality and poetic practice.

It seems that Kaufman not only shared Burroughs’ skepticism about the power of straightforward language to resist, he also seems to have shared a kind of hope in silence to efface the self. In what at first seems like a straightforward meditation on silence, Kaufman said

That silent beat makes the drumbeat, it makes the drum, it makes the beat. Without it there is no drum, no beat. It is not the beat played by who is beating the drum. His is a noisy loud one, the silent beat is beaten by who is not beating on the drum, his silent beat drowns out all the noise, it comes before and after every beat, you hear it in beatween [sic], its sound is

Bob Kaufman, Poet. (Kaufman qtd. in Kohli)

Here Kaufman muses on the importance of a silent beat in music, but he implicitly sets himself up as *the silent Beat*, though in characteristically understated form. It’s as though Kaufman saw his silence as a part of something beyond himself, a necessary element in the disruption of comfortable American values that the Beat movement was attempting to offer. Here his efforts at extended silence are a kind of self-effacing sacrifice that made him a constituent silence to punctuate the streams of consciousness, by which the dissatisfaction of the Beats might be better heard. He is the one who gets beaten, by those

resistant to Beat attitudes, rather than the “noisy loud one[s]” beating drums in the Beat movement. Of course, a Black man offering his silence to foreground the voices of his white peers is hardly a satisfactory explanation for Kaufman’s silence. We have to think about his silence as a part of his practice of finding freedom from a self, that was not simply a foregrounding of the message of white Beats, but also a critique of their “noisy” foregrounding of the self. After all, Kaufman’s silent sacrifice is anything but a messianic foregrounding of the self by sacrificing the self. In contrast to the claims of representation and prophetic postures of Kerouac and Ginsberg, Kaufman refused to style himself as representative or prophet.

In his poem “Ginsberg (For Allen),” Kaufman says that “I am not not an I” presumably to play with the Cartesian presumption of self, wherein a philosopher presumes a self from which to question the existence of a self. All of the seemingly self-effacing gestures in the Whitmanian tradition Ginsberg is participating in ultimately incorporate the self with every effort to efface it, by bringing the self in before it can supposedly dissolve into something else. Kaufman refuses this trend by acknowledging, with his double negative, that what starts with “I” cannot be “not an I.” Instead of posturing at total self-transcendence and self-effacement, Kaufman plays with the nuances of self-fragmentation, penetration, and annihilation.

When he claims he wants to simply be a “secret wick/ do nothing/ light myself/ burn” he is experimenting with a self-effacement through self-immolation that has obvious undertones of messianic martyrdom, though it emerges here in a Buddhist register when we remember that monks were burning themselves in protest at this

historical moment. Likewise, when he claims “when I die, I won’t stay dead” there seems to be something messianic in his poetry. However, these moments of self-sacrifice and resurrection aren’t about a transcendent messianism defined by an ultimate escape. They are about transcending death by burying yourself in hell, by embracing penetrability – literally through intravenous drug addiction – and psychological turmoil. Kaufman expounds on

The holey little holes
In my skin,
Millions of little
Secret graves,
Filled with dead
Feelings
That won't stay
Dead. (24)

The reason Kaufman won’t stay dead isn’t because of his coherent transfiguration, but instead because of his penetrability, fragmentation, and diffusion amongst the multitudes.

Not only was Kaufman not interested in being a prophetic Beat figure, his “Abomunist Manifesto” lauds a kind of anti-messianism and claims that Abomunism was started by Barabbas, the prisoner that was freed in Jesus’ place. The manifesto hilariously parodies poetic messianism by dramatizing Jesus’ last moments as simply the moments of a reluctant hipster who is bummed by the raw deal he got:

Roman turnkey was around passing out crosses. The two thieves have good connections so they got first crack at them – I got stuck with the biggest one. One of the guards doesn't dig my beard and sandals – taunted me all night. I'm going to be cool now, but tomorrow I'll tell him to go to hell, and what's so groovy is: he will. o ... somebody coming. I feel sort of abomunable. Barabas [sic] gets a suspended sentence and I make the hill.

What a drag. Well, that's poetry, and I've got to split now. (“Abomunist”)

Here, Kaufman makes the messianism of Beat practice into a joke by incongruously inserting Beat language into a narrative about the crucifixion, and ultimately by associating himself with Barrabas, the guy successfully avoiding getting hung on a cross. The only time Kaufman humors resurrection is when he invokes a “death and resurrection by A-bomb” (“Second”). The only resurrection from hell he performs is when he rises from the ashes of a literal “Dante’s Inferno,” which is to say the fire that burned down the Hotel Dante he was living in, supposedly starting in his room (*And When I Die*).

Beats like Ginsberg and Kerouac sought to disrupt the hegemony of a mass culture that had become the target of other thinkers I’ve drawn on in my critique of the interior so far – namely Walter Benjamin – and their efforts at disruption were certainly fruitful. They arguably spawned the counter-culture of the sixties and I don’t hope to take that away from them. However, their efforts depended on and in many ways reinforced a movement toward material comforts in an insulated interior at the expense of those who were cast out, in spite of the fact that this was the very movement they claimed to be

critical of. In spite of their good faith intentions to make the world a better place for the downtrodden, not unlike Whitman their claims to represent the marginalized and counter-cultural often did more for them as artists than for the people they ostensibly aimed to represent and guide. Meanwhile, their art often covered over the reality of the interior and exterior lives of the marginalized. Their reinforcement of the retreat to the interior affected women and people of color by limiting their access to the comforts of the interior, denying the richness of their subjective interiority, and ultimately limiting – or at the very least refusing to collectively work toward – their freedom to move through what Bob Kaufman called “the out place.” Bob Kaufman’s engagement with these Beat tropes offers a corrective to this troubling privileging of white men in the inside and the outside spaces of mid-20th century American life. The counter-interiority he embraces offers us an instructive reimagining of the privileges of self-hood, the mixed promise of self-effacement, and the freedom offered by mobility. Though his greatest hope was to be forgotten, there is perhaps something in his self-effacing life that we would do well to remember when we confront the impacts of interiority on collective modes of freedom.

Chapter 3

Home is Where We Hide:

Post-Suburban Punk as a Rejection of the Interior

In their 1979 single “Home is Where,” the seminal Orange County hardcore punk band The Middle Class repeatedly pose the question “Home is Where?” Their answer, “Home is where we hide!” – bellowed as an excoriating and mournful refrain throughout the song – functioned as an expression of the bewilderment and disaffection of a subset of American youth enmeshed in the post-suburban geography of Los Angeles and Orange Counties. The Middle Class’s answer was demanded by this social space itself, a space defined by the movement of urban structures – like large commercial districts and business parks – into the suburbs and a bringing to the fore the contradictions of capitalism that middle class white flight to the suburbs had originally aimed to assuage. By encouraging movement across loosely demarcated interpenetrative urban and suburban terrain – what we think of as a sprawl today – and consequently untethering collective spatial orientations, this new post-suburban formation served to amplify the contradictions wrought by efforts to maintain private wealth and well-being in proximity with public poverty and squalor. “Home is Where” speaks to an intense dissatisfaction with a social milieu in which hiding seemed to be the only solution pursued by a post-suburban middle class, despite this solution becoming increasingly untenable and depraved. The song’s recognition that the post-suburban dwellers of this period were merely “consorts to the myth they’re given,” living in an illusory space in which “defects are swept under the carpet,” expressed the newly perceived impossibility and

perniciousness of the suburban home – the ideal domestic interior – as a hermetic refuge from the contradictions and antagonisms of modern capitalism.

This sentiment became increasingly pronounced as punk spread from an already largely decentralized Los Angeles to the more acutely post-suburban sprawl of Orange County, where it found a consistent expression in the discourse and practices of hardcore punk and a broader subcultural formation I'll be calling post-suburban punk. Beyond simply offering an analysis of a post-suburban punk ideology critique of domesticity, this essay examines the early LA/OC post-suburban punk subculture's efforts to intervene on an entire mode of dwelling in the world of which the retreat to the suburban domestic interior was merely a salient manifestation. This mode of dwelling consists of a movement toward a quiescent private interiority that is both architectural and interpersonal. This mode of dwelling in many ways reflected the expansive liberal interiority we see in figures like the Beats and the transcendentalists, in that it sought to disavow the white suburbanite's debt to urban dynamism and public infrastructure, and to allow a free and safe movement beyond and back to the confines of the refuge of the private interior to strategically permit both growth and insularity. Much like the Beats and the transcendentalists, the white suburbanite sought to have their cake and eat it too.

The post-suburban punk intervention on this mode of dwelling necessarily involved disrupting hegemonic maps of meaning and affect that sought to neatly split inside and outside, private and public, wealth and poverty, stability and crisis, order and disorder, safety and risk, progress and decline, existential fulfillment and depravity, and

not coincidentally, white people and people of color.²⁵ By maps of meaning and affect I mean to evoke the collapse of discourse and practice in what Henri Lefebvre calls “spatial codes,” which involve continuing acts of incorporation and inscription in the production of both “concepts” and “experiences” of space. These codes are the connotative cultural codes that allow for the very production of space – and culture for that matter – as a thing to be experienced by a distinct body and subject. To speak about dwelling is to speak about a specific incorporation and (re)inscription of such codes.

My analysis of post-suburban punk’s rejection of this liberal interior dwelling involves an examination of punk discourse on the ideal suburban home as a failed interior – found in song lyrics, interviews, zines, and video zines – and punk practice observed in the cultivation of unconventional counter-interior spaces for “not living” and in chaotic yet communal high contact modes of dance and performance. Though it would perhaps be inappropriate to call this counter-interior a Black counter-interior, this punk counter-interior reflected an allegiance to the Black counter-interiority I’ve been unpacking thus far in that it involved predominantly white and Latinx post-suburban punks refusing the privileges of interiority that were refused to others, even when those privileges were readily offered to them. It is, of course, difficult to uniformly characterize an entire subculture, and many punks inevitably were merely performing the kind of self-aggrandizing posturing at marginality that we see with Kerouac for example. However, this doesn’t seem to have been the rule. Whereas for Kerouac leaving the interior

²⁵ Interiorization understood as a defining feature of civilizational progress tracks back to Hegel in the 19th century (Jarzombek 768).

involved retaining much of the comforts of interiority he supposedly abandoned and allowing for the possibility for easy return to quiescent domesticity, for committed punks there seems to have been a genuine desire to leave behind the privileges of bourgeois white interiority for good.²⁶ Their punk counter-interiority involved a good faith embrace of penetrability and discomfort that reflected Harney and Moten's ethos of "being together in homelessness" (96).

The fault post-suburban punks found with dwelling in the interiority of the suburban and post-suburban home is twofold: on the one hand they recognized that, though the suburban home was coded as the vessel by which a white nuclear family could weather the socioeconomic crises of the late 70s and early 80s and reorient society toward inevitable progress, it could never in reality contain the disparities of wealth (and concomitant crime), gender asymmetries, racial anxieties, and contacts with transgressive non-normative modes of living and desiring that were increasingly re-amplified by the post-suburban formation. On the other hand, punks seemed to recognize that were such a refuge possible, it would nonetheless be found lacking. Simply put, for punks living in post-suburban California, the suburban home was not an adequate hiding place and hiding was not a desirable solution. They recognized on some level what the privileged often fail to recognize today: the ever-deferred movement toward womb-like interiors insidiously dovetails with the notion that it is possible to retreat from a broken social world and that there is therefore less immediate need to fix it.

²⁶ The ubiquity of extreme forms of tattooing within the subculture, for example, seems indicative of this impulse.

“Cast into the world”: Post-Suburban Punk Space

I pull the concept of dwelling from the work of Martin Heidegger, though I do not endorse his exact use of the term, which seems to identify an inherent kernel of utopianism – a comfort in openness and oneness with the outside – in what is always happening in being. That being said, we agree on the *possibility* of one day feeling at home in the world, though this would involve no longer being “*in the world*” so to speak. For Heidegger, to dwell is to find a kind of contentedness in the world, and this movement toward contentedness is supposedly an essential feature of human existence that encompasses – and in fact produces – architectural space and personal space. To perhaps oversimplify, Heidegger believes that space must always be made as a kind of livable inside as it is lived in. He suggests that this phenomenon, rather than emerging from building, is what must already be happening for building to begin. Peter Slotterdijk makes explicit that dwelling does invoke interiority, and that the interiority of the buildings we dwell in is merely a manifestation of a broader movement toward interiority that extends to personal and interpersonal spaces of privacy and comfort not limited to architectural space. As I’ve suggested, it is this broader interiority that we invoke when we think about our “personal bubble” or “personal space,” and it is this broader interiority, for example, that the punk intervenes on when slamming through personal and bodily space in high contact slamdancing (later called moshing), regardless of the architectural space they inhabit.

I identify the mode of dwelling I am interested in here in Walter Benjamin's writing on the emergence of a middle class impulse toward isolated architectural and subjective-bodily interiors and Gaston Bachelard's writing on the home as an interior space of well-being.²⁷ In *The Poetics of Space* Bachelard aims to modify what he sees as a naïve universal vision of a being "cast into the world" naked and cold and the psychoanalytic account of a being always looking for an unattainable womb-like space in a cruel world. For Bachelard, houses – and later in life, spaces mapped after them as interior homes, whether architectural or not – mediate between the quiescence and warmth of the womb and the noise and chilliness of the world by instituting a specific kind of space of "well-being" that replicates this womblike contentedness (7). Whereas Bachelard fails to foreground the social and historical specificity of this phenomenon, Benjamin is explicitly interested in the class implications of the retreat into a comforting private interior. For Benjamin and post-suburban punks alike, the move toward a private contentedness in the midst of a public discontent is more a historical classed and raced form of hiding than it is an essential form of human dwelling in the world.

When thinking about post-suburban punk's intervention on modern spatial codes and the dwelling practices they inhere in, it's important to understand how those spatial codes and modes of dwelling arose. In his seminal history of suburbanization, *Crabgrass Frontier*, Kenneth T. Jackson explains that by the end of the 19th century the American suburban ideal had emerged specifically in relation to a distinction between

²⁷ There seems to be a sort of lineage of influence in philosophy that tracks from Heidegger to Bachelard to Slotterdijk.

Gemeinschaft, defined by the direct face-to-face interactions and values existing within a family and community, and *Gesellschaft*, defined by the indirect relations between individuals in an impersonal and presumably hostile outside society (46).²⁸ It was at this point that the family and the suburban home came to be understood as “a personal bastion against society, a place of refuge free from outside control” (47). However, the structure of the suburb and the suburban home began to reorient the relations between people even at the level of community: individual rooms, front yards, and closed in porches, all worked to increase isolation within the community itself.

“The new ideal,” Jackson contends, was eventually defined by the desire “no longer to be a part of a close community, but to have a self-contained unit, a private wonderland walled off from the rest of the world” and to “separate the family by real estate from intruders into the private space” (58-59). This insulation from contact with the outside operated according to connotative codes by which comfort, safety, stability, and reproduction within the strategically closed system of the home and Oedipal family depended on a hermetic interiority and isolation from a chaotic, ruined, and ruining outside space. As Jackson notes, this desire to escape into a suburban interiority was largely conditioned by a cultural narrative that associated the city center with crime, sexual deviance, and racial minorities (275), and what was felt to be a crisis of post-suburbia was in part precipitated by an opening up of the urban periphery – the gateway to the suburb, if you will – and the suburb itself to the minorities, lower classes, homosexuals, and otherwise abject figures that wealthy whites had sought to escape in

²⁸ Jackson is referencing Ferdinand Tönnies’ seminal work.

their flight to suburbia. Such figures were seen as chaotic threats to the stability of a transgenerational social reproduction achieved within the refuge of the nuclear family and the domestic interior (Butz 45). However, in its expansion of private interiority, suburban dwelling overshot its efforts to develop *Gemeinschaft* and, to borrow an aphorism from Adorno, “privacy [gave] way entirely to the privation it always secretly was” (34).

This retreat from the city was fueled not only by a general narrative perception of the exterior world as hostile, but also by a relationship between bodies, habituated by what we might think of as maps of affect in which proximity and contact with others was understood and felt as intrinsically undesirable.²⁹ To be clear, this is to suggest that the physical discomfort people often feel in cramped quarters with others is always also ideological. This is an embodied sentiment we can see diagnosed in Walter Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” and “Experience and Poverty.” Benjamin’s writing hints that an impulse toward suburban geographic and architectural isolation had origins in a desire to achieve a kind of bodily and subjective interiority insulated from the more physical shocks of urban life, which included the experience of moving through crowded city streets on foot. Though he suggested that the character of the city – with its crowded streets and flashing lights – shocked city dwellers in general and caused them to either reel away or become desensitized and habituated, Benjamin saw that this sensory battle

²⁹ Affect here is not intended to suggest a “preconscious” bodily or extra-discursive character for meanings produced between bodies in contact, because these meanings are always also operative in a discursive register. This use of affect is simply meant to avoid making the mind an interior for containing and retransmitting ideology and discourse.

was classed, and often involved efforts to avoid face-to-face encounters with the public poverty wrought by private wealth via a retreat into subjective and bodily interiors as well as architectural ones. Like narratives about the general hostility of the city and the broader global exterior, these maps of affect were always overdetermined by socioeconomic and racial anxieties.

At the end of the Second World War, as Black soldiers returned home and began to agitate for rights and attain mild upward mobility, and the Cold War bred paranoia about nuclear war and the end of private property, the suburb and the suburban home functioned even more explicitly as an escape into an imagined hermetic and quiescent interior protected from the tensions of a changing and supposedly hostile exterior world (May 10). It is important to note that during the post-war rise in suburban domesticity Black families were kept out of the suburbs by explicit and implicit segregation and federal housing loan subsidies and were thereby denied the same opportunity to accumulate wealth and equity that their white counterparts had. However, between 1950 and 1980 the structure of suburban living changed as a result of the rise of the automobile, the proliferation of new information technologies, and the growth of the youth consumer class, all of which resulted in the movement of commercial districts into the urban periphery and the concomitant emergence of a decentralized sprawl where there had once been a more or less clear demarcation between an urban center and its suburban outskirts.

Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster refer to this new formation as “post-suburban,” drawing on Robert Fishman’s description of a “breakaway of the urban

periphery from the city it no longer needs; and the creation of a decentralized environment that nevertheless possesses all the economic and technological dynamism of the city” (qtd. in Kling et al. 6). Post-suburban regions like Orange County, they explain, are characterized by a “multinucleated” sprawl in which “people are likely to travel by automobile *across* city boundaries for work, socializing, and shopping as much as *within* them” (Kling et al. ix). That the early punk band Flipper’s single “Ha Ha Ha” (1981) refers to those who “work in suburbia” rather than those who “live in suburbia” reflects this change in the organization of urban and suburban life in the San Francisco bay area, which Poster et al also discuss as an early post-suburban formation.

Building on the insights of Robert Fishman, I would suggest that the decentralized post-suburban formation further served to isolate individuals, untethering them from a collective cognitive mapping of space oriented around a common center. As Fishman notes, in these post-suburban formations “the true center [. . .] is not some downtown business district but in each residential unit. From that central starting point, the members of the household create their own city from the multitude of destinations that are within suitable driving distance” (qtd. in MacLeod 101). However, in this sense post-suburbia both provided the conditions of possibility for a new imagination of fraught interiority and privacy – in which each member of the post-suburban middle class imagines they have their own city while nonetheless feeling embattled by all the strangers that seem to have taken up residence within it – while simultaneously demanding this new fantastical retreat by bringing *Gesellschaft* back into the suburb with a vengeance.

To understand post-suburban punk's reaction to the post-suburb we should understand its not quite equal and opposite counterpart. As I've been suggesting, the rise of post-suburbia in Orange County and elsewhere coincided with increasing doubt about the continuing effectiveness of suburban dwelling in containing social antagonisms. Simply put, for a white middle class attempting to flee the problems associated with the city center, the retreat to what was once a more insulated suburban interior no longer did the job. Whereas the suburb was defined by explicit and implicit barriers to entry for poor people and people of color, the post-suburb was open to the intrusion of undesirables, which threatened the consolidation of private property by placing it into closer proximity with public poverty. In response to this crisis of containment, post-suburban punk aimed for an abandonment of what much of the white middle class sought to double down on: interiority. Post-suburban punks frequently bemoaned the ascendancy of Regan and the reactionary "moral majority" that sought to rectify the suburb's failure by, among other things, carrying out the California Taxpayers Revolt of 1978.

The California Taxpayers Revolt, which in simple terms limited the amount of property tax that could be collected from homeowners, was merely one iteration of many in a long tradition of economic gerrymandering in which real estate owners consolidated their power and wealth at the expense of broader social concerns (Butz 47). Such tax revolts and the formation of breakaway municipalities were often thinly veiled efforts to deny poor people and people of color in city centers their share of a wealth that was always nonetheless produced through shared enterprise and dependent on the existence of urban infrastructures and publics that extended beyond the municipalities and property

owners in question. This phenomenon is simply another manifestation of the suburban impulse to consolidate wealth by retreating into safe and private demarcated interiors at the expense of a rejected yet nonetheless necessary exterior. It is in this context that punks saw their elders as pitiful and even villainous figures attempting to hide inside suburban and post-suburban dwellings from a presumably dangerous outside society that they were in fact responsible for. For The Middle Class, to buy into this “cultural conceit” – the imagined possibility of achieving pure interiority – was to “live the way nostalgia lives” and “die the way your elders die,” selfish and afraid.

The subgenre of punk most shaped by the post-suburb is hardcore, though what I’m calling post-suburban punk refers to something broader than hardcore. Emerging in Orange County at the end of the 70s, hardcore was a faster, more minimalist, more underground, and less artistically ambitious version of punk played by bands formed by young predominantly white middle-class males. However, this story of a hardcore subculture led by young white middles class men functioning as the seat of the post-suburban complaint is only part of the picture. Borrowing from the insights of Paul Gilroy, we might say that punk, like any cultural or subcultural formation, is actually a “complex interpenetration” of permeable transcultural multiplicities (48). What this means is that the back and forth between the hardcore punk of Orange County and the broader punk scene of Los Angeles County and even the San Francisco Bay area was not unidirectional and ultimately fostered a wider punk community that shared counter-interior sentiments that were amplified by a subcultural dialogue with no clear-cut origin.

With this in mind, it makes sense that with the emergence of hardcore, the entire landscape of punk changed, and bands not necessarily based in a post-suburban milieu began to perform in that milieu and enter into a collective performative and discursive community with the highly influential bands that were based there. Simply put, the shift from “city” punk to “post-suburban” punk was not an artistic or a spatially demarcated one as much as it was a historically defined one. To complicate matters, however, the counter-interior impulse in post-suburban punk predates hardcore, which we might instead think of as its apotheosis. The designation “post-suburban punk” for me highlights an urban geographical distinction, though the agitated condition of post-suburban space and the attendant recognition of white interiority’s contradictions, which defined hardcore punk, refused to confine itself to the post-suburb.

Instead not only did this agitated post-suburban condition bleed out into surrounding spaces but it also connected up rhizomatically with other scenes in other locations that, for one reason or another, felt an affinity with the sentiments being expressed in hardcore and that perhaps spoke to some aspects of their own less post-suburban sociospatial moorings. For these reasons, when discussing post-suburban punk I have not included or excluded bands based on some imagined autochthony and immobility within the periphery or the core of the Los Angeles area.³⁰ Nor have I shied away from the LA punk that preceded hardcore. Instead, I’ve strictly paid attention to

³⁰ Music scenes seldom function in such a spatially demarcated fashion: bands and audiences in California during this period were highly mobile, with LA and OC punks making trips in packed vans and/or buses as far as San Francisco – and vice versa – with some regularity.

bands that clearly held an important place in a punk landscape informed by this post-suburban sentiment that home is increasingly, and to our detriment, where we try and fail to hide.

In my analysis of post-suburban punk, I've chosen a handful of songs and bands that are largely representative of the subculture at the time. I chose issues of *Flipside*, a seminal and central hardcore punk fanzine based in Whittier, from 1982. By 1982 "punk" proper in Los Angeles and Orange County had undeniably evolved into a new subcultural formation melding hardcore, horror punk, and the vestiges of earlier punk. I've particularly focused on songs, bands, and albums mentioned in each issue's iteration of "Rodney's Chart" which listed the top 20 requests on Rodney Bingenheimer's weekly radio show. Dewar Macleod in *Kids of the Black Hole* and Alice Bag in *Violence Girl* – among numerous others – identify Rodney Bingenheimer as a stalwart of the scene. His show was organized such that pretty much any band with a recording could get it played (17-21).

To provide an example of this methodology in action, Black Flag's "TV Party," which I've chosen for analysis, is mentioned in almost every "Rodney's Chart" in the issues I sampled. Likewise, 45 Grave, a horror punk band I'll be discussing, appears on Rodney's Chart – in fact they are mentioned throughout the zine more frequently than almost any other band – as does Flipper, a San Francisco based band that was enmeshed with the Los Angeles and Orange County punk scene. The Orange County hardcore bands Social Distortion and The Adolescents, whom I'll discuss later in this essay, are also featured prominently in the zine.

“Sleep in Safety”: Post-Suburban Punk Discourse

Any discourse analysis aiming to understand punk’s critique of the interior must confront punk discourse’s hesitance to embrace the comfort of literal meaning. Flipper’s sardonic attack on post-suburban living in the bay area and the hopeless nostalgia for an idyllic suburban retreat in “Ha Ha Ha” – “Isn’t life a blast, it’s just like living in the past” – for example, obviously can’t be read literally. Drawing on Henry Louis Gates’ work on signifying practices in Black cultural production, we might say that punk discourse very often “tropes-a-dope” (Kimberly W. Benston qtd. in Gates 988), which is to say that it adopts a tactic of saying one thing but meaning another in an effort to confuse power. This tactic functions as a kind of indirect attack aimed at the dominant connotative codes and narratives through which power is organized. In the case of our study, these are the discursive and embodied narratives about interiority that reinforce the power of the white middle class. One of the most salient features of punk discourse is its almost inescapable facetiousness. Nearly every other voice in punk was a disingenuous and acerbic one and it is often a terrible error to take a punk utterance purely at face value.³¹ Instead we must frequently assume there are at least two voices speaking within every punk utterance.

As post-suburban hardcore punk took on a more serious tenor, the nihilistic pure transgression of punk sarcasm slowly shifted toward a more politically oriented troping.

³¹ We might, for example, look at Konstantin Butz’s analysis of The Descendants “Suburban Home,” which embarrassingly takes the band at their word when they claim in the lyrics to “want a suburban home.”

As a result, we should attend to the ways in which post-suburban punk is both incredibly serious and incredibly flippant, often simultaneously. This makes analyzing punk discourse as a scholar frustrating at times, but that is somewhat the point. A particularly salient example can be found in a *Flipside* interview with Los Angeles punk band Castration Squad.³² When asked for their “thoughts on society,” members of the young all female group responded in unison with “the world needs to be more socialistic, [but] not communist” and “everybody needs to play Ms. Pacman,” “yes Ms. Pacman will rule the world.” Here they both seriously speak to a need for social equity and sarcastically critique the empty tokenism of an affectively and politically effete culture industry. It’s doubtful we should take their name entirely at face value either. Despite its frustrating indirectness and at times seemingly irredeemably offensive content,³³ this kind of symbolic subversion was useful as one of the primary practices punks utilized to disrupt hegemonic narratives and connotative codes along with their ideological potency. When we look closely at the lyrical content of post-suburban punk we can see that its sarcasm sought to subvert the role of the interior within hegemonic connotative codes and narratives by 1) ironically inverting connotative assumptions, 2) amplifying connotations beyond what even the narratives themselves suggest and/or following these connotations

³² Initially with Dinah Cancer, later of 45 Grave. Names like Dinah Cancer – think “dyin of cancer” – though seemingly purely transgressive for transgression’s sake, tend to carry a critique of some aspect of straight middle class suburban values, in this case a suburban impulse to preserve white life as a quantity, regardless of its quality.

³³ See for example the Sex Pistols’ “Belsen was a Gas” and other references to Nazi propaganda, which in fact were often efforts to show the hypocrisy of Western liberal democracy in its failure to triumph over the values of fascism despite paying lip service to anti-fascism.

to absurd conclusions, 3) associating these narratives with those abject figures they aim to exclude, and 4) inserting uncertainty into any instance of the narrative by proliferating insincere iterations of it.

We can identify nearly all of these tropological tactics in the lyrical style of Black Flag, a highly influential early hardcore band from Hermosa Beach. “T.V. Party,” a track from their first full length album *Damaged* (1981), begins in a seemingly enthusiastic and sincere tone, with the members all excitedly chanting “T.V. party tonight!” before vocalist Henry Rollins catapults into a boyish “We’re gonna have a T.V. party tonight!”³⁴ However, as the song unfolds the band begins to inject increasingly incongruous lyrics like “We’ve got nothing better to do” alongside more neutral content about “watch[ing] TV and hav[ing] a couple of brews.” A recognition of “dedicat[ion] to [their] favorite shows” – listing off some of the most popular from the period, including the soap opera *Dallas* and the police drama *Hillstreet Blues* – is preceded by the request: “don’t talk about anything else – we don’t wanna know!” The lyrics narrate that the band “sit glued to the T.V. set all night, and every night!” They finally make explicit their amplification to absurdity of the narrative of suburban refuge, asking “Why go into the outside world at all? It’s such a fright!” By this point it becomes apparent that the song is performing a “fairly exact repetition of a given narrative” in this case about the joys of gathering in the house around the television as a family and about the dangers of crime outside the interior, “filled incongruously with a ludicrous or incongruent content” (Gates 992), in an

³⁴ The album’s title – *Damaged* – is a statement of the “damaged life” that Black Flag sought to affectively reconcile themselves with via dwelling in the Church, as I will elaborate in the following section.

effort to disrupt the hegemonic connotative codes of the period. The mainstream square that has taken their enthusiasm literally is made into a fool by the song's end.

The idea that TV news shows “what it's really like out there – it's a scare!” and the fearful suggestion that “you can go out if you want, we wouldn't dare!” is lampooned in an ironic extension of the logic of suburban refuge; the obvious implication is that the news isn't in fact providing an honest representation of “what it's really like out there.” While the proliferation of images of urban violence and crime in the news has its own logic – “if it bleeds it leads” – this proliferation feeds into a myth of suburban escape which has equally cynical and self-interested origins. As Jackson points out, the shifting identification of cities with “fear and danger rather than with glamour and pleasure” that occurred in the mid-20th century does not necessarily correlate with a real change in crime rate per capita as much as it correlates with an effort to consolidate capital. Crowded and vibrant cities can actually be relatively safe spaces when compared to less densely populated post-suburban regions, yet the shifting narrative about cities created a feedback loop in which crime and poverty in the city was potentially the effect before it was the cause of white flight (275-76). Here Black Flag's lyrics call attention to this narrativization of the dangerous city and the safe suburb and question whether or not retreating into domestic interiors is a productive or necessary tactic.

We can turn again to Walter Benjamin's discussion of the emergence of the domestic bourgeois interior in the 19th century to get a clearer handle on the historical implications of modern interior dwelling. In his analysis of the bourgeois interior, Benjamin suggests that the interior functioned as an ideological salve for the

contradictions inherent in the bourgeois effort to consolidate private property and security at the cost of social well-being and security. The vision of the interior is the vision of man as an island – contra John Donne – that modernity has obsessively constructed and reconstructed. It is a vision in which well-being begins and ends within clearly demarcated boundaries, and in which wealth, safety, and life can be appreciated in close proximity to poverty, crime, and death. In his analysis of the interior as a stable, ordered, safe, private space of one's own isolated from the disorder, danger, and dispossession of the social world it existed in, Benjamin notes that such a hermetic interiority was always an illusion, though it nonetheless had power effects that helped the bourgeois at the expense of the working class ("The Interior" 214). Though Benjamin is writing specifically about 19th century Paris, and though he suggests that the interior died with the emergence of a new "glass culture" in the early 20th century, I would argue that the bourgeois domestic interior did significant work beyond this context as a space in which to stitch together an inevitably ruptured domesticity and tranquility in the suburbs of the 20th century, and only began to wane somewhat in its ideological potency after the rise of the post-suburb.

The horror punk band 45 Grave's 1983 album *Sleep in Safety* even more effectively short-circuits the spatial codes that suggest the suburban home could provide a hermetic interior haven from a dangerous exterior. The album's cover art (Fig. 5) moves the suburban bedroom into the city, puts the domestic bed into squalid city streets, and places in that bed a figure that is either a placidly sleeping blonde or a casualty of some unknown gruesome crime. A shadowy figure with demonic red eyes looms ominously

behind the bed. Here we see the ornateness and purity of white suburban isolation dropped into the ruined urban environment it both neglects and depends on. This incongruous semiotic juxtaposition produces an uncanny affect that shocks the post-suburban dweller into a recognition. The recognition this juxtaposition precipitates is that the interior space the middle class cultivates as an exclusive private refuge can never isolate itself from the antagonisms of the social world the dweller imagines to be exterior. Here, the exhortation to “sleep in safety” is a wildly ironic signifying practice, saying one thing while displaying its impossibility.



Figure 5: The suburban bedroom moved outside (*Sleep in Safety*)

One of the album’s more nuanced and profound tracks – “Slice O’ Life” – supplements the subversion performed by this cover image by injecting further ironic

juxtaposition and dripping sarcasm into the narrative of the interior as refuge. While the song opens with Rob Graves singing about “Living in a nightmare,” by the chorus the song has shifted in tone as Don Bolles³⁵ begins to sing a saccharin yet subtly haunting and nostalgic melody: “You’ll be home now, where everything’s just the way you like. You’ll be home now, everything’s just mighty nice. You’ll be home now, with ice cream and candy and good things to eat. You’ll be home now, you’re so nice, you’re very sweet,” in later repetitions adding “You’ll be home now, where everything’s gonna be alright,” and “You’ll be home now, so sit down, relax, and just watch TV.”

In the context of the “nightmare” being explored in the rest of the song, in which the addressee has “developed a taste for the flesh of [their] own race” – an expression of the organization of an exterior life by a Hobbesian logic that can only be escaped in an ethereal dreamlike interior – the nostalgic and haunting tone in which the longing for an ideal refuge is expressed uncannily suggests that such a refuge is a spectral apparition that remains forever out of reach as long as its exterior is a nightmare. The hyperbolic construction of the home as a space with “ice cream and candy and good things to eat” in “Slice O’ Life” contains a nauseating excess of suburban comforts and delights that refigures this edenic space as a grotesque mirage. Despite its repeated comforting suggestion that once at home “everything is gonna be alright,” the import of the song’s symbolic and affective subversion is that any nightmare we abide outside the home will inevitably make its way inside. Here 45 Grave embodies Adorno’s aphorism that “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly” (39).

³⁵ Formerly of The Germs.

“To Escape Hell, You Must First Bury Yourself in It”: Post-Suburban Punk Dwelling

When he writes that “new social relationships call for a new space,” (59) Henri Lefebvre states a basic thesis that he shares with post-suburban punk. This new space that the punk calls for is not only a new built space, but a new dwelling space that would involve not only new architectures and city planning but also new understandings and embodied feelings about occupying and being occupied by space. However, the latter can have everything to do with the former, and the built spaces of punk are as important to its subversion of dominant spatial codes as is its explicit reconceptualization of space in discourse. If, as Bachelard suggests, “the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his [sic] shelter” (Bachelard 5), then the spaces of well-being we produce and which produce us have indeterminate limits. However, because nuclear “families breed inside four walls, like they’re expected to do,” as the band The Middle Class bemoans, individuals are bred into a particular sociospatial configuration with potentially damning limits. What is at the heart of the post-suburban punk critique is a rejection of the limits of a particular built interior that aims to be an insular and exclusive space of well-being.

To move into a discussion of the architectural spaces of post-suburban punk, I’d like to suggest that the cover image of *Sleep in Safety* functions as a sort of photo-negative of the architectural dwelling practices of post-suburban punks. For Benjamin and post-suburban punks alike, “To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence” (“Surrealism” 209). Rather than moving dwelling into the outside, post-

suburban punks instead often chose to dwell in architectural counter-interiors. The subversion of spatial codes performed in these counter-interiors involved a movement of the outside inside. These architectural counter-interiors were defined by a seemingly interior space that openly allowed and even amplified disorder, risk, depravity, and intrusion. It was an interior that denied the interior its interiority, and that performed the impossibility of the space called upon to negotiate and resolve the tensions of advanced capitalism in a post-suburban geography.

It is helpful to open this discussion of counter-interiority in dwelling practices with brief reference to Gordon Matta-Clark, an artist who prefigured punk sentiment and style in a number of respects. In his contextualization of Matta-Clark's work, Matt Waggoner argues that the work of Gordon Matta-Clark in the 70s aimed to outline the contradictions masked by the suburban domestic interior through a new form of art called "anarchitecture," in which Matta-Clark literally split entire homes with heavy machinery and photographed them (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). In the context of an advanced capitalism in which "life does not live" (Ferdinand Kürnberger qtd. in Adorno 19), Matta-Clark sought to answer Le Corbusier's "machines for living" with what he called "machines for not living" (Waggoner 163). It is in this same spirit and toward an even greater effect that the counter-interior emerged in punk practice during this time as a space for not living and a particularly salient unmasking of the contradictions at the heart of the suburban domestic interior as refuge.



Figure 6: A penetrated dwelling (*Splitting*)



Figure 7: A split dwelling (*Splitting*)

Any glance at the punk culture of this period reveals a pronounced disregard for privacy, personal boundaries, order, and safety. Counter-interior architectural living spaces – or perhaps, to follow Adorno and Matta-Clark, not-living spaces – are only one

manifestation of this disregard, but they are one of its most salient. Sitting in a squalid rehearsal space – random graffiti covering the walls and a noose hanging from the ceiling – in a run-down abandoned church in Orange County California circa 1980, Penelope Spheeris asks Ron Reyes of Black Flag “Where do you live?” He responds “You mean like specifically where I sleep? This room [the common space] is where I live” before showing her to a closet with what appears to be a bed. He explains that he rents it for \$16 a month. It is made clear that at least one other band member lives in the same closet as well (*Decline*). It is significant that where he “lives” is not where he sleeps. He, like many punks of the time, very nearly lives in public; the condition of precarious dwelling, in situations of scarcity, discomfort, danger, intrusion, and even complete homelessness at times, was one adopted often intentionally – though sometimes by necessity – by young punks often born into middle class privilege.

The question that has yet to be adequately answered is why anyone would live this way by choice. The claim that this group of young people were simply looking for an oppositional identity in order to set themselves apart in the context of declining white middle class agency and therefore chose to appropriate the “otherness” of the margins – as suggested by Daniel Traber – is insufficient. It is an easy academic answer to a complicated question, and one that obscures the role punk played in the counterhegemony of its time. After all, the suburbanite figures most concerned about their declining white middle class agency were explicit enemies for these punks, and the white middle class impulse toward consolidating agency in the face of the growing influence and presence of people of color was an explicit target of punk rage and critique.

Post-suburban punk dwelling practices were less a marshalling of subcultural capital aiming to reassert white middle class agency than they were a confrontation with and subversion of the dominant spatial codes that offered the suburban domestic interior as a bastion of white agency at the expense of an abject exterior.

“The plunger pit” – a well-known LA punk dwelling in which four punks shared a bed – is remembered by residents as a counter-interior in which “there was a constant stream of people and hardly anyone was ever turned away . . . you never had many moments to yourself . . . [because] there was constantly people there, sleeping everywhere” (*Neutron Bomb* 129). The post-suburban OC punk dwelling, “the black hole” – the apartment home of Social Distortion’s Mike Ness, which was immortalized by The Adolescents’ “Kids of the Black Hole” – was a “crash pad” with spray-painted walls and “fungus growing on the windows and shit” that operated by a similar ethos (258-59). One stated goal of the black hole was to create a space of home that “belonged to all the homeless kids,” to borrow a lyric from “Kids of the Black Hole.” Though accounts of punk precarity are often overstated, and though there were obviously punks who merely postured at the refusal of suburban comforts, many young punks burned the ships they came in on, so to speak, and their desire to “feel at home with the homeless” (97) – to borrow the formulation from Stephano Harney and Fred Moten – evinces a genuine refusal of a private comfort in the face of public cost.

Accounts of counter-interior living spaces are echoed throughout the documentation and oral histories of the punk scene in this period. In fact, many punk dwellings that weren’t self-consciously crash pads, nonetheless took on this character.

Exene Cervenka from X recalls that the first place she lived in Santa Monica was a one-bedroom apartment with five people living in it; she slept in the kitchen (*Neutron Bomb* 94). The knock on the door, the ringing of the bell or telephone that represented such a violent intrusion into the bourgeois interior of Benjamin's analysis does not phase the punk, who needs no apotropaic "threshold magic" ("Interior" 214) because she is in a sense always already dwelling outside, even when inside. The ethereal comforts, security and privacy of the interior have been abandoned by her, replaced by a raw absorption of the shocks of a damaged exterior life. This resembles both a subversion of dominant spatial codes and, as I will discuss below, a means of bearing nearer witness to the public conditions of life in capitalism.

Traber and others are quick to dismiss the punk search for "authenticity" in the "real" and "tough" element of life in the streets (Traber 31) as a fallacy that was merely an offensive form of posing as poor (33-34). However, I largely identify this drive toward authenticity as a drive toward a mode of dwelling that bears an honest embodied witness to the contradictions and the shocks of capitalism that the domestic interior aimed to disavow and insulate itself from. Traber reacts particularly harshly to the punks living in the Canterbury Arms apartments. It is true that punks reveled in the fact that they were living in a precarious space with the abject and marginal elements of urban and post-suburban capitalism, including people in positions of greater precarity than themselves. Margot Oleverra remembered the Canterbury as "a haven for underclass marginals, especially punk rockers like myself with no regular income. It had [. . .] these rickety elevators that smelled of mildew and petrified soggy mattresses" (*Neutron Bomb* 167).

Another punk remembers that “the week before we were to move [into Canterbury], the landlord shot somebody in the lobby and killed him, but we still moved into this place anyway” (167). Still others remember neighbors threatening them with guns (168) and Kim Fowley sums up the scene at Canterbury as “excremental existential sexual shit at death’s door” (171). Traber reads this as an appropriation of otherness, but what it more likely represents is an effort to live amongst the realities of the social world that the suburban domestic interior attempted and failed to isolate punks from.

That punks reveled in often chosen precarity is not to suggest that they did not suffer and complain, but merely that they suffered well knowing that they were refusing to attempt to isolate themselves in insulated interiors at the expense of an abject exterior. Of the post-suburban punk scene out of which hardcore and pop punk emerged, Tony Cadena from The Adolescents admits that “some of us came from very stable families,” but adds that “there was also a lot of turmoil, a lot of divorce, a lot of kids literally running their households” (*Neutron Bomb* 258). Regarding the disparagement of post-suburban punks and suburban privilege, Mike Ness of Social Distortion responded “There was this misconception that it was plush . . . Just because we live in a suburban setting, what? There isn’t alcoholism in the home? There isn’t child abuse? There isn’t fucking abandonment? There isn’t fucking addiction?” (258). While their suburban privilege was undoubtedly real, their choice to reject it – because of the cracks in the façade – is what is most relevant here. And while they differ, for instance, from figures like Kaufman, Douglass, and Jacobs in that they are offered a choice to refuse the

privileges that are refused to others, they differ just as much from the poets like Thoreau and Whitman, and Beats like Kerouac in that they make the right choice.

As Hortense Spillers notes, studies of dysfunction in the Black family tended to focus exclusively on the bounded family itself, to the exclusion of the social forces that shape the family, as in accounts of missing Black fathers. In her work on mass incarceration, Michelle Alexander appropriately points out the convenience of blaming missing Black fathers for crime in Black communities as an apology for aggressive policing tactics and mass incarceration, when it is these aggressive policing tactics and incarceration that produce the missing Black fathers. Though this tendency is applied differentially across lines of race and class – e.g. we are more willing to have sympathy for the ways that peer influence or a job loss affect life outcomes in white upper class families – it is nonetheless a part of a broader liberal tendency to demarcate the family as an interior isolated from the social exterior, and to understand the family as a bastion against social problems rather than as an inevitable product of the social. What can be drawn from these examples of the punk’s rejection of the interior is the following: When facets of “damaged life” inevitably intruded into their homes, revealing the private interior space for the privation it always secretly was, punks chose to dwell in a reconfigured counter-interior; this is what authenticity meant for punks, and it was an authenticity with what Waggoner identifies as “negative utopianism” at its heart.

Waggoner identifies negative utopianism in the work of Adorno, for whom “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (Adorno 18). Waggoner sums up that negative utopianism requires “keeping a record of the wrongness of *what is* and the

rightness of an unforeseeable *ideal*” (Waggoner 157). It is for Waggoner a kind of “set[ting] up camp in hell” (157).³⁶ Waggoner explains that “it is an approach that requires one to ‘dwell’ in the bad, keeping track, however, of the distance between the way things are and how they might otherwise be, between one’s inhabitancy of hell and the fact that one does not really belong there” (157). By embracing the precarious mode of dwelling experienced by the poor and many people of color – “a hostile dwelling . . . [which] can never feel like home” (Marx qtd. in Benjamin “Interior” 223) – the punk is able to marshal this homesickness in the home as a “profane illumination” and amplification of the contradictions inhering in the suburban domestic interior. When we read that among the palimpsest of graffiti wallpapering the Masque – the illegal punk rehearsal space/dwelling/venue that the early LA punk scene crystallized around – was the scrawled sentence “To escape hell you must first bury yourself in it” (*Neutron Bomb* 130), we begin to see just how clearly the notion of dwelling in hell articulates the subversions of the punk counter-interior.

Post-suburban punk’s negative utopian “dwelling in hell” functioned as part of a broader impulse in punk practice, aimed at overcoming what Benjamin calls “the poverty of experience,” a phrase meant to evoke the ways in which our impoverished experience is linked to the more general and shocking poverties we seek not to allow into our experience (“Experience” 732). As I’ve hinted, coping with shock is the crux of the oppressive division between public and private for Benjamin, and it involves repressing

³⁶ Waggoner attaches significance to the concept of “Camp” that is not particularly relevant for this study.

not just the urban social world but those things most abject within it: the beggar, the homeless person, the immigrant struggling to survive, the addict, and the violent criminal; these are the shocks that the post-suburban punk aimed to absorb rather than dodge. This kind of negative utopian illumination achieved through the shock of an urban exterior is celebrated in FEAR's "I Love Living in the City." The song announces a morbid pride in living amongst the "People dying in the street." Far from celebrating poverty itself, however, the song celebrates the social reality the city bears forth and juxtaposes this mode of city living with a harshly critical vantage on the retreat into the suburban domestic interior, complaining that "the suburban scumbags they don't care, they just get fat and dye their hair."

This affective dimension of punk practice is crucial, because it is through this salvaging of experience via shock that punks sought to produce enduring counterhegemonic spatial codes. People "long to free themselves from experience" ("Experience" 734), Benjamin suggests, because of what experience reveals to them: no-man's lands littered with the casualties of capitalism (732). In a sense it seems that if people embrace the poverty of experience, it is often because they cannot embrace the experience of poverty. One such escape from shock and experience then is the interior, and in their rejection of the interior punks appropriately embraced that experience which the interior recoiled from. For the post-suburban punk, home is where we hide, while squalor and poverty is unfortunately where we salvage experience and bear closer witness to our real conditions of social existence.

The Punk Does Not Bow to Jostlers: Post-Suburban Punk Dance

As I've suggested, the practice of post-suburban punk bands like Black Flag takes aim not just at domestic interiority, but an interiority that attaches itself to public life. The node at which this latter interiority was confronted by post-suburban punk was punk performance and dance. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" Benjamin compares Baudelaire's posture toward the masses of the city to that of the pedestrian. Benjamin draws on Freud's discussion of shock to understand the pedestrian as a figure who automatically filters out shock without any ability to reintegrate shock as "lived experience." He goes on to note that for Marcel Proust, the most powerful memories and experiences always come in below the level of consciousness, which he links to a battle with shock: "That the shock is thus cushioned and parried by consciousness, would lend the incident that occasions it the character of having been lived in the strict sense. If it were incorporated directly in the registry of conscious memory, it would sterilize this incident . . ." ("Some Motifs" 162). Importantly, while for Proust the ability to receive and integrate such a shock experience is entirely dependent on chance (158), Benjamin locates in Baudelaire a valuable capacity to receive and integrate shocks into lived experience through a particular kind of posture toward the masses of the city.

Benjamin identifies in Baudelaire's practice a kind of "combative" posture, that of a "fencer" who fears losing the image of his experience ("Some Motifs" 163-65). Rather than simply setting himself off from the crowd – surrounded but isolated – and bowing to the jostles of the crowd automatically, Baudelaire is able to turn consciousness' battle

with shock into a genuinely lived experience and illumination of the chaotic and bustling city. Benjamin explains that “the mass was the agitated veil; through it Baudelaire saw Paris” (168). It is in this respect that Benjamin contrasts Baudelaire to Edgar Allan Poe’s pedestrian, whose experience is a reaction to shock that converts it into a disciplinary function rather than an opportunity for innervation. For Benjamin, “The shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker “experiences” at his machine” (176). The pedestrian is jostled, but automatically “bow[s] profusely to the jostlers” (171), and is unable to integrate these shocks into any sort of lived experience. Benjamin suggests, however, that “Of all the experiences which made his life what it was, Baudelaire singled out his having been jostled by the crowd as the decisive, unique experience” (193). Baudelaire is able to convert the “sensory alienation” (Hansen 38) of the shock experience into a profound de-alienation: a genuine apprehension of the city and those living within it.

While it is perhaps unlikely that Baudelaire would have felt at home in a slam pit with Los Angeles and Orange County punks, they have an element of practice in common: the punk does not bow to jostlers. In fact, jostling and being jostled is the crux of the punk’s practice. If the domestic interior is the architectural space in which one avoids the battle with shock, the posture of the pedestrian achieves this effect in public. Just as the abandonment of the suburban domestic interior is a crucial aspect of the punk’s dwelling practice, once outside this safe space the punk’s posture takes on this other form of revolt. By refusing to retreat into bodily and subjective interiors in the face of shock, post-suburban punks were able to rework the spatial codes that demanded

discomfort in the proximity of others, and which held that bodies must occupy their own strictly demarcated and defended space. By doing so they were able to reimagine what it means to dwell together.

In this way they very much operate within the vein of Harney and Moten's "hapticality." For Harney and Moten, one of the potentially subversive elements of the slave hold is the necessity of physical proximity and touch. The forced haptics of touch for those treated like objects in oppressive environments like the hold of a slave ship become a means of breaking down the interiority of the demarcated individual liberal subject and recreating community through a kind of forced commons. This hapticality evokes the refused rights of subjective and bodily interiority that must also be willingly refused by those to whom it is granted in order to construct new utopian forms of community (96). In this case, we might think of the punk's mode of jostling and being jostled in slam dance and other practices as not only a form of play, but a form of a symbolic and practical refusal of what was refused to others.

At this point it becomes necessary to briefly narrate the kind of behavior that evolved in punk dance, which can be seen in footage and descriptions from the period. What started as jumping up and down in isolation in the UK (Hebdige 108), evolved in Los Angeles into a higher contact form of pogo dancing in densely packed often impromptu punk venues. As hardcore punk arose in the post-suburbs of Orange County, this higher contact form of pogo turned into slamdancing (*Neutron Bomb* 199), a mode of dance involving groups of people packed into close proximity, intentionally slamming into and pushing off of one another, as well as aggressively grabbing and handling one

another.³⁷ This denser form of dance was accompanied by a more diffuse practice involving spinning while stomping about with arms thrashing, and individuals freely climbing onto the stage, dancing, knocking over equipment, and often singing into the mic before voluntarily throwing themselves from the stage – sometimes from startling heights, using amplifiers or other elevated platforms – often in a simple dive, though also frequently performing front flips or back flips into the crowd. The crowd usually accommodated such landings, though crowds were on rare occasions known to part sending divers slamming into the dance floor (*Another State; Decline*). In contrast to the more contemporary ceremonious stage dive as spectacle, such a mode of dancing was often a continuous stream of high energy trust falls (or rather, trust leaps), at times multiple dancers flinging themselves from the stage at once. One particularly interesting phenomenon observable in slamdancing is the spontaneous evolution of smaller individual circular movements into a larger circular movement of the crowd as a whole. It's important to highlight that, though it often bore the appearance of an unfolding conflict, this form of dance was typically far more playful than it was antagonistic. In fact, slamdancers were often friends with the people they seemed to be violently slamming into (*Another State*). As David James' observes in his analysis of hardcore punk, slamdancing was organized around the transgressive and subversive utterances being shouted from the stage, the boundaries of which were frequently violated by stage divers or enthusiastic audience members coopting microphone duties. James describes the kind

³⁷ This has been commonly referred to as “moshing” for quite some time now, though for my purposes I’ve chosen to keep the terminology used by the punks of the period.

of participatory performance that unfolds in punk venues, by highlighting a performance from the *Flipside* video fanzine “When Can I Sleep in Peace,” a title which of course returns us to a preoccupation with the impossibility of interior refuge.

When asked “why do you get so loaded to perform?” Darby Crash of the Germs confessed “Because that way I don’t feel myself getting hurt. I mean it’s scary out there” (*Decline*). This answer raises a litany of other “whys” – Why do it if it’s scary? Why continue to perform in dangerous conditions? Why intentionally cultivate an environment in which discomfort prevails? – that can only be answered by considering the affective and symbolic function punk dance and performance played in a broader counterhegemonic impulse. As Benjamin suggests, the ultimate aim of pedestrians is to attend to private affairs, “Their only agreement is a tacit one: that everyone should keep to the right of the pavement, so as not to impede the stream of people moving in the opposite direction.” (Engels qtd. in Benjamin “Some Motifs” 167). However, the punk in the slam pit is in the business of impeding traffic. Pessimists and critics of slam dancing portray it as either a kind of fascist performance of struggle and superiority, a demonstration of masculinity through aggression, or a mere effete catharsis (*Neutron Bomb* 199, 222). However, there is a more primary affect and meaning at work in the practice. It functions as a subversion via shock experience of the habitus and spatial codes that emphasize avoiding or automatically responding to shock and antagonistically insulating oneself from the dangers of the exterior.

In discussing the automatic behavior of the pedestrian, Benjamin notes that “Comfort isolates; on the other hand, it brings those enjoying it closer to mechanization”

("Some Motifs" 175). It seems that, for Benjamin, shock can either innervate or enervate, depending on its mode of reception. The post-suburban punk's appreciation of jostling certainly seems to involve what Benjamin calls "collective innervation." For Benjamin, film had the potential to marshal the profane illumination of surrealist practice to overcome the mechanization and isolation of the masses, by estranging from and illuminating the particular material and symbolic structure that dominated them, in Benjamin's case the logic and practices of Taylorism and Fordism. This profane illumination could occur en masse through the mass reproducibility and distribution of cinema in such a way that it offered the potential to innervate the masses as a "collective physis." For Benjamin, this innervation had the potential to subvert the domination of the masses by disrupting the hegemonic codes and affects by which their domination was organized (Hansen 38).

Miriam Hansen examines the role of innervation in Benjamin's work explaining that "The concept of self-alienation leads Benjamin – via the question of technology – to the opposing concept of "innervation" (37). She continues "On one level, Benjamin indeed envisioned the process of innervation, like the notion of shock, in rather neurological, electrodynamic terms. In that sense, the paralyzing and destructive effects of technology are only the flip side of tensions, currents, and forces which, under different relations of production and reception, could have a mobilizing and empowering effect" (38). The slam pit embodies these different relations of reception, not just between performer and audience, but between audience members, among whom music turns into a sort of complex process that sets off an undisciplinable Brownian motion in

an innervated collective physis, abolishing the boundary between body and sound-space, as it were. Rather than understanding the leap into the pit as the pedestrian's leap into a "reservoir of electric energy" that subjects "the human sensorium to a complex kind of training" (Benjamin "Some Motifs" 175), it is better to understand the slam pit as containing an electric energy that does not abide training; there is no appropriate set of reflexes to develop in slamdancing and to become automated in a spontaneous and chaotic high contact dance is for vigilance to fail hazardously. If we attend to the cultural milieu out of which slamdancing arose, it appears that the innervation of punk practice occurs in a form of dance that produced an absurd and incongruous community found in chaos, and which in turn sparked a profane illumination of the incongruous chaos found in the supposedly stable (non)community of the modern private interior. This "profane illumination" was an incorporation and disruption of a particular spatial code that attached safety and stability to insulation, interiority, and well-being, and cultivated a revolutionary "collective physis" that extended out from the slam pit into the broader community of punks.

While it manifests itself in its most extreme form in slamdancing, I would be remiss not to clarify that punks carried this practice of embracing the innervating potential of the shock engendered experience into city and post-suburban streets. The mode of punk dress was itself, after all, quite a shock to the system for middle America, and this in turn exposed the punk to numerous countershocks so to speak. A member of the post-suburban punk scene remembers that "You couldn't walk down the street without getting called a faggot or getting beat up," (*Neutron Bomb* 260) and Mike Ness

of Social Distortion recalled “I was fighting a lot ’cause I’d be walking down the streets of Fullerton with vermilion red hair and a leather jacket and a carload of construction workers would drive by and say, “Faggot.” And you’d flip ’em off and then they’d turn around and you gotta box! You gotta fight!” (260). This experience of persecution in the streets – one embraced by choice for some punks and as a supplement by others – is echoed throughout accounts of the period. Shock was not just a means by which punks achieved innervation, it was the means by which they hoped to instill it into the world at large. Despite a usual lack of education and conceptual framework, punks were often surprisingly articulate and self-aware regarding the obliquely political nature of this kind of practice: “At least we know we’ve accomplished something. If we’ve bummed their lives at least we know we’re opening their minds up a little bit, [to see] that there’s not just this stupid world that they live in but there are other things going on around them” (*Another State*).

The intensely homophobic response to punk bodily transgressions is telling. In his article “Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That: Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons,” Jose Munoz uses queerness in the early LA punk band the Germs and slam dancing to theorize “queerness as a mode of “being-with” that defies social conventions and conformism and is innately heretical yet still desirous for the world, actively attempting to enact a commons that is not a pulverizing, hierarchical one” (96). I am particularly interested in expanding on his limited use of the slam pit as a space in which this queer futurity might be activated, however momentarily, through a queer desire. For Munoz, the slam pit

is a rendering of a being-with that forms a provisional and temporary commons through the encounter, and it happens under the sign of punk. It is replete with queer animism but does not indulge in the holding pattern of naming this desire as anything but the style we call punk, which we know to have partially emerged from violent scenes of incarceration, yet goes on to stand in for *a more general collision of people and objects that can be simultaneously destructive and generative, annihilative and innovative, insofar as it is the ground for enacting new modes of being in the world and enacting a punk's uncommon commons.* (102; emphasis mine)

I want to briefly unpack how this collision in the slam pit reimagines desire. Punk's "visceral desire to want something else within a field of ossified social relations" (103) led to the production of an alternative to negative Oedipal desire in the practice of slam dancing. The desire of punk that Munoz is reaching for is a kind of counter-interior queer desire in which you can in fact touch what it is you desire, because you are no longer hermetically sealed off from it as a subjective and bodily interior, as in the ever-deferred Oedipal desire of a heteronormative schema. It is a desire that is positive and can arrive at its object precisely because it does not abide an object or a subject. This desire is embodied for punks in a type of shocking contact nonetheless defined by cooperation, openness, and shared space.

I'm interested here in the ways slam dancing intervenes on what Eve Sedgwick reads as the relationship between the transgenerational repetition of structure and an

Oedipality defined by “sexual rivalry, sexual desire, and the near-impossibility of their direct satisfaction” (*Weather* 22). Here Sedgwick is referring to the understanding of desire as negative – which is to say, characterized by absence – defined by a zero-sum logic, and formed in the context of a gender dualism and within the nuclear family. For Sedgwick, disavowing an Oedipal fatalism and deferred desire and recognizing that things can surprise – both in their arrival and by the very fact of their arriving, as in a slam pit – accentuates our ability to be surprised and foster surprise. To think about how slam pits achieve this interruption of Oedipal repetition through a counter-interior mode of desire, it might help to look at an important progenitor of punk’s articulation of a pernicious Oedipality: the proto-punk author and Beat, William S. Burroughs.

In his writing practice Burroughs attacks a particular form of desire that he calls “the Venusian flesh gimmick.” For Burroughs, the Venusian Flesh Gimmick undergirds “the birth death cycle” by promising an illusory ever-deferred G-O-D or “Garden of Delights.” Burroughs’ Venusian flesh gimmick finds its most salient personification in “one average, stupid, representative case: Johnny Yen the Other Half, errand boy from the death trauma. [. . .] *Death is orgasm is rebirth is death in orgasm is their unsanitary Venusian gimmick is the whole birth death cycle of action.*” Johnny Yen is the “God of sexual frustration. [. . .] His immortality depends on the mortality of others – the same is true of *all* addicts” (32). The yenning of the Venusian flesh gimmick is none other than the negative desire of a proto-Lacanian lack that compels us to circle around an object of desire, repeating circuits of action in search of a lost origin that the child – in the

schema of heteronormative futurity – inevitably comes to stand in for.³⁸ Burroughs, like Sedgwick, identifies a symmetry between the spiraling of demands and needs wrought by negative Oedipal desire and addiction. For Burroughs humans are essentially addicted to heterosexism and children – as well as their neatly demarcated domestic interiors – in the same way they are addicted to heroin. Like heroin addiction our sexual desire can never be satisfied, and as a result subjects us to an enforced repetition in the symbolic that Burroughs calls control. It the repetition of suburban heteronormative futurity, and the interiority it depended on, that queer and straight punks alike resisted by reformulating desire in the slam pit.

In *The Ticket That Exploded* Burroughs describes human sex as “this unsanitary arrangement whereby *two entities attempt to occupy the same three-dimensional coordinate points* giving rise to the sordid latrine brawls which have characterized a *planet based [...] on separate flesh engaged in endless sexual conflict*” (32; emphasis mine). Here, it is paradoxically the universal transcendent distance of the interiorized Oedipal subject from its object that makes closeness uncomfortable. The two bodies register their discreteness through Oedipal desire and as a result find a zero-sum conflict over space and power at the heart of their contact. As in Harney and Moten’s discussion of hapticality, subjects don’t want to be close only because they imagine they are separate. It is important to remember, however, that though the suburban impulse toward insulation was defined by the discomfort with proximity of an Oedipal schema, it was inevitably mediated by elitist, racist, and sexist logics. If, within an Oedipal

³⁸ See Lee Edelman’s *No Future* for an expanded discussion of this.

regime of desire, proximity results in discomfort, proximity with some bodies was more uncomfortable than with others. This interplay of distance, closeness, discomfort, and lack that Burroughs foregrounds in his writing becomes important for thinking about what alternative modes of desire and contact look like for his inheritors in the post-suburban context of early LA and Orange County punk.

If Oedipal sex involves the awkward failed attempt of two entities to occupy the same three dimensional coordinates, the Brownian motion of a slam pit often involves the successful attempt of more than two entities to occupy the same space by embracing the immanence and potential embedded in the immediacy – though never unmediated – of contact. Munoz sees “the punk who staggers forth in a slampit, hurling herself against another body, not to do harm, but instead to touch in a way not predicated on mastery and control, signaling a salient desire for an encounter” as a synecdoche of the “seeing and feeling in common” that might be achieved in a broader social collectivity (106). In a slam pit any transcendent distance between the subject and its object, or the symbolic and the original presence of the real, has the potential to collapse into an immanent field of difference that is defined neither by pure unmediated presence nor by negativity and transcendent distance. To rephrase Benjamin in Munoz’s terms, the slam pit can be the veil through which we see the commons in common.

Though we don’t typically think of punks as utopian hopefuls, there is a form of hope in their refusal of the future. And even when we don’t hear the hope in the things they say, we can detect it in the way they move. The form of counter-interior desire cultivated by the renegotiation of spatial codes in punk practices – a renegotiation that

refused to accept the boundaries of bodily interiors and the limits of desire – had the potential to disrupt our addiction to cycles of action that reproduced the interiors we live by, and in so doing, punks had the potential to bring us closer to a better world than many more explicitly utopian movements.

The fecundity of this field of analysis is made evident by the feeling of abruptness this ending evokes for me. Every cut made into one of the many points of aggressive contact between the post-suburban punk and the interior as a site of refuge seems to multiply the sites that call themselves to be addressed. I've attempted to map here only some of the ways post-suburban punk dramatized and subverted the contradictions at the heart of the hegemonic spatial codes that aligned an insular and private suburban domestic interior with safety, stability, and progress. I've suggested that by doing so, post-suburban punk called into question the belief that we can or should escape the exterior rather than embrace it as a means of reaching for a better world. Having sated myself for the time being with a close reading of the critical engagement punk's lyrical content and visual art makes with the suburban domestic interior, as well as an assessment of the symbolic and affective confrontation with the hegemony of interiority observable in punk dwelling and dance, I can only offer – perhaps platitudinously so – that this topic is ripe for further discussion. Efforts to reconfigure space and subjectivity in our current moment make punk's critique of a delimited interiority in which we hide incredibly relevant. In light of the continuing prevalence of the contradictions and antagonisms that initially preoccupied the post-suburban punk, I'll conclude by gesturing at punk's primary utopian lesson for us: if home is where we hide, this is because we've

failed to build a world in which we feel at home. We would be remiss to ignore punk in any future efforts to build such a world.

Chapter 4

“Are You Immensely Pleased. [sic]”:

David Foster Wallace’s Postmodern Interiority

Most of the literature I’ve discussed so far has adopted a tone of sincerity in its concern with the interior. Regardless of whether or not Kerouac was correct in his conviction that freedom could be found in precarity, for example, he was sincere in this belief. Likewise, much of this concern with the interior has been characterized by a general lack of self-awareness. We can perhaps see this lack of self-awareness most evidently on display in Thoreau’s claims to have escaped society in spite of his obvious dependence on the aid of social actors and forces. And though we see the onset of a postmodern irony and self-awareness in punk’s critique of the interior, punks generally still had the tendency to break the act and come right out and say what they thought in sincere terms at strategic moments. The concern with interiority and freedom that we see in earlier U.S. literature, however, takes on a strange tenor in a postmodern era we can heuristically mark as beginning in the mid-1960s. Because postmodern literature found itself suffused with the spirit of literary critique, it adopted a sort of recursive and insincere orientation toward anxieties about freedom and interiority.

Whereas, writers like Thoreau and Kerouac are able to unironically wax poetic about the importance of getting outside – of stifling social spaces and strictures – and moving freely, writers like Pynchon, DeLillo, and Wallace seem to have inherited a kind of extreme skepticism about the possibility of this kind of freedom, while still seeming to long for it. Timothy Melley diagnoses this ambivalent orientation toward freedom in

postwar American writers like Pynchon and DeLillo, as a concern about intrusions into interiority as much as a concern about being contained within interiors. Their reaction, he suggests, was not only rooted in a postmodern distrust of master narratives and an increasing awareness of the role of the social in the production of the subjective interior, but also in a recognition of new material conditions of existence that involved sprawling bureaucracies and wide reaching systems of globalized and “distanced” production of materials and culture. In reaction to their concern that the self no longer began and ended within specifically demarcated boundaries, these writers adopted a paranoia that involved conceptually shifting agency from the individual to monolithic social forces like television or mysterious and powerful social actors (6-16). Wallace certainly inherited these writers’ paranoia, but his concern seems to be wholly with escape rather than insulation. His seemingly post-postmodern response – as a writer acutely aware of his own postmodernness – results in a kind paranoid gymnastics consisting of recursive self-awareness and what I’ll call an interior ad infinitum that is compulsively reproduced in the effort to escape it.

Twenty years after its initial publication, *Infinite Jest* has, at this point, probably been irremediably canonized as a great American novel. It has the sentimentality of Salinger, the vocabulary of McCarthy, the metafictional impulse of Barth, the relentless complexity, parody, and absurdity of Pynchon, and the subtle philosophizing of DeLillo. Wallace clearly saw himself in the vein of such “great” – read white, male, middle class, and over-educated – writers, which might explain his jab at “Professor H. Bloom’s turgid

studies of artistic *influenza*” in *Infinite Jest*. A.O. Scott goes as far as to call Wallace’s anxiety of influence a “panic of influence.”

In his *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom addresses a kind of psychological distress felt by new generations of writers attempting to define themselves as unique contributors to literature, and the effect of this distress on the writing itself. As we’ll see, Bloom was also a critic of what he saw as a waning respect for the white canon. Appropriately, Wallace’s effort to escape from the influence of his progenitors is also an effort to escape from what he felt were the new constraints of his whiteness in the context of that waning respect. Despite his efforts to escape their influence, or perhaps because of it, Wallace’s debt to the postmodern “hysterical realism” of Pynchon and DeLillo is immediately evident. *Infinite Jest* opens with Hal having a psychotic episode that dramatizes his feeling of separation from figures of authority as well as dominant narratives and modes of comportment, a scene reminiscent of the closing scenes of DeLillo’s *White Noise*. Furthermore, *Infinite Jest*’s frequent devolutions into cartoonishness remind of Pynchon’s penchant for constructing cartoonish characters who burst into musical numbers amid serious backdrops. We particularly see this in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the sprawling and dense novel that gave Pynchon his status as a literary genius, and which Wallace almost certainly saw as a kind of model for *Infinite Jest*.

In her *Anxiety of Obsolescence*, Kathleen Fitzpatrick tracks another particularly important through line between Pynchon, DeLillo, and Wallace. She suggests that Wallace inherits from these progenitors an anxiety about the death of the novel. I’m particularly interested in Fitzpatrick’s work, because she focuses on the ways this “death

of the novel” discourse is implicated in a disguised defense of a threatened white male autonomy emanating from the dissolution of the liberal humanist subject and the perceived waning of influence of the white male novelist as an elite purveyor of high art. Citing the rarity of high literacy amongst the masses historically, she points out that not only did the novel never occupy a position of cultural centrality that many harbingers of the decline of the novel seem to suggest it did, but that whatever truth such a discourse might hold about the tenuous position of literature in a television age, the more telling truth, she argues, is in the cultural and social functions this discourse is pressed into the service of, namely elitism and privilege. While the "anxiety of obsolescence" – a sort of obverse of Bloom's "anxiety of influence" – felt and expressed by white male writers is ostensibly about the intrusion of new technologies into the writer's sphere of influence, the writer's declining cultural relevance, and the stultification and dumbing down of culture, it is actually about a fear of the growing influence of marginalized subjectivities and the waning agency of the white middle class male in an era when the liberal humanist subject has less potency.

Wallace's discomfort with the way these authors' tendencies come together in *Infinite Jest* – particularly the critical “hysterical realism” of Pynchon and DeLillo – is likely a result of his recognition that the confluence of these traits in *Infinite Jest* is a part of the intractable struggle at the heart of the novel: its desire to transcend interiority, which manifests itself as subjective, behavioral, and spatial inward-looking “traps,” and its fear that every effort to escape is merely another iteration of the interior trap. *Infinite Jest* has been lauded with a kind of religious fervor amongst scholars, critics, and casual

readers alike, and is widely considered a work of genius, though genius *in regards to what* is not widely or compellingly clarified. Part of the purpose of this paper is to analyze Wallace's writing as simply genius, that is to say, as not any kind of genius declaration about anything or genius operation on or genius performance of something, but instead merely an inward looking performance of genius, which is to say a posture that continually transmits its geniusness to the world but offers little else.

This posture of genius, I'll argue, manifests itself in Wallace's struggle with interiority, specifically in *Infinite Jest* and one of his most famous essays "E Unibus Pluram," which preceded the novel and clarified problems the novel itself was later engaged with. Wallace's performance of genius is an attempt to escape the interiority of his highly self-referential mind, the self-serving and comfort seeking patterns of behavior that emerge in life, and the never-ending search for spatial insulation and comfort. This attempt at escape in Wallace's writing is, to be fair, an attempt to be a genius-for-something, by connecting with something or someone outside himself. Tragically, however, the attempt fails, and Wallace ends up trapped in an infinite recursion inward that seems to have haunted him throughout his writing career.

Interiority emerges in *Infinite Jest* on three levels: the subjective interior, the architectural interior, and the interior of the womb, all of which resonate with one another in the novel. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace is participating in a very old narrative about the escape from a harsh exterior world into an interior. This narrative of interiority that we see in *Infinite Jest* is indebted to the same phenomenological vision of a being cast from a space of innocence into a cruel world that we've seen throughout the post-romantic

formation that occupies this project. As I've suggested, the psychoanalytical version of this narrative has us always looking for an unattainable womb-like space or reconnection with the mother, where every need is automatically met, in contrast to a world defined by an insatiable drive toward an object of desire that is always out of reach. Wallace, like William S. Burroughs, links this Freudian drive toward "the womb" or a space of quiescence and comfort where the object of desire is no longer out of reach, with harmful and inward-looking cycles of behavior like addiction.

Infinite Jest particularly responds to the Bachalardian strain of this vision, in which the architectural space becomes an important point of mediation between birth and our recognition of being in an outside that needs to be made livable. These accounts all dovetail with an account of subjectivity – in the spirit of continental philosophers like Kant or Descartes – in which the outside is represented to an interior mind/subjectivity/self, the inside being all that we can know anything about, and the only place we can attain any kind of real grounding. While each of these widely disparate theoretical/philosophical fields have their major differences, the dominant thread that runs through them is the construction of a comforting inside juxtaposed with its uncertain, hostile outside. In the spirit of Burroughs concern with addiction, *Infinite Jest* inverts some of this narrative's basic assumptions and responds to the interior with a profound dread. In *Infinite Jest*, the inside becomes the space of depression, death-in-life, incest, pathetic infantilism, chaotic self-reference, and relentless self-competitive ambition. But it is first and foremost a trap.

“Inner Infants:” The Inside of the Womb

Infinite Jest is probably most saliently defined by overwhelming anxieties about being trapped in the interior of the womb, which is to say the regressed pathetic infantile state in which needs are expected to be met without activity. Pathetic scenes of grown men holding teddy bears and crawling on all fours and generally catering to their “inner infant” blur into scenes of infinite mommy and daddy issues from Orin and Joelle and pretty much everyone else in the novel. Drug addicts dredge up childhood wrongs³⁹ and battle with a drive toward what is explicitly referred to as the “womb” of narcotic warmth, and Gately and Fackelmann soil their pants on a dope binge hiding inside an empty luxury condo, where the revelation occurs to Gately that an addict is primarily a “pathetic creature [...] that basically hides” (*Infinite Jest* 932). As the novel unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear why the bulk of the plot takes place in the, at first curiously named, “year of the depend adult diaper.”

Probably the most explicit and pathetic display of regression in the novel occurs when Hal accidentally attends a men’s rights type support group meeting in which grown men are embracing their “inner infant” and learning to vocalize and pursue said infant’s needs. In a cringe and pity inducing display of infantilism, grown men clutch teddy bears, which they also make talk and gesture. They crawl on the floor like infants, weep uncontrollably about their helplessness, and tragically bemoan the fact that their parents

³⁹ The origins of their own personal fall from innocence/grace – though their obsession with this origin is actually a cause of acute mental pain, as the novel makes clear.

aren't going to answer their calls, and that they are in fact on their own in the world when it comes to making sure their infantile needs are met. At one point in the meeting the group leader asks a member "if it feels to his Inner Infant like Mommy and Daddy were ever going to appear cribside to meet his needs" while "idly arranging his bear's splayed arms in different positions, so it looks like the bear's either waving or surrendering." When the group member says no, the leader asks "Do you suppose you would be able to ask someone in the group here tonight to love and hold you instead, Kevin?" (*Infinite Jest* 805).

Despite the fact that these support groups are intending to encourage grown men to abandon their infantile womblike interiors and attempt to find love and connection by being vulnerable and risking pain and rejection in the world outside the womb, the crib, and the childhood home, the lengths that they must go to – by accommodating the infantile with teddy bears and performances of infancy and childhood – are laughably extreme. Here the text seems to be offering a satirical critique of a culture that encourages isolation and insulation from a cruel and dangerous outside world. However, as we'll see, this satire devolves into a characteristic recursive self-analysis that removes much of its potential punch in the novel.

This catering to the inner infant occurs toward the end of the novel and is a sort of climax for all of the interior-seeking womb phantasies that have been unfolding in the plot before it. An important early scene, in which we are perhaps first introduced to the inner infant as it manifests itself in the addicted behavior of Ken Erdedy, opens with the question "Where was the woman who'd said she'd come. [sic]" (17). The scene consists

of Erdedy, having decided to go on one final marijuana binge to supposedly cure his addiction, waiting with an absurdly anxious inner monologue for a woman who'd said she would pick up, with her own cash, "200 grams of unusually good marijuana" (18) for him. He alternatively describes the binge to come and explains the steps he's taken in preparation for said binge. The binge, it is explained, will require his shutting off all contact with the outside world, by way of a prepared voice recording on his voicemail, and hiding his car. It will also involve Erdedy smoking insane quantities of marijuana, gorging himself on sugary foods, masturbating excessively, watching TV, and moving as little as possible, all of which have long since ceased being fun for Erdedy. In the midst of the binge "He would disappear into a hole in a girder inside him that supported something else inside him" (20).

In addition to his obvious regressive tendencies like preferring masturbation over sex while high, hiding from social contact, and just generally reverting to a sort of fetal state of pure consumption, Erdedy's waiting for a woman to come and provide for his needs resonates with the inner infant scene, in which men struggle with actively pursuing the needs of their inner infant rather than passively waiting to have the needs of their inner infant met for them, a passivity which they acknowledge tends to result in such needs not being met.⁴⁰ Erdedy is immobilized by waiting with his own anxiety: he hilariously refuses to call the woman because of the fact that a) she might call while he is on the line calling her and b) he is afraid of appearing creepy.

⁴⁰ There are seemingly two undesirable and ultimately equivalent choices in the novel. The choice is between being a parasite, like the drug addict, and being "productive," like the sex addicted Orin. See Marathe and Stapely's dialogues.

There is a degree of uncomfortable subjective interiority here: even the narrative evokes the feeling of being trapped in a man's head. This scene with Erdedy is defined by intense critical self-awareness: "He couldn't even be around anyone else if he'd smoked marijuana that same day, it made him so self-conscious" (22), we're told. He goes to extreme efforts to avoid being creepy such that he accidentally seems overly casual in arranging for the woman to bring him weed. He begins to suspect that his casualness may have led the woman to decide not to bring the weed, despite the fact that this casualness, ironically, was an elaborately self-conscious performance carried out with the intense hope of securing the weed by seeming totally normal. What Wallace achieves here, is an amazingly detailed and accurate portrayal of the inner thoughts of an addict hoping to score.

Erdedy's weed binge is also defined by a spatial interior he retreats into, namely his room. This spatial interior is so insulated and organized that he will not leave it except to go to the refrigerator or bathroom. However, unlike Bachelard's comforting interior, this is an interior defined by intense fear and paranoia. To grapple with this Erdedy compulsively watches television on his binges. Again, Wallace offers us a brilliant portrait of an addict's spatial practice. This retreat into his room, and into a regressive infantile state, like all of the retreats into interiority in *Infinite Jest*, is related to "the entertainment." Weed "made him stare raptly like an unbright child at entertainment cartridges" (22). For Wallace, "the entertainment" refers to two things. On the one hand, it refers to the MacGuffin of *Infinite Jest*, a mysterious tape that we eventually learn portrays a woman's face and comforting voice, filmed as though from the perspective of

an infant in a crib. This tape drives the plot by causing those who watch it to fall into a catatonic – yes, infantile even – state and in turn fueling a manic search for copies of it, in order to keep it from being viewed. The “perfect Entertainment” is described as a “chance to be fed this death of pleasure with spoons, in their warm homes, alone, unmoving” (318).

On the other hand, “the entertainment” seems to refer in *Infinite Jest* – and “E Unibus Plurum” – to an inescapable pacifying televisual culture in which comfortably watching others while avoiding being penetrated by their critical gaze becomes an all-encompassing and dominant mode of life. Wallace unpacks the way this televisual culture produces a kind of interior insulation from a threatening outside – of the self, of the home, and of the familiar – in more explicit detail in “E Unibus.” The problem for Erdedy in *Infinite Jest* is that his retreat demands, first and foremost, waiting for the woman who isn’t coming to supply his need. However, it is a need he doesn’t even enjoy having met, as it so happens, but nonetheless needs to have met. This ambivalent relationship with drugs also describes our relationship with TV as Wallace understands it.

In *Infinite Jest* all of the forms of addicted interiority find a common node in “the entertainment.” US culture’s addiction to television is lampooned in *Infinite Jest* in the form of the “perfect Entertainment” that ends up turning anyone who views it into a catatonic infantile zombie unable to care for themselves beyond simply consuming, because of the intense pleasure it offers. Ironically, the perfect Entertainment, we learn, was created by JO Incandenza, Hal’s father, in an effort to get Hal outside of himself, to “reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in

life” (838). Ironically, JO attempts to do this by providing a “magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy” and generally interpellating the film’s viewer into the infantile gaze by way of camera techniques – that “reproduce an infantile visual field” (939) – and the general content of the film, which consists of a woman staring down at the lens apologizing, presumably for not being able to meet the absolute need of the viewer’s inner infant. JO’s effort to get the subject outside of its own recursive and immobilizing interiority ironically involves – in the kind of addict logic we see with Erdedy – indulging in the subject’s infantile interiority just one last time. As I’ll suggest, this is also Wallace’s general project with his own Entertainment which, as it happens, shares its title with JO’s film: *Infinite Jest*. Here we begin to see some of the meta-level inward looking performance of genius in Wallace’s writing. Rather than succeeding in the task of escaping interiority through one last indulgence in interiority, and creating what some have described as a paradoxical new sincerity found in irony and mediation (Konsantinou 102), both *Infinite Jest* and the diagetic “perfect Entertainment” that shares its name, simply become an addictive, pacifying, and interiorizing extreme expression of the televisual culture Wallace describes. They construct a fractal-esque interior ad infinitum that makes it difficult to discern how exactly one might escape the womblike interior of a televisual culture that, as we’ll see, Wallace seems to imagine is inescapable.

In the process of his tennis academy brainwashing in *Infinite Jest* – the novel, not the film in the novel – Hal is taught by his instructor Gerhardt Schtitt that in a tennis match the other is merely an “occasion for meeting the self.” Hal is told to “compete with

[his] own limits to transcend the self” (*Infinite Jest* 84). This incessant self-competition and the imperative to improve is a feature not only of the interior psyche, but also of the tennis academy that young players are trapped in, and functions as a source of serious anguish for most of them. The use of drugs to deal with the pressure is ordinary, we’re told. In the spirit of the Freudian, and later Lacanian, theory of drive, the players are all engaging in punishing conditioning routines day in and day out as a means of working toward a shot at being on “the Show” which it is later clarified will not be any kind of reprieve, but merely a continuation of their struggle for self-transcendence. They will never arrive at their object of desire, which in the novel is both the comfort of a womb-like reprieve from struggle they will never reach, and the continuation of struggle in “the show.”

This longing for “the show” of course also has obvious resonances with the role of TV in *Infinite Jest* and “E Unibus Pluram.” The shows we watch merely provide us with the illusion that we have arrived at our object of desire and a state of satisfied comfort, yet we watch them endlessly, never feeling satiated. This also seems to be a characteristic of addiction in the novel: the addict repeats pointless and even harmful patterns that are no longer fun, with the hopes of getting to some desired outside, but the outside never arrives, the repetition of the addictive habit becomes an end in itself, and the addict is left stuck inside the recursion of pattern for its own sake, along with the immobilizing subjective ad infinitum reflexivity and rationalization that defines addictive thought.

The alternative tennis coaching methodology offered by JO Incandenza to Ortho Stice in the novel at first seems to be a way out of this bind. Elizabeth Freudenthal suggests that Ortho “The Darkness” Stice is the novel’s stab at overcoming a kind of Cartesian subjective interiority. Stice is influenced indirectly – and apparently directly, though in wraith form – by JO Incandenza’s philosophy of “be[ing] a body” (168) to connect with the ball. This is a tennis philosophy passed down to Stice from the creator of “the entertainment,” and it encourages Stice to imagine that he has become one with the object. Here, as Freudenthal overlooks, Schitt’s “battle with the self” continental philosophy infused theory of tennis is contrasted with a tennis philosophy that suggests we overcome interiority not by reflexively battling with ourselves until we somehow magically transcend the interior limits of self, but by flattening our consciousness into a one dimensional plane with the material. Stice is told “Head is body. [...] Total physicality. No revving head. Complete presence. Absolute potential” (159-60). However, the idea that, as Freudenthal imagines, the novel is suggesting, this kind of immanence of subjectivity in matter is a solution to interiority is made laughable in the final scene of the novel in which Stice literally gets frozen stuck to a material window. In this scene, ironically, Stice is forced into the interior of a kind of theatric Cartesian subjectivity mapped by a Bachelardian spatial interior. He is stuck looking out the window of a warm inside dwelling onto the cold outside, in a parody of the philosophical problem of subjectivity. When contemplating how long Stice waited before calling out for help, Hal remarks that “Imagining it seemed somehow unendurable: me just sitting there, stuck” (*Infinite Jest* 869). The thought evokes a “horror” in Hal. This scene

devolves into a cartoonish effort to pull Stice from the window which results in Stice's "Winston Churchill" face getting stretched to absurd lengths and then finally ripped off. The novel's laughable solution to what it sees as a perhaps laughable problem of subjective interiority – being trapped behind a face and inside a head – is to rip your face off.

By now we're getting a clearer picture of the novel's own addiction. In a kind of nervous tic, *Infinite Jest* compulsively backpedals, and refuses to allow itself to offer any kind of substantial critique of interiority that includes a possible solution, without introducing a layer of irony or jest that critiques the critique, or a recursive meta-level of interiority that makes all solutions seem out of reach. It is a novel that is deeply concerned with the sense of alienation that comes from the interiority of subjectivity, the womb, and the insular institutional spaces and habits that organize life, and yet it is totally unwilling to even take a stab at solving these issues. In its critique of the subjective interiority of Schitt's tennis philosophy – and continental philosophy's account of subjectivity more generally – the novel refuses to offer us another image of subjectivity.

It could have, even in its satire, tried to embrace a new concept of self that incorporates immanence rather than dualism and encourage a move away from self-serving habits and attempts to isolate oneself from an uncomfortable outside, in the way that Stephano Harney and Fred Moten attempt to, for example, in their *The Undercommons*. This is, after all, the critique that Freudenthal forcefully reads into the novel. It is the critique she would have had Wallace offer. Instead, however, Wallace

gives us some looney tunes critique of that critique, and laughs at Stice's efforts to overcome the stifling effects of interiority and become one with the material, by ripping his face off and leaving it stuck to a window. The self-awareness of the novel seems to be an awareness of its inevitable failure, a backtracking "I'm only being half serious here" because it's afraid of being wrong or knows it's doomed to be wrong. The novel seems afraid to commit to what it says and instead just performs the curse of the postmodern artist doomed to eternally acknowledge what he's doing and critique it in an infinite feedback loop.

The novel's best hope for an escape from interiority, and arguably the character it takes most seriously, is Don Gately. Critics⁴¹ have argued that Gately is what they call a "believer" – a character supposedly representing a hopeful vision of the possibilities of sincerity in the effort to overcome paralyzing irony. This is a type of character found in the works of writers of what scholars and critics have termed the "New Sincerity" and the "Post-Ironic," which typically includes at least Wallace and Dave Eggers, whose most famous work in this vein is the probably not sincerely titled *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (Williams). The New Sincerity critics note that Wallace talks a great deal in his oeuvre about the pernicious effects of irony and cynicism and states his desire for a new generation of critics to be sincere. He likewise paints a picture of himself as a real flesh and blood author behind the text trying to connect sincerely with his reader in

⁴¹ Or probably more accurately, fans. The fanishness of critics like Konstantinou – and a crowd of others who pursue "Wallace Studies" as a field... there's actually a journal dedicated to it – is after all what makes them willing to take Wallace at his word, focusing almost exclusively on the literal content of his language rather than its satirical function.

works like “Octet,” the bulk of which is an exercise in efforts to overcome the impossibility of connection between writer and reader, as well as between two distinct subjects (Williams).

Furthermore, they have noticed, as though by way of refutation, that the critique of Wallace looks a lot like Wallace’s critique of the postmodern fiction that came before him (Konstantinou). As will become clear in the following section, there’s a good reason for this. Unlike the postmodern authors he is critiquing, they suggest, Wallace’s playing with irony and self-awareness, is a part of his necessary struggle to transcend them. If this sounds familiar, it’s because it’s a description of Schitt’s tennis philosophy, which is clearly a satirical jab at philosophical attempts to transcend the interior limits of the self in *Infinite Jest*. However, as I’ll expand on in the third section of this paper, the idea that an exploration of irony has ever been an essential prerequisite for being sincere is a part of a dubious and likely politically motivated vision. The paradox of Wallace Studies scholars like Konstantinou is that they take Wallace at his word in order to try to convince us we should take Wallace at his word. I, however, would respond with the same skepticism as Scott to a “Janus faced” author who “demands to be taken at face value.”

As Konstantinou points out, Gately is the one character who is able to escape addiction and the harmful interiority of reflexive critical thought by simply believing naively in AA. However, the fact that the novel ends with Gately trapped inside of himself in a hospital bed, unable to move or speak, constraining himself to smaller and smaller interiors of time, all as an end result of his sincerity, suggests that he is not a great

model for an escape from interiority. Here, the mantra of AA – “one day at a time” – which Gately found so helpful, is made into a joke, with Gately dealing with the pain of his injuries by living “one second at a time.” This final interiority is appropriately juxtaposed with the addicted interiority he sought to escape, which is narrated to us in the form of a fever dream flashback. We are shown that Gately has arrived where he started. His escape from addiction involved merely further traps, at first in “the rooms” of AA meetings, then in a halfway house, and finally in a hospital bed. The novel ends with Gately “waking up” either from the fever dream or still within the fever dream, and finding himself lying on the beach at low tide, a gray sky above him, in a sort of sublime outside. This all suggests that Wallace couldn’t resist one final critiquing jest at the sincere Gately’s expense: at the novel’s end Gately has either failed to get outside, because in an ironic twist the effort to escape through sincerity has brought him back full circle to exactly what he set out to escape, though in the form of a more literally and intensely trapped interiority, or he has escaped, but only through death, which is pretty grim, and not really a great solution.⁴²

In fact, the novel ends with pretty much everyone trapped: Gately is living in a subjective and temporal interior, in which living one day at a time in AA is taken to a satirical extreme, living a second at a time; Joelle is behind a veil, holding off the gaze of others; Orin is in a kind of bell jar, ironically the object of analysis of someone he had referred to as one of his “subjects,” though who, as Hal notices, he really meant to refer

⁴² Though it’s definitely Freudian.

to as one of his “objects”⁴³; Hal’s mother, “the moms” is still trapped in the headmaster’s house; Marathe is trapped in his chair; Steeply is trapped in prosthetics; and of course, Hal is trapped inside his head moving toward the hysterical realist scene that opens up the novel. The sort of inevitability of trapped interiority in the novel, as I’ve already noted, dovetails with irony and self-critique. This is, as I’ll expand in what follows, because the novel itself unfolds within what is imagined to be, an infinitely self-critical and ironic interior: our televisual hyper-critical culture.

“Television has become our interior:” The Inside of Culture

As I’ve been suggesting, there is in fact another kind of interior trap that defines *Infinite Jest*, one that plagues all other attempts to escape interiority. Wallace thinks of his writing and his life as unfolding *within* a culture as an interior that he wants to transcend via critique yet finds he cannot, only because the effort to transcend via critique is itself a constituent part of the culture. His struggle here is the struggle to figure out how to adopt a critical posture of a hypercritical culture. The interiority of this culture manifests itself in Wallace’s anxieties about the possibility of real critique and the self-critical nature of a televisual culture that cannot be critiqued, not only because all critique is subsumed within it – such that there is no getting at it from outside, as it were – but also because self-criticality has become a defining feature of the culture, such that when

⁴³ Though, it seems, ironically, that maybe he ends up having been right about them being the “subjects” all along.

it critiques itself it reinforces itself. Though for Wallace, television typifies this cultural interior trap, we'll see that Wallace finds this trap replicated in his own orientation to himself and his relationship with the "great" authors of the postmodern tradition.

For Wallace, the answer to the question "Why are we so immersed in [TV] if we hate it so?" ("E Unibus" 157) is that hating on TV is such a TV thing to do. We are trapped within "the boundaryless flux of televisual monoculture" (190). For Wallace, the important questions about TV are "weirdly, being asked and answered by television itself." An example of the immanence of televisual critique is the image of a cartoonishly hypnotized audience "with little mesmerized spirals revolving in our eyes" (162), a hyperbolic fixture of the critique of television, that is of course a televisual image. In fact, in *Infinite Jest* Wallace specifically draws on this televisual image to critique the naïve/cynical televisual critique of TV. As I'll unpack, in this essay he pursues a kind of performative meta-analysis that layers self-critique over self-critique ad infinitum.

Wallace suggests that besides TV, the arts, and especially fiction – no surprise there! – are best equipped to ask and answer questions about television. Unfortunately, the brilliant critique of TV offered by late 80s/early 90s postmodern fiction, Wallace explains, was already TV's critique of itself (173). He suggests that the best contemporary postmodern fiction, like Leyner's *My Cousin My Gastroenterologist*, is just TV.⁴⁴ "The reason why today's imagist fiction isn't the rescue from a passive, addictive

⁴⁴ His critique of Leyner suggests that Leyner's famous novel entertains by "(1) flattering the reader with appeals to his erudite postmodern welschmerz, and (2) relentlessly reminding the reader that the author is smart and funny" (191). Now if THAT'S not ironic I don't know what is.

TV-psychology that it tries so hard to be,” explains Wallace, “is that most imagist writers render their material with the same tone of irony and self-consciousness” that TV has been deploying for some time (173). The once effective detached critique of mass culture – a critique that imagines the critic as a figure “outside” of mass culture looking in – has become the bread and butter of mass culture. For Wallace, irony and the aloofness of efforts to attain some transcendent critical distance are always incorporated into the thing being critiqued itself, such that they are always an ironic self-critique. This ironic self-critique has paradoxically become the trademark of the postmodern televisual culture we would aim to critique, though always inevitably from within its bounds.

Wallace’s anxiety has us trapped in an interior of culture in which critique from an outside place is impossible, and critique from within is no longer critique because it doesn’t get us outside.⁴⁵ “A dog, if you point at something, will look only at your finger,” (“E Unibus” 160) Wallace offers by way of concluding his long explanation of what is at base, this simple sentiment: rather than having us move into its interior “[Television has] become our interior” (“E Unibus” 159). TV watchers, according to Wallace, let TV convince them that they are the self-aware transcendent watcher that gets all of TV’s tricks – and self-aware jokes about these tricks – and who enjoys TV for recognizing their transcendence. These watchers appreciate TV from the outside as it were, despite the fact that, as Wallace argues, instilling this conviction of being outside the crowd is

⁴⁵ This is almost like a “naïve” Deleuzean critique of control societies, except the immanent plane for Wallace is an inside rather than an outside.

one of TV's best tricks and tools for bringing the watcher into the televisual interior (177).

It is this interior of a televisual culture that is the most pernicious and inescapable interior for Wallace, and it is the interior he most struggled to escape from in both "E Unibus" and *Infinite Jest*. As Wallace Studies scholars like Konstantinou explain, and as Wallace himself suggests in "E Unibus," the only way to escape this interior is to simply be sincere and risk sentiment and attacks from "gifted ironists" ("E Unibus" 193). And this is precisely what Konstantinou imagines Wallace doing in "E Unibus." However, Konstantinou's understanding reflects a failure of close reading. Rather than taking his own advice and putting his position as a writer on the line, Wallace simply performs a reflexive self-critique to absurdity, as though in search of an implosive limit of this cultural interiority. In actuality, this search is just as much an attempt to perform his own genius as a master critic within this hypercritical culture, as it is an attempt to escape insularity and connect with others, though the two may be related for him.

Behind his explicit concerns about the impossibility of critique, Wallace's real nightmare hides in plain sight: his greatest fear in "E Unibus" and *Infinite Jest* is not that critique has been exhausted, but that the critique of critique is equally exhausted, and that reflexive critical self-awareness can offer no escape from the inside of a culture that we should not enjoy, but nonetheless somehow do enjoy. "E Unibus Pluram" is, at base, a terribly ironic, aloof, cynical, and self-aware critique of ironic, aloof, cynical, and self-aware critique, one that ultimately suggests and in fact performs the impossibility of critique as an escape in the postmodern cultural moment. Of course, critique never

actually takes place from “outside” of culture, and culture isn’t a neatly demarcated interior. Despite any posturing, the critic is never a transcendent intellectual looking in at culture from the outside, and critique is never an escape. Critique is simply an immanent form of resistance, and this fact presents no major problems for many cultural critics. For Wallace, it seems to be a labyrinthine disaster. Walter Benjamin adopted a sort of obverse Marxist belief that cultural critique cannot happen from outside of a cultural position, and this fact must be taken into account when performing critique. However, rather than imagining this as evidence of an inescapable cul-de-sac or interior, the Marxist tradition has typically understood the dialectical evolution that results from immanent critique as automatically transcendent. However, transcendence is perhaps not even the real goal for Wallace. As I’ll expand on, the drama of this struggle to escape culture as an interior trap in Wallace’s writing is really about Wallace’s struggle to locate his agency in a newly complicated literary political landscape.

Wallace’s critique of ironic critique in “E Unibus” is genius, but only because it performs itself so deftly, and makes a *mise en abyme* of its object of analysis. It is less an argument and more one long example of his point. If we break down Wallace’s critique in “E Unibus” into its constituent reflexive levels, we have the critique of television, followed by the critique of the critique of television. In this second level of attempted critique, “E Unibus” points out that “There’s this well-known critical litany about television’s vapidness, shallowness, and irrationalism. The litany is often far cruder and triter than what the critics complain about,” which is to say that complaining about “how TV’s become this despicable instrument of cultural decay” (156) is actually more boring and

culturally decaying than TV. Note how ironic and cynical and aloof Wallace is being here about TV watching critics who pretend to be above TV, while he himself does just this. As I'll show, he is not unaware of the irony here.

Wallace argues that it is possible to be both cynical and naïve, and suggests that critics who are aloof and cynical and ironic about TV are actually really just naively trapping themselves even further in TV's interior by being cynical about TV. As I've suggested, we can see Wallace lampooning this naively cynical critique of TV in *Infinite Jest* as well, when those subjected to "the ultimate entertainment" are described by way of the same cartoonish image employed in Wallace's critique of anti-TV paranoia mentioned above: spirals in eyes, drool coming out of mouths. Just as Wallace is trying to be critical of TV while also being critical of naïve critiques of TV in "E Unibus," we can see in such scenes his legitimate concerns about the socially pernicious effects of an advanced form of TV in *Infinite Jest* being cut through and totally undermined by a critique of the critique of TV. Just as in his critique of classic accounts of subjectivity with Ortho Stice, Wallace cannot allow himself to sincerely critique TV culture in *Infinite Jest*, and decides instead to fall back on a satirical cartoonish image that mocks the critique itself.⁴⁶

In "E Unibus," Wallace critiques the critic of culture who imagines they have attained a kind of transcendent critical position outside of culture, by analyzing "the most photographed barn in America" scene of DeLillo's *White Noise*, in which a barn is

⁴⁶ The necessary corrective to a naïve critique of TV apparently is a self-awareness of the naïve narrative one is, despite one's best efforts, participating in and deftly attempting but failing to avoid.

watched merely because it is a watched barn, and the people watching that barn are watched because they are watchers of something that is watched only because it is widely watched. In this scene, the cultural critic, the watcher of these watchers, of course starts to watch himself. DeLillo's "parodic force is directed at Murray, the would-be transcender of spectatorship," Wallace suggests. "Murray, by watching and analyzing, would try to figure out the how and whys of giving in to collective visions of mass images," including his own "giving in" and being ultimately trapped within the aura. DeLillo and Wallace seem to be using Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura" – in a less precise way than Benjamin did – to refer to a spectacular component of ideology in which a sight interpellates a viewer into a way of seeing. The critic in DeLillo ultimately offers a pithy analysis that "We can't get outside the aura," that is, of his own enmeshment in the object of his analysis. This is an analysis with which he was finally "immensely pleased" (185).

Paradoxically, Murray nonetheless imagines himself to be transcendent and able to comment on the totalizing culture of watching he is analyzing, despite recognizing that he is in fact a watcher too. It is this last self-aware recognition that likely convinces him of his transcendence. The immense pleasure of the critic here is a pleasure derived from the feeling that, in understanding his enmeshment inside culture, he has achieved a transcendent position on the outside. It is a pleasure one reflexive turn beyond the pleasure of the TV watcher, who Wallace suggests have allowed themselves to be convinced by TV that they stand out from the TV watching crowd.

This critique of the critic in DeLillo is important, because Wallace, as it becomes even clearer later in the essay, is not unaware of his own effort to offer a detached transcendent critique (of critique). He offers that there is no way out of this problem but silence for DeLillo:

To speak out loud in the scene would render the narrator *part* of the farce (*instead of a detached, transcendent “observer and recorder”*) and so vulnerable to ridicule himself. With his silence, DeLillo’s alter ego Jack eloquently diagnoses the very disease from which he, Murray, barn-watchers, and readers all suffer. (170-71; emphasis mine)

Murray the critic, however, is ultimately unable to adequately diagnose the aura he is within because of his incessant efforts to analyze it and attain some kind of transcendent critical vantage on it, especially when he talks about the phenomenon of his own enmeshment in the aura itself.⁴⁷ Here we can start to see the paranoia that animates Wallace’s writing bubbling to the surface. In his incessant reflexivity, he seems to fear becoming this foolish would-be-transcendent critic.

The third reflexive level of Wallace’s critique is a self-awareness of his own critique and its potential shortcomings. Here, in his critique of his critique of critique is where he really starts accelerating the inward reflexive movement of self-criticality. First, despite recognizing the ways in which he is inevitably a part of a paranoid narrative about TV, Wallace nervously attempts to convince us he’s not like all the other paranoid critics.

⁴⁷ Wallace does not go so far as to note that, in presenting this scene, DeLillo was likely immensely pleased with himself.

He's "worried" that his writing might "easily slip into the worst sort of anti-TV paranoia, treating of TV as some diabolical corrupter of personal agency and community gumption." Wallace is "anxious to avoid anti-TV paranoia" (162) and his essay is full of "quick intermission[s] contra paranoia" (173) that make sure the reader understands that he isn't participating in the paranoid and naïve narrative about TV as a pernicious force that garners control over individuals and communities.

This is a narrative that critics like Fitzgerald insist, nonetheless, that he is participating in. In fact, while she makes quick work of his contemporaries and predecessors, Fitzgerald encounters some difficulty in critiquing Wallace, and it is no doubt because Wallace has done so much work to shield himself from critique⁴⁸ by a) exhibiting extreme self-awareness of his critique of TV and its proximity to an undesirable one he'd like to critique, while also recognizing he is being helplessly drawn into it, b) critiquing in advance his would be stuffy and turgid academic critics or the aloof ironists that might respond to him, who are also in their own ways the naïve cynical critics of TV, and c) when these last two have become untenable, detachedly and ironically critiquing himself. Like the self-conscious TV audience that indulges in an aloof gaze but is afraid of being penetrated by the gaze of others, he has been anticipating our critique of him all along.

⁴⁸ Despite his claim that "Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk things. Risk disapproval" ("E Unibus" 193), Wallace is compulsively afraid of critique and most of his works are in fact just elaborate shields against critique (though he surely must have realized this would expose him to critique?).

Importantly, in “E Unibus” Wallace is explicitly critical of the ways in which – in his critique of TV criticism – he is after all just like the aloof ironists who watch TV only to critique it (and find immense pleasure in their critique of it).⁴⁹

My God, I've just reread my heartfelt criticisms of Gilder. That he is naive. That he is an apologist for cynical corporate self-interest. [...] That under its futuristic novelty is just the same old American same-old that got us into this televisual mess. That Gilder vastly underestimates the intractability of the mess. Its hopelessness. Our fatigue. My attitude, reading Gilder, is sardonic, aloof, jaded. My reading of Gilder is televisual. I am in the aura. (189)

Here Wallace acknowledges that he is “in the aura” though he is sure we won’t miss the irony in even that critique of himself. After all, as Wallace has already pointed out, the critic in DeLillo who recognizes himself as being trapped in the aura still imagines a transcendent position for himself. Specifically, he imagines an escape for himself *because of* a recognition of the inescapability of the interior. In this respect Wallace is being profoundly self-critical, embedding a moment of further critical irony within his self-critique here. He is trapped within the televisual culture, because he too is willing to indulge in the illusion of his transcendence, an indulgence which, as he has pointed out, is immanent to televisual culture, and evinced ever more profoundly with each additional reflexive layer of ironic critical self-awareness he piles on to assure himself of his critical

⁴⁹ Clearly, one of Wallace’s great anxieties is that his writing, like Leyner’s will ultimately just be more TV, and he confirms in many respects that his essay does fall prey to that fate.

transcendence. As I've suggested, this inward acceleration is merely one long performative example of his thesis: the inside can't be escaped, because to try to escape is to tighten the snare.

As I've suggested, all of this acrobatic irony is in part the product of a recognition on Wallace's part, that we are watching him and critiquing him. Wallace anticipates our critique of him throughout. However, his thoroughgoing critique of our critique does not arrive until the final sentence of "E Unibus." In one deft concluding move, he confirms a recognition of our inevitable critique of his self-aware critique of his own critique of critics, and offers a critique of that anticipated critique by turning the reader's critical gaze back at themselves. His closing sentence – "Are you immensely pleased" – echoes the critic from DeLillo, in a televisual recognition that he was after all being like the transcendent critic from DeLillo. This sentence also involves a turning of the critical gaze onto the reader and their critique, and ultimately asks the reader to critique their own enmeshment in this hypercritical televisual culture. The "you" suggests the reader's implication in this drive toward critical transcendence, and asks if they are pleased with both his critique of critique ad infinitum, and their inevitable critique of it. In this essay's final moment, Wallace appears to be critiquing our critique of his critique of his critique of critique, which, to be absolutely clear, I'm sincerely unironically impressed with.

This is all beyond clever on Wallace's part, but it is not in the end a solution to his concern with interiority. It is merely a performance of genius⁵⁰ that depends on infinite

⁵⁰ He nonetheless mocks this posture of genius, ad infinitum. The fact that he's just written an entire analysis of this phenomenon means the whole thing is really just on some level a hilarious dramatization of the thing he was analyzing – the trap and

interiority. As I've noted, this performance of a self-critique has been a crucial part of the performance of genius since before Wallace, and part of Wallace's critique of a postmodern 90s culture seems to recognize this. The only explanation of his failure to evade must be that he saw no way out, but to go even further in. There is good evidence in *Infinite Jest* that this is what Wallace's writing attempts while, of course, recognizing its failure.

There is no more apt metaphor for the nauseating excess of irony, reflexivity, and self-awareness that I've just finished analyzing, than the drug overdose. Wallace's writing is an irony and self-awareness overdose comparable to what it must be like to ring one's bell on crack so hard one dies, which is exactly what Joelle attempts to do in *Infinite Jest* in order to escape her own crushing subjective interiority. The addict attempting to escape their being trapped in addiction by using the substance they are addicted to so much in one sitting that it somehow spits them out of their addiction is a recurring motif in *Infinite Jest*. For Joelle, the hope is simply that she'll use so much she'll die. For Erdedy, the plan was to "simply smoke so much so fast that it would be so unpleasant and the memory of it so repulsive that once he'd consumed it and gotten it out of his home and his life as quickly as possible he would never want to do it again" (*Infinite Jest* 22). Like a child forced to smoke an entire pack of cigarettes, his hope is that he can somehow smoke so much pot – "an insane and deliberately unpleasant amount" – that he shocks his system out of its repetitive sobriety-binge cycle and "cure

inescapability of it all, the illusion of transcendence that makes one even more a part of the crowd – and kudos to the critic for recognizing it in a way no one else probably could.

himself by excess” (22). Ironically, this logic is encouraging him to begin what is, effectively, another binge, in the same way that the effort to transcend reflexive interiority of self-critique necessarily involves another critical reflexive folding inward for Wallace. Like an addict, Wallace is incorrigible. He knows what trap he’s falling into with self-critical irony, and he knows that knowing what he’s doing doesn’t fix anything, but he can’t help himself, and on some level must suspect that knowing that he knows that knowing what he’s doing doesn’t fix anything might fix something. He must imagine that the next level of critique might get him out of the trap he’s analyzing, and as a result he forces himself to indulge in “an insane and deliberately unpleasant amount” of critical reflexivity. Scott doesn’t fail to catch this either, and he sums up Wallace’s similarity to Erdedy by imagining Wallace telling himself “If I blow my mind on self-consciousness this one last time [...] I’ll never go near it again.”

“New White Guys:” The Outside?

The notion that we are trapped within a cultural horizon of infinite reflexivity, a vapid *mise en abyme* of irony, cynicism, and self-consciousness, that we can only escape by doubling down on, needs to be interrogated. The idea, also supported by Wallace’s fans in Wallace Studies, that it takes a great deal of effort to be sincere is highly suspicious. It seems to be a distinctly Wallacian notion to begin with, and a notion likely more a reflection of someone who themselves has such a difficulty rather than a fair broad-brush cultural diagnosis. As Scott notes, “If one way to escape from the blind alley

of postmodern self-consciousness is simply to turn around and walk in another direction – which is in effect [...] what a great many very interesting writers, without making a big deal about it, simply do – Wallace prefers to forge ahead in hopes of breaking through to the other side, whatever that may be.” This, as Scott can’t help but notice, causes us to have doubts about whether we can take Wallace at his word, doubts that make efforts to establish Wallace as the head of a “new sincerity” generally pretty laughable. It is hard to believe, after all, that irony has ever been so pervasive that it has been the default assumption about every utterance. Yet, as Iain Williams notes, as a result of all of Wallace’s second guessing of himself and our presumed desire to read him ironically, this does end up becoming a sort of default assumption when reading Wallace. Williams rather astutely points out that, whatever Wallace’s intentions, “we can never finally shake the feeling that it is all part of an elaborate joke, an infinite jest” (302). Ironically enough, by being so concerned with our “inevitably” reading him ironically, Wallace has created the trap through his effort to escape it.

Was pervasive irony an annoying hipster and intellectual trait in the 90s? Of course. It still is! But the idea that it was inescapable seems, well, paranoid. We might suggest, following Kathleen Fitzpatrick, that Wallace was having a paranoid response – what Timothy Melley would call “agency panic” – to the diminishing social influence exerted by white male writers, to which Wallace responded by participating in the construction of an agency-threatening, monolithic, pernicious televisual culture, for him defined by an irony containing all aspects of life. This monolith preempts our every effort to critique it as transcendent outside observers – that is to say as purely autonomous and

insular agents – because of our containment within it. For Melley, agency panic and paranoia was felt by all in response to a threatened sense of liberal individuality and agency beginning in the period following WWII, though I would expand Melley's position and argue that this paranoia and panic about autonomy emerged in distinct ways for white men, whose cultural hegemony had been somewhat unchecked up to that point. For American white men in the second half of the 20th century, agency panic typically emerges as a kind of holding out against ground being lost in a zero-sum game with new social actors gaining ground in a contest of social agency. We can think of this in contrast to how agency panic and paranoia emerged, for example, for Black men, who have historically indulged in conspiracy theories that are more strongly rooted in actual realities of organized and coordinated oppression, and which often operate as strategies for addressing this coordinated oppression. We can see the substantial overlaps between Black paranoia and very real historical and contemporary events in Ishmael Reed's postmodern satirical masterpiece, *Mumbo Jumbo*, for example, a text that is often paired with Pynchonian paranoia as a Black counterpart of sorts.

Though the critique that Wallace anticipates most is a kind of postmodern – often white male – deconstructivist critique like the one I've been pursuing so far, there is another critique that he fears, one that he hints at when he refers to himself as a member of the "New White Guys" and when he compares white male writers to "tribal writers." Wallace longs for a time before TV's preeminence when "insights and guides to human value used to be among literature's jobs" ("E Unibus" 189). This also was conveniently a time when white men occupied the bulk of tenured positions in higher education and held

much of the power in publishing and literary or artistic discourses. It is no coincidence that, as Fitzpatrick has noticed, Wallace doesn't seem all too enthusiastic about the increasing attention writers of color, queer writers, and women writers were getting in the 90s. Fitzpatrick suggests that there is a feeling of being "excluded from a culture of exclusion, marginalized by a culture that is finally paying attention to the voices originating on the margins" reflected in Wallace's unfortunate white plighly complaint that "Tribal writers can feel the loneliness and anger and identify themselves with their subculture and can write to and for their subculture about how the mainstream culture's alienated them. White males are the mainstream culture. So why shouldn't we be angry, confused, lonely white males who write at and against the culture?" (qtd. in Fitzpatrick 209). Here Wallace seeks to represent himself as a marginalized bastion of resistance to pernicious cultural forces, a representation which obscures the actually lived social relations of marginality and resistance. It is important to note after all, that what Wallace chose to write "against" the dominant white culture could have easily involved some of the same concerns as "tribal writers." Yet rather than write in a way that critiqued racism, he chose to spend his critical energy on television as a universal cultural problem. His critique of television, however, has more to do with concerns about himself rather than concerns about culture. Fitzpatrick compellingly maps the ways that for postmodern writers like Wallace, "technological changes in contemporary culture serve as convenient masks for other, more threatening, social and political changes that confront the novelist" (26). In Wallace's case, these social and political changes involved what he perceived as a diminishing respect for white male authors.

It certainly seems as though Wallace felt trapped within his whiteness. He supposedly referred to the collection of 90s authors – including Eggars – that he was being associated with as the “New White Guys” (qtd. in Fitzpatrick 209). As Wallace was writing “E Unibus” and well before he finished *Infinite Jest* and much of his other work, the reappraisal of the American literary canon – through a race conscious lens in particular – was finally gaining enough steam to be on the radar of writers like Wallace and critics like Bloom, who would begin to complain about “the School of Resentment” in the 90s. Bloom would famously claim that the only works from the Black American literary tradition that deserved to survive into posterity were *Invisible Man* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Weiss).⁵¹ As Wallace began attempting to define himself as a great writer against the backdrop of his white canonical influences, Toni Morison was publishing *Playing in the Dark* in 1992, a text which proposed that, beyond simply neglecting the richness of Black cultural production, literary criticism had long neglected the relevance of Blackness to the “white” canon. Likewise bell hooks had begun writing and speaking about “postmodern blackness” and published *Teaching to Transgress* in 1994. These texts were part and parcel of a broader reassessment of a racially exclusionary canon that had a hard time grappling with the genius of writers of color precisely because they supposedly wrote “to and for their subculture” rather than from and about a mainstream white culture.

⁵¹ *Mumbo Jumbo*, absurdly, doesn’t make this cut apparently, but I get the sense that Bloom probably hasn’t read it.

At a moment when the whiteness of the canon was under fire, this “New White Guys” title seems to wryly acknowledge Wallace’s imbrication in the historical trends that have led to a disproportionately white canon – how “new” can they be, after all – and attempt to distance Wallace from those trends by acknowledging them and offering an ironic self-critique. Here, we can see how his reflexive performance of genius is an effort to escape and expand the boundaries of his subjective interiority and grow his intellectual and cultural capital in the face of cultural changes. His effort to demonstrate the expanded capaciousness of his subjective interior is, importantly, an effort in direct response to the growing acknowledgment of the richness of the intellectual interior worlds of people of color in the 90s, and the growing resistance to an automatic association of white masculine pontification and genius. Wallace seems to be scrambling to figure out how he can be a literary genius at a moment when people are increasingly skeptical of white men adopting this posture of genius and benefiting from its asymmetric power effects.

There is something troubling about the fact that, recognizing his supposedly awkward place in this new racially conscious literary landscape, Wallace’s move is to foreground the capaciousness of his subjective interiority through reflexivity. Sylvia Wynter argues that the racial hierarchies that have organized power in the world for the last several centuries have depended on an “over-representation” of a Western European ethno-class’s vision of what it means to be human. This situation has involved interpreting all that fits within the boundaries of “Man” as “supraculturally” human, and all that falls outside of those boundaries as somehow less than human to one degree or

another. She argues that “the criterion of reason” took the place of “the redeemed spirit” as the primary determining factor of this supposedly supracultural human in the modern period (287). The continental philosopher’s man who thinks about his thinking would be the standard by which the intellectual depth and, by proximity, humanity, of all humans would be measured. This rational Man occupied the top rung on the hierarchy of humanity and, as Wynter argues, Black people occupied the bottom rung.

I would expand her argument and say that, in the postmodern period, in both literature and philosophy, it seems our concept of Man shifted to favor a kind of meta-rational cognition – typically for its own sake in a “universal” or supracultural mode, rather than for “subcultural” or provincial purposes – in which questioning reason, is perfectly acceptable, as long as this kind of critique is within reason. What became most human was a vision of Man who not only thought about his thinking, but who thought about the fact that he thought about his thinking. In the hierarchy of humanity, Wallace seems to be attempting to repossess the cultural capital of his progenitors by participating in the creation of newer rungs at the top, so to speak, after the writers of color threatened to take their place alongside white authors. Once writers of color began to gain respect for the richness of their interior worlds – as humans perfectly capable of thinking about their thinking – it seems the white postmodern tradition sought to move the benchmark, even while authors like bell hooks⁵² and Ishmael Reed made clear that Black writers and intellectuals had a place in the postmodern literary and intellectual landscape.

⁵² See bell hooks’ “Postmodern Blackness.”

Despite Wallace's supposed desire to get outside of (white) identity, he seems curiously unwilling to engage with difference. As Williams seems to hint, Wallace's whole "post-irony" schtick is middle class over-educated white people solutions to middle class over-educated white people problems, posing as universal human solutions to universal human problems. But perhaps more importantly, his characters are overwhelmingly white and decidedly apolitical despite their ample opportunities to take any kind of stance. *Infinite Jest* does include some Black and brown characters "who only get mentioned for a couple paragraphs as they work in the background of Enfield Tennis Academy's program serving lunch and doing custodial duty" (Gandert). Despite his efforts to foreground the fact that "the background characters of life also have stories," Sean Gandert explains, "[Wallace] seems fundamentally incapable of imaging non-white characters in any but subservient or otherwise racist roles."

We can see this in the way *Infinite Jest* chooses to foreground interiority by shifting between third-person and first-person perspectives in the text. This shifting occurs differentially and tends to foreground the subjective interiors of white characters over characters of color, and at moments even chooses to foreground the inner thoughts of racists like Randy Lenz. By doing this Wallace does draw our attention to the racism that exists in the world in a way that could have been productively interrogated, but instead of interrogating the racism in characters like Randy Lenz, he doesn't really do anything with it. Again, Wallace pulls back at any moment he has a chance to offer a sincere critique. As Gandert puts it, "Wallace recognizes racism and that this is a hateful, harmful thing, but doesn't question its existence, doesn't problematize its role in the

world. Instead, he recreates it.” Wallace seems to recognize that there is a problem with recreating racism without somehow repudiating it in the plot or dialogue, because he draws our attention to the fact that he has censored certain racial slurs. Yet this is precisely the problem: he is so resistant to critique as a solution that he chooses instead to just awkwardly represent racism while removing its most egregious examples to hopefully stay on the right side of publishable and, if we’re being fair to Wallace, in a good faith *attempt* to do the right thing.

We can see this same effort to represent social injustice, without really critiquing it, in Wallace’s treatment of sexism. Wallace seems to acknowledge that the space of the domestic interior is a space that depends disproportionately on the labor of women to sustain the comfort of men. He clearly shows us that the interior is a place where women take care of men so they don’t have to take care of themselves. Interiority is denied to women but is formed for men by women. In this sense, Wallace’s concerns about a social retreat into womblike interiority are well-founded, though he understates the relevance of the asymmetric effects of this retreat. His understanding of the gendered nature of interior formation is evident, for example, in the scene in which Erdedy waits for the “woman who said she would come” (17), as well as in the novel’s general representation of the search for a quiescent womblike interior, represented in the presence of Joelle as a maternal presence in the “perfect entertainment” (318). However, little is done to offer a substantial critique of the gendered nature of this phenomenon, beyond implicitly observing that it is in fact gendered.

Wallace also recognizes that this gendered labor of constructing comforting interiors that provide men with the object of their desire occurs against a backdrop that denies women interiority as the objects of male desire. Orin, for example, is said to treat his “subjects” – as in, of an experiment – like objects, ironically. *Infinite Jest* perhaps does slightly better with a critique of sexism than it does with a critique of racism, since it provides a kind of critically potent revenge against Orin for his objectification. Wallace ends Orin’s story by trapping him like a bug beneath an “inverted glass [that] was the size of a cage or small jail cell, but it was still recognizably a bathroom-type tumbler” (*Infinite Jest* 971). This scene involves Orin’s “latest subject” “looking *at* his eyes rather than *into* them” from outside the tumbler. As he is tortured he screams “Do it to her! *Do it to her!*” (972). Here Orin is in an exaggerated interior that makes him the object of analysis by one of his subjects. Here the roles have been reversed, and in his quest for a richer subjective interiority at the cost of his female “subjects” he has been made the subject of study, which of course is an object without its interiority on display. Paradoxically, however, the novel runs against this reversal at the level of its form, by narrating Orin’s experience of being trapped through a third person omniscient narration that foregrounds his subjective interiority – to the point of narrating him deluding himself into thinking that he was dreaming – far more than his female subject/object.

The fact that Wallace is largely unable to say anything of real political substance that might turn attention away from himself is unredeemable. Everything for Wallace must instead turn into a jest that illustrates his genius. He exhibits an unwillingness to substantially critique racism despite noting racism, he is unwilling to sincerely critique

imperialism despite noting its pervasiveness, and he is unwilling to really just say that the nuclear family is an interior that promotes anti-social behavior, that the draconian imposition of competition and self-centered ambition onto children is creating a society full of inward-looking and apathetic individuals, and that scapegoating is a deeply troubling aspect of in-group formation that might be avoided by doing x, y, and z. Ultimately, he just makes a joke out of these issues, by critiquing them, yes, but then critiquing his critique of them, to show us that he gets how truly really complicated all of these problems are and how resistant they are to the kind of simple understandings that might come with a sincere critique. What is most troubling about his failure to critique the racism he represents, is that this resistance to critique is a part of his broader effort to protect an agency that he feels is compromised by the imperiled place of whiteness in a literary and academic community becoming more critical of racism.

Wallace's most sincere engagement with racial difference is with the alterity of white Canadians, which is of course not that sincere. In fact, it seems obviously laughable by design. Wallace sets up Canadians as the victims of a new kind of United States led imperialism that he calls "experialism." This experialism – not unlike modern global neoimperialism – operates under the guise of a mutual "interdependence," but essentially consists of the United States forcing Canada to take responsibility for land that the United States has polluted and filled with waste. His most sustained engagement with imperialism here is a satire of what imperialism looks like after Empire has become so total that imperial powers are actually trying to get rid of control over land. This is a satire that suggests naïve critiques of imperialist power struggles just don't quite get it.

The Canadians become the oppressed stewards of U.S. toxic waste in Wallace's experialist world. The obvious real world parallel to this is the historic targeting of Native American land for nuclear waste repositories in the United States. However, in *Infinite Jest* the primary victim of the United States' experialism are "Nucks" – a made up name for white French Canadians – rather than native people. The Nucks are a part of a broader parody of Quebecois separatism in the novel. Not only does Wallace fail to take the French Canadian separatist cause seriously, but he also conspicuously elides the Quebecois First Nations struggles that were gaining attention in the 90s, evidenced, for example, by the Oka crisis. There is something remarkable about Wallace's discomfort with engaging racial difference here. His artistic imagination is so inward looking that he must create white stand-ins for oppressed people of color, which reminds of Wallace's ultimate self-critique: "A dog, if you point at something, will look only at your finger," ("E Unibus" 160). Wallace's concern with the impossibility of transcending through critique – or even connecting with another person – seems to have led him to not even attempt to engage with racial difference.

Curiously, one of the closing scenes of the novel involves a battle royale in which the Nucks are beaten by some of the background characters who Wallace seems to have intended to be women of color. However, rather than turning this scene into a kind of opportunity for people of color to take their revenge against the Nucks – Wallace's laughable excuse for an engagement with racial oppression – and Randy Lenz – the racist character whose interiority is foregrounded above that of people of color – it simply works to reinforce racial stereotypes. The scene has "Clenette H. and Yolanda W. [...]"

circling them and getting solid high-heel kicks into the Nuck's and sometimes hopefully Lenz's ribs, reciting 'Motha-fucka' and landing a kick each time they get to fu" (*Infinite Jest* 614). The scene ends with injured and dead Nucks, one of whom has a spiked high heel through the eye. Here, Wallace makes a kind of joke out of their revenge by channeling it through a kind of blacksploitation parody that foregrounds the feistiness and physicality of the women of color.

Wallace's writing is profound yet wanting, comical yet frustrating, and emotionally compelling even while self-serving. He constructs intricate and engaging narratives that illustrate his literary talent in an elaborate performance of his own genius. This performance not only misses opportunities to offer powerful critiques, but promises critiques – of subjective, spatial, and behavioral interiority, as well as social injustices like racism, imperialism, and sexism – that it ultimately betrays by either pulling back from them at the last moment or never fully committing to them. However, at the risk of pulling back on my sincere critique, I'll say that this isn't a total repudiation of Wallace's writing. I find myself feeling guilty here, as though my inner suburban middle class, over-educated, self-aware adolescent has betrayed the Wallacian voice that was, at points, music to its ears. I by no means see Wallace's writing as unredeemable. It contains moments that exceed everything I've just said about it, moments of sentiment and honesty – about addiction and depression and self-consciousness – that refuse to be compromised by his jest. That is, after all, sort of the point that he relentlessly aimed for and missed isn't it: that everything *isn't* all hopelessly compromised by an infinite jest? To be sure, even parts of me likely not limited to my Wallacian inner infant were touched by brief

moments of sincerity in *Infinite Jest* in a way I haven't been by a novel in some time. And though I'm tempted to leave you here with a witty nod to the failures and ironies of my critique, perhaps in the spirit of Wallace's hope that the new generation of rebellious critique might transcend the temptation to avoid sentiment with recourse to irony, that they “might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, [...] the parody of gifted ironists” (“E Unibus” 193), I can't quite bring myself to.

Conclusion

What Does it Mean to Leave the Inside?

Wallace's failure to leave behind the overwhelming interiority that hamstrung not only the lives of his characters, but also his own capacity for critique, leads us to a closing question: if we know, at this point, what it means to be inside, what does it mean to leave interiority behind, and is this even possible? My exploration so far, has determined that the interior is a space that demands its transcendence and is in many ways formed by its transcendence. White masculine figures from the transcendentalists to the Beats to the "great American writers" of the postmodern canon have historically forged a greater sense of freedom and agency through their ambivalent orientation to the interior. They have called upon the interior to cultivate comfort and demonstrate intellectual capacity, and they have postured at leaving it behind in order to even further expand the comforts and freedom it offers. However, even in their resistant orientation to the interior, demonstrated in their projects to cultivate a kind of counter-interiority, 19th century Black American writers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, mid-20th century Black Beat poets like Bob Kaufman, and disaffected punks of post-suburban America, practitioners of "counter-interiority" – as the name suggests – do not necessarily "leave" the inside so much as articulate it otherwise through an alternate orientation to interiority. To answer what it means to leave the inside behind, requires grappling with the boundaries of this project.

Having perhaps dizzyingly traversed from the mid-19th century to the late 20th century, I find myself returning to Walter Benjamin's concern with "doing justice" to the

truth of a historical object. You'll recall that, for Benjamin, the truth of a historical object has as much to do with our current subjective interest in the object, as with the object itself, though there is perhaps something in Benjamin's formulation of this dialectic that refuses to fully enclose either the subject or the object. Here, at the end of this analysis of interiority as a cultural and historical "object," as I stare at my computer screen in neither the 19th nor the 20th century, I feel a need to address my current interest, which I find "preformed in that object" and which "feels this object concretized in itself" (*Arcades* 391). When I ask "What does it mean to leave the inside?" one might reasonably object that by beginning with the act of "leaving" I presume the interiority that I would hope to leave behind. A critically minded reader might wonder whether this interior/exterior dynamic I've been plotting throughout this project is merely a problematic way of thinking that I'm actually reproducing in my critique, partly because of my orientation to the interior as a white middle class male in higher education.

The immediate question that a concern with my current interest in interiority comes up against is: Am I caught in Wallace's trap? I think not. And I think my out here stems from the unenclosed nature of the subject and the object in Benjamin's mystical dialectic, in which a subjective orientation can find itself preformed in an object, and in which an object concretizes itself in a subjective orientation. Because of the unenclosed nature of the subject in a search for historical truth, I feel I have a bit more leeway here, than to simply replicate my subject position – and its current interest in interiority – in an exploration of what it might mean to leave the inside. Admittedly, I have of course risked undermining an effort to change the way interiority structures our living and thinking –

that is to say, to leave the inside – by leaning on it so readily in my critique thus far. That is, after all, one of the conundrums of critique: a critique must bring with it what it critiques, and perhaps for that reason a relatively traditional dissertation isn't the place to honestly explore and implement a mode of thinking and dwelling outside of an inside/outside dichotomy. Here I intend to invoke what Foucault calls the “the thought from the outside” (16) or what Fred Moten, following Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Édouard Glissant, and Black Atlantic slave culture, calls “the outside of the outside” (“The Black Outdoors”). Thankfully, the bulk of this dissertation has been concerned with exploring the inside, so accidentally bringing this inside into the outside of the outside hasn't been of major concern thus far. However, to leave this project on interiority, I'd like to at least offer up an exploration of leaving the interior for this outside of the outside, by exploring my present interest as an unenclosed interest.

If I remain true to the spirit of this project, and Benjamin's project of doing justice to the truth of history, I have no choice but to acknowledge that my present interest inevitably exceeds the enclosure that I imagine constitutes my subject position and relation to history, and despite whatever interest I might imagine is my own, I cannot isolate it from the interest of that which is supposedly outside of me. In that sense, my present interest in this project, though obviously deeply informed by my subjectivation as a white middle class male, also necessarily involves a desubjectivation that refuses to consolidate my interest – or promote such an interest – to the exclusion of the interest of the outside. As a result, my present interest in this project is informed as much by concerns about mass incarceration, poverty, violence, settler colonialism, and

homelessness, and the stakes for these of being outside of the outside, as it is by drug addiction, mental illness, and the alienation of suburban heteronormative futurity.

In their talk on “the Black Outdoors” Fred Moten, Sadya Hartman, Sarah Jane Cervenak, and J. Kameron Carter touch on all of the above in their attempt to conceptualize exteriority and its relationship with blackness. Like the figures I’ve explored, who concern themselves with Black counter-interiority, Moten and Hartman reject naïve Black interiority building projects that hope to offer liberal subjective interiority or domestic interiority to Black subjects as a part of a political project aiming for Black freedom or equality. However, beyond simply working toward crafting counter-interiors, the discussion that occupies “the Black outdoors” working group here aims to also map what it means to leave behind interiority altogether. Moten puts it succinctly when he says “Fuck a subject, I don’t wanna be one.” This is in part a refusal of what has been refused, to quote Moten again, but as Hartman points out – and makes even clearer in *Scenes* – it is also a necessary tactic in response to a strategic dispossession founded on the persistence of an inside/outside dichotomy in modern liberalism.

We can begin to see what “the outside of the outside” looks like – and what it might offer to those for whom the most is at stake – when we imagine a world without subjects, humans, dwellings, or states. In the course of their discussion, Cervenak brings up the recent shooting of a Black man in his car⁵³ as a way of pointing out the refusal of

⁵³ The shooting she brings up, of Keith Lamont Scott, actually occurred after he was ordered out of his car, though these facts had yet to come to light it seems. Regardless, the incident was emblematic of many similar incidents of Black men being made

the privileges of safe interiors to Black people in the context of what Hartman calls the “unceasing militarized violence against a civilian population.” Here, we might draw a useful connection to the Beats, and specifically to the difference between the comfort of white Beats in the interiors of their cars, and the exposure to state sanctioned violence and incarceration for a Black Beat like Bob Kaufman in the name of ensuring white safety. To imagine what it looks like to leave behind the interior and “be together in homelessness” in this context, we could point out that giving up the safe interior of the automobile for white subjects – which would mean giving up the need to protect white interiors from the threatening mobility of Black bodies like Kaufman’s and Scott’s – would mean giving up the very need for the automobile as an interior for the Black body that it can never seem to protect anyways. Carter suggests that abandoning such an interiority would constitute the kind of “outside of the outside” that Moten is concerned with, but that it would nonetheless come with challenges since “it doesn’t stop the bullets from flying.” But perhaps it does, when we consider the relationship of this state sanctioned violence and the state more broadly to interiority. By removing the demands of white interiority to be made safe from a threatening Black mobility by means of state sponsored violence, we deal a blow to the state’s *raison d’être*.

In fact, the outside of the outside would necessarily involve contending with histories of settler colonialism by, for instance, refusing the state as an enclosing project. This would mean refusing to legitimate the state sponsored violence that made possible,

vulnerable to state sanctioned violence in their cars or forced from their cars and then subjected to state sanctioned violence.

for instance, Thoreau's project of expansive dwelling on private land enclosed from a resistant native and fugitive outside, and that continues to make possible settler colonial enterprises everywhere. In discussing her preference for petit marronage over grand marronage, Hartman clarifies that grand marronage inevitably involves allegiances to sovereign states as an enclosure that refuses interiority to Black people. In her exploration of petit marronage, Hartman clarifies that petit marronage is her preferred mode of marronage because it refuses to enclose – in dwelling and through sovereignty – that outside that speaks to a Black resistance to enclosure. In her discussion of petit marronage – for example, involving the kind of slave dwelling on the outskirts of a plantation we see Douglass's protagonist Maddison Washington participating in – Hartman describes a practice that required slaves to hide so well that they left no traces of human habitation. This recalls Washington choosing a cave as his home and feeling at home with wild animals. Beyond simply cultivating a counter-interior here, Washington is perhaps working with the outside of the outside, by refusing the enclosure of humanity itself. Moten, following up on Hartman's insights, calmly says "Fuck the human, fuck human inhabitation," and I'm inclined to agree with him.

A common thread running through *The Undercommons*, as I've highlighted repeatedly, is that one thing we can learn from "the shipped" is that refuge is not necessary, and instead we should aim to be "together in homelessness" until we realize we've always been together in a kind of home before the project of dwelling inside – of minds or homes – ever began. One might object that this gets tricky when we start thinking about what homelessness and precarity actually mean to homeless people, and

what an interior reprieve can mean for people living in precarity. Do we need to put our seemingly rarified intellectual task of exteriorizing on hold for long enough to build interiors for the homeless? I think it was Chinua Achebe who, when contemplating academics who do their work in the name of some more marginal figure, humorously asked something like “when will the peasant have suffered enough for the intellectual?”

I think the answer to this question is “when the intellectual is genuinely willing to suffer for the peasant.” The problem we face is not a lack of dwelling spaces for the homeless. The problem we face is a mode of dwelling that demands enclosing spaces – many of them entirely unoccupied – in the name of a propertied individuality that benefits academics and mustache twirling bankers alike. When we imagine the outside of the outside then, we imagine a place in which figures like Washington – and the homeless faces that provoke Benjamin’s “poverty of experience” to this day – don’t need to ask for permission to inhabit white interiors during a storm, because everywhere and nowhere is everyone’s home. This kind of extreme dwelling in the outside of the outside seems to be alive and well today, for example, in the squatter ethos of the descendants of post-suburban punk.

I might finally expand the discussion of “the Black outdoors” by thinking about what the outside of the outside might look like in the context of our current system of warehousing Black men en masse to ostensibly protect the consolidated wealth and well-being of white people (Alexander). What might a world look like without this inside? One might complain that restorative justice cannot adequately grapple with all forms of crime we encounter today, but when we leave behind the interiority of disciplinary

subjectivity we find on the one hand, there is no one left to correct, and on the other hand, there is no one left to make amends to. Restorative justice, which depends on reconciling a disjunction between the individual and the community, only has shortcomings when we enclose the individual and enclose the community. In a true commons, a crime against anyone is a crime against everyone, yourself included. This wild and probably scoff-inducing display of naivete – I’m really running the other direction after seeing Wallace’s example! – in my discussion of criminal justice reform here brings us to our final conundrum.

When imagining a world that has left behind interiority, we must confront the question of such a world’s viability, beyond its desirability.⁵⁴ Seeming to anticipate concerns about the practicality of this kind of utopian vision, Harney and Moten laugh at the idea that their utopianism is “an abdication of political responsibility” (20). In response to this skepticism, they joke that “we’re just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life.” Rather than claim to be “responsible for politics” they offer that they are “the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicize, every imposition of self-governance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home” (20). They seem to offer that behind every political movement is an embattled orientation, or the assumption that the fight is between a surrounded political activism and a surrounding social order. But they provoke that “we got politics surrounded” in order to suggest that the social order is what is embattled, and that we need only to recognize our position surrounding it to affect our

⁵⁴ If we can even get that far...

change (20). The most practical answer, then, to the question of not only what it might look like to leave interiority behind, but how we might leave it, is that we need only to collectively recognize that we were never inside to begin with.

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