

BEYOND MOURNING: AFRO-PESSIMISM IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN  
AMERICAN FICTION

BY

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## Abstract

This thesis engages questions about the relationship between black life and black pain within the confines of a racist society to defend black subjects from the continued violence of systemic racism. Through a reading of three contemporary African American fiction texts, this thesis considers the implications of reading black life through its relationship to systemic racist violence to consider the possibilities of futures for black life beyond this circumscription of a relationship to black pain. This thesis reads *Citizen: An American Lyric*, *Between the World and Me*, and *Get Out* as texts which share a similarly afro-pessimistic understanding of black life as defined by this relationship to systemic racist violence. These readings protest the precariousness of black life to everyday racist violence by offering space for empathetic engagement between black subjects and a wider (white) readership. These texts insist that readers engage with the pain of racial embodiment, particularly the haunting awareness of history of racist violence and the fear of anticipating one's own victimization to racist subjection. These texts demand a future for black subjectivity in which black life is not constructed by its relationship to black pain. This thesis considers the different possibilities these texts imagine for black life beyond its circumscription by a history of racist subjection to imagine what freedom could look like for black subjectivity.

## Introduction

In “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning,” Claudia Rankine describes the emotional toll of living in a systemically anti-black state as a black subject. She describes the fear in constantly anticipating a wide range of anti-black violence, in which even everyday actions threaten to give way into potentially lethal encounters. This constant anticipation of violence infuses black life with an aesthetic of mourning because “at any moment [you] might lose your reason for living” due to the precariousness of black life (Rankine, “The Condition...”). Rankine protests the ordinariness of systemic anti-black violence which constantly reduces black lives to disposable black bodies. She advocates for black subjects to protest their vulnerability to the tradition of white Americans “assimilat[ing] corpses into their daily comings and goings” in racist processes of black death (Rankine, “The Condition...”). Reading black life through its relationship to systemic racist violence participates in contemporary African American fiction’s investment in protesting this status quo of anti-black subjection. This thesis considers the relationship between racial embodiment, violence, and affect to engage questions about the relationship between black life and black pain in a systemically racist society. Through a study of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, *Between the World and Me*, and *Get Out*, this thesis reads these texts’ anticipation of racist violence as similarly mournful visions of black life as framed by systemic racist violence. These texts ultimately resist the notion of black life defined by racist violence, protesting the systemic subjection of black subjects by imagining the possibilities for black life beyond racist violence. This thesis considers the political possibilities which emerge for black life in this reading of the relationship between a systemically anti-black world and black subjects.

The attitude of mournfulness in black life which anticipates racist violence stems from an afro-pessimistic vision of black life in an inherently anti-black world. In this viewpoint, black subjects possess an acute awareness of black life as a form of subjective alterity, in which the perception of racial blackness as an undesirable, othered quality in an anti-black world provokes racist hostility. This otherness produces a sense of hypervisibility in which a subject's demarcation by racial blackness precipitates a constant sense of frightened vulnerability for black subjects as they move through an anti-black world. In a systemically anti-black society, this hypervisibility operates as "an imposed incapacity" upon black life, in which the "the general incapacity...of a world 'structured by anti-Black solidarity' to appreciate the sentience, much less the sapience, of those marked by racial blackness" circumscribes black subjects with the cognitive dissonance in being conditioned to see oneself as inherently loathed in society (Sexton, "Unclear"). This cognitive dissonance follows black subjects as a type of self-consciousness in the "sense and awareness of precarity" of black life under systemic racism. Black subjects find themselves constantly surrounded by reminders of systemic racism's suppression of black life, which emerge in the form of "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment," among a host of legitimized acts of anti-black violence (Sharpe 5). The alterity of black life assumes a mournful aspect because these acts of subjection devalue black life to the point of making it disposable. This systematic racist subjection operates through legitimized, systematic processes of black death, which is "normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary: it is the ground we walk upon" (Sharpe 7). This

afro-pessimistic reading of violent racist subjection objects to the normalized horror of anti-black violence and black death in the American space.

This theoretical orientation understands contemporary actions of systemic anti-black violence and oppression as the legacy of American slavery. Afro-Pessimism focuses on the event of “transatlantic slavery [that] was and is the disaster” which organizes a history of anti-blackness in the United States that is “marked by lynched black bodies” (Sharpe 5, Rankine, “The Condition...”). These arguments read slavery as the focal point of interpreting American blackness, understanding the long history of violently enforced white supremacy as slavery’s “still unfolding aftermaths” (Sharpe 2). This notion conceptualizes systemic anti-blackness as a long historic legacy extending from the overt subjection of black life in slavery and Jim Crow to the subtler, more insidious contemporary anti-black systems of mass incarceration and police brutality. By interpreting the tradition of black subjection through the figure of the slave, afro-pessimism understands the historical and structural underpinnings which produce American anti-blackness. The figure of the slave reads blackness and being in the contemporary American moment as part of a historical trauma in which “ontological and gratuitous...violence towards the black body is the precondition for the existence of...the modern bourgeois-state” to “generate...the coherence of white life” (Wilderson 229, 232). The figure of the slave signals anti-black subjection as an essential formative action for America, necessitating the continuance of anti-black violence across this long history of afterlives. This understanding of afterlives in a tradition of subjection underscores the urgency of defending contemporary black life from normalized processes of violence. This thesis explores such a defense of black life in contemporary African American

fiction through texts which invite a wider readership into spaces of empathetic engagement with black subjects.

However, this relationship between anti-black violence and the figure of the slave also presents a potentially totalizing view of black life as constitutively defined by black pain, flagging a major tension in reading black subjectivity through this singular focus on systemic, often lethal, subjection. Afro-pessimism understands the mournful “conditions of Black life as it is lived near death, as deathliness,” but a relation which runs the risk of defining black life by its vulnerability to a whole range of racist violence (Sharpe 7-8). This equation of blackness with black pain is politically troubling because it does not imagine a version of black subjectivity that can exist without the overwhelming horror of black death. This reading does not believe black subjectivity can exist, imagining black life as little more than black pain. Instead, afro-pessimism insists that black life operates in spite of, albeit constantly aware of, black pain, in which the fact of black life itself is an act of resistance to the circumscription of systemic anti-blackness. To counter the totalizing view of black life reduced to the political impossibility of black pain, “Black people everywhere and anywhere. . . still produce in, into, and through the wake [of systemic anti-blackness] an insistence on existing: we insist Black being into the wake” which would have blackness consumed by “Black death and trauma” (Sharpe 11). Although black life lives in constant awareness of black death, the two must be seen as interrelated instead of equated because “black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject” (Sexton, “The Social Life” 28). Instead, the very fact of black life in its state of alterity speaks to the remarkable resistance of black subjectivity in spite of its relationship to death. Black subjectivity

resists a long history of violently enforced systemic anti-black oppression in the defiance of its continued existence.

In light of the exceptionality of black subjectivity due to the tight interrelatedness between black life and black death, this thesis explores the political futures that can be imagined for black subjects circumscribed by and living in the midst of this history of systemic subjection. Recent interventions in afro-pessimism especially raise the question of “What kind of politics might be possible across this gap” between black life and racist subjection, opening space in an otherwise totalizing vision of black life to imagine a political future in which black subjectivity is not inherently defined by or interpreted through its relationship to systemic anti-black violence (Sexton, “Social Life...” 31). This project explores these possibilities for black life through a multi-genre examination of contemporary African American texts. This project focuses on texts which share similarly afro-pessimistic visions of black life in a systemically anti-black American world. This project asks whether black subjects can be defined beyond their relationship to racist subjection by exploring the different possibilities that emerge from an afro-pessimistic reading of black life. This project explores these possibilities through the potentialities of the generic forms of lyric poetry, epistolary memoir, and horror-satire film to engage with empathy. By examining the different possibilities across these genres, this thesis considers the different “ways [black subjects] resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence” of black death and systemic anti-black violence through the potentiality of these different generic forms (Sharpe 13).

My first chapter defines an afro-pessimistic vision of contemporary black American life through a reading of Claudia Rankine’s poetry collection *Citizen: An*

*American Lyric*. This chapter reads the collection's poetic narration as an account of the toll of racial embodiment for black subjects. Rankine's narration reads black life through the emotional wear of constantly anticipating racist violence in a systemically racist society. This emotional state of fearful anticipation lends black life a mournful aesthetic in which black subjects grieve the constant possibility of black death, even before lethal acts of racist violence occur. Racial embodiment in moments of racist imposition leads black subjectivity to anticipate the possibility of death due to the constancy of violently enforced systemic racist subjection. *Citizen*'s manipulation of lyric conventions immerses readers in the complicated layers of affect that shape black being in the midst of systemic anti-blackness, creating a space for empathetic engagement with black subjects. This chapter attends to the emotional responses available to black citizens as they live "in the wake" of this constant, systemic anti-blackness, tracing the potentiality of different responses to this mournful vision of black life which constantly anticipates systemic racist violence and black death. By reading *Citizen*'s notion of the imposition of racial embodiment as an act violence, Rankine's mournful account of racial embodiment advocates for black life, protesting its vulnerability to a wide range of racist violence that spans a long history of systemic anti-blackness. Although this chapter primarily focuses establishing an afro-pessimistic vision of black life in contemporary American anti-blackness, its reading of the collection's lyric narration as a space for empathy demands intervention from its white readership, insisting on space to imagine political futures for black citizens in which their subjectivity can exist beyond the circumscriptions of systemic anti-blackness. With this definition and its subsequent activating political demand, the following chapters of this thesis consider two possibilities for imagining

black subjects' political futures in an afro-pessimistic reading of contemporary American blackness and being.

My second chapter turns to a consideration of the curious popular embrace of Ta-Nehisi Coates' nihilistic afro-pessimistic reading of black life in his polemical memoir *Between the World and Me*. This chapter considers the concerning political implications of Coates' popular embrace as a preeminent social commentator on race, given the totalizing configuration of black citizens and systems of power he imagines in his memoir. Although the intimate urgency of Coates' memoir offers a moving account of his experience of navigating an anti-black world in a black body, the popular embrace of Coates' fearfully afro-pessimistic vision of blackness in the contemporary American space holds troubling political implications. In the face of his totalizing fear of racist violence, Coates' institutional focus on systemic anti-blackness forecloses political possibility because he conceives of systemic anti-blackness as an insurmountable power. This nihilism presents a disappointing outcome of an afro-pessimistic understanding of black life which seems to read blackness as impossibility. This totalizing impossibility imagines even potentially activating political moments, such as Coates' configuration of black bodies and movement, as tightly circumscribed by anti-blackness with no possibility of change. This chapter questions the totalizing possibility of an afro-pessimistic ethos through the simultaneity of Coates' deeply moving mournful warning of the dangers of systemic racism and the troubling prohibition of possible political futures for black life in the American space.

Finally, my third chapter reads Jordan Peele's horror-satire film *Get Out* as an afro-pessimistic vision of black life that ends in a thrilling alternative to nihilism that

imagines the possibility of political futures for black life in a rejection of systemic anti-blackness. Through an aesthetic of dread and fear, Peele's insistence that the audience align with the film's black protagonist animates his vision of the precarious nature of black life's vulnerability to constant white supremacist threats of violence. However, the mediation of horror with comic irony creates space for a fantasy of black life that can escape the confines of the constant, everyday threat of white supremacist anti-black violence. In this vision, black life operates in a space of possibility through the protection of a community which can mediate the emotional wear of moving through an anti-black world in a black body by refusing to participate in the logics of whiteness. The film protests the vulnerability of black subjects to the horrific isolating effects of white supremacist violence against black bodies, particularly the white supremacist manipulation of black pain, ultimately insisting on the potentiality of political futurities for black life that can flourish in spite of its embodiment by the threat of systemic anti-black violence and black death.

This collection of contemporary African American authors advocate for black life by inviting their audience to empathetically engage with black subjects. Their common focus on black bodies, combined with language of affect, give an account of the fraught complexities of racial embodiment. The fear of moving in an anti-black state in a black body particularly underscores the complex emotional responses that emerge with feeling oneself to be under scrutiny in the midst of moving through the world as a visibly racial other. Contrary to the mythos of a post-racial American space, these black subjects know that they are racially embodied in a state that remains markedly anti-black, leaving them fearing vulnerability to anti-black violence in a state that systemically devalues black life.

This thesis proposes that black writing in this moment offers insight into the interiorities of black subjects to by allowing a wider readership to engage the emotional wear of the constant mournful anticipation of racist violence that accompanies racial embodiment. This offer of empathetic engagement advocates for black life by urgently insisting on its precariousness, carrying out the charge to “defend the dead” (Sharpe 10). This afro-pessimistic ethos in contemporary African American fiction insists on care for black life in the midst of systemic racist subjection to imagine the potentiality of black life that is possible in spite of the circumscription of this systemic disenfranchisement, and perhaps even beyond these confines.

## Chapter 1

### Poetic and Politic: Racial Embodiment in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) debuted to an astounding level of critical praise. These reviewers marvel at *Citizen*'s urgency, calling it a "groundbreaking" and "especially vital book for this moment in time" with an "arresting" and "radical portrait of our 'post-racial' society" that has "punctured the consciousness of the country" ("*Citizen: An American Lyric*," *Graywolf Press*).<sup>1</sup> *Citizen*'s portrayal of contemporary experiences of anti-black racism felt so timely at the moment of its debut because it was written in the wake of Trayvon Martin's death and published in the months of growing protests in Ferguson after Michael Brown's death. With this incredible timing, *Citizen*'s portrayal of the embodied experience of contemporary anti-black racism entered into the critical debate raised by the coalescing Black Lives Matter movement, which was on the cusp of gaining national recognition as a protest movement. *Citizen*'s account of experiential racism grieves for black Americans and their vulnerability to systemic anti-black violence, expressing an investment in honoring black life that the state relegates to the social margins. *Citizen* insists on the insidious presence of anti-black racism as an everyday occurrence in American life, affirming the ongoing danger of white supremacy that threatens black citizens with racist violence that is both constant and ordinary.

With this espousal of the everyday violence that systemically devalues black life, *Citizen* considers the emotional and physical wear of systemic racism on black Americans by revising the conventional portrayal of black pain. Rankine's narration does

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<sup>1</sup> These quotes are excerpted from reviews in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Guardian*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *Stranger*, all of which Graywolf Press cite on their webpage for *Citizen*.

not permit the distance of a spectator through the traditional display of a violated black body in which evidence of pain appeals for the victim's humanity. Instead of relying on such a spectacle to elicit empathy, *Citizen* presents a narrative of racialized embodiment, in which Rankine's narrator finds her sense of her subjectivity shaped by the racist stereotypes projected upon her black body by a white onlooker. This chapter considers Rankine's notion of racial embodiment through Alexander Weheliye's term *habeas viscus*, in which the idea of blackness creates a "distinct assemblage" of the human (Weheliye 12). This conceptualization of racial subjectivity originates in the white gaze in acts of violence, casting blackness into "spaces of exception" through the systemic "barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human" in processes of othering (Weheliye 3). This notion of embodiment facilitates the consideration of a raced subject's affective responses to moments of violent racist othering. With this shift in orientation, *Citizen* invites its readers to *see with* black Americans in their experience of vulnerability as a raced citizen instead of merely *looking at* black bodies in positions of subjection. *Citizen's* readers have the opportunity to empathize with black Americans as they move with the text's speaker through a series of escalating racist encounters. These encounters position black citizens as hypervisible bodies in both the everyday transgressive microaggressions and acts of extreme anti-black violence. This continuum of racist violence accumulates in the speaker's body, revealing the constant emotional toll of living as a black citizen in a society ordered by anti-black racism. In these encounters, the speaker feels herself both take on and take in these racist encounters in emotional responses, raising questions of how much pain a body can be expected to hold. As these scenes slip from accounts of microaggressions to outright physical violence, the text's

language aches, eliciting visceral emotional responses which invite the reader to grieve with the speaker.

This chapter considers the relationship between black pain and mourning in black life by reading *Citizen*'s narration as a mournful account of the pain of racial embodiment. This chapter will read the collection's narration as an innovation of lyric poetry through modifications of conventions which offer insight into the interiority of a black American during these encounters with anti-black racism. Various critics have classified *Citizen* as documentary, testimonial, and elegiac poetry, all of which relate to the collection's configuration of poetic speaker and reader in narration from a modified lyric subject. Rankine replaces the conventional lyric "I" with a second person pronoun, a substitution whose point-of-view narration collects a montage of different experiences into an individual poetic body. This collection allows readers to witness how the scope of systemic racism wounds individuals through the constancy of racist encounters. With this point-of-view narration from a raced lyric subject, Rankine allows readers to explore the narrator's different affects which emerge from these encounters, giving *Citizen* an aesthetic of bodily weariness in the face of constant moments of invasive, potentially deadly, racist violence. This narrative device illustrates the speaker's sense of circumscribed subjective agency in these encounters, in which her racialized subjectivity leaves her feeling as if her individuality has been reduced to her black body. Simultaneously, this narration describes dueling feelings of urgency and helplessness to address the different available political responses in these encounters, illustrating the wear of the accumulative effects of these different affects through the use of enjambment. *Citizen* considers how this constant process of negotiation gives way to grief over the

systemic injustices which circumscribe black life, revealing a mournful vision of the toll of living within the body of a raced subject.

*Citizen* explores its portrayal of racial embodiment by entering into a tradition of black poetry that is deeply invested in deploying a distinctly black aesthetic for political statements. In *Renegade Poetics*, Evie Shockley identifies a trajectory of innovation in twentieth-century black female poetry into which Rankine could be placed as a twenty-first century successor. Shockley considers the long tradition between poetics and politics, focusing on the 1960s Black Arts Movement as an origin point for a distinctly black aesthetic. She situates her study within an ethos which insists on “the interconnectedness of culture and politics,” which in turn allows her to explore Black poetic innovation as “rebellious, nonconformist approaches” to aesthetics (3, 15). With this focus on formal innovation in Black poetics, Shockley examines the “multifarious, contingent non-delimited complex of strategies that African American writers may use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing” which attempts to navigate “a poetics in the context of a racist society” (9). This emphasis on innovation in experimental poetry resists monolithic claims about Black art, instead privileging the “subjectivity produced by the experience of identifying or being interpolated as ‘black’ in the U.S.” through forms of active engagement (9). While *Citizen* exists outside the historical scope of Shockley’s study, Rankine’s investment in creating art that speaks to distinctly black experiences takes up the focus of Shockley’s study through a confrontation of contemporary American anti-black racism. This shared attention to political movement in black art presents an opportunity to use black poetry to explore the

interiority of this produced subjectivity, particularly the emotional toll of racial embodiment.

Shockley's gestures toward experiences of black individuality and interiority introduces the potentiality of affect as an aesthetic tool in this politically-minded poetics. While Shockley does not directly attend to embodiment, this stance creates space that can consider the role of embodiment in black artists-as-citizens in their subjective positions of alterity in the way that Rankine deploys through her use of formal poetic innovation. Shockley's description of Black experimental poets as "renegades" identifies the "othered" position Black Americans inhabit in an anti-black culture, which in turn emphasizes the potentiality for Black artists to explore marginalized experiences through moments that emphasize the "otherness" of black bodies. Rankine extends this renegade poetics by considering the cost of racial embodiment through an articulation of the pained affective responses to racist encounters which undercut autonomy in black subjectivity. This term "renegade" presents a sense of dislocation from dominant culture in the relationship between black aesthetics and formal innovation in experimental works that emerge from racialized frameworks (15). Shockley's focus on experimental poetry born from "those instances when such race-related wrangling has led the poet beyond what experience has shown will do the job" gestures toward a feeling beyond the space of the everyday, into some alternate space outside of the world ordered by whiteness (9). For Claudia Rankine, this space of alterity emerges when black individuals are subjected to racist othering, producing a feeling of dislocation stemming from encounters in which "the meanings of race are more amorphous, and the operation of racism is more difficult

to articulate” (Shockley 198). *Citizen* can be read as an exploration of the insidious toxicity of language in these racist encounters which produce such feelings of dislocation.

Rankine opens *Citizen* by immersing the reader in this feeling of dislocation. In the early sections of the collection, *Citizen* narrates a series of encounters in which black citizens experience the unsettling feeling of everyday encounters disrupted by microaggressions. The scenes describe moments in which time seems to freeze, but each individual scene unfolds and passes quickly. This troubling montage at once submerges the reader into the feeling of imbalance while speeding them through an unfolding series of similar moments of failed encounter. The insult of being mistaken for another black person slips into the discomfort of hearing white people unexpectedly code switch, which in turn escalates into the horror of being subjected to complaints about Affirmative Action-mandated diversity hires and university admissions practices, or the assumption of a black body entering a predominantly white space as an act of intrusion (Rankine 7, 10, 13, 15, 18, 41). In each of these vignettes, the “sensory shocks” of these disrupted everyday moment emerge in the speaker’s stunned question, “What did you say?” which echoes through the early portion of the collection (Frost 187; Rankine 14, 41, 43). The breathless barrage of similarly double-taking questions, “Who said that? She said what? What did he just do? Did she really just say that? He said what? What did she do? Did I really hear what I think I heard?” underscore the overwhelming constancy of these moments in which the speaker finds everyday movement through the world disrupted by these moments of racist othering (Rankine 63).

With this sense of disorientation, the speaker finds herself subjected to the shock of feeling herself to be racially embodied in these moments of racist othering. The

speaker conceptualizes her embodiment by locating her responses to these moments in her body. The speaker's refrain of shocked questions reveals her "corporeal reaction to language" of racist moments that "evades cognition" (Frost 187). In these moments, her bodily reactions to these encounters serve as symptoms of the physical and emotional toll of being subjected to constant acts of racism. The speaker's sense of shock at the initial action slips into a sense of heightened awareness of her marginalized status as a black citizen in which her body is positioned "front and center" (Rankine 8). With this shift to her body, the speaker feels hypervisible, with her body under the intense scrutiny of being "thrown against a sharp white background" (Rankine 25). In this "unsettled feeling," the speaker perceives her offense over these everyday racist encounters through physiological bodily responses, in which "certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs" (Rankine 7, 8). Besides this catalogue of symptoms that emerge from racist encounters, the speaker describes her affects produced in these encounters, considering their production as the transmission of these encounters into her receiving body. The speaker feels her body absorb the moment as a sort of pathogen. Her initial sense of horrified bafflement over the "wrong words [which] enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth" does not protect her from the effect of these words; she finds herself taking these words into her body, which make her feel sick (Rankine 8). This language of visceral physical reactions to these events reveals the physical and emotional wear of being subjected to these encounters.

However, at times, the speaker entertains the choice of engaging these moments by intervening in them, recognizing the possibility of countering these feelings through a moment of political intervention. In the piece "You are in the car..." the speaker

considers reacting to her colleague's complaint about being made to "hire a person of color" to follow Affirmative Action hiring practices "when there are so many great writers out there" (Rankine 10). After this comment, the speaker's initial feeling of shock-as-illness quickly gives way to anger. In her reactive momentary disbelief, she cycles through a rapid-fire set of self-conscious scenarios stemming from the corporeal sensation of hypervisibility, initially wondering if "this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something" (Rankine 10). Her initial reactions are self-reflexive, directed inward due to a wish for a rational, if unfair, justification of how this exchange is possibly "an okay conversation to be having" (Rankine 10). With this very question, the speaker's line of inquiry turns outward, as she lands upon the furious question "Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me?" (Rankine 10). With this shift of direct address in the speaker's interior monologue, she issues an unsaid challenge that seems poised to precede an active verbal challenge. With this activating response, she rejects her colleague's distinction between race and talent as mutually exclusive qualities in a job candidate. The speaker seems to prepare herself to enter this exchange by confronting this microaggression, but she recognizes that confrontation not necessarily feasible. Instead, it serves as one of several choices available among many affective responses.

In this moment of potential intervention, Rankine's speaker also contemplates the possibility of expressing her anger as a way to resist the totalizing paralysis she feels after these microaggressions. The speaker's turn to anger presents a potential path to break out of this moment constrained by a microaggression. For a split second, she entertains the desire for an outside force to disrupt this encounter with the "wish [that] the light would

turn red or a police siren would go off so you could slam on the brakes, slam into the car ahead of you, fly forward so quickly both your faces would suddenly be exposed to the wind” (Rankine 10). With this fantasy, the speaker considers the political possibility of a violent moment of disruption to challenge the status quo contained in this moment. This act of disruption would force this moment into the light instead of merely allowing it to pass “in the dark,” refusing the colleague’s disparagement of black writers’ talent and qualification (Rankine 10). Because the poem opens with language of consumption with the image of “the black-tarred road being swallowed by speed,” the speaker indicates that the stakes of this encounter hinge upon her colleague’s slight as infringement on black citizens’ right to dignity. If she were to articulate her anger, she would overturn the expectation for her passive, silent acceptance of this aggression. The speaker considers engaging a politics of refusal by entering into the interaction, inhabiting and rejecting the exchange by using her anger as a small-scale act of revolutionary violence and political disruption.<sup>2</sup> This instinctive reaction offers a glimmer of possibility to overturn the paralysis of these inflicted microaggressions.

However, the poem’s subsequent focus on silence underscores the weight of this possible encounter, presenting with this additional choice the stakes of negotiating moments of imposed racialized embodiment. This consideration of silence underscores the personal risk for the black subject in navigating these encounters. While this turn to silence seems to curtail the political possibility of the speaker’s violent impulse, this

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<sup>2</sup> See Therí Pickens’ article “The Verb is No: Towards a Grammar of Black Women’s Anger” for her reading of Rankine’s essay on Serena Williams’ engagement with anger as a black female celebrity under constant, elevated scrutiny in the public eye. Pickens proposes the political possibility of black women’s anger which “functions as one of those ruptures of silence and an affective charge and emotional experience that resonates interpersonally and politically” in an active rejection of the moment of microaggression (Pickens 16).

choice merely reflects a change in the directionality of the speaker's affective response. An inwardly-oriented decision to maintain silence serves as a self-protective measure by not risking further vulnerability in confrontation. Rankine's awareness of the role of negotiation operates similarly to Sharpe's conception of "wake work," which explores this notion of living with and in spite of constant racist subjection, and the mournful wear of the constancy of this ongoing process. For Sharpe, "Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror" over vulnerability to such racist attacks as "the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies" (15). Similarly, Rankine's speaker's choice of silence reveals the emotional difficulty of resisting these moments of imposed racial embodiment; engagement has the dangerous potential to exacerbate the physical and emotional wear of navigating the world in a raced body, where moments like these will be frequent. Rankine makes a similar concession to Sharpe in this moment, who considers the perilous role of potentially "deadly repetition" as "one instantiation of the wake as the conceptual frame of and for living blackness in the diaspora" under an anti-black context (Sharpe 2).

Rankine's speaker anticipates this encounter in the car as one such repetition, therefore granting her choice of silence a significant portion of political work in the form of self-preservation under her colleague's imposition of racial embodiment. When she wearily laments that "as usual you drive straight through the moment," she recognizes that she has faced moments like this one often enough to anticipate an "expected" denouement (Rankine 10). She also realizes that, under a constant barrage of similar racist attacks, she has to choose her battles because "confrontation is headache-

producing” (Rankine 10). Sometimes a person just has to focus on getting to the other “destination that doesn’t include acting like this moment isn’t inhabitable,” that does not force the speaker into taking on every racist aggression she faces (Rankine 10). While this choice could be read as a failure of engagement,<sup>3</sup> this decision also works to resist the notion of black life lived “simply or only in subjection and as the subjected,” which would be emphasized in a moment of confrontation (Sharpe 4). Instead, this choice operates alongside Sharpe’s notion of black life in the wake as a form of awareness, or political consciousness, which resists the totality of racist subjection. In this constant process of negotiation and deciding whether or not intervention is worth the emotional toll, Rankine’s speaker’s decision to pass through this particular moment in silence performs a necessary action of self-preservation and care. Although this decision is motivated by a complex knot of affective responses, this refusal to confront the moment performs its own political work in preserving the black citizen from additional racist harm.

This nuanced expression of a complex tangle of embodied emotions facilitates Rankine’s engagement with lyric conventions to articulate the emotional uncertainty of finding oneself racially embodied.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, *Citizen* manipulates the lyric “I” by deploying a second person pronoun whose addressee shifts between inward and outward

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<sup>3</sup> See Pickens, who reads this and similar moments of silence in *Citizen* as a failure to perform the politics of refusal. However, I would argue that this choice of silence also performs refusal’s political work, as it allows the speaker to claim the sanctity of preserving her inner life while resisting the paralysis of finding herself on the spot in this moment of hypervisibility.

<sup>4</sup> Pickens considers the way in which Rankine’s meditation on Black women’s anger destabilizes the affective expectation of the lyric form, saying “If the lyric promises direct feelings from a speaker or an effusive display of clearly defined emotion, the rest in uncertainty performs a willful disregard of the lyric’s purported aim. The poem is blackened” by its engagement with Black women’s anger, and “The poem defies the forthright emotional expectation of the lyric by participating in the creation of a murky emotional landscape” (20).

subject positions. Generally, the lyric “you’s” identify either the speaker or one of the many offensive white people inflicting the microaggression. With this constantly shifting lyric “you,” *Citizen*’s slippery address leaves readers constantly asking how the poems configure the relationship between subject and object. This turn toward the lyric “you” of direct address underscores the collection’s portrayal of embodied affect by “call[ing] attention to the speaker, who uses the second person—which might be the reader addressing herself, but it also is suggestive of...an address to the reader, implicating her” in these scenes of microaggressions, thereby blurring the distinction between the different parties (Flynn et al). The speaker’s description of her reactions to a microaggression presents a series of questions that quickly slip from inwardly-directed monologue to an outwardly directed accusation as she asks, “did you just hear, did you just say, did you just see, did you just do that?” (Rankine 55). In this shift from double-take to accusation, the quick juxtaposition between self-reflective and investigative inquiries complicates attempts to parse the addressee. In this space of ambiguity, the speaker gestures beyond her own bodily experience, seeming to ask for a corroborating witness from outside the text. This manipulation of the pronoun’s direction raises questions of how *Citizen*’s readers should position themselves in relationship to the speaker’s ambiguous mode of self-address which is circumscribed by her deeply emotional description of racialized embodiment.

At many points, the speaker’s “you” points inward, inviting readers to inhabit and engage the speaker’s position as a raced subject. When the speaker reflects on her constant, instinctive reaction to these encounters, her use of the second person pronoun illustrates the tension between her embodiment as a racial other and her individuality.

This second person narration performs the function of self-talk as an attempt to maintain control through emotional distancing under a barrage of racist insults. This attempt to create distance through interior monologue almost reads as an out-of-body experience, particularly when the speaker supplements the second person with “the voice in your head” as further subjective distinction (Rankine 55). This distancing gesture voices the speaker’s plea for reprieve, expressing the desire to escape the imposition of racial embodiment, which she conceptualizes as a feeling in which “You take in things you don’t want all the time” out of her own body (Rankine 55). She wishes instead to be able to dictate her own embodiment like her friend who “refuses to carry what doesn’t belong to her” (Rankine 55). This scene underscores Rankine’s questions over the possibility of resistance for individuals who feel their subjectivity to be formed by these racist encounters, in the face of the exhausting focus on their own corporeality. In articulating this painful feeling of double-taking as “your foot” on “your throat,” the speaker expresses her longing desire to place the onus of these unwanted experiences onto someone else (Rankine 55). The reader inhabits the speaker’s intense feeling of vulnerability in these encounters from “The second you hear or see some ordinary moment” with “all its intended targets, all the meanings behind the retreating seconds, as far as you are able to see, com[ing] into focus” (Rankine 55). As the reader engages with this scene, the speaker’s narrative vantage point allows the reader to affirm her experience as a witness to the pain of being racially embodied.

While the speaker’s lyric “you” allows readers to inhabit her narrated experience, eruptions of apostrophe from this lyric “you” thrust the second person address beyond the poem to implicate white readers in this subjection of black Americans to the pain of

racial embodiment. The speaker signals this shift in the pronoun's direction through interrogative direct address. Accusing questions echo throughout the collection, forcing the other party in these racist encounters to stop and acknowledge the offenses they have committed with the speaker's insistent demand to know "Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me?" and, even more directly, "What is wrong with you?" (Rankine 10, 54). These questions demand that white readers consider their own position in these types of encounters through an insistent implication that "we have been that blind and opaque man, sometimes" (Capildeo). These gestures beyond the circumscribed events of the poems turn toward the white readers in a demand that they see the insidious violence of their naively wielded offenses. This turn outwards implicates the reader in these failed moments of encounter which fall into racist stereotypes, "forcing the reader to either embody the micro-aggressions she documents, or to stand apart and say 'that's not me'" through the cringe that circulates through these early poems (Flynn et al). Simultaneously, through the multiplicitous direction of the lyric "you," these moments of direct address demand recognition for the harmed subject by holding these offenders accountable.

However, this shifting lyric "you" also works to close the gap inflicted by these acts of racist aggression by introducing space for empathy. The demanding direct address questions implore the reader to empathize with these violated black citizens. The refrain "Have you seen their faces?" from the situation script on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina seeks to counter the "aestheticized distancing" between the black victims in New Orleans and white onlookers seeing the destruction on the news (Rankine 83, 85). In this poem, multi-directional direct address destabilizes the lyric subject to perform a type of

polyvocality, in which the excerpts from news coverage on the Katrina disaster merges into a type of Greek chorus that demands that the distant viewers witness the way in which those with power to administer aid “forgot about us” (see Shockley, *Renegade...* 17; Rankine 84). Through the furious demands to know “Where were they? Where was anyone? This is a goddamn emergency,” this chorus draws the white viewer into the wreckage with those “so poor” and “so black” who are “trapped...in the difficulty” (Rankine 83). This anger condemns the distant concern of the bystanders who dare to say “who could see it coming, the difficulty of that” from a safe distance, while “we are drowning here//still in the difficulty” (Rankine 83, 85). Through these insistent demands, the collection offers space for empathetic “cross-racial identification” to counter this mass of offenses (Shockley, “Race, Reception...”). In this furious venting of injustice and abandonment, the multiplicitous pronouns collapse the distance between victim and onlooker, begging the bystanders to break their complacent and complicit silence and intervene in this scene of racist subjection with empathy.

With this pleading gesture, the momentum of the constantly shifting “you” escalates into a collapse of address which questions a black citizen’s access to bodily autonomy as a sign of subjectivity. The speaker grows overwhelmed by incessantly seeing and reacting to these moments of racist violence, with a moment of confusion over her inability to distinguish between these encounters, saying “I they he she we you were too concluded yesterday to/ know whatever was done could also be done, was also/ done, was never done—” (Rankine 146). The rapid-fire shifts between pronouns illustrate the disjointed nature of her fragmented address that threatens to spiral into a state of exhaustion as her reflection on these moments accumulate. With this collapse of address,

the speaker perceives a breakdown of the bodily boundaries between herself and others, leaving her with “The worst injury is feeling you don’t belong so much/ to you—” (Rankine 146). This injury reveals the wear these moments have on her body as “it all comes from the world to be stored in you” (Rankine 63). As these moments gather within the speaker’s memory, turning “your flesh into its own cupboard,” the speaker finds herself in a position that “problematizes the ‘I’” through a manifestation of “the impossibility of a coherent self for black subjects who continued to be othered” by their subjection to these moments (Capildeo, Hume 105). The speaker finds herself isolated by this paralyzing, growing weight. This moment of isolation gestures toward the difficulty of accessing standard signs of subjectivity for black subjects when one is embodied by racist othering. Rankine’s breakdown of address problematizes first-person pronouns to illustrate the alterity of black subjectivity under racist subjection.

Rankine’s portrayal of a troubled relationship between her black narrator and first person pronouns speaks to black writing’s concern for the way in which black subjects’ vulnerability to a wide range of acts of racist violence threatens to overwhelm black life. The collection structurally represents this growing emotional weight by pairing enjambment with the escalation of racist encounters from microaggressions to horrific spectacles of anti-black violence. This slow escalation reveals the way in which “psychological violence...gives rise to the physical” through a normalizing anti-black ethos (Flynn et al). In Part VI, the collection’s subtle transition from these small acts culminates in the situation video scripts which narrate the speaker’s witness-as-subjection to extreme spectacles of systemic racist violence. As the speaker navigates these scenarios, her notion of herself is circumscribed by an embodied feeling of accumulation,

regardless of whether or not she is directly victimized. The speaker grieves the overwhelming effort she must summon to face the world, in which “gathering energy has become its own task, needing its own argument” (Rankine 8). Instead of being able to face this world by engaging these moments, the speaker finds herself collapsing under the toll of taking these moments into her body through her affective reactions. The speaker laments the toxic danger of opening herself to these moments, reading these moments of potential engagement as a type of passive permissiveness contained in the rhetorical orientation of “yes, and” (Rankine 8). This openness removes the protective buffer of “yes, but,” leaving the subject vulnerable to an incessant barrage of racist violence in “a life with no turn-off, no alternate routes” (Rankine 8). This openness leaves the speaker feeling utterly vulnerable to these attacks, at the mercy of “the condition of being addressable” in an inability to close off “your memory, vessel of your feelings” (Rankine 7, 49). In this shift, the presentation of accumulation within a racially embodied subject underscores the mournful wear of this vulnerable position.

The collection’s transition by enjambment underscores this sensation of accumulation as the speaker gives way to a pervasive feeling of grieving for the acts of violence which she witnesses and experiences. The collection opens with this despairing sensation “when you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices,” illustrating the way these constant attacks wear down the speaker (Rankine 5). This notion grows in the collection’s later sections, especially part VII, where prose poems give way to more overt engagements with enjambment. The fragmentation within the poems matches the speaker’s emotional fractures which threaten to overwhelm her, in which “there exists a wanting to escape—/ you, floating above your certain ache—/ still

the ache coexists./ Call that the immanent you—” (Rankine 139). Sometimes the best the speaker can accomplish is the mere fact of continued existence in spite of this state of weariness. The speaker describes grieving as an act of endurance, saying that, “To live through the days sometimes you moan like a deer. Sometimes you sigh” (Rankine 59). The speaker grieves to mediate the ache she feels as she moves through an anti-black world as a black citizen, even as the “world says stop that” and devalues this grief (Rankine 59). However, the outside world’s insistent demand that the speaker “stop that” reinforces the speaker’s grieving sense of fragmentation, in which the speaker attempts to appeal to others “only to discover/ to encounter// to be alien in this place” (Rankine 140). This all-consuming grief leaves her to ask “How to care for the injured body,/ the kind of body that can’t hold/ the content it is living?” (Rankine 143). This question broadens the speaker’s scope of concern beyond herself, thinking about the relationship between care and grief in loving other black people.

With this broader scope of concern for a black community that shares her experience of racial embodiment, the speaker contends with her status as an inheritor of a long history of racist violence. The speaker understands her placement in a historical moment as one that is shaped by this historic lineage of subjection, much like Sharpe’s notion of living “in the wake” is constantly consciously aware of itself as “the contemporary conditions of Black life as it is lived near death, as deathliness, in the wake of slavery” as the “precarities” of its “ongoing disaster” (Sharpe 5, 7-8). By drawing a distinction between her “historical self” and her “self self,” the speaker considers herself responsible to honoring this past as she engages with these afterlives of racist oppression (Rankine 14). Her embodied sense of accumulation extends beyond individual

experiences, including a sense of shared experience within this history of anti-black oppression, in which “the past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow” (Rankine 72). She constantly finds herself confronted with this history, a “feeling of being heavy with time,” in which her experience of time accumulates as a physical and emotional weight on her body (Capildeo). With this assumption of history, the speaker’s accumulated grief extends beyond her lived experience back to “the Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads” (Rankine 73). This reference is Rankine’s most explicit engagement with slavery’s afterlives as “the past that is not past [which] reappears, always, to rupture the present” in a process that is ongoing and “deeply atemporal” (Sharpe 5, 9). This long history of anti-black violence fuels the harmful force in contemporary racist encounters by extending the violent theft of black citizens’ access to subjectivity. Contemporary acts of anti-black violence perform this same theft of black bodily autonomy which originates from colonialism and enslavement. In light of this history, the speaker faces the present with a sense of reverence for these ancestors lost to enslavement, musing that “exactly why we survive and can look back with a furrowed brow is beyond me” (Rankine 72). She feels a deep sense of responsibility to honor this history, by respecting and defending it. This sense of responsibility is distinct from her questions over “carrying the baggage” of racist encounters because it casts her in solidarity with the ancestors who have also suffered as a result of their own racialized embodiment.

This responsibility-as-solidarity extends to memorializing contemporary victims of black death by considering these losses of individuals on a larger scale. The poems from Section VI dedicated to the memory of specific black citizens who died at the hands

of anti-black violence operates within an awareness of how these young black men enter into a history of racist violence in their death. The situation script dedicated to Trayvon Martin places him within the history of “Those years of and before me and my brothers, the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, one in three, two jobs...accumulate into the hours inside our lives” with the observation that, in this history, “we are all caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us” (Rankine 90). With this evocation of lynching in relationship to a young man killed by the state’s proxy, Rankine deploys a historicized grief to explore “what...I gain by dwelling in the struggling public spaces that wish to obliterate the black male body” in its contemporary iterations (Rankine, *BOMB*). The grieving language propels this poem to preserve the memory of a life that would be a mere body forgotten in death; the promise that “on my birthday they *say my name*. They will *never forget* that we are named” links memorial language with rallying cries of protest (Rankine 89, emphasis added). The phrase “never forget” fills the middle space between command and promise: it is often deployed as a rallying cry of defiance and grief in the aftermath of tragedies. Similarly, the phrase “say my name” alludes to a common Black Lives Matter protest chant, in which the call to “say their names” protests the commonplace nature of these deaths by asserting the individuality of these victims.<sup>5</sup> The collection expresses a compulsion to memorialize these lost ones as an act of protest.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Although the poem does not address it specifically, the phrase “say my name” also evokes the #SayHerName movement, which advocates for Black women who are victimized by racist policing to counter the obscuring of these cases by disproportionate focus on male victims.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most compelling memorial in the collection is the poem with the phrase “In Memory” repeated down the length of the page, with the ink gradually fading out from black. The first few lines are filled in with names of black men, and, in later print runs, black women who have died at the hands of police or their proxy. In different copies of *Citizen*, this list is filled out to differing degrees; the list is updated with every new print run, making the poem a sort of living monument with a constantly updating roll call of the dead. Watching the list fill underscores the scope of this process of black death: the fading

This grief as a political action deploys memorializing as an act of care for individuals who would otherwise be reduced to wasted, disposable bodies by systemic indifference toward black life. The poem dedicated to the memory of Trayvon Martin grieves tenderly through collectivist language. The language of camaraderie with the recurring phrase “these brothers, each brother, my brother, dear brother, my dearest brothers, dear heart” situate these young black men within a community of their peers in which their lives matter. The speaker situates herself in this love for these brothers through an intimate interpersonal connection that she performs in a telephone call. The language of “call[ing] up a brother” and pleading with him “not to hang up” evokes the tenderness of contact by being able to communicate with someone, even across great distance (Rankine 89-90). The fear of hanging up as severing the connection takes on a more lethal threat of separation with the evocation of lynching in “the rope inside us,” which casts a shadow over their connection (Rankine 90). This shadow underscores the grief in this tender connection, in which the speaker attempts to reconcile this love with this loss in the paradoxical knowledge that “my brother hangs up even though he is here” (Rankine 90). The speaker attempts to counter this absence by keeping the line open, trying to continue the connection by evoking his memory in which “I keep talking. The talk keeps him there,” speaking care into this loss with the tender questions “Is it cold? Are you cold? It does get cool. Is it cool? Are you cool?” (Rankine 90). Even though the speaker’s distance at the other end of the figurative phone call mediates her ability to

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ink evokes an ellipsis, intimating that this violence will extend into the future to claim more black lives (Waldman). The accompanying text on the following page that reads “because white men can’t/ police their imagination/ black men are dying” deploys the collection’s mode of memorializing as protest through the furious condemnation of its grieving language (Rankine 135).

enter and intervene in the scene, this tender care works to preserve these lost ones through love, resisting the violent imposition of racial embodiment in their deaths.

This desire for intervention raises the question of political futures for black subjects that is prevalent in contemporary black writing in its objection to the status quo of anti-black violence of moments in racial embodiment. However, the speaker's limited ability to intervene indicates the narrow avenue Rankine feels is available to imagining a political future for black citizens. The collection's emphasis on the present moment in its depiction of black embodiment in racist encounters leaves the text fixated on the world as it is. The speaker's grief for her contemporaries as inheritors of a long history of systemic racist violence protests this continuance as the ultimate imposition of racial embodiment by grieving the anticipation of more of the same. The poem dated July 13, 2013, the day George Zimmerman was acquitted of criminal charges for Trayvon Martin's death, languishes in this feeling of inevitability. Even though the wider world rages against this verdict with "Trayvon Martin's name sound[ing] from the car radio a dozen times each half hour," the speaker feels dread, seeing this verdict as a continuance of the status quo in which she must anticipate future victimization (Rankine 151). She fears this continuance striking closer to home, feeling that "though no one seems to be chasing you, the justice system has other plans" (Rankine 151). For the speaker, this state of constant fearful grief composes "how you are a citizen," which prohibits black Americans' access to autonomous subjectivity (Rankine 151). However, even as the speaker tells herself to "Let it go. Move on" from her objection to the world as it is, she feels "a breeze touch...your face. As something should" (Rankine 151). With this desire for an intimate gesture, the speaker feels a glimmer of possibility for a new world, motivating the

potential of political actions which she considers elsewhere in the text. In spite of her skepticism, the speaker can envision an alternative to the political status quo for black Americans in these brief moments of possibility.

With *Citizen's* embodied narration from a raced subject, Claudia Rankine engages lyric poetry's portrayal of individual affect to illuminate the complexities of inhabiting an anti-black world as a raced subject, revealing that this embodiment emerges at the imposition of moments of racist violence. Rankine's innovation of the lyric subject through a second person pronoun facilitates cross-racial empathetic engagement with her raced speaker who gives an account of the emotional toll she feels in which she attempts to move through a world that does not value her life and normalizes black death. Through this narrative position, readers can engage the speaker's questions about the possibility of black subject formation, questions which are raised at the outset of the collection with its accusatory title. Rankine imagines her speaker's citizenship in an anti-black society as one that is shaped by a history of violent anti-black racism, which operates as slavery's horrific afterlife. Through the collection's embodied narration, the speaker presents the weariness that stems from facing and choosing how to respond to these acts of violence, in which witness becomes an indirect form of victimization. Although this feeling of exhaustion reveals Rankine's fear of limited possibility of a political future for black Americans, grief for this history affords moments of affective agency in a refusal of the world-as-it-is. These moments of refusal offer political agency to black citizens who see their experience in Rankine's account, which opens cracks of potential for some sort of political futurity through these moments of black life. With these glimpses of an unseen but imaginable futures, *Citizen's* accusatory charge also issues a demand for political

recognition that alters this status quo of anti-black subjection. The subsequent chapters consider different imagined possibilities of political futures that can emerge in light of comparable understandings of the role of mourning in black life, asking what sort of futures are possible for black subjects in light of this ongoing history of subjection.

## Chapter 2

### Populating Ta-Nehisi Coates' World: Blackness and the Question of Political Action in

#### *Between the World and Me*

Ta-Nehisi Coates holds a curious position in American public life. After emerging to prominence as an *Atlantic* correspondent, Coates published his 2015 polemical memoir *Between the World and Me* to effusive critical praise. Upon its release, critics hailed Coates' condemnation of systemic anti-black racism in contemporary America as a singularly essential text for this moment. With this astounding critical praise, Coates has been publicly heralded as *the* preeminent social commentator on race in contemporary America, with signs of this public favor indicated by his winning the National Book Award and a McArthur "Genius" grant for *Between the World and Me*. In the midst of this clamor for Coates' insight, white liberals have interpreted his journalistic ethos and his memoir's affective resonance as markers of a singularly crucial perspective on the horrors of contemporary racism. With this white liberal embrace, Coates has been frequently compared to James Baldwin, especially in light of Baldwin's marked influence on *Between the World and Me*. Coates' epistolary memoir, presented as a letter addressed to his son, takes formal precedence from Baldwin's essay "My Dungeon Shook" in *The Fire Next Time*, written as a letter to his nephew. However, this comparison has raised considerable debate over white liberals' insistence that Coates perform as the preeminent social commentator on race in America. This stature as a public figure places demands on his text beyond the memoir's political focus. Cornel West's accusation of Coates as "the neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle" questions the liberal embrace of Coates as a definitive voice on race in light of the "apolitical pessimism" which traces through

*Between the World and Me*. While Coates' memoir offers a moving portrait of one man's experience of anti-black racism, the pressures of the white liberal embrace of *Between the World and Me* has the text perform political work beyond its generic scope.

This chapter considers the implications of white liberals' clamor for *Between the World and Me* as a political text, questioning this public demand for Coates' perceived social commentary through an examination of the political implications of the memoir's rhetoric. This chapter identifies the troublesome implications of upholding this text's political ambivalence as required cultural reading. How do we reconcile these public demands with the private exigence of this book, which offers a searing narration of one man's frightened rage over his feeling of constant vulnerability as a black American in a systemically anti-black culture to warn his son of the dangers of moving through an anti-black world as a black man? Coates fearfully rages against the imposition of racialized embodiment, but his linguistic focus on black bodies takes a more generalized view than Rankine's presentation of a raced individual's affect. This larger-scale focus on racism as a system risks eliding individuals and the potentiality of collective political action. Instead, Coates' institutional reading of racism emphasizes the perceived power of anti-blackness as a systemic attitude, giving way to despair. Coates articulates this despair through markedly afro-pessimistic metaphors which grieve the scope of anti-black racism while implicitly casting it as an insurmountable, inalterable force that cannot be overcome. As a result of this scope, Coates' focus on depersonalized black bodies and metaphors which emphasize systemic racism's seemingly absolute power translate his despairing hopelessness into a vision of political impossibility, foreclosing the trajectory that *Between the World and Me* seems poised to offer in its urgency.

Coates' presentation of his polemic as a letter to his son uses the intimacy of private exchange to portray his personal grief on a larger scale. He channels the urgency of his condemnation of systemic white supremacy into an intimate conversation with his son, in which he must perform the solemn duty of "wisdom teaching," the experience of warning his son of these dangers as he comes of age (Lewis). In this public indictment-as-private exchange, Coates allows the wider white readership to eavesdrop on the revelation of the sober knowledge "that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you [Samori] must find some way to live within all of it" as a young black man (Coates 11-2). This sober warning also functions as a condemnation of the white readership's complicity in the dangers Samori will face as a young black man moving through this anti-black world. On the night that the officers who killed Michael Brown did not receive indictments for his death, Coates realizes Samori must learn "that the police departments of the country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body... The destroyers will rarely be held accountable" (Coates 9). In this somber exchange, Coates' transmission of wisdom in an attempt to preserve his son from the "sheer terror of disembodiment" in a white supremacist world becomes a moment of bittersweet intimacy, with the revelation of "the question of how one should live free in a black body" marking a sorrowful rite of passage in coming-of-age as a black man (Coates 12). Coates' repeated phrases "you know now" and "you have seen" mark Samori's passage into this knowledge, simultaneously revealing to the wider readership the knowledge that "All of this is common for black people. All of this is old for black people" (Coates 9). Coates uses Samori's somber induction into this knowledge as a compelling exposé of the horrors of a white supremacist world.

While Coates compellingly reveals the systemic violence that will haunt his son, his grief over this somber rite of passage presents a sense of helplessness that complicates his sense of urgency. Coates watches the revelation “that the killers of Michael Brown would go free” crush Samori’s youthful belief in justice for a young black man with the knowledge that “the men who had left his body in the street like some awesome declaration of their inviolable power would not be punished” (Coates 11). Coates silently witnesses Samori’s realization that young black men can be killed with impunity with the devastated reaction of saying “I’ve got to go’ ...and I heard you crying” (Coates 11). However, Coates watches this devastating scene impassively, revealing the way in which his anticipation of racist violence forecloses his ability to comfort his son with any sort of “specious hope” for justice (Coates 10). Coates acknowledges his inability to console Samori with his apology that “I cannot make it okay. I am sorry that I cannot save you” (Coates 107). He empathizes with Samori’s discovery that as a young black man, the sanctity of his life is no less tenuous than those of Michael Brown or Trayvon Martin. Coates imagines Samori’s realization that their lives are all vulnerable to the caprices of systemic racist violence is a formative moment, musing that “Trayvon Martin must terrify you in a way that he could never terrify me. You have seen so much more of all that is lost when they destroy your body” (Coates 25). In this observation, Coates considers the distance between his and Samori’s upbringings, with Samori’s removal from the streets’ constant fear of disembodiment allowing him space to imagine his life’s potentiality, heightening the stakes of losing his body. Rankine comparably fears for the security of black subjects in intrusive moments of racist violence, but her mode of address through the lyric subject fosters intimacy between the “you” and the “I,”

insistently demanding that readers see what is done to black subjects in these moments of violence. In contrast, Coates' focus on loss emphasizes the distance between "you" and "me," which produces a sense of powerlessness over protecting one's body, stalling the letter's initial urgency with a vision of inevitable grief.

This sense of helplessness marks Coates' departure from Baldwin in a diverging political vision. While Coates embraces defeatism, Baldwin merely acknowledges the wear of moving through the world under constant racist attacks by recalling the way his father "was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him" (Baldwin 4). The rhetorical placement of defeatism on his father emphasizes Baldwin's distance from this despair by focusing on individual responses to racism, allowing him to instead emphasize the power and potentiality of collective social action. In contrast, Coates reverses that approach through his structural approach to the machinations of racism. Baldwin can imagine other social possibilities for black Americans because he does not believe that whiteness possesses a totalizing power in the American space. When he reminds his nephew that "I *know* the conditions under which you were born, for I was there. Your countrymen were *not* there, and haven't made it yet," Baldwin holds white Americans accountable for the gap between their worlds, but the "yet" offers a space for his white peers to take the chance to know, instead of assuming that their ignorance will guarantee their power into perpetuity (Baldwin 6). In contrast to Coates' insistence that "we cannot win," Baldwin reminds his nephew that "the details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you...what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their

inhumanity and fear” (Lewis 195, Baldwin 8). In this stance, Baldwin “repeatedly emphasizes his nephew’s power and potential and urges him to believe that revolutionary change is possible” by understanding whiteness in a way that limits its seemingly totalizing power (Lewis 195). While Coates adopts Baldwin’s understanding of the dire state of black life, Coates’ ability to retrospectively analyze the limits of Baldwin’s optimism fuels a sense of nihilism that understands the logics of whiteness as a totalizing power.

In contrast to Baldwin’s hopeful vision of a future for black life, Coates’ fixation on the direness of black life eschews the potentiality of collective action. Coates’ extended metaphor of racism as a natural phenomenon understands the commonality of racist violence as an inescapable status quo for black Americans. Coates frequently considers racist prejudices and anti-black violence as “inalterable condition[s],” which he expresses in the terms of “an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men” (Coates 7). These metaphors of natural disasters emphasize the overwhelming, terrible power of racism on black Americans in the notion that it permeates every corner of American life. Coates particularly engages this language to discuss the deaths of black men at the hands of the police, underscoring the power imbalance in these encounters. When he laments the death of a college acquaintance as a victim of police brutality, he imagines the omnipotence of the officer, raging that “The earthquake cannot be subpoenaed. The typhoon cannot bend under indictment...He was a force of nature, the helpless agent of our world’s physical laws” (83). This language at once blends the power of the officer with the pervasiveness of these dangerous attitudes which black Americans will constantly confront. Coates’ language of racist violence as a

force of nature operates similarly to Sharpe's metaphor of anti-blackness as weather, which she describes as "the totality of our environments," as "total climate...that is antiblack" (Sharpe 104). Sharpe similarly considers the pervasiveness of these attitudes as the "total environment" of slavery which remained the social "atmosphere" through the transformation of "slave law...into lynch law, into Jim and Jane Crow, and other administrative logics that remember the brutal conditions of enslavement after the event of slavery" (Sharpe 106). While these related metaphors provide a moving description of the paralyzing terror black Americans face in these encounters, Coates' frequent return to this metaphor reveals his ambivalence towards the possibility of black subjectivity under these racist attitudes.

The problem of the white liberal embrace of *Between the World and Me* as crucial social commentary emerges in Coates' reliance on this metaphor. In a political context, Coates' metaphor of anti-blackness as a natural phenomenon presents troubling implications which complicate his condemnation of systemic racism. While Coates' frequent use of this metaphor movingly underscores his individual sense of grief, this sense of helplessness can be read as normalizing systemic racism, despite Coates' insistence of its unnaturalness as a constructed social attitude. Despite his skepticism of Americans' unquestioning belief in "the reality of 'race' as a definite, indubitable feature of the natural world," Coates forecloses the possibility contained within this acknowledgement by insisting that "racism...inevitably follows" (Coates 7). Coates reads race as an "unnatural" phenomenon, limiting its power by imagining its malleability; racism, on the other hand, appears as an inevitability against which individuals cannot resist, whether it is natural or not. Even though Coates acknowledges that racism is

subsequently “rendered” instead of simply “being” in a collective imaginary, his suggestion that the state treats racist violence like “the innocent daughter of Mother Nature” (Coates 7). This insinuation reduces participants in this toxic attitude to helpless onlookers, mere bystanders swept up in this force who can only “deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deplores” natural disasters (Coates 7). Coates considers himself a “survivor of some great natural disaster, some plague, some avalanche or earthquake” in which he makes it out of West Baltimore by some mere chance, emphasizing his sense of helplessness in the face of systemic racism (Coates 129). Coates’ repeated return to these metaphors of racism as a natural phenomenon underscore the helplessness of both victims and offenders to withstand racism’s pervasive force, raising the troubling conjecture of a world populated only by individuals who react passively to bigotry.

Coates’ notion of these violent mores as a cruel historical inheritance for black Americans underscores the apparent helplessness of black lives under threat of insurmountable systemic racism. Contemporary acts of racist violence stem from a long tradition of black subjection in America, in which “it is traditional to destroy the black body—*it is heritage*” (Coates 103). For Coates, this heritage originates in the production of whiteness, in which the “people who believe themselves to be white” simultaneously produce and believe in “The Dream,” a shorthand term for white supremacy as the governing ethos of American civil society. Under this ethos, the subjugation of black life gives American life socio-political coherence. This vision of “the Dream” echoes Wilderson’s notion of black death as the foundational action in modern state-formation in which the category of the slave reduced black bodies to commodities to usher in

capitalism. Wilderson emphasizes the role of “the incoherence of black death” as “America generates the coherence of white life,” similarly imagining the role of violence on black bodies in the formation of the modern American state (Wilderson 229, 232). An implicit awareness of this legacy of “the plunder everywhere around us” creates an instinctive fear that permeates black life (Coates 21). The scope of racist violence fuels the insidiousness of this fear, manifesting in Coates’ recollection of his childhood in West Baltimore, where “I was haunted,” “wounded” and “marked by the old codes” of the streets, because “in the crack era all we had were our fears” (Coates 39, 125). These discrete moments culminate into a state of terror for black life in which “it had to be blood...It could only be the employment of...whatever might be handy to break the black body, the black family, the black community, the black nation” (Coates 104). The apparent inevitability of this searing terror constricts Coates’ vision of black life into a state of paralysis.

Coates’ sense of helplessness produces a sense of timelessness in which systemic subjection manifests in the constant interpretation of black life through the figure of the slave. In a markedly afro-pessimist vision of history, Coates reads slavery as marks of “damnation” and “never-ending night” for black life which can never be overcome in any sort of futurity (Coates 70). This ahistorical vision of the legacy of slavery mystifies the systemic processes which embedded anti-black racism into the national ethos. Frank Wilderson’s afro-pessimistic figuration of racial capitalism seems to bridge this gap, offering a similar focus on the inevitable constancy of “State violence against the black body” which “is not contingent, it is structural and, above all, gratuitous” in the formation of the American capitalist state (Wilderson 229). They share a singular focus on the

subjection of the black body through the figure of the slave in the origins of the American nation, with Coates approximating Wilderson's notion that black bodies were only ever meant "to be accumulated and die" (Wilderson 238). To honor the weight of this history, Coates feels a sense of obligation to the memory of the enslaved ancestors, imploring Samori to "Never forget that for 250 years, black people were born into chains—whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold" (Coates 71). This deeply compelling catalogue of subjection insists that "enslavement was not destined to end," and that it has not ended due to the "commingling of atrocities of the present and past" which "compresses American history into a timeless 'now'" (Smith 188, Coates 70). In this endless present of anti-black subjection, individuals become generalized bodies who represent these endless iterations of systemic racist violence. In contrast to Rankine's narration of a lineage of racist subjection located in a racially embodied lyric speaker, Coates' language of predestined doom generalizes on black suffering as an absolute constant. This image of constancy emphasizes isolation and distance where Rankine's speaker offers an intimate look into the feeling of an accumulation of grief over this long history. Coates' contrasting absolute vision loses sight of temporal particularities in which specific instances of violence compose this history of subjection.

Coates' condemnation of systemic anti-black racism stems from a deep sense of grief for the individuals lost to anti-black violence; his signature rhetorical move of cataloguing underscores the vastness of this subjection. His focus on lists of corporeal acts of anti-black racist violence condemns the commonality of these actions, which are

obscured by the “process of washing the disparate tribes white” under the mythos of white supremacy (Coates 8). Thereby contextualizing his constant state of fear, Coates condemns the entirety of mainstream American society for this systemic process of violence. In this wide scope, Coates’ polemic presents the entire construction and operations of the American project as one that was achieved “through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children” (Coates 8). These acts of violence perpetuate systemic racist inequality by denying black Americans “the right to secure and govern our own bodies” (Coates 8). The reliance on iterations in these listed acts of violence emphasize the constancy and regularity with which Coates anticipates these attacks, while also emphasizing the toll of these racist attacks on individual black bodies as “a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth” (Coates 10). Coates grounds this abstracted list with a series of specific victims of this deadly violence, listing the deaths of Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, and Marlene Pinnock as the exigence for *Between the World and Me*, imploring his readers that “You must never look away from this” everyday yet horrific process of black death (Coates 9-10). Coates uses the accumulation of these incidents and victims as a testament to the scale of this violence.

Coates’ shift in focus from cataloguing large-scale acts of oppressive racist violence to an account of the death of his university acquaintance Prince Jones addresses the emotional wear of grieving black death. This shift from generalized masses of victims to an individual lost to systemic racist violence seems presents a curious form of

memorialization in which the loss of the individual becomes a conduit to describe the emotional distress of those who mourn for that loss. Coates recalls reading in the newspaper that Prince Jones had died after being shot by a police officer, discovering this tragedy after three days of coverage by seeing Prince's photograph, "frozen in the amber of his youth" (Coates 77). Coates describes the horrific initial shock of discovering Jones' death, from which emerges a feeling of the "old gravity of West Baltimore, the gravity that condemned me to the schools, the streets, the void" of forces bent on wasting black bodies coming up to swallow him (Coates 77). Despite making it out of West Baltimore, Coates finds himself reminded of the fragility of his life in the hands of the police with the realization that "Prince Jones had made it through, and still they had killed him" (Coates 77). With this realization, Coates feels "rage" over the uncountable injustice in Prince Jones' death, recognizing that "Prince was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth" (Coates 78). With this understanding of Prince Jones' death, Coates perceives the systemic force behind this single act of lethal violence. With this awareness, Coates asserts that the other mourners' suggestion of forgiving the officer who shot Jones "would not have moved me" in his consuming, furious grief (Coates 78). Instead, Coates is consumed by his rage over the horrific cost of this loss.

The most tragic elements of this account surround Coates' singular focus on black bodies, in which he figures the loss of black lives in terms of catastrophic bodily destruction. This conceptualization employs language of theft, repeatedly describing "plundered" and "destroyed" black bodies, refusing to conceive of bereavement in the passive terms of "loss." Instead, Coates describes this bereavement as a horrific injustice,

in which the cherished individuality of Prince Jones, “a one of one,” become a stolen black body that is “destroyed” by his murderers who “scorched his shoulders and arms, ripped open his back, mangled lung, kidney and liver” with their bullets (Coates 79). This highly dramatized description of gunshot wounds casts a police shooting as an epic tragedy, underscoring the burden of responsibility Coates places on the practice and ethos of police brutality in Prince Jones’ state-sanctioned killing. This violent language of wounding echoes the visceral emotional pain Coates feels in response to Jones’ murder, in which the lost treasure of an individual who “live[s] in a warm place within us...becomes a wound” for the bereaved “when they are plundered, when they lose their body and the dark energy disperses” (Coates 64). He attempts to fathom the full reaches of this theft by imagining the “wounds” of Prince Jones’ family. His conclusions stand aghast, figuring Prince Jones’ death as an irreparable wasting of “all of the love poured into him” and “injected into that vessel of flesh and bone” in the violence of “how that vessel was taken, shattered on the concrete, and all its holy contents, all that had gone into him, sent flowing back to the earth” (Coates 81-2). The prosaic description of this theft elegizes the murder of Prince Jones, underscoring the tragedy of these lives being violently extinguished.

However, instead of using this shift to memorialize the loss of the individual Prince Jones, this shift to a specific victim of black death continues to participate in Coates’ focus on the generalized notion of blackness as a sign of victimization in his continued linguistic focus on black bodies. This focus on bodies operates alongside the rhetorical strategy of cataloguing, in which the physicality of racist violence on the black body emphasizes the role brutalization plays in black racial embodiment (Gordon). This

shift to corporeality allows Coates to explore the question of subjective autonomy as an element of anti-black suppression “control over one’s body...was the site on which slavery did its most destructive work: controlling the body to enslave the soul,” which Coates sees in the state-sanctioned “plunder” of black bodies (Rogers). Coates reads black being as a crisis of the definition of Cartesian subjectivity, engaging the historical distinction drawn between “rational subjectivity” and “the objectivity of the body” to “make the issue of racial violence more visceral and immediate to white audiences otherwise indisposed to perceive black pain as a moral problem” (Dahl 324). This shift allows Coates to consider blackness as a state of exception, playing upon the insidious undertones of mind-body dualism which dehumanize blackness. He appropriates this prerogative by privileging the black body, “rejecting the description of racial violence and suffering through the prism of Cartesian mind-body dualism” to “locate the pain of black disembodiment in a non-subjective field” (Dahl 325). In this way, Coates can expose the crisis systemic racism continues to play on black subjectivity. However, his focus on the body runs the risk of participating in this crisis by privileging generalized corporeality at the expense of human individuality.

Instead, Coates’ focus on black bodies distills his account of bereavement into an ontological totality. Coates’ focus on murder as plunder minimizes the humanity that has been stolen, focusing instead on the loss of a body. This problem emerges in Coates’ belief that “our bodies are our selves, that my soul is the voltage conducted through neurons and nerves, and that my spirit is my flesh” (Coates 79). Other critics’ attention to Coates’ admission of atheism<sup>7</sup> during his account of Jones’ funeral reveals a slippage in

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<sup>7</sup> Both Adam Dahl and Matthew Shenoda consider the role Coates’ atheism plays in his exclusive attention to understanding blackness through the corporeality of the body. Dahl reads this focus as an understanding

which his disavowal of an afterlife collapses the individual into mere matter. Instead, his singular belief in “this one-shot life and the body” eschews the distinction between body and soul, privileging the body as flesh (Coates 79). Coates’ understanding of black life in corporeal terms reduces these plundered lives into a representation of victimization by the anti-black violence: even Prince Jones’ spectacular humanity is reduced to “the superlative of all my fears” in Coates’ vision of inescapable violence (Coates 81). Coates imagines blackness as “the mark of plunder,” with black life shackled to “the gravity of our particular world” (Coates 81). This notion of blackness as an ancient, unbreakable curse fuels the despairing aimlessness in his furious grief while foreclosing any notion of an imaginable political future for black Americans. In this apocalyptic nightmare vision, “it occurred to me then that you would not escape, that there were awful men who’d laid plans for you, and I could not stop them,” leaving Coates only able to imagine a world in which black Americans must face its horrific capacity for destruction (Coates 81). When these scenes of bereavement would seem to open up spaces to agitate and protest, Coates can only turn to despair, which stagnates the account of an individual lost to anti-black racist violence.

Coates’ cosmological metaphor for the geography of systemic anti-black racism underscores this halted sense of momentum by emphasizing the impossibility of social movement. As a child growing up in West Baltimore, Coates considers his sense of estrangement in the schools and his fear on the streets as if he were adrift in the outer

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of human life, and especially black life as “the bare life of the body in all its exposed vulnerability,” and Shenoda considers the utility of this “vantage point for us to understand the brutal legacies of genocide, slavery, and the like” (Dahl 326-7). However, they disagree over the productivity of this line of inquiry to produce affect in Coates’ readers, not taking into consideration the way Coates’ totalizing representation of black pain precludes collective engagement by circumscribing individual agency.

reaches of space. When he watches television, the overwhelming whiteness of the actors and newscasters feed his sense of isolation as “dispatches” from some “other world” (Coates 20). He muses over the distance between his experience and those of his white peers, where “somewhere out there beyond the firmament, past the asteroid belt...children did not regularly fear for their bodies...I obsessed over the distance between that other sector of space and my own. I knew that my portion of the American galaxy...was black and that other, liberated portion was not” (Coates 20-1). This language of a cosmos undergirds Coates’ description of the scope and reach of systemic racism by considering its geographical space on the scale of the universe. Coates imagines the permeation of anti-black racist violence across the entirety of existence in an unfathomably large “cosmic injustice” and “profound cruelty” that implicates every element of existence in its violence (Coates 21). Coates imagines this violence inherent in systemic anti-black racism in terms of the universe-as-universal in his mother’s fear for his safety as a young man when she “knew that the galaxy itself could kill me, that all of me could be shattered and all of her legacy spilled upon the curb like bum wine” (Coates 83). In this imagined moment, this metaphorical galaxy absorbs the power of the racist ethos it represents, weaponizing space and place against black citizens. Coates carries a curious relationship with movement through the rest of his essay, juggling “an abiding, irrepressible desire to unshackle my body and achieve the velocity of escape” with a deeply confined sense of the possibility of physical movement in the space of this galaxy (Coates 21).

Because Coates imagines systemic anti-black racism as a force of nature that spans the galaxy, his despair over the impossibility of reprieve complicates the political

potentiality of his desire for movement. Under this tightly circumscribed worldview, Coates can only consider movement in the individual, physical sense, sans any political collective connotations. In his trip to Paris, he finally gains access to the other end of the galaxy, which he accesses by “a starship” which “punched out into the dark, punched through the sky, punched out past West Baltimore...past any language and every spectrum known to me” (Coates 121). This return to language of the cosmos illustrates the limitations Coates imagines for the political possibility of individual movement or motion. In Paris, Coates imagines himself as “in someone else’s country and yet, in some necessary way, I was outside of their country. In America I was part of an equation—even if it wasn’t a part I relished...But sitting in that garden, for the first time I was an alien—I was a sailor—landless and disconnected” (Coates 124). This consideration of the traveler’s amorphous relationship to space and place seems to offer a trajectory for an escape route. Coates marvels at his shifted relationship to his “generational chains” in Paris; he feels a deeper critical understanding of his sense of his “body confined, by history and policy, to certain zones” as a black man in the American space once he is able to leave this familiar environment (Coates 124). He sees this movement to a new context as illuminating and restorative.

However, the unsustainability of movement in Coates’ vision of Paris does not offer motion to a different space as a viable solution to the systemic injuries black citizens suffer in the American space. Instead of imagining movement as a sign of a futurist trajectory, Coates’ space of Paris participates in the reductive logic of expatriation, reading the alterity of Europe as an idealized escape from American anti-blackness. Coates’ utopic vision of his blackness in France allows him to live in the

freedom of a context where “our color was not our distinguishing feature,” thereby imagining Paris as a space of refuge where the fact of his blackness is “not their particular ‘problem,’ nor their national guilt” (Coates 127). However, this exoneration of a “national guilt” is a troubling line of thought in which Coates seems to deploy ultimately reductive wishful historical revisionism, imagining that his ability to move through the Parisian cityscape unimpeded owes to the absence of a history of colonial enslavement in France. On its face, this reading is simply incorrect, and while Coates later acknowledges France’s complicated history with colonialism and blackness in the larger Francophone world, he never really reconciles these observations. This line undercuts the believability of this imagined utopia, limiting the possibility and sustainability of escaping these spaces of alterity at the outset. Instead, he further limits the futurist possibility of his relationship to movement by considering this motion as a moment of temporary recuperative retreat before returning to the struggle. He recalls a French protestor who takes to the street in response to Trayvon Martin’s death with the grim conclusion that “Home would find us in any language,” revealing his inability to escape the struggle entirely, which he always feels calling him back (Coates 129). Ultimately, this individual movement into spaces of alterity functions as a moment of retreat from the inescapable horrors of his American context, to which he feels he must inevitably return after these moments of reprieve.

In the absoluteness of this stagnating despair, Coates’ rage tightly circumscribes the advice he can pass on to Samori, leading him to advocate personal reflection and self-care. On its face, this individualist focus tracks with the intimate privacy of the essay’s memoir form. However, this narrative focus could precipitate troubling political

implications in which the call for radical self-care can be extrapolated into a politics of isolationism which does not permit collective action. Coates frequently emphasizes the impossibility of changing white Americans, leaving his advice to “attack every day of your brief bright light in struggle” with a sense of deflated urgency (Coates 108).

Although Coates’ marked disinterest in the redemption of “the people who must believe they are white” takes a significant stance in valuing black life on its own terms, this proscription presents the culmination of Coates’ argumentative ambivalence (Coates 108). In light of his image of racism as an insurmountable systemic force, Coates’ individualist focus does not seem to endorse collective political action. Instead, he insists on individual awareness, lest “you descend into your own dreams” (Coates 108).

However, this interior focus dilutes the potency of his call to “Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom. Struggle for the warmth of the Mecca. Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name” by isolating the individual in a strict proscription for the introspective care through personal therapy (Coates 151). Coates advocates for both for active subjective agency as “a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world” and for the passiveness of “hop[ing] for the Dreamers,” despite doubting the possibility of their awakening (Coates 108, 151). This ambivalence cements the insurmountable nature of systemic anti-blackness, apparently stalling momentum for collective political action. Instead, Coates can only offer individualist responses in self-discovery and self-care in balancing struggle with movement into spaces of reprieve.

However, Coates’ consideration of moments of reprieve from the struggle via movement into insular spaces offers a glimpse of collective possibility by imagining the restorative potentiality of black spaces removed from the dominant ethos of anti-

blackness. He offers a powerfully restorative vision in the therapeutic embrace of black community. His joy at a Howard University Homecoming party marvels over the richness of black life in “the entire diaspora around me” that he had initially discovered at the Mecca as a student (Coates 147). Although considerable life experience after college tempers this initial generalizing joy over black life, Coates entertains a similar “joyous moment” of abandon “beyond the Dream” in which he revels in the “warm blasts rolling over us” and the uninhibited joy of alumni cheerleaders who danced “as though she was not somebody’s momma and the past twenty years had barely been a week,” offering black joy as a political choice in the struggle (Coates 147, 149). In this moment of joy, Coates allows himself to be united with the community from which he otherwise feels distance. He gestures toward a potential collective experience with the notion that “I felt myself disappearing into all of their bodies,” a powerful restorative in which “the birthmark of damnation faded” (Coates 147). This scene is the closest Coates comes to aligning himself with black optimism, in which this absorption into community allows him to meditate on the distinct power that emerges from black life. Coates allows such moments of reprieve from the isolated individualist struggle to embrace the therapeutic connection of black community.

In this community, Coates’ exploration of the power of black joy in community seems poised to transcend his totalizing vision of black life as subjection into a gesture for collective political action. His meditation on this collective power at Homecoming “originates in a view of the American galaxy taken from a dark and essential planet,” inverting his cosmological metaphor to consider the geographical space of black life on its own terms (Coates 149). This inversion gives black life its own merit by pushing back

on the imposition of the mainstream American ethos and flipping its script in “a dungeon-side view...taken in struggle” (Coates 149). Coates sees this power of black life as a beautifully generative force offering “a kind of understanding that illuminates all the galaxies in their truest colors” (Coates 149). This moment, culminating in the awe-filled observation that “we have made something down here” seems to attenuate his singular focus on black death. This concession offers Coates’ otherwise pessimistic vision of black life a potential trajectory beyond his totalizing vision in terms that mirror Jared Sexton’s proposition of “black social life in black social death” (Sexton 28). Sexton unites the dueling claims of “black social life” and “black social death” from black optimism and afro-pessimism, respectively, to describe the ways in which black life is conducted in a constant awareness of black death. Sexton reads Moten’s assertion that “Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space” as one that acknowledges that “black life is not social, or rather that black life is *lived* as social *death*” (Sexton 28-9). In the union of these concepts, Sexton imagines space for politics that “might be possible across this gap,” which Coates’ turn to black joy seems to acknowledge (Sexton 31). However, this moment is disappointingly fleeting, with Coates’ narration ultimately returning to foreclosure within “the old fear” to see “the rain coming down in sheets” (Coates 152). This dreary ending with a return to the normalcy of dismal weather limits the potentiality of the Homecoming party, falling back into the encompassment by the atmospheric environment of systemic racism.

Coates’ grief, fear, and rage in *Between the World and Me* shape a vision of systemic racism that hinges upon metaphors of natural phenomena and the focal image of black bodies under violent subjection. While these rhetorical focuses present a

compelling image of the dire state of black being in the anti-black ethos of the American space, they also create an aesthetic of despair, in which this vision of grief ends with nihilism. With Coates' large-scale focus, he privileges abstracted systems over the individuals for whom he mourns, imagining depersonalized bodies that are trapped under the absolute power of white supremacist anti-black racism. This totalizing view constricts the argument's initial urgency, reflected through a vision of limited movements which operate as sidesteps from the onslaught of unswayable racist violence. In this reading, movement cannot be configured as a trajectory for black life that can exist beyond its history of enslavement. What remains in this foreclosure of political possibility besides bodies without agency and struggle without hope? More pressingly, why have white liberals embraced Coates' pessimistic vision as the definitive stance on blackness in America, when it does not permit futures for black subjectivity? This liberal embrace proves especially troubling when the implications of Coates' nihilism absolves readers of any responsibility for their participation in systemic anti-blackness. In contrast to Rankine's charge to her white readership to condemn and resist this status quo, Coates' totalizing vision permits little more than guilt and resignation for white Americans, leaving black life defined by its pain.

### Chapter 3

#### Beyond the Sunken Place: *Get Out*'s Fantasy of Escape

By director-writer Jordan Peele's own estimation, his horror-satire film *Get Out* (2017) is an unlikely success. For Peele, producing *Get Out* presented a series of gambles: he was a first-time director making a modestly-budgeted genre film to open a frank discussion about America's flawed relationship to racial difference. Peele recalls that "I stopped writing this movie about twenty times because I thought it was impossible...I thought no one would ever make this movie" because its position as a horror film satirizing the unacknowledged toxicity of America's continued anti-black racism was simply too weird of a project to gain a following in the American public (Peele, "Oscar 2018 Acceptance..."). While horror film generally meets critical and popular ambivalence, *Get Out* debuted as an equally unlikely and undeniable hit. The film received clamorous, nearly universal praise, heralded as one of the best films of the year. The film's innovative vision of American anti-black racism offered some crucial intervention in the American consciousness as the supposedly post-racial Obama era drew to a close. The unexpected necessity of *Get Out* at once speaks to a need for honest portrayals of the continued horrors of contemporary American racism while offering a thrilling vision of possibility in spite of these horrors. The American public's unexpected love affair with *Get Out* allows the film to defy the expectations of its genre through its longevity in the popular and critical imagination, in which the film has evolved into a cultural touchstone as a popular phenomenon. Even the Academy Awards acknowledged *Get Out*'s unexpected resonance, awarding Jordan Peele an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. The inventiveness of the film's signature vocabulary on the insidious

machinations of contemporary anti-black racism has entered the mass consciousness, offering a crucial intervention in the cultural lexicon on race in contemporary America.

In light of this embrace of *Get Out*'s intervention in the national dialogue on contemporary racism, this chapter examines the relationship between *Get Out*'s formal innovation and its vision of political possibility for black subjects. The film's use of horror deploys a sense of urgency for the vulnerability of black life in similar terms to *Citizen* and *Between the World and Me*, using the pathos of audience identification with a black protagonist to expose the danger of finding oneself isolated in a predominantly white space. The film mourns the toll of black citizens' constant suspicion of whiteness, in which black individuals under constant threat of systemic racist violence grow paralyzed by their fear of vulnerability to anti-black violence. However, the film's combination of horror and comic satire offer a fresh reading of this mournful vision of a fundamentally anti-black world to open up the film's exigency into a space for political possibility. The film's satire invites audience members in on the joke, capitalizing on their sympathetic alignment with the film's black protagonist to grant them access to his knowledge of systemic racist violence which undergirds the film's entire conceit. This permission of awareness via irony mitigates the totalizing grip of the film's horror aesthetic, creating space for comedy to provide an imagined path of rescue from racist horror. This playful vision of escape marks a departure from Coates' comparable vision of a systemically anti-black society. Where Coates' mournful reading of this world ends in isolation and nihilism, Peele instead turns to optimism by animates the space in Rankine's account of the pain of racial embodiment which calls for advocacy. Peele offers a vision of community which can intervene in the horror of racist subjection to

anti-black violence, ultimately allowing black subjectivity to chart an imagined trajectory of escape from systemic racist subjection.

*Get Out*'s political intervention emerges through its innovation of the horror film genre. Peele engages horror film's fascination with fear to expose the terror in black Americans' experience as subjects who are racially embodied by systemic racist violence. This project enters into a generic tradition that is deeply invested in America's fraught relationship to blackness. Horror films manufacture feelings of fear through images of "violence in [American experiences] of Blackness" to "provide important discursive inroads" into American cultural conceptions of race (Means Coleman 5). Even though the genre does not always consider race explicitly, horror films offer interpretations of the role of blackness in America through considerations of otherness, belonging, outsiders, and the horror of intruders transgressing boundaries. This reading of a horror film tradition that reflects the systemic anti-black racism embedded in the American consciousness indicates the genre's potentiality as a form social critique.<sup>8</sup> Both horror films by white artists and those produced by black artists engage this fascination with racial horror through the genre's capacity for "imagination, innovation, and push toward provocation" not just to "comment on Black culture," but also to expose "mainstream media as well, noting its lapses in convention, representational and cultural vision, and courage" (Means Coleman 2). Black horror films overtly include "an added narrative focus that calls attention to racial identity...Black film is about Black experiences and Black cultural traditions" with "a Black cultural milieu and history swirling around and impacting Blacks' lives in America" (Means Coleman 7). Peele situates *Get Out* in this

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<sup>8</sup> Peele also flags this potentiality in his definition of *Get Out* as a "social thriller" (Peele, "*Get Out* Sprang from an Effort...").

tradition of black horror film by invoking its perspective on racial identity to revise white horror's clichés on blackness. His presentation of a black male protagonist frightened by his constant vulnerability to racist violence in a white space inverts racist tropes on black masculinity by transforming the traditional horror image of a black man from the monstrous object that elicits fear in white subjects into an individual who fears the violence of a white supremacist world. Through this narrative orientation, Peele reveals to white audiences the everyday fear of navigating a white supremacist state in a black body.

To immerse the audience in this dread aesthetic, *Get Out* opens with a scene of a young black man frightened by his vulnerable isolation in the white space of the suburbs. This scene operates as a mournful expression of care for black men, setting up the film's metaphor for systemic black death through the depiction of Andre Hayworth's kidnapping. Andre expresses his fear of walking alone at night as a young black man lost in "this creepy, confusing-ass suburb" (Peele). Andre's exposure in this space where his blackness sticks out "like a sore thumb" emphasizes his vulnerability in a predominantly white space, with the narrow sidewalks walled by tall border shrubs making his isolation claustrophobic (Peele). The urgency of Andre's frightful displacement and disorientation approximate the notion of black life as a precarious, tenuous phenomenon that is "lived near death" in its constant susceptibility to anti-black violence (Sharpe 7). When a passing car turns around to follow Andre, his muttered response, "Fuck this...not today. Not me" signals his expectation of a violent reaction to his black body's presence in a white suburban space (Peele). Andre's fear of being another black man caught in the "wrong" place at the wrong time gestures toward the "deathly repetition" of black death

through an encounter that evokes the circumstances surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin (Sharpe 2). Andre turns around to walk the other way, but before he can escape, he is overpowered by an unidentified assailant and stuffed into the car's trunk (Peele). The conceit of *Get Out* invokes the expectation of black men's exclusion from the suburbs to present the presumably white monster consuming the racial outsider (Means Coleman 148). With this encounter serving as a proxy for black death, Peele mourns black subjects' vulnerability to racist violence and their subsequent fear of isolation in white spaces, framing the film with a desire for the protection of black community.

Peele protests the constancy of this vulnerability through the notorious garden party scene, in which Chris anticipates his susceptibility to inadvertent acts of everyday racism as one of the only black people at his girlfriend's family estate. Chris' initial concern over meeting his girlfriend's parents fuels a sense of dread over their reactions to the discovery that a black man is dating their daughter. Chris anticipates uncomfortable encounters as a black man in the white space of the Armitage estate, a sense of foreboding which proves true through his interactions with the white garden party guests, who universally enact a series of microaggressions. The guests overcompensate for their awareness of Chris' racial difference in markedly stilted attempts at small talk, reducing Chris' personhood to a series of appallingly base stereotypes. These offhand comments range from a guest's condescending admiration for black athleticism because he "do[es] know Tiger!" to another guest's invasive inquiry into Chris and Rose's sex life when she asks, "is it better?" with a black man (Peele). The partygoers' inability to talk to Chris without resorting to racist clichés becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, leaving him to navigate these stilted encounters with a visible sense of growing discomfort. Chris exudes

a palpable sense of growing claustrophobia as he feels the isolation of being othered as the only black person in the room, forced to navigate these encounters with a forced laugh or a neutral reply, all the while visibly downplaying his obvious objection to these encounters in the moments of pause, often accompanied by a questioning look, before he responds. Much like Rankine's narrator's process of self-reflexive questioning, Chris' decision to deflect and downplay microaggressions acknowledges the danger in these moments of racist othering, emphasizing the extreme caution with which the black subject must negotiate these encounters for fear of escalating these small-scale acts of racist violence into more overt aggressions.

Peele's foreclosure of moments of solidarity between black characters in this white space flags the reach of anti-blackness' isolating effect in a white supremacist society. Chris' similarly failed interactions with other black characters at the Armitage estate becomes a device of suspense by complicating his feelings of vulnerability and resignation. Chris is repeatedly baffled by Walter, Georgina, and Logan's animatronic speech and servile smiles as they attend to their respective duties as groundskeeper, housekeeper, and token black party guest. These markedly outdated forms of black subservience lead Chris to marvel that they seem to have "*all...missed the movement*" (Peele). In an exchange with Georgina, Chris admits that "sometimes, if there's too many white people around, I get nervous." Chris is surprised by her response, "Aren't you something? That's not my experience, not at all" which markedly sides with her white employers instead of validating Chris' experience with her own experience in similar encounters. Georgina's response visually cues the troubling implication of this reversal, flagging the tension in these responses through paradoxical physical affects: Georgina

sheds a single tear, all the while maintaining her robotic smile, with her repeated “Oh no, no, no” shifting from distress to placation as her accompanying sob devolves into an unsettling chuckle (Peele). This and other such failures of communication deny Chris his expectation of reprieve from the onslaught of anti-black racist encounters through community with other black people in their shared experience. These encounters between black characters indicate the dueling priorities for black subjects in white spaces, troubling Chris’ desire to participate in the logics of whiteness. Chris’ status as a black subject complicates his desire to play by the rules of whiteness in these encounters because his desire to believe the best in the white characters’ intentions inevitably meets racist acts of violence. Georgina’s dueling emotional extremes similarly flag this tension for black subjects moving in predominantly white spaces who have been given over to the priorities of systemic whiteness. These disturbing encounters trouble Chris’ dedication to participating in the logics of whiteness as a black subject, calling into question his determination to follow the dictates of these white spaces in which anti-blackness constantly infuses these scenes.

Chris’ response to the onslaught of racist impositions deploy *Get Out*’s aesthetic of fear and dread to reveal the danger of racist violence for black subjects in these moments of vulnerability. As viewers watch Chris negotiate a growing sense of paranoia and fear, they take on his distress through the film’s mounting suspense. This escalation underscores the terror for black subjects in these moments of isolated vulnerability to anti-black violence. Chris’ involuntary hypnosis reveals the monstrosity in these intrusive encounters, in which Missy’s imposition on Chris’ autonomy ends in a striking image of terror. Although Chris clearly objects to “having strangers messing around in [his] head,”

he finds himself ambushed by Missy late at night (Peele). Chris realizes that Missy's questions about the death of his mother flag an attempt to initiate hypnosis without his consent; he looks at her askance as he asserts that "I don't want to think about that" (Peele). Missy's imposition in this scene proves to be a deliberate act of suppression in service of the family's secret plot to use Chris in a process of pseudo-black death by converting his body into a host for a white consciousness via a partial brain transplant. The insidious desires of whiteness in this conspiracy legitimizes Chris' fear of isolation at the Armitage house, in which the garden party guests' fascination with Chris' blackness obscures the violent desire to manipulate black bodies as commodified objects for white pleasure. Missy's manipulation of Chris' fear under hypnosis underscores the horror of this intrusive racist violence. The shot zooms on Chris' face, showing his growing distress as tears gather and run down his face. Camera cuts to Chris scratching at the arms of the chair heighten these tangible cues, confirmed in his weeping whisper that "I can't move" (Peele). This scene builds to the film's emblematic shot: a close up of Chris' wide-eyed, tear-stained face, frozen with terror. This single image, omnipresent in the film's promotional materials, summarizes the film's insistence on the terror of living as a black citizen under constant threat of racist violence.

This aesthetic of fear culminates in the Sunken Place, the film's representation of the feeling of utter helplessness black citizens face in a society organized by anti-blackness. The Sunken Place illustrates the alterity of black life, figuratively representing the horrific emotional paralysis that stems from black citizens' firsthand awareness of the alterity of black life. Peele capitalizes on this horrifying sensation of distance in the culmination of Missy's imposed hypnosis of Chris when she commands him to "sink into

the floor” (Peele). Chris sinks into himself, submerged into an undifferentiated bottomless black space. He floats, suspended and paralyzed, looking up at the exterior scene that hovers above him in a small window of light. Chris tries to scream, but he only makes a muffled sound, finding himself silenced in this position of utterly helpless vulnerability. Chris’ affect in the Sunken Place gestures towards the emotional toll of black citizens’ constant negotiation of “the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation” by anti-black violence (Sharpe 20). Chris’ utterly helpless isolation in the distinct space of the Sunken Place approximates Christina Sharpe’s conception of the alterity of black life as “living in the wake,” a metaphorical configuration of black life as a state of constant difficulty. Chris’ paralysis seems to emerge as a sense of being overwhelmed by this insurmountable difficulty. This outcome mourns the seeming unavoidability of being overwhelmed by this sensation of “living the history and present of terror...as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated in, and on, our black bodies” (Sharpe 15). Chris’ inescapable, overwhelming helplessness in the Sunken Place illustrates *Get Out*’s ultimate fear of being wholly consumed by anti-black violence.

Simultaneously, the enigmatic space of the Sunken Place exposes the horrific injustice of the “sunken” black subject’s paralysis through its representation of systemic oppression. The Sunken Place’s metaphor of racial subjection as a form of paralysis echoes Jared Sexton’s formulation of the inherent anti-blackness in American society as “an imposed black incapacity” (“Unclear...”). These similar orientations to anti-black racist oppression accept as given the notion that anti-blackness functions in American

society as a foundational social attitude. In these comparable arguments, the inescapable nature of anti-blackness in American life in turn fundamentally constitutes black life by tightly circumscribing the life chances available to black citizens. Beyond this formulation, Peele figures the Sunken Place as an undefined space in what appears to be “an attempt to formulate an account of such suffering [for black citizens]” that dwells in the difficulty of “establish[ing] the rules of its grammar” (Sexton, “Unclear...”). Although Peele discusses the Sunken Place sequence in interviews as “a way of thinking about a crisis like the mass incarceration of black men,” the sequence itself operates as a far more capacious metaphor of “institutional disenfranchisement” (Morris). The Sunken Place instead emphasizes the overwhelming force of this anti-black institution. The boundless ambiguity of the Sunken Place’s space heightens the notion of this oppressive force’s overwhelming totalizing power. Its blank emptiness indicates the insidious pervasiveness of the Sunken Place as unacknowledged anti-blackness that undergirds white culture in the “upper” world. With this horrifying image of inescapable, systemic white supremacist power, *Get Out* seems to envision a world of utter impossibility for black life, much like Coates’ resignation to anti-blackness as a force of nature.

However, where Coates’ comparable vision of black life ends in nihilistic pessimism, Peele’s use of comic satire mitigates the totalizing nature of this mournful vision of black life. Peele lampoons white liberal people’s naivetés of the ways in which they inadvertently contribute to white supremacist ideologies. The film represents this naïve problem of white liberalism through Rose’s horrified realization that her family’s abnormal behavior towards Chris signals their condescension towards black people. This satirical portrayal of liberal whiteness invites white audiences in on the film’s central

joke: what is horrifying to white audiences is wholly expected by black ones. This form of advocacy for the vulnerability of black citizens comically highlights the distance between white liberals' shock at the unintentional ways they contribute to anti-blackness, and black subjects' utterly unsurprised anticipation of these racist encounters. The film's alignment with a black protagonist offers insight not only into his experience of terror, but also into his anticipation of the scenario going awry. Rod, another black character and Chris' best friend, operates in this space of comedy which mediates the film's horror. Rod's distrust of the entire premise of Chris meeting his white girlfriend's parents serves as the film's comic relief, audience proxy, and validation of black suspicion. For every odd observation Chris makes at the Armitage house, Rod returns to his precept that a black man should never "go to a white girl's parents' house" because he rejects the possibility of white people's ability to engage black people outside racist stereotypes. Rod's one liners, including his recurrent suspicion that Missy's use of hypnosis turns black men into "Sex slaves!" operate at the meeting point of comedy and irony, destabilizing the totalizing power of the Armitage family's violent white supremacist conspiracy (Peele). Although Rod's interjections highlight the absurdity of this plot, his suspicion proves true, justifying his urgent warning that Chris must "get the fuck out of there...*Leave, motherfucker!*" (Peele). Rod's status as a figure of suspicion offers space for black life beyond the totalizing power of white supremacist violence by refusing the logics of whiteness at every turn. His comic suspicion breaks the film's tension by offering a route out of the Sunken Place as "a man who refuses to be sunk" in white supremacist subjection of black life (Morris). Rod's comic suspicion opens up the film's possibility for a fantasy of escape from racist horror.

In this fantasy of escape, Peele considers the mobilization of black rage as a form of resistance to the horrific generic and political expectations for black death which *Get Out* protests. Chris violently resists the Armitage family's plot to steal his body, turning to black rage as a response to racist violence that refuses to participate in the logics of whiteness. Instead, this explosion of black rage engages the conventions of slasher films to offer space for Chris' survival and escape from racist horror, opening a possibility to "rupture...what happens when we *know* this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand" (Sharpe 7). As Chris performs a series of revenge killings to fight his way out of the house, the film sets up a return to social order by allowing Chris to emerge from the Armitage estate's horror as the film's "final girl," a slasher film trope in which the climactic escalation of violence culminates in the defeat of the film's monster and a return to social order (Clover 45). Chris' survival as a sort of "final girl" interprets the gore of Chris' escape as a narrative necessity to survive white supremacist horror. Instead of presenting Chris' escape as violent excess, this escalation fulfills a generic expectation to restore social order, flagging the lengths which must be taken to overcome the monster of systemic racism. Chris' survival inverts the generic expectation that black characters are among the first to die in a slasher film, rendering his prior participation within the logics of whiteness as an insufficient gesture to maintain social order. Instead, this survival flags the troubling exclusion of people of color when the logics of whiteness serve as social order. Peele wryly notes that the absence of a "final brother" trope indicates this exclusion as a necessity in this logic (Morris). For black Americans, the traditional values of whiteness are normal, but Chris' experience with the Armitage

family's racist cabal reveals that this normalcy is, in fact, the unacceptable danger which must be overcome.

Meanwhile, this invocation of black rage as resistance also contends with white anxieties over black violent insurrection. The image of black subjects enacting violence typically invokes political censure from white subjects due their fear of black subjects overthrowing the social order by appropriating the state's right to enact violence. White anxieties surrounding black violence fear the state's inability to maintain social order in the face of violent insurrection. The logics of whiteness assuage these fears by reserving violence for the state to enforce social control, legitimizing state violence against black subjects to maintain a white supremacist social order. These anxieties have a long history which shape the scene of Chris' rampage, creating a sense of discomfort which casts this scene of insurrection as a display of violent excess. This tension between the horror of white supremacist subjection and violent resistance engages these historical anxieties to flag Chris' movement from temperance to a violently asserted rejection of the logics of whiteness.<sup>9</sup> At the culmination of his rampage on the driveway, Chris nearly strangles Rose, an action that conjures the stereotypical fear of an uncontrollably violent black masculinity from which white womanhood must be protected at all costs (Peele). The stereotypical fear of black violence against white individuals, especially against white womanhood risks reducing Chris' enactment of violent rebellion into the stereotype of the "black brute." Similarly, Walter's moment of violent insurrection inhabits this

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<sup>9</sup> Anxieties about black violence in revolution have a long genealogy that extends back to fears of slave rebellions, with a tradition of reading black resistance stemming from Fredrick Douglass' "The Heroic Slave" and Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno." The former emphasizes the revolutionary slave's nobility to ameliorate white fears of insurgent slaves enacting violent reprisals upon white subjects, while Melville presents the scheming slave Babo as a figure of melodramatic suspense, an object of utter terror for the white sailors against whom he rebels.

problematic of black violence in rebellion. When Chris awakens Walter's suppressed black consciousness through a camera phone flash, Walter seems to take up the radical call to "the incoherence of civil war" to resist anti-black violence (Wilderson 239). However, Walter rebels with an act of self-slaughter, shooting himself with Rose's shotgun so that he does not have to continue living in the Sunken Place (Peele). Although this scene offers a moment of triumph for his black consciousness in his duel with the Coagula's imposed white consciousness, the proximity of brutality, insurrection, and the foreclosure of self-slaughter dwell in the difficulty of enacting violence to "resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence" of black death (Sharpe 13).

*Get Out's* final scene uses this engagement with the problematic of black violent insurrection to imagine political possibility for black subjects in a fantasy of rescue. In the penultimate moment of his fight out of the Armitage house, Chris hears police sirens in the exposed space of the driveway while he is surrounded by an incriminating scene. The interjection of sirens and blue flashing lights threatens to reveal the arrival of law enforcement catching Chris red-handed at a scene of violence against a white family. In this ominous moment, Chris knows that the scene will not be read in his favor: he is a black man in a white space, blood-spattered, looming over an injured white woman, surrounded by multiple bodies. The fearful anticipation in Chris' face as he raises his hands signals his despairing resignation that the arrival of these actors of the state will not protect him as a victim of white supremacist violence (Peele). Instead, Chris anticipates that this intervention of the law will lead to the loss of his body to the state in a criminal conviction and an unjust prison sentence. He knows he will not be able to defend himself in the eyes of the law, so he faces becoming yet another black man condemned to the

prison industrial complex. The horrific anticipated future evoked in this moment of suspense dissipates with the cut to the word “airport” on the cruiser’s door. This presumably disastrous arrival of law enforcement actually is an act of rescue: Rod has arrived to save Chris in a TSA car. With this final resolution of the film’s suspense, Chris’ rescue reveals the completion of the audience’s empathetic engagement with his experience, in which their assumption of fear for the arrival of police gives way to delight over Rod’s rescue.<sup>10</sup> With this reversal, Peele offers the audience the potentiality of an imaginable future for Chris where he can leave the scene of carnage alive, escaping the threat of police arrest which would reinstate white supremacist violence.

In the void left by the state’s inability to rescue Chris, Rod emerges as an analogue for the law that is actually able to rescue black subjects. When Chris does not come home from his weekend at the Armitage house, Rod’s inherent distrust of the white family’s intentions allows him to reject Rose’s performance of concern, automatically knowing that she is a “lying motherfucker” when he calls her to investigate Chris’ disappearance (Peele). Rod’s employment as a TSA agent solidifies his status as a proxy for black suspicion of whiteness, as the TSA is a state agency governed by suspicion. Rod’s use of suspicion as a black TSA agent ironically inverts the institution’s

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<sup>10</sup> I cannot overstate how effectively this moment resolves its dramatic tension. Many reviewers of the film note the audience’s reaction in this moment as a shared experience of a deeply cathartic resolution of suspense. For example, Zadie Smith notes one audience member’s comment that “You’re really in for it now, you poor motherfucker” as a representative indication of the expectation that the police will not allow Chris’ victimization “to count for a goddamned thing,” which quickly gives way to “a collective gasp of delight” throughout the theater. The delight of this plot twist has become its own touchstone as a shared experience; Peele regularly engages with Twitter threads in which users document other people (often their parents) watching *Get Out* for the first time, with their reactions to the plot twist often feeling as satisfying as the plot twist itself. I also took notes on my roommate’s comments when she watched *Get Out* with me for the first time. In her most telling reaction moments before the sirens sound, she turned to me and said, “Is it bad I’m thinking about what’s going to happen if a cop shows up and sees a black man with all of these white bodies lying around?”

deployment of suspicion against black and brown bodies, anticipating his singular ability to coopt signs of the anti-black state to rescue Chris from racist horror. When Rod feels “that TSA shit tingle,” he becomes the only character who is able to uncover the Armitage plot (Peele). When Rod is unable to convince police detectives to investigate Chris’ disappearance as a missing persons case, he recognizes the state’s complicity in systemic anti-blackness in its inability to rescue a black citizen from racist horror. To mediate the state’s inability to protect black citizens, Rod manipulates signs of the state, coopting the state’s authority to enter the scene and rescue Chris himself. Rod appropriates the symbols of law to intervene as an actor who recognizes Chris as a vulnerable subject instead of a raced criminal. Rod’s use of police lights and sirens as signs of the law voices the desire for an entity that protects black bodies instead of victimizing them. However, his arrival in a TSA car ironizes this rescue because the TSA operates as a secondary state security entity with limited authority, only able to offer the appearance of safety instead of substantial measures of protection. Rod’s replacement of the police cruiser with an airport security car offers a gesture of rescue that intervenes in a system that will not protect either his or Chris’ black male lives.

In light of this failure of the law, *Get Out*’s ending considers how black life exists within the sphere of social death. Although Chris escapes from the Armitage house with his life, he must modify his conception of his own subjectivity. The numb tone with which Chris delivers his final lines indicates the shock he feels after this traumatic event (Peele). The Armitages’ racist violence has stripped away the veneer of social respectability that seemed to offer Chris equal footing with white America as a citizen in a post-racial society. Instead, Chris’ encounter with the Sunken Place tracks with

Sexton's reading of Fred Moten's notion that "Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground" (Sexton, "The Social Life..." 28). Peele's figurative visualization of the distance between black life and white social life approximates Moten's formulation of the distance between aboveground and underground spaces. These similar formulations both consider the institutional level of (white) American social life as one that looms over and holds down black life, leaving it at a fundamental disadvantage. After his experience in the Sunken Place, Chris drives away with a horrific reinforcement of the knowledge that his "black life is not [a] social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture" (Sexton, "The Social Life..." 28). Instead, Chris' near-victimization by horrific racist violence underscores the subordinated position blackness continues to hold in American life as a result of this violently oppressive force. The final image of Chris staring blankly into the distance underscores the traumatic nature of his encounter with white supremacist violence. The primary task of Chris' imagined future will be the work of learning to live with the traumatic knowledge that the violence he has suffered is an utterly normal logic in the American consciousness, merely amplified in extremity. The film asks us to wonder if Chris can learn to live in a system that will not save him from anti-black violence, which is both normalized and legitimized in American life. Because this emotional work seems to be a lot to ask of a violated subject in the name of creating alternate political futures out of systemic oppression, the film seems to gesture to a desire to imagine black life that can exist beyond the imposed subjection of systemic anti-blackness.

However, Rod's rescue frames Chris' sense of loss with a desire to move forward from the pessimistic anticipation of black life as black pain. Instead of anticipating systemic anti-black violence as a totalizing certainty, *Get Out*'s ending offers a fantasy of escape to imagine alternative futures for black subjectivity. The very fact that Rod's rescue flies in the face of material expectations for Chris in his moment of vulnerability creates space to explore the "potential energy of a black...[subject] position" within community (Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism..." 5). Through Chris' friendship with Rod, Peele considers a black subjectivity that can "hold...a singularly transformative possibility, an energy generated by virtue of its relation to others in a field of force" (Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism..." 5). Although *Get Out* strips away any semblances of systemic protection for contemporary black subjects, the film ends with Chris' rescue by another black subject through a liberating rejection of the logics of whiteness. Although Chris must reckon with the traumatic destruction of the mythos of white goodwill which is capable of operating beyond anti-black racism, he is saved by the suspicion and protection of his friend. Their relationship gestures toward a community that can intervene in the state's failure to offer protection to black subjects. With Rod's promise that "I'm TS-motherfucking-A. We handle shit. It's what we do. [You can] consider the situation fucking handled" as the film's final lines, Peele envisions a political future for these men in the very offer of a black man manipulating signs of the state to rescue his friend (Peele). By operating as the state in absentia, Rod allows Chris to move in (relative) freedom, in which he will not be consumed by the mechanisms of white supremacy that intend to destroy him. Although Chris will have to live with the weight of this violence, signaled by the camera cut that glances back towards the carnage on the driveway and the

smoldering house, the mere fact of his survival without repercussions justifies his enactment of violence against a white family. This justification tempers the dire state in which Chris drives away from his near consumption in racist horror. This ending longs for an alternative for black bodies that is not inherently constituted by the racist subjection.

With *Get Out*'s generic innovation, Peele advocates for black life by offering a fresh and invigorating imagined future for black subjectivity. While the film channels the urgency of mournful appeals for the vulnerability of black citizens to systemic anti-black violence through the conventions of horror film, it does not become absorbed by these processes of mourning. Instead, the combination of revisions of anti-black tropes in horror film with the injection of comic satire mediates the film's mournful vision, presenting a deeply ironic tone which capitalizes on the never-fully-earnest tone of horror film. This tone capitalizes on anticipation and reversals, allowing space beyond feelings of helplessness by necessarily prohibiting feelings of totalizing despair. While the film offers a deeply compelling portrayal of the sense of vulnerability that accompanies black citizens, particularly in white spaces, its use of satire allows viewers to anticipate the plot's reversals, inviting the audience in on the joke that *Get Out*'s scenario of flawed encounters between black and white individuals as wholly predictable, if perhaps taken to metaphorical extremes. The play of the film dwells in the melodramatic elevation of these everyday scenes, ironizing American racial fears to open a trajectory for black life beyond the circumscription of racist subjection. This mediation is politically crucial, as it prohibits the misreading of black life as little more than black pain. Instead, *Get Out* valorizes black joy through the use of a comic character who emerges as the film's hero,

offering a vision of community that can chart a trajectory beyond anti-black oppression. The question remains of how to access this trajectory, as this ending only seems possible as the stuff of fantasy. How does one access this triumphant vision of escape, when the specter of white supremacist violence haunts even Chris' fictional rescue? In the meantime, the very existence of this escape route, despite its constant proximity to the threat of anti-black violence, insistently advocates for the possibility of a black subjectivity beyond the reaches of the Sunken Place.

## Conclusion

This thesis engages questions about the relationship between black life and black pain within the confines of a racist society. This project argues that an afro-pessimistic configuration of this relationship seeks to defend black subjects from the continued violence of systemic racism. Through a reading of three contemporary African American texts, this thesis considers the implications of reading black life through its relationship to systemic racist violence. This project identifies some of the possible futures for black life, imagining whether black subjectivity can exist beyond its circumscription by black pain. This thesis considers *Citizen: An American Lyric*, *Between the World and Me*, and *Get Out* as texts which share a similarly afro-pessimistic reading of black life which is defined by this relationship to systemic racist violence. These texts use their comparable visions of the state of contemporary black life in America to raise an objection to anti-blackness as the social status quo. Instead, these texts protest the ordinariness of systemic anti-black violence, advocating for black life by opening space for empathetic engagement between black subjects and a wider (often white) readership. These texts demand a public recognition of black subjectivity to intervene in the systemic subjection of black life. These texts construct narratives which insist that readers engage with the pain of racial embodiment. Within this exploration of affect, this thesis defines black pain as a sense of haunting awareness of black life's relationship to a history of violently enforced systemic oppression. In this anti-black state, black life is shaped by the fear in constantly anticipating one's own victimization to acts of racist violence. These articulations of black life and its relationship to black pain resist the ordinariness of black

suffering, issuing a demand that for public recognition of the inescapability of racist violence as an underpinning in the American state.

In this act of resistance, these texts demand a future for black subjectivity in which black life is not defined by its relationship to black pain. These texts express a desire to imagine a black subjectivity that is not circumscribed by the violence of systemic racist subjection. This thesis explores the possibility of such a future for black life by identifying the different imagined futures which emerge from an afro-pessimistic reading of contemporary black life. These texts ask what futures can exist for black life in light of its relationship to this history of racist subjection. While Rankine's focus on the present moment does not define a political future, her advocacy for black life furiously demands something different from the status quo of racist subjection. With this setup, the potentiality of this future extends from the possibility of overcoming the logics of whiteness. Coates' response to a similar condemnation of systemic anti-blackness does not offer such a possibility. Instead, his nihilism pessimistically imagines a future in which anti-blackness persists eternally. On the other hand, Peele offers a fantasy of escape from systemic anti-blackness, imagining a community which can rescue black subjects from racist horror through a rejection of the logics of whiteness. This fantasy of rescue imagines white supremacist violence as a monster which can be defeated. While these texts offer different degrees of potentiality within these imagined possibilities, they agree on the existence of a future for black subjectivity. However, the question remains of what to do with these different imagined outcomes. The work that remains beyond the articulation of these possibilities gestures to the question of what black life can look like when it is not constructed through its relationship to systemic violence.

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Curriculum Vitae

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**Wake Forest University**, Winston-Salem, NC, May 2018  
Master of Arts in English  
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**Wake Forest University**, Winston-Salem, NC, May 2016  
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Graduated Magna Cum Laude, Dean’s List: every semester  
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**WORK EXPERIENCE**

**Graduate Assistant**, Wake Forest University Writing Center, August 2016–June 2018

**Circulation Department Weekend Supervisor and Student Assistant**, *Z. Smith Reynolds Library*, Wake Forest University, September 2013–June 2018

**Editorial Intern**, Wake Forest University Press, August 2014–May 2018

**Design and Production Editor**, *Notes on American Letters*, Wake Forest University, June 2017–December 2017

**Design Submissions Editor**, *Notes on American Letters*, Wake Forest University, January 2017–June 2017

**Research Assistant**, History Department, Wake Forest University, July 2016–August 2016

**Design Intern**, *Z. Smith Reynolds Library Writers’ Camp*, Wake Forest University, March 2016

**Editorial Intern**, *Smyth & Helwys Publishing*, Macon, GA, May 2015–July 2016

**PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS**

**Article Placed**, *Sociation Today: The Official Journal of the North Carolina Sociological Association*, “Here for the Mrs. Degree: Women’s College Major Choice and Marital Status,” Spring/Summer 2016

**Paper Presented,** *Fifth Annual WFU Student Symposium on Gender and Sexuality, Feminist Intersectionalities: Systemic Injustice and Social Inequality*, “Here for the Mrs. Degree: College Major Choice, Marriage, and Work,” March 2016

**Contributor,** *Wake the Artifacts: Student Writing from Wake Forest University’s Special Collections*, “W. J. Cash at His Typewriter, Mexico City 1941,” March 2016