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Dissertation

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blackness příště: Proroctví Jamese Baldwina o kráse a lásce

blackness Next Time: James Baldwin's Prophecies of Beauty and Love

Dissertation supervisor: Mgr. Pavla Veselá, PhD.

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I hereby declare that I have written this dissertation independently, using only the mentioned and duly cited sources and literature, and that the work has not been used in another university study programme or to obtain the same or another academic title.

In Alhos Vedros (PT) on June 13, 2024 Emanuela Maltese, PhD.

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To Lombe
this time, next time

Contents

Linguistic Note

Afropessimism/Afro-pessimism: In accordance with Frank Wilderson III's work, the thesis favors the term Afropessimism over Afro-pessimism. However, Afro-pessimism persists in citations when adopted by their writers.

Black/black/blacks: The term "Black" is always capitalized throughout the thesis, and not only when it appears in commonly recognized phrases (such as Black Power, Black Arts movement, Black Lives Matter movement, etc.) unless it appears as "black" within a direct quotation or is deliberately chosen by critics (for instance, Fred Moten usually does not capitalize it in his writings, and "black optimism," the stream of thought to him associated, adheres to this convention as well). When referring to those who self-identify as Black individuals, "blacks" is often preferred to "Blacks," unless the latter is used in a direct quotation.

Blackness/*blackness*: Blackness with a capital "B" will be used when referring to the scientific-philosophical racial category consolidated during the Enlightenment. The same will occur to allude to its use within the Black Arts Movement in the 1970s. However, blackness with a lowercase letter "b" refers to the reevaluation of discourses on Blackness and the adjective "black" by the Black radical tradition and especially the critical work of Fred Moten. I adopt the latter usage and also deliberately italicize it (*blackness*) in order to connect it to my re-reading of James Baldwin and include Denise Ferreira da Silva's perspective.

Black Feminist Poethics: The initial letters are capitalized as they appear in Denise Ferreira da Silva's works; additionally, the term "Poethics" is capitalized when referring to Ferreira da Silva's Black Feminist Poethics but will be lowercased in all other contexts.

Plenum is capitalized as it appears in Denise Ferreira da Silva's works and

The use of other emphasized words (i.e., italicized) that do not appear in this note will be explained in their corresponding footnote.

Baldwin's titles

The thesis draws upon the three exhaustive collections (of essays, early and later novels) edited by Toni Morisson for the Library of America as primary sources for Baldwin's works. Consequently, I will present all titles mentioned in these collections in footnotes using Roman type, enclosed in double quotation marks, including the titles of the main essays. For the first time, they will also provide comprehensive, clear publication information, including the original publication year when available. In subsequent footnotes, only the title of the work will be displayed.

E.g.,

James Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation," "Nobody Knows My Name" (1961), *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 209–14.

Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation," 212.

Or, James Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk" (1974), *Later Novels*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 363–509.

Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 400.

However, when mentioning novels or the primary title of an essay collection in the body of the thesis, italics are preferred.

E.g.,

Nobody Knows My Name

If Beale Street Could Talk

References to works not edited by Toni Morrison shall include complete citations, and titles will be formatted according to the requirements of the Chicago Manual of Style. Specifically, titles that are not collected in volumes but are published independently will be italicized.

Introduction

Ever since 2016, when the inaugural international conference on James Baldwin studies was convened and director Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* was released in cinemas, the author, born in Harlem on August 2, 1924, has actively reemerged in prominence, not only within academic circles but also and particularly in popular culture, film, and organizations associated with anti-racist and anti-sexist movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement. The development of this thesis precisely emerges from my interest in this revival.

In the following pages, I will attempt to analyze selected works and conversations of James Baldwin, such as some essays contained in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), *Another Country* (1962), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *No Name in the Street* (1972), *A Dialogue* (1973), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), "Open Letter to the Born Again" (1979), "Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation with Audre Lorde" (1984), and "Here Be Dragons" (1985). This analysis will be conducted from a theoretical-literary perspective that incorporates a series of studies that originated from the postructuralist revolution in the 1970s, i.e., postcolonial, cultural, and feminist studies, and paved the way for queer and trans* studies. Additionally, it will explore the involvement of the Black radical tradition—a stream of thought that emerged in the 1980s in the US via the groundbreaking work of the scholar Cedric J. Robinson, but whose origins can be traced back to the first half of the nineteenth century and study extended to other regions of the world—and the revaluation of it by scholars such as Hortense Spillers, Éduard Glissant, Robin Kelly, Stefano Harney in addition to Fred Moten and Denise Ferreira da Silva, whose works are central to the thesis.

In light of this, the approach is complex and intricate, necessitating a careful interaction between both areas of literature and criticism. In pursuit of this objective, my personal experience as a translator and my affinity for performativity and music have provided great support. Baldwin's literary oeuvre entails translation in many ways. These works can *carry* the reader *across* the author's formative years and later times, the many identities he encounters, and his fears and hopes, which are frequently manifested in the sentimental non-fictional testaments of Baldwin or reflected in the characters of his fictional stories. It also transports the critic toward other nuances of literature.

Furthermore, translation—with its emphasis on the ongoing loving movement between a work of art and its analysis—has assisted me in weaving the intricate threads that connect the writer's works to a novel idea of *blackness*. Influenced by both Black radicalism and certain principles from the aforementioned plethora of studies, *blackness* is denoted by a lowercase letter—a choice that I adopt after some Black radicals, and I additionally emphasize it as a distinctive marker of my thesis. It diverges from the notion of Blackness as a unified racial category shaped by Enlightenment philosophy and scientific presumptions and challenges the aesthetic revindication of Black beauty that the Black Arts Movement in the US during the 1960s and 1970s attempted to reestablish. The ultimate goal is to advocate a novel framework for comprehending the world.

The study of *blackness* proposed in this thesis is influenced by two specific branches of Black radicalism: black optimism, as articulated by cultural theorist Moten, and Black Feminist Poethics, as presented by philosopher and artist Ferreira da Silva. The initial inquiry of the first strand revolves around the issue of the negative aspects associated with Black/Blackness. It reexamines Frantz Fanon's psychological analysis of the living experience of Black life, with a specific emphasis on the dynamic relationship between joy and pain, pessimism and optimism. The strand prioritizes the social energy and creative expression of Black life, by extending it to a model for all humanity. The second strand critically explores the process of knowledge and the historical and scientific assumptions that originated "the analytics of racialization."[1] Thus, it advocates an alternative form of knowledge named Black Feminist Poethics, which combines creativity and responsibility, and draws from Black female science fiction. Both streams of thought converge in their common desire to re-found the world from a new angle and question the rigid systems of categorization that uphold political and social capitalism, which is rooted in the historical subjugation of Black people via enslavement and racialization. This view corrects Marxism's materialist consideration of capitalism and offers a critique of the poststructuralist turn in critical theory.

Central to the thesis is my argument that Baldwin anticipated through his own exemplary life and oeuvre the desire to change the perception and knowledge of both the world and the word, as also shared by Black radicalism. As a result, he can be regarded as a prophet of *blackness*. Hence the title, "*blackness* next time": this is Baldwin's ultimate prophecy. Baldwin is often regarded as a prophetic author, of the Jeremiad tradition, who

[1] Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xv.

anticipated numerous posthumous developments and trends. However, in the thesis, the intention is to "translate" and contrapuntally read prophecy as a form of "afterlife" or a form of translation itself—that is, as a pre-diction, a diction concerning the future that protects us from the present while also containing information from the past. In other words, prophecy functions as a form of virtuality that amalgamates the past, present, and future by conceptualizing the past as both something that has come before us and something that will come after us, which is *before* us. Baldwin favors prophecy as a modality due to its capacity to convey the weight of an intricate vision concerning current events, which concurrently serves as a representation or iteration of a past occurrence that is susceptible to change. Consequently, he hopes for a change in the perception and understanding of human life and language, and beauty and love are two of the primary emanations of his prophecy.

Three literary devices will be employed in demonstrating this sophisticated re-reading project: contrapuntal reading, *augmentation*, and apposition, which are derived from musical language, translation, linguistics, and biology. Edward Said's piano-based idea that texts might be understood as musical counterpoints that reciprocally convey the political and socio-cultural connections of the world's texts inspired this strategy. Contrapuntal reading of earlier and later works will reveal Baldwin's persistent exilic sense—represented in certain of his characters—caught between belonging to the US and journeying over the ocean, vision and sound, and optimism and despair. Moten's call to "consent to not be a single being" (first articulated by Glissant) and Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist idea of translation as survival (*survie*) lead to *augmentation*. Finally, Moten uses apposition, a concept from linguistics and biology, to show closeness rather than antagonism, even when opinions diverge. In grammar, apposition indicates two noun phrases (np) in a sentence to refer to the same person or object. In biology, it signifies cell wall layer expansion, which happens by addition and proximity.

The thesis is structured into four chapters, each consisting of four sections. The preference for this four-part structure is also influenced by Ferreira da Silva's Poethics, which proposes the number "four" as representing a knowledge structure that has been erased by both the individualism of the one, the binary thinking characteristic of the Enlightenment, and the trinity valued in Catholic religious doctrine. The number four not only represents the four components and dimensions, but it also signifies a "declension

from the Hegelian triad" of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, as it suggests a resolution of dialectical thinking.[2]

The first chapter presents an in-depth investigation of the resurgence of James Baldwin in the last two decades. The first section addresses how the author and his writings have been extensively analyzed through various literary approaches, such as cultural and postcolonial studies, feminism, queer studies, and trans studies. The second section is informed by the concept of the "afterlife" in the field of translation studies. This concept includes Walter Benjamin's famous work "The Task of the Translator" and Derrida's use of the term "survival," which refers to a continuation of life that persists and endures, rather than life after death.[3] Similarly, Baldwin's "afterlife" refers to the notion that his life and works not only underwent changes throughout time and after his death, but they also gained a renewed existence, which persists in our present day. I, thus, examine the postcolonial and cultural reinterpretation of Baldwin, emphasizing that the writer can be seen as a forerunner of various postcolonial tenets, including Stuart Hall's theory of diaspora, Homi Bhabha's notion of "hybridity," and Edward Said's perspectives on exile and his application of the Gramscian concept of "organic intellectual." The studies reveal the use of contrapuntal reading methods and the examination of identity concerns that arise from exile and diaspora. These analytical tools are particularly helpful in looking at Baldwin's transnationalism, experiences of exile, and diasporic encounters, as well as his role as an organic intellectual. In the third section, I introduce the queer and feminist approach to Baldwin, which has been revitalized in recent decades by the LGBTQ+'s support of Baldwin in view of his homosexuality and queerness. More than Baldwin's parallels to queer and feminist views, this section is about how both feminism and queer studies fight patriarchal heteronormativity, which some of Baldwin's characters struggle with. Feminism also encourages the use of "speculative fabulation," a significant theoretical method described by Donna Haraway as the integration of intellectual and imaginative endeavors. I employ it to demonstrate Baldwin's point about art and the power of "interior life." Speculative fabulations also suggest that literature may affect reality and vice versa, bridging the gap between reality and fiction, but also the fields of the humanities and science. Baldwin's time-related testimonies are an example of this. In

[2] Denise Ferreira da Silva and Rizvana Bradley, "Four Theses on Aesthetics," *e-flux Journal* 120, September 2021, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/120/416146/four-theses-on-aesthetics/

[3] See Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 15–25; and Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," *Difference in Translation*, ed. and trans. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165–205.

the fourth part, transness is included as a critical lens. Based on the findings and tenets elucidated in the preceding sections, transness becomes a more sophisticated method to understand Baldwin's difficult existence. It expands feminist intersectionality and queer studies-based or critical trans* ideas, complicates postcolonial diasporic identities and transnationality, and acknowledges Baldwin's "many strangers" in life and fiction. Transness is indeed read, firstly, as a conjunctive marker (trans*) that indicates the many "ands" (or possibilities) to understand Baldwin's complexity. It is then imagined as a musical trance, a dancing movement, and a state of possession to attest to the writer's multiple identifications and troubled masculinity and his conceptualization, through his works, of a trans-aesthetic that embraces androgyny. Finally, it is approached as transnational feminism (Jacqui M. Alexander), which advocates a return to spiritualism and views transness as a work of the spirit and, more importantly, the flesh, which Spillers views as the site of knowledge without symbolic conceptualizations and inscription in the universal linguistic "grammar" (contrarily to the body). In this sense, Baldwin's transnational attitude is a will to balance particularity and universality and welcome the spiritual. He may have gone beyond queerness to trans*ness, or physical and spiritual contact with the other side: the flesh, love as sensuality, or presence without preconditions.

In the second chapter, I *augment* the methodologies introduced in the first section, which align with my starting point (i.e., postcolonialism and feminism, particularly). This expansion involves delving into the Black radical tradition, particularly focusing on the works of Moten and Ferreira da Silva. She also touches on the concepts of Blackness, Black aesthetics, and the notion of lowercase *blackness* as a social force able to know the world and literature in a different, more ethical, way. In the initial section following the introduction of the Black radical tradition, which argues for an alternative understanding of history by asserting that capitalism did not abolish slavery but rather emerged from it, the appositional replies to it are set out: Afropessimism (as presented by Frank Wilderson III) and black optimism (as advocated by Moten). The former agrees with the Black radical notion that Marxism—a theory originating from Europe (despite its connection to global events)—is inadequate in explaining the racialization of non-European groups or extending its fight to include anti-racism. However, it univocally associates Blackness with slavery and the Middle Passage. Additionally, it harbors skepticism towards any effort to understand the dehumanization of Black individuals resulting from these experiences. Moten, who appositionally reads, rather than contradicts, Wilderson's stance, holds that the lived experience of Black individuals, entangled in the complex interplay of

pleasure and grief, has also given rise to another way of seeing the world, a sociality that he refers to as *blackness*. The second section is devoted to Moten's contrapuntal study of *blackness* by taking a detour through Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness," which raises questions about the psychoanalytical and ontological nature of Black existence. This study leads Moten to advance the "case of blackness," which alludes to the potential of *blackness* when detached from Western ontological binarism between Subject/object, as well as from the ideas of individuality and transparency. Moten enriches his perspective by incorporating elements of opacity, nothingness, multiplicity, and mysticism of the flesh, all deeply entwined with the musical experience. In the third section, *blackness* is further translated as "matter," as explained by Ferreira da Silva's Black Feminist Poethics. This interpretation is rooted in Black feminism, art, and literature, to encourage intersectionality and transness. The significance of the sensitive world and the need to move away from the Enlightenment and (post-Enlightenment) Subject are followed by a return to the world as a Plenum (Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz), where all existing creatures are virtually and nonlocally interconnected and different but inseparable. In the fourth section, the brilliant intuitions and study of *blackness* put forth by both Moten and Ferreira da Silva support the argument that Baldwin's prophecies of beauty and love are manifestations of *blackness*. While maintaining the essence of the Jeremiad, Baldwin also embodies a new kind of prophet, who envisions the termination of the socio-political arsenal that subtends institutions and systems of knowledge. This prophecy resonates with the evocative essence of "all that jazz," while also drawing inspiration from the depths of Black mysticism to eloquently extend a welcoming embrace to those who are marginalized, silenced, and part of the forgotten "many thousands gone," as referenced in one of Baldwin's renowned works.

The third chapter presents the first manifestation of Baldwin's prophetic vision of *blackness*, which is embodied in the concept of beauty. The chapter begins with a detour into theories of Black aesthetics, inspired by Baldwin's recurring question at the end of his influential work *The Fire Next Time*—"*What will happen to all that beauty then*?"—referred to the Black individuals he had observed in major American cities and at Elijah Muhammad's table the day he was invited to the Nation of Islam leader's place. Black beauty, which is a crucial aspect of Black aesthetics, extends beyond the well-known slogan "Black is beautiful" and the consideration of Black performativity as unilaterally essential to Black people. Baldwin looks "through and with" "*all that beauty*" to both engage intimately with human beings and maintain a moral distance from the world. This

approach redefines aesthetics as a revolutionary area of study. The third section offers a contrapuntal reading of *The Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work*, focusing on the interconnection between joy and pain and the importance of the ambivalent experience of "terrible beauty," by revealing that the Black experience cannot be confined uniquely to the narrative of despair and sorrow: the Middle Passage also generated examples of resistance, fugitivity from canonical assumptions, and experimental performativity. The fourth section of the reading explores the aesthetic aspects of both works, specifically their receptiveness to a non-linguistic dimension and their musicality. This shift in critical analysis moves from the mirror stage to what I refer to as Baldwin's Plenum stage, after Ferreira da Silva's discussion on the Plenum. In this stage, the beauty of blackness is expressed through the "implicancy" of all senses and an invitation to accept "exsense" (Harney and Moten): that which goes beyond sense and exists outside of it, thus eluding comprehension.

The fourth and final chapter deals with the second prophecy, known as the prophecy of love, which is depicted through the intricate plots of two remarkable novels, *Another Country* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Parts of this chapter have appeared in two articles I wrote for Litteraria Pragensia and *James Baldwin Review*, respectively.[4] Additionally, the passionate reading experience is enhanced by the rhythmic influence of blues and jazz. This chapter also includes counterpoints provided by minor texts such as "Revolutionary Hope," "Open Letter to the Born Again," and "Here Be Dragons." The first section provides a brief excursus of Baldwin's love ethics, with specific attention to two significant events: his exile to France and the death of Martin Luther King Jr. It also explores the effect of Black Power and Black feminism on the writer's poetics, both aspects only lately addressed by critics of Baldwin. In the second section, I envision James Baldwin's "trans* cartographies" in relation to contemporary ideas on trans* and transness, as well as *blackness*. This figuration specifically centers on *Another Country*. The text is divided into three sections, each focusing on different characters (Rufus, Vivaldo, Leona, Cass, Eric, and Ida), who represent the three distinct perspectives on the study of transness introduced in the second chapter. Firstly, transness is used as trans*, an

[4] Emanuela Maltese, "Fugitively Crossing the Ocean: James Baldwin's Love and Consent to Be in Trans/Trance," *Trans*migrations: Cartographies of the Queer*, ed. Vit Bohal (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2020), 109–22; and Emanuela Maltese, "'Love Is the Key': James Baldwin's Poethics of Love," *James Baldwin Review* 9, no. 1 (2023): 89–107. The contribution received the Graduate Student Essay Award from the journal.

open signifier to indicate various identity possibilities not limited to the gender/sex axis but encompassing other aspects such as interraciality, heterosexuality, queerness, and homosexuality. Secondly, transness appears as a trance state to describe a state of creative possession and the experience of being inhabited by other lives and their joys and pains. This limbic state helps Baldwin and some of the mentioned characters redefine the concepts of life and death. Lastly, transness alludes to transnationality, which entails both a physical and spiritual journey in the world/word. Both Baldwin's life and that of the characters of *Another Country* mirror this transnational quality in the way they interrelate with friends and lovers, and cross borders between Europe and the US, as well as other places, including Turkey, Israel, and Palestine. Transnational quality also refers to the intersection of gender relations and racial tensions, drawing parallels to historical events like the Transatlantic Crossing and the Middle Passage, as well as religious and spiritual traditions. In the third section, *A Dialogue* with Nikki Giovanni interacts with *If Beale Street Could Talk* and sheds light on Baldwin's "poethics" of love in the 1970s, after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination and the author's engagement with Black Power and feminism. This revision takes its cues from intersectionality and extends them via Hortense Spillers's bold critique of Baldwin's politics of intimacy, his writing style, and the American family grammar. His vision of love as moral "energy" not only anticipates Ferreira da Silva's "Black Feminist Poethics," but is also a potential "key" to end "the racial nightmare" and "save the children," thereby becoming a poethics of love for the infancy of the world. The fourth section, indeed, proposes love as a prophetic work for the infancy of the world. Here, infancy does not merely refer to children, to whom Baldwin had directed all his prophecies, but also as a condition in life that resembles *blackness* and thus aims at loving the world in a way that departs from the political divisions of private and public, and re-creating a society in which infancy, just as *blackness*, in all its acceptations, is loved.

The thesis is ultimately an attempt to reread the works and life of James Baldwin through a literary analysis influenced by the work of *augmentation* offered by the translation practice, the modality of apposition between the Black radical tradition and a range of studies that span from postcolonialism to trans* studies. What is at stake, and I seek to demonstrate it, is the writer's desire to imagine and practice a revolutionary mode of living and knowing the world, both aesthetically and ethically.

1. Critical "Afterlife": Baldwin's *This Time*

1.1 An Overview of Baldwin's Critical Arenas in His "Afterlife"

There is nothing new. And what is new is always very, very old;
it is always you.[5]
James Baldwin

Nice, June 17th, 2022. As we gathered for the 7th International James Baldwin Conference focusing on the queer, global, and elder Baldwin, we, more than one hundred fifty speakers, scholars, academics, activists, artists, musicians, and writers from all over the world, had a mesmerizing collective moment of self-recollection.[6] This moment occurred during the plenary session, in the *Marie Center Universitaire Méditerranéen* (CUM), a grim colonial-style venue but with an impressive amphitheater, the building's jewel, featuring a dome decorated with the twelve constellations of the zodiac family. Under the suggestive decoration, we conveyed Baldwin's survival to the audience: yes, as a zodiac constellation, we were held together by his memory, his voice, his words, and the worlds he helped create, projected for a few minutes in a video shot in Saint-Paul de Vence when he was alive. As if he were there, we were able to acknowledge his "afterlife."

Yet, Baldwin's "afterlife" has so far been very contradictory. Soon after his death and throughout the 1990s, he became an underrated and almost forgotten writer, but in the 2000s, he experienced a vibrant renaissance. Every year, some of his works are republished and retranslated, and his towering figure is hailed all around the world and in various fields, from literature to cinema.[7] Baldwin's life and career could be viewed as an

[5] Malcolm Preston, "The Image: Three views–Ben Shahn, Darius Milhaud and James Baldwin Debate the Real Meaning of a Fashionable Term (1962)," *Conversations with James Baldwin*, eds. Louis H. Pratt and Fred L. Standley (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), 31.

[6] The International Conference on James Baldwin took place in Nice, from June 16th until 18th, 2022. For more details, see the website of the event: www.lamaisonbaldwin.fr.

7 Among the new publications we find: James Baldwin, *James Baldwin: The Last Interview: And Other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2014) featuring the unpublished last interview to Baldwin by Quincy Trope and some conversations; Bill V. Mullen, *James Baldwin. Living in Fire* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), a very poignant biography; the cinematic adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* by Berry Jenkins (2018); Michele Elam, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), a collection of essays on Baldwin's genres and collaborations; and the latest volumes on Baldwin's importance in the contemporary struggle for justice, namely Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Today* (London: Vintage Publishing,

act of translation. In every critical examination of Baldwin's life and career, his originality is enhanced and *augmented*.[8] For critics and translators, what comes later, or the future of text, has always been a *sine qua non*-requirement. The original text would not be able to continue telling its story, and exist, without its posthumous critical analysis or translation. Differently said, it survives through the rereading of the critic and the rewriting of the translator. In his influential essay "The Task of the Translator" (1923), the philosopher Walter Benjamin argues that a translation is the "afterlife" of the original:

> Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original-not so much from its life as from its "afterlife." For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life.[9]

It is as if the primary text already contains the condition for "translatability," and the survival of what it was meant to say, that as Benjamin claims, and later Derrida underscores, consists of a particular element innate in the original. This element is called "afterlife," and it entails the possibility for world languages to be reunited through translation in a unique and "pure" language, able to convey their similarities and their common origin.[10] It is noteworthy that although Benjamin never used the exact German

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2021), and Jamie McGhee and Adam Hollowell, *You Mean It or You Don't: James Baldwin's Radical Challenge* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022).

[8] The terms *augment/augmentations*, which will appear throughout the thesis in italics, are used emphatically to refer to both Fred Moten's invitation to being "more than a single being" and Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist claim for multiplicity and translation as survival, to be understood not so much as an extra life, but a resonating or amplified life. In addition, *augmentation* also draws inspiration from Derrida's use of the term "abounding" (in French *débordement*), meaning something exceeding and overflowing borders, Moten specifies his use of the Derridean term when he reflects on the hole/whole sexual/linguistic relation in sound: "The repression of the knowledge of the hole in the signifier is shadowed by another, not so easily sensed repression of the knowledge of the whole in the signifier. This is a repression of amplification, of sound, and, most especially, of *abounding*, in the sense that Derrida employs, where the whole expands beyond itself in the manner of an ensemble that pushes conventional ontological formulation over the edge. The hole speaks of lack, division, incompleteness; the whole speaks of an extremity, an incommensurability of excess, the going past of the signifier, neither its falling short, nor some simple equivalence. This understanding of the whole is not formed in relation to an impenetrable and exclusionary integrity but is, as Derrida puts it, 'a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy' that raises the most severe and difficult concerns regarding the question of its own representation." See Fred Moten, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 173 (emphasis in the original). See also Jacques Derrida, "Living On/Border Lines," *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom and others, trans. James Hulbert (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 62–142.

[9] Considered one of the most widely cited texts on translation, and one of the most known by Walter Benjamin, this is a central text in translation studies. See Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 71.

[10] "Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. […] Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express. [...] Certainly not in the similarity between works of literature or words. Rather, all suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each

word for "afterlife," but for survival (*Überleben*), he created a new term (*Fortleben*), that critics and translators have returned as "afterlife" to indicate his preoccupation with the transformation of texts *after* they have been published, or *after* their author died. However, I regard Benjamin's new word as an example of how translation is a complexifying task, unveiling *the words within the word* or some other meaning. *Fortleben* is not entirely "afterlife," but can be also a life itself that goes on, a living-on life "rather than life post mortem"—a "survival" (*survie*) as Derrida named it.[11] This difference is very crucial because Baldwin's "afterlife" alludes to both the transformation and fate of his works over and "above" (that better translates both the German and French prefixes *Über-* and *sur-*) his passing and his fame, or rebirth (renewal of his life) in our contemporaneity.

Indeed, the concept of "afterlife" transcends mere translation, and it may be argued that every piece of literature and art already has the prerequisites for criticism and fame. A text's "afterlife" and maturity are ensured by critical analysis and literary rereading, which are forms of translation from one period, culture, and sensibility to another. Benjamin himself compares the task of the translator to the work of the literary critic. Influenced by his ambivalent position between messianic vision and materialism, he advocates a critical work that restores the original text critiqued, by giving it a new force, a new life whose consciousness is alien even to the author.[12] Both the translator's and the critic's task entails a transfer, "carrying over or beyond" from one location or text to another, as the origin of the term translation suggests.[13] All writings, whether they are literal translations or critical ones, are the outcome of such a movement because they are written by carrying stories and languages "over and beyond" space and time, transnationally and synchronically.

Benjamin's essay on translation and Derrida's rereading of it in "Des Tours" serve here as a theoretical and ethical model for understanding Baldwin's "afterlife" in our time; the latter owing to the beauty of his language, the strength of his ethical effort, and the clarity of his prophecies. While acknowledging the challenges inherent in this translation endeavor—an (im)possible task, according to Derrida—my desire in this thesis is to

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language as a whole-an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language." Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 72–74.

[11] Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," 178.

[12] Benjamin devoted his doctoral thesis to the work of criticism, *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism* (1919). His idea of criticism derives from the Romantic writers who unearthed classic texts, and like his conception of translation, it is connected to the possibility for an author and his text to survive through other texts and authors.

[13] See the online etymological dictionary retrievable at http://www.etymonline.com.

augment some of the writer's works and show the urgency and capability with which he may continue to impact the lives of many people, Black and non-Black, via his prophetic words.

In this chapter, I will discuss the culturalist and postcolonial, queer and feminist, and trans* methodologies, the three primary theoretical frameworks from which this project draws inspiration. The tripartite structure reflects the development of Baldwin's scholarship over the past two decades, albeit it has not been a linear process, with the three methodologies frequently intersecting. In addition, Baldwin's complex personality and vision and the numerous critical trends generated by his "posthumous fame" have rendered his work and persona "unclassifiable" to the point that it is impossible to derive from a singular methodology.[14] Indeed, the writer's eclectic nature and his extensive literary career spanning a wide range of genres—including novel, drama, essay, poem, and interview—have generated a significant amount of scholarly analysis from a multitude of theoretical perspectives. This criticism encompasses several academic disciplines, including literary and comparative studies, political science, sociology, anthropology, media studies, queer and feminist studies, as well as cultural and postcolonial studies.

As Conseula Francis notes in her bibliographic essay on Baldwin, which provides an exhaustive overview of the writer's scholarship until 2015:

> Considering the critical reception of James Baldwin is difficult for a number of reasons. First, Baldwin was a widely reviewed, widely studied, prolific author. He published twenty-two full-length works in his lifetime, in addition to many essays, reviews, introductions, and interviews. In addition, his career was quite long. [...] As a result of this long and prolific career, Baldwin's work experiences numerous waves of being in and out of vogue, making it difficult to ascertain which critical trends are significant in Baldwin scholarship and which are merely the result of critical fashion. Another difficulty in studying the critical reception of Baldwin is that so many critical, political, ideological, and identity groups lay claim to him that it is almost impossible to find a critical center in Baldwin scholarship. Studying the last fifty years of Baldwin scholarship means engaging feminist and queer theory; it means considering the critical backlash against black nationalist politics; it means looking at the tradition of black American writing both inside and outside the United States; it means wading into a critical pool that is as interested in his sexuality as it is his gender and nationality and religion and taste in film.[15]

[14] In her introduction to *Illuminations*, Benjamin's collection of writing which includes "The Task of the Translator," Hannah Arendt writes that "posthumous fame is for the unclassifiable." See Arendt, "Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940," *Illuminations*, 3.

[15] Conseula Francis, "Reading and Theorizing James Baldwin: A Bibliographic Essay," *James Baldwin Review* 1, no. 1 (2015): 179–80, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48664481

The difficulty in organizing Baldwin's criticism has become more pronounced in the last decade, which has witnessed an almost unprecedented and vibrant renaissance of Baldwinian studies that has ensured the author's "afterlife." Francis identifies three major stages within this scholarship. Baldwin's career reached its peak in its first stage (1963–1973), with critics simultaneously praising and questioning the writer's relevance, as reflected in his *Time* cover picture in May 1963, and *Soul on Ice*'s essay "Notes on a Native Son" (1968), a famous homophobic attack on the writer penned by Eldridge Cleaver.[16] The second stage of Baldwin's career (1974–1987) is marked by a proliferation of corrective essays, which is indicative of a concurrent decline in his reception and critical canonization. One such work is the volume on Baldwin edited by Harold Bloom for his Modern Critical Views series (1986), which underscores and offers a corrective view on Baldwin's political commitment and literary formalism.[17] In the final stage (1988–2000), shortly after Baldwin's death, his literary legacy was gradually rehabilitated, and his place in American literature was reassessed. This was also due to the fact that "Baldwin's death in 1987 coincided with significant shifts in critical theory," with the emergence of poststructuralism, and cultural, feminist, queer, and postcolonial studies.[18]

The thesis draws on Francis's periodization, particularly the final stage, and her exhaustive bibliographic work, but then extends the critique from the past twenty years, which she only briefly comments on in the final chapter. In it, she recalls and introduces the principal critical texts on Baldwin published between 2000 and 2010 and describes several later scholarly trends, in the Anglo-American context mainly, that have not been collected yet but have been published as articles and essays—mostly in the *James Baldwin Review*, where a compilation of the latest trends in Baldwin criticism is published starting in 2001—or are scattered throughout recent biographies and studies that carry on Francis's work.[19]

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[16] Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

[17] Francis argues that formalism in literary criticism is typical of this period and that Bloom's decision to devote one of his Modern Critical Views series to Baldwin attests to the fact that by the 1980s he was held as a canonical figure worth the "scrutiny and rigor of formalist criticism" that the prominent literary critic advocated. See Conseula Francis, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin 1963–2010: "An Honest Man and a Good Writer"* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014), 54–5. For reference on Bloom's volume, see its updated edition: Harold Bloom, *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: James Baldwin—Updated Edition, 2nd ed.* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007).

[18] Francis, *The Critical Reception*, 61.

[19] The *James Baldwin Review* is an annual journal "that brings together a wide array of peer-reviewed critical essays and creative non-fiction on the life, writings, and legacy of James Baldwin," initiated by Douglas Field, Justin A. Joyce, and Dwight A. McBride in 2015. The bibliographic reviews about trends in Baldwin's criticism from 2001 until today—that continued Francis's work after her death (2016)—were published in the following volumes: Lynn Orilla Scott M., "Trends in James Baldwin Criticism 2001–10" 2,

In the sections that follow, I will attempt to figure out a trajectory for these trends, which are essential to my *critical translation* of Baldwin's works. In the second section, I will read the culturalist and postcolonial approaches to Baldwin's works; in the third section, feminist and queer theories and studies will *augment* the latter approaches; and in the fourth section, I will introduce the trans* paradigm, which stems from the previous trends.

1.2 Culturalist and Postcolonial Contrapuntal Readings

> A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven.[20]
> James Baldwin

In regard to the first critical perspective advanced to confront Baldwin's scholarship in the past twenty years, namely the postcolonial and cultural studies perspective, it is important to note two factors. The first is that it began circulating in the Western and Anglophone academic worlds in the 1980s and shortly after Baldwin's death but only became a consolidated field of study in 2000. The second refers to the fact that this perspective has uncovered some of Baldwin's classics, such as *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), as examples of literature capable of bringing the intricacies of textuality and colonial enterprise, as well as the global implications of racial and gender constructions, to the core of the critical debate.[21]

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no. 1 (2016): 168–96; D. Quentin Miller, "Trends in James Baldwin Criticism 2010–13" 3, no. 1 (2017): 186–202; Ernest L. Gibson III, "Trends in James Baldwin Criticism 2013–15" 4, no. 1 (2018): 128–43; Jenny M. James, "Trends in James Baldwin Criticism, 2015–16" 5, no. 1 (2019): 143–59; Joseph Vogel, "Trends in Baldwin Criticism, 2016–17" 6, no. 1 (2020): 155–70; Terrance Dean, "Trends in Baldwin Criticism, 2017–19" 7, no. 1 (2021): 245–65. In terms of translation, there has been a remarkable resurgence characterized by the production of new translations for previously translated literary works. For instance, in Italy, the publisher Fandango Libri released new translations of *Giovanni's Room* [*La stanza di Giovanni*] in 2017 and *Another Country* [*Un altro mondo*] in 2019. To access more details on the current state of translations in circulation within Europe, refer to the scholarly essay authored by Remo Verdickt titled "The Evidence of Things Translated: Circulating Baldwin in Contemporary Europe," *James Baldwin Review* 8, no. 1 (2022): 195–221. See https://www.jstor.org/journal/jamebaldrevi

[20] James Baldwin, "The Creative Process" (1962), "Other Essays," *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 670.

[21] Since the 1970s and the poststructuralist turn, theorists have tended to follow Michel Foucault's study of discourse, which he defined as a set of ideas and practices that make up a contingent social system. As a result, race and gender have often been considered discursive realities. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 2nd ed., trans. Alan M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). See James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), *Collected Essays*, 5–136; and "The Fire Next Time" (1963), *Collected Essays*, 291–347, for complete references to the two cited Baldwin's essays.

Since the term "postcolonialism" first made its appearance in the humanities in the 1970s, many definitions have been proposed. As has been the case with other "posts" (postmodernism or poststructuralism, for example), the main concern with postcolonial studies has been about the prefix "post," as indicating a period that comes after—in this case, after colonialism. Postcolonial studies were first regarded as a theoretical response to the end of colonialism in Africa and the proclamation of many African independent nations in the 1960s.

However, as Stuart Hall posits in his influential article "When was 'The Postcolonial'? Thinking at the Limit" (1995), the postcolonial field is a very contentious one, and it presupposes the following question: "When was 'the post-colonial'? What should be included and excluded from its frame?"[22] The "post" in postcolonial, according to Hall, is neither restricted to a specific area or period (i.e., Anglophone or Francophone countries in the 1960s), nor is it a homogenous idea devoid of history, politics, and culture. It is more of a descriptive term that refers to "a general process of decolonisation which, like colonisation itself, has marked the colonising societies as powerfully as it has the colonised (of course, in different ways)," and that helps us to "characterise the shift in global relations which marks the (necessarily uneven) transition from the age of Empires to the post-independence or postdecolonisation moment."[23] In the end, it is an invitation "to identify what are the new relations and dispositions of power which are emerging in the new conjuncture" and "think at and beyond the limit."[24]

Colonialism and imperialism are certainly at the core of postcolonial studies. Western canonical literary texts and histories of Europe and the US are re-interpreted in light of the fact that they were written and celebrated when "the West" was occupying, colonizing, and enslaving other territories, their stories, and their peoples.[25] As a result, the postcolonial theory evolved into an interdisciplinary paradigm that permeated several fields such as linguistics and anthropology, and led some critics to view it as nebulous, vague, and politically unanchored (see Shoat 1992, for example). Yet, as Leela Gandhi

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[22] Stuart Hall, "When was 'The Postcolonial'? Thinking at the Limit," *The Postcolonial Question*. *Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, eds. Lidia Curti and Iain Chamber (New York-London: Routledge, 1995), 242.
[23] Hall, "When was 'The Postcolonial'?," 253.
[24] Hall, "When was 'The Postcolonial'?," 261.
[25] For Hall himself, if a postcolonial periodization should exist, its real distinctive element would be the "retrospective re-phrasing of Modernity within the framework of 'globalisation' in all its various ruptural forms and moments (from the Portuguese entry to the Indian Ocean and the conquest of the New World to the internationalisation of financial markets and information flows)." Hall, "When was 'The Postcolonial'?," 260.

observes: "[T]he intellectual history of postcolonial theory is marked by a dialectics between Marxism, on the one hand, and poststructuralism/postmodernism, on the other."[26]

Indeed, postcolonial theory incorporates both a political reference—notably Marxism and its critique of capitalism and, by extension, imperialism, and colonialism—and a textual source, namely poststructuralist language, with its rejection of logical thinking based on binarism, linearity, hierarchy, and uniformity, and its engagement with the fragment, hybrid, and synchronic. Without ignoring the recent controversy surrounding the postcolonial ethical commitment (i.e., the risk of another grand narrative, ahistorical concerns, intellectual extractivism, the leftist failure to address non-secular forms of knowledge, etc.), I will use the term "postcolonial" in accordance with the latter frame—the methodological one with its interdisciplinarity and synthesis of Marxism and poststructuralism.

If postcolonialism is meant to reconsider power relations, promote counternarratives, and transnationalism, and reread canonical texts not only "under Western eyes," then Baldwin anticipated postcolonialism.[27] As Lloyd Kramer contends:

> Long before the intellectual world had discovered postcolonial literary theory or described the cultural constitution of public spheres, Baldwin had identified the key issues of these non-familiar arguments. The interest in "diaspora" as a pattern of modern social-cultural experience, the emphasis on "hybrid" cultural identities and narratives, and the concern with public intellectuals who strive to play a shaping role in the public cultures of modern societies.[28]

Consequently, Baldwin can be seen as the precursor of many postcolonial tenets, such as Stuart Hall's diaspora theory, which revaluates dislocation as an entanglement of identity and difference, since "[d]iaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference"[29]; Homi Bhabha's

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[26] Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 7.

[27] "Under the Western Eyes" is a clear reference to Chandra Talpade. Mohanty's famous essay titled "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (Spring-Autumn 1984): 333–58, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1395054

[28] Lloyd Kramer, **"**James Baldwin in Paris: Exile, Multiculturalism and the Public Intellectual,**"** *Historical Reflections* 27, no.1 (2001): 29.

[29] For Hall diaspora does not mean returning to an originary and fixed identity: "I use this term here metaphorically, not literally: diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising, form of 'ethnicity'. We have seen the fate of the people of Palestine at the hands of this backward-looking conception of diaspora - and the complicity of the West with it. The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity." Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic

"hybridity," as the condition of in-betweenness of certain languages, and cultures but also individuals who live both in the bridging space of the "boundary," meant as "the place from which something begins its presencing," and in the realm of the "'beyond': "an exploratory, restless movement […]—here and there, on all sides, *fort/da*, hither and thither, back and forth."[30] Finally, Baldwin's personal vicissitudes certainly echo Edward Said's reflections on exile—conceived as an experience of both "terminal loss" and "a potent, even enriching, motif on modern culture"[31]—and his notion of Gramscian "organic intellectual," the one who struggles to change society.[32]

Thereby, it could be argued that Baldwin's ongoing travels between the US and Europe, as well as Europe and Turkey, the Middle East, and Africa, are part of his diasporic identity, in which he reassessed his connection to home and the need to relocate that same place through various places. Similarly, the author's exile to Paris, where he was forced to move for the first time in November 1948, was marked by a sense of doubleness. On the one hand, it was felt "as a means to staying alive,"[33] because his life was in danger—"my life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart."[34] But, it was also experienced as a source of creativity and relative freedom that allowed him to re-discover his own country again.

In *Notes of a Native Son* and, successively, in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), Baldwin elaborates on his in-betweenness, his being here and there, and living "beyond"

Representation," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 80, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44111666

[30] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London-New York: Routledge, 1994), 1 and 5.

[31] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 137.

[32] Antonio Gramsci, in *The Prison Notebooks*, posits a contrast between the "traditional intellectual" and the "organic intellectual," from which Edward Said takes his "organic intellectual" notion: "In the first place there are the 'traditional' professional intellectuals, literary, scientific and so on, whose position in the interstices of society has a certain inter-class aura about it but derives ultimately from past and present class relations and conceals an attachment to various historical class formations. Secondly, there are the 'organic' intellectuals, the thinking and organising element of a particular fundamental social class. These organic intellectuals are distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than bv their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong." See Antonio Gramsci, "The Intellectuals," *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 3. Gramsci's innovation, according to Said, is that intellectual activity, therefore, is open to everyone and cannot be relegated to a certain set of individuals (professionals), nor can it aspire to secure power for a restricted number of people: "Gramsci believed that organic intellectuals are actively involved in society, that is, they constantly struggle to change minds and expand markets; unlike teachers and priests, who seem more or less to remain in place, doing the same kind of work year in year out, organic intellectuals are always on the move, on the make." Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 4.

[33] Mullen, *Living in Fire,* 23.

[34] James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), 72.

Harlem but also on the "boundary," in the interstices of what he has left behind and his new geographies.[35] He demonstrates this most clearly in essays like "A Question of Identity" and "Stranger in the Village," in which he is able to recognize the ambivalence between being at home abroad, and finally finding out his Americanness.[36]

In the former piece, for example, he muses over the life of the American student in Paris and acknowledges the fact that latent "in the heart of the confusion, he encounters here [Paris] is that which he came so blindly seeking: the terms on which he is related to his country and the world."[37] The experience of losing one world is balanced by the "vantage" to discover "his own country."[38] This mirrors the ambivalence of exile as depicted by Said, and informs the question of identity with terrific truths about the history of one's nation: abroad Baldwin is confronted with the truth about the American past, the racial problem, and its "unprecedented people," whose history has been constructed as a myth and must now be deconstructed in order to unmask the global and unbalanced connections between the countries of the world, as well as their internal (racial, gender, and class) divisions. Baldwin's preoccupation with this history takes him to the shores of Europe to examine "the American experience," notably the Black American experience, as he writes in the latter piece.[39]

Published during a particularly depressive period, "Stranger in the Village" transports the reader to a little Swiss village, Leukerbad (also known as Loèche-les-Bains), where Baldwin spent one summer and two winters with his lover Lucien Happersberger and his family between 1951 and 1952. In it, he once more feels the urgency to confront the history of the "American Negro" and the "rage" and "contempt" he cannot be liberated from when he is in a white world, because "no black man can ever hope to be completely liberated from this internal warfare"—rage, dissembling, and contempt having inevitably accompanied his first realization of the power of white men."[40] In that remote village, Baldwin uncovers the specificity of the Black American experience, caught between slavery's heritage and European colonial history. In Leukerbad, too, children point at him

[35] For a full reference to the second cited collection of essays, see James Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son" (1961), *Collected Essays*, 135–285.
[36] "Stranger in the Village" first appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1953 before being included in *Notes of a Native Son* in 1955. For full reference, see: James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), *Collected Essays*, 117–29.
[37] James Baldwin, "A Question of Identity," "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), *Collected Essay*s, 100.
[38] Baldwin, "A Question of Identity," 100.
[39] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 124.
[40] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 122.

and yell the N-word—"The children shout *Neger! Neger!* as I walk along the streets"—much as it used to happen in the streets of Harlem when he was younger.[41] However:

> There is a dreadful abyss between the streets of this village and the streets of the city in which I was born, between the children who shout *Neger!* today and those who shouted *Nigger!* yesterday-the abyss is experience, the American experience. The syllable hurled behind me today expresses, above all, wonder: I am a stranger here. But, I am not a stranger in America and the same syllable riding on the American air expresses the war my presence has occasioned in the American soul. For this village brings home to me this fact: that there was a day, and not really a very distant day, when Americans were scarcely Americans at all but discontented Europeans, facing a great unconquered continent and strolling, say, into a marketplace and seeing black men for the first time. The shock this spectacle afforded is suggested, surely, by the promptness with which they decided that these black men were not really men but cattle.[42]

What makes "unique" the American Negro is not only the experience of slavery but "the American experience" itself, which has forced both Europeans and enslaved Africans to live for the first time in an unknown continent. The American Negro is different from the other Black people living in the world because his relationship with the white world is not of the order of center/periphery, metropole/colony. He is part of (and has contributed to the making of) the social fabric of an imperial force that tries to alienate him and keep him as a "problem." The "American Negro" was not born elsewhere, and "even as a slave" his presence was inescapable since "no American could escape having an attitude toward him," while "in effect, the black man, *as a man*, did not exist in Europe."[43]

Baldwin's ambivalent sentiment toward his homeland, of both belonging and alienation, in this sense, questions or *augments* postcolonial notions of exile, diaspora, and hybridity in that it is rooted in a history that, while global, must remain local if identity must be sought. In Cheryll A. Wall's view, throughout the exilic period in Paris, Baldwin maintained a "strategic American exceptionalism," analogous to Spivak's "strategic essentialism": "Baldwin makes a purposeful and strategic use of the American exceptionalism to advance the scrupulously visible political interests of African Americans, indeed, of Americans in general."[44] This "strategic" Americanness has been very helpful in contextualizing his hybridity and diasporic identity, preventing also the

[41] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 118.
[42] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 124.
[43] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 124 (emphasis in the original).
[44] Cheryl A. Wall, "Stranger at Home. James Baldwin on What It Means to Be American," *James Baldwin: America and Beyond*, eds. Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 2014), 37.

risk of neglecting local histories—a risk often associated with Bhabha's optimistic and idealistic idea of "hybridity."[45]

During his youth, the writer was obsessed with the search for his own self with whom he wanted to be reconciled; his "soft nationalism" was indeed a way to claim the history and identity from which the "American Negro" has been estranged.[46] "He —Baldwin insists—is unique among the black men of the world in that his past was taken from him, almost literally, at one blow."[47] However, his absolute estrangement reflects the ultimate lies that undergird the abstraction of the "Negro problem," which exposes how fictitious whiteness is:

> Yet, if the American Negro has arrived at his identity by virtue of the absoluteness of his estrangement from his past, American white men still nourish that there is some means if recovering the European innocence, of returning to a state in which black men do not exist.[48]

The truth is that the illusion of separation (between blacks and whites) or disappearance (of blacks) is just "one of the greatest errors."[49] In this regard, Baldwin's thought is clearly contemporaneous with Said's assertion that Orientalism, as a discourse attempting to separate the West from the East, says as much about (and lies about) the East as it does about the West. Similarly, in the final lines of "Stranger in the Village," Baldwin writes that Blackness and whiteness are mutual discourses that simultaneously originated with the birth of a nation, the US.: "The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too."[50]

In his recent re-reading of the essay, written after a visit to Leukerbad on August 2, 2014—the day of what would have been Baldwin's ninetieth birthday—the Nigerian-American writer, photographer, and art historian Teju Cole emphasizes how Baldwin's reckoning of the "American Negro's past" was troubled by his vexed filiation to African culture.[51] He can see himself as a "bastard of the West," but he is certainly unable to see himself as a bastard of Africa, although the Swiss villagers had imagined it to be so.[52] For

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[45] See, for example, Aijaz Ahmad, *Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1994).
[46] Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 72.
[47] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 124.
[48] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 128.
[49] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 124.
[50] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 129.
[51] Teju Cole, "Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin's 'Stranger in the Village,'" *The New Yorker*, August 19, 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/black-body-re-reading-james-baldwins-stranger-village
[52] James Baldwin, "Everybody Protest Novel," "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), *Collected Essays*, 12.

Cole, this is also a chronological matter, since it is only in recent years that the history of Africa's cultural and economic accomplishments, which has been mostly silenced in European historiographies, has begun to be rewritten. As a result, as Baldwin ironically observes, whereas the villagers look back on their past with "full glory," he is imagined by them as being "in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive."[53] Nonetheless, his words are consistently bold when declaring the fundamental challenge associated with being Black, namely the perpetual threat to her/his humanity: "The black man insists, by whatever means he finds at his disposal, that the white man cease to regard him as an exotic rarity and recognize him as a human being."[54] Cole joins this pronouncement, recognizing that Baldwin's irrevocable desire to be "'so much" is neither a matter of ego about his writing nor an anxiety about his fame in New York or Paris."[55] It is rather "about the incontestable fundamentals of a person: pleasure, sorrow, love, humor, and grief, and the complexity of the interior landscape that sustains those feelings."[56]

In the second collection of essays here analyzed, *Nobody Knows My Name*, his in-between identity, and the interdependence between what has been constructed as Black and what as white are further elaborated. In the introduction, Baldwin admits that the new essays pertain to another stage of his life in which he has reluctantly realized that his youth is coming to an end; indeed, he has become a writer whose primary purpose is the examination of life, since "the unexamined life is not worth living."[57] The identity drama becomes internal, and the systemic threats posed by racism are transposed to his own personal experience:

> In America, the color of my skin had stood between myself and me; in Europe, that barrier was down. Nothing is more desirable than to be released from the affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested from a crutch. It turned out that the question of who I was was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces which menaced me—anyway, these forces had become interior, and I had dragged them across the ocean with me. The question of who I was had at least become a personal question, and the answer was to be found in me.[58]

The movement between external experience and the inner world enables a deeper understanding of the "Negro Problem," as well as its discursive and powerful nature, following the postcolonial idea (borrowed from post-structuralism) that words are

[53] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 121.
[54] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 122.
[55] Cole, "Black Body."
[56] Cole, "Black Body."
[57] Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name," 135.
[58] Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name," 135.

associated with power.[59] In the first essay, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," he grapples with how the discovery of the "*specialness*" of his experience could connect, and not separate him from other people.[60] As an American, and as a Black American writer, he understands how important it is to "sit in the house," untangle oneself from "the myth of America," and reconcile that "*specialness*" with "this fearfully troubled world."[61] By the 1960s, Baldwin clearly perceived his mission as a writer to be more "organic," in the Gramscian sense of the word. He was a witness and, as a witness, he had to make change possible.

However, his engagement is not mediated through a creed or a political party. Not yet at least in the 1960s. At that time, he was engaged with literature, and words able to change the world, and as an American writer he endeavored to understand how the American myth was created and sustained by both Europe and the US:

> In this endeavour to wed the vision of the Old World with that of the New, it is the writer, not the statesman, who is our strongest arm. Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world.[62]

It is because of his faith in the potentiality and reality of the "interior life" that Baldwin accepted his mission as a witness of the world, a world to be changed. These features and modes promoted by postcolonialism, and addressed by Baldwin in his first essays, are also evident in the recent publications of some scholarly volumes that ponder the global Baldwin, just as the conference in Nice did. Works such as the aforementioned volume titled *James Baldwin. America and Beyond*, edited by Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz, or *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (2009) by Magdalena Zaborowska, for example, stress that Baldwin committed his personal life to be in "the world."[63] His encounters and journeys in the "outer-national sites"—France, Turkey, and West Africa—were always diasporic, indicating a constant compromise between his emotional connection to his birthplace and the need to seek refuge in order to ensure his survival.

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[59] In postcolonial studies, and especially in Said's work, there is quite extensive use of Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power. See footnote 17.
[60] James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," "Nobody Knows My Name" (1961), *Collected Essays*, 137.
[61] Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," 141.
[62] Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," 142.
[63] Kaplan and Schwarz, "Introduction: America and Beyond," *America and Beyond*, 5; Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

According to D. Quentin Miller, the trend to think of Baldwin as a global and transnational figure reached its peak between 2010 and 2013.[64] It has also helped critics to have a more sophisticated approach to Baldwin's ambivalence or polarization—Baldwin the novelist and Baldwin the essayist, the early Baldwin and the later Baldwin, the "American Baldwin and Baldwin the expatriate," the preacher and the blues man, among other dichotomies.[65] As Kaplan and Schwarz contend, it is time to transcend this binarism and think of the several conjunctures inhabiting Baldwin's soul and writing: "As ever with Baldwin, the salient point—if invariably also the most contentious—resides in the conjunction."[66] The thesis aims to embrace these conjunctions and *augment* them in many other "ands." By reconsidering Baldwin's mobility and organic intellectualism, critics were able to reassess the writer's assumed polarities and rejection of narrow encapsulations of his works or social actions into specific political parties and ideologies such as communism and Marxism—which significantly influenced literary criticism in the 1970s, particularly postcolonialism—despite his late support for Black Power. This trait is very important to understand why Baldwin's unclassifiable vast corpus prevents criticism, as the one here proposed, from adopting a single methodology, in favor of a multidisciplinary approach.

Nonetheless, while there are clear contact zones between postcolonialism and Baldwin's diasporic identity and intellectual commitment, there are no dedicated analyses of the writer's real encounters (not many, after all) with some of the theorists and writers who have been fundamental to the creation of postcolonial studies, and who were contemporary to him. Baldwin's tour in the American South with the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, a renowned name in postcolonial literature, and an interview with Paul Gilroy, another prominent figure in postcolonialism, are two of these most notable encounters.[67] It is surprising, for instance, that Baldwin and Frantz Fanon, who occupied the same space in September 1956 at the Sorbonne at the "First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists" convened by *Présence Africaine*, get just a fleeting mention in criticism. On

[64] Miller, "Trends in James Baldwin Criticism 2010–13," 194.
[65] Kaplan and Schwarz, "Introduction: America and Beyond," 4.
[66] Kaplan and Schwarz, "Introduction: America and Beyond," 5.
[67] The encounter with Achebe is documented in *I Heard it Through the Grapevine* (1982) by Dick Fontaine. The Nigerian writer is also mentioned in some comparative literary analyses: Eleanor W. Traylor, "James Baldwin and Chinua Achebe Transgressing Official Vocabularies," *America and Beyond*, 229–40; Bill Schwarz, "After Decolonization, After Civil Rights: Chinua Achebe and James Baldwin," *James Baldwin Review*, no.1 (2015): 41–66. The interview with Paul Gilroy occurred two years before Baldwin's death and focused on the writer's thoughts on the English language, music, and jazz. Gilroy wrote about the event in an article for the magazine *City Limits*. See Paul Gilroy, "James Baldwin Interview," *City Limits*, March 15, 1985, http://www.pg.gilroyware.com/Gilroy_interviews_baldwin_1985.pdf

that occasion, several additional authors, such as Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal, Jacques Alexis from Haiti, and George Lamming from Barbados, who are now studied in many postcolonial departments, were invited. In his poignant recounting of the event, included in *Nobody Knows My Name* and titled "Princes and Powers," Baldwin does not comment at all on Fanon as he does with the others.[68] He rather focuses his attention once again on the inextricable difference between "the American Negro" and the other Black people of the world, by showing a certain skepticism toward the *Négritude* movement promoted by Césaire and the possibility of extrapolating from a history of oppression a unifying and glorious Black culture:

> And the question was this: Is it possible to describe a culture what may simply be, after all, a history of oppression? That is, is this history and the present facts, which involve so many millions of people who are divided from each other by so many miles of the globe, which operates, and has operated, under such very different conditions, to such different effects, and which has produced so many different subhistories, problems, traditions, possibilities, aspirations, assumptions, languages, hybrids—is this history enough to have made of the earth's black populations anything that can legitimately be described as a culture? For what, beyond the fact that all black meant one time or another left Africa, or have remained there, do they really have in common?
>
> And yet, it became clear as the debate wore on, that there was something which all black men held in common […]. What they held in common was their precarious, their unutterably painful relation to the white world. What they held in common was the necessity to remake the world in their own image, to impose this image on the world, and no longer be controlled by the vision of the world, and of themselves, held by other people. What, in sum, black men held in common was their ache to come into the world as men. And this ache united people who might otherwise have been divided as to what a man should be.[69]

For Mullen, Baldwin's suspicion about the effectiveness of the *Négritude* movement "predicts another contradictory current of his thought: an initial political rejection of black nationalism."[70] The African American critic and feminist Hortense Spillers, at the opening of the 2014 James Baldwin Conference in Montpellier, evocatively named "James Baldwin: Transatlantic Commuter," underpinned and *augmented* this idea.[71] She explained Baldwin's skepticism for a global Black nationalist afflatus not only as a result of his

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[68] Written in Corsica, "Princes and Powers" was initially released in January 1957 on *Encounter* before being later included in *Nobody Knows My Name.* For full reference: James Baldwin, "Princes and Powers" (included in *Nobody Knows My Name*), *Collected Essays*, 143–69. In order to establish a distinction between the aforementioned series of James Baldwin Conferences held in 2014 and 2022 and the "First Congress of Black Writers and Artists," the latter will hereafter be referred to as "the Congress."

[69] Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," 152–53.

[70] Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 72.

[71] The Conference was held from June 5 to 7, 2014, at the Université Paul Valéry (Montpellier, France) and Spillers was the keynote speaker. Hortense Spillers, "A Transatlantic Circuit: Baldwin at Mid-Century. Opening Keynote Address," *Callaloo* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 928–37.

vexed Americanness and transatlantic condition but also because that day at the Sorbonne he found himself caught in an "untranslatable African *diasporic* space."[72] The languages of the Congress—French, English, Wolof, and Yoruba—reflected postcolonial conflicts, and required the understanding that the difficulties implicit in the practice of translation are "carried over into the psychological dimensions inherent in cultural differences between the confreres."[73]

According to Spillers, "[e]ven here, the 'American dilemma' enters the picture as Baldwin draws out his version of African American exceptionalism."[74] This confirms what other scholars have already seen when analyzing Baldwin's early pieces. She affirms that this dilemma should be contextualized as "we also must bear in mind that Baldwin's career […] is forged in the context of the Cold War and the mid-century projection of American."[75] After all, as Baldwin himself notes throughout the Congress: "Hanging in the air, as real as the heat from which we suffered, were the great specters of America and Russia, of the battle going on between them for the domination of the world."[76]

Among all the conferees' addresses in Paris, Lamming's urges Baldwin the most to view the Congress as an opportunity to reinvigorate his dissonant vision of the "common thing" in the Black experience. This vision comes as no surprise to Spillers, as Lamming, too, experienced both the sorrow and pleasure of exile. He also knew that the fundamental issue was not how to secure a white form of power for Black people, but what they would do "'when there was no longer any colonial horse to ride?'"[77] His outspoken words—that cost him being abruptly silenced by the chairman—joined Baldwin's ones when he too acknowledged the relevance of the "double-edgeness" in the "richness of the Negro experience."[78] When Lamming queried what would be of Black people if they were liberated from their obsession with the "Other—this Other being everyone who was not Negro," Baldwin noted that the Caribbean writer, like him, had accepted the complicity between Black people and the West and welcomed "the immensity and the variety of the experience called Negro":[79]

> He [Lamming] was suggesting that all Negroes were held in a state of supreme tension between the difficult, dangerous relationship in which they stood to the

[72] Spillers, "A Transatlantic Circuit," 929.
[73] Spillers, "A Transatlantic Circuit," 932.
[74] Spillers, "A Transatlantic Circuit," 932.
[75] Spillers, "A Transatlantic Circuit," 932.
[76] Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," 145.
[77] Lamming, quoted in Spillers, "A Transatlantic Circuit," 931.
[78] Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," 161.
[79] Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," 160–61.

> white world and the relationship in which they stood to each other. He was suggesting that in the acceptance of this duality lay their strength, that in this, precisely lay their means of defining and controlling the world in which they lived.[80]

Spillers reads the acceptance of this duality, or "double-edgeness," as the preliminary condition of "being born again," that is, "that literally stunning self-awareness that Du Bois elaborated a half century before Baldwin as the situation of 'the double consciousness.'"[81] The fact that pain can also generate pleasure—a controversial thought when pronounced by both the people who endure violence and those who are not victims of it—is a consequence of that "springing into awareness" experienced by those subjects who are "born again":

> This springing into awareness […] is the commencement of self-alienation, another name for self-division, which we might regard as the capacity to both occupy ego and to stand apart from it, the being in the moment, but simultaneously neither there nor then. Though induced by pain and humiliation these narrative cruxes amount to a second birth because one is obligated to surmount and ed to surmount and exceed the first and natural birth.[82]

Still, the political uncertainty of the epoch is not the only reason behind Lamming's and Baldwin's evasion from the negritude appeal. Personal and private life also have an impact and demand "respect."[83] As a result, not only was the Cold War in the air, but also was the tangibility of personal fantasies and dreams. Lamming and Baldwin shared the dream of writing, the creative attempt to come to terms with life through words, but also the intimacy of their masculinity. According to Kevin Gaines, Lamming's presence at the Congress was a "pivotal moment" for Baldwin to formulate his own personal and "political project," and for critics to reread "Princes and Powers" beyond the exclusive focus on Baldwin's early relation to the Cold War and American exceptionalism.[84] Thus, the personal accounts of Baldwin's and Lamming's specific exiles can be interpreted as postcolonial reflections on the creative power of literature when one's identity is displaced by exile, as well as by racial and sexual alienation.

For Mullen, in Baldwin's literature, there is a constant reciprocity between political events and personal life. This is particularly true of his 1970s works. The new experiences of the Civil Rights Movement in the US and the war in Algiers, for instance, did *augment*

[80] Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," 161.
[81] Spillers, "A Transatlantic Circuit," 931.
[82] Spillers, "A Transatlantic Circuit," 931.
[83] Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," 161.
[84] Kevin Gaines, "Exile and Private Life. James Baldwin, George Lamming, and the First World Congress of Negro Writers and Artists," *America and Beyond,* 186.

his interior life and thrust his cosmopolitan dream to be channeled in the reality of Black nationalism, whose urgency was so praised by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).[85] It was also the enormous grief he had felt for the loss of three very important political figures in the US and in his life—Medgar Evers (1963), Malcolm X (1964), and Martin Luther King (1968)—to transform his faith in the reality of the interior life into "hope." In a later essay, his fourth non-fiction collection titled *No Name in the Street* (1972), Baldwin's change and hope would be more apparent, even before human wretchedness: "Yet hope—the hope that we, human beings, can be better than we are—dies hard. […] But it is also hard to see what one sees. One sees that most human beings are wretched […]."[86] His organic intellectualism also changed and became more politically committed: "From 1968 to 1973, Baldwin was pushed by a sympathetic affiliation with the Black Panther Party into a sharper critique of U.S. militarism and imperialism."[87]

To *No Name in the Street*'s pages, thus, Baldwin delivers his political evolution from juvenile anti-communism—"I had been an anti-Communist when America and Russia were allies"—to non-aligned socialism.[88] In the second part, "To Be Baptised," he also finally "comments on Frantz Fanon and postcoloniality," as Zaborowska notices in her volume on Baldwin's Turkish decade.[89] However, he distances himself from Fanon, because he insists on the fact that although his story as a Black man has been affected by colonialism and slavery, he is "yet still a child of the West," as Mullen argues.[90] He firmly declares: "Four hundred years in the West had certainly turned me into a Westerner—there was no way around that. But four hundred years in the West had also failed to bleach me—there was no way around that *either* [...]."[91] The West has "no moral authority," and its nations are all "caught in a lie, the lie of their pretended humanism."[92] Despite the fact that Fanon also in *The Wretched of the Earth* blames the murderous European supposed "civilization" on this lie, Baldwin feels more affiliated with Malcolm X: "Malcolm, yet more concretely than Frantz Fanon—since Malcolm operated in the Afro-American situation—made the nature of this lie, and its implications, relevant and articulate to the

[85] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961] (New York: Grove Press, 2004).
[86] James Baldwin, "No Name in the Street" (1972), *Collected Essays*, 374.
[87] Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 134.
[88] Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 370.
[89] Zaborowska, *Erotics of Exile*, 217.
[90] Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 72.
[91] Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 378.
[92] Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 404.

people whom he served."[93] And yet, the vocabulary Baldwin employs in *No Name in the Street* is still infused with the phrase "the wretched of the earth," whose fate lies at his hearth and which will be so fundamental to the ethics of love he will construct in later years, as I shall explore in chapter 4.

The connection between Fanon and Baldwin is also underscored by Bhabha. In a recent article, he argues that the two authors share a "startling family resemblance" in their exploration of "black existentialism."[94] This term was coined by Jamaican-born American philosopher Lewis R. Gordon to describe the various schools of Black thought that have engaged in the fight against anti-Black racism by investigating the experience and consciousness of human existence and its phenomenology in the world.[95] Specifically, as stated by the author of *The Location of Culture*, the scenario known as the "Look a Negro scenario" or the "primal scene of the everyday racial encounter," as described by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*—"Look a Negro! [...] Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" a child says upon seeing Fanon—is repeated in "Stranger in the Village," when, as previously mentioned, "*Neger*! *Neger*!" is shouted at Baldwin by the children who encounter him in the streets of Leukerbad.[96] This scenario has epitomized the moment when Blackness is epidermally *fixated* into, and as, (an)other identity: Fanon understands that the colonial discourse has decided that the Self for the Black is already the Other. It is from this ambivalent recognition—the Black man sees his Blackness through white eyes—that Bhabha rereads Fanon and Baldwin.[97] Both Fanon's and Baldwin's works are placed in an endeavor to evade, but also disturb, the double fabrication of whiteness and Blackness in order to carve out a space for private life and flights of imagination.

The proximity between some postcolonial tenets and Baldwin's work and thought as it has been presented and partly discussed so far is the starting point for this research. Postcolonial criticism can shed light on new and other aspects of Baldwin's life and work, or it can add to the recent wave of criticism that is moving in the same direction, that is, toward a reconsideration of Baldwin's role as a transnational African American

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[93] Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 404.
[94] Homi Bhabha, "Thinking the Burdened Life with Fanon, Baldwin and Coates," *Nietzsche 13/13*, January 14, 2017, https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/nietzsche1313/homi-k-bhabha-thinking-the-burdened-life-with-fanon-baldwin-and-coates/
[95] Fanon, one of the most influential philosophers in this field, is also a key figure in the postcolonial study of identity and, as will be addressed in the second chapter, in the formation of the Black radical tradition.
[96] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952] (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 89.
[97] Fanon is a crucial writer for both postcolonial studies and the Black radical tradition. As will be clear in the third chapter, his study on the process of Black/white identification and its aesthetic and ethical implications.

intellectual, a central aspect of postcolonialism with its emphasis on diasporic spatiotemporal junctures. In this thesis, postcolonialism is used as a methodological subtext to both *augment* the global Baldwin and read him in a contrapuntal way, given that contrapuntal reading was first introduced in postcolonial studies by Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), and explained as a way to reread the cultural archive "not univocally," but "with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts."[98] Inspired by the counterpoint of Western classical music, where "various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one," yet resulting in a concerted and ordered polyphony, the Palestinian writer invites readers to interpret literature as an "organized interplay" between the history of colonization and its resistance, enabling the emergence of "alternative or new narratives."[99]

Contrapuntal reading as a literary comparative and critical technique will be adopted throughout the rest of the chapter and the thesis. This section, for example, has already incorporated my own contrapuntal reading of Baldwin's insights on race, identity, exile, intimacy, and intellectual life and some of the most discussed postcolonial tenets on the same issues. It has also imagined Baldwin's own counterpoints between his and other postcolonial voices, such as Said, Bhabha, and Fanon. In addition, through the use of contrapuntal reading, Baldwin's early works, which are more focused on the definition of identity, Black beauty, and aesthetics, can be compared and contrasted with his later works, which are devoted to the creative process of love and the transformative power of living in trans*/trance. As I suggest, this transition is also reflected in the writer's style, which evolved from one influenced by the Black church and the Pentecostal rhetoric in his early works to one that, while retaining the religious language, experimented with other musical genres like the blues and jazz in his later works. Finally, the adoption of the contrapuntal reading will allow the *augmentation* of postcolonial and cultural studies into queer and feminist studies, as well as an explanation of their reciprocal influence.

[98] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 51.
[99] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 51.

1.3 Queer Imagination and Feminist Fabulations

> What happens […] when a reality finds itself on a collision course with fantasy?[100]
> James Baldwin

The second cluster of studies that has significantly dealt with Baldwin's writings and has produced vibrant scholarly literature in the last two decades is the feminist and queer one. This literature, it may be stated, has greatly contributed to the newfound appreciation for the Harlem-born author, particularly in the US and Europe. As was the case with postcolonialism, it is important to understand how the terms "feminism" and "queer" are adopted before venturing into the trends initiated by queer and feminist studies. Instead of providing two distinct explanations, it is more appropriate to examine the similarities shared by these two extremely dense terms. In fact, both feminism and queerness embody noncompliance with heteronormativity and its capitalist nature. In addition, queer theories arose from the feminist consideration of gender and sexual orientations as performative experiences.[101] Therefore, they share a poststructuralist and deconstructivist theoretical terrain: "Queer theory [as feminist theory] asks us to consider that heterosexuality is neither a natural nor a universal form of sexuality; that sexual identity is a social construct rather than an essential feature of the self; and that gender is performative rather than simply biological."[102] This is the line followed by most queer theorists and initiated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, who investigate the linguistic performance of gender and sex too, by associating them to the performativity of speech, and therefore expanding Foucault's *History of Sexuality* through a deconstructionist move that displaces essence and appearance and "damages" the very linguistic structure or "central substance" of Western culture.[103]

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[100] James Baldwin, "Dark Days" (1980), "Other Essays," *Collected Essays*, 788.
[101] The term "queer theory" was coined by Teresa de Lauretis, who organized a conference on gay and lesbian sexualities at the University of Santa Cruz in 1990. The proceedings of the conference were collected in a special number of *differences*, a well-known feminist journal. Nevertheless, de Lauretis could not imagine that the word queer would become a rich field of inquiry, a separate field of studies (queer studies), and "a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry." On the other hand, other theorists, such as José Esteban Muñoz, praised the "subjectless critique" of queer theory by insisting on the necessity of "an ongoing reflection about what has fallen and continues to fall outside the scope of queerness." Will Stockton, *An Introduction to Queer Literary Studies. Reading Queerly* (London-New York: Routledge, 2023), 3–6.
[102] Stockton, *An Introduction to Queer Literary Studies*, 3.
[103] Sedgwick and Butler published two landmark texts within queer studies and performativity theory in the same year (1990), respectively, *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. See Stockton, *An Introduction to Queer Literary Studies*, 12.

However, while feminism emerged from the struggle of subjects who self-determined themselves as *women*, since its inception, the term 'queer'—the meaning of which has been traditionally associated with 'strange'—has been more of an umbrella term used to encompass all those individuals who reject being identified according to their gender role or sexual preference.[104] As such, queerness cannot be reduced to homosexuality, but it includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans* people, that is, those people who are constantly menaced by a "culture that privileges heterosexual and cisgendered people."[105] It defies not only anti-heteronormativity but also notions of gender and sexual identity, privileging deviation, fluidity, and indeterminacy over fixity and determinacy, and making queer theory an often-contested field.[106]

In this thesis, feminism is used as a literary technique and social phenomenon in order to "fabulate" Baldwin's relationship to feminism itself, women's struggle, and masculinity—since feminism also comprises a preoccupation with masculinist formations and male destiny. The term "fabulate" is directly derived from "speculative fabulations," a concept introduced by Donna Haraway in her recent book *Staying with the Trouble* to indicate a "mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding."[107] Speculation as a mode of the intellect is weaved into the texture of the "fabula," meant as a practice of *wording* and *world* and vice-versa. The "fabula" in Latin literature was the term used to refer to storytelling. Haraway reappropriates it by transforming it into a practice capable of affecting the world.

As a result, speculative fabulations make scientific thought and reality inseparable from fiction and the work of imagination. Baldwin's statement "the interior life is a real life" can be seen as a form of fabulation, exemplary of how a work of art is inextricably enmeshed in the reality it derives from and aims to transform, but also of the dangerous and illusory interplay between the real and fantasy. "What happens […] when a reality finds itself on a collision course with fantasy?"—asks Baldwin echoing Langston Hughes's poem "Dream Deferred" and clearly referring to both white fantasies about Black reality and the shock of Black people when confronted with the reality fantasized by

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[104] "The word first appeared in English around the year 1500 to mean strange or peculiar. Although there is some argument about its provenance, it probably derives from the German word *quer*, meaning *oblique* or *perverse*." Stockton, *An Introduction to Queer Literary Studies*, 3 (emphasis in the original).
[105] Stockton, *An Introduction to Queer Literary Studies*, 3.
[106] Abbie E. Goldberg, ed., *The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2016), 907.
[107] The term speculation also refers to speculative science-fiction narratives and the works of Margaret Atwood and Ursula K. Le Guin. See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chtulucene* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2016), 230.

white people for them. In a similar way, his narrative attests to a fundamental process within feminism, that is the movement from the personal 'I' to the collective 'we,' so that intimate life can resonate in, and touch, more than one singular life. For this purpose, Francis recalls Brian Norman's analysis of Baldwin's early essays as examples of proto-feminist works in which the double movement I/we is deployed.[108] Baldwin—Norman contends—"played a key role in the development of many women's liberationists," especially white American feminists, and his essays, and not only his fictional works, offered to them models to build "collectivity based in personal experience."[109]

In the collected essays analyzed in the previous paragraph, for example (*Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name*), Baldwin's attack on patriarchy is fiercely directed toward the lack of courage on the part of white supremacists to *imagine* a romance between a Black man and a white woman; something so feared by Black men too, as shown by Bigger Thomas, Richard Wright's famous character in *Native Son* (1940)—a novel not surprisingly criticized by Baldwin in his famous essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) as a story that demoralizes the Black male:

> For Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth.[110]

Instead of rejecting life, Bigger could have embraced it and abandoned the "theology" that perpetuates white heteronormativity and keeps white women under white men's control, and thus safe from Black males. White women become central to Baldwin's early non-fictional writings because they allow him to "examine personal experience and identity in order to change the reality of race in America."[111] This change is imagined through the eyes of his white teacher Orilla Miller, who saved him from his father's religion, or through those of the white diva Bette Davis, the frog-eyed actress so loved during his childhood at the point to be imagined as his mother, a Black woman or as himself.[112] It is even imagined through the encounter with the white waitress who refuses to serve him in a New Jersey diner, provoking in him the most violent thought—"I wanted to do something

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[108] Francis, *The Critical Reception*, 125
[109] Brian Norman, "Crossing Identitarian Lines: Women's Liberation and James Baldwin Early Essays," *Women's Studies* 35, no. 3 (2006): 242–44.
[110] "Everybody's Protest Novel" sparked strong controversy for its attack on Richard Wright. See Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 18.
[111] Norman, "Crossing Identitarian Lines," 248.
[112] Norman, "Crossing Identitarian Lines," 248.

to crush these white faces that were crushing me"—but also an opportunity to profoundly reflect on the complicity between racism and white heteronormativity.[113] He picked a "watermug half full of water" and "hurled it" at her.[114] It missed her, and it was in that precise moment that he could "*see*" that he could have been killed by the white "round, potbelly man" who began to beat him, as well as the white waitress was herself used to defend once again white patriarchal supremacy.[115] She was the "complicit pawn" of this machinery that after all had to be destroyed for everybody, males and females, and blacks and whites.[116]

These personal facts help him to reconfigure his ideal of love, and at the same time promote feminist strategies of resistance that combine personal facts with socio-political struggles. Baldwin's proto-feminism in the early essays can be read as an example of the African American contribution to larger feminist literature "that arises out of the experiences of African Americans, including men."[117] Throughout the pages of *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin's own experiences seek to build a bridge between personal suffering and general human pain to the necessity of hope for joy, love, and beauty. In them, there is a sense that Black beauty, which will be discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis, is troubled by the attempt to *dare* interracial and same-sex love. The two questions—the racial and the sexual—are so connected that racism in America cannot be faced if sexism and the fear of one's own sexuality are not faced.

The essay *The Fire Next Time*, which is considered to be the epitome of Baldwin's early non-fictional stage, would be eloquent on this topic. When Baldwin meets Elijah Muhammad, the head of the Nation of Islam, and tries to defend his belief that love is more important than color, that he has good Black and white friends, and that he does not see anything wrong with a mixed marriage, he also considers what the religious (both Christian and Muslim) dictum "*protect your women*" means:

> *Protect your women*: a difficult thing to do in a civilization sexually so pathetic that the white man's masculinity depends on a denial of the masculinity of the black. *Protect your women*: in a civilization that emasculates the male and abuses of the female, and in which, moreover, the male is forced to depend on the female's bread-winning power. *Protect your women*: in the teeth of the white man's boast "We figure we're doing you folks a favor by pumping some white

[113] Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 71.
[114] Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 71.
[115] Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 72.
[116] Norman, "Crossing Identitarian Lines," 249.
[117] Norman, "Crossing Identitarian Lines," 252.

> blood into your kids," and while facing the Southern shotgun and the Northerner billy.[118]

Yet, Black women remain at the margins. The triumphant masculinism of the New Left and Black Power movements neglected Black Feminism. Baldwin, however, would acknowledge this marginalization and change his attitude towards Black women's claims in the 1970s and 1980s. Black feminism would leave a lasting impression on him in his later non-fictional and fictional writings and interviews, thanks to its po-ethical, both creative and ethical, aesthetics.

The lack of recognition Black feminism's concerns within white feminism is also interconnected with one of the most debated issues within feminist theory: how to deal with differences while maintaining universalist claims of equality in terms of rights? Feminist theory is indeed fragmented and uneven when it comes to identitarian and sociopolitical claims. For example, in the 20th century, there were strong differences between Western feminism and Third World feminism, or between the first wave and second wave, or between Black feminism and white feminism. Because of this, emphasis will be accorded to those feminist tenets that have also influenced Baldwin's works, such as intersectionality, which, as will be shown below, is capable of dealing with simultaneous forms of oppression and revolt (i.e., race, gender, sex, and class).[119] Nonetheless, every feminist movement has benefited interchangeably from its counterpart, even when in unfavorable critical terms. As *augmentation* and conjuncture are preferred to oppositional dialectics, I imagine different strains of feminism being intertwined as in a "fabula." For this reason, as shortly illustrated, the personal-is-political view that has been so central to second-wave feminism in the 1970s is also part of the power of erotic life, as advanced by Audre Lorde; in like manner, intersectionality itself is *augmented* by transnational feminism and the redefinition of the pronoun "we."

Regarding the term "queer," I will use it not only to refer to anti-(hetero)normativity, but also as a form of imagination, following Matt Brim's suggestive idea, which he re-proposed in the title of his book *James Baldwin and the Queer*

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[118] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 330–31 (emphasis in the original).

[119] It is common knowledge that since its inception, feminist theory has witnessed many internal divisions and polemics, especially in that white feminism has often been unable to welcome claims of other feminisms. The works by Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Jacqui M. Alexander, and Chandra T. Mohanty seek to consider the discrepancies and common terms of the various feminisms through the recognition of the inseparability between particular and universal, we and them. Their feminism, usually labeled as 'transnational' will be helpful in the discussion about the trans* paradigm discussed at the end of the paragraph.

Imagination, that we should try to imagine more wor(l)ds, altogether, through Baldwin's own complex queerness.[120] For Brim, the writer from Harlem embodies the imagination of strangeness and impossibility inherent to queerness; at the same time, his powerful voice and style can help reveal the limits of queer imagination, how it "continually undermines itself," due to its "own surprising contradictions and unexpected ruptures."[121] Brim's perspective is invigorating because it challenges the late connection between queer theory and Baldwin's literature on many points by demonstrating Baldwin's irreducibility to queer theory and, on the contrary, his endeavor to complicate it. It also enables one to share Baldwin's view that the imagination plays a pivotal part in both the comprehension of one's own reality, as well as the creation of false myths and dreams that can be turned into nightmares.

Baldwin's scholarship views queer theory as the most suitable approach for revisiting specific works and uncovering the writer's homosexuality, which he embraced following some heterosexual encounters. In other words, the attention to the queer Baldwin is often justified in the name of his own sexual identity and that of his characters, who shift between homosexuality and bi- or heterosexuality, or both. But Baldwin himself had difficulty feeling "at home" with words like "gay," a word coined in the 1980s, or "queer" the term most commonly used to refer to homosexuals in the 1960s—"[t]he condition that is now called gay was then called queer."[122] In 1984, in the interview with Goldstein, Baldwin confessed that the only word he had in those youthful days in the Village was "homosexual," though that term was unable to "cover whatever it was [he] was beginning to feel."[123]

The Black Lives Matter Movement has been the main catalyst for the canonization of Baldwin as a queer spokesperson. The network was launched in 2013 and originated from a hashtag created in February 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi after the shooting of African American teen Trayvon Martin (February 26, 2012).[124] It was recently reinforced after the death of another African American man, George Floyd (May 25, 2020), at the hands of a white policeman, Derek Chauvin. The

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[120] Matt Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014).
[121] Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination,* 2–3.
[122] James Baldwin, "'Go the Way Your Blood Beats': An Interview with James Baldwin," interview by Richard Goldstein, *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2014), 59.
[123] Baldwin, "Go the Way Your Blood Beats," 59–60.
[124] See the movement's webpage, http://www.blacklivesmatter.com

assassination, filmed by some witnesses, among whom was a terrified African American teenager (Darnella Frazier), went viral and sparked global outrage. In the streets of major US cities, the BLM network organized many rallies and demonstrations, united by a communal endeavor to intervene against the systemic violence inflicted on Black communities. Many adopted Baldwin's most poignant and prophetic quotes as leading messages for their protests. As William J. Maxwell states in his volume on Baldwin's FBI files:

> [T]he impression that Baldwin has returned to preeminence, unbowed and unwrinkled, reflects his special ubiquity in the imagination of Black Lives Matter. As Eddie Glaude Jr. observes, "Jimmy is everywhere" in the advocacy and self-scrutiny of the young activists who bravely transformed the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Natasha McKenna, and far too many others into a sweeping national movement against police brutality and campus racism. For these activists, disruptive and creative and warning of new fires next time, Jimmy himself has filled the void traced to his death.[125]

Maxwell posits that the BLM's platform and movement have played a significant role in Baldwin's resurgence in his "afterlife" due to two primary factors. Firstly, the network's concept has been fueled by a reconsideration of the African American literary canon. The movement has elected Baldwin "as the movement's literary conscience, touchstone, and pinup [...]."[126] Secondly, given the queer-inflected nature of the BLM movement, Baldwin and his "strangeness"—"I was considered by everyone to be 'strange,'" he would write about his adolescence in the 1970s—have been revalued through the lens of queer theory.[127] As Maxwell continues: "It's Baldwin's good name and impassioned queer fatherhood that aspiring movement intellectuals invoke in Twitter handles such as #SonofBaldwin, #Flames_Baldwin, and #BaemesBaldwin."[128] In short—Maxwell concludes by mentioning the Paris-based African American writer Thomas Chatterton Williams's opinion— "Baldwin's variously queer misalignment with the social history of his present assures his model alignment with ours."[129] The BLM network's openness to queerness and Baldwin's revisionisms, on the other hand, are not limited to sexual or gender concerns, but rather add more critical layers to them by underscoring the impossibility of separating gender and sexual questions from racial and socioeconomic

[125] William J. Maxwell, *James Baldwin: The FBI Files* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2017), 11.
[126] Maxwell, *James Baldwin: The FBI Files*, 12.
[127] James Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work" (1976), *Collected Essays*, 483.
[128] Maxwell, *James Baldwin: The FBI Files*, 12.
[129] Maxwell, *James Baldwin: The FBI Files*, 14.

ones. Nor are they part of "the usual campaign to comfort an anxious radical present with the names and slogans of an admiring past."[130]

LGBTQ+, bisexual, and transgender persons have found protection within the BLM movement since its founders also work to eradicate violence against transgender and gender non-conforming people of color. Consequently, this aspect has enabled a better understanding of new trends in queer, especially Black queer, scholarship. For Francis, for instance, the attention accorded particularly by scholars working in the context of Black queer studies to Baldwinian known and lesser-known works is increasing because a mutual critical extension (that can be regarded as a work of *augmentation*) ties their scholarship and Baldwin's works; these scholars "are both reexamining his most famous works and using him as a jumping-off point to theorize Black queer studies more broadly."[131]

Although it is true that the emergence of new trends engaging the queer Baldwin and Black queer theory predates the boosting effect of the BLM network and started in 1999 with Dwight McBride's edited and innovative volume, *James Baldwin Now!*, it is in the last decade that Baldwin scholarship has consistently engaged with queer and (almost re-created) Black queer studies.[132] In McBride's collection, for example, Baldwin's queerness is introduced as an aspect of his life that is concomitant to two very important but undermined events of the Black experience in the 1980s—the recognition of the invisible Black homosexual life and the problematic consequences of the HIV crisis on Black lives. Since 2010, however, Black queer studies critics such as Robert Reid-Pharr, Rinaldo Walcott, and Mae G. Henderson, to name a few, have redirected attention to the extension of the terms "queer" and "Black" to other experiences (i.e., transexual and transgender).[133] Black queer studies are, thus, a queer research field whose focus has moved from the sexual/gender identarian axis to its intersection with the racial one. It is worth noting that this reorientation has been motivated by some Black feminist claims

[130] Maxwell, *James Baldwin: The FBI Files*, 14.
[131] Francis, *The Critical Reception*, 127.
[132] "With the advent of black queer studies, 'quare' studies, and queer of color critique, Baldwin's work has achieved a new presence, not because the composite term 'black queer' somehow succeeds in stabilizing an intersection […] but precisely because such terms often operate in unpredictably elaborate and productive relationship to each other […]. Far from a totalizing impulse, black queer studies energizes Baldwin studies by marking a racial and sexual connection, the specifics of which inevitably enrich (and often explode) the very terms used to frame the debate. It is no surprise that of the seventeen essays that comprise Black Queer Studies, three focus primarily (and others secondarily) on the work and influence of James Baldwin." Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*, 20.
[133] See E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson eds., *Black Queer Studies. A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

advanced in the 1970s and 1980s by prominent figures such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, and Hortense Spillers (i.e., intersectionality, the power of the erotic, and the politics of intimacy).

On the other hand, the appearance of Brim's work on Baldwin's queer imagination, as aforementioned, has shown the porosity and extensibility of the word "queer" and its field of study while also analyzing "the paradoxes of Baldwin's queer exemplarity," "an intervention [he adds] made possible because Baldwin has been productively re-viewed, renewed, renamed, and reclaimed as a queer object of study over the last two decades."[134] For Brim, "we must imagine more" than a Baldwinization of queer studies or a queering Baldwinian scholarship.[135] The "more" that we can imagine is first and foremost the overcoming of the dialectics between heterosexuality and queerness, which are so pervasive in queer theory as a result of the insistence on the Foucauldian theory of power, according to which there is no external reality outside the realm of power—that is, there is nothing beyond the struggle between the power of heterosexuality and queerness.[136] Similarly, the "more" we can imagine should motivate feminist theory to grapple with the pitfalls of sexual difference. Baldwin's writing is certainly situated beyond any dialectics to imagine a more complex reality and an incommensurable identity.[137] Thus, in this line, an endeavor to imagine "more" through and beyond queer and feminist theory is pre-announced in this section.

1.4 Intersectionality and the Emergence of the Trans/Trans* Paradigm

What are the feminist and queer practices that help fabulate and imagine "more" about Baldwin? In this section, I will examine how Baldwin's works touch queer and feminist theories and studies on many points. I will specifically discuss two of them—intersectionality as proposed by Black feminism and the trans* paradigm within trans

[134] Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination,* 1.
[135] Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination,* 2.
[136] "Broadly speaking, the imaginative dynamic that I trace here emerges out of what I argue is the vexed relationship that queerness has to normative practices, both representational and disciplinary. I want to trouble that relationship even more by reimagining the queer/norm dyad beyond a liberation/constraint paradigm, as I sense this coupling has become a static conceptual tool in queer theory. The Foucauldian model of power, in which there is no 'outside,' has provided a foundation for conceptualizing the queer/identity relation, but it has also had the unintended effect of creating a closed interpretive loop—everything is within the field of power. Working in that tradition, theorists rightly aver that the queer creative practices are not simply free; they are free even as they confine and are confined. We say that queer theory is not only liberatory but always under the pressures of normative reinscription and reabsorption." Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*, 3.
[137] Baldwin does not discard the discourse-power logic, as we have seen in the first section. On the contrary, many times he stresses how the "Negro problem" and "whiteness" are constructed realities. If nowadays this line of thought seems old, at the time it was a novelty. Yet, he is also able to question that logic.

studies—since they will be fundamental in the literal analysis of some novels, interviews, and essays, that are offered in the final chapter, which focuses on love and transness. Each of them stems from the paradoxes contained in the word "queer" and the ambiguities of feminist theory.

Hence, intersectionality tries to anchor the indeterminacy of queerness to identitarian claims in terms of race, class, sex, gender, religion, age, and the general necessity to preserve those claims under a universal appeal. Trans*, on the other hand, attempts to find a balance between the need to preserve those claims and the universal appeal for anti-normativity, fluidity, and global peace that is attainable only as long as differences, so functional for specific liberation struggles (consider how important sexual difference has been for women's liberation, for example), are recognized as not separated. Likewise, given that this thesis is imagined as an ongoing work of *augmentation* and translation, the two queer and feminist tenets also amplify the postcolonial tenets examined in the previous paragraph. As a consequence of this, intersectionality complicates the discourse about diasporic and exilic identity and its discursive and performative substratum, while the appearance of trans* further explores the relationship between the intellectual and the wor(l)d, notions of home and abroad, and hybridization.

It is again in Francis's bibliographic book that intersectionality is identified as one of the most deployed critical strategies to confront the writer's plurality since 2000.[138] The term was first used by the African American scholar and attorney Kimberlé Crenshaw to refer to the "critique of the single-issue framework," or the privileging of but a single discriminatory category, typically race—translated in the idea that "African Americans are simply involved in a more important struggle"—in the scrutiny of the double oppression of the Black female.[139] It has since been widely adopted by Black feminists as well as scholars in queer and cultural studies and has been read as a call to review racial and sexual discrimination within a broader theoretical framework that combines various forms of social stratification, such as class, race, sex, age, religion, language, and gender. In addition, intersectional analysis of African American texts has fostered a questioning of the postcolonial narrative of slavery that complicates the Marxist hegemony/subaltern model it was (and, in fact, still is) based upon, by bringing other undermined factors such as sexuality or religion to the fore. Though from a chronological standpoint,

[138] Francis, *The Critical Reception*, 67.
[139] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8 (1989): 162, http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

intersectionality made its debut two years after Baldwin's death, and the writer seemed amenable to the prioritization of the so-called "Negro Problem" over all others—"The sexual question comes after the question of color; it's simply one more aspect of the danger in which all black people live," he would say in one of the last interviews prior to his death—his literary corpus was, in reality, built on an ongoing call and response between race, class, gender, religion, and sexual orientation.[140] As McBride writes: "Baldwin reminds us that whenever we are speaking of race, we are always already speaking about gender, sexuality, and class."[141]

Baldwin's texts, including classic novels like *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, and *Another Country*, have garnered significant attention in queer analysis. However, a diverse range of minor texts, such as conversations and interviews, also testify to the paradoxes of both the writer's queerness and queer theory, and preference for intersectionality.[142] These "minor" works—unimagined as queer or considered to be lacking a proper queer plot or feminist attention—are where the dialectics between the queer Baldwin and the Civil Rights activist, the novelist, and the essayist, or again, the Harlem boy and "the transnational commuter," are finally overcome.[143] The difficulty of reconciling his essays, in which political and racial themes predominate, with his novels, in which homoerotic themes are more overtly addressed, calls into question the idea (so popular in the 1970s and 1980s) that Baldwin is "an exclusively *black* mouthpiece," as Brim observes.[144] The critic uses Robert Reid-Pharr's insightful analysis of Baldwin's paradoxical literary status to support this point: "One must remember always that Baldwin is *the* black author, the paragon of the Black American intellect, the nation's prophet of racial tolerance, one whose queer sexuality presumably stands in such anomalous relation to his racial presence, intellectual and otherwise […]."[145]

The opposition between Baldwin the US Black writer and Baldwin the commuter retraces this logic too, wherefore his literary status *at home* is associated with his militancy

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[140] Baldwin, "'Go the Way Your Blood Beats,'" 67.
[141] Britt, *James Baldwin and Queer Imagination*, 20.
[142] *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* are the two most examined books by queer theorists, who view the former as an account of Baldwin's first gay experience and the latter as an account of his first fictional interracial and homosexual encounter.
[143] "My subject is my country. […] I had to come back to check my impressions, and, as it turned out, to be stung again, to look at it again, bear it again, and to be reconciled to it again. Now, I imagine, I will have to spend the rest of my life as a kind of transatlantic commuter." James Baldwin, "James Baldwin Discusses His Book 'Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son,'" interview by Studs Terkel, *The WFMT Studs Terkel Radio Archive*, July 15, 1961. https://studsterkel.wfmt.com/programs/james-baldwin-discusses-his-book-nobody-knows-my-name-more-notes-native-son
[144] Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination,* 24.
[145] Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination,* 24.

in the anti-racist struggle while *abroad* is more affiliated with his openness to homosexuality and queerness, as Zaborowska notes: "We have […] inherited and been haunted by the Black writer from Harlem of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* or the gay writer from Paris of *Giovanni's Room*."[146] Some people have raised this point in Nice during the 2022 Conference to contrast the notion that the boy from Harlem is not the intellectual émigré who dares discuss sexuality and gender, or be free not only to write about Black people's lived experience, as Baldwin himself declared in *Nobody Knows*: "I wanted to prevent myself from becoming merely a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer."[147]

Paying attention to "minor" works could disrupt these polarities and illustrate the "fabula" between novels and essays, the experiences at home and those lived transnationally. The conversations with Margaret Mead, Nikki Giovanni, or Audre Lorde that Baldwin had in 1970, 1971, and 1984 respectively, for example, look simultaneously at the gender, sexual, and racial conflicts between Black men and Black women, but also at the socio-political environment that has generated them, as well as the role of the Black Church.[148] For instance, during his interaction with Mead, Baldwin is prompted to consider the vagueness of categories based on color separation—"we're speaking in such horrible generalities, speaking of white people or black people"—and how this vagueness is exploited to promote an uneven geopolitical order.[149] It is a lengthy talk with Mead that also reveals the intensity of two queer intellectuals concerned with preserving the beauty of difference, albeit in different ways. Baldwin would return to the issue of the color line and its socio-economic and sexual implications in his moment with Giovanni. Humans "invent categories in order to feel safe," he tells the young poet, and then he continues: "White people invented black people to give white people identity […]. Straight cats invent faggots so they can sleep with them without becoming faggots themselves."[150] Baldwin's intention in making this remark is both to shed light on the interrelated nature of racial and gender/sexual categories and to encourage the endeavor of moving beyond them "for the sake of your kid and for the sake of future generations, and even for the sake of white people."[151]

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[146] Zaborowska, quoted in Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination,* 9.
[147] Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," 137.
[148] James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race* (New York: Delta Books, 1971); James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, *A Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1973); James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, "Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde," *Essence Magazine*, 1984, http://theculture.forharriet.com/2014/03/revolutionary-hope-conversation-between.htm
[149] Baldwin and Mead, *A Rap on Race*, 6.
[150] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 21.
[151] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 21.

This move is fundamental because while Giovanni rightly and emphatically criticizes Black masculinism that continues to repeat the same "old syndrome," white patriarchy, Baldwin proposes an additional counterpoint so that the intersection of sex and race does neither succumb to the infinite dialectic play nor is resolved in a final synthesis; it is rather a counterpoint that *augments* the intersection.[152] He introduces love, "the tremendous responsibility" to understand that we are human beings, continually failing due to the definitions that have been set to separate us (man and woman, Black and white, Christian and non-Christian, husband and wife, etc.), but obliged to get past those differences "for the kid" to come. Love should not only foster the endeavor to be responsible for each other's lives, but also urge change for future generations, who are more important: "Think about the kid […]. No matter what happens to me or to you, one's responsibility is somewhere else."[153]

While conversing with Audre Lorde more than ten years later, Baldwin insists that love comes first, and human nature is fragile and prone to fail. When Lorde reminds him that, as a Black man who has to survive the legacy of slavery, he has yet to learn that Black women had to survive double for being racialized and sexualized by both white and Black men, he acknowledges the conflict between what Lorde calls "white racism among Black people" and the paternalistic idea that men should protect women and children. He does accept, upon Lorde's invitation, that the dangerous (not only racial but also sexual and gender) terms absorbed by Black men in their relationships with Black women, should change and that it is he, as a Black man, who must teach his boy not to beat, mistreat, or rape a Black girl.[154]

However, Baldwin is unable to fully dismiss paternalism, and the solution he envisions does not align with Lorde's aspirations. While the author of *Sister Outsider* hopes that internal differences within the Black experience are acknowledged—"when we look at our differences and not allow ourselves to be divided, when we own them and are not divided by them, that is when we will be able to move on"—for Baldwin those differences should surrender to love.[155] He favors transcending the racist and sexist "distortions" absorbed by Black males that cause Black women to suffer by turning the struggle toward the larger "trap" that keeps Blacks and whites, women and men, far from

[152] Here, the reference is to Hegelian dialectics, which consists of a contradictory process between opposing factions (thesis and anti-thesis) that culminates in a moment of resolution and unification (synthesis) in which truth and reality are pursued.
[153] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 50.
[154] Baldwin and Lorde, "Revolutionary Hope."
[155] Baldwin and Lorde, "Revolutionary Hope."

romantic love. For him, solving the crime of being a Black man via the community labor of love should come before "redefining the terms of the western world."[156] The debate between Baldwin and Lorde is deep and reflective of the "more" that occurred at that key period in African American history: the internal divisions in the Black freedom movements.

These conversations are crucial for comprehending Baldwin's use of intersectionality and his attempt at 'queering' the field of feminist studies in some of his later novels. Consequently, it is inconceivable to separate his fictional from his non-fictional writings, his opposition to racism from his encouragement for sexual freedom, and ultimately, these aspects from the struggles related to social class and generation struggles. Indeed, the factor of age plays a central role in Baldwin's pedagogy, which is entirely devoted to the children of the future. In these conjunctions, we have Baldwin's speculative fabulations at work, which aim to change society and make humanity more lovable and loved.

A notable example of the interrelation between fiction and non-fiction is *If Beale Street Could Talk*, the first novel to be narrated by a woman and not centered on homoerotic and interracial love but on heterosexual and Black love, and clearly influenced by *A Dialogue*.[157] Throughout chapter 4 of this thesis, the romance between Tish and Fonny will be revisited in light of Baldwin's preoccupation with the fate of Black women, as he discussed with Giovanni, as well as with religion and the spiritual life, which are intertwined with race, class, gender, and sexuality. Without acknowledging the religious and spiritual factors, after all, it would be impossible to read Baldwin's work and embrace his complex idea of love. This is also what, according to Francis, emerges as a novelty in some scholarly essays, such as the one penned by Douglas Field in 2008, that tries to *augment* intersectionality through the complexity of the "Black Church," and specifically Pentecostalism, the kind of religion practiced by Baldwin in his childhood and adolescence.[158] The Pentecostal Church was the "gimmick" that allowed him to fly away from the needle and the street in a summer of "dreadful speculations and discoveries" when he was fourteen.[159] However, it was also the religion—and the term religion is referred to by him in "the common, and arbitrary, sense," by which he "discovered God,

[156] Baldwin and Lorde, "Revolutionary Hope."
[157] James Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk" (1974), *James Baldwin: Later Novels*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 363–510.
[158] Francis, *The Critical Reception*, 132.
[159] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 299–301.

His saints and his Blazing Hell."[160] He indeed believed and became a Holly Roller Preacher, and a very persuasive one.

Thus, as Field points out, Baldwin never completely rejected religion, but its traces are in the language he used. The narrative of bisexual and interracial relationships, as well as that attentive to social class inequalities, is infused with the "Black holiness culture."[161] Baldwin's love for "communion with friends and lovers," and the language deployed to depict scenes of lovemaking are paradoxically part of a tradition in which the secular is not distinguished from the sacred.[162] It is the tradition of blues and jazz and, at the same time, of the peculiar sermons used in Pentecostalism.[163] Pentecostal rhetoric allowed him to maintain spirituality while criticizing "institutionalized Christianity as embodied in the churches," because being the marginalized religion within the mainstream Baptist African American tradition, it offered interesting insights on the theme of exile. It also allowed forms considered to be "pagan" in other protestant forms of belief, such as the rituals for healing the sick, the wider participation in its functions and ministry by women and children, and the use of dance and music, including shouting and even speaking in tongues.[164] As Baldwin writes: "There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord."[165]

The importance of "that music" highlighted by Field as "all that jazz" is an unavoidable aspect of the intersectional analysis of Baldwin's literary work. It secures that movement between I/we, the personal and the collective, as discussed by Norman, since it is the religious music he sang and preached that, for a moment, made it possible the

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[160] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 296.
[161] Douglas Field, "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz: Tracing James Baldwin's Religion," *Literature and Theology* 22, no. 4 (December 2008): 439, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23927323.
[162] Field, "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz," 439.
[163] Field is careful to distinguish between Pentecostalism and Black Holiness movements and between these and the broader term Protestantism. Baldwin embraced Pentecostalism after a brief period in the Baptist Church. Pentecostalism is characterized by a critique of the Christian Church, justified in the name of a return to the true religion. In this sense, it shares some elements of the Holiness movements, which place emphasis on a direct experience with God without the mediation of a preacher. Furthermore, according to many critics, Pentecostalism conserves the traces of much older African religions: "The deliberate movement away from established Protestant traditions to an 'old-time religion' both characterises Pentecostalism as a new and an ancient form of worship. Historically, the formal birth of Pentecostalism is marked by the Azusa Street revivals of 1906, an event which precipitated the formation of the Holiness Church. And yet Pentecostalism, according to a number of critics, in its attempts to rescue a more authentic religion, can be traced to much older African religions. Hurston famously claimed that the Pentecostal church was an attempt to reintroduce an earlier African religion that was lost during slavery." See Field, "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz," 442.
[164] Field, "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz," 441.
[165] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 306.

incessantly needed feeling to not be alone: "Their pain and their joy were mine, and mine were theirs."[166] It is in "all that jazz" that Baldwin's imagination becomes "speculative" in the way the language of the pulpit is when he tries to fabulate the mystery of life. The result is an intersectional performance that *augments* the power/discourse dilemma as envisaged by both Foucault and Butler with the counterpoints of a reality that cannot be reduced to a single grammar, nor a binary logic, but that is hoped for as change and love. The introduction of religion and music to the prism of intersectionality not only offers "more" imagination but also exposes the limits of certain postcolonial, feminist, and queer theories still predicated upon a sentiment of laicity and the dominance of the visual, even when the latter is made object of analysis.[167] As Field laments: "In a critical era that is dominated—at least in Baldwin studies—on areas such as gender, masculinity, and sexuality, might it be that the sophistication of cultural studies is ill-equipped or simply unable to grapple with the religious?"[168] If Baldwin's works, then, are addressed within these multiple configurations, one will be able to acknowledge the multiplicity of the characters that inhabited both the writer and his works: the religious, the secular, the queer, the Black, the Civil Rights activist, the solitary exile, the poor man and the acclaimed viveur.[169]

Concerning the second factor, the appearance of trans studies and, lately, of the trans* paradigm, they have been viewed as the missing point between feminist and queer studies. In actuality, trans studies first surfaced as transgender studies in the 1990s, as Susan Stryker explains:

> [A]s we understand it, is the academic field that claims as its purview transsexuality and cross-dressing, some aspects of intersexuality and homosexuality, cross-cultural and historical investigations of human gender diversity, myriad specific subcultural expressions of "gender atypicality," theories of sexed embodiment and subjective gender identity development, law and public

[166] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 306.
[167] It will be further *augmented* in the next chapter by the Black radical tradition and its complex inquiry into the visual/aural ensemble in a modality that, once again, does not reinforce dialectics but conjunction. The aural/visual communion is also discussed by Brim, through David Gerstner's *Queer Pollen: White Seduction, Black Male Homosexuality, and the Cinematic* (2011), as the "cinematic" (something that will be further examined in the chapter on Black beauty): "By reading Baldwin's fiction through the visual/aural lens of the cinematic, Gerstner offers an important model for not only conceptualizing but concretizing the insistent vagueness of what I call the queer imagination. This is no easy task, for it requires the theorist to articulate, as does Gerstner (pointing to Derrida), the artist's own rendering of the 'possibility of the impossible.'" It is in that space of (im)possibility, Gerstner suggests, that "Baldwin's 'cinema of the mind' makes available a queer black 'real.'" Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*, 14.
[168] Field, "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz," 438.
[169] This is an allusion to Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

policy related to the regulation of gender expression, and many other similar issues.[170]

It arose from a critique of feminist and queer theories' failure to include theories about the special condition of subjects who retain gender identification while also claiming the right to change their sex, sexual orientation, and gender role.[171] Since transsexuals, transgenders, and transvestites were regarded as among the deviant people (including homosexuals, lesbians, and queer), the most alienated, with significant invisibility and categorization difficulty, transsexuality, transgenderism, and cross-dressing were primarily studied as psychological and medical phenomena prior to the 1990s.[172] Transgender studies entered the academia in the feminist, women's, and queer programs because they share a call to nonconformity to heteronormativity.

However, their theorization remains marginal. One of the reasons for this marginality is, as mentioned above, the unique position occupied by trans-people, some of whom feel identified with female/male sexes while being of the opposite sexes, and some do not have either male/female or queer identification, but multiple sexual orientations and gender roles, and therefore eschewing the binary structure and the queer choice simultaneously. There is a sort of aporia in transgenderism and transsexuality, an irresolvable internal difficulty to come to terms with the several experiences embedded in them.[173] It is as if the terms of these experiences need to be reinvented or demand other

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[170] Susan Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges," *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (London-New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

[171] Pioneer texts in Transgender studies are Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," *Camera Obscura* 10, no. 2 (1992): 150–76; Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come by Leslie Feinberg* (New York: World View Forum, 1992).

[172] "First usage of the term 'transgender' is generally attributed to Virginia Prince, a Southern California advocate for freedom of gender expression. Prince used the term to refer to individuals like herself whose personal identities she considered to fall somewhere on a spectrum between 'transvestite' (a term coined in 1910 by Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld) and 'transsexual' (a term popularized in the 1950s by Dr. Harry Benjamin). If a transvestite was somebody who episodically changed into the clothes of the so-called 'other sex,' and a transsexual was somebody who permanently changed genitals in order to claim membership in a gender other than the one assigned at birth, then a transgender was somebody who permanently changed social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation." Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges," 4.

[173] "A trans identity is now accessible almost anywhere, to anyone who does not feel comfortable in the gender role they were attributed with at birth, or who has a gender identity at odds with the labels 'man' or 'woman' credited to them by formal authorities. The identity can cover a variety of experiences. It can encompass discomfort with role expectations, being queer, occasional or more frequent cross-dressing, permanent cross-dressing and cross-gender living, through to accessing major health interventions such as hormonal therapy and surgical reassignment procedures. It can take up as little of your life as five minutes a week or as much as a life-long commitment to reconfiguring the body to match the inner self. Regardless of the fact that trans identities are now more available, the problems of being trans have by no means been resolved. In many parts of the world, having a trans identity still puts a person at risk of discrimination, violence, and even death." Stephen Whittle, "Foreword," *The Transgender Studies Reader*, xi.

modes of knowledge. As a consequence, in the first decade of the 2000s, transgender studies were shortened to trans studies to avoid any encapsulation in the gender/sex conundrum and allow a major understanding of how transexual and transgender people enact their embodied experiences of gender.

Trans as a stand-alone term has different sources, but I will only name two: the legal and the linguistic ones. As Stephen Whittle argues, the legal source dates back to 1998: "'trans' as a stand-alone term did not come into formal usage until it was coined by a parliamentary discussion group in London in 1998, with the deliberate intention of being as inclusive as possible when negotiating equality legislation."[174] The linguistic source, on the other hand, looks at the semantic potential of the prefix "trans" whose original etymological meaning, in Latin is "'across, beyond, through, on the other side of, to go beyond,' with the prefixal meaning of crossing (trans-Atlantic), changing (transformation), or between (transracial)."[175] The linguistic source has produced a sort of "conceptual operation that transects the academy by connecting a variety of ethical, sociopolitical, and scientific questions that traditionally have been addressed within separate disciplines."[176] More and more scholars in the humanities are calling for this procedure, which would put an end to a *modus operandi* inherited from the Enlightenment and founded on the principle of separation; this topic will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter, but it bears mentioning here because of its critical importance in analyzing the recent literary trends that have relied on feminist, queer, and trans critique.

In the past decade, the ongoing need to transcend the sex-sexuality-gender triad and its linguistic, psychological, and social implications, as well as incorporate broader discussions about feminist intersectionality and queer identity, and promote transversality, transitivity, and transnationality, has resulted in a further transition, from trans studies to trans* studies.[177] Trans* with the asterisk or star (*) is a conjuncting marker operating as "a wildcard character in computing and telecommunications," and so "open[ing] up transgender or trans to a wider range of meanings," as explained by blogger Sevan Bussell, who adds: "The asterisk came from Internet search structure. When you add an

[174] Whittle, "Foreword," xi.
[175] Eliza Steinbock, "Trans," *Gender: Sources, Perspectives, and Methodologies*, ed. Renée C. Hoogland (Macmillan Reference USA/Gale, part of Cengage Learning, 2016), 377, http://www.academia.edu/29555925/TRANS_chp_in_Gender_Methodologies_Perspectives_Approaches_Handbook
[176] Steinbock, "Trans," 378.
[177] According to Steinbock, this corresponds with the launch of the journal *Transgender Studies Quarterly* in 2013. Steinbock, "Trans," 378.

asterisk to the end of a search term, you're telling your computer to search for whatever you typed, plus any characters after.''[178] The asterisk as a conjunction is an *augmentation* that does not necessarily follow a consecutive path, but is also casual, inclusive, and final; in Sam Killerman's words the "*" stands for not only transgender, transsexual, trans man, trans masculine, trans woman, and trans feminine but also for "genderqueer, neutrios, intersex, agender, two-spirit, cross-dresser, genderfluid, non-binary, gender non-conforming, bigender, third gender, androgynous, two-spirit."[179] Trans* also seeks to discard the ontological, theological, colonial, and patriarchal practice of naming. For Jack Halberstam, in fact, trans* does not name or classifies, rather "it modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity."[180] Naming, Halberstam stresses, is replaced by "expansive forms of difference, haptic relations to knowing, uncertain modes of being, and the disaggregation of identity politics predicated upon the separating out of many kinds of experience that actually blend together, intersect, and mix."[181]

However, this openness is not without historical and critical context. Instead, it strives to complicate and lay out the complexities of identitarian claims of acceptance that acknowledge and expand beyond the sex, sexuality, and gender triad, as well as national boundaries, and anti-racial and class struggle—and I would add religious and spiritual belonging.[182] This use of trans* seems to allude to and reframe, at once, one of the most debated uses and types of trans-, that of transnational. In my view, the movement embodied by trans* bears a certain resemblance with the mode transnational feminism

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[178] In the very first issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly,* Avery Tompkins offers a general introduction to the uses and meaning of the asterisk, by mainly drawing from the following works: Sevan Bussell, "Why We Use the Asterisk" *Candiussell Corner*, October 2, 2012, http://www.candiussellcorner.blogspot.com/2012/10/why-we-use-asterisk-sevan.html; and Sam Killerman, "What Does the Asterisk in 'Trans*' Stand for? And Why Should I Use It?" *It's Pronounced* Metrosexual, May 2012, http://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/05/what-does-the-asterisk-in-trans-stand-for. See Avery Tompkins, "The Asterisk," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 26–27, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399497

[179] Killerman, "What Does the Asterisk in 'Trans*' for? And Why Should I Use It?."

[180]Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Berkeley: University of California, 2018), 4.

[181] Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 5.

[182] I make a difference between religion as a system of recollection (from Latin *relegare),* and spirituality perceived as *spiritus*, breath. As such, I use the word spirituality to refer to a breathing meditative practice that connects the inner soul to the body and the flesh but also indexes the necessity to know through the pneuma, our lungs. This use is inspired not only by Black transnational feminism but also by Luce Irigaray's ontology of breath on the necessity of different breathing in the world, which is also a different way to know the world. See Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (London: Athlon Press, 1999).

shapes and teaches trans, transness, transition and transversion.[183] Transnational feminism, as defined by Jacqui M. Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, is "a way of thinking about women in similar contexts across the world, in different geographical spaces, rather than as all women across the world."[184] Its fundamental objective is to reconcile the unique and the universal, to challenge identity politics and naming, and above all, to reclaim the spiritual aspect of existence. A significant chapter of Alexander's book, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, pays tribute to the well-known feminist collection *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color* by redefining the pronoun "we" in the global present: "How do we continue to be rooted in the particularities of our cultural homes without allegiance to the boundaries of nation-state, yet remain simultaneously committed to a collectivized politics of identification and solidarity?"[185]

The use of the pronoun "we," the privileged mode of address of many feminists, becomes a sort of conjunctive bridge, which hosts the "confluence of the local and the global" and looks at the transnational "as [not] merely a theoretical option."[186] The "we" only makes sense when it is accepted as the daily practice "to see ourselves as part of one another, even in the context of difference"; or when we reject "the belief that 'it could never happen to *us*, so that our very consciousness would be shaped by multiple histories and events, multiple geographies, multiple identifications."[187]

This "we," devoid of the oppositional logic of *we* versus *them*, is also present in Baldwin's work: "We: who was this we?"—he asks in "The Price of the Ticket" remembering the Second World War when "we" (Americans) were supposed to bring freedom to Europe.[188] This memory is for him an opportunity to think of the Black Army too, and "we: the black people of this country, then, with particular emphasis on those

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[183] The term "transnational feminism" first appeared in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* eds. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 1994), and it was successively extended in other important contributions such as *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Future*, eds. Chandra T. Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander (London-New York: Routledge, 1997), the essay "Cartographies of Knowledge and Power Transnational Feminism as Radical Praxis" by Mohanty and Alexander contained in *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*, eds. Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), and *Pedagogies of Crossing. Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* by Alexander (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). I will mostly refer to the later book since it incorporates the primary issues addressed by other transnational feminists and because of its complete spiritual dimension.

[184] Mohanty and Alexander, "Cartographies of Knowledge," xix.

[185] Alexander is obviously referring to the need to come to terms with the idea of American supremacy and to see ourselves as part of a global history that, no matter the provenance, has been affected by colonialism and imperialism. Decolonization is indeed a project for everyone. Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 167.

[186] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 264.

[187] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 265 (emphasis in the original).

[188] James Baldwin, "The Price of the Ticket" (1985), "Other Essays," *Collected Essays*, 836.

serving in the Armed Forces"; "we: my family, the living and the dead, and the children coming along behind us."[189] "We" is therefore a pronoun that relates to Black people, who should no longer be seen as a societal phenomenon, a problem, or an object of investigation. Still, "we" is also that "white world" Baldwin were to find "downtown" when he abandoned the pulpit and Harlem and he had to confront in order to understand *the price of the ticket* of both white and Black Americans.[190]

The intersubjective solidarity, or "new contract" taught by Alexander—"any dis-ease of one is a dis-ease of the collectivity; any alienation from self is alienation from the collectivity"—is mirrored by Baldwin's mission to examine "the graver question of the self."[191] This self cannot stand alone, and, at a certain point, it has to fall at the crossing, in that transitional and transversal experience of being *touched* by the other. The terms "self" and "other" are not suppressed but reformulated differently. Naming becomes a paradoxical act, and the question "Who are we?"—asked by both Alexander and Baldwin—can only be replied to if we "practice *how* to disappear the will to segregation."[192]

The "*how*" is the core of transnational feminism, and I would suggest Baldwin's own art; it is pursued through the third element that conjoins and *augments* trans* to transnational feminism and Baldwin's literature, namely the spiritual dimension of life, a trans-dimension itself in which body, soul, spirit, and flesh *cross* each other. Spirituality, similarly to religion, has been strongly forgotten and disavowed by left-inspired movements and theories (including postcolonialism, feminist, and queer studies) that have always built their *how* in secular forms of praxis disenfranchised from both religious dogmas and the enchantment of spirited life, inspired by collective intra-special and global breathing. Secularism, explained as a will to demonstrate and confront the connection between colonialism, imperialism, and religious conversion, has paradoxically profited from the idea that spiritual forms of knowledge other than the Judeo-Christian tradition belong to a tradition that is too remote or regarded as extreme strangeness, which risks being accommodated as exotic or misappropriated by the same powers they intend to contrast.[193]

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[189] Baldwin, "The Price of the Ticket," 836–37.
[190] Baldwin, "The Price of the Ticket," 837–38.
[191] Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name," 136.
[192] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 18.
[193] This is a very crucial and debated question within social science and literary criticism. Fanon himself, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, was reluctant to recover African traditional forms of knowledge in order to create a counter-metaphysics able to decolonize the world. See Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 280.

However, for Alexander, a queer feminist and priestess of two Afro-Atlantic spiritual systems (Vodou and Lucumi), the trans- in transnational is a material as well as a spiritual fact. It is the ethical recognition that our bodies made of bones and flesh are sustained by a desire to be guided, not be alone: "We cannot afford to cease yearning for each other's company."[194] For her, spirituality manifests as Afro-Atlantic spirits, African gods who made the Crossing (the Middle Passage), and African cosmology that, contrary to what secular thought maintains, makes intelligible and livable most of the main critical issues on which the humanities have built their inquiry, including identity, belonging, migration, memory, and sexuality.[195]

For Baldwin, a man of moral energy and religious prophecy, it comes in the form of a profound love for everybody ('s body, soul, and flesh). The work of the artist presupposes a "fragile, delicate undertaking of revealing the beloved to herself and to one another," which is how Baldwin sees it: "The artist does at his [her] best what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself [herself] and with that revelation to make freedom real."[196] It is not hyperbolic to affirm that the writer, in his heart, could imagine and practice love without separation. Here, love is not the naïve and sentimental act of romanticizing forgiveness and acceptance, but a concrete effort to make life livable by not suppressing differences and dissidence but trying to know them differently. Furthermore, the kind of love Baldwin develops throughout his life bears the imprint of the biblical meaning of knowing, which is getting closer to the other in all one's nakedness.[197] In this sense, I read his famous statement about androgyny—"We are all androgynous"—as an invitation to divest one's mask and accept one's "nakedness"; doing so enables one to perceive beyond and transcend the differences that are put in place to mark one's identity.[198] Hence, "Here Be Dragons," which has long been seen as a kind of queer manifesto, can be read as a trans* manifesto.

In a passage from *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin narrates how, while in New York he only had lived in "pockets of it," in Paris he "lived in all parts of the city" and

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[194] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 18.
[195] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 297.
[196] Baldwin, quoted by Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 18.
[197] This is a point observed by Field: "Baldwin's repeated references to nakedness rework the Old Testament notion of standing naked before God in order to be saved." See Field, "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz," 452.
[198] Originally titled, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" and published in January of 1985 in *Playboy*, it was then renamed "Here Be Dragons," after a conversation the author had had with the Black feminist Audre Lorde, as it will be analyzed in chapter 4. See James Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" [renamed "Here Be Dragons"] (1985), "Other Essays," *Collected Essays*, 828.

"knew all kind of people, from pimps and prostitutes in Pigalle to Egyptian bankers in Neully."[199] He loved to "talk to people, all kinds of people, and almost everyone, as I hope we still know, loves a man who loves to listen."[200] Baldwin's love for the community is imbricated in his spiritual knowledge, both contested and recognized as the site for making oneself; it is recognized because he cannot deny that he was once a preacher and is the son of one, and it is contested because Christianity is unable to dismantle the very structure of white supremacy. As Lata Mani argues, thus, "the personal is not only political but spiritual."[201]

In addition, the spiritual is not only the work of the soul, but of the body, its flesh, bones, and sex(es) too. This transition from body to sex is rarely accounted for when analyzing Baldwin, and it is derived from Black feminism first (in the 1970s and 1980s), and elaborated by transnational feminism later (in the 1990s and 2000s).[202] The white feminist mantra "the personal is political" and its focus on the body, regarded as the exclusive *locus* of self-knowledge and agency, are complicated and *augmented* by transnational and Black feminism that, in my view, are the two streams of knowledge and practice that can better accommodate intersectionality and trans*ness. Experience, "a category of great epistemic import to feminism," and always linked to the social sphere or to the collective need to do together, has absented the spiritual from the "bodies that matter."[203] The spiritual, instead, cannot be "closeted," and its secrecy or privacy, as well as its enchantment, are "very much lived in a domain that is social in the sense that it provides knowledge whose distillation is indispensable to daily living."[204]

Lorde's voice here must be invoked again because, as Alexander observes, it is her "The Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power" (1978), with its restoration of sexual life within the spiritual life, that redirects the dissemination of the personal and the intimate experience into a spiritual and sexual community and practice in which *we* and *them/they* are not self-exclusionary but bound by reciprocal energy, and a power that resides in the erotic:[205]

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[199] Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," 140.
[200] Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," 140.
[201] Lata Mani, quoted in Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing,* 295.
[202] One of the rare analyses of this influence is found in Field's article on Pentecostalism.
[203] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 295.
[204] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 295–96.
[205] "The Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power" is a paper delivered at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Mount Holyoke College, August 25, 1978. It was, then, published as a pamphlet by Out & Out Books (available from The Crossing Press). It was, finally, reprinted in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley, California: Crossing Press, 1984), 53–59.

> The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.[206]

Lorde urges us to embrace the creativity that comes from feeling and sensing, and "those physical, emotional and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us being shared: the passion of love in its deepest meaning."[207] For Baldwin this energy, or power, is love. Baldwin's love, as Field asserts, is a complex blend of sensuality and a responsible will to change. Against American Puritan prohibition and inhibition of spiritual and bodily contact, he emphasizes touch, "which is both physical and spiritual, suggesting being moved (to be touched), but also the physical act of reaching out to another."[208] When he describes sexual scenes, he infuses them with biblical rhetoric but also with the power of touch. Even though he discriminates sexual gratification from love, his love ethics, especially in later fiction, is "spiritual/sexual."[209]

Thus, when Lorde and Baldwin meet and have a conversation in 1984, it seems incredible that Baldwin almost misses the *crossing,* or traverse, between his sensual and revolutionary love for the Black man's struggle and the Black women's struggle and the power of the erotic. Despite the fact that Lorde was a pioneer of the Black feminist movement, this is the case. Nevertheless, as the chapter on love will demonstrate, Black feminism would have a significant impact on him, if not on a conscious level, then on an unconscious one.

This preliminary excursus in transgender/trans and trans* studies, as well as its *detours* into reminiscences of transnational feminism, indeed served to *augment* the analysis of Baldwin to a paradigm, trans*, that enables the reader to grapple with the author's paradoxes and imagine with him one "more" world, more words. The author's multiple identifications, his troubled masculinity, the development of a trans-aesthetic that embraces androgyny as suggested by trans* theory, and a transnational attitude in the manner figured out by transnational feminists—that is, as a will to balance particularity and universality, recognize the paradox of naming, and welcome the return of the spiritual—can all be understood if we think of Baldwin through trans* lenses and some of

[206] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 55.
[207] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 56.
[208] Field, "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz," 451.
[209] Field, "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz," 453.

its transnational feminist declinations. What I would suggest is that, in short, Baldwin may have lived his life in a state that was beyond queerness and towards trans*ness, that is, a condition leaning not necessarily towards being transgender, but toward being (physically and spiritually) in communication *with the other side*.[210] After all, the beauty and love of Baldwin's generous testament—the two main subjects explored in my thesis, and addressed in chapters 3 and 4—lie at the core of this condition, which is also the condition of those who accept to be *all incomplete*.[211] In particular, Baldwin's trans* trajectory will be traced in the chapter on love, through a contrapuntal reading of *No Name in the Street* and "Here Be Dragons," on the one hand, and *Another Country* on the other.[212]

Before delving into the literary examination of beauty and love in selected works by Baldwin, the next chapter will first provide an additional instance of translation. It will serve as the core of my thesis, as I will introduce Baldwin's main prophecy, *blackness*. It will involve a methodological approach that examines the Black radical tradition. This tradition, akin to a thread, will re-stitch various culturalist, postcolonial, feminist, queer, and trans* points woven in this introductory text(ure) about Baldwin's scholarship in the past twenty years and support the contrapuntal reading of Baldwin's prophecies of beauty and love.

[210] Part of this idea, which will be dealt with in detail in the chapter on love, has been discussed in my essay; see Maltese, "Fugitively Crossing the Ocean."
[211] This is an homage to Harney's and Moten's last book, *All Incomplete* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2021).
[212] James Baldwin, "Another Country" (1962), *James Baldwin: Early Novels & Stories*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 361–756.

2. James Baldwin's Prophecy: *blackness Next Time*

2.1 Baldwin and the Black Radical Tradition

> Black Studies is the critique of Western civilization.[213]
> Cedric J. Robinson

> One of the things the white world does not know, but I think I know, is that black people are just like everybody else […]. We are human, too.[214]
> James Baldwin

In this chapter, the critical arenas introduced in the previous chapter are further *translated* and *augmented* by another critical angle, the Black radical tradition, which has significantly impacted my contrapuntal reading of Baldwin's works. The historian, professor, and activist Cedric J. Robinson, who coined the term, explains that the ideology behind this tradition emerged in the context of the "post-slavery world order" of the twentieth century as a militant response to so-called "racial capitalism" that is the development of capitalist wealth through the expropriation of the lives and labor of racialized Africans and African descendants.[215] Black radicalism is also presented by Robinson as a form of Marxism in its attempt to forge a program for revolutionary change. Yet, Black radicalism is detached from Marxism in that it is a "critically different realization of a history."[216] This different realization is contingent on the recognition of two important factors neglected by Karl Marx. The first factor refers to the racial and class struggles that took place outside Europe. The second factor involves the correction of the notion that capitalism terminated the old order, feudalism, and racism. As Robin Kelly claims in the introduction to Robinson's book:

> Robinson not only finds racialism firmly rooted in premodern European civilization but locates the origins of capitalism there as well. […] Robinson directly challenges the Marxist idea that capitalism was a revolutionary negation of feudalism. Instead, Robinson explains, capitalism emerged within the feudal order and grew in fits and starts, flowering in the cultural soil of the West-most notably in the racialism that has come to characterize European society. Capitalism and racism, in other words, did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it

[213] Cedric J. Robinson, quoted in Fred Moten, "Black Op," *PMLA* 123, no. 5, (October 2008): 1743.
[214] James Baldwin, "Transcript: James Baldwin Debate William F. Buckley, (1965)," *Blog #42*, June 7, 2005, http://www.rimaregas.com/2015/06/07/transcript-james-baldwin-debates-william-f-buckley-1965-blog42/
[215] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 77, 2–3.
[216] Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 1.

> to produce a modern world system of "racial capitalism" dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide.[217]

This important correction about "racial capitalism" and the necessity of looking at contexts beyond Europe are both crucial to the two currents of Black radicalism whose proposals, in my opinion, can also be observed in certain elements of Baldwin's style and work.[218] I am referring to Fred Moten's radical aesthetics or "black optimism" and Denise Ferreira da Silva's Black Feminist Poethics.[219] These new trends have not only *augmented* the field of the Black radical tradition by looking at other forms of knowledge and semiotic systems (like science, oriental philosophy, quantum physics, sound, and tactile languages) but have also re-weaved, in a very original way, those tenets advanced by postcolonialism, feminism, queer and trans* studies. Indeed, my initial, postcolonialist-influenced take on Baldwin has been revolutionized by the works of these two cultural theorists and artists with whom I have had stimulating conversations.

However, I think that it is necessary to understand the reasons behind the significant detour into Black radicalism before reviewing the specifics of the two aforementioned strands of "black study" that are crucial to my literary analysis of some works by Baldwin.[220] First, Baldwin was a radical revolutionary figure in his own right,

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[217] Robin D. G. Kelley, "Foreword," *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, xiii.

[218] In this thesis, I will not explicitly engage Robinson's arguments, which must be contextualized and have been contested or elaborated over time. I will rather highlight the influence of his reading of Marxism and slavery on both Moten's and Ferreira da Silva's discussions of *blackness*. Furthermore, Robinson prefers to mention Richard Wright rather than Baldwin in his study of Black Marxism because of the latter's harsh criticism of *Native Son* in the aforementioned "Everybody Protest's Novel."

[219] "(and I think I'm as reticent about the term *black optimism* as Wilderson and Sexton are about *Afro-pessimism*, in spite of the fact that we make recourse to them)." [Emphasis in the original] Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness. Mysticism in the Flesh," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 738, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2345261. For Ferreira da Silva's Black Feminist Poethics see her article: Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," *Black Scholar*, 44, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 81–97.

[220] The term "black study" alludes to *The Undercommons*, in which Harney and Moten prefer its use over "black studies" in order to engage with study as an intellectual form inspired by the sociality of black people; a form of study not separated from collective activities such as playing music, sharing a conversation, dancing etc. "A couple of people seem to be reticent about the term 'study,' but is there a way to be in the undercommons that isn't intellectual? Is there a way of being intellectual that isn't social? When I think about the way we use the term 'study,' I think we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal – being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it 'study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present. These activities aren't ennobled by the fact that we now say, 'oh, if you did these things in a certain way, you could be said to be have been studying.' To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice. What's important is to recognize that that has been the case – because that recognition allows you to access a whole, varied, alternative history of thought." Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*: *Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 110.

despite being marginalized until the 1990s for his partial commitment to leftist parties by political theory and studies influenced by Marxist political thought, such as cultural and postcolonial studies, as well as certain feminisms. The adjectives "radical" and "revolutionary" echo Black radicalism wanting to append pre-existing systems of knowledge and feeling, independently from political affiliation. Additionally, as will become evident in chapter 3, the chapter on the beauty of *blackness*, the word revolution for Baldwin entails not only a change in the social and political structure of a nation, but also a change in the way one feels, learns, and knows.

Second, there is a constant interaction of hope and sorrow in Baldwin's writings that can be equated to "the entanglement of joy and pain" that is central to Moten's Black aesthetics and it is proper of *blackness*.[221] It is important to pinpoint that *blackness*, with lower-case b, in this context has neither the ideological-philosophical connotation that has relegated it to a despised racial category nor the political connotation that has elevated it as a reason for cultural and aesthetic vindication in the 1960s in the US, which will be addressed more properly in chapter 3. Rather, *blackness* is a mode of life and body of knowledge that emerged from the living experience of Black people before, during, and after the Afro-Atlantic trade later. As Robinson teaches us, and Kelly reminds us, the terms "Blackness," and "Black" cannot be reduced to slavery: "[S]lavery did not define the Black condition because we were Africans first, with world views and philosophical notions about life, death, possession, community, and so forth that are rooted in that African heritage."[222]

I consider *blackness*' entanglement of joy and pain the most difficult aspect of this thesis, because it relies on the project, fostered by Black radical thinkers, to alter the dominant narrative about enslaved people as victims, and consequently the negative connotation that the consideration of them as things, commodity or nothingness has acquired in both academia and elsewhere. As a *white* scholar, though my whiteness is not aligned with North-European supremacist white standards, neither materially nor spiritually, I feel compelled to express my responsibility in embracing this delicate issue. To affirm that in the hold of the slave ship, there was an experimental laboratory of fantasy, love, and beauty is to understand that those usually referred to as enslaved people, as Kelly educates us, "[m]ore accurately, […] had been human beings who happened to be

[221] Fred Moten, "Fred Moten, Cultural Theorist and Poet | 2020 MacArthur Fellow (Extended)," February 16, 2021, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHV8WopTYlA.
[222] Kelly, "Foreword," xix.

slaves."[223] This recognition should be supported by both those who identify themselves as whites and those who identify as blacks, without erasing the history and the socio-political consequences of racialization. It also should be comprehended by Marxist intellectuals since, as Robinson observes:

> Marx had not realized fully that the cargoes of laborers also contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality. These were the actual terms of their humanity. These cargoes, then, did not consist of intellectual isolates or deculturated Blacks—men, women, and children separated from their previous universe. African labor brought the past with it, a past that had produced it and settled on it the first elements of consciousness and comprehension.[224]

Most importantly, according to both Moten and Ferreira da Silva, *blackness* is not exclusive to Black people and it can become a model for the entire humanity since it can break with ideas that reiterate segregation and racial capitalism and instead "announce a whole range of possibilities for knowing, doing, and existing."[225] *blackness* becomes, then, a social force, an un-pathological case that indicates a poetics and aesthetics that are at once ethical (po-aesth-ethics) and thus attentive to creativity, its responsibility, and its beauty. As a result, Baldwin's writings undertake this po-aesth-ethic mission because it attempts to transform the modalities in which we perceive, narrate, and experience the world.

Thirdly, my interest in the Black radical tradition is also an act of reconciliation between two fields of study—Anglo-American postcolonialism, cultural studies on the one hand, and Black studies, particularly those that have proliferated in the US context on the other—that share many contact zones but appear to maintain a spiritual distance. This is not only due to the fact that Baldwin is an African American writer or Black American, and to the clear connection between his writings and the context that produced them. It is also an attempt to intellectually reposition the author at the crossroads of two significant streams of thought that reflect his in-betweenness: the phenomenological and deconstructionist tradition from Europe and the Black radical tradition from the US first, and from other countries where it has developed, such as the Caribbean and South America. In this thesis, there is a continuous flow of thought that encompasses both sides of the Atlantic and is anchored by the image of the "global, queer, and elder Baldwin"

[223] Kelly, "Foreword," xxx.
[224] Robinson, quoted in Kelly, "Foreword," xiv.
[225] Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 81.

presented at the Nice conference. In Baldwin's scholarship scarce attention has been posed to repositioning Baldwin in the Black radical frame and transnationally.

Keeping these premises in mind, in the following sections, I will attempt to *augment* the way postcolonialism, feminism, and queer and trans* studies have deconstructed notions of diasporic identity, hybridity, intellectual organicity, intersectionality, and transness, that I regard as central to Baldwin's poetics. Through Moten's black optimism and Ferreira da Silva's Poethics, I will continue to weave the notes of my contrapuntal reading of some of the writer's works. This move will enable me to conclude that Baldwin was first and foremost a prophet of *blackness*, and most importantly of *blackness* as a mode of sociality, love, and change rather than as a racial or aesthetical category. As the thesis title suggests, the basic prophecy he left us with is *blackness*, as promoted by Black radicalism: *ergo*, *blackness* next time. This prophecy takes the shape of two crucial lessons: beauty and love.

In section two, I will engage with Moten's rereading of Fanon's work on "the fact" of *blackness* and his theory on the mysticism of the flesh, which is informed by Spillers's theory of the flesh, and that *augment* notions of hybridity and intellectual organicity.[226] In section three, *blackness* is translated as "matter" in accordance with Ferreira da Silva's proposal of Black Feminist Poethics grounded in Black feminism and literature, in order to *augment* intersectionality and transness. Finally, in the fourth part, I will explain how Baldwin uses the language of prophecy to engage with the "fact" and "matter" of *blackness* introduced in the preceding sections to teach beauty and love that correlate to chapters 3 and 4 and show their respective trajectories. In particular, I will emphasize how the critical methodology that I have developed over the past three years of my doctoral research—combines my recent involvement with the Black radical tradition with my academic background in postcolonial and feminist studies—has been beneficial to each of these two emanations.

[226] The "fact" of *blackness* refers to one chapter of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, titled "The Fact of Blackness." See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 82–108.

2.2 The "Fact" and "Case" of *blackness*: Fred Moten's Black Aesthetics and Optimism

> How can we fathom a social life that tends toward death, that enacts a kind of being-toward-death, and which, because of such tendency and enactment, maintains a terribly beautiful vitality?[227]
> Fred Moten

> I plan to stay a believer in blackness, even as thingliness, even as (absolute) nothingness, even as imprisonment in passage on the most open road of all, even as […] fantasy in the hold.[228]
> Fred Moten

> Blackness bears or is the potential to end the world[229]
> Fred Moten

To understand the Black radical reevaluation of words such as "Black" and "Blackness," one has to consider two fundamental questions asked by Moten on more than one occasion. The first one is: "What is wrong with black folk?";[230] the second one echoes Bob Marley's song and asks about "whether *blackness* could be loved."[231] The responses to these questions have resulted in different trends within recent evolutions of the Black radical tradition, particularly Afropessimism and the aforementioned black optimism, also referred to as black mysticism, which will be the focus of this section's examination. According to Afropessimism's major theorist, Frank B. Wilderson III, Blackness (with capital B) is an interpretive framework that, even if it informs Black people's struggle and survival, will not attain the position of the thought/Subject. Wilderson writes in his new book, *Afropessimism* (2020), which combines rigorous theory with personal memories:

> Afropessimism then is less of a theory and more of a *metatheory*: a critical project that, by deploying Blackness as a lens of interpretation, interrogates the unspoken, assumptive logic of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism through rigorous theoretical consideration of their *properties and assumptive logic*, such as their foundations, methods, form, and utility; and it does so, again, on a higher level of abstraction than the discourse and methods of the theories it interrogates […]. It is pessimistic about the claims theories of liberation make when they analogize Black suffering with the suffering of other oppressed beings.[232]

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[227] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 188.
[228] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 742–43.
[229] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 739.
[230] Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 140; and Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 177.
[231] Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 193.
[232] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 13–14 (emphasis in the original).

Afropessimism shares Robinson's criticism that Marxism, a European theory, cannot fully account for the racialization of non-European people, or at least that its social struggle cannot be extended to the anti-racial one. However, it departs from Black radicalism in that it intrinsically relates Blackness to the Middle Passage and Black people to slavery. Wilderson, not without polemics, maintains that the slave trade not only dehumanized Black people but also produced a metaphysical holocaust that never ended. He uses Saidiya Hartman's provocative intuition, which states: "On the one hand, the slave is the foundation of the national order, and, on the other, the slave occupies the position of the unthought."[233] Hence, every narrative attempt to include or integrate the slave, even that predicated upon empathy, results in a re-elaboration of the same foundation and position: "Blacks alone will remain essentially slaves in the larger Human world, where they can never be truly regarded as Human beings."[234]

For this reason, Wilderson regards as impossible the realization of international solidarity in the fight against anti-Black prejudice. There is a passage from *Afropessimism* in which he recounts the instant he understood that the condition of Black people is so unique that it cannot be compared to class struggle, subaltern struggle, or the Palestinian struggle. Upon encountering a Palestinian librarian who admitted it would be a greater disgrace if the oppressor, the Israeli soldier, turned out to be an Ethiopian Jew, he realized that even the mind of an oppressed Palestinian "shares a largely unconscious consensus that Blackness is a locus of abjection to be instrumentalized on a whim."[235] In this passage, he clearly refutes the way postcolonial transnationalism and even Black Marxism address Blackness, that is as a "sentient implement to be joyously deployed for reasons and agendas that have little to do with Black liberation."[236]

While not rejecting Wilderson's arguments, but instead choosing to pair them in a manner reminiscent of appositionality, i.e., conjunction, Moten offers an optimistic reinterpretation of *blackness*. His trajectory toward black optimism, which is the predilection for life and joy over death and suffering, has spanned nearly two decades and has been marked by the publication of incredibly intricate and significant contributions. In this trajectory, I consider four major phases, each of which is an *augmentation* and critical translation of *blackness*. The initial stage corresponds with the groundbreaking *In the*

[233] Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 2003): 184–85, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20686156
[234] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 19–20.
[235] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 19–20.
[236] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 19–20.

Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (2003), a manifesto for *blackness* in which Moten devotes one chapter to Baldwin's "mirror stage" and visible music through the analysis of his sixth novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979). The second phase coincides with the crucial essay "The Case of Blackness" (2008), in which Moten rereads Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. The third phase is related to two works both published in 2013: *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, co-written with Stefano Harney, and the essay "Blackness and Nothingness. Mysticism in the Flesh." The most recent phase aligns with the trilogy titled "Consent not to be a single being," whose source will be explained further in this section, and which comprises *Black and Blur* (2017), *Stolen Life* (2018), and *The Universal Machine* (2018).[237]

In turn, there is an internal path within this trajectory that, in my view, is punctuated by motifs that, as stitching points, re-weave the postcolonial, feminist, queer, and trans* tenets of exilic/diasporic identity, hybridity, intellectual organicity, transnationality, and intersectionality presented in the previous chapter into a new critical texture. This texture will be the methodological framework for the contrapuntal reading of the selected works by Baldwin in this thesis that unveils prophecies and lessons of beauty and love. These motifs include the entanglement of life and death, which resembles the doubleness of the exilic condition; the relationship between *blackness* and ontology that redefines the role of the intellectual; the multiplicity and opacity of *blackness* that *augments* hybridity and complicates both intersectionality and transness. The works of Moten that I have mentioned above will be supportive in the discussion of the new crucial texture and these motifs, and they will be read not always sequentially but also contrapuntally.

When Moten opens *In the Break* by stating that "[t]he history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist," he is celebrating *blackness* as the "object" capable of overflowing the boundaries of identity, which is generally equated with subjectivity. However, *blackness* is neither a movement of identity formation from below nor an attempt to replace whiteness's identification with a human, juridical, self-determined, and dominant subjectivity. In the first of Moten's many publications, which can be regarded as attempts to translate the Black radical tradition and reinforce the belief in the beauty and joy of Black life, *blackness* is rather an energy that resists the alleged "social death" of Black life. The practice of translation is, indeed, essential to Moten's

[237] See Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

rereading of *blackness*, as it is through a detailed translinguistic study (of French, English, German, Latin, and Greek) of the etymology of the words used in the philosophical analysis of *blackness* (i.e., thing, being, beings, fact, experience) that he figures out new senses for "black" and "blackness." In addition, Moten's rereading of theories of Blackness is enabled by the translatability of the texts in question, primarily Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, which is also crucial to the critical analysis of Baldwin's works. He emphasizes that his "reading is enabled by the way Fanon's texts continually demand that we read them—again or, deeper still, not or against again, but for the first time."[238]

Fanon's masterwork, specifically the fifth chapter titled "The Fact of Blackness," is one of the two primary texts from which the concept and condition of "social death" are derived. The second is Orlando Patterson's 1982 polemical study, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, in which the sociologist coined the term "social death" to refer to slavery and its repercussions, namely alienation and absence of social life among the enslaved people and their descendants.[239] Slavery and colonization remain, for both Patterson and Fanon, the two most prominent facts and experiences of Black existence. Nonetheless, at issue is not only the Black man's sociality, but also his access to the very concept of being, and thus ontology, as noted by the psychiatrist from Martinique: "For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man […]. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man." [240] This quote serves as a prelude to Fanon's identitarian split, which he experiences when a white child looks at him. The episode—which is regarded as the primal scene of racialization—is indeed described two pages after the quote, and, as already noted in chapter 1, strikingly resembles Baldwin's experience of being looked at by white children, as recounted in "Stranger in the Village."

While Patterson has been widely criticized because, in the words of another prominent Afropessimist, Jared Sexton, he "takes the liberty of speaking about the dominated," the enslaved people, Fanon's text, and specifically the above passage, has sparked and continues to spark insightful criticism.[241] Moten devotes his "The Case of

[238] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 182.
[239] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*: A *Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
[240] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 82.
[241] Patterson's encyclopedic analysis has sparked considerable controversy because he relies primarily on secondary sources that reinforce the view that has contributed to the dominance of masters over slaves. Despite providing a significant quantity of information, according to Sexton, it fails to acknowledge "the perspective of the dominated." See Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death. On Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism," *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations. De)fatalizing the Present,*

Blackness" to the rereading of "The Fact of Blackness," and confronts the assumption that "blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay, even when that decay is invoked in the name of a certain (fetishization of) vitality."[242] He draws a correlation between this assumption and Fanon's above paragraph on the social life of Black people, which at the same time turns to generating a gap within the philosophical discourse on Blackness, a "strife between normativity and the deconstruction of norms."[243] Differently said, there is a gap between the positivist tendency that brings the non-Black subject back under the sign of sociality and ontology, and the existentialist, psychoanalytic one that holds the pathologizing and objectification of blacks as opposed to white human beings and Blackness as property of blacks opposed to whiteness.

This gap also exists on the level of translation since, as Moten points out, the phrase "the fact of blackness" is a mistranslation of the more accurate "the lived experience of the black," that in Moten's analysis becomes "case":

> The title of this essay, "The Case of Blackness," is a spin on the title of the fifth chapter of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, infamously mistranslated as "the fact of blackness." "The lived experience of the black" is more literal—"experience" bears a German trace, translates as *Erlebnis* rather than *Tatsache*, and thereby places Fanon within a group of postwar Francophone thinkers encountering phenomenology that includes Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, and Tran Duc Thao […]. However, I want to linger in, rather than quickly jump over, the gap between fact and lived experience in order to consider the word "case" as a kind of broken bridge or cut suspension between the two. I'm interested in how the troubled, illicit commerce between fact and lived experience is bound up with that between blackness and the black, a difference that is often concealed, one that plays itself out not by way of the question of accuracy or adequation but by way of the shadowed emergence of the ontological difference between being and being.[244]

The case of *blackness*, therefore, opens a new path and a new translation between Fanon's "fact of blackness" and the "lived experience of the black," which also delivers a new figuration for *blackness*, unbound from ontology and objectification. This figuration introduces "thingness," on the basis of an observation, once again, derived from Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and pertaining to the translation/reading domain. Moten proposes to shift attention from the dualism of Subject/object to the relation between "object" and "thing" by rereading the following paragraph (translated from French): "I came into the

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Forging Radical Alternatives, eds. Anna Agathangelou and Kyle Killian (New York: Routledge, 2016), 65–66.

[242] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 177.

[243] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 178.

[244] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 179–80.

world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects."[245] In it, there is a "slippage, or movement that could be said to animate the history of philosophy": the transition from things (*choses*) to object (*objet*), recited by Fanon as a "fall from prospective subject to object."[246] Instead of focusing on the object's possibilities and resistance, as done in *In the Break*, in the critical translation of *blackness* offered in "The Case of Blackness," Moten proposes a further change, or better a further return, from "object" to "thing": "What if we bracket the movement from (erstwhile) subject to object in order to investigate more adequately the change from object to thing […]?"[247]

What if *blackness* does not aspire to the subject position, escapes the Subject/object dialectics, and becomes thingness, not to be perceived anymore as an inherent property of Black human beings? The object/thing distinction, according to Moten, should be perceived along the lines of Martin Heidegger's famous discourse "The Thing" in his wider criticism of (Western) metaphysics and the division between thing as "assembly," "court" (*Ding*) and thing as "matter, substance, and affair" or "legal case" discussed in the court (*Sache*). If we think of this second sense (*Sache*), then we could read "The Case of Blackness," as the case which discusses *blackness* as a thing "which is off to the side of what lies between subjects and objects."[248] It is a "case" that reopens both "the fact" of *blackness* and "the lived experience" of blacks and inhabits the distance between fact and lived experience.[249]

Most importantly, Moten's case of *blackness* accounts for what critics of Fanon have failed to contemplate: not only is there sociality in Black life—and that there was social life among the enslaved through their resistance, fugitivity, and creation of new aesthetics—but this sociality is presented as an energy that moves between, and away from, the aspiration to be for oneself and for the others, as it is required by ontology, and the absolute improvisation to existing as a thing, and thus beyond ontology.[250] This

[245] Fanon, quoted in Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 181.
[246] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 181.
[247] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 181.
[248] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 186.
[249] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 182.
[250] Moten specifically refers to Afropessimistic and existentialist readings of Fanon, as well as postcolonial/feminist readings that have respectively focused on the social death of enslaved and colonized people and the mirror stage, the visual impact of being for the others, or critiques that combine both concerns, such as "Raw Life: An Introduction" (2003), which he co-wrote with Huey Copeland. In response to "A Case of Blackness" and Moten's critique of his writing, Jared Sexton, whose positions are closer to

sociality enfolds in *blackness*, "a mode of being for which escape or apposition and not the objectifying encounter with otherness is the prime modality."[251] It is a mode that accepts life and its "beautiful vitality," as well as the experiences of pain and "the *fact* of death," as it will be reviewed at length in the next chapter.[252] It is not strictly inherent to Black people, and this is why Moten, following Heidegger's distinction between being and beings, advises not to conflate Blackness with blacks.

This distinction should be examined alongside the difference between fact and lived experience, thing and things, since "Heidegger thinks *being* neither as idea nor as position/objectness (the transcendental character of being posed) but as thing."[253] Despite the fact that Heidegger's distinction still operates in the ontological domain, Moten perceives it as an opportunity to escape the ontology of Being (capitalized this time because it refers to Being as *Dasein*, the existence of human beings) and proposes a new philosophical matrix in which to consider *blackness* and Black people as *things* that can act, live, and rejoice in their humanity. Through Nahum Dimitri Chandler's deconstructionist critique of the discourse on Blackness, which is a reformulation of both Fanon's and W.E.B. Du Bois's ideas on Blackness, he sets the stage for the term "para-ontology."[254] By recalling the polysemic nature of the prefix "*para-*"—which resembles *trans-* in that it indexes something which is "by the side, beyond, irregular,

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Afropessimism, published an intriguing article about the relationship between Afropessimism and black optimism (2016). To support this view, Sexton argues that "black life is not social, or rather black life is *lived* in *social* death, which is also social *death*," which does not mean that there is not sociality in black life, "only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system." For Sexton, the fact of *blackness*, that he considers being the relation between slavery (social death) and freedom (social life), is another name for "the social life of social death." For this reason, he continues, "black optimism accepts Afro-pessimism and vice versa because both recognize the entanglement of life and death proper to *blackness*. For Moten however, Afro-pessimism encloses the entanglement within the tight mesh of political ontology and its separation between the after-life of slavery and humanity. That is to say, what Moten asserts against afro-pessimism is a point already affirmed by afro-pessimism and is one of the most polemical dimensions of afro-pessimism as a project: black life is not social, or rather black life is lived in social death, which is also social death. That's the point of the enterprise at some level. It is all about the implications of this agreed upon point where arguments (should) begin, but cannot (yet) proceed." See Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death on Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism," 65 and 69 (emphasis in the original).

[251] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 187.

[252] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 188. The expression "the *fact* of death" (emphasis in the original) is used by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*, and it will be analyzed in chapter 3.

[253] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 186 (emphasis mine).

[254] Moten in a footnote explains: "I am invoking, and also deviating from, Nahum Dimitri Chandler's notion of paraontology, a term derived from his engagement with W. E. B. Du Bois's long anticipation of Fanon's concern with the deformative or transformative pressure blackness puts on philosophical concepts, categories, and methods." Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 187 and 215. For more on para-ontology, see Nahum D. Chandler, X–*The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*.

defense/protection from"—, paraontology can be regarded as ante-/anti-ontology, prior and against ontology.

The importance of "A Case of Blackness" relies on its effort to disentangle Blackness from the visual objectification of blacks and delve into works of art that attest to the thingness and aural sociality of *blackness*, which is also what is aimed at in this thesis. It also serves to anticipate Moten's next phase, in which he *augments blackness* as "paraontology" into "no-thingness," reinscribes the distinction between Blackness and blacks within the paraontological domain, and translates the sociality of *blackness* into fugitivity, multiplicity, and opacity. The article "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *The Undercommons* and *Black and Blur* will guide this part and all the terms that have been just mentioned.

By reiterating and sustaining his apposition to Afropessimism, Moten argues that Blackness and blacks cannot be reduced to the problem of the color line, the Kantian discourse on race, or the ontological terms of objectification/object. The distinction between Blackness and blacks must be comprehended not within and according to the ontological domain, but rather as an operation sourced by paraontology. As a result, *blackness* appears as "an-original displacement of ontology, that it is ontology's anti- and ante foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space."[255] Both the consideration of *blackness* as paraontology and the paraontological distinction between Blackness and blacks allow "us no longer to be enthralled by the notion that blackness is a property that belongs to blacks […] but also because ultimately it allows us to detach blackness from the [ontological] question of (the meaning of) being."[256]

It therefore allows the recognition that colonialism, slavery, and post-slavery have affected and continue to affect the entirety of humanity, though in unbalanced ways. Baldwin might be considered a precursor to this consideration because his poetics is an attempt to embrace the whole of humanity while nurtured by a profound love for Black people and their aesthetics. It is not surprising that, as observed by George Shulman in his analysis of Moten's relation to politics, "Moten echoes Baldwin [when in an article titled

[255] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 739.
[256] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 749–50.

'Black Op' written in 2010, he says] 'everyone whom blackness claims, which is to say everyone, can claim blackness'—that is, acknowledges it and so 'experiments' with it."[257]

In both Moten and Baldwin, there is no attempt to forge a "black subjectivity," not for Blackness nor Black people, but to reclaim a new mode of knowledge called *blackness* and an optimistic view of the fact that it is rooted in the Trans-Atlantic Crossing and African cultures and languages. In other words, it is fabulated in the fantasy of life and joy, and not social death, that was experimented on in the hold of the slave ship, the supreme non-place of unspeakable truths and refusal of (dominant) standpoints. It is a "fantasy in the hold," which, according to Moten, is the most superb insight, the "terribly beautiful phrase," that Afropessimism and Wilderson offer the world.[258]

"Fantasy in the hold" is also the title of the sixth chapter of *The Undercommons*, which I regard as the most revolutionary section of the book and whose core is enriched in the second section of "Blackness and Nothingness." This fantasy does not merely postulate the existence of "tremendous life" in the hold of the slave ship; it also suggests that this life may be a foreshadowing to a new universe and body of knowledge based on a rich vocabulary and some leitmotivs spread throughout Moten's works (both the ones just briefly analyzed and those corresponding to the last trilogy).[259] I will try to read the magnitude of this universe from two angles.

First, the social death of Blackness, as deemed by Afropessimism and Patterson, should be interpreted, in reality, as the death of politics in Black sociality. Moten identifies Hannah Arendt's exclusion of sociality from the political order as a central source in Patterson's work. As a consequence, what enslaved people endured was not a lack of sociality, but rather excommunication from the political power structures that rule societies: "The problem with slavery, for Patterson, is that it is political death, not social death; the problem is that slavery confers the paradoxically stateless status of the merely, barely living; it delineates the inhuman as unaccommodated *bios*."[260] Social death is reached when the political order requires the "subject's necessity," and therefore it corresponds to the imposition of being self-determined.[261] The *blackness* agenda, on the other hand, seeks the abolition of the political order that has contributed to the reinforcement of racialization based primarily on the Subject/object dichotomy. As

[257] George Shulman, "Fred Moten's Refusals and Consents: The Politics of Fugitivity," *Political Theory* 49, no. 2 (2020): 12.
[258] Wilderson, quoted in Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 743.
[259] Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 239.
[260] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 740 (emphasis in the original).
[261] Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 212.

discussed in the final section of this chapter, Baldwin's preference for using prophecy as a rhetorical technique echoes the abdication of politics as we know it.

The second important lesson imagines the hold of the slave ship as an "experimental venue" in which Black people improvised different forms of sociality, apart from dispossession, grief, violence, and unpayable loss.[262] This social *poiesis* has not only carried survival but also forged a new language and moral order through "fugitivity" from "the proper and the proposed."[263] Inspired by runaway slaves, marronage, and the musical fugue, fugitivity must be understood not as a mode for escaping to the world outside, but for staying in the other world within this one, or, alternately, for ending this world, which continues to be determined by separation, ontology, and individuation.

As such, fugitivity becomes a model for the redefinition of the role of the intellectual, who, as a poet, must fly away, detach, from common sense, "in the confines, in the form, of a break."[264] The break, here, is both the musical interval (echoed in Moten's *In the Break*) and the rupture with a predetermined way of knowing and understanding the world. *blackness* dwells in the break, in the interstitial space where one can both be a participant and witness, in the movement of seeing and being seen, which as I will discuss in the chapter on beauty is the movement of "looking through." Baldwin effectively demonstrates this trait by upholding love as a means to remain in the world and bring about positive change. Furthermore, he did not seek refuge in France with the intention of abandoning his homeland; rather, as discussed in the previous chapter, he did so in order to make his position as a witness more complex and out of love for his country.

While the grammar of Western thought inscribes forms of sociality in the possibilities of the body, the new "sea-born variance" of "the shipped" seeks to emancipate the captive bodies from the colonialist category of commodities.[265] Indeed, according to Spillers, in the hold of the slave ship, those bodies, caught in the suspension of space and time, but also a dimension of extreme proximity, nullified the very

[262] Moten refers to the hold of the slave ship as an "experimental venue" in both *The Undercommons* and "venue" in "Blackness and Nothingness." Moten also denotes the experiment of the slave ship's hold as a "linguistic lab": "The word "laboratory" is used in its "bio(al)chemical" sense, due to the fact that Blackness has been addressed in various fields, including medicine, biology, and philosophy, and can be discussed as a form of alchemy as well. See Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 94; and Moten "Blackness and Nothingness," 743 and 765.
[263] Moten, *Stolen Life*, 131.
[264] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 51.
[265] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 94.

conception of the body by generating a new possibility: that of the "ungendered flesh."[266] The critic first exposed her rich flesh vs. body theory, which would become so influential for the Black radical tradition, and especially for Harney, Moten, and Ferreira da Silva, in her 1987 groundbreaking essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book":

> But I would make a distinction in this case between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African "middleman," we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the "flesh" as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or "escaped" overboard.[267]

Consequently, while the logic of white supremacy already inscribes and conceptualizes the sociality of the body, the "primary narrative" of the flesh describes it as the palimpsest yet unwritten by any grammar, whose sociality is situated in the mystic realm of spirituality. In *apposition* to the previous chapter, which investigated the flesh as a vital component in the intersectional framework of transnational feminism and spirituality, as well as in the reevaluation of Baldwin's personal spiritual experience, this chapter discusses the flesh as the very den of *blackness*' sociality and its power of touching. In *The Undercommons*, the flesh is the vessel for what Harney and Moten call "hapticality" or the capacity for touch and love: "the capacity to feel though others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you, this feel of the shipped is not regulated, at least not successfully, by a state, a religion, a people, an empire, a piece of land, a totem."[268]

The sociality of the flesh is also rooted in the flesh's having and being nothing, its dispossession: the flesh of the enslaved people is the thing that has *nothing*, and is *nothing*; however, this no-thingness (which is an *augmentation* from thingness) should not be posed in a negative relation "to the substance of subjectivity-as-nonblackness (enacted in antiblackness)."[269] For Moten, the nothingness of *blackness* should not merely be rehabilitated to the status of something, nor should it be romanticized; rather, it should be

[266] See Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer, 1987): 67.
[267] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.
[268] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 98.
[269] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 749.

interpreted as a refusal to be what and how ontology requires one to be. It should be poetically translated as "consent not to be a single being," the English translation of "*consent à n'être plus un seul.*"[270] The Martinican poet and theorist Éduard Glissant, whom Moten celebrates in his last trilogy, pronounced this famous phrase when he sailed from Southampton (the UK) to Brooklyn, New York, on a luxury ship, the Queen 5 Mary II. The irony lies not only in the contrast between the comfortable ship in Glissant's time and the torturous hold of the ship of previous centuries, but also in the fact that while Christopher Columbus "left," he, Glissant, was returning:

> There is a return, because right from the start, the whole set-up—Africa/middle of the ocean/arrival—is an enslaving, colonialist set-up: it's the moment when the African diaspora became a forced diaspora. And the return occurs when slavery and domination disappear. That's why I said that Christopher Columbus leaves, but I'm the one who returns.[271]

What changes forever in traversing the Atlantic, Glissant meditates, is that the unitary idea of slavery and its singular and dominant history disappear in the moment of return—"the return occurs when slavery and domination disappear"—already being displaced in the moment of departure, seen as the collective erratic moment "when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many things at the same time."[272] Slavery and its effects cannot be explained in a linear and unitary way. Baldwin emphasized this point while speaking with Mead and Giovanni. African Americans are the descendants of slaves who made the perilous journey across the Atlantic Ocean, yet this cannot remain the unique defining experience for people of African descent in the Americas, as Afropessimism contends. Consequently, *blackness*, which stems from this non-exclusive experience, cannot be inextricably linked to slavery and dominance, which "disappear" as other unspoken narratives and unrecorded sounds arise and "return."

Moten, in my opinion, employs the word "consent" in a subversive manner, in accordance with its etymological history, which also includes the meaning of concurring with something with which one ought to disagree. He does this to assert that nothingness consents to not be a singular being and to be many things at once, as it agrees with not being univocally associated with a unitary history while disagreeing with the negative

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[270] This is the original quote, uttered in French by Glissant in conversation with Malian scholar, filmmaker, and historian Manthia Diawara and translated by Christopher Winks in 2011. See Édouard Glissant and Manthia Diawara, "One World in Relation: Conversation with Édouard Glissant aboard the Queen Mary II (August 2009)," *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 28 (Spring 2011): 4–19, https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-1266639

[271] Glissant and Diawara, "One World in Relation," 4.

[272] Glissant and Diawara, "One World in Relation," 5.

connotation of being linked to slavery and Black people. Moreover, this consent also has a spiritual and musical tone. The term "fantasy in the hold" not only alludes to the renowned musical piece by Beethoven, but also to Theodor Adorno's essays on music and jazz, which invites the reader to consider the significance of performance during the Middle Passage.[273] Languages, chants, laments, creeds, musical fugues, and spontaneous dances have all been produced and performed by excessive contact, which is a symbolic representation of the survival of the captive body.

The spiritual world and its vital force, breathing's vibration, and sonority are essential to these performances that exist in the "boundary" and "beyond," as Bhabha would have it—i.e., they are born in the break of the Crossing, and made as excess(ive) thing. In the end, they have generated a transnational map that incorporates both Western and Eastern philosophies and has its own sacred center in the flesh, which is per definition the one that cannot be touched (by normative grammars) but that touches.[274] This clarifies the meaning of "(Mysticism in the flesh)," which appears in the subtitle of "Blackness and Nothingness": there is something excessive, and ungraspable in *blackness*.[275] The mystery is in the hidden link between fantasy and reality, dreams and waking life, and the private and the public. As previously mentioned, these are also Baldwin and Black feminism's mysticisms, which are not meant to be understood at all costs but to be experienced and felt.

With a flight of fantasy, Moten moves further and unveils the hidden entanglement between Western and Eastern mysticisms, by translating the flesh's nothingness, or its *consent not to be a single being* into "*mu*—which has been variously translated from the Japanese translation of the Chinese *wu* as no, not, nought, nonbeing, emptiness, nothingness, nothing, no thing […]."[276] As "a practice of mysticism in the flesh," *mu*

[273] Theodor Adorno wrote many essays on music which were collected in the volume titled *Quasi Una Fantasia*. He also wrote controversial essays on jazz, that he deemed as a musical form, unfortunately, entrapped in the capitalist consumeristic machine. See Theodor Adorno, *Quasi Una Fantasia. Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London-New York: Verso Books, 1998); and Theodor W. Adorno, "On Jazz," *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Jamie Owen Daniel and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 470–95. For a discussion on Adorno's view of jazz refer to Robert W. Witkin, "Why did Adorno 'Hate' Jazz?," *Sociological Theory* 18, no. 1 (March 2000): 145–70, https://www.jstor.org/stable/223286.

[274] According to the etymology, sacred means something that cannot be touched, pure. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the flesh has long been considered an object of demonization with respect to the soul, and something that if touched brings immorality. However, in the Black radical tradition the flesh is both the site for pureness, the zero degree, and something that is lived in the social contact, both sacred and profane.

[275] Etymologically, mysticism is linked to what is hidden, secret, and not given to logical and rational comprehension. For this reason, the Enlightenment has also been discarded as an inferior form of knowledge.

[276] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 750.

undoubtedly echoes the spiritual breath of music.[277] *Mu* has a very rich semantic field. *Mu* stands for *mu*ni bird, the mythological bird, which is credited to have originated music, and "*Mu*tron"—Blackwell and Cherry's jazz performance.[278] Scholars have extensively debated the significance of music in US black studies, highlighting its central role in the commonly stereotyped connection between Black people and musical and artistic performances, particularly jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, and hip hop.[279]

Despite the "(under)privileged relation" that blacks have to *blackness* and keeping in mind the paraontological distinction between *blackness* and blacks, the most striking aspect of Black performances, according to Moten and for the scope of this thesis, is that they have inspired *blackness* to challenge the predominance of visuality in Western metaphysics. To understand music as resistance, one must first acknowledge that the eye and ear are not distinct, nor is the visual prior to the aural. In *In the Break*, in the section devoted to Baldwin, Moten discusses the visibility of music at length and disrupts Lacan's

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[277] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 753.

[278] Emphasis and use of italics mine. According to the myth, after catching a shrimp a boy from the Kaluli people of Papa Nuova Guinea became a *muni* bird, the Beautiful Fruitdove (*Ptilinopus pulchellus*). His sounds became the basis for sound and sentiment among the Kaluli people, and the myth is associated with the birth of music. Moten draws his suggestive evocations of mu from Nathaniel Mackey who in his turn is influenced by two texts, Steven Feld's *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression* and Victor Zuckerkandl's *Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World*. Mackey explains: "The myth tells of a boy who goes to catch crayfish with his older sister. He catches none and repeatedly begs for those caught by his sister, who again and again refuses his request. Finally he catches a shrimp and puts it over his nose, causing it to turn a bright purple red, the color of a muni bird's beak. His hands turn into wings and when he opens his mouth to speak the falsetto cry of a *muni* bird comes out. As he flies away his sister begs him to come back and have some of the crayfish but his cries continue and become a song, semiwept, semisung: 'Your crayfish you didn't give me. I have no sister. I'm hungry […].' For the Kaluli, then, the quintessential source of music is the orphan's ordeal-an orphan being anyone denied kinship, social sustenance, anyone who suffers, to use Orlando Patterson's phrase, 'social death,' the prototype for which is the boy who becomes a *muni* bird. Song is both a complaint and a consolation dialectically tied to that ordeal, where in back of 'orphan' one hears echoes of 'orphic,' a music which turns on abandonment, absence, loss." Nathaniel Mackey, "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," *Callaloo*, no. 30 (Winter, 1987): 29.

[279] Moten posits that the deconstructionist and structuralist perspectives on the matter are illustrated by the works of Amiri Baraka and Henry Louis Gates Jr., respectively. Nevertheless, the former is praised for its capacity to poetically study the entanglement of joy and pain in Black life and for fostering a distinct interpretation of Blackness, whereas the latter has been deemed to be ensnared in the Saussurean signifier/signified language, to which African and African American literature is subsumed. In this thesis, deconstructionism will be the primary influence. Despite acknowledging *The Signifying Monkey*'s contribution to the study of African linguistic traditions and its significance in African American literature, I regard it as a minor source due to its continued use of metaphysical standards and the grammar of separation. Also in between the two tendencies is the approach advocated by Fanon (which echoes Adorno's position on jazz), who does not consider jazz and blues to be representative forms of black resistance and, as a result, incapable of contributing to a genuine anti-racist revolution. In this respect, Moten writes: "What are the implications of a social life that, on the one hand, is not what it is and, on the other hand, is irreducible to what it is used for? This discordant echo of one of Theodor Adorno's most infamous assertions about jazz implies that black social life reconstitutes the music that is its phonographic distillate. That music, which Miles Davis calls 'social music,' to which Adorno and Fanon gave only severe and partial hearing, is of interdicted black social life operating on frequencies that are disavowed—though they are also amplified—in the interplay of sociopathological and phenomenological description." Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 151.

mirror stage through Baldwin's sounding gaze and the sounds (cries, weeping, wailing, moans, and groans) of his writing. This aspect will be analyzed in the ensuing two chapters that are interspersed with the sounds of Baldwin's literature and bold vision.

And yet, *mu* is also "not only music," but also *mu*tability, *mu*teness, *my*thos, and much more, as Nathaniel Mackey writes in the preface to *Splay Anthem*, to which Moten pays homage and quotes almost entirely in *The Universal Machine*.[280] *Mu* is "the imagination [that] produces exsense in the hold," that excess and exit at the same time of sense, space, and time performed in the Crossing.[281] *Mu* is *mu*ltiplicity, which not only refers to being more than one and many but also to a disturbance in vision, a blurring that provokes opacity. Once again, it is through, but also beyond, Glissant that opacity is *augmented* by Moten. In *Poetics of Relation*, the Martinican poet claims a "right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity."[282] Moten celebrates opacity not only as the right to not be understood (more than misunderstood), but as the right to "see through" the distortion and blurring offered

[280] "'Mu' […] is also lingual and imaginal effect and affect, myth and mouth in the Greek form *muthos* that Jane Harrison, as Charles Olson was fond of noting, calls 'a re- utterance or pre- utterance, […] a focus of emotion," surmising the first *muthos* to have been "simply the interjectional utterance mu.' 'Mu' is also lingual and erotic allure, mouth and muse, mouth not only noun but verb and muse likewise, lingual and imaginal process, prod and process. It promises verbal and romantic enhancement, graduation to an altered state, momentary thrall translated into myth. Proffered from time immemorial, poetry's perennial boon, it thrives on quixotic persistence, the increment or enablement language affords, promise and impossibility rolled into one (*Anuncia*/ *Nunca*). 'Mu' carries a theme of utopic reverie, a theme of lost ground and elegiac allure recalling the Atlantis-like continent Mu, thought by some during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to have existed long ago in the Pacific. The places named in the song of the Andoumboulou, set foot on by the deceased while alive but lost or taken away by death, could be called 'Mu.' Any longingly imagined, mourned or remembered place, time, state, or condition can be called 'Mu.' […] Provisional, ongoing, the serial poem moves forward and backward both, repeatedly 'back / at / some beginning,' repeatedly circling or cycling back, doing so with such adamance as to call forward and back into question and suggest an eccentric step to the side—as though, driven to distraction by short-circuiting options, it can only be itself beside itself. So it is that 'Mu' is also Song of the Andoumboulou, and Song of the Andoumboulou also 'Mu.' H.D.'s crazed geese, circling above the spot that was once Atlantis or the Hesperides or the Islands of the Blest, come to mind, as do John Coltrane's wheeling, spiraling runs as if around or in pursuit of some lost or last note, lost or last amenity: a tangential, verging movement out (outlantish). The ring shout comes to mind, as do the rings of Saturn, the planet adopted by Sun Ra, one of whose albums, Atlantis, opens with a piece called 'Mu.'" Nathaniel Mackey, quoted in Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 202–03.

[281] Harney and Moten do not explain the term "exsense," which can be only imagined as a sense without explanation, both excessive and outside/beyond sense: "As Frank B. Wilderson III teaches us, the improvisational imperative is, therefore, 'to stay in the hold of the ship, despite my fantasies of flight.' But this is to say that there are fights of fantasy in the hold of the ship. The ordinary fugue and fugitive run of the language lab, black phonography's brutally experimental venue. Paraontological totality is in the making. Present and unmade in presence, blackness is an instrument in the making. *Quasi una fantasia* in its paralegal swerve, its mad-worked braid, the imagination produces nothing but exsense in the hold." See Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 94.

[282] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 191.

by opacity.[283] Recently, in the poetical and collaborative collection *All That Beauty*, Moten pays tribute to Baldwin's art of seeing "through" the "muddy waters" of black "wet" life, which also means "looking through" and beyond oneself, toward the beauty of social life, toward the good company of what cannot be discerned transparently as one, single, and unique.[284] It is important to stress that Moten, as Glissant, does not seek to re-habilitate opacity to the level of light, to suggest the advent of a counter-enlightenment; he is rather questioning the aesthetical negative value given to what is opaque, not visible at first sight, concealed, and dark. Lastly, *mu* "also bears the semantic trace of dance" and enables us to envision the slave ship's hold through the perspective of another Caribbean voice who has long envisioned the Middle Passage as a creative space of transness, as well as a space of (dis)possession and trance. This is the voice of the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris, who is celebrated by both Moten and Mackey.[285]

Harris asserts that the trance dance can be read and written about (and danced) as a "space of recollection and expression" of what the Middle Passage has dismembered and scattered, but also as a suspended space between and beyond categorical limits, between and beyond the two shores of the Atlantic.[286] He draws a parallel with the West-Indian limbo dance that he dramatizes as an expression of his art and writing, "a limbo gateway between Africa and the Caribbean."[287] Most importantly, he points out that limbo is said to have originated in the hold of the slave ship, in the lack of space and excess of intimacy, and, as in the trance dance, its scope is one of remembrance and reassembly of loss into art.[288] *blackness* recollects this art and makes of limbo, and suspension, its own preferred state. As will be noted in chapter 4, Baldwin uses the expression "limbo" several times to

[283] Moten, *Black and Blur*, 13.
[284] Fred Moten, *All That Beauty* (Seattle: Letter Machine Edition, 2019), 8–9.
[285] Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 750.
[286] Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (London: New Beacon Books Ltd, 1967), 50–54.
[287] Wilson Harris, "History, Fable, and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas," *Caribbean Quarterly* 54, no.1/2 (March-June 2008): 5–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2008.11672333
[288] "The limbo dance is a well known feature in the Carnival life of the West Indies today […] The limbo dancer moves under a bar which is gradually lowered until a mere slit of space, it seems, remains through which with spread-eagled limbs he passes like a spider. Limbo was born, it is said, on the slave ships of the Middle Passage. There was so little space that the slaves contorted themselves into human spiders. […] [T]he limbo dance becomes the human gateway which dislocates […] a uniform chain of miles across the Atlantic. […]. The limbo dance therefore implies, I believe, a profound art of compensation which seeks to re-play a dismemberment of tribes […] and to invoke at the same time a curious psychic re-assembly of the parts of the dead god or gods. And that re-assembly which issued from a state of cramp to articulate a new growth—and to point to the necessity for a new kind of drama, novel and poem—is a creative phenomenon of the first importance in the imagination of a people violated by economic fates." See Harris, "History, Fable, and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas," 10–12.

refer to his in-betweenness and state of being constantly in trans*, which can be interpreted as a state of (creative and spiritual) trance and possession.

This intricate weaving of complex philosophical words will aid in approaching Baldwin's words as words of love, that is, words that can change the world. The novels *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Another Country* (chapter 4) should also be read as works of absolute *blackness* and *mu*: music, multiplicity, and mysticism, as well as touch, feeling, and love. They will also provide the chance to *augment*, through trance and *outrance*, transness. To conclude this section and set the stage for the next, I would like to explain why Moten felt compelled to reconsider *blackness* in apposition to Fanon, Afropessimism, and Caribbean literature, among other influences.[289] In light of the philosophical and linguistic reinterpretations he has provided over the past two decades, I highlight at least three reasons. I believe that Baldwin and the characters in some of his works, which will be contrapuntally read in chapters 3 and 4, may also share them.

The first refers to the need to disentangle Blackness and black from the dominant ontology, which attributes whiteness to the domain of Being (the one who rules) and Blackness to the quality of those whose identity is equated to black pigmentation, and who are denied existing as human beings and objectified as such. The second need entails the appositional effort to differentiate *blackness*, as a movement that can interest all human beings, from those human beings who identify themselves as blacks. The third one requires questioning the very nature of ontology and advancing *blackness* as a (pre-)existing force not invested in the ethical terms determined by a certain ontology—one that upholds anti-blackness and racism and reiterates a way of knowing the world based on political categories of separation, oneness, and individuality. *blackness* is rather preoccupied with the death of politics, which has determined in the history of Western metaphysics the exclusion of Black sociality from the sense of humanity. In a word, it is preoccupied with sociality and its beauty, love, and transness.

These reasons also reflect, in my opinion, the critical trajectory that motivates Moten to believe in the sociality of *blackness* and create, as the poet that he is, a new way to read, translate, and *augment* the word, which is also and always the world. In the ensuing section, I will endeavor to further translate Moten's evocative study of *blackness* by drawing upon Ferreira da Silva's proposal for a Black Feminist Po-Ethics. This work is informed not only by Moten's work but also by the insights of several Black feminist

[289] It is important to note that this thesis will not delve into the examination of other influences, such as Japanese philosophy and quantum physics.

scholars, including Hortense Spillers and Audre Lorde, as well as transnational feminism and trans* theory. I will examine the "matter"—meant as both the materiality and maternality of the flesh and its significance—of *blackness*, as well as its capacity to construct a concrete world and the means of taking responsibility for it. This will explicitly serve for the analysis of Baldwin's love ethics in chapter 4, which I will reread as a poethics of love.

2.3 The Inseparable Matter of *blackness*: Denise Ferreira da Silva's Black Feminist Poethics

No-thing is a thing as much as anything is every-thing.
What is the thing then?
A thing is but this incomprehensible incompleteness.[290]
Denise Ferreira da Silva

Would Blackness emancipated from science and history wonder about another praxis and wander in the World, with the ethical mandate of opening up other ways of knowing and doing?[291]
Denise Ferreira da Silva

The work of the Brazilian philosopher, sociologist, and visual artist Denise Ferreira da Silva is the second theoretical and methodological source for the redefined concept of *blackness*, which, as this thesis demonstrates, is central to Baldwin's main prophecy: "*blackness* next time." Similar to Moten's, her analysis of *blackness* is grounded in the Black radical tradition, yet with a specific emphasis on its feminist reevaluation and an engagement with both historical and scientific knowledge. The closeness between her scrutiny of *blackness* and Moten's is evident. Furthermore, they share a close bond of friendship. They engaged in numerous joint encounters and lectures, and most recently, Ferreira da Silva composed the "Foreword" for the latest collaborative publication by Harney and Moten, entitled *All Incomplete*. In it, she expresses gratitude to the authors and friends, for their generosity and their effort to enhance the sociality of *blackness*, which is "not based on the individual," nor on completeness, but on the "power of the matter" and its incompleteness and incomprehensibility.[292] She thus introduces *blackness* as a matter, a substance, as opposed to a problematic issue, whose study should not be limited to the social sciences but should also encompass scientific knowledge. Henceforth, the

[290] Ferreira da Silva, "Foreword," *All Incomplete*, 6.
[291] Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 81.
[292] Ferreira da Silva, "Foreword," 9 and 6.

complexities of interdisciplinarity and intersectionality extend beyond the realm of humanities.

Before delving into the matter of *blackness*, as was done for the previous section, I will divide this section into three parts that trace Ferreira da Silva's journey toward her Po-ethics of *blackness* and explain how this can be crucial to Baldwin's prophecy of *blackness*. The initial focus of this analysis will be on the critical examination of the manner in which race and racial identity have impacted the experiences of individuals of African descent, as well as the concept of *blackness* itself. Additionally, this inquiry will explore the relationship between these issues and the (post-)Enlightenment Subject, which Ferreira da Silva refers to as the transparent I. It is worth noting that, despite the efforts of poststructuralism, this Subject has yet to be fully eradicated. This segment will primarily reference Ferreira da Silva's seminal work, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (2017), and the article "Notes for a Critique of the 'Metaphysics of Race'" (2011).[293]

The subsequent part will entail an examination of the proposal for *blackness* posited by Ferreira da Silva in her essay titled "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Towards the End of the World" (2014), which is aptly named Black Feminist Po-ethics. In it, the author builds upon Spillers's flesh theory and highlights the inadequacies of Marxism in comprehending the intricacies of slavery and the chronicles of Black social struggles.

The final part expands upon the notion of *blackness* as a material substance, whose distinct components and senses are inseparable, and whose potentialities in terms of space and time are characterized by a state of flux and virtuality. In addition, Ferreira da Silva suggests reading *blackness*' matter as the Leibnizian Plenum, an infinite composition that does not adhere to the concepts of segregation and categorization. This last segment relates to the following works: the article "On Difference Without Separability," the innovative film entitled *Serpent Rain* (2016), which was created in collaboration with Arjuna Neuman, and the article "1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ − ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value" (2018).[294]

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[293] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 8; Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Notes for a Critique of the 'Metaphysics of Race,'" *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 1 (2011): 38–148, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0263276410387625

[294] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ − ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," *e-flux Journal*, no. 79 (February 2017), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/; *Serpent Rain*, directed by Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman, (Norway, 2016), HD video, sound, 30 min.; Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability," *32nd Bienal de São Paulo – Incerteza Viva*, catalogue, ed. Jochen Volz and Júlia Rebouças (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016), 57–65,

As a result, this section aims to broaden the perception of *blackness*. In addition to being an ante-/anti- ontological force, a multiple and opaque "no-thing" accessible to every human, but which cannot be known through the modes of knowledge that perpetuate anti-blackness racism, *blackness* becomes here also a po-ethical matter, a concrete materiality whose creativity also consists of its responsibility to care for the world. This complication of *blackness* enables us to read Baldwin's profound love for the world to become a type of social energy in which the environmental and natural dimensions are not distinct from the ethical and aesthetic. It also permits the examination of the connections between transnational feminism, Black feminism, and Baldwin's works and characters in an effort to "open up other ways of knowing and doing." Due to the complexity of Ferreira da Silva's works, I will only emphasize those aspects of the excursus in the development of her Poethics that I consider contact zones with Baldwin's poetics. Indeed, it would be reductive to address the remarkable theoretical and aesthetic work she has produced over the past two decades. Moreover, the motif of *augmentation* rather than reduction has been prevalent since the beginning, and it will be maintained throughout the thesis.

Like Moten, Ferreira da Silva uses pressing questions about *blackness* and Black people as starting points for her study. These questions include: "How did whiteness come to signify the transparent I and blackness to signify otherwise?"; "Why is it that the question of 'the what' of race is no longer considered in the analysis of 'the how' of 'race'?"[295] The author's need to deal with the daily murders of yet "another young Black body, still another brown corpse, and another one," is the driving force behind these inquiries.[296] She rereads the discourse on race, which is present in both philosophical and scientific accounts, in order to reformulate *blackness* beyond it.[297] In addition, she criticizes poststructuralism's attempt to reconcile science and consider the repercussions of racism outside the Western hemisphere. Therefore, Ferreira da Silva's analysis of race embarks on reflections about Blackness as a biological category in the eighteenth century and links it to the "racial" as a "scientific construct" and "raciality" as a mode for human and social differentiation that still operates in the post-Enlightenment era.[298]

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https://mumbletheory.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/denise-da-silva-on-difference-without-separability.pdf

[295] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 8; Ferreira da Silva, "Notes for a Critique of the 'Metaphysics of Race,'" 139.

[296] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xi.

[297] She specifically focuses on a rereading of Immanuel Kant's "On the Different Races of Men" (1775) and Isaac Newton's *Principia* (1686).

[298] Ferreira da Silva uses the term *race* and *racial* to refer respectively to "a term previously [until the eighteenth century] employed to describe collectivities in terms of blood relationship," and "a scientific

Both race and raciality are supported by a philosophical onto-epistemological framework constitutive of the subject as it was conceived, first in the Enlightenment and subsequently in the post-Enlightenment, within the "transparency thesis," that has established the logic of exclusion.[299] According to this thesis, the (white) subject should be transparent, self-determined, self-aware, male, and identified with the I. By analyzing the statements of the philosophers of the transparent I (especially, Locke, Kant, and Herder), one can conclude that in order to guarantee self-consciousness or self-determination, a stage of interiority is required—one "that guides the production of human knowledge and culture," linked to the *cogito* and the mind's powerful ability to determine the world through temporality.[300]

Contrarily, a stage of exteriority "operates as the exterior ruler of affectable things" and is located in the domain of the body, which is determined by spatiality.[301] While the interior stage is secured by history, which, in turn, protects the products of human knowledge and culture, the exterior one is guarded by science, whose productions are declared universal by an exterior reason.[302] Therefore, interiority and exteriority adhere to the long-established dualistic framework of the mind and the body, the intellectual and the scientific, and reason and nature that has shaped Western thought, but that should be regarded as mutually productive rather than self-exclusive. Within this framework, a greater metaphysical and ethical significance is, thus, attributed to interiority, which has come to signify whiteness, while Blackness has come to signify "otherwise."[303]

Therefore, Ferreira da Silva's work is not limited to describing the exclusion of Black people and Blackness through racialization from the world order dictated by the transparent (white) Subject; rather, it insists on the ways to abolish the structures and theories that assign universality to whiteness alone and redesigns a new way to conceive of Blackness. Through this investigation into the transparency thesis and the implied two dimensions of interiority/exteriority, she attempts to map the "analytics of raciality" in the post-Enlightenment period and specifically from the less ontoepistemological context of

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concept" circulating in the Post-Enlightenment period. I will follow this same use. See Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 116.

[299] The transparency thesis, which according to Ferreira da Silva was productive in the post-Enlightenment period, has its fundament in Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*, and it has been central to the philosophies of the Enlightenment (Locke, Kant, Herder, and Hegel). It is based on the assumption that all knowledge is attributable to a self-conscious, self-determined subject. Transparent alludes to the fact for the subject all is intelligible, evident to its intellect. See Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xxxiv.

[300] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xxxiv.

[301] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xxxiv.

[302] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 38.

[303] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 8.

science, exteriority, and spatiality.[304] In this outer context, which excludes transparency and the rational mind, exists the affectable body that Western thought attributes to non-whites and non-Europeans. The purpose is to reveal how the racial is embedded within the apparatus of knowledge of the Subject and its spirit, not only historically and socially, but also scientifically and globally: hence, the global idea of race.[305] Her movement is thus directed not only to map the *what* of race but also to unearth the *how* of it—in the *how* she included both historical and scientific tools. In "Notes for a Critique of 'Metaphysics of Race,'" she urges the recognition of racial knowledge rather than the insistence on "wishing race away," because it is the negligence of the "*how*" of race, and its separation from its "*what*," that has fortified racism.[306] One should attempt "to dismantle the apparatus that renders it [race] such an effective, because productive, political tool" and accept that racial and cultural difference are "inscribed in the founding philosophical discourse of universal reason [being both] producers of the modern apparatus of knowledge and of the modern condition of existence."[307]

Ferreira da Silva asserts that not even poststructuralism or certain postcolonial theories, with their emphasis on decolonization and investigation into the relationship between power and discourse in the colonial enterprise, have been able to address the tangled relationship between the *what* and the *how* of race. Specifically, she emphasizes that the presumed death of the Subject, which was celebrated after Foucault's examination of the linguistic structures of Western metaphysics, never actually occurred: "the subject may be dead [...] but his ghost—the tools and the raw material used in his assemblage—remain with us."[308] If one acknowledges that the philosophical and scientific underpinnings of racism are still active and perpetrated even within ostensibly anti-racist theories, then one can view Blackness as other than a pathologic construct ascribed to Black people.

Ferreira da Silva's mapping of both raciality and the discourse on race is the preliminary base for her proposal of *blackness* as another way to know the world, or to "end the world as we know it," known as Black Feminist Po-ethics.[309] The term "poethics" indicates that *blackness* is both poetical and ethical, and thus a creative force aiming to

[304] "The analytics of raciality" is defined as: "The apparatus of knowledge manufactured by the sciences of man and society." See Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xv.
[305] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 3.
[306] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 140 (italics throughout).
[307] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 140.
[308] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xxiii.
[309] Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 84.

terminate the basic modes of thinking the world, transcending both space and time as they are imagined within modern knowledge and scientific reason, in favor of a more responsible existence. It is called Black Feminist Poethics as it draws inspiration from Black female characters who ethically strive to create a different world by rejecting the sociohistorical terms and scientific categories that uphold the white heteronormative Subject.[310]

It is crucial to emphasize that Ferreira da Silva also regards the term *blackness* as not being an inherent characteristic of individuals of African descent, nor a racial category based on skin color, despite its being rooted in the living experience of Black people. Rather, *blackness* should be taken as "a referent of another mode of existing in the world," which also goes beyond the interiority/exteriority descriptors of modern thought.[311] Like black optimism, Black Feminist Poethics is neither interested in the critique of ontology, nor the ending it wishes is an attempt to escape the world. First, as Ferreira da Silva confesses, the term critique is still "modeled after Immanuel Kant's formulation of critique, which he describes as systematic exposition and assessment of the conditions of possibility for X."[312] Second, despite the racial capitalist ruling destruction, our world still has "democratic structures that, though limited and perverse, provided at least an anchor to claims for social and global justice (from Indigenous, migrant, LGBTI*, non-white populations everywhere) and could (at times) limit total violence."[313] Instead, the end of the world primarily concerns how we reconstruct our understanding of it, particularly through history and science.

However, Ferreira da Silva's position differs from Moten's in that she focuses on different aspects of *blackness*, such as its relation to racial violence and the scientific and historical discourses. Moreover, she hopes that *blackness* redefines metaphysics itself. This hope echoes the renowned essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984) by Audre Lorde, which does not propose a metaphysical framework aimed at reversing the hierarchical structure of the system but rather advocates

[310] Ferreira da Silva finds these characters in the narrative of Octavia Butler, as well as in the writings of Spillers and Lorde.
[311] Ferreira da Silva, "1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ − ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value."
[312] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "An End to 'This' World," interview by Susanne Leeb and Kerstin Stakemeier, *Texte Zur Kunst*, April 12, 2019, www.textezurkunst.de/en/articles/interview-ferreira-da-silva
[313] Ferreira da Silva, "An End to 'This' World."

the pursuit of novel tools to dismantle the master's house.[314] This particular facet will prove pertinent when reassessing Baldwin's encounter with Lorde.

While in *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, Ferreira da Silva seeks to expose the structures of the transparent I and refute the presumed death of the subject, in "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," she attempts to correct the historical materialist view of slavery, revisits *blackness* as a thing and the theory of the flesh, and proposes other modes to think beyond the boundaries of space-time of the universal transparent reason. The final goal is the creation of a world that emancipates the category of Blackness from the ways of knowing that produce it, embraces modes of transness, and contemplates as if it were "everything which makes all matter interconnected," namely a Leibznian Plenum.[315]

Bringing to the fore the issue of slavery and the commodification of enslaved Black people is indispensable because the category of Blackness is produced by the same tools of scientific reason that separated the enslaved labor from the production of capital: "Karl Marx disavows any consideration of how enslaved labor, as producer of surplus value that is the blood-nourishing capital, participates in the accumulation of capital."[316] Slavery cannot be placed in "the prehistory of capital," because the expropriation of the total value obtained through chattel labor was and continues to be part of global capital.[317] The occlusion of the relationship between the enslaved people's capacity to produce the capital and the capital(ist) is a "violent analytical gesture" that contributes to enclosing slavery into the category of Blackness, and "arrest" its "creative potential (that which slavery has never been able to destruct)."[318]

At work here, there is a certain resonance with both Wilderson's and Moten's fantasies in the hold, and Spillers's theory of the flesh. Black Feminist Poethics urges to face slavery "as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding" and "think of the 'flesh' as a primary narrative."[319] That flesh indicated something that has existed, exists, and will exist in the history of capital, which is also the history of the transparent and determined subject. This *something* is the *thing* that failed to capture Kant's interest and that Moten perceives as

[314] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, California: Crossing Press, 2007), 110–13.
[315] Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 81 and 96.
[316] Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 83.
[317] Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 83.
[318] Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 83.
[319] Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 91.

both *blackness*' thingness and nothingness.[320] The thing survived and now guides the Black feminist poet towards her Poethics of *blackness* through her imagination. In it, she is encouraged to "un-organize, un-form, un-think the world, towards the Plenum."[321]

In her 2016–2017 writings and artistic works, Ferreira da Silva expands the concept of the world as a Plenum, releasing Blackness not only from the principle of determination but also from that of separability. In "Difference Without Separability," she revisits Kant and Newton in order to unsettle separability, on the one hand, and to reexamine the concept of matter, on the other. She elucidates that Kant's program was designed as "a system that relied primarily on the determining powers of reason and not on a divine creator," and on the two interrelated principles of separability and determinacy. I will focus on the principle of separability, which is defined as follows:

> (a) separability, that is, the view that all that can be known about the things of the world is what is gathered by the forms (space and time) of the intuition and the categories of the Understanding (quantity, quality, relation, modality)—everything else about them remains inaccessible and irrelevant to knowledge.[322]

To depart from separability Ferreira da Silva suggests "a radical shift in how we approach matter and form."[323] This implies that matter is not regarded as early natural philosophy and classical physics did:

> What will have to be relinquished for us to unleash the imagination's radical creative capacity and draw from it what is needed for the task of thinking The World otherwise? Nothing short of a radical shift in how we approach matter and form. Early Natural Philosophy (Galileo, 1564–1642 and Descartes, 1596–1650) and Classical Physics (Newton, 1643–1727) have inherited the Ancient view of matter—in the notion of body which comprehends it in abstract notions, such as solidity, extension, weight, gravity, and motion in space, in time, which are said to be present in thought.[324]

Separability and the aforementioned theory of matter have influenced the grammar of raciality, particularly through George Cuvier and Charles Darwin, who have reinforced the separation of the races as a result of evolution and the struggle for survival. The intersection of science and discourses on racial or cultural difference (as of the twentieth

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[320] For Kant, the thing was "the element in knowledge supplied by or derived from sensation, as distinct from that which is contributed a priori by the mind (the forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding)." Ferreira da Silva, "1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ − ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value."
[321] Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 86.
[322] Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability," 60.
[323] Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability," 56.
[324] Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability," 59.

century) has been prominent throughout centuries of history. Albert Einstein's and Werner Heisenberg's contributions to the field of physics, on the one hand, and the cultural anthropology of Franz Boas's students and Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, on the other, have had a profound impact on both the physical sciences and the disciplines in the twentieth century.[325] Yet, despite attempts to arrive at a model of thought that could inspire practices aimed at avoiding violence and segregation, they were unable to imagine difference without separability. Revisiting these concepts is important, because at the time Baldwin wrote his works, in the US, anthropology and sociology were still inscribed in a grammar of separability, and the politics of segregation had its foundation in the scientific notions of the racial.

As a result, Ferreira da Silva emphasizes the need for a world as a Plenum inspired by other scientific and epistemological principles that have not yet reached the level of influencing sociopolitical and ethical juridical programs. These principles might be "non-locality" and "virtuality," which conceive the existence of everything on the planet as entangled "without space-time."[326] Hence, the invitation:

> What if, instead of the Ordered World, we imaged each existant (human and more-than-human) not as separate forms relating through the mediation of forces, but rather as singular expressions of each and every other existant as well as of the entangled whole in/ as which they exist? What if, instead of looking to particle physics for models of devising more scientific or critical analysis of the social we turned to its most disturbing findings—such as nonlocality (as an epistemological principle) and virtuality (as an ontological descriptor)—as poetical descriptors, that is, as indicators of the impossibility of comprehending existence with the thinking tools that cannot but reproduce separability […]. If so, then why not conceive of human existence in the same manner? Why not assume that beyond their physical (bodily and geographic) conditions of existence, in their fundamental constitution, at the subatomic level, humans exist entangled with everything else (animate and in-animate) in the universe?[327]

To achieve an entangled world requires shifting literary and critical analysis from the primacy of visuality to other senses and considering the elemental world to be inseparable from the artistic work. Consider, for example, how hearing can operate at the same time as sight and touch. Hearing is the first sense to appear in unborn children and the last to disappear when adults die—the reverberations of *mu*, the *aurality of blackness* resound

[325] Specifically, the concept of cultural difference, which was intended to contradict racial thinking, replicates a pattern of separability by viewing the social as a whole composed of formally separate parts. Each of these parts consists of a social form as well as geographically-historically distinct entities and, as such, stands apart from the ethical concept of humanity, which is associated with the particularities of white European collectives.
[326] Ferreira da Silva, "Difference Without Separability," 65.
[327] Ferreira da Silva, "Difference Without Separability," 65.

here. In a conversation with Arjuna Neuman about their experimental film *Serpent Rain*, Ferreira da Silva reflects on the topic of sound and peri-acoustic attunement, a type of hearing resembling the one experienced by both a pregnant mother and her fetus in the womb, and she explains:

> Sound is vibration. It propagates through everything. So I can hear with my hands. This more evident haptic aspect of sound is a reminder of how vision is haptic. Our eyes refract light (electromagnetic waves) emitted by things around us, which the brain translates into images. These waves are "sensed" by the cornea and the retina, but they emit radiation that "touches" us.[328]

Serpent Rain disrupts vision through sound and the haptic and suggests another path for *blackness*, whose matter is differentiated but inseparable materiality enabling the creation of a more ethical existence—a *mater*iality as Moten would suggest, connecting it to the maternal.[329] As such, *blackness* as matter and *mater*iality, which is dependent on virtuality and non-locality, *augments* the paradigm of transness. While it aligns with the transnational feminist objective of resolving the tension between particularity and universality, it also questions the fundamental assumptions of dialectical reasoning. It surpasses the conventional tools of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis and introduces the notion of entanglement, which is not founded on the logic of oppositions or relationality, but on the "implicancy" of all entities, both human and non-human: the imagination that all existents are implicated.[330] Matter, ultimately unequivocally conjures the question that the Black Lives Matter movement should venture to ask and that Ferreira da Silva does ask, namely, "Why don't black lives matter?"[331]

Consequently, these modes of existence, which are generally circumvented by Western metaphysics and implied by the force of *blackness*, are already present in the works of art, music, literature, and imagination. I believe that Baldwin's works are noteworthy due to their focus on the *how* of racism and the development of a social existence that is experienced through the assembly of sound, vision, and touch, as well as the capacity to live life with sensuality (in the way Baldwin taught us). They also incorporate elemental life and its sacred dimension and "implicancy," as demonstrated by

[328] See Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman, "Arjuna Neuman and Denise Ferreira da Silva 'Serpent Rain,'" Int. Margarida Mendes, *Vdrome*, 2016, http://www.vdrome.org/neuman-da-silva
[329] Moten, *Stolen Life*, 11.
[330] The concept of "implicancy" refers to the matter without separation, without form and relation. It also refers to Ferreira da Silva's second experimental film with Arjuna titled *4 Waters. Deep Implicancy* (2019).
[331] Ferreira da Silva, "1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ − ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value."

many of the titles, subtitles, or incipits he employs, such as *The Fire Next Time*, "Take Me to the Water," "*For our God is a consuming fire*," among others.[332]

In the subsequent and concluding section, I will discuss *how* Baldwin's prophecies of beauty and love, which are evident in some of his works, have foreshadowed the substantial contributions of Moten and Ferreira da Silva to the imagination of *blackness*.

2.4 Baldwin, the Prophet of *blackness*

> Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety.[333]
> James Baldwin

> The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.[334]
> James Baldwin

As posited in the preceding chapter, Baldwin may be regarded as a forerunner of certain postcolonial, feminist, queer, and trans assertions. However, his use of rhetoric and poetics is rooted in a spiritual language that has yet to be adequately examined by the shift in knowledge and language that has pervaded literary criticism since the 1970s. The failure pertains primarily to the incapacity to comprehend the intricacy of *blackness*, and completely release it from the historical-scientific category and racial discourse of Blackness, which is responsible for having reinforced antiblack violence. However, as evidenced in the preceding sections, Black radicalism offers a vision and perception of *blackness* as a paraontology, a social force, and a poethics that has the potential to end the world as we know it—and Baldwin is, in my view, one of his main prophets.

This section will commence with an elucidation of the reasons why prophecy can be regarded as the favored rhetorical mode employed by Baldwin and why it can be prefigured as a mode of *blackness*, that is, as another way of knowing the world. Subsequently, I will explain how the beauty and love of *blackness*—the emanations of Baldwin's main prophecies, which will be exposed in the following chapters 3 and 4—

[332] James Baldwin, "Take Me to the Water," "No Name in the Street" (1972), *Collected Essays*, 353 and 407; Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 479.
[333] James Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation," "Nobody Knows My Name" (1961), *Collected Essays*, 209.
[334] James Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," "Nobody Knows My Name" (1961), *Collected Essays*, 221.

interact with the tenets of diasporic identity, exile, the role of intellectual intersectionality and transness engaged primarily through postcolonial feminist queer and trans studies and *augmente*d by Black radicalism.

Given that the thesis draws from the domains of translation and critical analysis, the concept of the "afterlife" will be introduced through that particular lens. As explicated in the first chapter, the process of translation encapsulates a paradoxical concept of both potentiality and impossibility, as it endeavors to communicate in different languages that which is intrinsically dissimilar and complex in the source(s) language(s). Prophecy, akin to the notion of the "afterlife," comprises the task of prediction—the divine potentiality "to tell before"—and protection, the impossibility of being completely detached from what stands in front of us, and thus, the necessity to face it and understand whether to shield from it. Indeed, the etymology of the word prophecy includes these two acceptations—*pro-* meaning for, before, in front, for, for the purpose of shielding and guarding, and *phe-theia* (φητεία) meaning a diction, telling, and speaker of God.[335] Therefore, prophecy already contains the condition of telling *before* what will be after, a sort of pre-dictability, but also what occurred earlier, what was already there, and that therefore it is part of the present's history. This predictive quality, like translatability, implies that prophecy is intended for an audience that will be present to witness the events that unfold, or who are already there, in front of it, to receive it. Prophecy brings an annunciation among those who are present and positioned to perceive it, both prior (in advance, ahead) to and in its immediate proximity (close to, in front of).

The virtuality of prophecy, in my opinion, is appositional to the way Moten and Harney interpret the word *before*, which conveys both anticipation, something ahead, in advance, and presence, something urgent, near, and in front, as a type of re-presentation of something that presents itself again.[336] If we embrace these detours of meaning, we can *augment* the figure of the prophet, as one who is not only able to see the unseen, but also the one who knows in another mode, which is already there, and urges a change for the sake of the generations to come. This mode was already there *before*, earlier, and in front of us, but was not allowed to gain recognition and power. Hence, the prophet tells it *before*, in advance.

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[335] See https//www.etymonline.com.

[336] See Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 17; in *The Universal Machine*, by quoting Santner, Moten stresses that representation in German means "to place before, in front of." See Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 28.

Baldwin was one of these prophets who carried out prophecy as a mode of *blackness*, of an absolute radical force that was/is *before*: it had already existed and needed/needs to be spoken about in front of (his) people. In the essay "The White Man's Guilt" (1965), he expresses his idea of history:

> History […] does not refer merely or even principally to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, so history is literally *present* in all that we do.[337]

Years later, in "Take Me to the Water" (the first essay of *No Name in the Street*) his vision of time is complicated by something that seems to go beyond the time/space markers:

> Well. Time passes and passes. It passes backward and it passes forward and it carries you along, and no one in the whole world knows more about time than this: it is carrying you through an element you do not understand into an element you will not remember. Yet, *something* remembers—it can even be said that something avenges: the trap of our century and the subject now before us.[338]

This sentence resonates with me as a prophetic warning against falling into the trap of the Subject, which is something that remembers and is still/already *before* us, as well as a call to maintain a commitment to what is held inside us. Unfortunately, the subject was designed to be remembered and to remember; it has existed *before*, in the past, and now stands *before* us as a promise of safety but also a vindictive trap that might thwart genuine transformation. Baldwin is a voice for the Civil Rights Movement, the prophet of *blackness*, and one of the most prominent prophets of American literature because of his appeal to the end of safety, which is also the end of the Subject and the way we know it and through it, the world.

On the day of his funeral, numerous authors paid tribute to his prophetic gift. Among them, Amiri Baraka and Toni Morrison emphasized Baldwin's unforgettable rhetoric. Baraka's eulogy, memorably voiced: "For Jimmy was God's revolutionary black mouth."[339] As Moten notices, this eulogy celebrates Baldwin's own *baraka*, a word that means "blessing," and the bliss lies not only in what that mouth was able to say but in the way it receives the vision from his "absorbing eyes."[340] In other words, the writer's bliss resides in the sound of his gaze, the excess of senses, and the more-than-one-single-being

[337] James Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt" (1965), "Other Essays," *Collected Essays*, 722–23.
[338] Baldwin, "Take Me to the Water," 365 (emphasis in the original).
[339] Amiri Baraka, *Eulogies* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996), 98.
[340] Moten, *In the Break*, 174.

of his prophecy: a form of *outrance*, in Derrida's words, to indicate both extravagance and a form of deviance.[341]

In Morrison's eulogy, those absorbing eyes become her eyes: "I have been seeing the world through your eyes for so long, I believed that clear clear view was my own."[342] This was Baldwin's gift: he offered numerous African American writers the opportunity to decolonize that "forbidden territory" of American English and experiment another language:

> You went into that forbidden territory and decolonized it, "robbed it of the jewel of its naivete," and un-gated it for black people so that in your wake we could enter it, occupy it, restructure it in order to accommodate our complicated passion—not our vanities but our intricate, difficult, demanding beauty, our tragic, insistent knowledge, our lived reality, our sleek classical imagination—all the while refusing "to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize [us]."[343]

After his death, many critics have associated Baldwin's strength and contemporary renaissance with the power of his rhetoric, which strongly relied on the interlacing of spirituality and a certain literary tradition that blends Charles Dickens with Henry James and Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his study on Baldwin, Bloom stated that "Baldwin is of the authentic lineage of Jeremiah, most inward of prophets"; however, it would be more accurate to compare Baldwin with Amos or Micah for their less individual vision, or with Jonah, who survived in the whale's belly to witness suffering and vengeance but also to be born again.[344]

The figure of Jeremiah and the rhetorical style known as *jeremiad* have long accompanied the writer. As Terrence Dean explains:

> The term *jeremiad* refers to a sermon or work that accounts for the misfortunes and misgivings of an era as just penalty for great social and moral evils. Yet, it also holds out hope for changes that will bring a greater and more desirous future. This genre derives from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who in the seventh century BCE attributed the calamities of Israel to its abandonment of the covenant with God and its return to pagan idolatry, and its religious and moral iniquities. It called on the people to repent and reform in order that God might restore them to favor and renew the ancient covenant.[345]

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[341] Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida, *Counterpath. Traveling With Jacques Derrida* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 259.
[342] Toni Morrison, "For James Baldwin: 'Jimmy you crowned us,'" *The New York Times*, December 20, 1987, http://www.speakola.com/eulogy/for-james-baldwin-by-toni-morrison-1987 (repetition of "clear" in the original).
[343] Morrison, "For James Baldwin: 'Jimmy you crowned us.'"
[344] Bloom, *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: James Baldwin—Updated Edition*, 1–2.
[345] Terrance Dean, "Fire This Time: James Baldwin, Futurity, and a Call and Response," *Black Theology* 14, no.1 (2016): 69–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2015.1131500

Baldwin's prophetic style—continues Dean—not only bemoans the afflictions he had to endure, which many other African Americans share, but also demands the reconstruction of a world for everyone, blacks, and non-blacks equally.[346] Even if Bloom recognized the religious dimension of Baldwin's prophetic stance, he considered it as secondary to the aesthetic one, as "his prophetic stance is not so much religious as aesthetic."[347] Spillers, on her side, conjures prophecy as the potential language of black people in the US, its avant-garde, and celebrates it as Baldwin's preferred mode of address:

> Baldwin, our modern-day Jeremiah, captures the brutal simultaneities and contrarieties that traverse the mid-century, when he pins his hopes on the prophetic potential of the American Negro, as "possibly the only man of color who can speak of the West with real authority, whose experience, painful as it is, also proved the vitality of the so transgressed western idea."[348]

In my view, the aesthetic and religious dimensions are also ethical and spiritual. Baldwin's prophecy is inseparable from the task he always remembered for himself and for which he *paid his ticket*: change, or "the end of safety" for every human being. As George Schuman suggests, Baldwin was able to unmask American innocence and reveal the real drama behind the creation of the "Negro problem," namely "the willful blindness" or unaware knowledge about racism and paternalism, for he drew "on the genre of biblical prophecy."[349]

The kind of prophecy Baldwin professed, moreover, was "nontheist," as it resumed the power and mortality of the flesh and requested the acceptance of what he called the "tragic" nature of life instead of aspiring to the promise of eternity.[350] And yet, for Schuman, prophecy is still a form of persuasion embedded in the political sphere, while Baldwin's attitude toward politics has always been of challenge. As Moten contends, and following the thesis that Baldwin was the prophet of *blackness* as perceived by Black radicalism, Baldwin was not "a political theorist," and was not interested in the way

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[346] "It seems accurate to observe that we remember Jeremiah, unlike Amos or Micah, for his individuation of his own suffering, rather than for his social vision, such as it was. Baldwin might prefer to have been an Amos or a Micah, forerunners of Isaiah, rather than a Jeremiah, but like Jeremiah he is vivid as a rhetorician of his own psychic anguish and perplexities, and most memorable as a visionary of a certain involuntary isolation, an election that requires a dreadful cost of confirmation."; "Like every true prophet, Baldwin passionately would prefer the fate of Jonah to that of Jeremiah, but I do not doubt that his authentic descent from Jeremiah will continue to be valid past the end of his life (and mine)." Bloom, *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: James Baldwin*, 3.
[347] Bloom, *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: James Baldwin*, 3.
[348] Spillers, "A Transatlantic Circuit," 937 [The quote she uses is from Baldwin's "Princes and Powers"].
[349] George Schuman, "Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics," *America and Beyond*, 107–18.
[350] Schuman, "Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics," 110–12.

politics is understood by Western structures of power—namely through the principles of self-determinacy, the division of the public and private spheres, and the ideal of universal rights.[351] Instead, he aimed to prove that revolutionary love can also reconstruct politics.[352] Thus, I approach Baldwin's prophecy as a mode of *blackness*, capable of indicating another sense of the human and a more entangled perception of the world, as also noted by Spillers. Still, this mode is not exclusive to Black people, despite being derived from them and their unique experiences.

According to Shulman, this is also how Moten evokes "prophecy" as constitutive of fugitive life and as the genre that enables a sort of "poetic access" to the world that "remains unheard, unnoted, unrecognized in this one."[353] Prophecy is a form of mysticism in the flesh, and its secrecy stands in its telling *before*, in front of the present, what will be but also what already was there but was not acknowledged. The secrecy of prophecy is its virtuality and multiplicity, its consent to not being one single being, not telling one single story, and not living in one temporal moment:

> By prophecy, those who inhabit racial impasse make the liminality of literal fugitivity a chosen ethos, imagining themselves as "more and less than one," in more than one world, and more than one temporal moment. Embracing "more and less than one" is generative; it "ends the world" as it prefigures another.[354]

This sense of prophecy is found in Baldwin's works, as I will analyze in the following chapters, in which I will present the prophecy of *blackness* through the emanations or secondary prophecies of beauty and love and their musical background. This background not only captures reverberations of the musical and religious traditions observed in the Black Church but also embraces that "energy" that displaces all things, known as *blackness.*

In chapter 3, serving as a background to the prophecy of beauty that emerges from the contrapuntal analysis of *The Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), we have the power of Baldwin's auditory gaze. Through it, he was able to both listen to the blues and all that jazz played in the church and care about the future of beauty (of/for

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[351] Moten, *The Universal Machine,* 88.

[352] Dr. Cornel West, who has expressed his appreciation for Baldwin's teachings on numerous occasions, also emphasized that Baldwin's ethics of love is revolutionary in that it challenges the fundamental concept of politics. Furthermore, West's intricate discourse regarding hope has been significantly affected by Baldwin's prophetic approach and Black theology. See Cornel R. West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times: Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993); and Cornel R. West, "Why James Baldwin Matters More Than Ever," interview by Christopher Lydon, *Literary Hub*, March 2, 2017, https://lithub.com/cornel-west-on-why-james-baldwin-matters-more-than-ever/

[353] Moten, quoted in Shulman, "Fred Moten's Refusals and Consents," 11.

[354] Shulman, "Fred Moten's Refusals and Consents," 11.

blacks and non-blacks). In chapter 4, Baldwin's writing is pierced by laments, groans, and moans but also cries for the birth of a new morality of love: it is the music of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, which is amplified by the dialogue with Giovanni. It is also the music of children who "want to live" and need a song of love capable of ending a certain way of experiencing the world. In this chapter, music becomes possession, trance, and a moment of transition for another cartography that can accommodate plural instances while maintaining specific struggles. Ultimately, it is the jazz of Rufus of *Another Country*, the biblical and prophetic music of *No Name in the Street*, and the sound of the "revolutionary hope" conversed about with Lorde.[355]

Each chapter offers a brief insight into the motifs that have been further developed by the hopeful perspective of Moten's black optimism and the lyrical expressions of Ferreira da Silva's Black Feminist Poethics. Chapter 3 resonates with Moten's discussion of audible music in his book *In the Break*, and Baldwin's literary opacity, which disturbs the perception and belief of a universal, transparent, and self-determined I. This context threatens the conceptions of hybrid and diasporic identities: the mirror stage, which plays a crucial role in the development of identity, is disrupted by the need to see human life as Plenum, as proposed by Ferreira da Silva. Therefore, beauty emanates from these different fragments of lived experience, which (are) not necessarily reflect(ed) (in) some ideology, nation, creed, or gender but are fantasized as an incredible entanglement of joy and pain.

In the fourth chapter, Baldwin's engagement with Black feminism leads the author to develop a new ethical framework for love, which is supported by the poethics of the physical body and its abilities to create intimacy, establish touch, and promote accountability. This poethics *augments* the principle of intersectionality by integrating the importance of *blackness* as matter and Plenum, which rejects the conventional way of relation and supports that of "implicancy." Furthermore, it complicates the discourse on transness and embraces the virtuality mentioned by Ferreira da Silva, in an attempt to draw "another country" where the music and dance with otherness are no longer part of a segregated world but recognized as different but inseparable. Finally, Baldwin's poethics acknowledges the necessity of believing in the end of politics as we know it, out of love for the children to come.

I would like to conclude this chapter with two well-known quotes by the writer which attest to his apposition to both pessimism and optimism and his belief and love for

[355] Baldwin and Lorde, "A Revolutionary Hope."

blackness as a way to end the world as we know it. The first one: "This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again."[356] The second one:

> I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life is an academic matter, so I'm forced to be an optimist. I'm forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive. But the future of the Negro in this country is precisely as bright or as dark as the future of the country.[357]

These two quotes indicate Baldwin's profound love for life, acceptance of the entanglement of joy and pain within it, and hope for more than *fire next time*. His main prophecy ultimately tells: "*blackness next time*."

[356] Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 129.
[357] James Baldwin, "The Negro and the American Promise," *PBS* (1963), http://www.pbs.org/wnet/exploring-hate/2022/04/05/full-film-the-negro-and-the-american-promise-1963/

3. Prophecy I: The Beauty of *blackness*

3.1 Black Aesth-Ethics in *The Fire Next Time*: "*What Will Happen to All That Beauty Then*?"[358]

> When I was very young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine- and urine-stained hallways, something in me wondered, *What will happen to all that beauty?* For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful. And when I sat at Elijah's table and watched the baby, the women, and the men, and we talked about God's—or Allah's—vengeance, I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, *What will happen to all that beauty then?*[359]
>
> James Baldwin

"*What will happen to all that beauty then?*"—this question is posed by James Baldwin in the concluding pages of *The Fire Next Time*, an impactful and emotionally charged essay composed for his then fourteen-year-old nephew, known as "Big James," on the commemoration of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation (1963); and in the form of two heartfelt and personal letters: "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One-Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" and "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region of My Mind."[360]

It is a testament of love, written out of love, that has left an incredible inheritance for generations of Black adolescents and adults, as well as for non-blacks who are willing to combat anti-Black racism based on an understanding of the inextricable connection between the white American dream and the Black American nightmare. In response to the enduring and pervasive image of Black bodies "beaten over the head by the whites every instant of our brief passage on this planet," over the past decade, activists, and especially those within the Black population in the US and abroad, have turned to Baldwin's essay to seek voices, words, and images able to help them unwind the terrible pain and fire whose next time seems always to be this time.[361] It occurred shortly after the killing of Trayvon Martin, and when the entire world witnessed the gruesome footage of George Floyd being

[358] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 346 (emphasis in the original).
[359] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 346.
[360] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 292.
[361] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 299. The use of the word "whites" in the thesis appropriately represents Baldwin's anti-essentialist viewpoint toward those who self-identify as whites. According to Baldwin, being white encompasses more than just the racial categorization based on skin color. It also includes the idea of conforming to an ideal of whiteness as a form of living based on Western standards. Moten and Harney, by quoting Baldwin, further contend that it includes those "who think they are white or that they ought to be." See Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 24.

assassinated. In both instances, "the *fact* of death" required words, and *The Fire Next Time* provided the best refuge to the majority of those seeking them.

In her widely acclaimed collection of poems and essays dealing with the topic of race and the formative influence of *The Fire Next Time* on myriad writers and artists—suggestively titled *The Fire This Time* (2017)—National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward explains that after Zimmerman's acquittal, she could no longer separate what was happening to her present from that future Baldwin was attempting to unveil for his nephew.[362] She thus envisioned a book that would "reckon with the fire of rage and despair and fierce, protective love currently sweeping through the streets and campuses in America."[363]

As a result, she thought to gather thinkers interested in passing on *The Fire Next Time*'s lesson of love and beauty to future generations. *The Fire This Time* allowed her and, more importantly, her young readers to hear Baldwin's voice as a "wise father, a kind, present uncle," telling them that they were "worthy of love," "worthy of something in the world," and "human beings."[364] As Baldwin put it so beautifully in his letter to his nephew: "[F]or here you were: to be loved. To be loved, baby, hard, at once, and forever, to strengthen you against the loveless world."[365] Ultimately, the idea that someone, someday, might appreciate that he (Big Jimmy) and she/they were beautiful, that their beauty mattered—indeed, the matter of *all that* [*would*] *happen to that beauty* itself—depended on how much effort blacks and whites made to release themselves from the principles that prevented them from bearing responsibility (for their own lives, for each other's) and "ending the racial nightmare."[366]

After Floyd's assassination, Baldwin's words on Black beauty have re-emerged, inexorably, bringing attention once again to the need for preserving beautiful Black lives, for making Black lives matter, and for reflecting on Black aesthetics, race, Blackness, and death. As cultural theorists and artists such as Ferreira da Silva and Moten have insisted, there is now, more than ever, the need to figure out *how* to believe in Black social life and joy—to act to make it happen—rather than fostering a narrative of grief and inescapable subjugation, or a belief that Black people are doomed to "social death," as writer and critic Frank Wilderson III and sociologist Orlando Patterson have both held. Despite the

[362] Jesmyn Ward ed., *The Fire This Time. A New Generation Speaks About Race* (New York: Scribner, 2017), 9–10.
[363] Ward, *The Fire This Time*, 12.
[364] Ward, *The Fire This Time*, 12.
[365] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 292–93.
[366] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 346–47.

appositional relationship between black optimism and Afropessimism, as discussed in the previous chapter, and the undeniable "entanglement in black life of joy and pain," Baldwin's illuminating words urge one to "advance joy, over against the condition that produces pain."[367]

On these grounds, this chapter will be an invitation to rethink Black aesthetics not so much as a realm of behavior, appearance, and judgment specific to Black people, that is, to people racialized as Black, but as a perceptive mode peculiar to *blackness*, which as black optimism holds, "must be understood in its ontological difference from black people who are, nevertheless, (under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it."[368] It is an inquiry into one (and in this thesis the first) of the most crucial emanations of Black aesthetics, namely, the beauty of *blackness*, identical to the beauty—"*all that beauty*"—of Baldwin's prophetic gaze.

To think of Black aesthetics as Black beauty in an age of catastrophe and death of many people racialized as blacks is also to recognize that aesthetics is not a branch of philosophy whose knowledge adheres to singular conditions disengaged from everyday reality. Here, the term "aesthetics" does not refer solely to a theoretical field of studies that seeks to know through the senses.[369] Similarly, it is not a subject matter intended to praise or criticize *l'art-pour-l'art*, or creative works by or involving Black people. As Ferreira da Silva and Rizvana Bradley state in their aesthetic manifesto "Four Theses on Aesthetics," the world itself (aesthetics) is an "aesthetic conceit" that is inexorably contingent and part of the vast majority of political initiatives, and as such, entails an ethical responsibility.[370]

If aesthetics, then, is the bridge by which the metaphysical and physical world interact, as it is "by way of the aesthetic that the ontological ground on which we are said to stand becomes experience,"[371] Black aesthetics indicates how *blackness* as para-ontology knows the living experience of the world in a different way. As a consequence of this shift in perspective, Black beauty, which is so central to Black aesthetics, becomes a perceptual mode, untethered from the conventional notion of beauty as universally defined by a transparent (white) Subject and bound instead to the experience as perceived by an

[367] Moten, "Fred Moten, Cultural Theorist and Poet."
[368] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 47.
[369] Aesthetics as a discipline was founded only in the eighteenth century; philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten coined the term in *Reflections on Poetry* (1735) to mean "the science of how things are known via the senses." See Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics* (New York-London: Routledge, 2005), 246.
[370] Ferreira da Silva and Bradley, "Four Theses on Aesthetics."
[371] Ferreira da Silva and Bradley, "Four Theses on Aesthetics."

opaque object able to envisage other senses. The resistance of the object (Moten) is of interest here.

Black beauty was a crucial issue within the debate about Black aesthetics during the decade of the Civil Rights Movement, as attested by the famous "Black is Beautiful" campaign, which was widely popular both right before, and in the aftermath of the publication of *The Fire Next Time*, and which—much as Pan-Africanism in the first half of the twentieth century—encouraged Black people not to despise their bodily appearance. The campaign was also a call to move beyond both the perpetuation of less-than-honorable Black narratives, such as those that iterate slavery fantasies, and the proposal of those that aim to revive a mythical (more honorable) African past of kings and queens.

However, in a recent article on Black beauty, philosopher Paul C. Taylor argues that despite the undeniable significance of the "Black is Beautiful" tenet to both the Civil Rights Movement's anti-racism and the Black Art Movement's aesthetics, the terms "aesthetics" and "black," which are commonly used as references for Black beauty, are "anachronistic" and "ambiguous."[372] They are "anachronistic" because they do not exclusively refer to the 1960s but rather a broader spatio-temporal framework dating back to the colonial enterprise (i.e., the Middle Passage). They are "ambiguous" because they require a more critical engagement with the term aesthetics, which cannot be reduced to a philosophical "interest in the norms that govern artistic production and evaluation."[373] On the other hand, they also require a revision of Enlightenment philosophy, whose racializing aesthetics—based on the association between the term Black and the adjectives ugly, bad, and wrong—remains very prevalent. Therefore, academicians interested in Black aesthetics should reevaluate it from a global and interdisciplinary perspective (i.e., scientific/historical discourses).

Taylor expands the theses outlined in his article in a subsequent volume on Black aesthetics that draws inspiration precisely from the "anachronistic" and "ambiguous" scene of eighteenth-century enslaved Africans brought from Ghana to Suriname, whose

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[372] What is "Black" and what "aesthetics" in that definition, and history? If a definition were to be given for Black aesthetics, says Taylor, this would be the "art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds." Paul C. Taylor, "Black Aesthetics," *Philosophy Compass* 5, no.1 (2010): 1. The scholar also received the 2017 monograph prize from the American Society for Aesthetics for his book *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

[373] Taylor, "Black Aesthetics," 1–3.

hair was cut with broken bottles to form stars and half-moons.[374] This rebellious act of "assembly" marked the beginning of African American culture and associated aesthetics.[375] It revealed that Black aesthetics originated in the hold of the slave ship and that the very idea of aesthetics was not confined to what is good, pleasurable, or beautiful, but extended to practices of resistance born out of pain.

As a result, any consideration of Black aesthetics should embrace, first, a longer and simultaneously temporal trajectory, and second, a broader metaphysical dimension, able to examine "the way that judgments of bodily beauty have shaped, and been shaped by, racialized practices of colonial domination."[376] It should also unearth theories that have reflected on Black features and values, such as those encoded in Kantian racializing aesthetics, which has been very influential in its assumption that moral attitude and bodily/artistic appearance must follow the rule of "common sense," exclusive of white subjects.[377] Black beauty has long suffered from aesthetic racialization, which "is not a function of racial essences, biological or otherwise, but of contingent dynamics that have linked human appearance and ancestry to distinctive social, semiotic and psychocultural locations."[378] Taylor argues that although the definition of the very term Black aesthetics has become more explicit and complete within the Black Arts Movement—thanks to figures like Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Addison Gayle—there are undoubtedly partially or entirely untold stories in its history that require a more complex reformulation.[379]

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[374] Taylor's source for the scene is an anthropological study called *The Birth of African American Culture* (1992) by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price: "They hold that distinctly African American cultures emerged quite early on, as enslaved Africans built wholly new practices and life-worlds out of the various old worlds—from different parts of Africa, as well as from Europe and the Americas—that collided in modern slave-holding societies." See Taylor, *Black is Beautiful*, 1–2.

[375] The idea of "assembly" is suggested by Stuart Hall as a practice that does not aim to unify the aesthetic object of art; it rather shows the "contradictory dispersion" of the assembled elements. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful*, 3–5.

[376] Taylor, "Black Aesthetics," 1.

[377] In his third critique, *The Critique of Judgement* (1790) Kant asserts that subjective feeling of taste can be universalized through an ideal norm called "common sense": "The judgement of taste, therefore, depends on our presupposing the existence of a common sense. […] Only under the presupposition, I repeat, of such a common sense, are we able to lay down a judgement of taste. […] [C]ommon sense is a mere ideal norm. With this as presupposition, a judgement that accords with it, as well as the delight in an object expressed in that judgement, is rightly converted into a rule for everyone. For the principle, while it is only subjective, being yet assumed as subjectively universal (a necessary idea for everyone), could, in what concerns the consensus of different judging subjects, demand universal assent like an objective principle, provided we were assured of our subsumption under it being correct." See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* [1790], trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), 238–39.

[378] Taylor, "Black Aesthetics," 3.

[379] Taylor, "Black Aesthetics," 8.

In opposition to emerging theories (such as the Black radical tradition) that challenge aesthetic norms based on the association between color and skin, the philosopher posits that in the culture of the "common sense" the term "Black" is employed as a skin color to denote individuals of African descent. However, he refrains from reducing the concept of "Black" to the essentialist implications imposed by Western aesthetic theories (i.e., those that associate "Black" with specific features and capabilities, such as dance and music, of those individuals whose skin color is Black or of African descent racialized as blacks). Similarly, Taylor also critiques the endeavors of Black aesthetic and political movements that seek to reclaim "Black" as a symbolic color and cultural marker of beauty and empowerment solely pertaining to Black people—attempts that can paradoxically reinforce stereotypes about Black culture.[380]

This double-bind recognition—of Black aesthetics and beauty caught between Western-oriented canons and Black-oriented essentialism—is at work in Baldwin's texts, in which "Black" and "beauty" defy any anchored and secure notions of identity equivalence (=be identical to). It is imperative to acknowledge the various limitations that definitions of "Blackness/Black" have suffered in both White supremacist philosophies and Black aesthetic aspirations, to examine the transformation of the color "Black" into a negative symbol representing "people who have been racially positioned as black, and […] the life-worlds that these people have constructed."[381] This acknowledgment is also required to comprehend the insightful message conveyed by Baldwin to his nephew—"You [Big Jimmy] were born where you were born and faced the future you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*."[382]

As Baldwin reckons when sitting at the table with Elijah Muhammed, the head of the movement, and formulating his question about Black beauty, the Nation of Islam's spiritual "fantasy" of a Black nation within the US is not separate from those limitations. He does not find convincing the essentialist notions that view white people as distinct malevolent entities, similar to how historically white people racialized Black people as descendants of the immoral Ham. These ideas advocate a return to "true religion" or the native land.[383] The writer transcends binary categorizations of Black and white despite his condemnation of the lies and fabrications propagated by white people (or people who

[380] This is a point made by Saidiya Hartman, as Taylor suggests, in her impressive work on how enslaved Black people were forced to dance to please and entertain their masters, so that what seems to be commonly associated with Black culture also has its colonial implications. Taylor, "Black Aesthetics," 11.
[381] Taylor, "Black Aesthetics," 11.
[382] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 293 (emphasis in the original).
[383] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 329.

identify as whites) about individuals racialized as blacks, who should not be destroyed "by believing" that they are "what the white world calls a *nigger*."[384] He does so to convey to white people that the falsehoods and constructed world they have created are detrimental to their own well-being, or as Moten would suggest, are "killing" them too, "however much more softly."[385]

Instead, Baldwin urges whites "to act," and "[t]o act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger," which for most white Americans means losing their own identity and becoming reconciled with "a history they do not understand."[386]He equally encourages both those Black people who believe in white fantasies and those tempted to "do to others what has been done to them" to be committed and to accept "them [whites] with love."[387] In the first letter, Baldwin exhorts his nephew:

> Please try to remember that what they [whites] believe, as well as cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear […]. There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love.[388]

In this sense, commitment rests outside of a white or Black deity or prophet, regardless of whether Christianity or Islam offered Black people refuge and solace from those "wine- and urine-stained hallways."[389] Similarly, Baldwin's commitment to the world is detached from a given creed, even though the church became his "gimmick" when he turned fourteen and gifted him a language to write with and about.[390] Therefore, although Islam consoled Elijah to the point that his face—the face of one who, as a child, witnessed his father's lynching—contained the beauty of redemption, for Baldwin that beauty did not derive from faith: "I felt that I knew something of his pain and his fury, and yes, even his beauty."[391] The essence of Elijah's beauty did not arise from his conviction or obligation to persuade others that Black individuals could strive for their salvation by establishing a Black nation with its own land, wealth, and authority. Instead, it laid in the fact that he, like Baldwin, had personally experienced the horrors of racial discrimination, yet

[384] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 291.
[385] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 141.
[386] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 294.
[387] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 334 and 294.
[388] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 293–94 (emphasis in the original).
[389] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 346.
[390] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 299.
[391] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 331–32.

possessed a vision for the future of Black beauty, albeit one that Baldwin found difficult to embrace.

Nonetheless, Elijah's beauty faded into those violent streets into which Baldwin plunged after meeting him, for it was precisely in those streets that Black people were looking for a "sense of their own worth," a sense no God nor Allah could bestow.[392] Indeed, Elijah was not able to offer this sense of one's own worth, because he "had nothing to lose" following the lynching of his father.[393] "*All that beauty*" could not imply the ascension of Black people to hypothetical heaven, or their confinement into a category, a case, a land, a religion, or an artistic movement. African Americans have been formed by the US and do not belong to any other nation, "not to Africa, and certainly not to Islam."[394] Likewise, Black beauty cannot be entangled within the rhetoric according to which Black music and dance, which were also used for the entertainment of white listeners, can be reclaimed as the authentic representations of the Black cultural heritage. As previously noted, Black beauty should be reconsidered in light of recent studies on *blackness* to be understood as a po-ethical mode to think about the world and aesthetics beyond "the realities of color, of nations, and of altars," and for impeding fear, inhumanity, and the delusion that one's life and freedoms can be controlled.[395]

How might world knowledge change if the concept of identity formation based on the assumption "I am because you are not" fails to hold true? Baldwin writes: "Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations."[396] "*What will happen to all that beauty*" once the pillar collapses? "*What will happen to all that beauty*" when Black people no longer accept that they must live in a world defined by white myths, yet at the same time, neither claim nor fantasize about a world defined by Black myths (i.e. a glorious African past) and revendication (the receipt of a separate tract of land as an act of reparation for the exploitation effected by slavery)—a revendication that, all things considered, has been an important step in the antiracist civil rights' cause, although not sufficient to halt anti-Black racism?

Questions are the philosophical mode *par excellence* for promoting change and disrupting the status quo, an idea strongly advocated by Baldwin to which I will return in

[392] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 330.
[393] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 330.
[394] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 333.
[395] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 330 and 333.
[396] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 294.

the third section of this chapter. Given that in the history of Western philosophy, the domain of perception, sensation, and feeling—in a single word, what the Greeks called *aisthetikos* (*αἰσθητικός*)—has been gradually marginalized and regarded as a subordinate field of inquiry, Baldwin's question about Black beauty creates a new opening for reintroducing that domain into philosophy. To begin an analysis of Black aesthetics with and beyond Baldwin's question about Black beauty, readers must revise the role of (Black) aesthetics in philosophy and incorporate what Taylor refers to as the "race-aesthetics nexus," which is the relationship between the discourse about racial formation and aesthetic practices involving perception and evaluation of beauty.[397]

That role and relation are amply addressed by *The Fire Next Time*, which, as I observe, can be considered as a work on aesthetics written by a writer who loved knowledge, like all philosophers, albeit in a form that was not ensnared by the theories of self-determination, transparency, and separability, among other philosophical outgrowths of the Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment, which have systematically undermined aesthetics and which I have analyzed through Ferreira da Silva in the previous chapter. It could not be different. In the end, "[o]ne can be, indeed one must strive to become tough and philosophical concerning death and destruction, for this is what most of mankind has been best since we have heard of man."[398] But "*most* of mankind is not *all* of mankind," and being philosophical does not always imply responsibility for each other's lives.[399]

Through Baldwin's words, we are confronted with an alternative way to be philosophical about death, one that is based on the awareness and endeavor to make life beautiful, to recognize the non-innocence of its devastators, and to make knowledge about death inseparable from knowledge about life. In a single word, the consciousness and initiative required to advance an aesthetic-ethical undertaking for future generations. Thus, *The Fire Next Time* partially follows the historical trajectory envisioned by Taylor, by subscribing to Black aesthetics' anachronistic ambiguity, and by bringing colonialism, slavery, and European aesthetics to the center of the critical debate. However, it also partially evades it, as it opens up Black aesthetics to the philosophy of ethics and futurity, as I will examine in the following sections.[400]

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[397] Taylor, *Black is Beautiful*, 21–22.
[398] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 292.
[399] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 292 (emphasis in the original).
[400] It is noteworthy that this second position—on the ethical future of Black aesthetics—is inspired by Taylor's own awareness that he might have approached Black aesthetics using, as Moten does, other philosophical approaches. See Taylor, *Black is Beautiful*, 14–15. Still, his formation prevented him from engaging with such approaches (post-structuralism, deconstructionism, and the Black radical tradition).

In fact, on the one hand, the essay draws inspiration from a slave spiritual, a poem after which the first letter is named, sung by one of the "greatest poets since Homer," that says: "*The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell of*."[401] In 1963, as the US celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of Black emancipation and the ostensible freedom accorded to Black people, Baldwin recalled this poem as a contrapuntal memento that "*all that beauty*" originated from oppressed people, who remained the object of contempt at the time and remain haunted by it today. He explicitly refers to slavery in his second letter, drawing a comparison between the Nation of Islam Muslim's substitution of the letter X for names inherited from slavery and the Christian renaming of enslaved Africans—as his surname, Baldwin, attests:

> I am, then, both visibly and legally the descendant of slaves in a white, Protestant country, and this is what it means to be an American Negro, this is who he is—a kidnapped pagan, who was sold like an animal and treated like one, who was once defined by the American Constitution as "three-fifths" of a man, and who, according to the Dred Scott decision, had no rights that a white man was bound to respect. And today, a hundred years after his technical emancipation, he remains—with the possible exception of the American Indian—the most despised creature in this country.[402]

In the present day, nearly 160 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the discourse of slavery has not completely disappeared. According to Michelle Alexander, the author of the acclaimed book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), we no longer live in a post-racial era, but rather in the age of "the New Jim Crow," and mass incarceration has replaced enslavement.[403] Ten years later, in 2020, she republished her study, acknowledging that significant changes had occurred, albeit not in the way that everyone had hoped. Barack Obama had been elected as the first Black president of the US, causing people to hope for a post-racial era, which proved to be a mirage, as in 2016 Donald Trump, a far-right nationalist and overtly racist president, was elected.

In this "astonishing decade," a nationwide resurgence of racial violence manifested as a brutal series of assassinations of young Black men at the hands of the police, which

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Using Taylor's view as a starting point, I will try to follow the shift from his more structuralist and religious philosophy to the Black radical tradition pursued by Moten and other Black radical thinkers such as Ferreira da Silva and Spillers.

[401] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 294.

[402] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 335.

[403] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2nd ed. (New York: New Press, 2020).

Alexander refers to as a "regular staple of the daily news."[404] Notwithstanding, "[a] wave of racial justice protest and activism swept across this nation, electrifying the country and much of the world."[405] Alexander acknowledges that the events that followed the initial publication of *The New Jim Crow* were, paraphrasing Baldwin's words, "more terrible and more beautiful than I could have imagined."[406] They were "more terrible" because they signaled the emergence of new forms of anti-Black racism that arose, and "more beautiful" for the courage demonstrated by protesters and movements, such as the Black Lives Matter network, all around the world.

Alexander's argument is echoed by Ward, who shares in a poignant interview about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic—not only resulting in the loss of her husband but also a disproportionately high death toll among marginalized communities such as Black, Indigenous, and impoverished individuals—that our present is both terrible and beautiful.[407] It is terrible because Black people are still witnesses of a country "that gaslit us for 400 fucking years," but it is also beautiful because, as Baldwin advocated almost sixty years ago, non-Black people are aware that they are also witnesses of a global injustice: "How revelatory that others witness our battles and stand up. They go out in the middle of a pandemic, and they march."[408] Ultimately, it is terrible as there remains a significant amount of work to tackle "the enormous punishment bureaucracy controlling people of color," yet it is also beautiful as it acknowledges the necessity of funding and implementing new initiatives within the judicial system.[409]

Nevertheless, if the only purpose of this call to revise the US juridical system is reformation, then programs of racial justice will continue to fail. Echoing Baldwin's refusal to have faith in a society whose very normative structures remain intact, Moten and Harney, along with Ferreira da Silva, aspire to abolition in the way Ruth Gilmore explained it: "Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society."[410]

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[404] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, viii–xi.
[405] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, xii.
[406] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, xii.
[407] Jesmyn Ward, "On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic," *Vanity Fair*, September 2020, http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2020/08/jesmyn-ward-on-husbands-death-and-grief-during-covid
[408] Ward, "On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic."
[409] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, xii.
[410] Spillers, quoted in Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 42.

In the following three sections, I will analyze how the beauty of *blackness* can be employed as a mode of abolition and the hope for a new society. In the second session, I will examine how Baldwin connects "*all that beauty*" to a different perception of life/death and how *The Fire Next Time*'s revolutionary aesth-ethical force advocates the abolition of the principles of self-determinacy and separability through the "sensuality" of social life. In the third section, I will extend the discussion about the entanglement of joy and pain and the significance of the double sensation of "terrible beauty"—both inspired by the Black radical tradition and especially Moten's reading of Baldwin's Black aesthetics—by contrapuntally reading *The Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work*. Finally, in the fourth section, I will continue the literary analysis of both works by delving into their pre-linguistic dimension and looking at their musicality. Following Ferreira da Silva's discussion on the Plenum, I will refer to this dimension and musicality as a Plenum stage; in it, the beauty of *blackness* emanates as a communion of all the senses and an invitation to also embrace "exsense."

3.2 Rejoicing in the "*Fact* of Death" and the "Sensuality" of Black Social Life

> Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.[411]
>
> James Baldwin

This section will begin with an image of an artwork (Figure 1) by the African American filmmaker and artist Arthur Jafa that I had the opportunity to admire in Prague in January 2019. At the time, I was rereading *The Fire Next Time* and Moten's rereading of it.[412] The work is titled *Black Flag* (2017) and consists of a hand-sewn flag made out of black cloth that provocatively revisits the thirteen-star Confederate flag, which has long been viewed as a symbol of racial discrimination in the US. Indeed, during the American Civil War between North and South (1861–1865), the Confederate flag emerged as the unofficial emblem of the South's discriminatory legacy. The Ku Klux Klan used it as a symbol of

[411] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 294.

[412] The exhibition is called *Arthur Jafa: A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions (Featuring Ming Smith, Frida Orupabo. and Missylanyus),* Rudolfinum Galerie, January 17-March 31, 2019. https://www.galerierudolfinum.cz/en/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/arthur-jafa-series-utterly-improbable-yet-extraordinary-renditions-featuring-ming-smith-frida-orupabo-missylanyus/

white supremacy to protest the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Recently, on January 6, 2021, in the hallways of the US Capitol, the same flag unexpectedly reappeared in the hands of one of the protestors belonging to the group of President Trump's supporters who attempted to infiltrate the government building to prove Joe Biden's victory over Trump in the 2020 presidential elections.

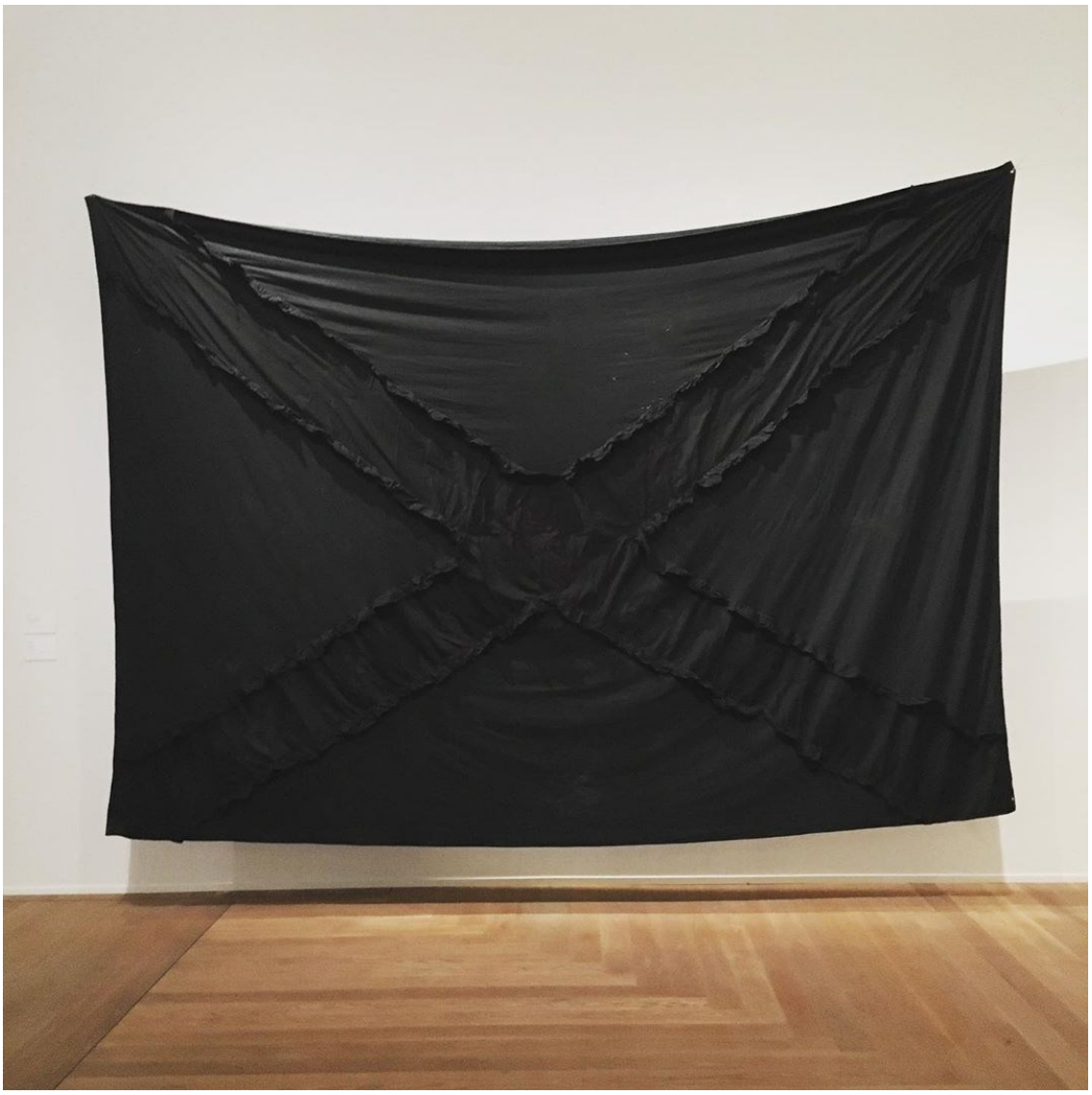

Figure 1 Arthur Jafa, *Black Flag* (2017). Installation view of Arthur Jafa's exhibition, © Galerie Rudolfinum, photo Martin Polak

Jafa's flag is controversial because of its central cross, which has a resemblance to the Confederate flag, although it has an impacting Black presence in place of white, red, and blue. The provocation destabilizes since it seems to revert a symbol associated with white supremacism to a counter-symbol representing Black Power. Yet, as art critic Max Feldman observed, as one approaches the installation, "a hideous secret code," a total-

black "cross-and-star pattern," is revealed.[413] This pattern unsettles for a while the Black Power/Confederate flag dichotomy and introduces another possibility: the flag serves as a deconstructionist symbol that is both erased and readable, or as a hieroglyphic reference to another significance. While closely observing *Black Flag*, in that space and time of proximity, I realized that, for me, "the secret code" was *augmenting* and translating itself into something else. It unveiled two concealed images and the sound of an excerpt from *The Fire Next Time*. The first image recalled the present-day US flag and its stars, as signifying that the birth of a nation was the result of the violence evoked by the Confederate flag and the resistance alluded to by the *Black Flag*. The second image surprisingly *displaced* me, as I realized that my body was standing "down at the cross," which not only referred to the title of *The Fire Next Time*'s second letter, and its incipit-hymn but also down at the cross, where Baldwin's ancestors were forced to kneel.[414] Eventually, it carried me to the crossing of Jacqui's pedagogy, her spiritual lesson, and *down the line* of Black musicality.

Indeed, the total-black star sewn onto the *Black Flag*, although almost impossible to discern at first glance, returned to my gaze as sonic images: a line from *The Fire Next Time* resounded in my head like the heavy deafening sound of the Black "fixed star," which stood in as "an immovable pillar" in the white universe described by Baldwin.[415] That star also echoed Taylor's story about a group of enslaved Africans who drew stars and half-moons in their hair as a tangible sign that resistance emerged during the Middle Passage and its oppression. These stars contained maps of another world, sociality, and knowledge; they were symbols of fugitive aesthetic stories.

Black Flag is thus a powerful aesth-ethical text(ure) that weaves together the history of the white (supremacy) American dream and the concealed history of African Americans. This is the history of an empire built upon slavery and Black "flesh" used as a commodity, as analyzed by Spillers and Ferreira da Silva and on which I will return in chapter 4. However, it also enables my imagination to confront the predominance of visual perception in the Western aesthetic canon and its inherent "danger of a single story."[416] A

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[413] Max L. Feldman, "Arthur Jafa at Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague," *Artreview*, May 9, 2019, https://www.artreview.com/ar-april-2019-review-arthur-jafa/

[414] "Down at the cross where my Saviour died,/Down where for cleansing from sin I cried,/There to my heart was the blood applied,/singing glory to His name!," Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 296 and 335.

[415] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 294.

[416] This is a reference to a speech originally delivered at TEDGlobal in July 2009 by Nigerian-American writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," *James Clear*, August 3, 2021, https:// jamesclear.com/great-speeches/the-danger-of-a-single-story-by-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie.

work of art incorporates more than one perception, such as the tactile and auditory senses, as seen in this particular example.

In this lineage of resistance, the *Dungeon-Shook* slave spiritual serves as a reminder that both those African Americans who lived in a "burning house" in the 1960s and those who are grappling with the effects of racism today are descended from people who, despite the tragedy of slavery and the incommensurable loss of lives, survived and created new languages, movements, sounds, and experiences of "beauty" through the force of social life (what Black radicals call *blackness*). Their poetic survival is an aesth-ethical—perceptive, sensual, and social—gesture that Baldwin celebrates in the following paragraph worthy of citation:

> This past, the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible—this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering […] but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are.[417]

By quoting the same passage in her preface to *The Fire This Time,* Ward assumes Baldwin's statement about the paradox of all suffering and "all joy"—what Moten refers to as the irreducible "entanglement of pain and joy"—as a way to disclose an epic of lives who are able to look at themselves with no fear, nor sentimentalism;

> […] an epic wherein black lives carry worth, wherein black boys can walk to the store and buy candy without thinking they will die, wherein black girls can have a bad day be mouthy without being physically assaulted by a police officer, where cops see twelve-year-old black boys playing with fake guns as silly kids and not homicidal maniacs, wherein black women can stop to ask for directions without being shot in the face by paranoid white homeowners.
> I burn, and I hope.[418]

To consider the entanglement of joy and pain beyond sentimentalism means that the survival of enslaved Africans and their descendants is also an act of responsibility and, therefore, an example of po-ethics, as Ferreira da Silva described it, that is, a creative attempt to have more accountable ways of living. Furthermore, it signifies reading *The Fire Next Time* as a daring examination of an expanded understanding of Black aesthetics,

[417] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 342–43.
[418] Ward, *The Fire This Time*, 13–14.

which rejects both universal judgments (the Kantian common sense) about the appearance and conduct of people who are racially marked as Black, and specific forms of revendication by African Americans (i.e., the Black-is-beautiful movement, requests for reparations, among others), which white supremacists often manipulate to reinforce essentialist judgments.

As stated in chapter 1, Baldwin is reluctant to conflate the condition and art of African American people with those of other people racialized as Black: "The American Negro is a unique creation; he has no counterpart anywhere, and no predecessors."[419] Hence, *The Fire Next Time* is not only an essential book for the understanding of discourses about race in the US—words such as acceptance and integration, or the interwoven fears and hopes of both Black and white people—but also a call to think of *all that beauty* aesth-ethically, which means a) as a *perceptive* knowledge of our responsibility to life and death, and b) as the sensuality of/for social and inseparable lives.

Regarding the first point, the ethics surrounding Black aesthetics include the endeavor to eradicate violence inflicted against Black individuals and to counteract the normalization of Black mortality within society. The social death of Black bodies, which precedes the actual death, has become a crystallized narrative. However, its *perception* should not reinforce the idea, supported by Afropessimists, that not even a refoundation of the way society is built, or any solidarity movement, could evade the existence of such a narrative and reality. Instead, as Moten and Ferreira da Silva hold, the responsibility we owe to life should encourage us to undo the very structures that facilitate and justify the premature death of individuals racialized as blacks.[420] This effort requires a different *perception* of life and death and, as Baldwin contends, it would also, and ultimately, free the white American society from its own terror.

Indeed, as emerges in *The Fire Next Time*, the encouragement to overcome the social and actual death of Black people implies that one has to "rejoice in the fact of death" and acknowledge the "reality" that life is tragic, and that for this reason we cannot sacrifice the beauty of our lives in categorical judgments or discriminatory and separatist ideals:

> Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty

[419] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 334.
[420] For a more detailed discussion about "the premature Black death," see Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression* (New York: Plenum Press, 1985).

> of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the *fact* of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible to life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us.[421]

This is the aesth-ethical beauty of Baldwin's words. This is "*all that beauty*." The beauty resides in the endeavor to negotiate the passage of life "as nobly as possible," which requires us to accept death as a "fact," rather than as a consequence of the belief in, and responsibility for, social common sense encoded in discursive formations and symbolic elements, such as "race" and "flags."

As a provocative response to Baldwin's words, the image of Jafa's *Black Flag* reappears here, inviting readers to disengage from the reaffirmation of Black as a "beautiful color," which remains ingrained in the logic of powerful fear, and thus impossible to love.[422] In this case, the flag, more than representing a reversal of the Confederate flag, sparks a debate about the presumption that Black is a color to be feared. If Black "has *become* a beautiful color" because it is "feared," as Baldwin writes, or it has absorbed (and been absorbed by) the white grammar of power, and its forms of separations (i.e., nations, totems, taboos, races, flags, and religions), then Black beauty with ethical responsibility to life and death would be unattainable.[423]

Black beauty is not merely a change of standpoint, because there cannot be a standpoint in the perpetration of the dialectics of violence; it is rather the absence of standpoint, a "blown standpoint" (Moten), and of the normative structures that uphold it, as it demands concern to "oppose any attempt that Negroes may make to do others what has been done to them."[424] It is an expression of a vital force manifested primarily through art and philosophy, which prompts inquiry into scientific and philosophical theories of race that sought a reason, a "sense" or a standpoint to believe that there is a sense to Black death. Black beauty is the desire to dismantle the universality of this sense.

I would suggest that here at work there is once again a translation movement, an invitation to think of language and words differently—an invitation offered by Balwin's emphasis on the word "*fact*." On the one hand, death is here devoid of "sense," it pertains

[421] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 339.
[422] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 331.
[423] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 331.
[424] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 94; Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 334.

more to the realm of that "exsense" fabulated by Harney and Mote, as discussed in the previous chapter. It is beyond, an excess of sense, and at the same time, it urges to exit (ex-) the philosophical standards (self-determinacy, transparency, and separability) of the notion of Being and essence. On the other hand, death is a "*fact*," to be understood not only as something that happens in the lived experience of human life but also in the way Moten discusses the difference between "fact" and "lived experience" in his "A Case of Blackness," when commenting on Fanon's chapter on "The Fact of Blackness" (which a literary translation would have as "The Lived Experience of Blackness"). What if one reads the passage of death as the passage from "fact" and "lived experience" as a "case," that is as a bridge between Black and *blackness*, which is also the passage between Being and beings? How can Black death move from being a "fact," that is a "lived experience" of people racialized as blacks to being a "case" for thinking that life, which is the common thing human beings share, entails rejoicing in the "*fact* of death"?

I can figure out that this can only happen if one moves from the realm of Being and embraces *blackness*, radical *blackness*, as also the consent (to oneself, to ourselves) to "believe in death," which means to believe in our finitude, non-eternity, and unavoidable incompleteness.[425] To believe in death, as Baldwin contends, means abdicating what cannot be constant, "safety, for example, or money, or power."[426] For the writer, the destruction of a system based on these inconstant values can be brought only by Black people, who have suffered precisely to preserve those things which should be constant: "birth, struggle, and death are constant, and […] love."[427] This mode of existence, suggested by the lived experience of people racialized as blacks, is not meant to romanticize death nor to indicate that Black aesthetics should solely protest against the debasement of "*all that beauty*"; conversely, it should read Baldwin's exhortation to "rejoice in the *fact* of death" as a call to reconsider the entanglement of joy and pain, and how it has been excluded from the aesthetic domain that deals with Black literature and art.

Consequently, to comprehend the significance of the entanglement of joy and pain in Black aesthetics and its neglect in the larger philosophical discourse, one must also acknowledge that enduring strategies and canons in our institutions, education, and politics have had a substantial impact on how we perceive death and life and are responsible for

[425] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 339.
[426] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 339.
[427] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 339.

them. Freedom—the one powerfully evocated and exemplified by Baldwin's statement: "We [blacks] cannot be free until they [whites] are free"—exposes (and strongly condemns) the combination of biopolitical strategies with aesthetic canons (i.e., what must live as good and beautiful and what must die as bad and ugly).[428] Racism has been a highly-formulated colonial enterprise, both in aesthetic terms and biopolitical ones. As Foucault argued in his lectures on racism, this is "a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die."[429]

Nonetheless, for Ferreira da Silva, as observed in the previous chapter, this aesthetic-biopolitical "arsenal" of race cannot be explained if we refuse to accept the fact that the Subject and its onto-epistemology, as well as its "tools and raw material," are still alive with us as a "ghost."[430] The "tools and raw material" referred to in this statement are those derived from both philosophy and science in Western epistemology. Or otherwise stated, racism as a biopolitical discourse should be framed within a wider discussion drawing from both science and philosophy (aesthetics), which would allow investigating the "how of race": how an analysis of science and history would allow the disassembling of the architectures of racial power/knowledge at work in the global present."[431]At the root of the inquiry about the how of race is the challenge to promote practices and modalities able to conjugate a more complex vision of racism—one not marginalized to colonialism or to Black people, but involving a "global idea of race"—with a new vision about Blackness (which is *blackness*).

Baldwin would refer to this challenge as "change," which is proper of freedom and necessitates education and the will to renew oneself: "It is the responsibility of free men […] to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change. I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths—change in the sense of renewal."[432] It also demands "risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving. And, after all, one can give freedom only by setting someone free."[433]

Therefore, *The Fire Next Time* is not a celebration of Black aesthetics, if the words "Black" and "aesthetics" are uniquely referred to as the project of emancipating Blackness

[428] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 295.
[429] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 254.
[430] Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xxiii.
[431] Ferreira da Silva, "Notes for a Critique of the 'Metaphysics of Race,'" 146.
[432] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 339.
[433] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 336.

from negative ontological assumptions (degraded physical and moral features) held together under the granitic determination of color. Black is not (only) a color, and beauty is not (only) an aesthetic category, as Blackness is not (only) a Foucauldian discursive construction invented by white people or an ideology of racial self-respect and pride claimed by Black people. They are an aesth-ethical endeavor, both pertaining to what would be a life free of judgment and our lives no longer imprisoned in the world as it has been made knowable by Western philosophy—above all through theories of politics and religious morals (reinforced by scientific tools)—but collected in the joy of accountability.

The project of freedom from racial aestheticization and the persistent perception of blacks as non-human beings should seek to tackle the principle of separability. This principle, as explained by Ferreira da Silva, is founded on the scientific presumption that political and social existence excludes everything that is not discernible through the categories of quality, quantity, relationship, and modality. The notion of color and the discourse surrounding race adhere to the principle of separability, which entails the division of people into distinct groups based on skin color. These groups are chosen to be categorically different (for quality, quantity, relationship, and modality), and thus to oppose one another across space and time.

As Baldwin remarks "America than in all other Western nations, has been best placed to prove the uselessness and obsolescence of the concept of color."[434] During the period in which he was penning this statement, W.E.B. Du Bois's 1903 prognostic declaration that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" struck a chord with many. However, Baldwin maintained that the problem's reality could be altered by conceding that "[c]olor is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality."[435]

In a time when the BLM's network and the discourse surrounding *blackness*, as advocated by the new strands of the Black radical tradition, have further emphasized the need to reevaluate the color line's reality and the very nature of politics, this statement is more pertinent than ever. This is because part of the political agenda that ruled and continues to rule society in the US is built upon the same principles that contributed to the formation of the color line (i.e., separability that manifests as mass incarceration, fewer welfare conditions for Black people, for example), and, by extension, upon "[t]he

[434] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 340.
[435] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 345.

glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another—or others."[436] As long as an individual maintains a restrictive perception of reality based on the color line, violence will have "no limit" and "murder," and delusion will be the only consequence—"the value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion."[437]

Regarding the second point—Black beauty imagined as social "sensuality" of/for inseparable lives—it stems from the multisensoriality of feeling and the acceptance, once again, that we are all incomplete, as also Harney and Moten suggest. Our lives are inseparable, the one from the other. Baldwin underlines the importance of understanding sensuality in its etymological implication, which refers to the enabling of the simultaneous presence of all senses:

> [T]he word "sensual" is not intended to bring to mind quivering dusky maidens or priapic black studs. I am referring to something much simpler and much less fanciful. To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.[438]

The simple, biblical act of breaking the bread is regarded as a synthesis of senses—taste, sight, touch—and as a perceptive means of understanding, sharing, and socially sensing life. Still, it is a multisensory mode that harnesses the imaginative capacity rather than being limited to what the senses perceive to be apparent and therefore understandable. A mode that seeks to reject the principle of separability once more, which is thus jeopardized by the irregular and disruptive force of *blackness* social life. Rather than aiming at individuation or the ethical pursuit of personal excellence, *blackness*' affect(ion)—its power to change lives—strives toward socializing all that "rest," which Kant described as "unclear and confused" and "inferior to what is produced by the formal tools of the Understanding."[439] This makes *blackness* sensual.

To release social life from the principle of separability and embrace "difference without separability" means "to rethink sociality without the abstract fixities produced by the Understanding and the partial and total violence they authorize—against humanity's cultural (non-white/non-European) and physical (more-than-human) 'Others.'"[440] Some scientific theories, such as the theory of relativity and its application in quantum physics,

[436] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 334.
[437] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 334 and 346.
[438] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 311 (emphasis in the original).
[439] Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability."
[440] Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability."

have had a significant impact on the rejection of exclusive knowledge and the acceptance of difference. However, these theories have failed to consider the power involved in envisioning "difference without separability."[441] What if "difference" is not only regarded as good (ethical) and beautiful (aesthetic) but also without the principle of separability? What if knowledge of ethics and aesthetics is imagined by (but also with and through) inseparable lives?

When Baldwin was at the table with Elijah, he precisely sought to imagine the sensuality of inseparable lives and all that sociality. He was *present* in all that he was doing and watching. But most of all, he was *present* virtually, too, with the power of his imagination, the aesthetic force of his linguistic fabulations, a sort of fictional and figurative force, even in the non-fictionality of his essays. That was the moment when he imagined himself as inseparable from that baby, those women, and men at the table; when he was very young, and already knew that he was inseparable from the people standing in those "wine-and urine-stained hallways"; and finally that was when, after the meeting with Elijah, he felt inseparable from those white folks who were having fun in the "enemy territory," at night, that "hour, strangely beautiful" of "Chicago, along the lake."[442]

"*What will happen to all that beauty then*?": At the end of the second letter, "Down at the Cross"—which is also "down the line" of *blackness*, or at the crossroads, where there is no separation, nor separability—Baldwin prophetically imagines his reply:

> If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others— do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*[443]

[441] Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability."
[442] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 332.
[443] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 347 (emphasis in the original).

3.3 Black Beauty's Sonic Future: "Looking Through" *The Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work*

A terrible beauty is born.[444]
W.B. Yeats

The last sense to go is hearing. When someone is dying, they lose sight and smell and taste and touch. They even forget who they are. But in the end, they hear you.[445]
Jesmyn Ward

First of all, Jimmy Baldwin was not only a writer, an international literary figure, he was a man, spirit, voice—old and black and terrible as that first ancestor. As man, he came to us from the family, the human lives, names we can call David, Gloria, Lover, George, Samuel, Barbara, Ruth, Elizabeth, Paula […] and this extension is one intimate identification as he could so casually, in that way of his, eyes and self smiling, not much larger than that first ancestor, fragile as truth always is, big eyes popped out like righteous monitors of the soulful. The Africans say that big ol' eyes like that means someone can make things happen! And didn't he? Let us hold him in our hearts and minds. Let us make him part of our invincible black souls, the intelligence of our transcendence. Let our black hearts grow big world-absorbing eyes like his, never closed […]. For Jimmy was God's black revolutionary mouth.[446]
Amiri Baraka

"*What will happen to all that beauty*?"—Baldwin's question does not remain in a state of closure, but it flies away through other detours. It deflects toward other questions, which are there to be opened or closed. In *The Devil Finds Work*—the second text mostly examined in this chapter, read contrapuntally with *The Fire Next Time* and other non-fiction works—Baldwin reflects on the nature of a question and its ability to either open or close doors of knowledge and experience: "A question is a threat, the door which slams shut, or swings open: on another threat."[447] This section will provide an in-depth look at other threats opened and closed by Baldwin's question on Black beauty. I want to revisit this question in order to examine how it now "slams shut" on the threats of beauty and terror, now "swings open" on *blackness*' sonic future. Once again, it is *with*, but also *beyond*, Moten's extra-sensual reading of Baldwin, that this play of resonance between *The Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work* is made possible.

[444] William B. Yeats, "Easter 1926," *A Terrible Beauty is Born* (London: Penguin Classics, 2016), 56.
[445] Ward, "On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic."
[446] Baraka, *Eulogies*, 98.
[447] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 489.

Resonance, after all, is a musical technique designed to re-present, that is to both present again and change what has been presented again into something else.[448] It is a phenomenon that aligns with the coexistence of the present, future, and past. It amplifies the recollection of information through the transfer of intensities, which is vital to the transversal nature of a question. Indeed, a question occupies a space between a narrative that has been written, told, and heard once, and a narrative that is continuously rewritten, retold, and reheard, and thus should be questioned. However, it also serves to interrupt the repeated narrative, thereby causing it to cease to exist in a particular sense. Hence, sound and future will be the leading aesthetical notes of this section, in which this play of resonance between *The Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work* further *augments* and expands upon the quest(ion) of Black beauty. As a result, it will attempt to "slam shut," and "swing open" the doors of knowledge, writing, and listening to more articulated visions, to not give in to the temptation of the single-story—unrepeatable, or repeatable but unchangeable.

When invited to the Trinity Church Wall Street in New York, in 2018, as part of the annual tribute to Martin Luther King's spiritual legacy, Moten poetically and movingly reads Baldwin's excerpt on Black beauty from *The Fire Next Time*, and he *augments* and complicates it by intimately suturing it with another excerpt taken from *The Devil Finds Work*.[449] He underscores this suture through what he calls a "grammatical black hole," the adjective "*that*" within the question "*What will be of all that beauty*?": Baldwin seems to look at all *that* beauty from a position of detachment, still, he is *with* us. One year later, he expands upon the Trinity speech in his most recent collection of poems, evocatively called *All That Beauty*, in which he returns to the grammatical hole ("that") and Baldwin's sonic gaze *with* and *beyond that* beauty:

> He makes us let us look for ourselves, and through ourselves, till we're beside ourselves. […] He brings us with what he is and sees, which is us; or we're brought with them in what he's not and sees through. That embrace, the ecstatic terrain of all that beauty, is Baldwin's function. […] He is the eye through which the scene he's in is seen. […] The nearly metaphorical errancy of "that" is there to let us know he doesn't merely look at us. He looks on us, and in that burden, we are covered and unenframed.[450]

[448] I here rely on the double meaning of the prefix *re-* which stands both for reiteration and change.
[449] Fred Moten, "Going Beyond Dream: Three Epistles on Race in America," *Trinity Church Wall Street*, January 14, 2018,
http://www.trinitywallstreet.org/video/going-beyond-dream-three-epistles-race-america
[450] Moten, *All That Beauty*, 3.

Baldwin not only looks at *that beauty* but also *with* and *beyond* it, *with* and *beyond* us—through his sensitivity and sensuality. His "visionary company" is made sharable so that we can witness with him the fact that if we want to protect *all that beauty*, we must see, then, in a detached still empathically and participated way.[451] Moten calls this way of looking that condenses looking *with* and *beyond* as "looking through,"[452] and it is sustained by a play of resonances between past and present, both being pre-figurations of a possible future.[453]

Through Baldwin's eyes, we witness his simultaneous longing for Harlem and a responsibility for looking into Black history and the experiences of Black people in the US from a perspective that transcends the country. It is in exile that he finds the most po-ethical—creative and ethical—way to *look through* black people. When, after several years in Paris, he returned home in 1957, he realized that what he missed most was the opportunity to see his brothers and sisters and *look through* the way black faces appeared in Harlem streets:

> I missed Harlem Sunday mornings […]. I missed the music, I missed the style—that style possessed by no other people in this world. I missed the way the dark face closes, the way dark eyes watch, and the way, when a dark face opens, a light seems to go everywhere.[454]

This intermittent, fugitive light flies away from the scopic drive and blends into the streets, without a name (*No Name in the Street*), blurring the vision (turning out the eye/I), and anonymously goes nowhere: a pure threat to the unilateral logic of the gaze, by which all that can be seen must determine a standpoint, a terrain for common judgment, a common sense. This light challenges the very notion of identity and its formation through the mirror stage as advanced by Lacan, and the power of vision as analyzed by Foucault.

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[451] Moten, *All That Beauty*, 3.
[452] Moten, *All That Beauty*, 3.
[453] Following Derrida's argument about the overcoming of the opposition between intelligibility and sensibility, between the word theory that etymologically refers to "looking at," in an absolutely transcendental and logical sense, and phenomenon, that relates to appearance, we can understand "looking through" as a textual modality that "resist this opposition," by opening up the comprehension (intendment) of the world to hearing, which in French is connected to *entendement*, the noun form of *entendre*, to hear: "[W]e must let ourselves refer to an order that resists the opposition, one of the founding oppositions of philosophy, between the sensible and the intelligible. The order which resists this opposition, and resists it because it transports it, is announced in a movement of différance (with an a) between two differences or two letters, a différance which belongs neither to the voice nor to writing in the usual sense, and which is located, as the strange space that will keep us together here for an hour, between speech and writing, and beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us to one and the other, occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that they are two." See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3–27.
[454] Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 396.

As mentioned in chapter 1, postcolonialism has examined the role of vision in the consolidation of processes of subjectivity at length (especially in the persons of Fanon and Bhabha). Bhabha specifically demonstrates how the mirror stage assumes an ambivalent nature in the racial scenario—what he calls the "Look-a-Negro-situation."[455] As explained earlier, this refers to the scene in which white children perceive and point to Fanon and Baldwin as racialized objects. In the preface to the second edition of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Bhabha argues that the "ambivalent identification of the racist world [...] turns on the idea of Man as his alienated image, not Self and Other but the 'Otherness' of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity."[456] Therefore, Black is not the Other opposed to the Self but the Other of the Self itself. The Self is not a uniform Subject, it is already split before every encounter, whether it is an encounter with a Black or a white person. When Baldwin and Fanon are being pointed at and called "Negro/*Neger*," are also experiencing a double vision, of the Self as Other—they see themselves seeing themselves—, like Lacan's infant who sees himself reflected in the mirror for the first time.

Nonetheless, Bhabha finds the "Look-a-Negro-situation" both painful and inventive, employing a strategy of mimicry to uncover a revolutionary force within this situation that engenders alienation and otherness. Assuming Lacan defined mimicry as a method that induces "camouflage" or "becoming mottled" rather than "being uniform with the background," Bhabha views mimicry as a reconciliation of two concepts that Said, in his analysis of the colonial condition, regarded as opposite, namely "the demand for identity, stasis" and "change, difference," between synchrony and diachrony.[457] The colonizer tries to keep the latter distant, as a separate Other but at the same time, the colonized is made familiar, close, "*almost the same but not quite*."[458]

In an effort to justify their "civilizing mission," white men created white masks for Black people. However, this did not guarantee that Black skin would no longer be regarded as the Other. It is, in a sense, a contradiction in which the Black individual is simultaneously closer to and further away from the white world. Given that, no one knows

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[455] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 85.
[456] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89.
[457] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 85.
[458] Bhabha in his account of mimicry hints at the colonial situation in India, where the British authorities required native peoples to work on their behalf and thus had to teach them the English Language. These people are called "mimic men" because they learn to act as Englishmen despite the fact that they neither appear nor are generally recognized as being English. As Bhabha puts it: "to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English." However, it is evident that his theoretical sources are Lacan and Fanon. See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 85–87.

how the mask will be worn or if the camouflage will function according to the hegemonic authority's design, this individual is both recognizable and a threat to the white order. In addition, because mimicry is a fabrication, its consequences are unforeseeable. Its efficiency, like that of any invention, is determined by how effectively it can contain and regulate the slippage and doubleness caused by its fictionality: the object of sight may be both revealed and unseen, or it is rendered impossible to see. This paradoxical effect is echoed by Foucault's discussion on the relationship between sight and disciplinary power: "Traditionally, power was what was seen […]. Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility."[459]

Bhabha's rereading of Fanon and Baldwin is crucial to comprehending the complexities of vision. However, as Moten points out, fixed or one-to-one relationships of vision are displaced in Baldwin's gaze not just because the mirror stage ironically already holds the secret to its own destruction, but also because it is supplemented by sound. It is a gaze that, continues Moten,

> […] intimidates black meta/physics—almost. All in transport all the way up in here, way out from out from out there, where Harlem is nowhere, in passage, the indexical play of observer and observed, theorist and theorized, dreamer and dreamed, ebbs in topographical caress. Glistening, unheld in gazing, intricate toward gala, neither here nor there we go, down at the cross. […] Where'd he get eyes to see all that like that?[460]

The capacity to "see all that like that" or to *look through* all *that* beauty like *that*—Moten continues—is something Baldwin learned as a child, and it is intertwined with a specific experience recorded in *The Devil Finds Work*. It was a Saturday night, and he was watching *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*, featuring Bette Davis and Tracy Spencer, with his beloved white teacher Orilla Miller, whom he nicknamed Bill. It is an extended paragraph that deserves to be cited in order to grasp the relationship between the two essays:

> My father said, during the years I lived with him, that I was the ugliest boy he had ever seen […]. But it was not my father's hatred of my frog-eyes which hurt me […]. I have my mother's eyes. When my father called me ugly, he was not attacking me so much as he was attacking my mother […]. And I loved my mother. […] I thought he must have been stricken blind […] if he was unable to see that my mother was absolutely beyond any question the most beautiful woman in the world.
>
> So, here, now, was Bette Davis, on that Saturday afternoon, in close-up, over a champagne glass, pop-eyes popping. I was astounded. I had caught my

[459] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd ed., trans. Alan M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 177.
[460] Moten, *All That Beauty*, 3.

> father, not in a lie, but in an infirmity. For here, before me, after all, was a *movie star*: *white*: and if she was white and a movie star, she was *rich*: and she was *ugly*. I felt exactly the same way I felt, just before this moment, or just after, when I was in the street, playing, and I saw an old, very black, and very drunk woman stumbling up the sidewalk, and I ran upstairs to make my mother come to the window and see what I had found: *You see? You see? She is uglier than you, Mama! She is uglier than me!* Out of bewilderment, out of loyalty to my mother, probably, and also because I sensed something crawling from under a rock, but I was held, just the same, by the tense intelligence of the forehead, the disaster of the lips: and when she moved, she moved just like a nigger. Eventually, from a hospital bed, she murders someone, and Tracy takes the weight, to Sing Sing. In his arms, Davis cries and cries, and the movie ends. "What's going to happen to her now?"[461]

This entire quoted excerpt serves as an introduction to the quest(ion) of beauty in *The Fire Next Time*, even though it was written more than a decade later. As it occurs in the blurring movement of resonance, what comes *before* already incorporates something that will be after, considering that, as we have anticipated in the previous chapter in the section on prophecy, "before" here signifies both that which precedes and that which stands in front of, ahead.

On the other hand, *The Devil Finds Work augments* and gives more life to *The Fire Next Time*. "*What will happen to all that beauty*?" is not separate from "What's going to happen to her now?": what Baldwin *looked through* at Elijah Muhammad's table is connected to what he *looked through*, on the screen and his own imagination, when going to the movies. The connection, in particular, exists between Davis's "pop-eyes," his own "frog-eyes" and the eyes of Black people sitting at Elijah's table; it unfolds in the way Davis, a white rich diva of Hollywood is seen by the audience (as a symbol of beauty) and *looked through* (and *beyond*) by Baldwin as "ugly." Still, her movements, beauty, and her future in the movie narrative ("What's going to happen to her now"?) matter as the beauty and future of those kids and men and women he described in *The Fire Next Time*. The future of blacks and whites and the perception of their beauty should be a project for everybody; one that demands the revaluations of literary and cinematic texts.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Black aesthetics found the most explicit codification in the film industry, which is also where *the devil finds work*. The projection and reinforcement of white supremacist American beliefs have occurred in this space, where the domain of innocent gaze has come to symbolize aesthetics. The movies watched by Baldwin with Bill gave him a *sense* of future that was untranslatable at that moment; and yet he knew

[461] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 481–82 (emphasis in the original).

that he would translate those sublime visions—that "cinema of my mind"—into literary works of art.[462]

Through a close reading of those visions and memories and how they are recounted in *The Devil Finds Work*—and inspired by Moten's contrapuntal reading of *The Fire Next Time* and his focus on *that* as an adjectival grammatical hole—my study concentrates on the return of *that* as a pronoun this time. While for Moten the adjective *that* ("*What will be of all that beauty*?") reveals the coexistence of a close and distance vision (*looking through*), in *The Devil Finds Work* the pronoun *that* appears more than once to indicate the promise of another sight. Baldwin remembers that the vision of *20,000 Sing Sing* occurred "longer time than that before I would cry in anyone's arms; and long long long long time before I would begin to realize what I myself was doing with my enormous eyes," but most importantly, before realizing that: "I was beginning to understand *that*."[463] The writer was beginning to understand *that* all the things he knew about himself as a child—"I knew that I was poor, and knew that I was black, but did not yet know what being black really meant, what it meant, that is, in the history of my country, and in my own history"—would have turned into terrible beauty.[464]

An awareness of a terrible beauty was born in him; *that* beauty was inseparable from the terror it reflected, thereby spawning a system of vision which consisted only of white heroes:

> I understood *that*: I had seen it in the face, heard it in the voice of many a black man or woman […]. Heros, as far as I could then see, were white, and not merely because of the movies but because of the land in which I lived, of which movies were simply a reflection.[465]

Baldwin understood *that* Bette Davis's supposed ugliness was inseparable from his mother's beauty, which was also his beauty (he had his "mama's eyes"). He understood *that* Davis's ugliness had to be transcended through beautiful Black eyes. Finally, he understood *that* he was a child when he started watching movies, learning to *look through* their Black characters, with both passion and detachment, selflessness, and objectivity. A terrible beauty is what the repetition of word *that*—"I understood *that*"—is trying to quest(ion).[466]

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[462] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 483.
[463] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 482–83, and 493.
[464] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 484.
[465] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 491 (emphasis in the original).
[466] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 491–93.

The relationship between beauty and terror that Baldwin came to understand—"between the way they see us and we might come to see ourselves"—was one of complicity, meaning both complex and complicit.[467] Terror and beauty retrace the irreducible relation between pain and joy, as previously discussed. As Baraka announces in his manifesto of Black terrible beauty: "Terribleness—Our Beauty is BAD cause we bad. Bad things," but "[O]ur terribleness is our survival as beautiful beings, any where."[468] However, it is important to underline that the concept of terrible beauty is not dialectical or dichotomist. It is not based on a binary logic, but rather on the revolutionary choice to change and hope for another reality. Terribleness is a condition resulting from oppression, debasement, and objectification. At the same time, it demands resistance (the resistance of the object) and the necessity to survive in beauty.

What Baldwin could see with those *terribly beautiful* eyes—maternal eyes and a white diva's eyes—was a future inseparable not so much from vision, but sound. As advanced in Moten's *In the Break*, Baldwin's gaze is indeed a sonic gaze, whose vision of the future bears the traces of sound.[469] Moten notes that this aural gaze should not be reduced to the linguistic sound-image, referencing Derrida's analysis of Saussure's differentiation between sound-image and sound:

> It is well-known that Saussure distinguishes between the "sound-image" and the objective sound. He thus gives himself the right to "reduce," in the phenomenological sense, the sciences of acoustics and physiology at the moment that he institutes the science of language. The sound-image is the structure of the appearing sound which is anything but the sound appearing […]. The sound-image is what is heard; not the sound heard but the being-heard of the sound. Being-heard is structurally phenomenal and belongs to an order radically dissimilar to that of the real sound in the world.[470]

Conversely, Baldwin's sonic gaze presents an opportunity to direct more attention towards the whole substance of Baldwin's *mater*iality"; a "phonic materiality," which is connected to Baldwin's *mater*nal eyes (the sound of his "mama's eyes"), and that "would […] allow for a fuller experience of the ensemble of the senses as it is experienced in Baldwin's writing."[471] Baldwin's sonic gaze anticipates, thus, radical *blackness,* given that its "matter" is both *mater*ial and *mater*nal. As mentioned in the previous chapter, for Moten, "the resistance to enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness [...] is a *being*

[467] Moten, "Going Beyond Dream: Three Epistles on Race in America."
[468] Amiri Baraka, *In Our Terribleness* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970), 10.
[469] "Baldwin's Baraka, His Mirror Stage, the Sound of His Gaze" is the chapter devoted to Baldwin's visible music. See Moten, *In the Break*, 171–232.
[470] Moten, *In the Break*, 189–90.
[471] Moten, *In the Break*, 191.

maternal that is indistinguishable from a *being material*."[472] But how sound can imagine another knowledge, wor(l)d, and future?

If the image of the clairvoyant exemplifies the connection between eyes and the future, how does one connect sounds to the future? I will attempt to play an acoustic accompaniment, to listen "nearby"—as Trinh T. Minh-ha would whisper to my ears—Baldwin's sonic gaze through Moten's "ensemble."[473] This attempt will also encompass the Black artistic shift from a focus on visuality to an emphasis on aurality and, subsequently, expand to include a broader range of sensory experiences. I will conclude, then, with a further movement from the synesthetic implication which flows into inseparable lives—as Ferreira da Silva would again suggest, though this time, shedding light on different aspects of the difference without inseparability as discussed in the previous paragraph—to "exsense," the realm that both preceded and exceeds sense(s), at its outside and beyond.

"*What* will *happen to all that beauty*?"—the more I listen to this question and the more its sound breaks onto another "grammatical black hole": "will" becomes an embodiment of both future and desire. Baldwin's quest(ion) of beauty desires to see another, more beautiful, and responsible future, with all the senses. Future is what is *before*, which again is what stands backward and ahead, what was once in the past, and will be after in the future. All senses are capable of perceiving it, with the exception of Kantian common sense. However, prior to delving into the five senses, sound—which Ward poetically describes as the last sense to vanish upon death—serves as the foundation for any contemplation of Black aesthetics for at least two reasons: a) As Taylor explains, the idea that such a thing as an intrinsic Black musical rhythm has problematically animated Black aesthetics since the beginning, and it has been nurtured by critical stances such as Senghor's famous remark, "[t]his ordering force that constitutes Negro style is *rhythm*";[474] and b) Baldwin elucidates in his works that his style is the style of Black people—"a style possessed by no other people in this world"—and their musical rhythms,

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[472] Moten, *In the Break*, 15.

[473] Trinh T. Minh-ha revolutionized the concept of anthropological research by introducing the possibility of "speaking nearby," rather than "speaking of" or "about," someone or something, thereby displacing the domain of a supervising I/Eye and the object to be discussed. In the same vein, I would like to endeavor to listen "nearby" rather than listening "to." See Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other. Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 100; and Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Reassemblages* (Senegal, 1982), 30 min.

[474] Léopold Sédar Senghor, "What the Black Man Contributes (1939)," *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1939), 296.

such as blues and jazz, which are more than a means of salvation and revindication, as it is the way people came to know the world in a different way.[475]

These two reasons lead to a couple of reflections. First of all, as previously stated, Black aesthetics cannot be reduced to music or to an alleged innate African rhythm, as observed by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, this can paradoxically result in the opposite effect. When regarded as the most valuable element of one's own distinctive identity by Black people, Black art and music may become instruments of invalidation in the hands of white audiences or the source of a limiting perspective: "It is the colonialists who become the defenders of indigenous style. […] For them jazz could only be the broken, desperate yearning of an old 'Negro,' five whiskeys under his belt, bemoaning his own misfortune and the racism of the whites."[476] Senghor's glorification of music as the real Black style is such an example of creative articulation subjected to manipulation by white people and reverted into cliche against Black people.

At the same time, music continues to function as a potent *lieu of memoire* (as Pierre Nora would put it) of Black history, which simultaneously facilitates the disruption and complexity of the singular perspective on such history. It helps the *augmentation* of sight through a gaze that is sonic and multisensorial at once. As Ed Pavlić affirms in his study on Baldwin's musical style, the writer's use of blues, jazz, and spirituals in late works such us *The Devil Finds Work* attests to the necessity "of addressing another audience, another structure of knowing and being."[477] Black music definitively indicates another kind of intelligence, one not aligned uniquely with the brain, but with the "heart and guts," as once Baldwin confessed to anthropologist Margaret Mead: "I never learned anything through my mind. I learned whatever I've learned through my heart and my guts."[478]

In light of this, an additional polemic formulation by Senghor, which asserts that "rhythm acts, despotically, on what is least intellectual in us, to make us enter into the spirituality of the object," should not be completely dismissed, provided one abandons the belief in a system in which the intellect is regarded as the true and only valid faculty for knowledge of the world, unencumbered by the other organs and senses.[479] Nor can it be devalued if we examine the origin of the term "spirit," which is "breathing," and as

[475] Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 396.
[476] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 175–76.
[477] Ed Pavlić, *Who Can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 86.
[478] Baldwin and Mead, quoted in Pavlić, *Who Can Afford to Improvise?*, 85.
[479] Senghor, "What the Black Man Contributes," 296.

suggested in the previous chapter we consider its connection to the vital, biologic, and multisensorial processes of exhaling and inhaling air and creating both sound and stillness via the blood flow in our "heart and guts."

In rephrasing Senghor's perspective, it may be posited that rhythm—as an expression of music and an effect of sound arrangements—acts in the most intellectual in us, namely an ensemble of brain, lungs, heart, and guts. It could be also argued, in alignment with Moten and Harney, that Baldwin can be described as a "subversive intellectual" who engages in a "black study," a way to know the world that is both collaborative and intellectual, because there is no intellectuality without sociality, nor study if you cannot do it with other people.[480] Here, one can hear the echo of Baldwin's social sensuality. The way he *looks through* Black and white people reflects this kind of experimental speculative "study" impossible to think without "all those strangers" living in (but also *with*/*beyond*) him, and that "poetic trick […] to be within the experience and outside it at the same time."[481]

When in *The Devil Finds Work* Baldwin recounts his reaction to Orson Wells's *Macbeth* "with an all-black cast," at the Lafayette theater, as one of total astonishment, for instance, he is performing a form of "black study."[482] He emphasizes the fact that in that theater, which is not so distinct from reality, "we are recreating each other […] we are all each other's flesh and blood," rather than the fact that he was impressed by the vision of so many Black actors for the first time.[483] According to Pavlić, Baldwin's reaction to Wells's *Macbeth* delivered an important lesson: "Collective action and mutual recognitions, he'[Baldwin]d learned, were crucial to any practical 'change in the depths.'"[484]

The next section will offer an additional stage of the contrapuntal reading of *The Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work*, by looking at the mutual recognition and the collective action recorded by Baldwin's language—as well as the sound "of all that jazz" embedded in his style—and its vision about a different future.

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[480] See Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 110.
[481] James Baldwin, "Sermons and Blues" (1959), "Other Essays," *Collected Essays*, 614.
[482] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 499.
[483] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 501.
[484] Pavlić, *Who Can Afford to Improvise?*, 88.

2.4 The "Exsense" of "All [That] Jazz": Baldwin's Plenum Stage[485]

> It is only in music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story.[486]
> James Baldwin

> In all jazz, and especially the blues, there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged. White Americans seem to feel that happy songs are happy and sad songs are sad, and that, God help us, is exactly the way most white Americans sing them—sounding, in both cases, so helplessly, defenselessly fatuous that one dare not speculate on the temperature of the deep freeze from which issue their brave and sexless little voices. Only people who have been "down the line," as the song puts it, know what this music is about […]. White Americans do not understand the depths out of which such an ironic tenacity comes, but they suspect that the force is sensual, and they are terrified of sensuality, and do not any longer understand it.[487]
> James Baldwin

Black music, and "all jazz"—and "especially blues," in which Baldwin underscored "something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged"—are tangible evidence of the reciprocal action and recognition found in music. They are also tangible evidence of the fact that sound can *do*. Again, there is such an intimate connection, a particular resonance between *The Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work*, between that early writing permeated by the memory of "all [that] jazz," played in the church, and the late essay written *with* and *through* "all [that] jazz." The tie is found in the "energy" of Black English, a language that has forged itself out of the "necessity to confront life, in order, not inconceivably, to outwit death," as all the other languages.[488] Its "passion," "(to quote Toni Morrison) 'sheer intelligence'" and "incredible music" testifies the promise of a long journey of survival to be prolonged—by all the senses, this time.[489] "*Who Saw Him Die?/I, Said The Fly*"—as the title of *Devil Finds Work*'s second chapter recites, by recalling an ancient British nursery rhyme used as a macabre reminder of death—hints at the musical fugue of flight from the master's language, heard in the hold of the slave ship, sung in the plantations, and *written* by Baldwin's sonic gaze.

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[485] "All [that] jazz" is inspired by both Baldwin's quote, which appears in the incipit of this section, and Douglas Field's eloquent essay on Baldwin's religiosity and musicality. See Field, "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz."
[486] James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), *Collected Essays*, 19.
[487] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 311.
[488] James Baldwin, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" (1979), "Other Essays," *Collected Essays*, 780
[489] Baldwin, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?," 782.

Given the prohibition of spoken and written communication imposed upon enslaved Africans on the Transatlantic crossing and, subsequently in the plantation system, they resorted to using screams, sounds, and silences as a revolutionary means of expressing their thoughts and their understanding of the reality that surrounded them. In Baldwin's words:

> Black English is the creation of the black diaspora. Blacks came to the United States chained to each other, but from different tribes: Neither could speak the other's language. If two black people, at that bitter hour of the world's history, had been able to speak to each other, the institution of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did. Subsequently, the slave was given, under the eye, and the gun of his master, Congo Square, and the Bible—or in other words, and under these conditions, the slave began the formation of the black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that black English began to be formed.[490]

The language of sounds, cries, and murmurs created by enslaved Black people posed the greatest threat to dominant linguistic syntax, which was unable to explain those nonsensical utterances and, as a result, condemned them as signs of animality.[491] Congo Square, which is also the title of the first essay of *The Devil Finds Work*, was the place where the African enslaved people were permitted to gather, sing, play music, and dance. Baldwin's writing is an incredible repository of these sonic gatherings and, as Moten observes, it is "pierced with screams and songs and prayers and cries and groans, their materiality, their maternity, and that's important."[492]

Still, "all [that] jazz" non-sense, was already an "exsense," something more than multisensorial performance since it was laying down the basis for another, and more than sensual, knowledge of the future. In this section, the sound's connection to the future is conveyed through incomprehensible echoes of cries, murmurs, silences or mutism, music spoken by "the slave," the commodity: "The knowledge of the future in the present is bound up with […] the commodity who speaks"—Moten stresses.[493] This connection is also given by another interpretative, contrapuntal, and grammatical reading of Baldwin's quest(ion) of beauty—"*What* Will *Happen to All That Beauty*." In it, the word "will"

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[490] Baldwin, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?," 782.
[491] "In *Caribbean Discourse* Édouard Glissant writes: From the outset (that is from the moment Creole is forged as a medium of communication between slave and master), the spoken imposes on the slave its particular syntax. For Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound. Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse [. . .]. Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise." Moten, *In the Break*, 7.
[492] Moten, *In the Break*, 7.
[493] Moten, *In the Break*, 8.

undergoes a transformation, surrendering its function as a verb and assuming a different nature. It becomes another *thing*, a linguistic commodity, existing beyond the confines of language itself. Its desire ("will") is to break and deviate from the singular meaning of beauty and perception that Western philosophies have imposed upon language for the formation of identities.

Indeed, the power of sound is a "radically exterior aurality that disrupts and resists certain formations of identity and interpretation by challenging the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical form."[494] As a result, a way to not "reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering"—as Hartman eloquently expressed in her study on the terrible spectacle introduced by slavery, whose epitome has been Frederick Douglass's description of the beating of his Aunt Hester—is to overturn the violence inflicted on Black bodies, "the primal scene," by disallowing words to imagine it.[495] Narratives that reiterate "the hypervisibility" of such horrible scenes of subjection should be dismissed in favor of other "scenes" of resistance.

Hartman's argument is highly original and thought-provoking, albeit paradoxically it could reenact the abhorrent scene that should never be exhibited again, with the associated risk being spectacle/spectacular. Moten begins *In the Break* with the same "primal scene" and acknowledges Hartman's equation of the Black body as a violated object. However, for him, Aunt Hester's cries provide an opportunity to reconsider the object in a different way: "The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist."[496] According to Parisa Vaziri, whereas Hartman insists on the failure to represent the object's resistance through violence, "Moten suggests meditation on that phenomenal aspect of the scream which exceeds the requirement for meaning and internal coherence origin demands of its object."[497] He envisions another manner to avoid that iteration of violence, which entails a return to the radicality of sound and its capacity to see the future in a *multi/ex-sensorial* way: *with* and *through* the other senses, but also *beyond* them, by means of a fugitive and incomprehensible, and opaque sense previously alluded to and referred by him along with Harney as "exsense." This is the radicality of

[494] Moten, *In the Break*, 6.
[495] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection. Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press), 3.
[496] Moten, *In the Break*, 1.
[497] Parisa Vaziri, "Blackness and the Metaethics of the Object," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016), http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/vaziri.html#footnote-10.

Baldwin's literature that is part of Hester's inheritance—her screams are the precursors of jazz, and her "shrieks improvise both speech and writing."[498]

Baldwin knew about it, he "knew something about the way that sound works, something about the work of sound."[499] As Moten continues, this was his *baraka*, his blessing, "what is held and carried in that gaze is the eruptive content of a transfer history; the material substance of a music that is more than aural: anticipatory, premature, insistently previous, Jazz."[500] This "world-encompassing gaze is the *baraka* of which Baraka speaks and sings."[501] Considering that, it came as no surprise that Baraka's funeral eulogy for Baldwin emphasized how the author's heartfelt blessings and music resided in his "absorbing eyes" that never closed.[502] Looking at the future *with*, *through*, and *beyond* (as) Baldwin's eyes, with all the senses, implies that you amplify your hearing experience by acknowledging touch, smell, and taste: your retina is first touched by the frequency of light, which emits waves in the guise of a haptic vibration.

As Ferreira da Silva vividly explained there is an incredible entanglement of vision, hearing, and touch because the light our eyes see and refract is first of all "sensed" as a vibration of sound (felt as a touch on the retina and cornea), which "propagates through everything" haptically.[503] This light is also the light that for Baldwin "goes everywhere" and moves our imagination. In addition, the haptic vibration of vision is also perceived by the olfactory tubercle which transmits smell to the mouth. Following Ferreira da Silva's view, then, multisensoriality prompts one to look at difference without the principle of (sensual/elemental) separability, and search for a life lived as a Plenum. Consequently, it can be postulated that within Baldwin's literary oeuvre and personal experiences, there seems to be a Plenum stage rather than a mirror stage, whereby every text and event can be perceived as "an infinite composition in which each existent's singularity is contingent upon its becoming one possible expression of all the other existants, with which it is entangled beyond space and time."[504]

Baldwin's narrative is an incredible repository of wor(l)ds that form a Plenum of inseparable and virtual senses and elements. In it, one is confronted with what Moten calls

[498] Moten, *In the Break*, 21.
[499] Moten, *In the Break*, 21.
[500] Moten, *In the Break*, 21.
[501] Moten, *In the Break*, 21.
[502] Baraka, *Eulogies*, 99.
[503] Baraka, *Eulogies*, 99.
[504] Ferreira da Silva, "Difference Without Separability," 58–59.

the "black phonography," the sound of writing, and with "flavorful pictures to touch."[505] In *The Devil Finds Work* this synesthetic experience makes one's "heart and guts" imagine all things possible, most of them left without a clear explanation, beyond any common and comprehensible sense, for they are written by using the language of sermons and blues: "Psalms of David and the Book of Job, to say nothing of the arrogant and loving Isaiah, the doomed Ezekiel, and the helplessly paranoic Saint Paul."[506] This language also contains blues and gospel moaning, which—as Moten suggests—like "the shout" and "the falsetto," "explores a redemptive, unworded realm—a meta-word, if you will—where the implied critique of the momentary eclipse of the word curiously rescues, restores and renews it: new word, new world."[507] Baldwin brings the new wor(l)d to recognize the sound of his gaze and the music of his writing.

Nevertheless, this change does not affect only the realm of language. The multi/ex-tra-sensoriality found in Baldwin's narrative—a narrative born out of the energy and beauty, and love of *blackness*—also deconstructs the psychoanalytical apparatus.[508] While Moten seems to contrapuntally read Baldwin's *baraka* and Derrida's discourse on "invagination" (as an anti-castration modality to rupture and *augment* texts), I contend that what is at stake here is not only his attempt (which is shared by Derrida and Baldwin) to displace logocentric, patriarchal and visual dominant worldviews, as invagination and Baldwin's sonic gaze do.[509] In fact, an endeavor and passion exist to challenge the very concept of worldview by reverting to the maternal/material pre-linguistic stage, namely what feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva called "the semiotic *chora.*"[510] Borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus*, the term *chora—χώρα* was in ancient Greece the space outside the *polis*, described by Plato as a receptacle, an interval without form, "a kind of thing"—refers to a semiotic dimension, a "nonexpressive totality," "a rhythmic space," preceding the mirror

[505] Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 51, 94.
[506] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 485.
[507] Moten, *In the Break*, 39.
[508] Psychoanalytically speaking, Moten operates a sort of mediation between Kristeva and Derrida, and he does not engage completely with Kristeva's semiotic model, since it is still dependent on a certain psychoanalytical "ordering," as Derrida, despite his appreciation of the *chora*, initially criticized it for its "ontological" approach (as uniquely associated with maternal archaism). In addition, Moten's discussion on visible music and Baldwin, addresses the writer's novel *Just Above My Head*, while I focus on the resonances of Moten's improvisations and Baldwin's essays.
[509] Derrida's invagination reclaims a female *genre* of resistance to castration. See footnote 54 for references. For Moten, an immediate consequence of invagination is: "So that speech is broken and expanded by writing; so that hieroglyphics is affected by phonetic script; so that a photograph exerts itself on the alphabet; so that phonographic content infuses the photo." Moten, *In the Break*, 202.
[510] Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution of Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 26.

stage and the child's entry into the symbolic order (law) of (paternal) language.[511] It is a maternal and nourishing space, "a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic."[512]

According to Vaziri, although Moten's appositional engagement with Kristeva's early works is more implicit in *In the Break*—except for constant acknowledging her influence on his discussion on the materiality and maternality of sound in various footnotes—"[t]he untranslatability of experience into meaning that Moten prizes and renominates as blackness shares a tightly analogous relation to the Kristevan theory and recoding of the semiotic as maternal."[513] The materiality of sound is so intimately connected with the maternal wor(l)d before and after children's birth. For this purpose, it should be recalled Ferreira Silva's explication that sound's interconnection to vision and touch is modeled after the study of peri-acoustics,

> a type of hearing inspired by how we hear as unborn children and mother beings. In this more-than-individual state, we hear through multiplicity and mutuality, we hear through four points in space, we hear both internally and externally, and we hear our speech as both our own and not our own (alien).[514]

Peri-acoustics can be considered as a cut in the dominant grammar, something which can resemble Moten's use of the expression "in the break" and its allusion to the musical interval, that maternal and nourishing kind of thing interposed between birth and the mirror stage resembling the semiotic *chora*, whose exhortation is: "Speak and break speech like a madrig, like a matrix (material, maternal)."[515]

However, for both Baldwin and Moten, this Black semiotic or Black *chora* bears the trace (and trace is indeed what semiotic is meant to be for Kristeva) of the "auction block" and the hold of the slave ship. When Baldwin repeatedly ruptures his writing with cries, screams, moans, songs, and sermons, his black English becomes like a Black semiotic *chora* in which what he sees has the feel and sound of that virtual maternal and material space whose wor(l)ds are differentiated but inseparable, just as enslaved lives and tongues were diverse but indivisible on the auction block and inside the hold. It is in this sense that Baldwin's mirror stage becomes a Plenum stage of inseparable differentiation or the irreducible difference without separability. It has the shape of a mirror stage no longer

[511] Julia Kristeva, *The Revolution of Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 26.
[512] Kristeva, *The Revolution of Poetic Language*, 26.
[513] Vaziri, "Blackness and the Metaethics of the Object."
[514] Mendes, "Arjuna Neuman and Denise Ferreira da Silva 'Serpent Rain.'"
[515] Moten, *In the Break*, 211.

marked by castration and identity paranoia but *augment*ed by the sound's incredible ability to amplify and resonate with all senses.

The Plenum stage also reveals an extra/exterior sense unrelated to the symbolic language cultivated by scopic drives and language ordering.[516] Baldwin's *baraka* lies, then, in the fact that his gaze is not part of the tradition of the evil eye—the only kind of *baraka* Lacan contemplates in his ocularcentric theory about the role of visuality (photography) in language.[517] His blessing comes from his visible music, whose signs are not necessarily meant to mean but to celebrate Black beauty and its resistance. Broken and "in the break," thus, Baldwin's mirrors *break* the vision of Black people and any view of the so-called "Negro problem," but also the way white people have been taught to look at themselves, as this excerpt from *The Fire Next Time* elucidates:

> [A] vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man's profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of the white anguish is rooted in the white man's equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of the mirror. All of us know, whether or not we are able to admit it, that mirrors can only lie, that death by drowning is all that awaits one there.[518]

This quote strikingly resonates with parts of *The Devil Finds Work* in which Baldwin *looks through* both himself and the representation of Blacks and whites in the film industry. With the mirror stage displaced by the Plenum stage what we have is also a counter-cinematic vision, one able to dismiss all the stereotypes contained in those Hollywoodian movies, whose main goal was to perpetuate "that beauty which lives so tormentedly in the eye of the white beholder."[519] In the analysis of the movies he has watched, which is reported in *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin uses a thoroughly musical language to narrate emotions, recollections, and thoughts with the intention of teaching us about matters that depart significantly and fundamentally from what we have been taught. This is because the true revolution or change begins with the process by which we relearn the ability to perceive words.

One of these words is precisely "revolution." In the analysis of the film adaptation of *A Tale of Two Cities*, which draws inspiration from the literary masterpiece authored by one of his favorite writers, Charles Dickens, the portrayal of a formidable and intimidating

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[516] According to Lacan, the instant an infant perceives his reflection in the mirror signifies his entry into the symbolic language of the Father.
[517] Moten, *In the Break*, 211.
[518] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 341–42.
[519] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 526.

"white mob" and the constant images of death prompts contemplation regarding the racial dynamics experienced by the author, a young Black individual, as he watched the film alongside his white teacher.[520] In that moment he also wandered about who must die and who must live and "how to distinguish one head from the other."[521] It dawned on him that those images must have been connected in some way to what her teacher had intended him to understand as that "inevitable human ferment" known revolution: "*Revolution*: the word had a solemn, dreadful ring […]. Beneath the resonance of the word, *revolution*, thundered the word revenge. But: *vengeance is mine, saith the Lord*."[522]

Here, the words *revolution* and *vengeance* echo (i.e., their sound is heard another time in another text and space) *The Fire Next Time* in the passages when Baldwin exhorts readers to risk change—"change in the sense of renewal"—to prevent vengeance, as "God's—or Allah's—vengeance" that he discussed at Elijah's table. This vengeance, like the white vengeance, is undoubtedly unattainable in the face of a more profound vengeance, namely "historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance," and the only one able to reply to the question "*What will happen to all that beauty, then*?"[523] This is the vengeance of new words, new worlds.

Baldwin's new wor(l)d is also our *baraka*, our good (not evil) *fascinum*, or fascination. We become fascinated by how he is fascinated by the screen, and we fall in love with the words used to donate us that fascination: "I am fascinated by the movement on, and of, the screen, that movement which is something like the heaving and swelling of the sea (though I have not yet been to the sea): and which is also something like the light which moves on, and especially beneath, the water."[524] We are thus carried away by this sonic watery gaze—but also haptic, tasteful, and olfactory (the touches, smells, and tastes of water)—into the sea, which is another screen. But, further still, we are *held* (as if imagination takes us to the hold of the slave ship) down "beneath water," in a dark world, where things and human beings have the "right to opacity," "that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity"—as Glissant beautifully wrote in his *Poetics of Relation*.[525]

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[520] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 487. See Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* [1859] (London: Penguin Books, 2003).
[521] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 488.
[522] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 488–89 (emphasis in the original).
[523] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 339, 346.
[524] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 479.
[525] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

Baldwin knew about opacity too. He first learned about it when he was going to the movies, and later at Beauford Delaney's place, in Greenwich Village. As a mentor, the artist nurtured Baldwin's sonic gaze and strangeness—"For I was not only considered by my father to be ugly. I was considered by everyone to be 'strange,' including my poor mother, who didn't, however, beat me for it."[526] He was "strange" because no matter how "unsophisticated" he "of course" was as a child, he "understood *that*" the wor(l)d needed to be seen and looked *through*, and not *at*.[527] Opacity was what he was reclaiming as his own right. Moten celebrates Glissant's and Baldwin's opacity not only as the right to be "strange" and not be understood (more than misunderstood) but as of the right to *look through* the distortion and blurring, the cracks and black holes, that inhabit language and make all efforts to explain unattained.

As an adolescent and then a young boy, Baldwin would understand more about it. When he was sixteen years old, he knocked on the door at 181 Greene St. in the Village, NYC. Beauford opened the door and let him both inside and outside his world. He taught Baldwin how to *look through* light and darkness by walking the city and listening to blues and jazz:

> I learned about light from Beauford Delaney, the light contained in everything, in every surface, in every face. Many years ago, in poverty and uncertainty, Beauford and I would walk together through the streets of New York. […] Now, what I began to see was not, at that time, to tell the truth, his painting; that came later; what I saw, first of all, was a brown leaf on black asphalt, oil moving like mercury in the black water of the gutter, grass pushing itself through a crevice in the sidewalk. […] To stare at the leaf long enough, to try to apprehend the leaf, was to discover many colours in it; and though black had been described to me as the absence of light, it became very clear to me that if this were true, we would never have been able to see the colour; black: the light is trapped in it and struggles upward, rather like that grass pushing upward through the cement. It was humbling to be forced to realise that the light fell down from heaven, on everything, on everybody, and that the light was always changing. Paradoxically, this meant for me that memory is a traitor and that life does not contain the past tense: the sunset one saw yesterday, the leaf that burned, or the rain that fell, have not been seen unless one is prepared to see them every day.[528]

This short passage—beautifully written in a multi-extra-sensorial way—was written two years after *The Fire Next Time* and long before *The Devil Finds Work*, and yet it interrupts and *augments* the two texts so that we can begin to understand that, as Baldwin would

[526] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 483.
[527] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 481, 493 (emphasis in the original).
[528] James Baldwin, "On the Painter Beauford Delaney" (1965), "Other Essays," *Collected Essays*, 720.

write some lines after, light "comes from darkness—as I do, as, in fact, we all do."[529] There is such materiality and maternality in this scene he sees, that we cannot *see* birth and death (of a nation, whether fostered by an African myth, or by a racist movie) as before. We cannot see if we are not able to see light *through* the "brown leaf" and the "black asphalt," every day; if we cannot see light *through* the "oil moving like mercury in the black water" that is not so different from the "muddy water" of the *hold* of the slave ship where, as Moten sings, "*Black life is wet."*[530]

Within this opaque, wet, muddy, and dark life, we are invited to *look through* and *beyond* Baldwin's sonic gaze. This gaze not only often writes in an opaque and unreadable way but also turns the reader into a "strange" creature: we, readers too become unreadable. As Moten comments: "The more we read all that beauty, the more unreadable we are."[531] And the more unreadable we are, the more open we are to the knowledge of other wor(l)ds, other selves. Given that what we can and cannot see definitively informs how we know the wor(l)d and ourselves, the experience of *looking through*, again and again, recreates other senses for the self. This is shown in a moment from Baldwin's life, narrated by David Lemming and shared by Moten, where our visual observations provide us with auditory insights, or our gaze must "hear":

> "Look," he said. Jimmy's eyes had already followed Beauford [Delaney]'s anyway, but he just saw water. "Look again," Beauford said. Then he noticed the oil on the surface of the water and the way it transformed the buildings it reflected, […], it had to do with the fact that what one can and cannot see "says something about you."[532]

All this is the Black aesthetic that *finds work*. It requires a sensual drift towards the abdication of self-determination, transparency, and intelligibility. Black aesthetics' synesthetic nature, all senses except common sense, is also an "exsense." It is also that strangeness which speaks in tongues and knows other wor(l)ds, and that, for Baldwin, no Hollywood movies at the time could "translate," or *augment*; as it happened with *Lady Sings the Blues* in which the audience is not given the opportunity to *look through* Billy Holiday's *Strange Fruit*, how she "dug it right off" through her moaning/mourning.[533] The lynching scene is devoid of its "black phonography," and Holiday's lament is bereft of any light, beauty, and joy. *What will be of all that beauty then?*

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[529] Baldwin, "On the Painter Beauford Delaney," 720.
[530] Moten, *All That Beauty*, 8.
[531] Moten, *All That Beauty*, 3.
[532] Moten, *In the Break*, 171.
[533] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 483.

And here I am again, down at the cross, in front of *Black Flag* and at the end of this multi-ex-sensorial journey "never alone," in a Plenum of senses, in a suspension of common sense, and in the good company of "all [that] jazz" and blues of Baldwin's style. This style is not to be explained, as Billie Holiday once sang—"Don't Explain"[534]—but its incomprehensible *chora* of moaning, murmurs, cries, and sighs should be sensed. *Black Flag* and the contrapuntal reading of *The Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work* raises many questions about the materiality of identity, and how it is sustained through symbols and systems of beliefs. Yet, they also require the imagination of our identities nullified, possessed in dispossession, our mirrors stages broken, so that our *mater*ial spirituality (the thing which breaths, and sounds) becomes the *matter* to matter. Finally, they initiate a moment of revelation, that moment "which changes one forever," which is found *before* us, *down at the cross, down* (at) *the line*:

> One is confronted with the agony and the nakedness and the beauty of a power which has no beginning and no end, which contains you, and which you contain, and which will be using you when your bones are dust. One thus confronts a self both limited and boundless, born to die and born to live. The creature is, also, the creation which is both the self and more than the self. One is set free, then, to live among one's terrors, hour by hour and day by day, alone, and yet never alone. […] The custodian of an inheritance, which is what blacks have had to be, in Western culture, must hand the inheritance down the line. So, you, the custodian, recognize, finally, that your life does not belong to you: nothing belongs to you. Will not sound like freedom to Western ears, since the Western world pivots on the infantile, and, in action, criminal delusions of possession, and of property. But, just as *love is the only money*, as the song puts it, so this mighty responsibility is the only freedom.[535]

The prophecy of beauty which is found in the pages of *The Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work* has opened another scenario in which the words "Black," "aesthetics," and "ethics" have acquired new senses. It has demonstrated Baldwin's radical vision (*looking through*) of a future in which blacks and whites can change the world if they also accept the inevitable task of changing the words to know it. Through his musical language, we are invited to "not falter" and risk a real change, which entails the abdication of our completeness, transparency, the awareness of a multisensorial inseparability, and recognition of our irreducible entanglement—that it is also the entanglement of life and death, joy and pain, and beauty and terror. Baldwin anticipates thus *blackness*' radicality and its will to know the world as we do not know it or as we forbid to know, which is also

[534] See Pavlić, *Who Can Afford to Improvise?,* 85.
[535] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 566 (emphasis in the original).

the will of Black beauty. In the next chapter, *blackness* will translate itself into another prophecy: the prophecy of love, "*the only money*," which as the "mighty responsibility" of rejoicing in the fact of death and life, is also "the only freedom."

Chapter 4

Prophecy II: The Love of *blackness*

4.1 James Baldwin's Journey of Love[536]

> [T]he white man came to the Negro for love.[537]
> James Baldwin

This chapter will delve into Baldwin's controversial project of love, conceived as an ethical attempt to end the racial nightmare, and the world as we know it. Love, often either overlooked by Baldwin's critics or addressed in terms more of its (separate) implications for sex and gender than for race, in fact, plays a central role in the writer's *oeuvre*. Whether expressed in fiction or non-fiction, the Harlem writer's words lead to and contain a profound *philosophy* of and for love: in other words, a loving knowledge of love. Over the course of his life, Baldwin developed a complex definition of love.

In the 1960s, his predominant conception of love was advanced in *The Fire Next Time*, in which the essayist unfurls the thesis that was to mark his own psychological and socio-political quest for love, a concept not be confused with sentimentalism: "I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth."[538] Influenced by Pentecostal rhetoric, African American music, and his own readings of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Charles Dickens, Henry James, and the King James Bible, love became at once a blues melody, a work of the self (*Notes from the Underground*), a revolution (*A Tale of Two Cities*), a vehicle for gender hybridization (*Portrait of A Lady*), and a means of redemption (*King James Bible*). As a work of blues music, love stood as a song of integration between "the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others."[539]

This famous quote, as will be argued in section four, has faced criticism for its seemingly utopian nature. Hannah Arendt, for instance, described it as a "gospel of love" that cannot be realistically implemented in public and political life to address

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[536] This section (partially) and section 3 (almost identically) are inspired by my article "'Love Is the Key.'"
[537] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 345.
[538] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 341.
[539] Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 346–47.

societal hatred toward oppressed individuals.[540] Nevertheless, in Baldwin's view, the very concept of what is public and what is private poses a challenge to politics and reintroduces love as a transformative force capable of reshaping political existence. It is evident that his integrationist idea of love is influenced by personal occurrences that marked his youth: his time as a preacher in the Pentecostal Church when he was an adolescent, his decision to leave this calling and embrace a deep non-religious spirituality, and his reinterpretation of Martin Luther King Jr.'s theology of love.

We can also observe traces of these factors in *Another Country*, a literary work that, in my opinion, can be interpreted as a cartography of love that captures Baldwin's ambivalent attitudes toward the desire to be rooted and the longing for other homes, and the imagination of another world. Additionally, it foreshadows a transnational perspective that becomes more prevalent in subsequent works, including *No Name in the Street* and "Here Be Dragons," in which the author boldly deconstructs American gender conformism and masculinity and invites the prospect of androgyny, displacement, and difference without separability to his "welcome table."[541] In a sense, those traces about love as observed in *Another Country* bear prophetic signs of a new perspective on love that will be solidified in the 1970s, when significant political occurrences transformed love into a project encompassing both ethics and poetry—a po-ethics. In this decade, indeed, following the deaths of Edgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., Baldwin underwent a terrible breakdown, at which time love as he conceived it became more engaged with political life, and more closely associated with the Black Power and (partly) feminist agendas. No longer was it to be the integrationist love of *The Fire Next Time*, but, rather, the love shared within the Black community by Black men and women, and finally, a love rooted in the living experience of Black people that would give rise to a new understanding of Blackness. Finally, in the 1980s, love became a "revolutionary hope" for future generations, as the conversation with Audre Lorde—"A Revolutionary Hope"—and the racial-sexual intersection was redesigned as a transitional connection, which brought forth the paradigm of transness as a possible mode of existence.[542]

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[540] Hannah Arendt, "The Meaning of Love in Politics. A Letter by Hannah Arendt to James Baldwin (November 21, 1962)," *Journal for Political Thinking* 2, no. 1 (September 2006), http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/95/156

[541] Baldwin's unpublished play, *The Welcome Table*, is inspired by the author's large table in his final abode in Saint-Paul de Vence, which served as a symbol of hospitality due to the gathering of numerous influential individuals around it.

[542] Baldwin and Lorde, "A Revolutionary Hope."

To unravel Baldwin's complex journey of and through love is not an easy task, as the way is often marked with contradictions and revisions. Within this critical knot, however, it is my view that Baldwin's ethics of love was shaped by two main factors. The first one refers to the author's novel place within African American literary culture, with specific reference to his aversion to any alignment with the so-called *protest literature*, and his preference for two themes his literary fellows had scarcely touched—namely, the critique of American Black and white Christian Churches and the evaluation of interracial hetero- and homo-sexuality at home and abroad. Associated with the second factor are Baldwin's encounters, in the 1970s and 1980s, with Black Power, second-wave white feminist and African American feminist movements (though, this last encounter, in a veiled and conflicting way), which shaped his later works. Though a discussion of both factors may seem rather ambitious, I feel it is nevertheless necessary to understand Baldwin's transition from a love ethic informed by Pentecostalism, music, and the daily confrontation with racial hatred in Harlem to a love project more dedicated to intersectional feminist agendas. Baldwin eventually arrives at a poethics of love, which envisions another way to know the world and to experience it politically. This perspective may be seen as a kind of transness or trans*love.

These three tendencies within the excursus on Baldwin's prophecy of love that have been briefly outlined—integrationist and religious love, intersectional love, and poethic/trans* love—are addressed in the following sections, through contrapuntal readings of early and later works. I will concentrate on the years 1962 to 1985, excluding from my analysis the phase influenced by Pentecostalism and the final phase except for the conversation with Lorde. These tendencies demonstrate that the writer's journey is complex, as some early works already contain elements that become more evident in later works. For example, *Another Country*, written between 1948–1961, already explores the theme of love as transness. Moreover, these three inclinations demonstrate that love, likewise beauty, predicts the emergence of *blackness*, as promoted by Black radicalism. Love is the entanglement of joy and pain, difference without separability, sensuality, and consent to not being one single being.

In the second section, I will reread *Another Country* through the lens of the trans* paradigm and with few contrapuntal detours in the review of *No Name in the Street* and "Here Be Dragons," and "Open Letter to the Born Again." The novel is presented as a narrative that expands into themes of racial violence, interracial and queer love, androgyny, which can be read as a sort of cartography of transness. It

portrays the transition between life and death, the transfer of love across racial boundaries, the liminal state of trance that blurs homoerotic and heterosexual relationships, and the sense of belonging to a home juxtaposed with journeys of exile. Ultimately, it encourages the study of transnationality from a feminist and spiritual perspective rather than a political one, even when confronting daring geopolitical themes like those prophetically and boldly tackled by Baldwin, such as the Palestine question.

The third section will look in detail at Baldwin's "conversion" to spiritual politics after King Jr.'s death (1968), through the contrapuntal reading of *If Beale Street Could Talk* and a conversation the writer had with the Black feminist icon Nikki Giovanni. This encounter additionally initiated a dialogue between Baldwin's love ethics and those of Black feminists, anticipating Ferreira da Silva's Black Feminist Poethics, for certain aspects, and informing a new American grammar, as advised by Spillers.

The fourth section will investigate the political dimension of Baldwin's love poethics and its pedagogical preoccupation, which I believe is the core of the prophecy of love. This investigation seeks to examine the complex interplay between prophecy and infancy, using an appositional approach that draws from Fanon's study of colonial and racist violence during childhood, as well as Baldwin's observations of racial segregation among school children in the US. This analysis will be *augmented* via the conversation between Baldwin and Lorde on the one hand, and Arendt's response to both *The Fire Next Time* and the above-mentioned observations about school segregation among children. The examination will conclude with Moten's reevaluation, influenced by Fanon, of Baldwin's radical humanism, leading to one last inquiry: Can love be considered political when seen through the lenses of prophecy or humanism? In light of my contention that Baldwin's conception of love is poethic—while simultaneously challenging the public/private nature of politics—the conclusive reply will demonstrate how Baldwin's concept of love can be described as both preceding politics (ante-politics) and in some ways opposing politics (anti-politics). It is a combination of creation and responsibility, private and public, as well as religious and spiritual. It is a po-ethical intervention into the world and a form of *blackness*.

4.2 Trans*Cartographies for *Another Country*: From Harlem to Bethlehem in Love

Baldwin commenced working on *Another Country* in Greenwich Village in 1948.[543] He then continued the project in Corsica in 1956; and finalized it in 1959–1961, in France, Switzerland, and Turkey, when he was awarded a two-year Ford Foundation grant to complete it. The Dial Press subsequently published it in June 1962. However, it was the decade 1946–1956 that provided most of the inspiration for the narrative. Indeed, the writer was profoundly affected by the suicide of his friend Eugene Worth—whom some biographers believed to be his companion—which took place in the winter of 1946 by jumping from George Washington Bridge. This tragic event became the key scene that the whole novel revolves around. *Another Country* employs the suicide of jazz percussionist Rufus Scott as its starting point to depict a variety of romantic, sexual, and social relationships among a consistent ensemble of characters who are related to Rufus in both direct and indirect ways. These relations reveal one of the most significant complications in the sentimental education of Americans, namely loneliness or the incapacity to embrace love. As Baldwin confessed to Studs:

> I am trying to excavate, if I can use that word, something about what is really happening in America, according to me and from my very limited point of view, my limited vision, which is hardly ever expressed and it's really a book about the nature of the American loneliness […] and how dangerous that is. How hard it is here for people to establish any real communion with each other and the chances they have to take in order to do it.[544]

Loneliness is also caused by the continual sense of confusion and incoherence noted by Baldwin in American life and reflected in the plethora of characters who desperately search for love in *Another Country*. According to Ernesto Javier Martínez, *Another Country* "is a particularly difficult novel to read."[545] The difficulty resides in its attempt to reconcile with a kind of incoherence articulated by Baldwin as an eerie sensation that arises when one is terrified to the point of death to face something undesired.[546]

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[543] About the datum of the initial writing of *Another Country* see Ernesto Javier Martínez, "Dying to Know: Identity and Self-Knowledge in Baldwin's 'Another Country,'" *Modern Language Association* 124, no. 3 (May 2009): 787.

[544] James Baldwin, "James Baldwin Discusses His Book 'Another Country' and His Travels Through Africa | the WFMT Studs Terkel Radio Archive," interview by Studs Terkel, *The WFMT Studs Terkel Radio Archive*, September 29, 1962, https://studsterkel.wfmt.com/programs/james-baldwin-discusses-his-book-another-country-and-his-travels-through-africa.

[545] Martínez, "Dying to Know: Identity and Self-Knowledge in Baldwin's 'Another Country,'" 782.

[546] Here, Martínez quotes Baldwin's "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel": "[Because I am an American writer my subject and my material has to be a handful of incoherent people in an incoherent country. And I do not mean incoherent in any light sense […]. It's a kind of incoherence that occurs, let us say, when I

However, those feelings are also a pre-text to challenge epistemological standards of coherence and order, and advance new possibilities to know the self and its entanglement with (the) other(s):

> *Another Country* is preoccupied with incoherence and confusion as epistemically significant states and needs to be read as an extended meditation on the peculiar difficulty of gaining self-knowledge in oppressive social contexts. The difficulty that Baldwin explores is not just intellectual or cognitive in nature, for it refers to the difficulty of living differently, living in ways that either imply or lead to new self-knowledge.[547]

Martinez's comment resonates in my reading as a call to think and know differently for the sake of future generations, which is also the most ambitious objective of Baldwin's love project. In this section, I will try to read those feelings of incoherence and confusion as the reflection of Baldwin's attempt to experiment with a form and content that does not belong either to the protest stream, or to the queer literature, but to something we might consider as expressive of the trans* form, which as mentioned in chapter 1, gathers some postcolonial, feminist, and queer tenets about identity, racism, and gender. After discussing the queer-oriented criticism of the novel, I propose that *Another Country* could be interpreted through the lens of trans*/transness theories on account of the work's complexity and its extremely intricate, po-ethical style. In particular, three interpretive factors are suggested by the prefix trans- in my analysis. The novel displays the following instances of trans-: as trans*, that is, it is receptive to the plethora of identitarian possibilities that its multifaceted characters present; as trance, a condition of suspension and possession (between death and life, joy and pain) that exposes an alternative epistemology and confronts Western ontological norms, and thus can be read as a manifestation of *blackness*; and as transnational, since both the novel and its characters, as well as the author, exist in a tumultuous and erratic state of displacement.

Each of these three trans-modalities also mirrors the tripartite structure of *Another Country*. The initial part, "Easy Rider," contains poignant excerpts that depict the confusing and bewildering nature of love and life in New York, as well as an ongoing sense of being without a country or certainty to rely on. The second one, "Any Day One," is a spatial and temporal journey that illustrates how the freedom granted by

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am frightened, I am absolutely frightened to death, and there is something which is happening or about to happen that I don't want to face." See Martínez, "Dying to Know," 782.

[547] Martínez, "Dying to Know," 783.

that in-between state of suspension of imagination—where thoughts of the future and past converge—contrasts the limitations of physical immobility and reveals the strength of the present. Finally, "Toward Bethlehem" illustrates a potential representation of love via a cartographic lens, envisioning a situation that transcends national and gender boundaries. It suggests that every individual embodies aspects of one another and that all nations may coexist within (another) larger collective country, allegorizing love. It also offers the opportunity to peruse Baldwin's transnational view of the political events of his time.

Passages from the three sections are also read in a contrapuntal manner with other works, such as *No Name in the Street*, "Here Be Dragons," and "Open Letter to the Born Again." In addition, each of the three modalities will correlate to one or more locations. Greenwich Village and Harlem will be the most relevant for the first part. Regarding the second one, it includes the simultaneous manifestation of different geographical places and temporal dimensions via trance flights of imaginations. These places pertain to the internal spatiality associated with both one's home and exilic destination, or the locations of one's soul that inhabit the creative process. The third part of the book encompasses scattered and worldwide geography, which documents Baldwin's travels during the composition of the book (including the US, France, Corsica, Switzerland, Israel, and Turkey), as well as those of the novel's characters between Europe and the US. The outcome will consist of the conceptualization of a trans*cartography of love, serving as a manifestation of the pressing need to reform the sentimental education of humanity, and consequently, the human approach to love.

Firstly, I will explore the extent to which queer studies have interacted with *Another Country*. Subsequently, I will introduce some of the most significant characters in the novel, namely Rufus Scott, a jazz drummer hailing from Harlem, Vivaldo Moor, a troubled bohemian writer, and Leona, a white woman from the South who has been deserted by her husband and forced to abandon their sole child. By analyzing the aforementioned trans-modalities as they manifest in the three sections comprising the novel, I shall demonstrate how these characters represent the intersection of *blackness* and transness in their search for love.

Not only is *Another Country* one of the earliest novels and works by Baldwin to employ the term "queer"—"Have you ever wished you were queer?" Rufus asks Vivaldo—but it has also become a seminal work in queer scholarship within the

academic sphere, alongside *Giovanni's Room*.[548] One of the numerous bibliographic references about Baldwin's queerness is, as mentioned in chapter 1, Brim's *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*. This anthology consistently examines Baldwin's paradoxical queerness through the lens of *Another Country* and other Baldwinian novels. In the third chapter—titled "What Straight Men Need: Gay Love in *Another Country*"—Brim poses the provocative question "Why do straight people have sex with gay people?"[549] He attributes a paradoxical queer attitude to the story's main male characters, whose homosexual encounters serve to reaffirm hypermasculinity or the oversexualization of Black men:

> Rather than homosexuality functioning as some kind of solution to racial discord, *Another Country* implies that one crossing of lines of identity can motivate and enable another […]. If Baldwin was seduced by the needs of white straight men, his work also suggests that at the center of the national erotic landscape is a disavowed blackness.[550]

Furthermore, the book presents an important point regarding Baldwin's stance on queerness. While encompassing the imaginative realm of queer intersections, specifically non-binary relationships arising from the crossing of race and sex, the author's writings neglect to address the complexities of lesbian relationships. Baldwin escapes complete queer emancipation in his writings by never explicitly discussing lesbian relationships outside of a conversation with Lorde, in which the latter seeks to open up a space for the necessities of Black women—especially lesbian Black women—as will be shown in the final section.

Still, in *Another Country*, there are depictions that, in my view, suggest possible lesbian interactions. These meetings include Cass, a companion of Vivaldo and Rufus, and either Leona or Ida, who are Rufus's girlfriend and sister, respectively. The expression on Cass's face, for example, when Ida pays her a visit in an attempt to locate her missing sibling simultaneously reveals her colonial desire and lesbian drive. Cass frequently makes stereotypical remarks about Ida. For instance, when Ida appreciates her attention and reassurance that nothing happened to Rufus, the white woman's anger at the "power she [Ida] held for this moment" is accompanied by the assurance and pleasure that as a Black woman, Ida "will be able to get through it."[551] Cass's ambivalent feelings mirror both desire and rejection, since they imply that Black women

[548] Baldwin, "Another Country," 411.
[549] Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination,* 92.
[550] Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination,* 98.
[551] Baldwin, "Another Country," 456.

are consistently prepared to endure adversity, and the power to face duress creates fascination and fear at the same time. In addition, Cass is physically, and sexually, attracted by Ida's presence: "She was terribly attractive when she grinned. Her face, then, made one think of a mischievous street boy. And at the same time there glowed in her eyes a marvelously feminine mockery."[552]

Even though in the 1960s Baldwin exhibited a hesitancy to further explore the interdependence of the racial and the sexual, in *Another Country*—as demonstrated by the above passage and several more—he tries to emphasize how fetishism and naiveté concerning race can entangle heterosexual and homosexual sexual relationships in the ambivalent racialization of Black bodies, caught by the white gaze into beauty and terror at the same time. Rufus's conviction that he has been ensnared in the perverted entrapment of racial fetishization is a contributing factor to his suicidal ideation: he becomes aware of being tormented by what Robert Reid-Pharr calls "the specter of the black beast."[553] He performs as a Black jazz percussionist, and engages in entertainment for a white audience, which regards his virility and violent character as inextricably linked to his Black identity. Consequently, the supremacist imagination perceives him as a crazed beater, a rapist, and an oversexualized "beast" searched by white women and men for their exotic sexuality. Rufus, for example, tells Vivaldo that Leona is attracted to him only for his sex: "'You know all that chick knows about me? The *only* thing she [Leona] knows?' He put his hand on his sex, brutally, as though he would tear it out, and seemed pleased to see Vivaldo wince. He sat down on the bed again. 'That's all.'"[554]

Nevertheless, while I do not disregard Rim's insightful critique and contribution about Baldwin's queerness, the aspect I intend to address in this discussion is the proposition that the writer's works are better understood through the lens of research concerning transness and the prefix trans* rather than queerness studies. Baldwin, in my opinion, is a transitional-transversal figure who is capable of reestablishing the various connotations of the prefix trans*, as opposed to merely a homosexual one. In this analysis, I will examine transness, in particular, as a characteristic of *blackness*. To do so, I will contemplate the essence of the prefix trans- and consider how it might manifest itself in my critique of *Another Country*.

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[552] Baldwin, "Another Country," 457.
[553] Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination,* 94.
[554] Baldwin, "Another Country," 426 (emphasis in the original).

4.2.1 "Easy Rider": *You Took the Best, So Why Not Take the Rest*?[555]

In "The Trans*ness of Blackness. The Blackness of Trans*ness," which draws from Black radicalism and trans studies, African American critic Marquis Bey argues that "[t]rans* and black […] denote poetic, para-ontological forces that are only tangentially, and ultimately arbitrarily, related to bodies said to be black or transgender."[556] Since both transness and *blackness* are fueled by the refusal to uphold a particular world order and language, the trans* of transness is not necessarily embedded in the rhetoric of gender (transexual-transgender), but rather in the para-ontological force of *blackness*. Bey cautions his audience against oversimplifications regarding the terms "Black" and "trans*," which refer to individuals whose skin pigmentation is Black and whose gender is not determined at birth, respectively. The correlation between *blackness* and transness exists primarily on an intellectual pragmatic level, which rejects color and sex categories and embraces the possibilities provided by the conjunctive nature of transness and the refusal of exclusive subjectivity of *blackness*.

In light of this, Baldwin's novels feature Black and white characters who possess the capacity to experience *blackness* and transness, although they fail to perform it several times due to societal constraints and prejudices. Furthermore, it is critical to emphasize that Baldwin's transness was founded upon a delicate equilibrium between a yearning for familiarity and a call for difference, a strategic positionality, and unequivocal support for globalism, transnationalism, and transgenderism.

In the first part of the novel, "Easy Rider," the most poignant one where Rufus's tragedy takes place (his murder-suicide), trans* as an open signifier, as suggested by Bussell, is at work. As I wrote in a recent article published by Litteraria Pragensia, the succession of the conjunctive particle "and"—activated by the asterisk in the word trans*—, apart from hinting at openness to something else, it can also be read as a consent to be more than one.[557] In this sense, it follows Glissant's famous quote "*consent à n'être plus un seul*," recently reread by Moten as "an interesting numerical glitch or rupture […] indicating that one can, at some point, not be one."[558] Trans* with the asterisk is interpreted as an invitation to think about what happens when "the subject

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[555] Baldwin, "Another Country," 367.
[556] Marquis Bey, "The Trans*ness of Blackness. The Blackness of Trans*ness," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (May 2017): 277. The article was recently expanded into a book titled *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).
[557] Maltese, "Fugitively Crossing the Ocean," 109–22.
[558] Fred Moten, "Ensemble: An Interview with Dr. Fred Moten," interview by Nehal El-Hadj, *M.I.C.E. Magazine*, Fall 2016, http://micemagazine.ca/issue-four/ensemble-interview-dr-fred-moten.

is displaced of that consent, calling into question even its powers of self-division, if not self-destruction."[559]

In my view, in addition to portraying the traumatic effects of racial and sexual discrimination, alienation, and the difficulties associated with extramarital affairs, homosexuality, and interracial relationships, *Another Country* can be read as a prophetic book that predicts the future but also accounts for what is happening in the present by evidencing its unseen or concealed truths. The novel, especially, suggests that embracing a state of transness, where individuals *consent not to be a single being*, is crucial for overcoming the social death of Black people and comprehending the confusion and incoherence in American society. The characters in "Easy Rider" persistently endeavor to forge a stable identity; however, this remains unattainable, as they all agree to exist as distinct entities, oblivious to the transformative potential of their bisexual, interracial, and homosexual interactions. Their acts of transness—strongly condemned and punished by societal norms—have the potential to disrupt the established political agenda of American society, which is still influenced by discrimination and segregation.

However, notwithstanding instances of kindness and friendship that appear to create an opportunity for sociability and inclusivity, every character in the book is an *easy rider* who embodies the inadequacy of a culture that is still reeling from the traumatic effects of slavery, Jim Crow, racism, and misogyny. These moments may appear fleeting, but they are regrettably still inscribed in a grammatical system that promotes despondency and the need for narcissistic self-determinacy. This is the case with Vivaldo and Leona.

Vivaldo is portrayed in a manner reminiscent of the hipster archetype elucidated by Norman Mailer in his renowned essay "The White Negro," which Baldwin himself vehemently critiqued in "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy."[560] He has internalized the belief in the over-sexualization of Black people, as described by Baldwin in his reaction to Mailer, where he states that "to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol."[561] As a result, he adopts this conventional archetype for himself, which (as per Baldwin's analysis) implies that his lack of confidence in his sexuality is compensated by his will of proximity to Black

[559] Moten, "Ensemble: An Interview with Dr. Fred Moten."
[560] Norman Mailer, *The White Negro* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957) and James Baldwin "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," "Nobody Knows my Name" (1961), *Collected Essay*s, 269–90.
[561] Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," 270.

males. Brandon Gordon asserts that Vivaldo attempts to imitate Rufus's sexual mannerisms, but he is unsuccessful due to his lack of comprehension of the racial ordeal and the reality that "that sexual style" represents the stigmatization experienced by many Black males.[562] Despite engaging in sexual activity with Rufus's sister, Ida, he excessively objectifies and places excessive importance on her racial identity as he "fetishizes her blackness and her African lineage."[563] This excess exposes his inability to welcome those fleeting moments of recognition that his life is intertwined with Rufus's and Ida's lives and he truly wishes to love them; but these fantasies of conjunctions and transness succumb to the image of Black people as wild and primitive and cause a failure of identification: "Contrary to Vivaldo's expectations, emulating the African American's hypermasculine sexual ethos does not ultimately enable him to fulfill the hipster's fantasy of embodied identification."[564]

Regarding Leona, she is described as an idealistic white woman who internalizes colonial desire by developing an intense fascination with Black males. However, she is also subjected to various forms of white patriarchal violence inflicted upon her by both her (white) ex-husband and Rufus. The novel devotes little attention to her, as if Baldwin were compelled to force the reader to share in Rufus's suffering by drawing attention away from her. Her negative portrayal or the manner in which she is rejected, committed to a psychiatric facility, and subsequently reunited with her family in the South renders her a lost and unredeemed individual. There was no other possibility; she could not have been the "Little Eva," as Baldwin also mentions her in the book, recalling the character Little Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She could not have been the white savior that Baldwin denounced in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" either. In my opinion, the only way to find atonement for her is by seeing her as a victim of the racist and heteronormative society in which she resides. Yet, it is also crucial to interpret her despair as an endeavor to assert love, though in an unconventional way. *Another Country* is not meant to be a protest novel, and both Leona and Rufus seek to escape the Little Eva/Tom stigmatization, by demonstrating to be more than one single and recognizable being.

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[562] Brandon Gordon, "Physical Sympathy: Hip and Sentimentalism in James Baldwin's 'Another Country,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 75–95, https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2011.0004

[563] Gordon, "Physical Sympathy," 85.

[564] Gordon, "Physical Sympathy," 86.

Baldwin employs a highly melodious, blues-infused style to convey that the novel's primary premise is American society's incapability to acknowledge and accept the yearning to complicate one's self-imposed limitations, rather than the characters' continual sense of bereavement and dismemberment. Hence, "Easy Rider" is a chapter of excessive language, excessive life and death, and joy and violence. The asterisk of trans* is a perfect metaphor for that which individuals find challenging to understand and their efforts to find moments of conjunction (especially friendship and affection), as well as final moments of recollection: Leona would have cherished her son's return, just as Vivaldo yearned to complete his book. Rufus is the only character to truly *know* how to end the consuming play between life and death, conjunction and separation, completeness and incompleteness, although his demise haunts the entire novel.

What Cleaver in his infamous attack in *Soul on Ice* to Baldwin, and especially to *Another Country*, called a "pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man's pastime of committing suicide," is for Baldwin "the black corpse floating in the national psyche," in reference to all the traumas (class, sexual, racial) that have caused his suicide-murder.[565] Rufus falls prey to the consolidation of certain tenets about both Black nationalist and white supremacist tenets: the separation of blacks and whites, the over-sexualization of Black men, the confinement of Black people to domains where they can excel (art and music, respectively), with the perpetual support of white consumerism, and the relegation of Black women to reproductive roles in order to ensure the expansion and survival of the two "races."

Conversely, Rufus is a very intricate character, and his act of suicide does not fall under the category of protest or romanticizing the victim. His suicide is evidence that only love as a disposition to change may be effective. Rufus has encountered transness to the greatest extent, seeing it as a deliberate choice to *consent not to be a single being*. He knew that his knowledge of the world was not rooted in the philosophy of the unitary body, but in the possibilities of the *flesh* (following Spillers's lesson) because he could not understand its laws: "Rufus was aware of every inch of Rufus. He was flesh: flesh, bone, muscle, fluid, orifices, hair, and skin. His body was controlled by laws he did not understand."[566]

Unfortunately, his openness was not to be understood and his choice to be more than one single being and flesh of his own flesh succumbed to another, this time

[565] Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 107.
[566] Baldwin, "Another Country," 413.

sinister, choice. The apex of "Easy Rider" is the instant just before leaping from the George Washington Bridge, a very dramatic point in the narrative, characterized by its experimental and lyrical depth. At this time, Rufus has a profound sense of self-alienation as Leona, whom he had subjected to ongoing mistreatment, departs from his residence. He imagines ceasing to exist as a whole being, and he agrees to disrupt his unity. I would prioritize the description of this particular moment, whereby Rufus's eyes possess the capacity to both retain and relinquish the many manifestations of existence and creativity. After leaving behind Greenwich Village, "the place of liberation," he stands at the train station. His eyes and whole body seem to disintegrate upon seeing the multitude of people there.

The train becomes a messenger: it is overcrowded and seems unable to transport more passengers, much like Rufus's life, which has become overwhelming and unbearable. He experiences several emotions inside himself, but he is profoundly alone, destined to bring his existence to a close. The train also acts as a vessel to a different viewpoint, a new level of awareness that Rufus seems to have just comprehended. He becomes aware of the hazardous nature of existence, and he envisions a fragmented cosmos where the functioning of objects deviates from their previous norms, and several interpretations coexist rather than a singular one. Perhaps an ominous glimpse into the future, but undeniably a glimpse of something novel. However, his thinking is rapidly overtaken by another certainty: "suddenly he knew that he was never going home any more," and that all those people on the train were simply in "a hurry to get away from each other."[567] Suddenly, the train becomes empty and Rufus gets off at Washington Station. The dramatic scene is described in a very intense and long passage, which suggests to me a moment of transness and is therefore noteworthy:

> Then something began to awaken in him, something new; it increased his distance; it increased his pain. They [the people in the train] were rushing—to the platform, to the tracks. Something he had not thought of for many years, something he had never ceased to think of, came back to him as he walked behind the crowd. The subway platform was a dangerous place—so he had always thought; it sloped downward toward the waiting tracks; and when he had been a little boy and stood on the platform beside his mother he had not dared let go her hand. He stood on the platform now, alone with all these people, who were each of them alone, and waited in acquired calmness, for the train. But suppose something, somewhere, failed, and the yellow lights went out and no one could see, any longer, the platform's edge? Suppose these beams fell down? He saw the train in the tunnel, rushing under water, the motor-man gone mad, gone blind,

[567] Baldwin, "Another Country," 442.

> unable to decipher the lights, and the tracks gleaming and snarling senselessly upward forever, the train never stopping and the people screaming at windows and doors and turning on each other with all the accumulated fury of their blasphemed lives, everything gone out of them but murder, breaking limb from limb and splashing in blood, with joy—for the first time, joy, joy, after such a long sentence in chains, leaping out to astound the world, to astound the world again. Or, the train in the tunnel, the water outside, the power failing, the walls coming in, and the water not rising like a flood but breaking like a wave over the heads of these people, filling their crying mouths, filling their eyes, their hair, tearing away their clothes and discovering the secrecy which only the water, by now, could use. It could happen. It could happen; and he would have loved to see it happen, even if he perished, too […]. At Fifty-ninth Street many came on board and many rushed across the platform to the waiting local. Many white people and many black people, chained together in time and in space, and by history, and all of them in a hurry. In a hurry to get away from each other, he thought, but we ain't never going to make it. […] The train rushed into the blackness with the phallic abandon, into the blackness which opened to receive it, opened, the whole world shook with their coupling. […] The train began to move, half-empty now; and with each stop it became lighter; soon the white people who were left looked at him oddly. He felt their stares but he felt far away from them. *You took the best. So why not take the rest*?[568]

In this passage, Rufus unequivocally espouses the notion that the world as we know it is coming to an end. And it motivates me to reflect on numerous questions: What if the abandonment of those identity certainties that were established based on exclusionary and heteronormative perspectives initiated an entirely new vision on the world? What if this flood of new vision would bring joy? What if Rufus's consent to be trans*, to be one, and more than one, would be tolerated, if his pain would be shared? What if he could really be loved, as he had imagined months before when listening to a saxophonist scream with his horn, "*Do you love me? Do you love me?*"[569]

This question remains unanswered and gives ground to the second part of the novel, suggestively titled "Any Day Now."

4.2.2 "Any Day Now": *(Don't) Let Them Blues in Here*[570]

The significance and figure of the Crossing, which both recalls the consequences of the Middle Passage in US society and the musical suspension ("down the line"), which may reflect the state of human existence and its pursuit of love, symbolize the second section of the novel. The Crossing is the site where the trance, which is embedded in dance and

[568] Baldwin, "Another Country," 441–43 (emphasis in the original).
[569] Baldwin, "Another Country," 371 (emphasis in the original).
[570] This refers to Bessie Smith's song "In the House Blues" quoted in this part of the novel several times.

music throughout Afro-descendant cultures, occurs and unveils the deepest secrets of one's own feelings. Transness, pictured as a trance, is presented in the second part of the novel. Its characters and their intimate relationships exist in a state of limbo, and uncertainty, and metaphorically may allude to the act of crossing itself. This crossing can represent various transitions, such as transiting between different parts of the city, exploring different sexual orientations, or navigating between life and death, love and hate, and transgressing. They are also a memento of the transatlantic journeys they embark upon, which retrace ancient circuits.

As stated in chapter 2, the term "limbo" is associated with the West-Indian dance, whose origins Harris locates in the slave ship's hold, and which also represents the creative process in which the artist attempts to "re-member" what has been lost in a new literary or artistic form. Similarly, in *Another Country*, Baldwin attempts to recollect the syncopated style that originated in the hold of the slave ship through a musical language while also accounting for the suspended lives of lovers who are connected to Rufus's life and death. The novel employs the term "limbo" to symbolize the indecision and impasse that define the existence of individuals whose lives are trapped between reality and fantasy, physical constraints, and flights of imagination to the point that they are "all equal in misery, confusion, and despair."[571]

A similar state of uncertainty can be observed in artists, whose struggle to create a piece of art reflects the transition from the personal to the public. Thus, Vivaldo is introduced in the novel; his unfinished novel compels him to seek the conclusive words ceaselessly out of fear of losing inspiration and those he tries to love, "and this fear kept him suspended in a pestilential, dripping limbo."[572] This is the same limbo that one morning while staring from his apartment, he had observed as a condition common to most people who were wandering in the streets of New York (and included in "Easy Rider"): "Most people had not lived. […] They passed their lives thereafter in a kind of limbo of denied and unexamined pain."[573]

Baldwin, who was in a state of transience during his exile years, appears to have been personified in Vivaldo on a creative and personal level. In *Another Country*, he seems to be in a state of literary and creative trance, foreshadowing a stylistic tone that would become more prominent in his later works, as we shall observe in the next

[571] Baldwin, "Another Country," 635.
[572] Baldwin, "Another Country," 649.
[573] Baldwin, "Another Country," 649.

section. This style serves to interlace Harlem to the Village, as well as the southern regions of both the US and France, and these to the Crossing. Only the quest for a "form" to confront the mystery of life and love may preserve humankind, as Baldwin indicates when describing Vivaldo's fear of being lost in a "region where there were no definitions of any kind, neither of color, nor of male and female."[574]

This form must be specifically sought in language. Hence, Baldwin's necessity to experiment with a language that is "pierced" by moans, groans, and most importantly, lyrics and sounds of blues and jazz. The distinctive musical quality of the work, which is intertwined with the fact that its main character is a jazz musician, is also acknowledged by critics Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson in a dated but enlightening study written in 1998, a decade before Baldwin's resurgence in literary analysis.[575] I am particularly intrigued by the assertion that *Another Country* is a "transitional" work. This is not only because it was written during a period of transition—commenced prior to the author's departure to France, completed in Istanbul, and subsequently published in New York—but also because it presents itself as a transition into a different realm, *another world* or other worlds, encompassing alternative perspectives, language, and understanding. Ultimately, it serves as a transition towards an alternative view on the Black artist. According to Shin and Judson:

> In the transitional *Another Country*, Baldwin attempted to evoke the bohemian world through a sequence of riffs and montages, fractured forms that express the brilliance and movement of improvisation […]. For Baldwin, the black musician is the intellectual, the restless experimenter who takes apart dominant musical forms and recasts them; the sexual lionizing of the black musician merely appropriates him for white consumption, and, Baldwin warns, if black musicians embrace this myth, they will be destroyed by it, as demonstrated by the case of Rufus Scott, the tragic character at the center of *Another Country.*[576]

What fuels Rufus and the entire narrative is also unquestionably a pulse that reverberates through the streets of Harlem and the obscured yet aglow gazes of its passersby as they relentlessly pursue love. The beat that moves Rufus—and that is reminiscent of the heartbeat and tambourine beat in "Easy Rider"—reappears in the opening scene of "Any Day Now" as the beat of Beethoven's "'Emperor' Concerto";

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[574] Baldwin, "Another Country," 636.
[575] Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson, "Beneath the Black Aesthetic: James Baldwin's Primer of Black American Masculinity," *African American Review* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 247–61.
[576] Shin and Judson, "Beneath the Black Aesthetic," 257.

this music frames the first meeting between Eric, an actor who fled from the South of the US to New York and then to the South of France in pursuit of love, and his French fiancé named Yves.[577] Baldwin uses the characters' fugues as a chance to explore the ambiguities that arise from the distance experienced between the past and the present, what has been left, and what has been encountered. Eric, for instance, lives in a limbic state as he tries to compensate for the feeling of loss he experienced when living in New York and being one of Rufus's partners. He is split between the memory of his past in New York and the new life offered by a village overlooking the Mediterranean Sea and before that Paris, where he momentarily felt he had found love when one day while crossing the street he encountered Yves's eyes and the "*tum-ta-tum*" of Beethoven's music coming from his small portable radio.[578] That music was the prelude for a new love and its "violence […] was like the violence in his [Eric's] heart, filling the soft, spring air."[579]

This new scenario transports the reader to Europe, depicting exiles, war survivors, prostitutes, and grimy alleyways reminiscent of the "urine-stained alleys" of New York. There is the eerie sensation that the past and future exist together in the present, that forgetfulness cannot substitute for what should be permanently remembered. Rufus's spectral recollection disrupts Eric's exquisite vision of the clear sea and the salty taste of marine water on Yves's skin. That skin and those waters both uncannily echo the murky waters into which Rufus's skin dissolves. Yves definitively had a resemblance with Rufus: "there was something in Yves which reminded him to Rufus—something in his trusting smile and his brave, tough vulnerability."[580] Rufus, thus, returns to the story during this detour in France and he makes his way until the end of the chapter as a reminder that love is not what appears to be, and more change is required before it can be realized. As a result, in "Any Day Now," he *possesses* all the people who are trying to forget them while simultaneously being compelled to listen to his excessive story, style, and music and his quest(ion) of love—*do you love me*?

Rufus's uncanny presence signals the need for the narrative to return to New York. It serves as a literary expedient, supported by Eric's decision to cross the ocean again under Yves's influence—who regards this return as a chance to reach him and realize his American dream—and motivated by the opportunity to participate in a

[577] Baldwin, "Another Country," 558.
[578] Baldwin, "Another Country," 558.
[579] Baldwin, "Another Country," 558.
[580] Baldwin, "Another Country," 537.

movie. He must experience an entirely novel transformation, a metamorphosis, entering a new stage of trance. As mentioned in chapter 2, the moment of departure as one of return implies that one departs to not return the same and, as suggested by Glissant during his meditation while crossing the ocean, these moments occur "when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many things at the same time." Traversing the Atlantic appears to be a passage of transness and multiplicity itself, a journey that Baldwin personally experienced. It may be trance and limbo that Baldwin encountered, both during his crossings and his exile. In 1962, in an interview with Terkel, the writer recognized that his journeys from Paris to New York, and from there back to France, from 1948 until 1960, changed his perception of the West, its power over him, and his opinion of exile: it was, it seemed, "another way of being in limbo."[581] But most importantly, as he wrote in *No Name in the Street*, what changed forever was his perception of love, because he fell in love:

> I starved in Paris for a while, but I learned something: for one thing, I fell in love. Or, more accurately, I realized, and accepted for the first time that love was not merely a general, human possibility, not merely the disaster it had so often, by then, been for me—according to me—nor was it something that happened to other people, like death, nor was it merely a mortal danger: it was among *my* possibilities, for here it was, breathing and belching beside me, and it was the key to life. Not merely the key to *my* life, but to life itself.[582]

Baldwin's own adventures are retraced in *Another Country*, and each of the characters reflects some of his vicissitudes. As the novel develops, the reader is encouraged to accept new notions of love. For example, when Eric comes to New York before Yves and is immediately confronted by a mesmerizing metropolis upon his arrival, readers must revisit the murder scene and immerse themselves in the city's limbo. Male characters are primarily the ones in a trance. This does not pertain to the homosexual interactions they have or want to have nor to the many depictions of male bodies being penetrated. According to Gordon, "Baldwin explicitly refuses any necessary connection between being 'passive' and being 'homosexual'"" and rather he connects this passivity to the capacity to allow "other bodies, and the pain those other bodies have endured, to enter into his own."[583]

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[581] James Baldwin, "An Interview with James Baldwin," interview by Studs Terkel, *Conversations with James Baldwin*, eds. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson-London: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 14.
[582] Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 365–66 (emphasis in the original).
[583] Gordon, "Physical Sympathy," 87 and 80.

At least three moments in the novel illustrate the value of this capacity. Eric's recollections of his youth spent in Alabama provide the initial moment of insight. In this instance, the flashback again appears as a tool driven by Rufus's spirit, revealing his "great power" over Eric, who feels the urgency to uncover his "buried" past.[584] Eric remembered the "terror" and "pleasure" he felt upon realizing his feelings for Henry, a Black man, and how this was "wrong" and indeed to be "lived in secret."[585] This hidden desire intensified over the years, becoming "something unspoken between them, something unspeakable, undone, and hideous desired."[586] It eventually led to a significant encounter with a Black boy named LeRoy when he was seventeen, which transcended mere physical attraction. On that day, LeRoy's body became the body of a stranger; "and yet this stranger worked in Eric an eternal, a healing transformation."[587] It marked the "beginning of his life as a man," and made the revelation of his secret—his yearning and terror to love beyond intimacy—true.[588]

The second moment, amplification of the first, manifests as a muted thought. Yves and his mother were in the kitchen when Eric reflected on the "army of lonely men who had used him," and he realized that they sought something beyond physical intimacy.[589] Baldwin eloquently articulates the epiphany in this second moment as a longing for "passivity," which he refers to as the "shadow of love":

> They [army of men] were husbands, they were fathers, gangsters, football players, rovers; and they were everywhere. Or they were, in any case, in all of the places he had been assured they could not be found and the need they brought to him was one they scarcely knew they had, which they spent their lives denying, which overtook and drugged them, making their limbs as heavy as those of sleepers or drowning bathers, and which could only be satisfied in the shameful, the punishing dark, and quickly, with flight and aversion as the issue of the act. They fled, with the infection lanced but with the root of the infection still in them. Days or weeks or months might pass—or even years—before, once again, furtively, in an empty locker room, on an empty stairway or a roof, in the shadow of a wall in the park, in a parked car, or in the furnished room of an absent friend, they surrendered to the hands, to the stroking and fondling and kissing of the despised and anonymous sex. And yet the need did not seem to be predominantly physical. It could not be said that they were attracted to men. They did not make love, they were passive, they were acted on. The need seemed indeed, to be precisely this passivity, this gift of illicit pleasure, this adoration […]. Something had been frozen in them, the root of

[584] Baldwin, "Another Country," 537.
[585] Baldwin, "Another Country," 543.
[586] Baldwin, "Another Country," 547.
[587] Baldwin, "Another Country," 549.
[588] Baldwin, "Another Country," 550.
[589] Baldwin, "Another Country," 554.

> their affections had been frozen, so that they could no longer accept affection, though it was from this lack that they were perishing. The dark submission was the shadow of love—if only someone, somewhere, loved them enough to caress them this way, in the light, with joy! But then they could no longer be passive.[590]

Passivity is necessary to prevent total "chaos," which might instill fear and disrupt the essence of love.[591] Eric was fortunate to have met Rufus, who had truly "dared to know him," and, therefore, to love him.[592] Rufus saw Eric's secrecy, and dragged it out of him, not for using him but for revealing it to the world (and the reader); reveling it as love, for "the act of love is a confession."[593]

Rufus's lesson comes into play at the third moment when Vivaldo and Eric meet, and Vivaldo contemplates a new kind of being: *androgynous*. This indicates that Baldwin begins to consider androgyny as a potential dimension capable of embracing the complexities of both sex and love already in *Another Country*. Furthermore, this mirrors the writer's consistent stance against fixating on one's sexuality and his preference for detailing the intricate nature of one's relationship with sex. Indeed, not only does the term "queer" first appear in the novel, but the word "androgynous" does as well. This dimension appears to be embodied by Eric, and the remark appears to have been voiced from Vivaldo's viewpoint. Upon observing Eric's performance in his inaugural film, he reflected on the transformative power of acting, which gave him a new light:

> It was the face of a man, a tormented man. Yet, in precisely the way that great music depends, ultimately, on great silence, this masculinity was defined, and made powerful, by something which was not masculine. But it was not feminine, either, and something in Vivaldo resisted the word *androgynous*. It was a quality to which great numbers of people would respond without knowing to what it was they were responding.[594]

Nevertheless, Vivaldo's resistance to the term "androgynous" begins to dim when Eric offers an invitation to a drink at his apartment following the night at the movies. The two individuals reveal their innermost secrets concerning women, men, love, and intimacy in this exchange. Their endeavor to establish proximity is concurrently an effort to articulate the ambiguity that engulfs their existence. They acknowledge that coping with the unpredictable "sense that one is never what one seems—never—and

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[590] Baldwin, "Another Country," 554.
[591] Baldwin, "Another Country," 554.
[592] Baldwin, "Another Country," 537.
[593] Baldwin, "Another Country," 555.
[594] Baldwin, "Another Country," 661(emphasis in the original).

yet, what one seems to be is probably, in some sense, exactly what one *is*."[595] Vivaldo is haunted by memories of his last encounter with Rufus, feeling a deep sense of confusion that masks the true terror preventing him from embracing the mystery of love totally, which is the fear of touching one's flesh. *Touching the flesh* is an indispensable element of Baldwin's love ethic, which will continue to inform his late style and writing. If the flesh is, as Spillers contended, "the zero degree of social conceptualization," then the ability to feel and touch the flesh, beyond skin and body conceptualizations, declares the flesh as the real site of love and pure nakedness. Differently said, as Baldwin wrote in *No Name in the Street*, a loveless society must confront "the terror of human touch, of human touch" and with it, the terror of the flesh.[596]

The fear of touching the flesh in the story is found both in heterosexuality and homosexuality, as well as in interracial interactions, and maybe only the acceptance of all of them or androgyny can heal. Vivaldo, on the verge of tears, confides in Eric a secret he has never shared with anyone before. The last time he saw Rufus, they fought, but eventually, they ended up in bed. Vivaldo was moved by a weird combination of fear and desire simultaneously:

> I had the weirdest feeling that he wanted me to take him in my arms. And not for sex, though maybe sex would have happened. I had the feeling that he wanted someone to hold him, and that, that night, it had to be a man. I got in the bed and I thought about it and I watched his back, it was as dark in that room, then, as it is in this room, now, and I lay on my back and I didn't touch him and I did not sleep. I remember that night as a kind of vigil. I don't know whether he slept or not, I kept trying to tell from his breathing—but I couldn't tell, it was too choppy, maybe he was having nightmares. I loved Rufus, I loved him, I didn't want him to die. But when he was dead, I thought about it, thought about it—isn'it funny? I didn't know I'd thought about it as much as I have—and I wondered, what would have happened if I'd taken him in my arms, if I'd held him, if I hadn't been—afraid. I was afraid he wouldn't understand that it was—only love.[597]

The vigil remembered by Vivaldo is a moment of trance that appears to bridge the divide between the fear of physical contact and the recognition that love must be taken into one's arms and comprehended. There is a touching passage in *No Name in the Street*, which is a continuation of the above passage about Baldwin's feeling of falling in love once in Paris, that seems to resonate with this moment, and with the beauty of all its clarity, delivers another important lesson,

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[595] Baldwin, "Another Country," 664 (emphasis in the original).
[596] Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 366.
[597] Baldwin, "Another Country," 672–73.

> It began to pry open for me the trap of color, for people do not fall in love according to their color […]—and when lovers quarrel, as indeed they inevitably do, it is not the degree of their pigmentation that they are quarreling about, nor can lovers, on any level whatever, use color as a weapon. This means that one must accept one's nakedness. And nakedness has no color: this can come as news only to those who have never covered, or been covered by, another naked human being. In any case, the world changed then, and it changed forever. Because you love a human being, you see everyone else very differently than you saw them before—perhaps I only mean to say that you begin to see—and you are both stronger and more vulnerable, both free and bound. Free, paradoxically, because, now, you have a home—your lover's arms. And bound: to that mystery, precisely, a bondage which liberates you into something of the glory and suffering of the world.[598]

Vivaldo could not feel this dual feeling of being both free and bound with Rufus, and Eric tried to comfort him by reassuring him that touching Rufus would not have been effective in preserving his life, as his suicide was predominantly motivated by a racist society incapable of loving and self-love. Yet, the two men attempted to overcome their fears and fell in love during that night of deep contemplation and reminiscence. Their love, which is beyond physical intimacy and homosexuality and inspired by the androgynous possibility contained in Eric's look, is announced in "Any Day Now," but it is made visible and intelligible only in "Toward Bethlehem."

This moment also brings the seeds of what Baldwin, years later, would discuss in his short essay "Here Be Dragons," that as advanced in chapter 1, should be read as a trans* manifesto more than a queer one. In it, the writer seems to leave his testament of love, and welcome Lorde's invitation to acknowledge differences within Black gendered life in the communal desire to change society. Indeed, as Mullen argues, in the famous conversation "Revolutionary Hope," Lorde also tried to "incite Baldwin to differentiate oppression by factoring in gender" when she used the metaphor of the Dragon for heteronormativity: "We must also examine the ways that we have absorbed sexism and heterosexism. These are the norms in this dragon we have been born into—and we need to examine these distortions with the same kind of openness and dedication that we examine racism."[599] Therefore Baldwin seems to have come to a resolution about his vexed relationship with the race/sex nexus and announces:

> But we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever,

[598] Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 366.
[599] Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 179; Baldwin and Lorde, "Revolutionary Hope."

> contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are part of each other.[600]

Baldwin himself had already emphasized this act of containing, which is also the act of trance—possessing and being possessed—very early in his life, after his first flight to Greenwich Village, when he realized that "categories of male and female, straight or not, black or white, were shattered, thank heaven […]."[601]

Nevertheless, in *Another Country*, the focus on women's limbic state seems to be minimal and tangential. Leona reappears throughout the second and third parts only as a tragic reminder of a mistreated woman. Although Cass and Ida initially appear to be more involved in facilitating masculine encounters, they offer profound insights into womanhood, particularly in this second section. Their perspectives supersede the initial static portrayals of the two women in the first part: a privileged white woman and a fetishized Black woman respectively.

In "Any Day Now," Cass surprises with an unexpected extramarital affair with Eric and she realizes that she could be "a married woman, no longer young, already beginning to moan with lust, pinned down on this untidy and utterly transient bed by a stranger who did not love her and whom she could not love."[602] On her side, Ida's insightful presence in "Any Day Now" is mostly acted out via her musical performances, as she becomes a jazz singer and enters a relationship with Vivaldo following her brother's death. Her songs disrupt the narrative and serve as a transitional moment of awareness, a moment of trance, prompting the reader to transition to another realm, namely one that reveals the truths of Black life embedded in the lyrics that she performs in the city's clubs or sings at home. Many of them belong to Bessie Smith's repertoire, which imposes on the narrative the force of the blues with her voice—"the voice of a colored woman"—who sings: "*Catch them. Don't let them blues in here*."[603]

Still, the blues "would force an entry one day," and surely they gave their version of *another country*.[604] Ida found in them the answers to her pain because, after all, "[p]erhaps, the answer was in the songs."[605] When she sang "*Just above my head,/I hear music in the air, And I really do believe/There's a God somewhere*," Vivaldo sensed that "she often sang them in order to flaunt before him privacies which he could

[600] Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," 828.
[601] Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," 819.
[602] Baldwin, "Another Country," 623.
[603] Baldwin, "Another Country," 578.
[604] Baldwin, "Another Country," 578.
[605] Baldwin, "Another Country," 578.

never hope to penetrate."[606] The secrecy of Ida's blues was, most probably, an invitation to accept the "exsense" of Black life, its *blackness*, that is its desire to know the world differently, *touch the flesh* and, most importantly, *pay the dues*.

According to Josh Kun, the role of blues and particularly Bessie Smith's numbers in both Baldwin and *Another Country* is fundamental to accompany the reader in the intricacy of the story it narrates and confirms Baldwin's identification with the singer, both for racial and sexual proximity: "Baldwin's identification with both the persona and the voice of Bessie Smith reveals as much about his approach to race as it does about his belief in the possibility of gay male desire."[607] The musical interruptions allow the reader to listen to the contradictions of life and accept their coexistence, since the blues, as Baldwin wrote in "The Uses of Blues," is "passionate detachment, this inwardness coupled with outwardness, this ability to know that, all right, it's a mess, and you can't do anything about it [. . .] so, well, you have to do something about it."[608]

What if the blues hovering in the pages of "Any Day Now" is finally *let in*? Will the readers as listeners be able to translate the emotions, sounds, places, and moods they encounter in the narrative? Through the blues and jazz, they are taken outside on a journey to Europe and then back to New York. However, neither Europe nor America can provide a new take on love, just the transient experience of these crossings, as well as the extremely transitory and fluid character of music. The voyage has not ended, and in the concluding section of the narrative, readers are encouraged to undertake a final journey "toward Bethlehem," which is a fictional destination in the meanderings of the mind in quest of another country where a unique kind of love and touch may be found and embraced.

4.2.3 "Toward Bethlehem": Trans- as Transnational

By employing a further evocative flashback, "Toward Bethlehem" retraces the conversations Vivaldo initiated in the preceding section regarding love, during the evening he spent at Eric's place. We had abandoned Vivaldo in Eric's bed, only to return to find him here dreaming. His dream is one of those convulsive dreams in which everything is possible, from the vision of the promised land to its destruction.

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[606] Baldwin, "Another Country," 646.
[607] Kun in Radiclani Clytus, "Paying Dues and Playing the Blues," *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Michele Elam (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 72.
[608]James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Kenan Randall (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 57.

As Baldwin had written in "Any Day Now": "The aim of the dreamer […] is to go on dreaming and not to be molested by the world. His dreams are his protection against the world. But the aims of life are antithetical to those of the dreamer, and the teeth of the world are sharp."[609]

However, Vivaldo's dream contains the chance of a possibility: a confession of love that can come true. In his dream, he "dreamed that he was running, running, running through a country he had always known, but could not now remember a rocky country."[610] This lost country is Rufus's arms; his odor and his *flesh*, as the page after resolves, "to his delight and confusion, Rufus lay down beside him and opened his arms. And the moment he surrendered to this sweet and overwhelming embrace, his dream, like glass, shattered […]."[611] Upon opening his eyes, in that real world from which he was asking for protection, "it was Eric to whom he clung, who clung to him."[612] The fear of touch is finally disclosed and although he could not surrender in Rufus's embrace anymore in real life, he finds himself in a state of confession.

If in "Any Day Now" the passivity of the trance state had given us a glimpse of the "shadow" of love, in this part love is revealed and no secret can be hidden from the sunlight. Eric surrenders to Vivaldo, who professes eternal love. Ida reveals the secrecy contained in the lyrics she sings, including memories of her childhood, her resentment towards white people, her strained relationship with her father, and the complex emotions experienced by her family at the sight of Rufus's swollen corpse. Ida also bravely admits that Vivaldo's suspicions of her infidelity are true; she had a clandestine affair with an elderly director called Ellis. Vivaldo acknowledges her reality and finally manages to "touch" Ida, leading to a creative breakthrough that motivates him to complete his novel. Cass, on the other hand, chooses to take a break and live with her children exclusively and divorces from her marital relationship. Yves eventually arrives in New York, where he can finally hold in his arms Eric.

Yet, there is a sense that all the characters now devoid of their fears and naked in the flesh are on a journey to a further world. Merely having undergone a transformation or traveled back in time is insufficient to resolve the question posed by Rufus about love. This return, as Glissant puts it, irrevocably changes the vision of life, love, and

[609] Baldwin, "Another Country," 543.
[610] Baldwin, "Another Country," 708.
[611] Baldwin, "Another Country," 708.
[612] Baldwin, "Another Country," 708.

history forever and, in this instance, opens the novel to other global cartographies, and the story of the lovers of Greenwich Village to the facts of the world.

In this section, this extended cartography will be reread as a rebirth, as a "being born again" in the sense discussed by Spillers in chapter 1 and invoked here not only because this third part bears the evocative title of "Toward Bethlehem," the place of nativity par excellence, but because being born again is part of a transnational tradition as well as a Black Christian tradition that calls for a new politics and new modes of belonging. In this context, the notion of transnationalism does not predominantly relate to political doctrines concerning economic, social, and political processes that transcend the borders of nation-states. Instead, it represents a spiritual healing practice grounded in solidarity and a harmonious balance of situatedness and cosmopolitanism. This perspective aligns with that of Alexander, Anzaldúa, and Mohanty, and clearly emerges in *Another Country*, in my view.

Spillers, in her research of Baldwin's transatlantic circuits, noted that the writer sought a second birth, aligning with the African American religious tradition of "being born again," rooted in the belief that one has to depart from oneself and create something anew somewhere else, in another manner, in *another country*:

> This second birth might be thought as a tear or rip through the centers of consciousness of which the adult becomes cognizant only sometime later. This springing into awareness, induced by gestures thrown in the path of one's witness, is the commencement of self-alienation, another name for self-division, which we might regard as the capacity to both occupy ego and to stand apart from it, the being in the moment, but simultaneously neither there nor then. Though induced by pain and humiliation these narrative cruxes amount to a second birth because one is obligated to surmount and exceed the first and natural birth. "Double consciousness," under the impress of this reading, might be thought of as an iteration of "being born again," but this time under the aegis of a secular heading that is characterized by gestures that turn a body inside out.[613]

This gesture symbolizes a spiritual journey in which one returns to the flesh, and becomes naked, without skin or boundaries. I think spiritual rebirth, which I reread here through both Spillers's African American religious tradition and Alexander's Afro-Caribbean spiritual transnationalism, is always to be understood as an implication between the material and spiritual worlds. The flesh is that guilty and despised place that, if recognized, loved, and touched without fear, may be, most likely, the only other

[613] Spillers, "A Transatlantic Circuit," 931.

country Baldwin desires to be in and the bridge between the material and spiritual world. Is "Toward Bethlehem" this spiritual and fleshly place called "another country"? Precisely because situated in the flesh, spiritual rebirth can traverse the territories of the world, and situate itself without the pretense, however, of repeating the language and form of the most blind nationalism. In *Another Country*, Baldwin advances a spiritual rebirth which is also a denouncement of both American exceptionalism and Black nationalism.

According to Stephanie Dunning, the novel reflects Baldwin's refusal to support the Black nationalist movement and his hesitancy to align himself with the Black Panther Party when he was writing it. This reluctance stems from the fact that Black nationalist discourse initially constructed the Black man as heterosexual and patriarchal.[614] She also holds that the novel is not an example of Black utopia—since there is "no place" where one can "escape the iniquities of racism"—and suggests that another model for thinking "outside the box that frames our discussions of interraciality and same-eroticism" has not been found yet.[615]

While I value her consideration about the fact that the "another country" of the title may refer to "'another try'" rather than to a form of Black utopia, I believe that the novel indeed anticipated a model for thinking "outside the box." This particular model is prophetic and encompasses a perceived transness by primarily attempting and providing "another try" with language. It continues to maintain the belief that it is possible to redefine the language of love before reframing one's requesting (or even striving for) political and patriotic revival. The way it does this is by observing the present-day circumstances of both his life and his historical time.

As a result, and once more, it is a biographical fact that speculatively intersects with Baldwin's spiritual prophecy. Baldwin finishes *Another Country* on December 10 in Istanbul in 1961, seeking refuge after a difficult journey to the holy land, Israel. Indeed, what transpires from the frenetic pages of "Toward Bethlehem," whose rhythm and brevity compel a pressing reading, is both the resolution of its characters, who eventually confess their feelings, and a certain demand for joy and peace. For example, the delight of Yves, who departs from France to enter a different world, and join his lover, parallels the joy of Baldwin, who in Turkey finds the solace and the warm

[614] Stefanie Dunning, "Parallel Perversions: Interracial and Same Sexuality in James Baldwin's 'Another Country,'" *MELUS* 26, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 103. https://doi.org/10.2307/3185543
[615] Dunning, "Parallel Perversions," 105.

hospitality of young Turkish actor Engin Cezzar, both necessary to conclude the novel, after the distressing visit to Jerusalem. Hence, the title of the conclusive part spreads with the impression that Baldwin's reference to a nation whose territory encompassed Bethlehem in that section is no mere coincidence. Perhaps, the title potentially hints that he would have preferred to be directed to Bethlehem rather than Jerusalem. The voyage to Israel left Baldwin in a state of distress, as Mullen reports in his commentary on Zaborowska's brilliant study on Baldwin's presence in Turkey, the country that played a fundamental role in his writing process:

> Zaborowska notes that Baldwin arrived "with little money, depressed by a trip to Israel, and with a severe case of writer's block that made him desperate to finish *Another Country*." Baldwin was taken in, housed, and fed by Cezzar and an extended family of friends. The positive effect was immediate. Baldwin rewrote and finished the book there, and developed a permanent sense that Istanbul was a place to get writing done [...].[616]

The correlation between personal experiences, literary works, and global events is further reinforced by the fact that Baldwin addresses the Palestinian question on multiple occasions in his works. The question interrupts *Another Country* not only to allude to a visit to Israel before the book's conclusion, as perhaps evocated in the title, but also to convey his views on transnational solidarity through the Palestinian resistance, fearlessly addressing the brutality and absence of compassion in neocolonial ideologies that are still relevant today. Baldwin's detached and at the same time passionate testimony, once again is incredibly prophetic and so much needed in the current moment in which the Palestinian question has raised a new wave of indignation.

"Toward Bethlehem," therefore, provides indications as to the destiny of Baldwin's new political involvement after the critical success of *Another Country* and *The Fire Next Time*: an anticolonialist activism that supports the Palestinian cause. Today, Bethlehem, more than ever, serves as a reminder of the need for a new humanity. Throughout his life, Baldwin has consistently criticized the Zionist state of Israel. When he first left New York in 1948, his destination had to be Israel, not France. In "Take Me to the Water," he explained his decision to not relocate to Israel: "And if I had fled, to Israel, a state created for the purpose of protecting Western interests, I would have been in a yet tighter bind: on which side of Jerusalem would I have decided

[616] Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 91.

to live?"[617] In a letter written on October 7, 1961, in Jerusalem, and addressed to Mary Painter, to whom he also dedicated *Another Country*, he wrote:

> A rather gloomy note, am within a stone's—or hand grenade's—throw from Gaza strip. One is never very far from a border here, all the borders are hostile. […] you can't walk five minutes without finding yourself at a border […], and of course the entire Arab situation, outside the country, and above all, within […] the fact that Israel is a homeland for so many Jews […] causes me to feel my own homelessness more keenly than ever.[618]

On the Palestinian issue, Baldwin would return pointedly in a letter suggestively titled "Open Letter to the Born Again" in response to Jimmy Carter's dismissal of Martin Luther King Jr.'s former aid Andrew Young from his position as ambassador to the United Nations for his decision to meet with a Palestinian Liberation Organization delegation. This correspondence appears to be a complete departure from the plot of *Another Country*; however, it adopts a vision that Baldwin had initiated to sketch shortly after or just before concluding the novel. The author tackles nationalist concerns in this work by providing an analysis that is both clear and accurate, particularly in light of the current climate of fervent discussions surrounding borders, nationalism, and defense. His argument consistently centers around the entanglement and complexity that arise from the desire for a homeland, even if it is another, and only if it is another. A place that is both a home and another place.

Again, the contrapuntal reading of the letter and *Another Country* and *No Name in the Street* establishes a connection between what is written before and what follows, enabling the reader to not only comprehend Baldwin's prophecy but also to reflect on how preceding content serves as a foundational recollection for future occurrences. In "Open Letter to the Born Again," Baldwin gives an account of his transnational geopolitical vision, clarifying the myth of Israel's birth, the divide between Jewishness and Zionism, and the European imperialist take on the situation, as well as demonstrating his support for the Palestine solidarity movement:

> Jews and Palestinians know of broken promises. From the time of the Balfour Declaration (during World War I) Palestine was under five British mandates, and England promised the land back and forth to the Arabs or the Jews, depending on which horse seemed to be in the lead. The Zionists—as distinguished from the people known as the Jews—using, as someone put it, the "available political machinery," i.e., colonialism, e.g., the British Empire, promised the British that, if the territory were given to them, the British Empire would be safe forever.

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[617] Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 378.
[618] Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 90–91.

> But absolutely no one cared about the Jews, and it is worth observing that non-Jewish Zionists are very frequently anti-Semitic.
>
> But the state of Israel was not created for the salvation of the Jews; it was created for the salvation of Western interests. This is what is becoming clear (I must say it was always clear to me). The Palestinians have been paying for the British colonial policy of "divide and rule" and for Europe's guilty Christian conscience for more than thirty years [...]. The collapse of the Shah not only revealed the depth of pious Carter's concern for "human rights," it also revealed who supplied oil to Israel, and to whom Israel supplied arms. It happened to be, to spell it out, white South Africa.[619]

Palestine echoes the Harlem ghetto, but also the suburban areas of Paris inhabited by Algerians, as well as the South African township resulting from apartheid. It becomes incredibly interconnected with global movements and demonstrations, which courageously claimed and still ask for the end of racism, as well as a ceasefire. Palestine, Harlem, and Johannesburg echo Ferguson in 2014, BLM's rallies in 2020, and today's marches for Palestine.[620] They are all part of Baldwin's trans-cartography, which is also a cartography of solidarity and love, strongly rooted in Black radicalism and anti-colonialism. Baldwin understands that the red thread connecting the "Negro" and the Palestinian, or the Algerian and the Black South African, is "the available political machinery" of colonialism, segregation, and slavery.

The goal of this global vision including border crossing is, of course, peace and unity but also a recognition of the specificity of each oppressed narrative. In his article on James Baldwin and Palestine, Timothy Seidel emphasizes that Palestine is a "growing theme in peacebuilding," and "whether it is the construction of walls, the militarisation of borders, the confiscation of land, or the brutalization and incarceration of bodies, activists and academics are identifying commonalities across experiences that transcend national boundaries and identities."[621] Furthermore, all genocide and oppression narratives revolve around "not born" children or survivors who want to be born again and whose existence shares the need to end a certain language, mode of knowing, and love. It is out of love and for love that Baldwin dedicated his life to creating a new language that could bridge various geographies and their histories

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[619] James Baldwin, "Open Letter to the Born Again" (1979), "Other Essays," *Collected Essays*, 785.

[620] The project of transnational solidarity has been recently analyzed by Angela Davis in her groundbreaking *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*. *Ferguson, Palestine and the Foundation of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016) in which she also acknowledges Baldwin's support for her liberation.

[621] Timothy Seidel, "'Occupied territory is occupied territory': James Baldwin, Palestine and the possibilities of transnational solidarity," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1645.

without disregarding their unique circumstances. His quest(ion) for another country was an intricate project which would continue until his death.

In the following section, I will continue to read Baldwin's journey of love, which between 1970 and 1985 as a result of tragic events, underwent another transformation, and compelled him to change his style, themes, and personal political commitments. He became increasingly preoccupied with Black nationalist and feminist demands, as well as children. His love ethics will reflect this preoccupation and will gradually become a po-ethics for the infancy of the world.

4.3 "Love is the key": Intimacies and American Love Grammars in *A Dialogue* and in *If Beale Street Could Talk*

Giovanni: Love is a tremendous responsibility.
Baldwin: It's the only one to take, there isn't any other.[622]
James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni

This section is conceived as a contrapuntal reading of *A Dialogue* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* by taking its cues from feminist intersectionality and expanding it through Spillers's critique of Baldwin's paradoxical "politics of intimacy," her groundbreaking analysis of an American family grammar, and her subsequent revaluation of Baldwin's subversive language in later criticism. Inspired by Spillers's observations on *If Beale Street Could Talk* and Baldwin's language, I propose an additional critical stance in my analysis of Baldwin's reimagined idea of love in the 1970s. I suggest that Baldwin's articulations of love in the 1970s foreshadow what Ferreira da Silva has eloquently called "a Poethics of Blackness," which has been briefly introduced in chapter 2. As I shall argue, some female characters in *If Beale Street Could Talk* are essential in shifting Baldwin and his art toward a more responsible and revolutionary love. In a similar vein, Nikki Giovanni's words in *A Dialogue* aim to persuade Baldwin of the need for an alternative and more accountable narrative of Black women's history, one that acknowledges the key role of their work in creating the wealth of the American dream as well as different world's definitions.

Since I embrace the term "Poethics" throughout my reading, my questions will be: Did Baldwin accept the invitation to welcome a world with Black female definitions and perspectives? Do the female and male characters in *If Beale Street Could Talk* love

[622] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 94.

differently? Why is it important that a different form of loving "end the world as we know it"? My replies are not certain, but they are suggestive of a possible understanding of Baldwin's transition to a more engaged concept of love in the 1970s, whose tenets presage *blackness* and its revolutionary force as envisaged by the Black radicalism of the 2000s. I consider this move to be a consequence of his attention to Black feminism and also as an attempt at creating a new language, new words for the world, as Spillers highlighted in her later critique. What I will seek to emphasize in my examination of *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *A Dialogue* is the use of a language that bears the imprint of *blackness*' social *poiesis* and the hope to halt the "racial nightmare" and "save the children."

On April 4, 1968, James Baldwin received a call from his brother saying that Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated. Three years later, in a conversation with Giovanni taped for the television program *Soul* (November 4, 1971, London), he would confess to the young African American poet and black feminist: "After Martin Luther King was murdered, I spent a long time in limbo."[623] Despair notwithstanding, that limbo paved the way to both new literary and political commitments, and a tormented reconsideration of his role as witness in the Civil Rights Movement. Although he had been cast out of the role of Black male spokesperson by the aforementioned harsh criticism penned by Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*—because of the interracial homosexual relations that had inspired his novels—he decided to reinforce his affiliation with Black Power, and in particular with the Black Panther Party.[624] Yet, standing as a challenge to the party's position regarding Black male subjectivity and the battle for self-determination was the protest on the part of Black feminism regarding the marginalization of African American women within the Black Power agenda; the same could be said for the emerging queer liberation movement. These changes, Mullen notes, "compelled Baldwin to rethink his ideas on race, and especially on masculinity."[625]

In the intense exchange with Giovanni noted above, Baldwin repeatedly displays a subtle hesitation about abdicating his vision of Black manhood, and when she laments the manner in which Black men reproduce the racist brutality they endure in the streets

[623] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 14.
[624] See Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 137–39.
[625] Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 135.

in their home with Black women, he exhorts her to "understand" that violence as symptomatic of the profound self-alienation (and castration) of the Black man:

> The price of being a black male in America—the price the black has had to pay, is expected to pay, and which he has to outwit—is his sex […] a black man is forbidden by definition, since he's black, to assume the roles, burdens, duties and joys of being black. In the same way that my child produced from your body did not belong to me but to the master and could be sold at any moment. This erodes man's sexuality, and when you erode a man's sexuality you destroy his ability to love anyone, despite the fact that sex and love are not the same thing.[626]

In this statement, Baldwin conflates race, sex, gender, and love and traces their intersection back to slavery, which is called, in their talk, as "the roughest game in the history of the world," and source for all the unbalanced power relations in the US.[627] Even so, what he seems to omit—and what Giovanni insists he be aware of—is that Black women, too, have paid their dues in the making of the American dream, both as enslaved individuals in the plantation system, and oppressed ones after the abolition of slavery. Both agree—and Giovanni reminds him—that "Afro-Americans [are the] sons and daughters of slaves and slave owners" and that the problem is not sex, but love or, better, a lack or incapacity for it.[628] They disagree, however, on the impact of patriarchy on Black women, which is double—that is white patriarchy as practiced by white men and white patriarchy as internalized by Black men.

Baldwin seems to not distinguish between Black male oppression and (double) Black female oppression.[629] For Giovanni the real drama is that Black men "try to be little white men […]. It does not work."[630] On a certain level, Baldwin seems unable to completely discard—despite his repeated appeal to detach from the standards of society—the paternalistic function of men as entities responsible for their households. Men, in his view, must "pay the rent," since under the internalized standards of the civilization into which African Americans are born, "a man who cannot support his wife and child is not a man."[631] But Giovanni, who at the time of the interview was aged 28 and a single mother, firmly replies: "[T]he rent has nothing to do with the responsibility that you as a man have to assume with me as a woman. Why we can't try it my

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[626] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 40.
[627] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 34.
[628] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 29 and 39.
[629] This was exactly the main argument on which Black feminism in the 1970s constructed their battle for recognition.
[630] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 65.
[631] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 52–53.

way?"[632]; And also "I've seen so many people […] that, for lack of being able to bring a steak in the house, they won't come. I can get my own damn steak!" [633]

Both the renewed engagement with Black Power and his conversation with Giovanni served to inform Baldwin's fifth novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, his first and only work of this genre not centered on interracial or homosexual love, and the first narrated by a woman, a character by the name of Tish Rivers. Set in Harlem at the beginning of the 1970s, the story revolves around the storyteller's love for Fonny Hunt, a young sculptor and the father-to-be of her child, who has been falsely accused of raping a young Puerto-Rican girl named Victoria. While Tish's family—her mother Sharon, father Joseph, and sister Ernestine—will show their support by facilitating Fonny's release from jail, the sculptor's own mother, Mrs. Hunt, along with her husband Frank and daughters Adrienne and Sheila, feel unable to save Fonny. *If Beale Street Could Talk* suggests that Baldwin took to heart both Giovanni's words, and her challenge that he attempt the portrayal of a Black man who truly loved his girlfriend without recourse to mistreatment. At the same time, the novel also tells the story of a woman called upon to "understand" the drama experienced by a Black man trying to be "nobody's nigger":

> [Fonny] had found his center, his own center, inside him: and it showed. He wasn't anybody's nigger. And that's a crime, in this fucking free country. You're supposed to be *somebody's* nigger. And if you're nobody's nigger, you're a bad nigger: and that's what the cops decided when Fonny moved downtown.[634]

Thus, *If Beale Street Could Talk* perfectly mirrors both the tension Baldwin experiences as he tries to reconcile with his own tormented masculinity as invoked by the Black nationalist movements and his acknowledgment that the struggle of a Black woman, "more visible" after King Jr.'s death, deserves recognition in like kind.[635] In this sense, it is, on the one hand, a story of Black romance that maintains heteronormativity—women must be mothers and wives—while at the same time, the narrative departs from the patriarchal/Christian paradigm in certain respects. The women from Tish's family, for example, "did not dig the church sisters" and they show a certain female agency throughout the novel.[636] To rescue Fonny, it is the dynamic blues lover Sharon who

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[632] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 65.
[633] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 55.
[634] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 393 (emphasis in the original).
[635] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue,* 67.
[636] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 381.

decides to go to Puerto Rico, where the only witness, Victoria, is now hiding. Tish is just as uninterested in getting married as Fonny is, and she is clearly not a tame adolescent given her brave thought upon meeting Officer Bell (the white policeman who arrests Fonny): "I wanted to get close to him, to enter into him, to open up that face and change it and destroy it […]. Then, we would both be free."[637] Ernestine, on her side, has acted like a rebel ever since she was a child, when, as Tish relates, she would stand in front of the mirror and recite, "*I don't care*. *I got me*"; she was also a voracious reader until one day she "stopped reading newspapers" and "going to the movies" because she realized that "'the white man's lie shit'" has "'fucked with [her] mind enough already.'"[638]

Such laudable qualities notwithstanding, a considerable proportion of late twentieth-century Black feminist critics such as Spillers, Trudier Harris, and Stacia L. Brown among others, tried to deny *If Beale Street Could Talk* the label of a proto-feminist novel—or at least of a Black proto-feminist novel.[639] In fact, the novel does sympathize more with men than women, the main character's destiny being to spend the rest of her life with Fonny, driven by a *childish* thought: "It simply had not entered my mind that my life could do anything else. I was still a child."[640]

Among Black feminist critiques, that of Spillers has proved of strategic value in illustrating the loss of agency for Black womanhood in the novel and its contradictions. It also allowed further analysis based on both my own revaluation, and the reassessment of the author Spillers was to offer in the decades to follow. In "The Politics of Intimacy: A Discussion," the critic observes that *If Beale Street Could Talk*'s plot repeats the masculinist structure primarily because of its language, given that the freedom and oppression of women are tied "to ways of saying things."[641] Baldwin uses exuberant metaphors to evoke powerful natural forces more than in his other novels, where

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[637] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 491.
[638] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 394 (emphasis in the original).
[639] It is interesting to note that Baldwin's early work in particular has been hailed as proto-(white) feminist, retaining the imprint of the white European feminist theories that circulated in France, where the writer lived nearly all his life. In particular, Brian Norman contends that it is the second-wave feminist personal-is-political tenet that is at work in Baldwin's 1960s novel. See Norman, "Crossing Identitarian Lines."
[640] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 404.
[641] Hortense Spillers, "The Politics of Intimacy: A Discussion," in *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, eds. Roseann P. Bell, Bettie J. Parker and Beverly Guy-Sheftal (New York: Anchor Books, 1979), 80.
[641] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 375.

biblical scenes and sermonic tones dominate.[642] The church language is limited, and strongly attacked, in his portrayal of Fonny's mother, Alice Hunt, the "Sanctified woman" who dedicated her life to the Lord and disapproved of both her son's romance and his future baby.[643] Despite the novelty of the language, Spillers argues, it paradoxically acted to limit the construction of a new "politics of intimacy," and women appear at the mercy of men and their world, a world still enmeshed in the rhetoric of American sentimentality. This failure applies in particular to the main character, Tish, who is completely at Fonny's mercy and stands uniquely as a female without charge or art—as opposed to Fonny, who is a sculptor—or any other purpose but to be there for his beloved and future son: the baby, indeed, will be male, and *her* love becomes *his* love.[644]

I find Spillers's lucid observations persuasive, particularly in that they were pronounced at an epochal moment when Black feminism was trying to establish a role for women that was not necessarily tethered to maternity—or at least, not to the kind of maternity embedded in the white patriarchal model—or heterosexual romance. Indeed, the narration focuses on the birth of the child and Fonny's incarceration, the baby in the womb and the man in prison both aspiring to freedom.[645] Tish, for her part, has no other agency than that which she exercises over her maternal body. Nor, given that the goal in *If Beale Street Could Talk* is to prevent the risk of an absent father, is there occasion for viewing maternity through a matriarchal prism. The Rivers family's struggle is to secure Fonny's freedom and presence in the baby's future life. Whether the newborn lives in a country defined by white men's norms—Sharon admonishes her daughter—is immaterial, but he, the baby, must be delivered and must not be alone:

> "Tish," she said, "when we was first brought here, the white man he didn't give us no preachers to say words over us before we had our babies. And you and Fonny be together right now, married or not, wasn't for the same white man. So, let me tell you what you got to do. You got to think about that baby, don't care what else happens or don't happen. *You* got to do that. Can't anybody else do that for you. And the rest of us, well, we going to hold on to you. And we going to get Fonny out. Don't you worry. I know it's hard—but don't you worry. And that baby be the best thing that ever happened to Fonny. He needs that baby."[646]

[642] Spillers, "Politics of Intimacy," 80.
[643] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 375.
[644] Spillers, "The Politics of Intimacy," 95–98.
[645] See Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 157.
[646] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 390 (emphasis in the original).

Obviously, here, I am reading *If Beale Street Could Talk* through the lens of "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," in which Spillers reflects on the history of Black women's family role in the US. In it, the African American feminist asserts that mothers and daughters have been unjustly blamed for the absence of fathers in Black families, which has been a constant motif in the symbolic order of the "American grammar" since the Middle Passage.[647]

In support of this claim, she references the Moynihan Report (1965), a widely disseminated US report on the state of the Black family, which posited matriarchy as the "pathology" of the Black family and Black males, whose roles had been threatened by their women's "'dominance' and 'strength.'"[648] This "pathology" would prevent the Black family from falling into line with the dominant "American grammar" that dictated the norm. Spillers disclaimed the report and suggested a very important correction: that the baby born of a female slave was never subject to claim by her/his mother, but inherited from her the condition of "enslaved."[649] Therefore, it was the very grammar of enslavement—reinforced by legal principles such as the *partus sequitur ventrem* principle, according to which "that which is born follows the womb"—and not motherhood or a "false" matriarchy that cruelly, systematically disrupted and discouraged family ties.[650] As Baldwin also reminds Giovanni when he asserts that the child created from an enslaved female belongs to the master, this unjust doctrine represses both Black motherhood and fatherhood. As a result, suggests Spillers, there was no matriarchy to blame, but rather a matriarchy to create anew:

> [T]he African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the Mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from *mimetic* view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law.[651]

Hence, Black feminism should write a "different text," with a different grammar, starting by *naming* African American women differently from "Daughter," "Sapphire" or "Brown Sugar" for example.[652] Names, in fact, played a crucial role in the history of slavery. In *If Beale Street Could* Talk this point is referenced on two occasions. First, as Tish recalls the many times she encountered shame, on her way to the exit after visiting

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[647] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 65.
[648] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 74.
[649] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 79–80.
[650] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.
[651] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80 (emphasis in the original).
[652] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.

Fonny in jail, including "the shame of the hardworking black ladies, who call me Daughter."[653] Secondly, following Tish's employment at the perfume center, when Ernestine began calling her sister "Jezebel," a derogatory name used to indicate a prostitute—"Sis claimed that I came home smelling like a Louisiana whore."[654] It is as if Tish, the narrator, is the feminine voice denouncing an entire system of signifying and saying with her private thoughts.

I contend that the force these intimate thoughts carry is paradoxically the very place for "Black Feminist Poethics," even when masculinist education emanates from them. There seem to be indications in Tish's narrative voice of another grammar that might be used to confront heteronormativity and white supremacist thinking patterns. Tish's inner meditations seem to evoke memories of Spillers's argument about the flesh, according to which the "flesh" comes before the "body," and unlike it, cannot be codified in normative structures. To speak from the realm of the flesh is to reject the societal constructs that confine one's body to narrow definitions and estrangement. In one of her introspective musings, Tish comes to the conclusion that the presence of a tangible body is what determines linguistic and interpersonal strangeness of one to other: "It's astounding the first time you realize that a stranger has a body—the realization that he has a body makes him a stranger. It means that you have a body too. You will live with this forever, and it will spell out the language of your life."[655]

Conversely, the flesh is not acted upon by language nor is covered by the skin of separability between one being and another. Instead of being despised or victimized, it can rather become the place where a real change can be pursued because it is not yet inscribed in the normative Eurocentric grammar. Spillers, of course, is pointing to the flesh of the enslaved people who endured the Middle Passage, which has been dehumanized due to its perceived value as a commodity.[656] Consequently, if rather than the body, we "think of the 'flesh' as a primary narrative" for accounting for the lives of enslaved Black women and men, "then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hold, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard."[657] If we think of the possibilities of the flesh, then we may alter the narrative about the intimacy of Black

[653] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 371.
[654] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 394.
[655] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 404.
[656] This is also what Ferreira da Silva stresses in her "Black Feminist Poethics" when she argues that we need to correct the "historical materialist reading of slavery" and recognize that the flesh of the enslaved (regarded as commodity) contributed to the making of the capital rather than preceded it. See Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 82.
[657] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

families. This is also what Ferreira da Silva gestures to in her "Black Feminist Poethics" project when she recalls "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" and urges us to "face slavery 'as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding.'"[658] This is ultimately what I observe with remarkable parallelism in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, particularly when Tish alludes to "the power of touch," which is the power of what has never been "thought," namely the flesh.[659]

By reading *If Beale Street Could Talk* against "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" one gains an insight into the realization that Tish and Fonny's love is not entirely entrapped in the American family grammar. In my reading, it rather defies and disrupts its rules through a story that cannot but must be told—"unspeakable things unspoken," as Toni Morrison would have it: the mystery of the birth of a baby, a flesh of one's own flesh, which is an allegory of love as a *poiesis* and morality, in a word a poethics.[660] On account of this, Baldwin's Black family in the novel is anomalous and far from generally recognizable, and indeed, the writer himself would later confess to his brother, David, that he had written "the strangest novel ever."[661]

Clearly, it is not the family of the Moynihan Report: Joseph, for example, is a father who is not only present, but also cares, and whose love for Tish is profound.[662] Fonny's presence is not threatened by women but by racism and one of its collateral plagues, the imprisonment of innocent Black men; the same goes for Frank, whose suicide has more to do with his incapacity to overcome the internalization of patriarchal masculinity than with his wife's attitude. Nor is it a completely "man-obsessed story," as Spillers posited in her literary analysis.[663] It is, rather, a baby-obsessed story, inscribed in a grammar proceeding from *the memory of the flesh*, and at the intersection of race, sex, religion, class, and gender, which subsequent to the year 2000 Baldwin scholarship has evaluated more positively, given the multifaceted complexity of the novel and the turns in the author's responsibilities and style around the beginning of the 1970s.[664]

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[658] Ferreira Da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 91.
[659] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 411, 403.
[660] Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" (1989), *Within the Circle*, *An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 368–400.
[661] David A. Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2015), 321.
[662] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 400.
[663] Spillers, "Politics of Intimacy," 99.
[664] See Francis, *The Critical Reception*, 126–43.

Spillers's reevaluation of Baldwin's prophetic language and fierce morality in her "Afterword" to *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* is part of this scholarship. In her new critical notes, she acknowledges *If Beale Street Could Talk*'s "penetrating, occasionally scary investigations into a familial politics of intimacy," and Baldwin's "role in shaping [her] own 'sentimental education.'"[665] While she makes only a passing mention of the novel, her discussion provides valuable insights to ponder as I examine *If Beale Street Could Talk.* She specifically encourages readers to consider the linguistic and moral dimensions, both of which are, in my opinion, central to Baldwin's later production and the development of what I term his poethics of love. With respect to the first dimension, Spillers traces Baldwin's experimental rhetoric of the final works back to his initial incursions into the musical style typical of North American Protestantism and particularly of the Black Church:

> Perhaps we could even go so far as to say that Baldwin style—what happened when the boy preacher became a man and took up the pen for real—could only have emerged in the cultural context of the United States with its peculiarly religious-sanctioned nativism that springs directly from the freewheeling, nonhieratical traditions of the Protestant church of North America.[666]

Considering Spillers's remarks, it is clear that in *If Beale Street Could Talk* the writer experiments with a style that preserves the Bible as subtext but promotes the blues to leading note. The title of the novel itself—*If Beale Street Could Talk*—emblematically refers to W. C. Handy's World War I blues number, "Beale Street Blues," which pays tribute to the focal point of the Memphis blues scene. As Mullen writes: "Beale Street is any street in Black America—from Harlem to East St. Louis—where Black people might take refuge and pleasure from a world of pain. Yet trouble waits round the corner on Beale Street."[667] The blues—being a genre that, like the musical fugue, relies on contrapuntal composition—gives Baldwin a *fugue* of "salvation" that the Pentecostal Church's "safety" has failed to offer him.[668] Nevertheless, the blues is not separate from

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[665] Spillers, "Afterword," *James Baldwin: America and Beyond*, 242, and 243–44.
[666] Spillers, "Afterword," 242.
[667] Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 157.
[668] The distinction between safety and salvation commenced with *The Fire Next Time*. For Baldwin, safety means the absence of risk and change. "God for them [white people] seems to be a metaphor for purity and safety," said Baldwin to Giovanni—while salvation implies the painful discovery of the self as other. In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, this contrast is recreated by Alice Hunt, who belongs to Pentecostal Church, and Sarah Rivers, a former blues singer who does not much "dig" the Abyssinian Baptist Church of which she is part. See Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 45.

the Church.[669] When talking about Black literature, Baldwin tells Giovanni that "we [Black writers] did it through our music and we did it in the church."[670] He is convinced that the Black writing style stems from a reinvention of the Judeo-Christian ethic and language—"Baby [continues Baldwin] what we did with Jesus was not supposed to happen […]. We took that cat over and made him ours."[671]

In respect to the second dimension, Spillers admits that Baldwin's language eschews "a predictable range of meaning" and is "conditioned by a larger sense of the *human*," not restricted to male, female, or queer, which surely makes of him a moralist, that is, "one who emphasizes the significance of *conduct* as the primary question of an ethical project."[672] On the basis of this remark, I consider *If Beale Street Could Talk* as a story that delivers not only a baby, but also a new moral order, a poethics of love which, even if inspired by a Black woman's story, transcends the fixity of both masculinity and femininity and teaches future generations how to be human. I also regard this new *conduct* of *human* love residing in Baldwin's later fiction as inseparable from what the writer addresses as "morality" and "energy" in his dialogue with Giovanni:

> The kids want to live. And we have out of a terrifying suffering, a certain sense of life, which everybody needs. And that's morality for me. You know, you use the word "morals"; I would use the word "energy" […]. Anyway it's a very mysterious endeavor, isn't it. And the key is love.[673]

This new moral energy no longer demands to "be like [the conscious white and Black] lovers," but it requires the acceptance of love as flesh, touch, and responsibility "for the sake of future generations, and even for the sake of white people."[674] It is therefore related to the poethics of *blackness*, its social "energy" and will to imagine another future. Consequently, if *If Beale Street Could Talk* is unable to fully satisfy the American, Black Power, or Black feminist grammars, this is due not only to the author's ambivalence but also to his moral attempt to forge a new language. This is also recalled

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[669] Douglas Field, in his excellent essay on Baldwin's Pentecostalism, argues that Baldwin never completely abandoned the Church. Though he left the institution, he developed from the Bible a personal language, mixed with Black musical patterns. Field also discusses how Baldwin's specific form of Black Christianity, Pentecostalism, incorporated secular musical forms, such as blues and jazz. See Field, "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz," 443.
[670] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 27.
[671] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 27.
[672] Spillers, "Afterword," 245.
[673] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 35.
[674] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 21. It is my suggestion that the analysis of love in *If Beale Street Could Talk* presupposes critical studies on language as belonging to the symbolic order, on music as pertaining to both the linguistic and extra-linguistic order (bluesology, in particular), and on affect entailing the sensorial order. Therefore, Baldwin's project of love in the years following Martin Luther King Jr.'s death pertains both to the linguistic realm and the extra-linguistic (sensorial) one.

by Spillers when she mentions a very important passage from Baldwin's "Notes on the House of Bondage": "Baldwin's insistence that we make new—'we have come to the end of a language and we are now about the business of forging a new one'—is asserted from his position as a moralist of the higher order."[675]

Caught in the double linguistic and moral movement, as emphasized by Spillers, this new language rejects the symbolic order of the father, and perhaps also the "evaporated law of the Mother," and instead welcomes the pre-symbolic language of the flesh, its touch, feeling, and responsibility to the children. As a result, in *If Beale Street Could Talk* love becomes first and foremost the ability to touch the other, being "a part of each other, flesh of each other's flesh" as Tish says of her and Fonny: "Which meant that we so took for granted that we never thought of the flesh."[676] It is feeling another human's pain: Fonny's imprisonment and the future baby "concerns *all* of us," says Joseph.[677] It is making it possible "for others to live," children in particular.[678] The most important responsibility of love is that associated with the children: "Save the children," admonishes Ernestine, who works with and for them.[679] *If Beale Street Could Talk* ends with the promise of this salvation, and Tish is "the only one who can tell the story. The book ends with the birth of Tish and Fonny's baby. [A mama's *and* a papa's baby.] That's what the story is about, our responsibility to that baby."[680] There is no other world beyond the baby, and in this sense, women are trapped primarily in a maternal responsibility, as Spillers had noted. Still, what Tish po-ethically delivers us is not only a newborn baby but also a new moral that wants to live beyond American grammar and sentimentality. This new life is born to end the world as we know it and claim a new politics of intimacy that is liberated from all forms of social and moral constraint as well as bodily imprisonment. If he—but I would imagine the baby as she—could talk, they would also tell us a different story about slavery, its women, men, and kids.

Unfortunately, we will never know if the child ever met his father, as the conclusion of the story has puzzled criticism, while Baldwin himself has never revealed whether Fonny actually gained his freedom. Perhaps the novel foresaw the problem of African Americans in our century, of mass incarceration as a new form of slavery. Perhaps the writer was suggesting that even if the Civil Rights Movement did attain the

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[675] Spillers, "Afterword," 245.
[676] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 403.
[677] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 401 (emphasis in the original).
[678] Baldwin and Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, 74.
[679] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 401.
[680] Baldwin,"'Go the Way Your Blood Beats,'" 89.

level of awareness necessary for a Black love, that this would still not be enough to save Black lives. Considering that we now find ourselves in the century of Black Lives Matter, we might say that in this, as in so many other cases, Baldwin's prophecy did, eventually, come true. We only know that the baby is born, love has "sent it," and it has sent love.[681] There is no blues song, tearful as the genre may be, nor spiritual language sufficient to communicate this birth. This event of love is unspeakable, and "if Beale Street could talk," it would say: "The baby cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries, cries like it means to wake the dead."[682]

What if these cries and screams suggest a new poethics of love inspired by "Black Feminist Poethics" and its grammar of the flesh, narrated by a Black woman, while simultaneously waking a new consciousness made of touch, the capacity of feeling and sharing the pain for the sake of the children to come? In my view, Baldwin's move toward a poethics of love in the 1970s was both a prescient and urgent lesson on love and a turning point in his artistic development. What I find particularly brilliant about his interaction with Giovanni and *If Beale Street Could Talk* is the prophecy and desire to invest the world with change through a different style that stems from Black culture but is not restricted to Black people. Baldwin does not claim subversion of roles in the existing social structures through his characters; rather, he seeks to abolish those preexisting structures through the power of language. This gesture inspires a practice of love, which is devoid of the fear of *touching* another human being, unconstrained by the requirement of separation, and bearing responsibility for future generations. Rarely has infancy been seen as the possibility for another grammar, another *humanitas*, but rather as an instrument for perpetuating a certain approach to knowing and inhabiting the world. Not only do the kids want to live with other definitions than those they have been given, but they also would be wanting to talk about and from a space where they can be loved. This might be the space of *blackness*, which opens up a "whole range of possibilities for knowing, doing, and existing."[683] *If Beale Street Could Talk* invites me to ultimately read the story as a baby-obsessed, a Mama's *and* Papa's baby story dedicated to the infancy of the world, the newborn, unable to speak, but whose

[681] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 403.
[682] Baldwin, "If Beale Street Could Talk," 509.
[683] Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 91.

language-to-be holds the promise of talking differently on love, using language differently, the promise of loving and living differently.[684]

4.4 "The Kids Want To Live": Love as "Revolutionary Hope" and the End of the Politics As We Know It[685]

> It was not *we* who were supposed to *die out*.[686]
> James Baldwin

> Infancy […] knows about broken promises, bitter disappointments, failings, and abandonment, but which also knows about dreaming, memory, question, invention, obstinacy, listening to the heart, love, and real openness to stories. Infancy is the state of the soul inhabited by something to which no answer is ever given.[687]
> Christopher Finsk

In the last decade of his life, Baldwin's literary success slowly faded away, although his political commitments and writings were assiduous and numerous. His later works have only recently come into appreciation, contradicting Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s assertion that Baldwin's later works lost influence, and his persona was "passé," as his editor had advised him when declining to publish his interview with the writer.[688] If critics saw his artistic vein and his yearning for change as extinguished, in fact, Baldwin still harbored revolutionary hope, and especially for the children of the world, as he implied in the ending of *If Beale Street Could Talk* as well as in other works not taken under analysis here but wonderfully centered on this theme.[689]

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[684] Etymologically, the word "infant" refers to one who is unable to speak.

[685] This section draws inspiration from my active participation (and reaction paper) in the EGS online class on "Fanon's *The Damned*" taught by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, in which I actively participated in August 2020.

[686] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 490 (emphasis in the original).

[687] I use the translation provided by Christopher Finsk in his beautiful essay titled "Lyotard's Infancy" (2001). Lyotard's complex analysis of infancy will be only announced here as it offers the opportunity to make a sort of leap into abolition. For the brevity of the essay, I could not delve into it, but it is one of the most intricate and interesting texts on infancy. Christopher Finsk, "Jean-François's Infancy," *Minima Moralia. In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*, eds. Claire Nouvet, Zrinka Stahuljak, and Kent Still (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2007), 135. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503625099-009

[688] Herny Louis Gates Jr., "The Fire Last Time. What Baldwin Can and Can't Teach America," *The New Republic* (June 1, 1992), http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114134/fire-last-time

[689] See, for example, the long essay *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), in which Baldwin reports on the Atlanta child murders, where some children, mostly Black boys, were killed by a serial killer between 1979 and 1981.

In this section, I will read contrapuntally a conversation Baldwin had with another famous Black feminist, Audre Lorde, entitled "Revolutionary Hope," and remarks made by the author from the two texts analyzed in the previous chapter—*The Fire Next Time* and *The Devil Finds Work*—and in *No Name in the Street*. The reading will be *augmented* through Fanon's views on violence, Hannah Arendt's critique of Baldwin's "gospel of love," in turn reread by Moten. Through this ensemble of critical perspectives, I will illustrate how the term "prophecy" will eventually come home, as if to complete a circle. When evaluated etymologically, in fact, the two terms imply a paradoxical combination between what is predicted (*profeteia*) and what cannot be uttered due to a lack of speech and authority (*infantia=unable to speak*). Given that Baldwin's prophecies, in my view, are addressed to the infancy of the world, they may be seen as a kind of *pro-infancy*, a prophecy for infancy, a "diction" for, before, in front of, and with the mission of sheltering or guarding infancy and its capacity for love.

However, this should not be interpreted as a "prediction" intended to fill the void of muteness or strengthen the predominance of verbal communication. On the contrary, according to Eddie S. Glaude Jr.'s recent work on the writer's significance, it is one of Baldwin's "urgent lessons" to convert the unspeakable into the possibility of alternative understanding and, by extension, alternative love.[690] Additionally, as Baldwin had fully sensed, children's openness to the world is the primary target of power play controlled by colonial and racist practices. Indeed, as Lyotard points out and as the incipit of this section clarifies, there are two notions of childhood: one as the first stage of life (proper of children) and the other as the ability to be open to the world, particularly an "openness to non-being," a capacity to feel, a kind of affectivity articulated in an open body that applies to all ages.[691] As a consequence, I regard infancy as a form of *blackness*, which denotes a modality derived from the "thing," originated in children, in their condition of muteness and mutability at the same time—the condition of *mu* of which Moten talks (and which not coincidentally alludes to the myth of a kid, as discussed in chapter 2). Finally, infancy's openness to non-being can be interpreted as consent to not being a single being.

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[690] See Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (Crown Publishing Group: New York, 2020).

[691] An example of this can be found in the scholarly work of Giorgio Agamben, which explores the relationship between infancy and history. In this regard, he discusses infancy as the site of an originary experience situated between the word and speech, a distinct realm that retains the imprint of the infant but transcends infancy as a developmental phase. Ultimately, infancy is the capacity to experience reality apart from the structural norms of language. See Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*. *Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London-New York: Verso Books, 1993).

This consent on the part of the children is first and foremost a consent to life: "children want to live"—Baldwin admonished in his dialogue with Giovanni—but the adult world does not know how to appreciate this desire and is not prepared to welcome it. This thought is also echoed in the conversation with Lorde, in which the hope that Baldwin conveys seems to be directed once again at the infancy of the world, to be perceived as both the stage of being children and the state of being open to the world. Baldwin seems to emphasize some of the points discussed with Giovanni, including the understanding that both Black men and Black women must subordinate themselves to an ethic, morale, and greater energy that is more concerned with children than with adults, more with infancy than with structured adult life. In response, Lorde seeks to advance a point of view that is critical for early childhood education, which is most of the time trapped in a sexist and racist pedagogy because of the lack of recognition of differences between male and female desires:

> We need to acknowledge those power differences between us and see where they lead us. An enormous amount of energy is being taken up with either denying the power differences between Black men and women or fighting over power differences between Black men and women or killing each other off behind them. I'm talking about Black women's blood flowing in the streets—and how do we get a 14-year-old boy to know I am not the legitimate target of his fury? The boot is on both of our necks. Let's talk about getting it off. My blood will not wash out your horror. That's what I'm interested in getting across to adolescent Black boys.
>
> There are little Black girl children having babies. But this is not an immaculate conception, so we've got little Black boys who are making babies, too. We have little Black children making little Black children. I want to deal with that so our kids will not have to repeat that waste of themselves.[692]

According to Lorde, the origins of the violence instilled from childhood and causing disparity between Black boys and girls, as well as instances of the former's mistreatment of the latter, can be traced back to the fact that Black masculinity has been unable to undo a patriarchal and heteronormative policy. As Fanon had extensively examined, this politics underpins the mental diseases induced by colonialism. Although the Martinican psychiatrist was unable to elicit feminine desire, he understood the racial equation of the colonial mission based on an Enlightenment calculation about human development: "The misfortune of man is that he was once a child."[693] This statement refers to the psychoanalytic approach, which is often employed to decode neurosis as rooted in childhood, but it also alludes to the colonial infantilization of Black males, and

[692] Baldwin and Lorde, "Revolutionary Hope."
[693] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 231.

colonized territories, to justify its civilizing mission. According to the colonial paradigm, colonized people should be taught and regulated by the colonizer's authority in the same way as children must refer to their father's authority: the colonized are therefore regarded infants. Violence cannot be divorced from the fact that, in some ways, the colonial relationship between colonist and colonized has not only retraced the divide between the adult (a rational, speech-proficient subject) and the child (an irrational and mute non-subject), but has also violently separated the brutal imposition of a developmental model (from the children to the future) from the resistance to it enacted by the colonized masses.

Fanon returns to the issue of violence and childhood in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which infancy is displaced, since it is neither the future nor the promise of development into which bourgeois linear progress is projected, nor is it the innocent period of existence described in Western literature. Children are turned violent by colonialism; they die; they are implicated in racism and colonial violence; and their growth is unnatural because it starts *at the end*: "We need not think that it is jumping ahead; it is in fact beginning at the end. It is already senile before it has come to know the petulance, the fearlessness or the will to succeed of youth."[694]

It is critical to reflect on violence because it is often separated from infancy in colonial, decolonial, and postcolonial contexts, as well as in anti-blackness racist ones: children are the most despised and brutally attacked group, but they are also the first to be exposed to the learning of violence. Violence is isolated and spreads in a compartmentalized environment. Similarly, it is only justified when "the vital interests" are divided following the Manichean distinction between those who matter and those who do not. In the session devoted to clinical instances, the most violent chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which diverse types of violence on both sides emerge lucidly and bloodily, Fanon narrates the tale of two Algerian children who murder their French friend. When he asks one of them why he would murder a European if it is something "for grown-ups," the fourteen-year-old responds, "But they kill children too."[695] There is no reasonable explanation for it; nonetheless, everything of colonialism's justified

[694] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 123.
[695] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 201.

institutional brutality is at work in this example, and the most "damned" of the earth are the children.[696]

Baldwin's view of violence and children seems to mirror some of Fanon's thoughts, indicating that there is a remarkable resemblance between the two figures, as previously stated in chapter 1. However, Fanon's new humanism and existential tone are replaced by Baldwin's radical love ethics and "revolutionary hope" that should be first guaranteed on a personal level, in each other's nakedness. Even Baldwin's use of the phrase "the wretched of the earth" seems to acquire new nuances if confronted with the Fanonian endeavor of nation-building undertaken by the colonized. An instance of this usage can be observed in *The Devil Finds Work*, a literary work published fifteen years after the release of *The Wretched of the Earth* and Fanon's death. There is a section in this collection, in which Baldwin candidly shares his emotions following the cinematic adaptation of Dickens's *A Tale of the Two Cities*. The author explicitly remarks on how he was "haunted" by the scene and description of the murder of a peasant boy who, before dying, curses all the impoverished women who ought to be "barren" from "the dreadful thing" of bringing a child into this world, so that "our miserable race dies out!"[697] Baldwin reflects on his dissatisfaction with this thought and this part of the film, conceding in a passage worthy of citation while speculating as to why "it was not *we* [the wretched of the earth] who were supposed to *die out*," but rather to be born:

> Dickens has not seen it at all. The *wretched of the earth* do not decide to become extinct, they resolve, on the contrary, to multiply: life is their weapon against life, life is all that they have. This is why the dispossessed and starving will never be convinced (though some may be coerced) by the population-control programs of the civilized […]. The civilized have created the wretched, quite coldly and deliberately, and do not intend to change the *status quo*; are responsible for their slaughter and enslavement; rain down bombs on defenseless children whenever and wherever they decide that their "vital

[696] According to Moten, the correct English translation for "*les damnés*," should be "the damned" instead of "the wretched." He explains his preference of "damnation" over "*wretchedness*, after the example of Miguel Mellino, not simply because it is a more literal translation of Fanon (though often, with regard to Fanon, I prefer the particular kinds of precision that follow from what some might dismiss as mistranslation) but also because wretchedness emerges from a standpoint that is not only not ours, that is not only one we cannot have and ought not want, but that is, in general, held within the logic of im/possibility that delineates the administered world of the subject/citizen. But this is to say, from the outset, not that I will advocate the construction of a necessarily fictive standpoint of our own but that I will seek out not just the absence but the refusal of standpoint, to actually explore and to inhabit and to think what Bryan Wagner calls 'existence without standing' from no standpoint because this is what it would truly mean to stay in the hold of the ship (when the hold is thought with properly critical, and improperly celebratory, clarity)." See Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 193.

[697] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 489.

> interests" are menaced, and think nothing of torturing a man to death: these people are not to be taken seriously when they speak of the "sanctity" of human life, or the "conscience" of the civilized world. There is a "sanctity" involved with bringing a child into this world: it is better than bombing one out of it. Dreadful indeed is to see a starving child, but the answer to that is not to prevent the child's arrival but to restructure the world so that the child can live in it: so that the "vital interest" of the world becomes nothing less than the life of the child. However—I could not have said any of this then, nor is so absurd a notion about to engulf the world now. But we were all starving children, after all, and none of our fathers, even at their most embittered and enraged, had ever suggested that we "die out." It was not we who were supposed to die out: this was of all notions, the most forbidden, and we learned this from the cradle. Every trial, every beating, every drop of blood, every tear, were meant to be used by us for a day that was coming—for a day that was certainly coming, absolutely certainly, certainly coming: not for us, perhaps, but for our children.[698]

Baldwin argues that the very cause of liberation that is subsumed by the ethical and affective obligation of love is the salvation of children. Additionally, if we follow Moten's invitation to adopt "damnation" instead of wretchedness, then we can imagine that in *The Tale of Two Cities*, the dying boy does curse the wretched, those who are doomed by fear to be more than one single being, but not the *damned*, those who want to live, and be more than one (ethically and numerically). By interpreting Baldwin's passage through Moten's suggestion and a transnational feminist perspective that encourages speculative fabulation, I am able to read the above passage beyond a mere celebration of life. It also touches on feminist issues related to women's role in motherhood and ecological concerns about global sustainability menaced by the growth of the population. The passage expresses a desire for life to be cherished, protected, and approached as a conscientious effort to create the necessary conditions for its sustenance. The "sanctity" of life does not imply that life must be a prerequisite for the future, nor that women should be considered mothers *per* nature or be barren to bring life to the world. It implies that children should not die because of violence, discrimination, poverty, exclusionary politics, and imperialist and colonial planning.[699]

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[698] Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," 489–90 (my emphasis).

[699] This echoes Fanon's depiction of the "Third World" and the narratives of female African American authors recalling the era of slavery, in which mothers engage in a distinct form of survival that involves a different type of violence, such as killing their children. This act figures as an oxymoron to the atrocities committed by colonizers or white supremacists since it intends to radically end a certain world order. It is a story that should not be "passed on," as eloquently Toni Morrison impressed in our minds forever with her novel *Beloved*. It indicates, once again, that life is not *sacred* because it should guarantee an "untouched" futurity (for the Self, the nation, family, etc.) but survival of (untouched) difference and other ways of knowing and loving which allow the *touching of the flesh*.

Therefore, the "sanctity" of infancy, similar to the "sanctity of life," entails the openness to not being that single being who, to survive, should rely on separability, unbalanced power relations, and the law of the Father. When Baldwin points out that "the answer is not to prevent the child's arrival but to restructure the world so that the child can live in it," he is advocating that new way of looking at sensuality he had described in *The Fire Next Time*, which is also able to rejoice in the force and fact of life. Furthermore, he is anticipating what years later, conversing with Lorde, would be hope for Black men and women to unite in an effort to recognize each other's incompleteness: "I cannot live without you, and you cannot live without me—and the children can't live without us."[700] Lorde would add to Baldwin's words an important reflection. Before restructuring the world for the child, it is vital to include women, to make the effort to know them:

> Do you know what happens to a woman who gives birth, who puts that child out there and has to go out and hook to feed it? Do you know what happens to a woman who goes crazy and beats her kids across the room because she's so full of frustration and anger? Do you know what that is? Do you know what happens to a lesbian who sees her woman and her child beaten on the street while six other guys are holding her? Do you know what that feels like?[701]

As Mullen contends, Baldwin tried to listen to Lorde's request to move beyond the definitions set by heteronormativity, and, as aforementioned, he used the conversation as inspiration for "Here Be Dragons."[702] However—continues Mullen—he was hesitant to admit that sexuality and sexual differences are private facts able to be attained to the public dimension.[703] It seems that for Baldwin the living experience of children should be both a private and public matter; or that the distinction is blurred.

I believe that, before concluding, there is one more reading able to *augment* and translate infancy's openness to the world and another way of loving and capacity to blur the difference between private and public. Rereading Hannah Arendt's criticism of both Fanon's quest(ion) of violence and Baldwin's quest(ion) of love sheds light on the political significance of public and private matters like parental care and pedagogy. As Bhabha reports in his "Foreword" to *The Wretched of the Earth*, the philosopher's "assault on the book in the late sixties was an attempt at staunching the wildfire it

[700] Baldwin and Lorde, "Revolutionary Hope."
[701] Baldwin and Lorde, "Revolutionary Hope."
[702] Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 180.
[703] Mullen, *Living in Fire*, 180.

spread across university," although he adds that "she readily acknowledged that it was really Sartre's preface that glorified violence beyond Fanon's words."[704] As if there was an unwillingness on her part to believe that Fanon the psychiatrist would have been able to love that "liberatory violence."[705] However, Arendt argues in her *On Violence* that violence is an unpredictably employed apolitical strategy that belongs in the private sphere as a non-public act of the individual or the social mass; it neither generates power nor can it support politics.[706] She is troubled by the flight of imagination—what Fanon calls "the leap of invention"—toward and out of the personal as the political.

As Moten underscores, Arendt's distrust of the personal-is/as-political, and her tripartite structure privacy-sociality-politics, can be observed in her reaction to Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. She considers the essay—that it is worthwhile to bear in mind to be addressed to a young boy, Baldwin's nephew and, in general, to future generations—a "gospel of love";[707] especially the famous passage about the "conscious lovers" preached at the end of the essay. In reply, she writes a letter to Baldwin almost to remind him that:

> In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is achieved except hypocrisy. All the characteristics you stress in the Negro people: their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity, are well-known characteristics of all oppressed people. They grow out of suffering and they are the proudest possessions of all pariahs. Unfortunately, they have never survived the hour of liberation by even five minutes. Hatred and love belong together, and they are both destructive; you can afford them only in the private and, as a people, only so long as you are not free.[708]

Indeed, her assertion holds true, given that etymologically and historically the concept of politics is intended for the *polis*, the hidden city, and consequently, a restricted part of the population; and Baldwin, in particular, has no interest in the American or European conception of politics—he "is not a political theorist," as Moten asserts—as he tries to reinvent politics itself.[709] His "like-a-lovers" vision seeks to eradicate the world of politics and reorganize it in the children's "vital interests," and not to maintain the *status quo*. Baldwin's revolutionary love narrates another tale of love in which the act of loving someone transforms the world, as written in *No Name in the Street:* "[…]

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[704] Homi Bhabha, "Foreword," *The Wretched of the Earth*, xxi.
[705] Bhabha, "Foreword," xxi.
[706] Arendt in *On Violence* exposes her controversial discussion around the public, the private, and the social, by recognizing as political only the first one. See Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1970).
[707] Arendt, "The Meaning of Love in Politics."
[708] Arendt, "The Meaning of Love in Politics."
[709] Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 88.

the world changed then, and it changed forever. Because you love a human being, you see everyone else very differently than you saw them before."[710] It also brings up Moten's question: "Is it insufficient to say that the love that must be opposed to politics […] merely serves as an inadequate indicator to suggest a love that exists independently of and in opposition to ante- and antipolitical society?"[711] For Moten, Arendt finds it difficult to perceive Fanon's analysis of violence and Baldwin's revolutionary love as political actions, respectively, due to her inability to transfer the concept and agency of change from the private or social sphere to the public sphere.

An additional scene, which implies children, exemplifies this gulf between the American philosopher and the Black radical call to disrupt the political, social, and cultural crystallization of abolitionism. A *pedagogica*l sequence that, once more, would have brought Arendt closer to Baldwin or Fanon, but instead concludes apologetically (concerning subjectivity and politics): the photographic scenes captured at Little Rock Central High School and Harry Harding High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, and Charlotte, North Carolina, respectively. It is September 4, 1957, and Elizabeth Ann Eckford and Dorothy Count, both fifteen years old, are visibly unwelcome and threatened upon entering all-white institutions.[712] By juxtaposing these two images through Arendt and Baldwin's responses to them, one is invited to confront the importance of prophecy for infancy, that is of telling *before* the infancy of the world, that abolition is *the present future*. Arendt argues in "Reflections on Little Rock" that she feels as if she is *looked* by the picture of Eckford, which should be considered "like a fantastic caricature of progressive education which, by abolishing the authority of adults, implicitly denies their responsibility for the world into which they have borne their children and refuses the duty of guiding them into it."[713] In her view, Eckford's parents are culpable for exposing their daughter to forced desegregation, and she deems this matter of education as a private fact entangled in social life but not in a public and political one, and thus incapable of effecting tangible political transformation. Conversely, Baldwin presents an alternative interpretation of Dorothy Count's arrival at

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[710] Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 366.
[711] Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 87.
[712] In lieu of Little Rock (which was also recounted in *No Name in the Street*), I opted to examine Baldwin's reaction to Dorothy Count. This choice was motivated by the photograph's distinct impact on Baldwin's memory, or more accurately, lack thereof. Baldwin mentioned the photograph in his narration from France in 1956, shortly after the "First Conference of Negro Writers," whereas he personally observed it in New York in 1957, the year the event in question actually occurred.
[713] Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* (Winter 1959), http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/reflections-on-little-rock/

school. As he recounts in *No Name in the Street*, when he finds out that is *faced* with the picture of the girl—"being reviled and spat upon by the mob […] with history, jeering, at her back"—he feels ashamed and he realizes that "[s]ome one of us should have been there with her!"[714]

In a manner akin to the response to the peasant boy's death in *The Tales of Two Cities* and the observation of the "wretched of the earth," Baldwin rejects the notion that Dorothy's parents should have prevented the young kid from entering school. Rather, for him, the answer would be "to recreate a world" for her; a world where, to borrow Moten's poetical, synesthetic (musical, haptic, and visual) image, "[w]hen mo'nin' breaks, the soloist walks away," an expression which displaces, once again, the notion of single being, completeness, and separatist individuality: children should not be left alone.[715] Baldwin denounces the prioritization of the pedagogical core values of American grammar and nation. Despite recognizing the cruel paradox of colonialism and segregation so deeply analyzed by Fanon—colonized adults equated to children, and colonized children equated to adults—he does not share with him the resistance project predicated upon the necessity of building up a national identity by all means necessary. He rather seeks to be open to other visions, and one of them derives from Black feminism, as this chapter in part has sought to demonstrate. Baldwin would learn from his conversations with Giovanni and Lorde that it is crucial to abolish the fundamental foundations on which identity is built before considering national or

[714] As mentioned in my previous note, it is interesting to note that Baldwin mentions having seen the picture after participating in the aforementioned First Conference in Paris one year before the picture was taken. It seems that in the 1970s, when he remembers the episode, his prophetic view was already meant to show what was before in a way that becomes *before now*, before as in front of him, of us, now. There is an effect of blurring of the image that renders the resonance of the story so closely distant and Baldwin a prophet in the sensual sense that he is *present in what he is predicting*. And it is this false proximity that in my opinion explains why Baldwin felt the need to stay with Dorothy even *before* she was left alone, and let us know that this "dreadful" thing of small Black boys and girls attempting to go to school—an attempt comparable to Jews' attempt to enter Nazi schools to overthrow The Third Reich (as he commented on for the Little Rock black kids)—it is still an attempt to shut up that public "jeering of history at her back." It is still a violent act of love. See Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," 383 and 389; and Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 389.

[715] Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 87. This is an expression that also implies the fact that we should listen to photographs as phonic acts and not only visuals for the potentiality of the history they contain. A more detailed study on Black "phonography" is found in the extraordinary article "Black Mo'nin," in which the critic addresses the topic of mourning taking inspiration from the death of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy found dead in the river in Money, Mississippi, in August 1955. The decision of his mother to show the swollen and damaged face of the boy spread contradictory reactions around the world as soon as the picture circulated. This photograph, according to Moten, contains all the force of "Black mo'nin'," which stands both for mourning and moaning and attests to the fact there is sound in photographs. The remembrance of Till's corpse in this section suggestively recalls Rufus's swollen body and the "mo'nin'" of his family, as Ida recounts to Vivaldo. In both cases, I can hear the sound of the vision of "a childless mother." See Fred Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," *Loss. The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David Kazanjian and David L. Eng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 59–76.

masculine identity. When Lorde presents the challenge, Baldwin is surprised, but the sound of it, reminiscent of the sound of the term "revolution" he experienced when he first went to the movies, was not unheard.

> AL: […] We live in the mouth of a dragon, and we must be able to use each other's forces to fight it together, because we need each other. I am saying that in our joint battle we have also developed some very real weapons, and when we turn them against each other they are even more bloody, because we know each other in a particular way. When we turn those weapons against each other, the bloodshed is terrible. Even worse, we are doing this in a structure where we are already embattled. I am not denying that. It is a family discussion I'm having now. I'm not laying blame. I do not blame Black men for what they are. I'm asking them to move beyond. I do not blame Black men; what I'm saying is, we have to take a new look at the ways in which we fight our joint oppression because if we don't, we're gonna be blowing each other up. We have to begin to redefine the terms of what woman is, what man is, how we relate to each other.
> JB: But that demands redefining the terms of the Western world…
> AL: And both of us have to do it; both of us have to do it…[716]

This is a possibility that although sounds utopian, can truly create a collaborative solidarity between blacks and whites, women and men, and adults and kids. This is infancy, and its power to change the definitions of the world. This is Baldwin's prophecy. Ultimately, this is *blackness next time*.

[716] Baldwin and Lorde, "Revolutionary Hope."

Conclusion

In a very real sense, every writing as revision makes the 'discovery' all over again.[717]
Hortense Spillers

The real leap consists of introducing invention into life.[718]
Frantz Fanon

Over the last twenty years, James Baldwin's persona and body of work have acquired considerable notoriety. His prophetic imagination, eloquent prose, and audacious examination of the human being's pursuit of a more ethical existence continue to serve as invaluable resources for addressing urgent inquiries that jeopardize "an examined life." If Michel Foucault's assertion that literature ought to excavate within itself in search of its own ruptures, and discontinuities, and ultimately discover its ground zero, or pure whiteness, from which metamorphosis can resurge, then Baldwin's work represents a vast matrix of transformation, capable of *looking through* itself, become closer and estranged to itself at once.[719] Indeed, his literature functions as a rupture from the real and at the same time gets closer to it, and therefore possesses the ability to change it, given that reading a book is always an experience of the real, as it happens with the figurations of "interior life." Literature not only establishes itself as a form of communication replete with evocative imagery and vivid metaphors, derived from the experiences of everyday people and encompassing a variety of existentialist themes and archetypes. It also broadens spatial and time horizons and fosters a more conscious understanding of the intricate entanglements inherent in the human condition.

On the basis of these premises, it can be asserted that Baldwin and his writing perform both an archaeological and genealogical endeavor, albeit it is no longer whiteness but *blackness* that emerges from it—the *blackness* of the page, which musically "speaks in tongues," and suggests an entire way of knowing and feeling. In

[717] Spillers, "The Politics of Intimacy," 69.
[718] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 202.
[719] See Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge And The Discourse of Language* [1969], trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

this thesis, I have sought to be moved by Baldwin's words and translate them—given that translation is both my personal and professional activity—through methodological paths that are not completely unfamiliar to the author and that precisely delineate the whole concept of *blackness* as understood by new strands of Black radicalism. Indeed, as I have emphasized repeatedly, Baldwin anticipates these areas of research. For this reason, he is a writer who legitimately demonstrates *blackness*' potential—through his stylistic choices and the prophetic message he conveys in certain of his works.

Similar to a weaver who translates threads into an intricate texture, I arrive at this conclusion by realizing that the power of imagination and fabulation in the work of literary criticism is not so much in bestowing additional meanings upon works of art, but rather in ensuring that they endure "more than one life" that can serve as a guide for the present. The vast array of resources at my disposal to analyze Baldwin's works, in conjunction with the intense lyricism of his language and the beauty of his fabula, enabled me to take a "leap of invention" into reality (as Fanon would have suggested me). Still, Baldwin's prophecies are imbued with a value of genuine pragmatism as they attempt to change the real by dismantling those power and knowledge structures that impede the task of practicing love, finding beauty in difference, persevering in the face of despair, or, in other words, to bear responsibility for the lives of all living beings in their various circumstances.

Upon this realization, and a stage of in-depth study on (but mainly *with* and *for*) *blackness* in counterpoint to the works examined in this thesis, fueled by a fundamental turn in my critical approach to Baldwin: the translation, into Italian between 2020 and 2021, of *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013) by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. This revolutionary work was very revelatory. As I was simultaneously revisiting *The Fire Next Time* and drafting a paper on it for a presentation in Naples in the winter of 2020, the title of my thesis unfolded before me: "*blackness* next time."

A further stage was subsequently integrated, which was made possible by the acquaintance of researcher Denise Ferreira da Silva. A friend of both Moten and Harney, she not only allowed me to suture the fields of science and history in the discussion of raciality, but also supported my spiritual condition while writing this thesis by introducing me to the world of reiki meditation and its po-ethical implications. She also helped me to reconnect Baldwin to Spillers—another scholar important to my critical translation—whose conceptualization of the flesh provided the groundwork for

the ethics and aesthetics that Baldwin, as a true organic intellectual and witness, so prominently incorporates into his work. Additionally, Spillers illuminated a neglected facet of Baldwin's criticism: its connection to Black feminism. This excursus into the Black radical tradition fed my critical fabulation and translation and motivated me to focus on two elements of Baldwinian prophecy, namely beauty and love.

My early research period, which was inspired by postcolonial thinkers like Said, Bhabha, and Fanon, played a crucial role in the understanding of beauty. Particularly Fanon—an especially prominent author for the Black radical tradition—is essential for connecting Moten's black optimism and Ferreira da Silva's Poethics to Baldwin. The act of revisiting *Black Skin, White Masks* and engaging in a thorough examination of *The Wretched of the Earth*, facilitated by my active involvement in an online seminar presented by Moten and Harney for the European Graduate School in the summer of 2021, proved critical in comprehending the discourse surrounding Black aesthetics. Furthermore, it shed light on the colonial dynamics that underpin the racialization of Black individuals. The seminar also presented a thought-provoking reexamination of the condition of infancy, as discussed in the previous chapter, and encouraged a careful analysis of the similarities and differences between Baldwin and Fanon.

Both Ferreira da Silva's poethics and Spillers's discussion on the politics of intimacy and American family grammar informed my attendance as a speaker at the James Baldwin International Conference in Nice in 2022. On that occasion, I could visit Saint-Paul de Vence, Baldwin's final abode and spiritual home; I strolled the streets he used to walk daily. The article given at the four-day event was published in the Fall 2023 issue of the *James Baldwin Review* and received the Graduated Student Essay award. These moments added complexity to chapter four, which fully absorbed me since Baldwin's ethics of love is everything but linear and readable; in fact, it is dense and, at times, contradictory, deserving a separate study in the future that may follow this thesis.

This thesis presents a forecast that suggests two changes in vision and ways of understanding, which both literary criticism and the performing arts are lately seeking to embrace. These changes revolve around the themes of beauty and love. The shift described here is a move away from relying solely on vision and accepting a more interwoven and multi-sensory experience. This includes giving importance to the tactile and auditory aspects of literature. It also involves an effort to overcome the divisions created by the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment era, and to bring together

scientific and humanistic theories, as well as the work of imagination and the factual living experience. These two changes are complex and challenging to translate and maintain. However, they have the potential to prompt a reassessment on the *how* of knowledge has influenced the way we think and do. Most importantly, these changes may facilitate an ethical advancement towards the ultimate objective of a loving knowledge of the world/the word, one nurtured by the necessity to believe and practice spirituality, that is *breathing* differently.

As the opening of my conclusion reads, in the words of Spillers—"[i]n a very real sense, every writing as revision makes the 'discovery' all over again"—the writing of this thesis has been a work of revision which have re-found Baldwin "all over again." I am grateful to have glimpsed *with* and *for* the writer from Harlem into a different way of knowing the world, especially in these uncertain times when we must undoubtedly "not falter," as lovers, in the consciousness of *another country*.

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine selected works of James Baldwin, including both fiction and nonfiction, using an interdisciplinary approach, in light of the current resurgence of interest in the author.

The work highlights Baldwin's role as a foreseer of *blackness* via his predictions of beauty and love. Written with lowercase initials to avoid confusion with Blackness as a racial category or an aesthetical revindication movement, *blackness* is understood as a force, mode of knowledge, and practice that can promote a more ethical perspective on language (the word) and global human existence (the world).

The first two chapters provide an overview of theories from the English-speaking world that have engaged with Baldwin's ideas in the present time. It also explores the perspectives on *blackness* put forward by the Black radical tradition, namely via the works of Fred Moten and Denise Ferreira da Silva. By using a contrapuntal reading and utilizing the approach of critical and appositional *augmentation*, which is informed by my translation practice, I establish a connection between works from the 1960s and those from the 1970s and 1980s.

Chapter 3 presents an analysis of Black aesthetics by contrapuntally reading *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976). It explores the idea that beauty is not only an aesthetic value but also an ethical one. The chapter examines how the use of language and different styles in these works intertwine with the sensitive and spiritual aspects of the Black experience.

In Chapter 4, the thesis explores Baldwin's ethical perspective on love. By analyzing the works *Another Country* (1962), *No Name in the Street* (1972), and "Here Be Dragons" (1985) alongside *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *A Dialogue* (1972) with Nikki Giovanni, it becomes evident that the writer not only embraces Black feminism but also incorporates the influence of Black Church spirituality and music into his concept of transformative love that generates a poetic ethic. The contemplation of love leads to a reexamination of infancy, which symbolizes both the early stages of human existence and openness to change. Ultimately, "*blackness* next time" is an invitation to hope for *another country*, another mode of existence.

Keywords: James Baldwin, *blackness*, prophecy, beauty, love, Black radicalism, Feminist Poethics

Abstrakt

Dizertační práce se věnuje vybraným dílům Jamese Baldwina. Ve světle současného oživení zájmu o tohoto autora zkoumá jeho prozaické, kritické i esejistické dílo prostřednictvím interdisciplinárního přístupu.

Práce poukazuje na Baldwinovu roli proroka *blackness* prostřednictvím jeho předpovědí krásy a lásky. Psáno s malým počátečním písmenem, aby nedošlo k záměně s Blackness jako rasovou kategorií nebo s estetickým revindikačním hnutím, *blackness* je chápáno jako síla, způsob poznání a praxe, která může podpořit etičtější pohled na jazyk (slovo) a lidskou existenci jako celek (svět).

První dvě kapitoly obsahují přehled teorií z anglicky mluvících zemí, které se v současnosti zabývají Baldwinovými myšlenkami. Rovněž se zde zkoumají různé pohledy na *blackness*, které předkládá černošská radikální tradice, konkrétně autoři Fred Moten a Denise Ferreir da Silva. Prostřednictvím kontrapunktického čtení a za pomoci kritické a apoziční augmentace založené na mé překladatelské praxi hledám vazby mezi Baldwinovou tvorbou z 60. let a tvorbou ze 70. a 80. let.

Třetí kapitola představuje analýzu černošské estetiky kontrapunktickým čtením knihy *The Fire Next Time* (1963) a *The Devil Finds Work* (1976). Zkoumá myšlenku, že krása není jen estetickou, ale také etickou hodnotou. Kapitola se zabývá tím, jak se použití jazyka a různých stylů v těchto dílech prolíná s citovými a duchovními aspekty černošské zkušenosti.

Ve čtvrté kapitole se práce věnuje Baldwinovu etickému pohledu na lásku. Z analýzy děl *Jiná země* (*Another Country*, 1962), *No Name in the Street* (1972) a "Here Be Dragons" (1985) spolu s *Beale Street blues* (*If Beale Street Could Talk*, 1974) a *A Dialogue* (1972) prostřednictvím Nikki Giovanni vyvstává, že Baldwin přijímá nejen černošský feminismus, ale do svého pojetí transformační lásky, která vytváří poetickou etiku, zahrnuje i vliv spirituality černošské církve a hudby. Úvaha o lásce vede k přehodnocení dětství, jež symbolizuje rané fáze lidské existence a otevřenost vůči změně.Ve své podstatě je "*blackness* next time" výzvou doufat v *jinou zemi* a jiný způsob existence.

Klíčová slova: James Baldwin, *blackness*, proroctví, krása, láska, černošský radikalismus, feministická poetika