

**Sites of Recognition:**  
**Literature and Social Form After WWII**

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THESIS

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For a father's love of labor and  
A mother's labors of love.

For a father's labors of love and  
A mother's love of labor.

These leaves  
Would not be without  
Those lives.

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## SUMMARY

*Sites of Recognition: Literature and Social Form After WWII* investigates literature's response to the late 20th century's use of recognition as a framework for understanding art's relationship to social reality. While many critics identify recognition as one of art's greatest potential contributions to the social world, my dissertation argues that literature's relationship to recognition is more contentious and critical than commonly understood. Moreover, recognition achieves its status within studies of literature primarily because of a belief in literature's potential remedial social effects. Yet, while literature offers a particularly rich site to study features of social interaction, not all literature values recognition for the same reasons nor sees recognition as a desired consequence. As my dissertation claims, evidence suggests a counter tradition beginning in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and continuing to the contemporary period in which authors use literature to explore potential limitations and dangers that follow from notions of social life grounded in claims of recognition. The novels and other works I study in the dissertation wrestle with the problems of recognition in multiple ways. Beginning with questions that range from literary form and genre to identity and war, the literature I study demonstrates not only the tremendous impact theories of recognition have had on literature but also the critical rejoinders literature offers in disputing recognition's social imperatives.

As a desire for recognition gained traction as a framework for diagnosing and solving social and political problems, my dissertation argues that literature, as well as artistic and critical practices more generally, took greater interest in exploiting the potential value of misrecognition. Contrary to those approaches that enlist literature in a project to correct misrecognition, I argue literature and art often use misrecognition as a critical force against those ideals most evident in the social and political uses to which literature is put. Both critical approaches orient themselves

## SUMMARY (continued)

to problems of recognition, but the difference emerges around the value ascribed to misrecognition. In the strongest cases, this standpoint leads fiction to imagine scenes of refusal, contradiction, and struggle where tensions are most apparently and severely exercised without recourse to reparation. Chapters of the dissertation attend to such problems surrounding recognition in works by many influential authors including Cormac McCarthy, Percival Everett, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, Colson Whitehead, and others. Each chapter engages with prominent authors of critical theory and literary criticism in producing a more thorough account of misrecognition's substantial critical value in an age dominated by the hegemony of recognition. Finally, *Sites of Recognition* sets out to test a phrase from philosopher Paul Ricoeur that claims misrecognition is a refusal of the peace of recognition. In pursuing the answer, the second half of the dissertation is a lengthy meditation on the relationship between misrecognition and total war as it appears in American literature of the post war period up to the present.

## **Introduction: Misrecognition's Antagonism**

Where an overwhelming majority of the literature contributing to the discourse of recognition over the past few decades ascribes misrecognition a negative value, *Sites of Recognition: Literature and Social Form After WWII* aims at establishing a counterweight to this broad consensus. Rather than uphold a sense of misrecognition that maintains its status as a cause of social injustice and subsequently calls for the need of greater as well as more equal distribution of recognition across social strata, my project explores the ways in which misrecognition works to interrogate and even upend the vast consensus that argues more and better recognition would mean a more equal social foothold for all members. To that end, my focus is less on arguing the vast majority of critics were wrong to focus on recognition; indeed, as a social imaginary it has been and remains quite useful. Instead, this project aims at establishing a base on which to build a more robust understanding of how misrecognition has been used in the same period to understand and challenge broader social norms that emerge from recognition's hegemony. To establish the ground on which to begin the project of revaluing misrecognition, I argue it is important to turn our attention away from philosophical and political treatments of recognition and instead focus on literature and literary criticism as the most productive sites for locating an alternative account of the use of misrecognition as both literary device and narrative strategy used to challenge, interrogate, and subvert the total investment in more and better recognition as a source of managing social conflict. On the one hand, where it understands conflict to be a baseline condition of human sociality, the discourse of recognition seeks to mitigate that conflict. On the other hand, where it understands conflict to be a baseline condition of human sociality, the discourse of misrecognition seeks to exploit that conflict. Where the former seeks peace, the latter sees war.

Recognition, as recent philosophers and literary critics understand and deploy it, in both socio-political and aesthetic-political ways, is a perversion of the relationship literature has to recognition, which is to say literature's cognitive function. While in such philosophic and literary critical contexts recognition is understood as a technology useful in managing social conflict, I understand recognition—and more specifically its dialectical other, misrecognition—to be methods with which to approach a fuller understanding of those very conflicts others are interested in managing. Literature in its best sense, after all, sets about to conflict with the world from which it emerges. That is, as with other forms of artistic making, “the essence of art lies in this paradox, in its simultaneous nearness to and distance from the world of experience” (Lukács “Art” 23). Such “mutual affinity and simultaneous distance” are absolutely indispensable to the way my project approaches artistic creation and its products as well as aesthetic experience and reception. This approach heeds Lukács's warning: “if art becomes the organ of the desire for unity, it ceases to be art” and instead is returned to the “sphere of mere experience” to which it must remain at once indebted but also upon which its condition of freedom is established (25). Where Lukács insists on this division between the “world of experience” and the work of art, many others will explore and eventually insist on the permeability of this division. Indeed, claims made about art servicing recognition not only misunderstand art's relationship to the world of experience but also represent the very perversion of what the work of art sets out to do in separating its own possibilities from those available in the world of mere experience.

The kind of hybrid world wished for by critics who turn to the aesthetic in order to look for ways of changing the world of experience is one founded on a presumed capability (or wanton desire) of the aesthetic object to make us “learn something about ourselves in the act of reading” (Felski 12). I do not want to contend too much with this sentiment as such, but instead

wish to contend with the orientation of the desired effect. The only way to learn something about ourselves according to the order of my project is by learning something about the way in which social conditions have come to be ordered. Recognition, according to the above formulation of self-knowledge is a perversion of the work of art—a kind of work that goes about itself only insofar as it begins from and sustains itself through antagonism. Unlike the animosity Felski finds between “literary theory” and “everyday language and thought” or “common knowledge”—an animosity characterized by Felski as being a symptom of literary theory’s commitment to being critical—my project begins by finding such animosity to be a rather productive way of understanding not exactly the relationship between literary theory and “commonsense beliefs” but rather of understanding the relationship between literary production (which itself can be understood today as having in certain instances a rather theoretical sense about it) and aesthetic reception (13). In other words, whereas Felski’s sense of recognition remains grounded in the work’s possible effects on readers, this project deploys recognition as way to understand better the animosity works of art have toward the world of experience. This is not to say that I disagree with Felski’s claim that literature can teach us something about ourselves. Indeed, it can and often does. But if we do not in turn learn something about the world and therefore something about the relationship between the work of art and the world, then we have failed to realize a primary and rather important component of what constitutes the labor of art, namely its ability to make the world—and in the meantime ourselves—misrecognizable. It is precisely in the desire for greater knowledge of oneself that we can locate how recognition initially came to assume such a prominent position in political, philosophic, and literary critical discourses to begin with. Understanding literature, as Felski does, as a way “to see something that I did not see before” or as having the power to “confound [our] sense of who and what [we]

are” is a rather common way of describing the potential effects of aesthetic reception (23). Felski is right to identify how recognition can be “simultaneously reassuring and unnerving” (25). Yet, for Felski and others, recognition remains a process of reassurance. No matter how jarring a “flash of recognition” can be to the sense one has oneself in the world, in “bring[ing] together likeness and difference in one fell swoop,” recognition remains for Felski an experience wherein the “unfamiliar” gets fit into “an existing scheme” (25). In this sense, Felski’s recognition remains being committed more to readjustment than any full-scale realignment of those preexisting schemes. Indeed, hers is an image of an ever-enlarging circle of comprehensibility—it is an image of assimilation and integration rather than dissolution and disintegration of the very schemas that constitute something being seen first as unfamiliar and second to be in need of assimilation. Hence, misrecognition is less about readjusting already existing schemes of intelligibility and more about undermining entirely not only the desire but also the need for such schemas—while also pointing toward the violence such schemas entail for the world of experience, a violence of which misrecognition is also guilty.

Felski uses recognition as it registers in aesthetic experience in a way not unlike the Russian formalist idea of defamiliarization. Where one comes in contact with the unfamiliar, it follows that certain modes of intelligibility will be in need of adjustment. “When we recognize something,” Felski claims, “we literally ‘know it again’” (25). A similar sense of recognition motivates Shklovsky’s aesthetic project of defamiliarization. Both critics imbue contact with the unfamiliar with a potential for renewing one’s sense of self and world. For both critics, art is a “device.” Whereas Shklovsky’s primary target is less a school of thought than habituated perceptions or thoughts as such, wherein “automatization eats away at the things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, at our fear of war” (5), Felski contends with those critics who would deny

self-knowledge is an effect of coming in contact with others and finding that knowing something is always part of an ongoing and incomplete process of “becoming known” (25). On the one hand, for Shklovsky recognition remains the enemy while the unfamiliar ascends to be its antidote. Art’s mission, therefore, is “to return sensation to our limbs” and “to make us feel objects” while “lead[ing] us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight rather than recognition” (6). On the other hand, for Felski recognition unseats self-assurances while promoting self-reflexivity and maintaining an open process of knowledge formation. What one sensed before in a “vague, diffuse, or semi-conscious way,” recognition helps to provide a “distinct shape” or make “newly visible” (25). Yet, both Shklovsky and Felski remain too strongly wedded to ideas of selfhood that while necessarily acknowledging the socially constituted nature of selves nevertheless remain committed to the category of the unfamiliar to the extent that they both leave the habituated, or the familiar not just undertheorized but also largely untouched. Despite their differences, how both critics approach recognition keeps them from asking questions about how particular recognitions come to be; that is, how things come to be recognizable in the first place. Admittedly, Shklovsky is better on such questions than Felski. For Shklovsky, time is a problem for perception. Impressions are necessarily fleeting and are worked over by a need for understanding. Understanding, in turn, is an effect of habit; the poetic image (impression) must give way to the prosaic one (thought).<sup>1</sup> Following Gilles Deleuze, we could say Shklovsky’s aesthetic project is one that has at its center a desire to replace recognitions with encounters; and yet such a project remains enchanted by the unfamiliar and so therefore fails at the moment of its greatest potential of overturning recognition as it stands.

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<sup>1</sup> A movement described by Hegel as one that proceeds “from the poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought” (*Aesthetics* 89).



Attending to Deleuze will provide the strongest case against both Shklovsky's and Felski's approaches to recognition. The strange and unfamiliar remain parts of the recognitive schema insofar as both are assimilable to already established horizons of thought. The non-recognizable, being different from both the unrecognizable and defamiliarized image of thought, constitutes the absolute failure of all technologies of recognition and so, therefore, presents not merely a need to readjust frames of intelligibility but instead the complete and total explosion of such frames.

### **Althusser and Deleuze on Recognition**

Following Althusser, we can say that what the oversight with which the politics of recognition is charged—that achieving mutual recognition is the realization of a just society—emerges not from an inability to see how misrecognition is neither recognition's failure nor its refusal but rather an inability to understand it as recognition's Other. And the condition for achieving this knowledge depends not on further distributing recognition or honing one's awareness of social injustices but rather in understanding how recognition is not the antidote but indeed the disease. The disease is one of the eye as much as it is one of the mind insofar as “the logic of a conception of knowledge in which all the work of knowledge is reduced in principle to the recognition of the mere relation of *vision*; in which the whole nature of its object is reduced to the mere condition of a *given*” (Althusser 19, emphasis original). In typical dialectical fashion, Althusser's critique is one in which any claim to immediate knowledge mistakes seeing for knowing. On the one hand, not to see something that is visible as being there is potentially reducible to an instance of individual oversight and therefore attributed to a “psychological weakness of ‘vision’” for which the answer remains one of retuning a proper order to vision. On the other hand, not to see something that is visible as being there is never reducible to an instance

of individual oversight to be combatted by making more things visible through better social attunement. Rather, according to Althusser, how knowledge is understood in the first instance rests on identifying knowledge with recognition. This standpoint, however, fails to remark the “weakness in the system of concepts that makes up knowledge” and instead is content to attribute the instance of not-seeing to an “oversight,” an instance of not seeing, not one of not knowing (19). Althusser’s remarks finally rest on the following diagnosis: “we must abandon the mirror myths of immediate vision and reading, and conceive knowledge as a production” (24). To diagnose the problem as one of knowledge rather than vision allows Althusser to refocus the problem as being one that concerns the totalized conditions of knowledge production rather than limiting it to individual events of seeing. Where knowledge produces the object’s existence, it preempts its emergence. To the same point, where recognition precedes encounter, thought stops at and even expects the familiar. As the result of such an accordance, an object of knowledge cannot preexist the event of its coming into being because it is already an object of sight. Instances of this oppressive condition increase under the instruction of recognition.

Althusser’s analysis helps to lay the conceptual framework for understanding misrecognition’s relationship to current organizations of knowledge and its production through the use of the concept of recognition. In unpacking the relationship between the visible and invisible, Althusser argues against individual failures in favor of structural achievements in which an object is produced within a field of knowledge. As a result, Althusser argues, “it is literally no longer the eye (the mind’s eye) of a subject which *sees* what exists in the field defined by a theoretical problematic: it is this field itself which *sees itself* in the objects or problems it defines—sighting being merely the necessary reflection of the field on its objects” (25). Therefore, knowledge is conditioned by a field insofar as the field itself is coordinated

according to its own principles of exclusion. A field of knowledge forms, on Althusser's account, "by excluding what it is not" a field thereby "makes it what it is" (27). And however much the discourse of seen and unseen dominates discussions of the possibilities and conditions of knowledge, Althusser warns against the presupposition that the unseen's condition of invisibility is a result of simple oversight rather than the product of the possibility of knowledge from which a field begins as well from where it sets out to act.

It is my argument that recognition sets out to understand not only the social world but also the relationship between art and society armed with the kind of seeing that is the object of Althusser's critique. Rather than understanding art's relationship to society as being at once grounded in social convention and therefore always potentially at odds with social convention, a theory of reading grounded in recognition sets out from a place and looks onto a field of knowledge already populated with recognizable objects and suffering subjects. Yet, my contention follows from Deleuze's insight that encountering not only counters recognition but constitutes its opposite; that is, misrecognition is recognition's Other.

Deleuze understands recognition to be established by processes of perception and self-consciousness in addition to those activities describing thought, identification, knowledge, and recall more generally. Insofar as it maintains its influence on philosophical understanding of these processes, recognition remains paradigmatic of what thought looks like and even what thinking itself is. Recognition is cognition inasmuch as it is an ongoing accumulation of input processed through faculties of the mind that, in turn, constitute the very functioning of faculties on which those processes and their outputs rely. Most famously, of course, in Descartes' formulation thought names being and vice versa contributing to recognition being elevated in philosophical discourse to becoming a "model" and "image of thought." Recognition is the

unification of the faculties and thus contributes to the centering of each “thinking subject” and making possible the “identity of the Self in the ‘I think’” (133). On Deleuze’s account, despite its “project of breaking with doxa,” philosophy clings to recognition as a model of how subjects come into and maintain self-consciousness (134). No matter what the proper project of philosophy may be, Deleuze rightly identifies recognition as having had a tremendous influence on establishing common notions of thought. If philosophy has failed to pursue relentlessly new modes of thought and in turn failed to imagine new modes of being, Deleuze blames recognition’s predominance in determining what counts as thought. Indeed, Deleuze contends “the form of recognition has never sanctioned anything but the recognizable and the recognized” (134). Following the overview and critique he provides, it’s not difficult to take Deleuze’s point that recognition unduly burdens thought with form. On Deleuze’s account, form is that which tethers thought to common sense, “insignificant facts” and “everyday banality” rather than pursue “models among stranger and more compromising adventures” (135). Where I think Deleuze goes too far, however, is in claiming “form will never inspire anything but conformities” (134). This sentence gives a particularly fine example of Deleuze’s confessed opposition to dialectical thought. While I am in no position here to defend dialectical thinking I do find it valuable, as many others have, in thinking the antagonistic relationship between recognition and misrecognition—a term Deleuze seems to give no place to in his critique of recognition. Misrecognition, on my account, offers a compelling example of a figure of thought that exceeds the limits of recognition Deleuze has rightfully laid out and yet remains engaged—antagonistically so—with the form of thinking that would seek to police, incorporate, and banish the thinking it makes possible.

## Chapter Summaries

My first chapter argues Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* exemplifies genre's importance for understanding the literary history of misrecognition. As a post-apocalypse narrative, *The Road* is a novel about its own status as an embodiment of an empty form. In this sense, *The Road* is a negative image of the narrative promise of time's fulfillment and apocalyptic revelation typical of the genre. Moreover, it is a spatialized narrative about the possibilities of narrative within spaces where instruments of both time and space fail. Emptying time of its social function as the measure of collective life leaves space as the remainder of apocalyptic fulfillment's broken promise. *The Road* knows itself as a generic allegory and ironizes apocalyptic time through the misrecognitions of generic convention. In sketching a larger argument for empty form's place in a history of misrecognition, I look at the particularly revealing site of misrecognition in the novel of the bunker. McCarthy offers the bunker, as well as the gun the characters find in it, as social analogues of empty generic form. McCarthy uses the recognitions associated with generic convention to plot the process of social space put under erasure. McCarthy turns genre into medium and in turn makes apocalypse look more like the end of social space than the end of collective time.

Percival Everett's fiction serves as a single author case of the experimental work novels and narrative do with problems of recognition and misrecognition. Everett's work gives a sense of how the novel is not only a particularly useful form for addressing these problems but is also a site where various mediums can come into contact and contest one another. In Everett's work, the highest orders of form engage with and even appear as various forms of disorder. Inasmuch as his fictional worlds are dark mirrors of the real and concern various turns of the dialectic

between identity and difference, they are built from the contradictions, absurdities, and vertigoes of misrecognition and exemplify what Kenneth Warren has called the “comedy of misrecognition.” The chapter focuses intently on how two of Everett’s most acclaimed novels, *Erasure* (2001) and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), use various sites of recognition to dramatize the contradictions of misrecognition. In *Erasure*, Everett uses the literary market’s desire for authenticity as a primary site of conflict between recognition and misrecognition. At the same time, Everett raises questions about the status of African-American literature as a totalizing project at a particularly fraught moment in that putative project’s literary history. Everett’s *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* is a novel that engages problems of recognition through dialogue between artistic mediums and their intended social effects. The novel finds its form by parodying Sidney Poitier film plots, and concludes with a particularly raucous moment of misrecognition and refusal of recognition’s revelatory ambitions. Indeed, both novels end with scenes at award ceremonies. The settings of these conclusions show Everett giving the clearest indication that, even in its crowning moments, recognition maintains a loose and temporary hold on its own forms of excess and that irony remains an indispensable weapon in the struggle *against* recognition.

The third chapter marks a turn in the dissertation toward exploring the intersections between misrecognition and war. Here, I take up several works by Richard Wright in demonstrating Wright’s interest in describing an existential condition of war in the absence of a declaration of war. Wright’s use of documentary photography to make his case reveals an interesting relationship between photography and literature, as the latter seeks to mediate the sensationalism of the former. The other part of the chapter focuses on Chester Himes’s prison novel *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*. In a way that’s both complimentary to but opposite of the

way Wright uses photography, Himes uses documentary photographs of war to make sense of life in prison. In doing so, I argue Himes's novel demonstrates the ways in which war has begun to saturate social life in America and uses the prison as an especially appropriate site of understanding how so.

Following from the previous chapter and continuing the meditation on war and misrecognition, the fourth chapter juxtaposes novels by John Edgar Wideman and John A. Williams. Published within a year of one another, Wideman's *The Lynchers* and Williams's *Captain Blackman* both present compelling cases of the individual and collective effects of total war. While Wideman's novel concerns a group of black men determined to wage war against the police and all of society, Williams's is a more conventional war novel but with an added twist. Williams's eponymous protagonist is soldier serving in Vietnam when an injury sends him into a liminal state of consciousness. While in this state, Captain Blackman travels to various sites of American military action, and along the way comes to realize a world even he—as a learned military historian—was previously unable to recognize. I use the competing imaginaries associated with epic and encyclopedic forms to explore more thoroughly literature's relationship to total war and its strategies of representation.

This chapter takes Colson Whitehead's 2011 novel *Zone One* to be the most recent example of a literary tradition in which Black American authors use war in their fiction as a framework for understanding conditions of social relations. The chapter argues, more specifically, that Whitehead's novel uses total war and allegorical indirection as strategies adequate to a condition of war that exceeds other frames. Offering a reading that highlights the importance of recognizing Whitehead's allegorical intentions, I argue critical assessments of the novel have missed the significance of *Zone One* without historical and literary frames of total

war. Beginning with a reading comparing John Edgar Wideman's response to 9/11 and Richard Wright's "Not My People's War," the chapter aims at establishing the theoretical groundwork necessary for constructing a literary history of total war. While previous chapters have tried to show earlier examples, this chapter argues that it is not until the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the tradition produces its strongest example—an example whose possibility rests on the increasingly militarized space of public life and the exportation of the U.S. police strategy known as "broken windows." It is through the history of police practices that culminates in broken windows theory and the Global War on Terror's COINTELPRO approaches that the radicalism of storytelling strategies used by total war novels become most evident.

The concluding coda returns to the problem of photography and representing war by way of aesthetic theory, visual art, and literature. Less an argument about than an exploration of the intersection of humanity, war, and machinery, the coda gestures toward the work on visual art that was left almost completely out of the dissertation and begins to pave a path leading out of the work presented here.



### **Of Guns and Bunkers: On Empty Forms**

A landmark novel in the contemporary genre turn, Cormac McCarthy's 2006 *The Road* is a post apocalyptic novel whose use of genre as a mode of self-reflection affords it an antagonistic standpoint toward the very kind of self-reflexivity it desires to use for itself. This is arguably a fairly common characteristic that sets examples of the genre of "serious genre novel" apart from the larger mass of lowly generic forms. At the same time that it uses genre to make real the virtual singular event, McCarthy's apocalypse refuses to narrate the event, reflecting the contemporary tendency to focus less on any specific threat and more obsess over the aftermath. It refuses the collective desires and expectations that attend the generic and yet maintains the exceptionality of the event that warrants the story's telling. The generic is present in the novel only insofar as the post-apocalyptic serves as a generic mask allowing for the kind of doubling Mark McGurl describes as characteristic of "meta-genre fiction" (217). The formal analogue of the event's apparent separation from human making—with a just a few ambiguous hints of human responsibility—appears as the story's distance from human telling, which entails a narrative voice capable of being apart from and a part of the process of narrativization. The novel uses third person narrative throughout, using generic sensibilities to highlight someone or something other than a human must tell the story of apocalypse. McCarthy looks at fundamental problems of narrative possibility through the enabling generic lens of apocalypse, using a genre whose history is intertwined with and reflects some of humanity's most basic narrative impulses. At the same time, *The Road* is contemporaneous with broader non-human and geological turns in literary and cultural studies that respond to the demands of the new epochal condition of the Anthropocene. In a highly determined way, McCarthy's novel illustrates how the literary imagination responds to practical kinds of ecological, moral, and social decisions present in

much popular, political, and scientific discourse today. The mode of imagination present in the novel, however, does not offer alternatives to the present as much as configure significance out of the empty forms that remain after the onset of the present's exhaustion and tells of a time the characters in the novel are left to live through that cannot help but be a part of as well as apart from the present to which they are left looking back.

The self-reflexivity of generic literature provides a standpoint from which to look at the project of literature writ large from the present. McCarthy's novel in the way I am describing it here registers what Robert Pippin has called "a widespread experience of ever greater worldlessness" (129). As such experiences proliferate, McCarthy turns not only to literature, but more specifically to genre, as a not untroubled form of "mutual social intelligibility" made available by, and not despite of, the increasing encroachment on art by the commodity (Pippin 141). In a narrative gesture that recalls the Judge's claim in McCarthy's earlier novel *Blood Meridian* that "What is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it's writ," the man in *The Road* finds himself in a library full of books whose stories could not contain the one being told (BM 148). These books were all incapable of imagining a book that could describe a world in which books could retain the potential of being impervious to a reality that imperiled their existence. They were books incapable of imagining the potential that they would be held responsible for creating the conditions of their very own obsolescence, if not their total extinction. Those books found "in the charred ruins of a library" are the objects of the man's "rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row. He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a *world to come*. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation. He let the book fall and took a last look around and made his way out into

the cold gray light” (187, emphasis added). Where other forms of received meaning fail while life goes on, where life is lived “under conditions where the shared commonalities, traditions, and fixed verities of the premodern world are no longer available,” McCarthy’s novel issues a challenge of what it would mean to achieve “proper *acknowledgement* of each other” (Pippin 142, emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup> Storytelling is the product of living through an event and the processes of documentation and sense making carried out by the technologies of imagination and memory. Imagined situations shape future forms of the world and the patterns of life those worlds can sustain. And yet these forms no longer stand the test of time, so to speak, once met with the vanished future an adequately historical imagination would require. Uncannily, in this fiction, time has outlived history; the deeds of storytelling have outlived the event that renders all stories irrelevant and unnecessary. Yet, the particular only appears to outlive the universal. The man’s death at the end of the novel marks the death scene of human making and human history—and, in turn, simultaneously marks a singular human as the site at which to interrogate collective forms of meaning making. In this sense, the man’s individual death fulfills the emptied promise of imminent apocalypse revealed once a collective singular human history has reached its own place of exhaustion and takes its form in the man’s dying body. In becoming this figure, the story of the man’s death is inseparable from the story of the death of all humans. Apocalypse is marked by the revelation of nothing but the clock’s empty pendulum swings no longer capable of measuring collective time. While it may remain in territory, space is no longer a medium for motion and change; rather it is the fallout from a world of geometrized planarity committed to the destruction of collective forms and the spaces that enable and sustain them.

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<sup>2</sup> Pippin makes a point to reference Cavell’s sense of acknowledgement here. In his book, Patchen Markell prefers Cavell’s sense of acknowledgement to recognition. See his *Bound By Recognition* for more, 34-37.

As a novel that thematizes the collapse of mutual intelligibility, *The Road* uses defamiliarized idioms as a way to illustrate a relation to the received world in which emptiness figures the persistence of imagination, language, and communicability despite the absence of the constitutive community that enabled that intelligibility in the first place. The boy's world cannot preserve the meanings of his father's. Nor can those previous meanings be salvaged. If there are no more crows—"except in books" as the boy learns and that links the novel in some way to a persistent desire for aesthetic wholeness as well as commitment to human work in the world—we can follow this logic of absent realities to books themselves and writing and documentation more generally. The novel's forms of temporality cannot sustain the means by which history—and the collective singular—and the historical record are made or made intelligible. The most telling quotidian example of this is the absence of calendrical time: "Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October but he wasn't [sic] sure. He hadn't [sic] kept a calendar for years" (4). News fares no better: "He sat by a gray window in the gray light in an abandoned house in the late afternoon and read old newspapers while the boy slept. The curious news. The quaint concerns. (28-29). The forms that held social life together in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's age of anxiety and alienation collapse around the father's attempts, failures, and ultimate refusals to summon back the old world into existence for the boy with whom he can share no real sense of the world except as they find it now together. Which is not to say that McCarthy's novel evacuates all meaning from remaining forms. Perhaps with little surprise, the premodern remains a site of potential value. As he washes "a dead man's brains out of his [son's]," the man's gestures appear familiar, "All of this like some ancient anointing." Rather than repress the significance of these forms, however, the narrative appears to condone the man's thoughts: "So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them"

(74). Emptied as they may be for the boy, such ghostly forms of collective practice purposely identify the archaic with a world in which “forces hold sway rather than human individuals” thereby providing the man with opportunities to think how to make the world mean something again not for himself, however, but rather as it had for others in other worlds (Jameson 551). Yet, the rest of the novel will show how the newly emptied world brings the premodern close in order to explore past human history. No matter from where they come, the novel demonstrates how forms of mutual intelligibility can be marshaled against the total exhaustion of collective meaning. But if, as Jameson suggests, “side-taking” is the “necessary investment of the subject in narrative,” then it seems without question that McCarthy’s narrative is an investment in premodern forms of world-making, which is to say that, for this narrative, despite its apparent investment in telling a story of two individuals, “the third person...comes first” (Jameson 550).

While the future of history given in the novel looks nothing like a medium for subjective action, the possibility of action remains in the form of genre. And while a world after history is one in which the effect—life after the event—paradoxically precedes the cause, which is the potential eventfulness of history itself, literature survives genre inasmuch as, following Stanley Cavell, “genre is a medium” (36). To read his novel as being a symptom of the “logic of the ruin” is to attend inadequately to McCarthy’s serious attempt to use the collective singular project of generic literature to think the total erasure of collective forms of social life. Untimeliness, of course, always needs more time.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely the novel’s use of the generic

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<sup>3</sup> There is more to be said about the relationship between spatialization and ruination as they relate to *The Road* and allegorization more generally. David. J. Alworth’s excellent essay “Pynchon’s Malta” uses untimeliness to describe how ruins “spatialize multiple times, as well as multiple *senses* of time, within a single site.” See also Nick Yablon *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819-1919* and Paul Bové “The American State Allegorizes The Ruins: Henry Adams and Counterstrategy” in *A More Conservative Place: Intellectual Culture In The Bush Era*.

form of post-apocalypse that allows such promises of more time to be finally nothing more than empty promises—the ruined sites of our collective projects coalesce a time without that continues to draw on a past without the promise of a future of history.

### **The Sextant**

It is well known that Cormac McCarthy has previously written works that challenge not only generic conventions but also assumptions that generic fiction cannot be serious fiction. In a wide-ranging and incisive essay, Andrew Hoberek traces McCarthy's use of genre and high style to glimpse "the power of imagination that remains even when the objects upon which it ruminates have passed" (497). The best figure with which Hoberek describes such fortitude is the misused object where human activity requires a kind of imagination that produces value through the "unimagined and contingent misuse of things" (494). Hoberek ultimately finds his rebuttal to "accounts of human beings as inconsequential to the natural order" by arguing that such accounts are the very "products of human imagination" (493). While I too have tried to put forward a similar claim, the larger problem here is that Hoberek uses the figure of "second nature" to ascribe things with the type of value he is pursuing. In objects and phrases appearing in the novel, such as "abnormal fescue" or the few appearances of dogs, Hoberek locates the novel's longing not for a "lost world of nature" but for "things of value beyond the question of necessity" (492). Hoberek contrasts the search for canned foods, for example, and those things with a direct relationship to human consumption to, for example, fescue, the companionship of dogs, literary style, and most importantly for my purposes, the sextant. These things are best described as being secondary to necessity, as things whose value comes precisely insofar as "they transcend the questions of necessity." With the stakes of the argument clearly established, it is no surprise when Hoberek claims "the aesthetic as something with value beyond use" (492).

In this estimation, canned goods do not appear to be like the sextant, but there would seem an alternative way of thinking about their division.

For Hoberek, the sextant's importance lies in its affirmation "to be stirred is a good thing, even [or we might add because of living in such a world] in a world where one must fight constantly to survive" (492). In his desire to locate a sphere of autonomy from the basic needs of survival, Hoberek misreads the sextant. In what his essay deems "already an old and thus useless technology before the disaster" the sextant is ripe for incorporation into a zone of autonomy identified with aesthetic pleasure. This position assumes the sextant to be simply something to stir the senses rather than understood through its status as an "old and useless technology" of position, location, and navigation. What the father both enjoys and refuses is not aesthetic pleasure but modern technologies that helped orient human life to the world. Moreover, he refutes a desire to install the human once again at the center of the world. He refuses the instruments of representation. The sextant is beyond necessity not because it is outmoded but because the father will not use it for what it is—a device used for orienting and representing humanity's place in the world and cosmos. Insofar as he misuses the sextant, the man does so not in any intended way and certainly not by using "human imagination" to do so as Hoberek would have it. On my reading, the father's gesture should be read as something more of a condemnation of human imagination insofar as the sextant, too, is one of its product and thereby can be identified with Hoberek's objects of aesthetic pleasure. This, in turn, is a decisive gesture—an act of autonomy and dignity unrelated to aesthetic practice, even as it signals the death of a certain kind of world making identified with modern technologies of navigation. His is an act that notably denies the child both the stirring feeling and modern technologies as the man places the sextant back on the shelf rather than taking it ashore. In a vertiginous world, the sextant

potentially helps to restore humanity's ability to stand upright. In the decision not to share the sextant, the man does not affirm the aesthetic's ability to bestow mutual intelligibility on the world but instead refuses to maintain this belief given the new conditions of what constitutes both necessity and freedom.

The sextant, within the novel's world, operates as a perverse image of the future. The desire to locate and represent man's position of power in relation to the worlds of nature and inanimate objects recedes into mere aesthetic pleasure in the inanimateness of the technology itself. Its value in the novel comes from the sextant's ability to index at once the tendency toward and refusal of anthropocentric relationships to the natural and object worlds. He appears to maintain a kind of relationship to a drive toward modernization, but the man who would use the world of objects to find his place no longer orients himself in relation to the cosmos; it is no longer his to measure, represent, map, or name. Instead, it is his to escape from—possibly more than ever before. The sextant's perfection is indeed tarnished by its use—"there were patches of green on it that took the form of another hand that once had held it"—but restored when left on the shelf from which it came despite the stirring feeling (228). The man's is an act against both aesthetic pleasure and the most basic anthropocentric drive to find oneself in a harsh and vast world. The gesture refuses a reenactment of modernity's reflexivity, while at the same time it is a product of that very reflexivity denied by the act. The man indeed enacts something of the "reflexive modernity" described by Ulrich Beck<sup>4</sup> and others in leaving behind the sextant—judging the sciences and technologies of modernity not only on their merits of measuring and knowing the world but more forcefully recognizing the "uncontrollable array of unknowable

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<sup>4</sup> See Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* for a comprehensive theory of reflexive modernization.



technological side effects cascading into and back from the future.” The novel articulates the “world of risk” that modernity constructs having intentionally and intensely realized what it is “to live in fear of what modernization hath wrought” most intensely through its nuclear imagination and the “democratic” figure of nuclear fallout, but most succinctly in the image of thought the sextant offers (“Ordinary Doom” 330). McCarthy’s novel reveals the fear of the work of modernity while at the same time leveraging the modernist problems to do so. In other words, McCarthy’s novel is less an endorsement of or further investment in arguments about the aesthetic’s ability to transcend the necessary and more a continuation of a particularly modernist problem that sees the emergence of “art having become a problem for itself.” Furthermore, McCarthy intentionally *uses* the aesthetic—here in the form of the generic post-apocalypse—as a way to think through problems of art that again emerge out of modernist practices responding to “a period when the point and significance of art could no longer be taken for granted” (Pippin 1). Reorienting our critical relationship to the novel in this way—away from a search for and further investment in aesthetic autonomy in favor of engaging strategies of self interrogation that animate modernist art practices—reinforces the novel’s own interrogation of current problems surrounding art’s relationship to historical agency insofar as it recognizes and refutes those technological materials from a situation of the world they have failed as well as those they have failed to create.<sup>5</sup>

Any sense of an objective or verified world—let alone one of pure aesthetic pleasure—pregnant with meaning is left in the ruins of the wrecked ship (notably, not a space ship) where

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<sup>5</sup> Mars remains the most clichéd image of utopia in the novel. Notably, the episode regarding Mars also concerns the breakdown of idiomatic phrases and the extinction of crows cited above. Finally, the man acknowledges crows now exist “just in books” (158). Given crows’ largely correlative existence to human life, if one wished to mine this episode for its utmost historical and anthropological significances the crow seems a perfect example from the animal world to do so.

the man finds the sextant. He leaves behind visions of a time when there were navigators and a place from which to leave and a space to which one might arrive and measure the path between the two. The sextant, as an object of use, threatens to reanimate the rift between worlds of subjects and objects—something the man attributes to a former and ultimately unrecoverable and unsustainable understanding of individual and collective places in the world. The man refuses to stand as man, thereby refusing to imagine a “new earth” and/or a “new people.”<sup>6</sup> There are no revolutions on the horizon. But this is not the poverty of imagination ascribed to the contemporary but rather a lasting and dignified imaginative act that commits less to valuing the products of imagination tout court and more to interrogating not just their use but also their value in a world left searching for somewhere else.

### **The Flute and Formless Music**

The man fashions the child a flute from cane, in turn suggesting a potential connection between the child and Pan the Greek god of shepherds and flocks. As the characters walk “the man could hear him playing. A formless music for the age to come.” Where it appears to offer time and world enough beyond the ashen one detailed throughout, the novel finds its grounds for refusal. The discrepancies emerging out of what is immediately offered and what is finally given provide the narrative opportunities to explore and interrogate the potential of a new collective world. The passage goes on: “Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin.” The boy achieves an agency attuned to the untimeliness of ruins wherein the past impinges on the possible emergence of a future. As flutist of the ruined world his is the last music—but at least music at last. Yet the passage still goes on: “The man thought he seemed some sad and solitary changeling child announcing the arrival of a traveling spectacle in shire

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<sup>6</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* for an elaboration of these concepts.

and village who does not know that behind him the players have all been carried off by wolves” (77-78). The final image is cruel. A flutist playing to herald the arrival of his band of fellow players finds upon their destination that hungry wild animals have silently nabbed them all. The image closes the episode and denies the promise of the gift that begins the episode: a flute to create a new music for a new world with a new vision for which the child will be the steward. The tension between what is and what may be remains, only if to foreclose the possibilities of anything being other than what it is. McCarthy’s novel allows, once again, the virtual to succumb to the real.

Insofar as literary critic Amy Hungerford’s suggestion that McCarthy’s 1985 novel *Blood Meridian* leaves us “the unreadable aesthetic object” is right, McCarthy’s novels are readable precisely because they rely on empty forms<sup>7</sup> to attain their legibility (95). McCarthy’s novels often achieve significance (here thought of as readability) by being composed of exchanges within the economies of recognition and misrecognition. Again, take McCarthy’s use of genre as a case in point. Much like how the generic can signal an artist’s “only concession to the market” insofar as genre attains its generic status through not only its own rules but the process by which

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<sup>7</sup> While David Summers’s *Real Spaces* helped guide my thinking about empty forms, Reinhold Martin’s essay “Empty Form (Six Observations)” offers a useful architectural description that nonetheless captures something of spirit in which I use the concept in this chapter: “Empty form is not useless form. Instead, translated into the terms of an earlier discourse, utility has become a floating signifier. This means that as with “meaning” in architecture, utility must be regarded as a kind of metaphor whose essential contingency is now taken for granted. Programmatic and technical indeterminacy has thereby effectively become a problem of form. Not in the sense of yielding new geometries or other spatial arrangements, but in the sense of being premised on a theoretical ‘flexibility degree-zero,’ a limit case in which the set of programmatic permutations and combinations tends toward an absolute flexibility. The result is a kind of uselessness-in-reverse - an empty shell potentially containing all programs rather than no program. Hence, a degree-zero of meaning has been joined by a degree-zero of utility as a hypothetical possibility. Together, these establish the logical, formal limits within which architecture operates under global capitalism” (17-18).

those rules come to be recognized and therefore a genre achieves marketability, genre gives particular works of literature recognizable forms in which to work (Brown “Real Subsumption”). On the one hand, received forms enable recognition, while establishing identifiable and repeatable rules first creates an economy of recognition out of individual instances. On the other hand, the economy of misrecognition allows established aesthetic forms to remain recognizable without maintaining the resourced significance or fulfilling the expected desires. Misrecognition privileges difference rather than identity without, however, finally claiming to do without one or the other. I want to show briefly two ways *The Road* does this. Immediately, two historically distinct but nonetheless related forms come to mind. First, we hear Dante’s *Comedy* echoed in the novel’s opening: “When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night.”<sup>8</sup> Despite its similar beginning, McCarthy promises no such reconciliation between meaning’s historical absence and fulfillment as we find in Dante even as it uses the figure of the “*selva oscura*” to begin the characters’ journey. Much like Dante’s pilgrimage, the characters in *The Road* have an end in mind—albeit the secularized bastion of the shore’s comfort rather than heavenly paradise itself. Their arrival could not be better marked by disappointment than the father’s own words to the boy: “Out there was the gray beach with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden and the distant sound of it. Like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of....He looked at the boy. He could see the disappointment in his face. I’m sorry it’s not blue, he said” (215). The novel’s characters set out on a spiritual pilgrimage in line with Dante’s only to find the heavenly light has been blotted out, leaving the sea not a steely blue but a leaden gray.

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<sup>8</sup> “Midway upon the journey of our life/I found myself within the forest dark,/For the straightforward pathway had been lost” (3) There’s more to be said here about the larger implications of allegorical thinking during and after postmodernism. See Bill Brown’s “The Dark Wood of Postmodernity (Space, Faith, Allegory)” for more.

I offer the road narrative in American literary history as the other form McCarthy effectively empties. The unpredictable events and potential networks of possibilities that accompany geographic mobility and the excitement of self-discovery characterize American road narratives. As one meets others from all walks of life, it is the potential of encountering oneself again and again that marks the road toward self-discovery. McCarthy's novel couldn't be more different while being at the same time recognizable as just such a narrative form. It embodies the ambivalence of the road wherein lies the potential to be both hopefully together and hopelessly alone. While their journey to the shore orients the characters spatially and geographically, absent are the freedom and openness of the road. In this situation, unlike other road narratives, the road is mapped from the start. The imperative is neither self-discovery nor participating in a mobile community of fellow journeymen; rather, it is the desire of self-preservation—a warmer climate might provide unfathomable ease in the world, an expectation ultimately left unfulfilled by the novel's world of diminished geographic climactic distinction. In *The Road*, to wake in the dark wood is to begin on a path toward the conclusiveness of death, if not to arrive at some brilliant meaning beyond the reality of earthly life. *The Road* moves toward establishing meaning only insofar as it locates it in the removal of the source of all meaning-making, which is to say, the novel dramatizes not just impending apocalypse but the revelation that the human discovers itself only in the time of its own self-destruction. It should come at no surprise to literary critics that the post-apocalypse is the literary form of imagination that attends the onset of what the scientific community now recognizes as the Anthropocene. And, following, there should be even less surprise at the conclusion of McCarthy's novel when the road to the shore leads not to paradise, or even warmth, but to the father's certain death. But both journeys are determined; the source of that determinism, however, makes all the difference in how we read the works. On the

one hand, Dante's sojourn is one precipitated by loss but rewarded with paradise. Dante's road is one that links dark forests to senseless light (unrepresentable in its physical intensity), from an exhaustion of representation to the sublimity of unrepresentability and total meaning.

McCarthy's road, on the other hand, is a journey through natural, geographic, and social wreck and ruin. *The Road* transforms Dante's sublime figure of light into a *facies hippocratica* for the humanist era, a light immeasurable not by its intensity but rather its gloominess:

They ate well but they were still a long way from the coast. He knew that he was placing hopes where he'd no reason to. He hoped it would be brighter where for all he knew the world grew darker daily. He'd once found a lightmeter in a camera store that he thought he might use to average out readings for a few months and he carried it around with him for a long time thinking he might find some batteries for it but he never did. At night when he woke coughing he'd sit up with his hand pushed over his head against the blackness. Like a man waking in a grave. (213)

What follows is a collection of examples from *The Road* that illustrate further how the novel attempts to make time appear in an era in which the dominant refrain tells of the end of history. At times, this can be a strategy that inevitably and paradoxically makes history appear as an effect of its disappearance. I argue *The Road* is a novel that shows the potential of experiencing and knowing the world that relies not on socially and historically particular ways of doing so but also, and more importantly, on a metahistorical sense of the human capacity to make the world. McCarthy dramatizes the exhaustion of history and nature to highlight not the eclipse of history as a collective project but the potential opportunities provided an individual to know and unknow that world. Most evidently, the novel's premise involves an all-too-perfect "axial event" in which history would have no other choice but to appear. Whatever indeterminate apocalyptic event has happened it leaves the remaining population "creedless shells of men," nature "motionless and precise," and the earth "cauterized terrain" (28, 6, 14). Rather than use the event negatively to judge history or positively to envision a collective project, McCarthy uses

it to produce the man's individual problem: how to locate "lived time" in the now "universal time" that follows the event.<sup>9</sup> This problem makes evident the difference in experiencing time after the failure of those mediating instruments that would translate time into history. Using this framework to read *The Road* highlights its anti-utopian impulse, not insofar as it favors dystopia but rather by presenting itself as an artifact of and even potential roadblock in the "long countdown towards Utopia or extinction" (Jameson 551). The novel inhabits the ironic mode by both denying and affirming the collective project of history inasmuch as that collective project is presented as ending with the extinction of collectivity itself. In a final ironic twist, the metahistorical conception of human action in the world the novel offers is figured through the collectivity inherent in generic form itself. Insofar as the novel figures collective action it does so through the determinate negation of genre—that is by evacuating a genre characterized by anticipating, imagining, and representing mass catastrophes of those characteristics at a point in history when human action has become most apparently an ecological force and therefore lacking adequate modes of representing itself to itself. *The Road*, as a generic work that works on genre during a historical period in need of a great ecological awakening, reaches toward achieving a kind of particularity antithetical to generic literature as such and therefore points toward a form of collective organization that potentially exceeds the conditions that would lead it to its own extinction.

### **Things in Space: The Gun and The Bunker**

The novel's bunker scene occurs at a crucial moment in the narrative. At a point when the characters' desperation could not be more intense and hopeless, the father fears the child's increasing inconsolability signals something "that could not be put right again" (136). With a

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<sup>9</sup> For a somewhat different look at McCarthy's novel's relationship to these problems see my "The Road is Mapped: Cormac McCarthy's Modernist Irony."

nod to the all-too-common trope of the apocalyptic genre's play with crisis and its eventual decline, the protagonists find "crate upon crate of canned goods" lamp fuel, cutlery, toothbrushes, even a toilet. The man's words match the exaggeration of the convention as well as the match the realities of such destitution: "...found everything. Everything...the richness of a vanished world" (139). Much of it, however, appears unreal to the boy's eyes. And while the protagonists find temporary shelter and sustenance enough to carry away, "there was no gun and there wasn't [sic] going to be one" (143). To this point in the novel, the gun has been a precious object for the characters, if not *the* most precious object precisely because of its relation to necessity; it is at once an object that signifies a means of protection and termination, in it is the potential of murder and suicide, either, or both, may be necessary.

The bunker's plentitude can promise nothing as much as a return of the social world that once was or a better one to come. With bullets but no gun on the shelf, the bunker fails to have become the privatized space of protection and survival intended by its owner who never made it inside. The gun's absence invokes a line from J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* in which the gun "stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself. The gun is our last defence against isolation within the travelling sphere. The gun is our mediator with the world and therefore our savior...the gun saves us from the fear that all life is within us" (79). Beyond the gun's mere absence is a final assurance that there is nothing to guarantee resumption of the kind of social world that guarantees one is not alone. From within the bunker, the object's nonexistence allows the reader to register a supplemental absence—that of social conflict and, therefore, social promise beyond mere survival. The missing object is a sign of the socially exhausted world from a place especially designed for the protection of future social exchange. While the gun's absence taps into the anxiety of social life's absence in the form of an object, the



bunker is the materialized presence of an imagination that grows out of this anxiety. The novel, too, offers a way to trace the forms this type of imagination not only lives off of but also those it can be expected to reproduce. For McCarthy, as a literary form of collectivity, the genre of post-apocalypse offers a way to work through the bad forms of collective imagination while also putting those forms to use to build more promising sites of conflict.

As it functions in the novel, as well as the larger cultural imaginary, the bunker is a site of social conflict. After WWII and throughout the Cold War period both catastrophe and community establish the bunker as a spatial instantiation of the apocalyptic imaginary. Putatively, the bunker functions as a respite from cataclysm, tempering the fears of annihilation by promising populations the protection of concrete walls and ventilated air. The bunker helps to imagine community spatially amid catastrophe and potential collapse of every means of recognizing socially managed and civilized life. A text like Paul Virilio's *Bunker Archeology* is evidence of how bunkers as spatial forms help to mediate the "strategic geometrizing of the world and its tragic character" brought on by the speed of "scientific instruments of modern warfare" (19).<sup>10</sup> Despite inevitable differences, Virilio's bunkers are quite similar to the one in which the characters in the novel find themselves. In part, the difference results from the ease and frequency with which total catastrophe is imagined in the contemporary period. Or, put more strongly and in concert with later parts of the dissertation, following Virilio's formulation that the modern period sees not only an increasing "reduction of the 'time of war'" given the speed and precision with which war is fought, the bunker gives spatial form to those forms of life reduced *to the time of war* (21). As such, survival has become an incredible figure in today's popular,

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<sup>10</sup> Virilio begins thinking about the "reduction of the planetary habitat" through the 'archeology of the brutal encounter' beginning with cannon powder (19). This history continues today with fiber optics and drones.

literary, and national imaginaries. We find little problem not only imagining catastrophe, but great joy, pleasure, and entertainment anticipating and withstanding it. Uncannily, the proliferation of survival as an image of thought leads to a paradoxically universal yet non-communal existential condition of isolation. The bunker, like genre, provides McCarthy with an empty form. Universality without community could just as easily describe McCarthy's relationship to genre as it could the bunker insofar as both—genre and bunker—allow McCarthy to think through empty forms of community as well as explore, or just exploit, their former haunts. The novel thinks about how community certainly conditions genre, but also how universal legislation remains the generic's ideal and how the singular remains its dialectical other. This mode of understanding, finally, allows us to think seriously about how this novel, and others like it, understand instantiations of the generic as being like a member of a family or part of a cycle that require reproduction. It could, therefore, suggest a different kind of significance behind the persistence of the family in the novel and reorient the framework of reproduction away from the biological human family toward something like genre; that is, reorient the site of reproduction toward the social. For McCarthy, genres and generations are not merely ready at hand collective forms but instead are two forms strongly marked by the making of human hands and so, therefore, both rule-bound but still open to transformation. If this does not point exactly to the optimism of regeneration, it does signal a kind of beginning in repetition with a more complete understanding of how socially recognizable forms require and recall a conscious process of their making.

In 2003, German businessman and art collector Christian Boros purchased a bunker in Berlin that would by 2008 become gallery space to exhibit an extensive private art collection. The bunker went through different phases since its 1943 construction: at one time serving as a

massive fruit storage facility and most interestingly becoming a space in which Berliners shared in the communal affective trance states of rave culture. These transformations in architectural space mirror changes in social needs. As one article described the transformation, the bunker was “once devoid of natural light” but is now capped by Boros’s “glass superstructure” of a penthouse (Argyriades). The visual contrast—not to say anything of the economic and class implications of the transformation—between opaque concrete walls and transparent glass matches the different social visions of the two architectural forms. In the past, immense concrete walls were the material results of a society dominated by the anxieties and destruction of aerial bombardment campaigns. Meant to shield civilian life and preserve the national population, bunkers vary in size and scope but share generic formal features—most identifiably in the concrete wall. It could appear a logical transition for a bunker to transform from a haven from aerial attack and destruction to a sphere of cultural and social communion constructed largely through visual imaginings within defined and confined spaces. In a brief, but potentially illuminating way, we can pick up Bruno Latour’s interest in one of the bunker’s artists Tomas Saraceno by way of the spatial metaphors he uses to describe the work being made up not only of “networks” but also “spheres.” We can understand the repurposed Berlin bunker as an attempt to transform networked into spherical space; to move from the speed and efficiency of destruction across planar space to the slow growth and rebirth of culture through the Saraceno’s spherical spatial forms; from the planar world suited for destruction to a reestablished striated space of tenuous but clustered structures built upon otherness. Like the bunker’s original intention, the gallery space is an attempt to wall off the outside world, with a new sense of what it means to do so without the specific threat of air raids but still with the proliferation of planar space. That is, Boros’s project appears still to fight against the kinds of undifferentiated spaces of military

assault and commercial markets that would apply the logic of exchange to aesthetic products. But if he exhibits any impulse toward freeing art or life from such appropriations, Boros's project does so by claiming what was once public space to be private space. Boros's project exemplifies the contemporary collector's desire to take art objects out of market circulation in favor of curating these objects within a space free from other institutions and forms of art production and exhibition. Despite the bunker becoming a privatized space of exhibition, it remains invested in the social possibilities of both bunkers and art exhibits. Indeed, Boros should be credited for bringing such forms together and exploring the possibilities that emerge out of their encounter. The collection raises questions regarding the relationship between the protective space of the bunker—rather than the museum as such—being used for objects without purpose. As a result, we are moved to pursue questions of purposiveness and usefulness that lead somewhere beyond the answers of autonomy from purpose or use. If nothing else, Boros's bunker offers a site at which to consider the connections between the social project of the bunker and the social project of the art exhibit.

The American cultural imaginary has begun to figure bunkers in ways similar to Boros. What may have once been a site used to preserve life and reinforce social belonging today has begun to look more like an intensely fragmented and contentious conflict over the forms of life that ought to survive a great catastrophe. While bunkers continue to signify a space of safety from the outside world, the American vision increasingly carries with it little sense of the complex relationship and potentially collective project of refuge. While the bunker remains a tremendous collective figure of thought firmly established in the American collective imaginary, it frequently appears as private rather than common space. Today, protection from calamity is bought and sold at prices ranging from a few thousand dollars for a basic DIY backyard structure

to tens if not hundreds of thousand dollars to acquire space in one of the many shared facilities dotting the American landscape today. The bunker is a space that has come to articulate a pervading sense of vulnerability and anxiety while often reinforcing calls for resilience and self-reliance coupled with extreme demands of exclusion.

Much like Boros's private collection, a highly selective process informs the decisions of who ought to survive. To begin to understand how things changed, we can look at two successors of the Cold War era fallout shelter in America. The first example is emblemized by a company like Vivos whose extensively detailed website acts as an advertisement for their "underground shelter network for long-term survival of future catastrophes."<sup>11</sup> Such spaces aim to guarantee a "new beginning for life" by offering the selectivity of a privatized enterprise of social collapse and future regeneration. Enterprises like this represent a kind of eugenics for catastrophic thinking; their brand of thought uses catastrophes to mark the possibilities of a more fully sanctioned community of survivors. The website includes numerous reminders "there are no free spaces available in Vivos," while also boasting military, security, and medical professionals among its clientele. Even still, compared to some recent revelations about preparations being made by America's super-wealthy, Vivos looks to have a welcome mat outside its steel reinforced blast proof doors.

From such large-scale exclusive communities promising the luxuries of contemporary living, we move to more modest bunkers meant to hold no more than a typical family. Imagining such forms of life are on full display in television shows such as "Doomsday Preppers" and the frequent advertisements for "Atlas Shelters" on the show's website. Such structures most

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<sup>11</sup> Since beginning this research Vivos has introduced an "economy class" of shelters with what might most easily be described as a space to house more people with less time and food. Needless to say, economic class withstands the apocalypse.

resemble the bunker in which the characters in the novel find themselves. Arguably even more than *Vivos*, these structures indicate a certain American brand of survival, with ambitions of self-reliance on full display. The gun—a necessary image and object in contemporary cultures of doomsday scenarios—is noticeably absent from the novel’s bunker, but not from those on the television or other media. The gun is *the* emblem of doomsday preparation insofar as it locates the anxieties about situations of unmitigated social confrontation in an object and its promises. This missing object’s presence in the bunker precisely articulates McCarthy’s social vision; that which guarantees something or someone “other than oneself” is not promised, but has to be imagined by the man when he whittles fake bullets for their gun’s empty chambers. The novel stages the man’s attempt to imagine others in a space designed to exclude social forms beyond a small family unit. An object of universal importance, the gun becomes the thing that unmakes the communion inherent to the apocalyptic. McCarthy’s bunker is the novel’s utopic and anti-utopic real estate *par excellence*. In being another empty form, the bunker stages the conflict inherent in imagining not exactly the apocalypse but rather its aftermath. The bunker is a site that makes it possible to interrogate present disagreements over what social forms are imaginable and poses direct questions about what possibilities particular spatial forms allow. Imagining social belonging—materialized in the man’s whittled bullets—survives the bunker’s attempt to wall off sociality beyond an insular and self-selecting unit.

A *New York Times* review of “Doomsday Preppers” describes it as “offensively anti-life...full of contempt for humankind” (Genzlinger “Doomsday Has Its Day”). To suggest McCarthy’s novel exhibits a similar contempt would not be entirely unfounded, but it would certainly reduce the novel’s serious treatments of anthropology, human history, and social belonging to a contemporary fascination with the end. In drawing attention to McCarthy’s

novel's larger anthropological project, I want to argue against identifying the novel with a desire to represent catastrophe in fiction so as to inoculate against it in reality. Indeed, it is the man's intentional historical forgetting and refusal to represent something old *as well as* new that best describe the finitude—against the suggestive readings of the final scene in which another roving family finding the boy—at the center of McCarthy's story. While this particular novel's treatment of apocalypse does not shy away from engaging the mythical imagination appropriate to the genre, it arguably does just as much to reduce myth to the status of fiction. The prehistoric, in this sense, is paradoxically profoundly historic inasmuch as it remains grounded in the fundamentally historical conditionality of the relationship between human agency and those conditions. In other words, *The Road* does not exactly fear the return of a Hobbesian state of nature after collapse of civil authority. Neither does its final paragraph hold out hope for a peaceful appropriation of the earth by the natural world—which is “out there past men's knowing”—even as it points to some kind of ultimately mysterious world to which human understanding can never be adequate but on which it nonetheless does have effects (*BM* 320). Instead, part of what motivates and makes his literary project recognizable as a project is the use to which McCarthy puts literature in studying social form. This would seem to be true in two ways. First, as I have tried to show, genre is a particularly literary example of socially constituted form, capable of bending with historical contingency and moving in and out of fashion often without sacrificing identity. Second, genre presents itself as a site of anthropological and sociological study. In McCarthy's case, apocalypse continues to undergo the process of secularization that brings apocalypse increasingly closer to a being recognized as tragedy with an increased emphasis on “personal death” and other “individual matters” (Kermode 27). At the same time, fiction replaces myth without creating a totally disenchanted world. From the novel's

standpoint, the possibility of imagining alternative forms of human life are conditioned by, but not limited to, established fictions of collective sense making. Yet, if natural history remains somewhere in the shadows of human history, it “has this principal property: that of being social” (3). For Vico, and I would argue also for McCarthy, humanity is naturally historical in that it is “poetic” for “men are men...because they are makers and what before everything else they make is themselves” (Said 117). I would suggest a loose contiguity between Vico, Said, and McCarthy focused around how Vico and Said’s poetic imagination or Poetic Wisdom and McCarthy’s fire both articulate a beginning and, therefore, try to think through the possible ends of human creation in/of the world. The possibilities of making change in time, which means that while imagination may appear as an ahistorical faculty, in truth it too is subject to the contingencies of historical time. Where time, here not just historical, but natural and cosmological movement too, is out of joint, the forms of life will follow. If nothing else, *The Road* is a novel about humanity not just living through a period of time out of joint but of the aftermath of such a devastating revelation.

It is from the staged denouement of universal history, from a standpoint capable of looking out at that which humanity has produced as maker of above all itself, that the man in *The Road* comes to understand a particular moment in human history, namely the contemporary period understood as the overgrowth of modernity. From such a standpoint, he is oriented at the nexus where natural and human history threaten total homology and do so with a sense of common ancestry and cause. The novel imagines a very real if not entirely contradictory point of human history (as maker of both himself and his worlds) in which history appears to have become natural. In a similar vein, W.G. Sebald sees how “collective catastrophe marks the point where history threatens to revert to natural history” (80). Yet, there’s a difference between how



McCarthy and Sebald read collective catastrophe. McCarthy sees this possible convergence not as a reversion but rather the result of humanity intentionally producing itself and the world following the “Great Acceleration.” For McCarthy, thorough loss and mourning, as exemplified by the “literary description of total destruction,” are inevitable; but it is irresponsible, if not impossible, finally to forget the fundamental claim about what defines the human against the natural. Which is to say human life is simply more than, or, more strongly, must be seen as being irreducible to biological persistence; that is, it is precisely in being irreducible to natural history and biological life that humanity sets itself apart from that which surrounds it. To follow this logic through to the problems of the history of humankind from philosophers like Vico to critics like Said to the contemporary’s enchantment with the Anthropocene means seeing humanity as the common ancestor of both History and Nature and fearing less the collapse of that difference and instead working to affirm them through human action.

#### **Coda: Coca-Cola, Abnormal Fescue, Hunger, Fire, and Mars**

I want to close this chapter with condensed readings of several objects that I think bear heavily on understanding the novel’s standpoint on the relationship between history and social being as McCarthy’s novel presents it to be.

I begin with the can of Coke shared between the two characters. Of course, the man already knows the joy of Coke; the boy does not. Not only a sign of prior plenty, the Coke episode provides another counter example of Hoberek’s assertion that the novel’s utopian impulse can be found in its promotion of the objects of a “second nature.” Coke is unquestionably a globally recognizable commodity—the entire world’s useless pleasure condensed not only into a product but also an image. It is a perfect commodity in a communal sense. It can be enjoyed because everyone can enjoy it. Its enjoyment circulates throughout the

world and provides the basis for a collective sense of sweetness and delight. I contend, however, the “second nature” that Coke represents is hardly of a piece with the aesthetic “second nature” Hoberek suggests. The invention of Coke follows from a logic similar to Hoberek that leads him to find value in the “misuse of things for purposes other than those for which they are intended” (493). In conversation with fellow writer Ben Lerner, American poet Cyrus Console, speaking on the connections between “food, drugs, and arms” in American business and politics, contends “all these powers converge at the soft drink.” Console takes just as seriously the issues of second nature as we’ve seen in both McCarthy and Hoberek. It seems fair to say, however, that where Hoberek wants misuse to be a utopian figure, McCarthy and Console share a healthy skepticism of such desires and indeed find in them instead a great promise of dystopia. Console quips, “What is caffeine-free Diet Coke? None of its known ingredients qualify as ‘food’ or ‘drug.’ It is a pure distillate of the military-industrial complex. People drink it, I suspect, not out of thirst or hunger, but because they ‘like the taste.’ Isn’t that what they’d tell you? What is the soft drink if not ‘the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic’ that Walter Benjamin worries about” (“Kansas”)? Pure enjoyment is not enough to free the object from either intention or use, let alone absolve its creators from anything like responsibility for its existence in the first place.

I do not share Hoberek’s conviction that “abnormal fescue” signals the novel’s “object of desire.” Nor do I think the novel’s defense of the aesthetic and imagination against hard realities is as strong as critics have argued. Instead, continuing the force of Console’s critique, McCarthy would seem to point toward humanity’s use and abuse of the natural world, its misunderstanding of its own most basic needs, as well as the potential that the imagination has been a faculty more ambivalent toward and complicit with these abuses than critics often care to entertain. Perhaps the strongest critical claim then to emerge from the Coke scene would be to point not again to

imagination's poverty but rather its insatiable hunger. In how McCarthy uses it, Coke leads not as much to the commodity recognition scene as a commodity misrecognition scene whereby the force of knowing commodities better comes not in the revelation of the labor process in their making as much as the imaginative process whereby what the imagination produces does not satiate hunger but rather feed excess. Put simply, Coke may not satiate your hunger, but its condition of existence is the occasion when you were not hungry in the first place. Rather than fall in line with Hoberek's defense of second nature and the aesthetic, the Coke episode looks forward to the end of these kinds of pure commodities, their economies of circulation, and the desire to find enjoyment in those things beyond necessity. Which does not add up to McCarthy disavowing the aesthetic as such but does imply a disagreement with Hoberek's characterization of aesthetic products being those things that emerge from beyond the necessary. We might go one step further to suggest that this episode, if not the novel as a whole, serves to rescue the aesthetic object from precisely the kind of enjoyment with which Hoberek identifies it. The scene expresses a desire to terminate the excess embodied in the commodity. Unlike the sextant, this joy is shared. Giving this desire a last flickering moment of joy and allowing the characters to lose sight of their own necessities of survival, the soda acts like the reclaimed commodity of genre, wrested from the chains of empty indulgences by the demand to comprehend and reveal the hard center that sits under a sugarcoated world.

In a recent essay dedicated entirely to exploring hunger in *The Road*, Matthew Mullins identifies it with a "foundational standard of morality" neatly emblemized by human flesh between teeth in a scene from the novel. The essay is concerned with identifying a "larger transcendence that would demand our attention even if we were the last humans on earth"—a moral sense beyond relational ethics and social immediacy. Rather than looking at hunger as a

way to affirm a transcendental moral sensibility, hunger helps us to think of the limits of representation itself. The difficulty in representing the ontic reality of hunger pushes on the distinction between concrete and abstract reality. In his recent book *Representing Capital*, Fredric Jameson reaches a certain denouement during the chapter on space while analyzing what he calls “Marx’s spatial form.” His interest begins with Marx’s exploration of the “ultimate spaces of capital” wherein Jameson argues, “spatial form is predicated on a primal scene, in which the ultimately unrepresentable is approached as at some outer limit.” What Jameson finds interesting and I find to be continuous with this chapter’s arguments about genre and imagination is that in Marx “what allows an act to come to consciousness is not its success as rather its failure.” For example, it is less any specific scene of working that provides Marx the opportunity to discuss the working day, as it is “the stumble and the body’s exhaustion” (113). Among his list of “unrepresentable phenomena,” Jameson singles out hunger: “none is quite so unrepresentable as hunger itself, divested of all its cultural forms, and reduced to the nameless inanition and debility” (125). When Jameson poses the question of “How finally to see hunger as such and not merely the bodies through which its effects express themselves?” it would seem McCarthy’s Coke scene offers at least one possible answer—with added irony. Indeed, if any product intended for human consumption cannot be “divested of all its cultural forms” while at the same time float freely around without being inhibited by them, Coke is it. The novel, therefore, represents the unrepresentable, i.e. hunger, in a Marxian moment of its failure. Which is to say, again, Coke was not made to alleviate hunger but to exceed need. Insofar as it does that, Coke can be directly associated with imagination. Finally, however, it again uses failure to bring an act to consciousness. Coke is the instantiation of a more persistent failure of imagination

that precedes the contemporary moment, indicting the imagination while also, arguably, inciting it to remain afire.

The processes of “world reduction”<sup>12</sup> that give the final image of unrepresentable hunger in Jameson’s account provide McCarthy’s novel its beginning. If statistics, calendars, and clocks are a few emblems of the “official world,”<sup>13</sup> then McCarthy’s novel gives the final images of alienation in that humanity is left alienated and in retreat from its prior technologies of self-production and representation. Rather than wanting to “produce the real” through the technologies of representation that mark the modern world, the characters more forcibly refuse “to know the real” in the same way that has brought the world to its knees. Producing the factual—one mark of a modern world—gives way in McCarthy to what the factual produces. The man finally learns after repeatedly warning the boy to avert his eyes amid “mummified figures” that no matter the aversion “they’ll still be there” and the boy will remain “strangely untroubled” (191). The world seems to refuse the boy access to “counterfactual or alternate worlds,” while he, in turn, seems not entirely to refuse the desire for the illusionary kinds of escape that modernism always falsely promised (Seltzer).

*The Road* poses clear questions regarding what there is in the world as well as what those things can be. The fire is an almost too perfect emblem of the danger in losing the distinction between ontology and metaphysics. It cannot be entirely physical yet it instantiates itself, as the man tells the child, “inside you. It was always there. I can see it” (279). The fire becomes the

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<sup>12</sup> For more on this concept see Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future*, in particular the essay “World Reduction in Le Guin,” 267-280.

<sup>13</sup> This phrase comes from Mark Seltzer’s recent work on modernity and reflexive modernity. In Seltzer’s own terms: “a modern world comes to itself by staging its own conditions. A modern world is a self-conditioning and self-reporting one.” For more see Seltzer’s “The Daily Planet” in *Post45*.

transcendental commodity—that which circulates both inside and outside physical being, but nonetheless cannot exist in everything or everywhere if it is to maintain its value. In *Blood Meridian* we find a similar image where “every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world” (148). The shore is that “uttermost edge” where the woman at the end of *The Road* gives the boy yet another image of the physicality of metaphysics where “the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” (286). Such images lead us to question the man’s decision to introduce the image of the fire in first place. Is this an act of recovery, reenactment, or repetition? If nothing else, the father’s decision is one that cannot forsake the desire for representation. More specifically, it is an act in which the man preserves a metaphysical element in what seems to be an all too physical reality, where absence remains present. No matter the physical conditions, the fire will not be extinguished; no matter the ontological realities, humanity remains that which is metaphysical and metahistorical—the architect living beyond the worlds it builds. The fire is that which remains when there is no God and humanity has become its own prophets; especially where necessity (in multiple forms: like food, but also shelter, or generic conventions, or a lift) appears to make its greatest assaults on the joyous, fire remains.<sup>14</sup> McCarthy’s characters do not live an event but through one; they live

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<sup>14</sup> I will come back to this point from a different angle later in the chapter, but Gaston Bachelard’s *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* offers a remarkable comment on the relationship between the impression, image, practice and concept of fire and not overcoming necessity, but more strongly the joy achieved in the pursuit of the unnecessary. Here is Bachelard, for example: “And it is always like that, through a kind of extra pleasure—like dessert—that fire shows itself a friend of man. It does not confine itself to cooking; it makes things crisp and crunchy. It puts the golden crust on the griddle cake; it gives a material form to man’s festivities. As far back in time as we can go, the gastronomic value has always been more highly prized than the nutritive value, and it is in joy and not in sorrow that man discovered his intellect. The conquest of the superfluous gives us a greater spiritual excitement than the conquest of the necessary. Man is a creation of desire, not a creation of need” (16-17).

not as individuals would but within a realm of pre- or post-individualistic life for which the fire remains an animating force.<sup>15</sup>

One final constellation of objects beyond the earth remains important to our understanding of the novel: the sun and Mars. Late in the book we learn the child has thrown away the flute the man made for him. We've already learned that the flute would not provide a new music for the ruined world. But now the object itself is discarded along with the promise of redemption. Earlier in the same episode the boy asks his father two important questions: Could they fly to Mars and find "food and stuff when [they] got there?" and "If you were a crow could you fly up high enough to see the sun?" (157-158). The man answers the first question simply: "there's nothing there" quickly putting the boy's hope of another hospitable planet to rest. The second question receives an affirmative answer.

In reading these passages, I cannot help but be reminded of Marinetti's "Second Futurist Proclamation" in which he describes looking at the earth below his airplane, conscripting nature in the fight: "how many flocks of rose-tinted sheep...O my soul, how you loved them!...Enough of that! You will never take pleasure in that kind of insipidity!...The reeds from which at one time we used to make shepherds' pipes provide the cannon for this plane" (30). Marinetti's vision gives a condensed figure of modernity and the imperative at once to know, create, and destroy the world—to be able, in short, to represent and thereby destroy one's own creation. What interests me here is Marinetti's commitment to representation but in a decisively non-naturalist way. For him representation is a purely human action no longer dependent upon understanding but in framing, or enclosing, the natural world. For the boy, "to see the sun" would be a return to a naturalist understanding of representation whereby human understanding

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<sup>15</sup> On the pre- and post-individual, see Jameson *Valences*, 551.

of the world depends upon its relationship to the natural world as something to be observed but not corralled. This is the payoff of being a crow. Instead, however, the man reminds us that the human is “earthbound” and, following Bruno Latour, being “human” is in the process of being eclipsed by being “earthbound.” At no other point in history has representing the human probably seemed as difficult, necessary, and in need of a commitment to see itself as being earthbound than today. So much has the virtual encroached on the actual and the historical the natural that to imagine again the differences between sides to find a way out it would seem requisite to bind the imagination to its own insatiable hunger and watch it feed upon itself to the point of exhaustion. And then wait for it to do it again.



### **“I Am Not Myself Today”: Cultural Commodities Speaking Ironically**

In a foreword to the 2002 collection *Making Callaloo: 25 Years of Black Literature*, Percival Everett suggests the journal has upheld the ideals of artistic merit in the face of a publishing industry motivated not only by profit but also a desire “to find the next, blacker work” (xvi). As the author of numerous novels and collections of poetry and short stories, a majority of which were published by small independent presses, Everett knows the publishing industry very well. But he holds no illusions about the industry’s motivations, which he views as “unapologetically and rightly a business, and one that has no moral conscience or compass of its own, or borrowed” (xvi). Everett makes clear that industry in a general sense, and the publishing industry more specifically, are driven by nothing more than finding a bestseller. If that is what it wants to find, however, it is not clear what it wants to make. We might respond by suggesting that industries are interested in making markets. And in order to make markets, industry is interested in finding the best commodity and making it available to all. From the standpoint of industry, the consumer is just as, if not more, important than the producer. And from the standpoint of the publishing industry, finding the best commodity depends on creating the largest market.

From Everett’s standpoint, “African-American writers were, and in many ways still are, stuck trying to supply fictions that are palatable to American culture’s tastes and expectations and that do not upset the way America wants to see black people and itself” (xvi). In this way, Everett suggests literature functions as a technology of recognition in which stories that achieve market circulation do so insofar as they reinforce familiar narratives of individual, communal, national, and global significance. Inasmuch as some would take African-American literature to be resistant to such an industry’s aims, Everett offers two counterclaims. His first claim regards

the absence of a “black reading public” to act as a counterforce to literature’s recognitive function. Not only does he identify the absence of a particular black reading public, however, but Everett also argues in the case of such a public’s existence it, too, would “[fall] as much a victim to the culture as anyone else” (xvi). Everett’s second claim follows from the first, but holds the possibility of revealing more interesting entailments. Building from the claim that a “black reading public” doesn’t make for much of a literary market, Everett goes on:

The market for the novels of social protest, from Wright in the 1940s to John A. Williams in the 1970s was mostly white, middle-class, and young. Black novels were, for lack of a better term, novel: a people’s statement about black life, about being black in a racist, oppressive society. It all fit neatly into a rehearsed rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s. New York publishing houses were trying to find the next, blacker work. (xvi)

The following paragraph, in which he praises *Callaloo*’s refusal to bend to market logic in deciding its content, clarifies the force of Everett’s argument. While major publishing houses considered “race [to] be [their] god,” *Callaloo* “became known as a forum for real, artistic expression” that opposed the tendency that follows from market logic to “funnel” the varieties of “African-American experience” and its possible forms of expression “into a tiny vessel of clichés and set pieces” (xvi). But for the reader of his fiction, Everett himself puts those “clichés and set pieces” to work in writing stories whose force of irony, parody, and satire depend on the kinds of established forms of which Everett is quite critical. Indeed, while Everett’s career can be seen as one long diversion from writing or talking about race, the novels tell quite a different story—a story to which I will return later on in the chapter.

But Everett’s foreword goes on to praise *Callaloo*’s commitment to fighting “the American cultural and political impulse to contain whatever threatens it. It didn’t matter what the fictions of the 1960s and 1970s said, and much of it was fine and magnificently honest, as long as it repeated itself into impotence. Building a fence around what is threatening and controlling it

is a superior oppressive operating principle” (xvi). Here, Everett returns to the work he previously dismissed for fitting too nicely with the rhetoric of empowerment of the 60s and 70s only to condemn its “impotence” in the fight against cliché. From Everett’s standpoint, these works were complicit in the marketing techniques that dulled the teeth of novels of social protest by searching without end for what Everett calls “the next, blacker work,” which at this point we should understand as the search for the next best commodity. As it became synonymous with Black fiction of the 60s and 70s, the novel of social protest goes through a normalizing process to an extent that narratives of social protest began to do less protesting while doing more selling. While praising publishing decisions that depend less on an author’s identity than a story’s “artistic merit,” Everett goes on to say, “[*Callaloo*] has finally encouraged the abandonment of the *recognition* of color, race, and national boundaries altogether. It has done this while still admitting, discussing, and challenging the notions of race and the realities of colonization” (xvii, emphasis added).

While *Callaloo* began as a “Black South forum in 1976,” it has since gone through various changes. Its most significant reformation came when the journal moved to Texas A&M in 2001. According to founder Charles Rowell, the project was first conceived while spending time on his father’s farm in Auburn, Alabama. Its primary motivation then was establishing a publishing forum for Black writers typically left out of venues in both the South and North. While the journal began with the intention of showcasing American writers, by the 2000s it had refashioned itself as a journal interested in the “history, life, literature, and culture of African descendants in different nations.” Using “Cuba and Mexico as our [its] points of departure,” the journal “wanted to follow the early routes that the Spanish used to transport and distribute their human cargo” (404). With this reorientation, the journal began focusing on publishing work by

authors outside of the U.S. who were living and working in geographic locations with deep ties to the transatlantic slave trade. By his own admission, Rowell recognizes that “there is a long distance between Havana and Veracruz and my father’s kitchen’s table” (402). Yet, as Rowell sees it, *Callaloo* is “currently the only site where writers and intellectuals from various locations in the African Diaspora may meet and converse, however indirectly” (404). Alongside its geographic reorientation, *Callaloo* looked to “[extend] and [expand] the aesthetic and ideational possibilities of African-American literature-in-the-making” (405). Throughout his introduction, Rowell writes twice about his journal emerging out of necessity. The first fulfilled a need Southern Black writers had in the 1970s for a place to publish literature while being excluded from established forums. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, a new necessity emerged in which “artists of African descent” would not only have a place in which to publish their work but also would become familiar with work produced by others across the globe. What was once a problem in the Southern states of America had by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, according to Rowell, become a global problem. *Callaloo* would remain a stalwart of emerging voices in art and literature, while working to establish itself as a central node in a growing network of artists and writers whose common feature, as Rowell saw it, was their “African descent.” As a project that began in the 1970s with an impulse toward highlighting the geographic specificity of Southern Black writing, by the 21<sup>st</sup> century *Callaloo* sought to reestablish itself as a meeting point in a vast network of African Diasporic writers and artists.

Geography provided a conceptual frame for the journal in the 1970s, and it continues to do so into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet while the journal’s geographic frame has extended beyond the Southern U.S. to include not only the Americas but also cultural production across the globe, its ideological frame remains remarkably consistent. As Rowell explains, “circumstances

dictated....that we also provide a publication outlet for black writers nationwide.” As publications associated with the Black Arts Movement “were already dead or dying” *Callaloo* would assume a new responsibility. But the journal would not uphold the “aesthetic and political tenets” established by the Movement. While it would “affirm the *blackness* of its writing communities and the aesthetic imperatives associated with them,” *Callaloo* would push back against the ideological purity of the BAM by “attempt[ing] to liberate black writers from the confining restrictions imposed on them by the prescriptive aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement” (“Necessity” ix). As he considers the BAM a “Northern urban phenomenon,” it comes with little surprise that Rowell would not consider *Callaloo* an appropriate venue to continue the movement’s aesthetic project. Rowell concludes, however, on a note of uncertainty that echoes the contentions Everett has with a totalizing project like that of African-American literature. As he aims to include work by authors that “evoke[s] the myriad differences in experiences and cultural traditions of which these Diaspora writers of two or three generations are heir,” Rowell is led to ask a question for which “we once thought [the answer] was obvious: beyond a history beginning in African slave trade, what do these writers share? What, other than the impulse to create, binds them together?” Thus go the troubles of delimiting African-American literature then and now. So that while it first appears aesthetics trumps geography in *Callaloo*’s newest instantiation, the relationship between the two remains not only important but indeed the conditions of possibility for “a future of black literature not only in the United States but elsewhere in the Diaspora for the next twenty-five years” (“Necessity” x).

It’s as if Percival Everett’s novels write their own criticism; or, put another way, Percival Everett’s novels are often enough works of theory/criticism themselves. And, in a purely modernist way, they are themselves, as novels, works of criticism; that is, they are novels that

take up the very notion of the novelistic, of the theoretical, of the critical. As such, these novels function at multiple discursive levels at once. They are novelistic insofar as they present stories of “the opposition between the individual and the world as a whole.” Without presenting a “stable reconciliation between the individual and society,” however, Everett’s novels also present themselves as a challenge to common understandings of novelistic objects (Pavell 299). Indeed, Everett’s novels often thematize the inherent instabilities and irreconcilabilities between individuals and collectives. With implications extending beyond the individual subjective frames used to tell their stories, Everett’s novels intervene at sites of common experience and intelligibility. As such, they function as theoretical works of the novel as well as works of critical sociology. But what kinds of interventions are the novels looking to make? If they ever were, are novels still capable of intervening at broader scales of collective intelligibility? I think they were and still are capable of making such interventions, and I think Everett’s novels are particularly incisive examples of exactly what such ambitions look like in novelistic form.

Everett’s work is an exceptional example of an author whose novels tell stories in which “the individual’s antagonist [is] the collective.” Where the collective can be figured as a “collection” of those novels Everett’s introduction references, it consists of a “heritage and techniques” that Everett’s works at once recognize and misrecognize (Cavell *Philosophy* 258). In being novels that not only require recognizing that worlds are configured by things “having already received significance” they also “[demand] a recounting of what has hitherto been taken to count” in the configuration of particular worlds as well as interrogate how significance comes into being and finds wide acceptance (Cavell *Philosophy* 259). For Everett, antagonism takes as its form the simultaneity of acknowledgement and opposition between the “heritage” of protest novels and the “techniques” Everett uses to construct the simultaneity necessary for the novels

both to acknowledge their place within a tradition of writing and to confront a system of meaning and circulation that requires things to be recognizable from the beginning. In a way that's been more sustained and productive than other artists engaging in similarly critical and creative projects, Everett's work shows how the various influences on artists, their practices, and their products can be taken as "pollutants" as much as "potsherds" (Cavell *Philosophy* 258). It is with a particular kind of ambivalence that Everett's novels cultivate both possibilities without resorting to either direct refusal or complete embrace of African-American literary tradition. Instead, Everett's novels, I suggest, are the very battlegrounds on which confrontations between individual encounters and collective recognitions are waged. These novels intervene at sites of both artistic and social value and therefore raise questions in line with recent scholarship interested in the "heritage" of the collective project of African-American literature.

We can begin to understand the Everett's relationship to problems of recognition by considering the short story "Appropriation of Cultures." Published in a 1996 issue of *Callaloo*, it tells the story of Daniel Barkley who "had money left to him by his mother" and a "house which had been left to him by his mother" and who "played a nineteen-forty Martin guitar with a Barkus-Berry pickup and drove a nineteen-seventy-six Jensen Interceptor which he had purchased after his mother's sister had died and left him her money" (24). One night, while playing "jazz with some old guys" at a local bar near the campus of the University of South Carolina, "some white boys from a fraternity yelled forward to the stage at the black man holding the acoustic guitar and began to shout, 'Play Dixie for us! Play Dixie for us!'" As his eyes shift between the "uncomfortable expressions on the faces of the old guys" and the "embarrassed faces of the other college kids in the club," Daniel "started to play." As he does, Daniel finds himself "feeling the lyrics, deciding that the song was his...He resisted the urge to

let satire ring through his voice. He meant what he sang.” Arriving at the song’s conclusion, Daniel “looked up to see a roomful of eyes on him” and subsequently finds himself “busy trying to sort out his feelings about what he had just played.” Those feelings, according to the narrative, were doubly ironic, Daniel finding himself able at once to play the song “straight and from the heart” while also feel as if he were “claiming southern soil, or at least recognizing his blood in it. His was the land of cotton and hell no, it was not forgotten.” His youth, the story tells us, provides Daniel a capacity to be at ease with his anger at the same time that “something like that night with the white fratboys or simply a flashing blue light in the rearview mirror brought it all back.” Arriving home that night, Daniel “made tea and read about Pickett’s charge at Gettysburg while he sat in the big leather chair which had been his father’s.” As he sleeps, Daniel dreams “a dream in which he stopped Pickett’s men on the Emmitsburg Road on their way to the field and said, ‘Give me back my flag’” (25). As the dream turns Daniel into a kind of war hero capable of redirecting the course of the historical past, it also makes his individual psyche a site of continued confrontation between the cultural heritage of the South and techniques used to establish boundaries between one collective and another. Moreover, Daniel’s psyche becomes the very site at which this ongoing confrontation plays out. In the process, Daniel finds himself divided in a way reminiscent of canonical notions of double consciousness in which a single individual understands him/herself to occupy the contradictory position of being both subject and object in a given set of relations. For Daniel, this means seeing himself as both inheriting the cultural legacy of the South and at the same time being the object of derision that inheres in the significance of such products.

The story’s following section sees Daniel perusing the classifieds for a used truck. He settles on going to see a “nineteen-sixty-eight Ford three-quarter ton” whose “full rear cab



window decal of the Confederate flag” becomes its most enticing attribute for Daniel. Pressed by his friend Sarah, “a very large woman with a very large afro hairdo,” to explain his purchase, Daniel explains, ““I’m not buying the truck. Well, I am buying a truck, but only because I need the truck for the decal. I’m buying the decal”” (27). Fueled by his experience singing *Dixie* in the bar and the effect it has on his audience, Daniel decides “the rebel flag is my flag” and urges Sarah to reconsider her approach to instances of such symbolic significance. Daniel’s activism is neatly presented in the image of the Confederate flag flying above the South Carolina state Capitol building: ““So, the goddamn flag is flying over the State Capitol. Don’t take it down, just take it. That’s what I say”” (28). Contrary to recent events that finally led to the decision to remove the Confederate flag from South Carolina’s Capitol building, Daniel finds the flag’s symbolic association with a racist past to be a source of its potential for resignification; rather than continuing to serve as a barrier to Black empowerment, Daniel finds in the act of misrecognition a source for reassigning the flag’s symbolic value. When the truck’s owner delivers it to Daniel’s home, his wife is compelled to ask a question that was “burning right through her.” After Daniel repeatedly rejects the offer to “peel that thing off the window,” she asks, “Why do you want that flag on the truck?” After reframing the question in a way that made it less about the decal and more about Daniel’s need for a truck, Daniel responds with a facetious answer about hauling groceries and books. He follows these explanations with a truly bewildering response that returns the question to its original inquiry about the decal and not the truck and consequently refocuses the question as being one of exchange value, not use value. Daniel explains it was less his need to haul anything that led to his purchase; instead, in a turn of fortune, he was “lucky enough to find a truck with the black power flag already on it” (28). In a

state of complete confusion, the truck's former owners are left standing on Daniel's lawn as he and Sarah drive away. Sarah remarks the beauty of the encounter while Daniel remarks its truth.

But it's Daniel who finally understands the power of misrecognition inheres in the historical contingency of the terms on which something achieves recognizability. As he drives his new truck around town, Daniel courts confrontation. Met by others' confusion, Daniel affirms his intention to transform the flag's symbolic significance. At one point, following his defense of the flag in front of "two big white men" and "four black teenagers," Daniel ups the ante with a "bent-arm, black power, closed-fist salute." And later, following another puzzled look, this time from "a lawyer named Ahmad Wilson," Daniel responds with laughter: "Power to the people." The strongest reaction Daniel's new approach elicits, however, comes not from the flag but from a second performance of *Dixie*. This time, Daniel performs it with an "R&B dance band at a banquet of the black medical association." The audience initially responds with "strange looks" and "expressions of outrage." Soon, however, "bemused laughter" and "open joking and acceptance" urge the crowd to dance and even join in the singing (29). The story closes by describing a proliferation of Confederate flags around town, especially on cars "being driven by black people." From the lapels of "Black businessmen and ministers" to homecoming football games, "black people all over the state flew the Confederate flag." Once black families begin using the flag to claim picnic spots the following Fourth of July, "the piece of cloth was quietly dismissed from its station with the U.S. and state flags atop the State Capitol. There was no ceremony, no notice. One day, it was not there" (30). Despite Everett's story's rhetorical attempt to reduce the flag to a "piece of cloth," the unceremonious disappearance of the flag is striking inasmuch as it ascribes powers to Daniel's and others' acts of appropriation that are disproportionate to the ceremoniousness of Daniel's initial appropriative attempt. That initial act,

of course, involves Daniel consenting to sing *Dixie* when goaded by his white audience. Despite his own conflicted feelings, Daniel begins “feeling the lyrics, deciding that the lyrics were his, deciding that the song was his” (24). Daniel’s is a ceremonious action whose condition of possibility depends not only on the song being recognizable as part of the cultural legacy of the Southern U.S., but also on experiencing feelings that make the song recognizable in the first place and, furthermore, enforce and sustain its collective recognition. Indeed, Daniel’s actions would seem to contradict the story’s conclusion in which the event it describes—the removal of the Confederate flag from state Capitol—is reinforced by the sentiment expressed in the song’s refrain that the story transforms into a recommendation, or even a command: “Look away, look away, look away...” Simply looking away would seem a weak strategy in comparison to the kind of power that inheres in continued acts of recognizing in the symbolism of the flag, in specific geographic and historical contexts, just how much looking—either at or away—is itself part of the problem inasmuch as power enables and disables certain kinds of looking. During the initial episode in which the “white boys from a fraternity” taunt Daniel, the narrative describes him giving them “a long look” before focusing on how Daniel registers the feelings of others in the room according to the looks on their faces. The old men’s faces with whom he plays wear “uncomfortable expressions” while other college students in the room display “embarrassed faces.” While playing a song “he had grown up hating,” a “song the whites had always pulled out to remind themselves and those other people just where they were,” Daniel revisits those familiar feelings and begins feeling something other than hatred but remains “busy trying to sort out his feelings about what he had just played” (25). In Daniel’s moment of bewilderment, the story reveals the extent to which the ritual enacted that night in the bar represents a battleground on which old wars are still fought. For as much as the boys’ taunting is intended to degrade and

humiliate Daniel, it's the frat boys who "stormed out" as the bar erupts with applause. The event, and the feelings it causes for both the audience and Daniel, provides an example wherein an "affective sense of bewilderment" and "an epistemological sense of indeterminacy" coexist within a single subject. Indeed, Daniel's response to his performance, which is not exactly the same as pointing to his decision to respond as he does to the request, is an outstanding example of what literary critic Sianne Ngai's influential book names the "ambiguous affect of affective disorientation" in which a subject is left with a "meta-feeling" where "one feels confused about what one is feeling" (Ngai 14). While other critics put Ngai's work to use in locating the ways in which bodies register these kinds of uneasiness, Everett's story resists being lured by such promises as "Daniel didn't much care for the slaps on the back" others offered as supporting gestures for the precarious performance.<sup>16</sup> And while it's not important to decide whether what Daniel feels after the performance would be more properly named as affect or emotion, what is important is that the feelings cause Daniel to pause over not only his feelings but also his actions. In the context of the event, Daniel's disorientation supplies a moment of self-reflection, an opportunity to assess himself and understand himself as a subject in a discernible set of objective conditions. Daniel's uneasy feelings possess, in Ngai's sense, a diagnostic power, a power to recognize and identify himself as a subject whose existence is determined within "situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular" (27). While it would seem Daniel doesn't have much of a choice but to perform, his decision goes on to cause every subsequent action in the story. From his decision to buy a decorated truck to the disappearance of the Confederate flag from South Carolina's Capitol building, the initial unsettling is the effect of a misrecognition and the cause of Daniel's rebellion. To be "lost on one's own 'cognitive map' of available affects," to

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<sup>16</sup> See Rachel Greenwald-Smith's "Organic Shrapnel" for an example of such work.

experience the “dysphoric affect of affective disorientation” is what in “The Appropriation of Cultures” counts as giving a subject grounds on which to act in ways that are uncharacteristic, unexpected, and unforeseeable (Ngai 14). To misrecognize one’s place in the world enables actions not forecasted by oneself or anyone else.

Such are the effects of discovering uncharted territory on one’s cognitive map, and it is a story of this condition that Everett tells of in “The Appropriation of Cultures.” It is my contention that these effects are of an affective as well as an epistemological kind. Moreover, it is often at this intersection of affect or emotion and knowledge or cognition that misrecognition appears in its most forceful and, ironically, recognizable forms. Despite ongoing tendencies in literary criticism to disregard emotion as being too deeply tied to individuality, and the idiosyncratic experiences of individuals more broadly, to be of much analytical use for larger questions about collective social life, and despite my own reservations about using affect to frame the kinds of problems misrecognition raises that I am pursuing here, it bears repeating, as Ngai’s book does, that “feelings are as fundamentally ‘social’ as the institutions and collective practices” that function to locate them in material form. Just as much as it is “socially real,” feeling, or more pointedly, sentience is a primary site of sociality, indeed, of what Fanon called sociogeny. Thus, the affect/emotion distinction that has been of much literary critical interest in recent years is of less interest to me here than is the category of feeling. Inasmuch as I am following Ngai following Raymond Williams here, feeling is understood to be distinct “from more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’” while also maintaining an understanding that while feeling may not have the strong relation to “systematic beliefs” that a term like ideology does, it helps perform the critical task of tracking changes in “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” (Williams 132). In this sense then, Everett’s story provides us

with an example of the failure of a subject's cognitive map and the objective social conditions that cause the failure as well as an example of making visible the process by which a subject has a certain kind of experience, namely "a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognizable as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies" (132). While its action follows from the initial uneasiness Daniel feels following the performance, the story is more accurately described as a thought experiment or, following Williams, a "cultural hypothesis" in which Everett explores not only the potential for a subject to have "a social experience which is *not* fully semanticized, yet *does not require* this semanticization in order to exert palpable pressures and generate concrete effects" but also the social consequences that would follow from a broader distribution of the potential of having such an experience (Ngai 359-360, n28). Yet, Everett's story concludes with a vision of a remarkably transformed social landscape wherein the old structures of power that made certain structures of feeling possible—those the story identifies as ranging from discomfort and embarrassment to pride and dignity—have disappeared and rather unceremoniously so. The story appears in the end as an endorsement of the lyrical refrain—as if, in order to overturn the "heritage and techniques" of the South all one would have to do is look away and without otherwise being urged others would follow suit while an entire system of power and social structure would disappear. By focusing on the setting rather than the action of the story, however, we end up with a better sense of just how important place is for understanding the story Everett tells as well as attaining a deeper understanding of how misrecognition works. For as much as the story tells of the unceremonious removal of the flag, the story tells of nothing but ceremony. And in doing so, "The Appropriation of Cultures" is just as much about exploring

how structures of feeling come and go as it is about the importance of ceremonies in enabling or disabling opportunities to have certain experiences over others. Everett tells stories of ceremonies, of heritage and techniques, because, as his *Callaloo* Introduction showed, he is interested in telling stories about power—and, in this example, particularly a story about power in the Southern U.S. And as Ashraf Rushdy argues in his analysis of John Edgar Wideman's novel *The Lynchers*, “what tradition means in the South is power” (111). There is little more necessary to say about Southern tradition than having a group of white men demand seeing a black man perform; but it's the point of Everett's story, a point best embodied in Daniel's own “meta-feeling” of feeling himself confused by what he is feeling, to say that while we can believe that structures of feeling come and go, feeling will always be a social affair and as such it always appears alongside the ceremonious, which means at the locus of empowerment.

Contrary to the more pejorative sense of the merely ceremonious, and given their importance for understanding material forms of collective belonging, ceremonies have tremendous social significance. Insofar as the ceremonial is a legislated form that the self-constitution of a community takes, it acts as a means toward inclusion and exclusion, as well as serves an initiating and authenticating function. Following the work of Sylvia Wynter, we can understand that while ceremonial acts are part of a complex “system of figuration” in which a collective works toward an “imaging of Self and Other,” ceremonies also present opportunities to “wed the structural oppositions” they are first meant to configure and later reinforce (“Ceremony” 34, 37). In other words, inasmuch as ceremonial acts are forms of collective self-definition and, therefore, simultaneously help to constitute the recognizable boundaries between Self and Other, they produce “liminal categories who existentially experience the mode of Chaos to the mode of order of the governing system of figuration, whose will to affirmation, like that of

the original humanists, depends on the unwriting/rewriting of the present schema and order of knowledge” (49). In order to “reinvent our present conflictive modes of group integration,” Wynter points to a need for “parodic forms” that afford opportunities for “the reimagining of the Self/Group-Self” (52). Coming to the end of Wynter’s essay, we are left thinking about not only the potential social effects of something like the parodic ceremony, but also questioning the very possibility of such kinds of ceremonies. What would they look like? Or, what have they looked like in the past and what were their effects? Could they, or did they achieve the kinds of radical social transformation Wynter sees them as being capable of? In a phrase, such ceremonies have the potential of posing a question whose reference point is usually the individual to the collective: Am I not I? At the same time that this becomes a question for both the individual and the collective, it also bears significance for asking questions about the relationship between works of art and commodities inasmuch as each contends with the other and defers the moment at which the line between the two becomes too blurred to be recognized any longer as a boundary.

While novels are particularly rich sites to study the kinds of questions Wynter raises, I look here at examples from Everett to understand better how these writers are thinking through, if not offering clear answers to some of the same questions Wynter poses about the potential of locating genuine transformation of social structures from within the very same structures, and within the very lives such systems place at their limit but from which they extract undeniable value. At first blush, such questions may appear too deeply indebted to the values of deconstruction to warrant much further attention. On the contrary, I want to suggest a connection between Wynter’s vision and the novels to be discussed—and building from the previous analysis of Everett’s short story—in support of the argument that a capacity for misrecognition



shares a genealogical connection with the kinds of powerful reconfiguration of social systems, and not just the state as such, that depend on consistent and severe forms of inclusion/exclusion that Wynter locates in the parodic. In this sense, misrecognition is not the absence of recognition but rather the capacity to register recognition's excess and locate potential sites at which the interruption of the techniques on which recognition depends is available. Furthermore, misrecognition is a mediation between subjective conditions of experience and objective conditions of history in which the latter appears as a totalized system and the former understands that inasmuch as any particular subject is part of that totalized system, it can also play a part in undoing received notions of what constitutes the objective conditions of history. In short, misrecognition, like recognition, acknowledges the indelible mark socialization leaves on the individual subject.

### **Appiah Responds to Taylor**

As recognition became a topic of philosophic and aesthetic inquiry, misrecognition remained a pejorative term. Often associated with being denied autonomy and understood as the psychological and social form asymmetrical domination takes at the level of individuals and groups, misrecognition is the name given to a certain effect of oppression in which those who are oppressed are left demanding to be recognized by those who already control the means of conferring recognition. The ability to confer recognition is an effect of already having been awarded the status of recognition. It is not difficult to see how the new interest in recognition was a replay of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic with a better sense this time, however, of how the slave not only possessed the power to confer recognition as well but also how the effect of possessing this ability brought the two sides to equals. Emphasizing this more equitable relationship between opposing powers, Charles Taylor argues rightly that following the Hegelian

formulation means that “the struggle for recognition can find only one satisfactory solution, and that is a regime of reciprocal recognition among equals” (50). Despite the promise of equality on which this vision of mutual recognition depends, it must presume an already abiding equality insofar as this “regime” of recognition is to be found in “a society with a common purpose, one in which there is a “‘we’ that is an ‘I’, and an ‘I’ that is a ‘we’” (50). But Taylor acknowledges the potential that absent a common purpose, difference remains the abiding principle of an organized society, which only guarantees continued oppression. Taylor’s proposed solution is one in which “distinct societies” are provided the institutional support that guarantee their “survival.” What Taylor means by survival is primarily a kind of “cultural survival” that would preserve whatever cultural community exists as well as continue to allow those cultural communities to provide the “background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense” (33). In the absence of the society with a common purpose, then, Taylor turns to culture as a way to smuggle difference back into a political situation that all but guarantees the continuation of a need for one group to dominate another if a society is to hold together despite the inevitability of internal differences that in many ways arguably creates the need for society in the first place. I will return to this last point in a moment, but it is important to highlight that when faced with the prospect that society is itself predicated on the model of a protracted struggle between equals, Taylor chooses to argue that it is cultural difference and not social difference that remains the problem. More importantly for our purposes, it seems Taylor zeroes in on cultural difference precisely because it is a kind of difference more easily managed and mitigated than those that emerge out of social difference, or more precisely the differences that emerge out of competing visions of what society ought to be. With all due respect to the influence that his work has had in focusing the debates about identity and difference, recognition

and misrecognition at the level of localized and historically specific struggles for recognition, Taylor chooses cultural difference over social difference in part because of either a failure or refusal to see a more totalizing picture of the struggles being waged over social difference, which at the same time are struggles over what a society of equals would look like that was not reducible to an alternative version of liberalism.<sup>17</sup>

What becomes clear is that Taylor's vision of mutual recognition remains indebted to an understanding of society as determined by "juridical and constitutional fact" (Appiah "Identity" 1). Yet, as one of Taylor's most thoughtful and fiercest critics K. Anthony Appiah rightly points out "that juridical fact is neither necessary nor sufficient for our being a society." Appiah takes the struggle for recognition to be decidedly more difficult than Taylor's model leads on mostly because of Appiah's willingness to take the site of struggle not be culture as much as society. Appiah takes societies rather than cultures to be the common organizational principle so that the problems surrounding recognition are recast as emerging out of "the yoking together of societies, groups of people with a common culture and common institutions, within a single set of political institutions and in a shared social space" (2). Whereas Taylor's critique of the configuration of recognition in a society stems from the degree to which identifiably unique cultural practices are able to survive under certain institutional constraints, Appiah's critique engages the problem at a more fundamentally social level insofar as it questions the degree to which a society—which he characterizes as "a group of people with a shared social geography, and certainly shared institutions and a common culture"—survives despite its internal differences (1). Appiah does

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<sup>17</sup> Taylor's alternative consists of forms of liberalism "willing to weigh the importance of certain forms of uniform treatment against the importance of cultural survival, and opt sometimes in favor of the latter. They are thus in the end not procedural models of liberalism, but are grounded very much on judgments about what makes a good life—judgments in which the integrity of cultures has an important place" (61).

not in any way dismiss the question of culture entirely but instead reduces it—alongside institutions—to being a component of society and thereby arrives at the existence of sub-cultures that point toward the fact that different cultures can coexist under the same institutional configurations. While he grants that differences between cultures are sustainable under common institutional configurations, Appiah is not so sure of coming to a similar conclusion on the question of identities. Because “ethnic and racial identities are contrastive” rather than complementary, for example, the recognition of difference when it comes to identities tends to lead to “treating people differently” which unsurprisingly entails “patterns of domination and exploitation” (11). If one approach to strengthening one’s own identity, of getting a better sense of oneself is to study one’s own culture, it remains beholden to a vision of self-identification as that which guarantees self-possession. In this case proper ownership of oneself depends on one’s ability to identify oneself insofar as he/she recognizes him/herself as being part of the common culture from which that identity has emerged and will continue to emerge. In short, Taylor and Appiah are both concerned with how to build and sustain a “sense of continuity” and the degree to which establishing this sense of continuity at the level of both individual and group identities is sustained by the recognition that certain traditions attain to the level of truths to be shared across cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, and other identifying boundaries between oneself, one’s group, and others. Appiah concludes that in judging traditions to be truths, one can “decide to make them mine” (14). This description articulates Appiah’s own influential attempts at thinking through the potential sites of solidarity that would transcend the typically “contrastive” structures of ethnic and racial identities. Insofar as Taylor’s investment in recognition remains a defense of cultural separatism, Appiah’s defense stands on the potential of cultural incorporation to influence how individual and group identities can be imagined.

Appiah and Taylor are both writing at time when recognition is understood broadly “as a matter of acknowledging individuals and what we call their ‘identities’” (Appiah 16). While there is no doubt that the period was fascinated with identity and very little doubt that recognition was—and continues to be—a primary mode of addressing the relationship between individual and group identity at the societal level, the discourse of recognition, on Appiah’s assessment, remained less authoritative insofar as its vision of individual identity relied too much on group identity. What has come to be called “identity politics” is largely the form of appearance the discourse of recognition takes as it gets filtered through political and juridical institutions. But there remains another dimension on Appiah’s account that remains largely absent from debates about recognition. Appiah opposes individual to collective identity insofar as the former might be called something like character traits while the latter remains connected to the instances of social categorization. He further splits individual identity into “collective” and “personal” dimensions in order to suggest how each dimension entails the degree to which one can decide to be true or untrue to each—decisions which will constitute the degree to which one might be thought of as being an “authentic” or “inauthentic” individual. But on this model authenticity is impossible insofar as individual identity emerges out of the collective identity of which one recognizes oneself to be a part. Moreover, the so-called authentic self in its strongest sense requires establishing an ironic, if not entirely critical, standpoint as it relates itself to the collective identity with which it chooses to identify or not.<sup>18</sup> It is out of this relationship between individual and collective identities that Appiah locates different “modes of behavior” associated with particular collective identities. Such “notions provide loose norms or models, which play a

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<sup>18</sup> Appiah is reassuring here: “We do make choices, but we don’t determine the options among which we choose” (21).

role in shaping life-plans of those who make these collective identities central to their individual identities.” Despite leaving open the possibility of choice, the relationship between individual and collective identity begins to look more determinist than before in that if one chooses not to make such collective norms a part of one’s identity then he/she will spend a lifetime asserting and even justifying those autonomous choices. Nevertheless, collective identities “provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories” (24). Even as such modes of resistance can be seen as being the predominant ones, for Appiah to flip these scripts is not enough to warrant authenticity. But Appiah remains committed to thinking about how value is imparted rather than establishing better ways of distributing value across an already presumed set of equal values as Taylor would have it. Appiah is clear that his version of recognition is driven less by a demand for “shared values” or a “common culture” and more about establishing a vision of society in which “enforcing identities” remains susceptible to state regulation (30). At the same time, however, Appiah maintains that as it stands, whatever it may be, American culture remains a site of unequal value, where, as he puts it, it is important to teach the value of the literature of Black authors especially where “there is still pressure not to respect black people” (29). We would be right to ask where the process of revaluing culture begins for Appiah. And he provides a clear answer, namely establishing and maintaining our commitments to those “common institutions” that have allowed us, at least in the U.S. and on Appiah’s account, to “muddle along in the meanwhile without a common culture” much “like we have been doing, lo, these many years” (30).

But if Appiah limits those institutions that are common to all in American society to state institutions, then what are we to make of those institutions that may maintain a more certain autonomous relationship to the state and other regulating bodies? Appiah’s objective of modeling

respect for the “cultural work” of others and thus demonstrating the cultural worth of that work as well as the “others” who produce that work is consistent with a view that identifies the legitimation of cultural work with wider circulation. This approach understands that “circulation is the process by which value is attached to cultural production” (Judy *(Dis)forming* 288). And while Appiah’s approach looks toward deregulating identity, it also tends toward a defense of those sites with the greatest accumulation of wealth remaining the arbiters of value, i.e. schools as those institutions with a presumed monopoly on the economy of knowledge and thereby on the legitimation of knowledge as it is achieved through greater distribution and circulation of what constitutes the object of that knowledge (Appiah’s Toni Morrison example remains apt). The alternative is to look for sites of cultural value that “exist beyond the state” and its various surrogates (those common institutions Appiah describes) without either relying on claims of autonomy from modes of circulation or identifying the value of cultural work insofar as it is the product of marginalized, oppressed, or subaltern groups and thereby categorized as being more authentic than other cultural forms (Judy *(Dis)forming*, 290). If one site of a work’s value is located within the networks of distribution and circulation it stands to reason that greater circulation does little to guarantee greater value as much as it reveals the vulnerability of existing networks and their modes of legitimation. Yet, this is a self-awareness built into cultural work that knows the work of culture is to push at the limits of existing social forms and challenge the legitimacy of those institutions that help to decide what and who are to be held and cared for in common.

As much influence as theories of recognition have had on recent thought about art’s purpose, I argue that for art itself misrecognition is not so easily and universally maligned. For those critics who praise recognition, aesthetic objects and the experiences of them become

instruments of nonfictional social life; that is, they insist on art effecting recognition, alleviating the tensions of social relations. Looked at from a different standpoint, aesthetic theory should be interested in how misrecognition is produced internally through histories of form. This attempt to theorize aesthetic work concerns how something like the internal workings of art objects effects misrecognition while remaining dependent upon the ground of recognition. Both discourses take recognition to be their problem, but the difference emerges around the value each gives to misrecognition.

Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* offers an example of this discrepancy. If reading for the correction of misrecognition, then the novel finally addresses the world's racism in its desire for fictional verisimilitude that too easily confuses stereotype for realism. Taking the pseudonym "Stagg R. Leigh" to write his satirical novella that interrupts the frame, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison becomes the stereotype made visible. His intention is to kill. Monk asks, "Will I have to kill Stagg to silence him" (276)? The force behind Monk literalizing double consciousness and making his publishers "behold the invisible" is felt insofar as it is intended as an act of symbolic murder (238). In wanting to make the invisible visible, Monk chooses an easily recognizable racialized stereotype for a pseudonym. In this case, Monk's wishes are to make visible unacknowledged yet deeply embedded images of thought that according to the novel have reduced Black literature to being a caricature of the kinds of protest novels Everett understood as already bordering on caricature. The threat lurking behind the book's fame is not the potential of Monk being exposed as the author all along, but rather the carrying out of a symbolic murder in which the recognitions enabling the book's success are unmasked. In presenting occasions for the potential of misrecognition to come into sight, Everett relies on the "immediately available discourses of masking" as a countervailing strategy against the forms of recognition responsible



for establishing the conditions of recognition on which the masking itself depends. Continuing “the practice through which African-American performers wore the roles available to them askew so that an alternative coding could peek through,” Everett’s Monk, in becoming Stagg R. Leigh, seeks to disrupt the codes through which Black writing becomes identifiable, in being both recognized and recognizable, insofar as it tells of “typical Black life in an unnamed ghetto in America” and its relationship with reality is understood as presenting “the ghetto...painted in all its exotic wonder” (*Erasure* 39). Everett’s novel presents Monk’s novella as a parody of a parody, which places Everett’s novel firmly between being a struggle over production and circulation. Moreover, insofar as Everett’s novel is a meditation on the relationship between works of art and commodities, and the potential of the former to be not merely distinguishable from but rather the opposite of the latter, then Monk’s novella is the site of these struggles even as it remains a part of Everett’s novel.

Monk’s motivation to write *FUCK* begins with his own books failing to sell, leaving Monk in need of money. At the same time the novella is composed as Monk’s reaction to the “runaway bestseller *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*” touted by the literary establishment as a “masterpiece of African-American literature” in which the reader “can actually hear the voices of [the author’s] people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America.” This is the triumph of recognition that Everett’s novel seeks to unmask, a goal whose success will depend on Monk donning Stagg’s mask. Instead of destroying the invisible masks of racism and technologies of racialization more generally, *Erasure* presents novels like *We’s Lives in the Ghetto* and *FUCK* as the offspring of the protest novel tradition Everett criticizes but which *Erasure* uneasily stands as a recent example.

In anticipating his own failed suicide attempt, Monk imagines “the nagging fear that upon waking from a three-year coma I would find the identification bracelet on my wrist reading Stagg R. Leigh.” Neither Stagg’s nor Monk’s death is to be had, however. Finally rejecting the thought that he could find someone who “by all measure was Stagg Leigh” and “kill him after all,” Monk presents us with the misrecognition that remains: “there was no such person and yet there was and he was me” (287). Where *Erasure* presents situations of misrecognition, it does so by fully embracing its own deeply ambivalent and ambiguous relationship to the forms of literature that have made novels like it exceptional. *Erasure* is less an attempt to negate the protest novel and more an example of the excesses it produces. It is their exaggeration, just as Stagg R. Leigh stands as an example of recognition’s excesses. Following from its affiliation with other forms of Black performance that deploy masking as a strategy for disrupting recognition, *Erasure* and *FUCK* are both “a step or two away from what [they] are supposed to imitate” where “style” acts as both “an indictment and mirror of what is both wrong and right” in whatever is subjected to imitation. Finally, these kinds of performances seize on the potential of unleashing the power embedded in the imitation gone awry and exhibit a “desire to live *within* those terms on other terms” (Reed 133, emphasis original). In mocking the protest novel through parody, Everett lays bare the mechanisms behind recognition’s machinery. From protest novels to the racialized expectations of authenticity that propel Leigh’s *FUCK*’s rise to critical acclaim and eventual literary award, Everett puts Stagg to work insofar as the combination of a novella that clearly parodies and “signifies on” Richard Wright’s *Native Son* written by a personified racialized stereotype compose a doubly exposed image. This image serves as a reminder of real threats adhering in the kinds of violence recognition makes possible. This violence takes many forms in *Erasure*, from the limits commercialism and expectations of racial authenticity place on

literary forms to Monk's sister's murder at the hands of anti-abortion activists and the denigration of Monk's artistic ambitions to the point of producing an artifact of the kinds of racial hatred he sets out to ridicule. The primary force behind all these instances of violence rests on Everett's attempt to produce something as close to an unrecognizable object as possible. Paradoxically, of course, his attempts begin from the familiarized grounds of recognition—protest novels, racial stereotypes, literary awards, etc.—and yet in their final product approximate something akin to what Reed calls the “universalism of the impossible” (Reed 135). In setting out to commit the kinds of symbolic murder that drive his novels, Everett is severely invested in divesting recognition of its powers over perception and its ability to establish the grounds of expectation. These investments are shown insofar as his works concern themselves with not only exploring but actually producing the very possibilities of the “not yet recognized, not yet present, not yet predicted, not yet inevitable.” Everett's work takes aim at “the hinges, the joints, the places where it [on my estimation, the “it” here is recognition] seems vulnerable to attack” (Reed 135). And, insofar as it does, at least in *Erasure* and the brilliant *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, Everett's work is an extended exploration of the ways in which recognition has used race to establish forms of mutual intelligibility based on racialized categorization while at the same time that it constitutes a force with which to fight against such shared forms and acts as a site at which different terms of living might come to be before recognition can swoop in to capture them.

Put differently, these novels are concerned with the conditions of their own possibilities, which may help to explain *Erasure*'s complex relationship to *Invisible Man*. Axel Honneth, for example, reads Ellison's protagonist as an embodiment of misrecognition and social “non-existence.” For him, the novel's protagonist defines the novel's social concerns in expressing the

“humiliation” of misrecognition (111).<sup>19</sup> But in *Erasure*’s echo of the “painful and empty” feeling of the Invisible Man, we get the emptiness of forms rather than Ellison’s protagonist’s experience and pain. In a final scene parodying *Invisible Man*, the conclusion of *Erasure* points toward a history of misrecognition present in literature that pushes against expectations of realism and so-called authentic representations of social life. As Monk moves toward the podium to accept his award undisguised, he begins to hallucinate. He is overwhelmed by visions of “the faces of my life, of my past, of my world” which begin to distort his ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. As the hallucinations continue, “a small boy, perhaps me as a boy...held up a mirror so that I could see my face and it was the face of Stagg Leigh.”

In Stagg’s question we are meant to recognize the lines from Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. After telling Monk “now you are free from illusion,” Stagg asks, “how does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?” As he struggles to maintain composure, Monk can barely recognize the words. “I know those lines,” he says as one of the judges puzzles over why Monk is coming to the stage. Rather than marking his freedom from illusion, the scene dramatizes the extent to which Monk remains handcuffed to the illusions from which he wants to be freed. In fact, Monk’s illusions realize themselves inasmuch as they are, like Everett’s novel, founded on allusion. Whereas Ellison’s Invisible Man famously ends up in an underground “hole” “full of light” after becoming “aware of [his] invisibility,” Everett’s Monk stands in a “flooding light” that signifies the excess necessary in misrecognition’s appearance. Against understanding misrecognition as recognition’s absence, the final scene uses Monk’s unraveling to show the degree to which the two are fatally intertwined. Monk is overcome. He “looked at the television cameras looking at

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<sup>19</sup>Axel Honneth and Avishai Margalit. “Recognition.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 75 (2001): 111-139. 111.

me” while at the same time he “looked at the mirror” still being held by the boy. Pulling himself together long enough to locate the TV camera and stare into it, Monk is horrified by the newfound visibility granted to him by first, the literary award, and second, his subsequent televisual experience: “Egads, I’m on television” (265).

In yet another example of misrecognition, the final scene in Everett’s novel parodies the final scene of Monk’s novella effectively rendering Monk and Van Go Jenkins analogs, instead of opposites of one another. Perhaps unsurprisingly the camera is presented as the enabling technology that establishes the two figures’ identification with one another. At the same time, the mirror presents itself as a more traditional trope of recognition. Both the camera and mirror are capable of effecting situations in which the dialectic of recognition and misrecognition is brought to a heightened intensity that threatens the boundary between them. Despite their differences, a shared relationship to criminality brings both characters into visibility. For Van Go, it’s the extent to which his life fulfills the racist expectations of both literary audiences and the sensationalist Snookie Cane show’s audience. While working for a wealthy family, Van Go develops a relationship with the family’s daughter that will eventually lead to her being raped by Van Go. The day following the rape, Van Go is contacted by the “Snookie Cane” show—a thinly veiled caricature, part Oprah part Maury—asking him to appear with a surprise love interest. Instead of meeting a surprise crush, Van Go is lured into a situation in which he must face the four mothers of his four children and attest to his failures to provide them support. Meanwhile, Snookie has learned of the rape and cops storm the stage to arrest Van Go. Before they can apprehend him, Van Go escapes. Ducking into a store to avoid arrest, Van Go sees “on screen after screen” of televisions “Me in front of everybody.” As the cops come in and Van Go makes his escape, “they rolls [sic] the tape back and show it again. Over and Over. On screen beside

screen beside screen” (122). But this is only Van Go’s first brush with his televisual image. *FUCK* concludes with Van Go’s apprehension. As Van Go runs down a litany of people to blame for his misfortune, from the woman he raped, his children’s mother, and his own mother to “that basketball coach...that white teacher” and finally “everybody,” Everett’s indictment seems to extend to recognition itself, or at least a certain species of recognition with direct ties to the televisual. Inside a post office attempting to avoid arrest, Van Go negotiates with the police for a getaway car and promised escape. As he leaves the post office and walks toward the car, Van Go remarks “the light outside is brighter than I member [sic].” While he again notices the cameras, the novel draws the reader’s attention to the relationship between the television cameras and the cop’s guns: “The cameras is pointin at me. All them cops be pointin they guns at me [sic].” As the car fails to start and the cops move in to arrest him, Van Go’s mind is somewhere else: “I looks up and see the cameras. I get kicked again while I’m bein pulled to my feet. But I dont care. The cameras is pointin at me. I be on the TV. The cameras be full of me. I on TV. I say, ‘Hey, Mama.’ I say ‘Hey, Baby Girl. Look at me. I on TV’” (135).

If *Erasure* primarily uses folk and literary histories to locate a particularly knotted node in the network of recognition, it points also to the camera as an influential technology in establishing the boundaries of recognizability. And if *Erasure* warns against the total inundation of perceptual, epistemological, and sociological processes by the exploits of consumerism and commodification, then *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* puts all its chips on the abilities visual media have to institute, if not entirely subvert, the foundations on which recognizability stands. Here again Everett shows parody to be a useful strategy to be used against institutionalized forms of recognition. At the same time that it offers a riotous series of situations that rightfully earns the title a “comedy of misrecognition,” in the character Not Sidney Everett’s novel considers the

consequences of beginning from a subject position far enough removed from the intersection between authentic selfhood and group identification that it mirrors, again, Ellison's *Invisible Man*. In what is arguably that novel's central scene of self-actualization in which the protagonist overcomes the perceived shame of his southern background, the Invisible Man decides to buy yams from a street vendor. Deciding to eat the "savory tautology of self-identity" (Warren 46) after feeling a "stab of swift nostalgia" for home, the protagonist undergoes a process of ironic self-duplication that allows him at once to feel a "surge of homesickness" and an "intense feeling of freedom" (264). Rather than having the experience of eating it seem a "tautology of self-identity," the yam arguably reinforces, if it is not the original cause of, a division within the protagonist over his allegiance to his southern heritage. The novel asks, "what happens to the subject that is beyond the corporate mind." If, as Ronald Judy has suggested, "such a subject is unrecognizable except as caricature," then it would seem both *Erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* pose parallel questions and offer similar answers (Judy "Irony" 169). Except that in the case of *Not Sidney* the novel and Not Sidney the character the division between authentic subject and group identity is secondary to Everett's aim toward "parodically pull[ing] down to earth the canonical models of identity" (Wynter "Ceremony" 55). In the case of the novel, that means using plots from Sidney Poitier films to explore the extent to which group identity presupposes and preempts individualities. *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* affirms Judy's argument about caricature, turning Not Sidney into a caricatured composite sketch based on what Everett takes to be the established caricature of Sidney Poitier—who was often expected to play the role of someone who was a kind of individual "beyond the corporate mind" (Judy "Irony" 169). The degree to which Sidney Poitier was successful at portraying an exception to those images of individuals polluting the corporate mind can, in light of Everett's novel, show also where those successes led

toward intensely proscribed limits on what should be included and what ought to remain excluded from an archive of images that would constitute new possibilities of recognizing oneself and others, as well as provide new possibilities of group identification.

If the folk hero Stagg R. Leigh is the ironic epicenter of *Erasure*'s battle against the powerful network of cliché, commercialism, and racial caricature in literature, then there's no better analog in the world of cinema than Sidney Poitier. Whereas Stagg's folk status made him a type and therefore quite useful for Everett's project, Poitier poses a different problem inasmuch as he became the genuine image of an individual. In playing roles that often overtly looked to overturn recognizable types, Poitier ironically became himself a type. Although Stagg is to be understood as a stereotype, and therefore taken as an image of the oversimplified and preconceived notions with which individuals are encountered. But stereotype also signals something like choice insofar as an individual chooses either to identify with or be repulsed by perhaps an oversimplified, but nonetheless readily available framework of behavior, demeanor, agency, etc. that guarantees some kind of social recognition. In some sense, then, Stagg and Poitier are opposites; and, yet, they're two faces on opposite sides of the same coin. They are both folk heroes, but heroes for different folks. Whereas Stagg is an outlaw, criminal, and avatar of vigilante violence, in the case when Poitier is a criminal—for example in *The Defiant Ones*—it is used merely as a vehicle of interracial solidarity, to give visual form to “the idea of men of different races brought together to face misfortune in a bond of brotherhood,” as the *New York Times* review of film said in 1958. Poitier's films often covertly deployed stereotypes as a strategy for creating what Stanley Cavell called “individualities.” In tracing the history of film as a medium, Cavell suggests “types are exactly what carry the forms movies have relied upon” for becoming a medium. Rather than simply reproduce types in stereotypical fashion, film “created



new types, or combinations and ironic reversals of types” (33). So while the early years of film tell of a “persistence of an obviously primitive or folkloristic element,” as the medium developed it found ways of incorporating old types while not entirely moving on from its beginnings. Film, on Cavell’s account, uses type to create individualities. Because types are readable entities, and individuals tend to remain opaque without some additional device for making meaning, film looks to deploy type to facilitate an individual’s recognizability. As one film scholar puts it, individualities “[provide] techniques for eliciting recognition and acknowledgement of full-fledged humanity in characters that many audience members might not ordinarily recognize or acknowledge” (Flory 315). But if, on the one hand, individualities can bring “to viewer[s]” attention previously unnoticed presumptions about identity and race in ways that call for contemplation and revision,” on the other hand, insofar as individualities remain intimately connected with type, they are susceptible to stereotyping. Granted, Cavell’s account is a bit more nuanced than this, focusing on how individualities enable the “project[ion] [of] particular *ways* of inhabiting a social role.” But I think what Cavell goes on to say captures very well the interesting case of Sidney Poitier. While “occasionally the humanity behind the role would manifest itself...the result was a revelation not of a human individuality, but of an entire realm of humanity becoming visible” (33-34). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Cavell’s examples (*Gone With the Wind* and *The Breaking Point*) of this peculiarity of individuality both concern black types that, on his account, signal the beginnings of the struggle of blackness on film to escape from the confines of stereotype: “In the case of black performers there was until recently no other place for them to recur in, except just the role within which we have already met them” (35). Originally published in 1971, it strikes one as strange that Poitier figures nowhere in Cavell’s account.

Published just five years later, James Baldwin's *Devil Finds Work* is the author's book-length essay on film going. And, rather than remain absent, Sidney Poitier and his films loom large throughout the book—if mostly as a target of Baldwin's criticism.<sup>20</sup> Accusing Poitier's films of "incre[sing] and not lessen[ing] white confusion and complacency, and black rage and despair," Baldwin believes Poitier's films (in this case *In the Heat of the Night*) "helplessly [convey]—without confronting—the anguish of people trapped in a legend. They cannot live within this legend; neither can they step out of it" (56). Baldwin's characterization implicates numerous parties, including the filmmakers, Poitier, white and black audiences alike, for "no one can be let off the hook." Baldwin sees the film's greatest failure to be its inability to understand its own motivations as well as its too easy reconciliations of a history too complex for the film's presentation. "It is a terrible thing, simply, to be trapped in one's history, and attempt, in the same motion (and in this, our life!) to accept, deny, reject, and redeem it—and also, on whatever level, to profit from it" (56). In the film's closing, as Poitier's character "has gone to where [Philadelphia] they call him *Mister*, far away, presumably from South Street, and the Sheriff has gone back to the niggers...nothing, alas, has been made possible by this obligatory, fade-out kiss...except that white Americans have been encouraged to continue dreaming, and black Americans have been alerted to the necessity of waking up." In reiterating the relationship between this movie and *The Birth of a Nation*, Baldwin suggests "Virgil Tibbs would have been the hunted, not the hunter" before going on to write "it is impossible to pretend that this state of affairs has really altered: a black man, in any case, had certainly best not believe everything he

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<sup>20</sup> In discussing *In the Heat of the Night*, for example, Baldwin figures it "a descendant" of *The Birth of a Nation* while also sarcastically remarking that because "it is hard to locate the niggers" in the film it is taken to signal "progress" (50).

sees in the movies” (57). I take Baldwin’s point insofar as he demonstrates the continuity between the inadvertent naiveties of Poitier’s films and the overt stereotyping of earlier films. Later on, while discussing *The Defiant Ones*, Baldwin seems to take a direct swipe at Cavell’s reading of black types. In describing the scene in which the character Scarlett O’Hara slaps her maid Prissy, Cavell suggests she does so “in rage and terror” (34). Baldwin would seem to take up Cavell’s conjecture in discussing *The Defiant Ones* when criticizing the film’s “profound American misunderstanding of the nature of the hatred between black and white” (61). Admitting his argument is “subtle,” Baldwin nevertheless goes on to suggest the hatred “is not equal on both sides, for it does not have the same roots.” On the one hand, the “root of the white man’s hatred is terror, a bottomless and nameless terror, which focuses on the black...an entity which lives only in his mind” (61). The root of this hatred remains phantasmatic and spectral on Baldwin’s account, leaving his example of white hatred stuck in a kind feedback loop in which “one is in terror of terror,” where the former names the internal state of mind while the latter names the external threat (Simpson 9). We are reminded here too of a line from Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*: “because white men can’t / police their imagination / black men are dying” (135). Black hatred, on the other hand, has its root in “rage” and “simply want[s] [white men] out of his way...[and] out of his children’s way.” What Baldwin sees as the film’s pretension is evident in Poitier’s character’s being absent of rage and the film committing the “most disastrous sentimentality [in] attempt[ing] to bring black men into the white American nightmare” (62). Baldwin’s reading, in another context in which Baldwin associates the camera with dreams, compels literary critic David Marriott to ask: “Who is the dreamer here?” Marriott’s answer affirms Baldwin’s nightmare: “rather than dream-filled refuge, cinema becomes a form of racial entrapment, a lure by which blackness is conjured up as negative or void. No escape from this

one-way self-fashioning; cinema takes up its place in a visual history of the black as cowed, mutilated, dead” (*Haunted*, 186). While Poitier’s films strike us as if depicting progress, Baldwin and Marriott, *pace* Cavell, would have the reader believe film has largely “worked and reworked” scenes of racial antagonism only to reiterate its “desire for race integration” that finds its fetish in Sidney Poitier’s uncanny ability to allow “black anger...[to] go missing” and give up that “force that threatens...*disintegration* (*Haunted* 187, emphasis original). The tagline rendered for Poitier’s oeuvre according to Baldwin and Marriott reads something like “No anger, No psychology, no analysis”...just the “imago of the black” (*Haunted*, 188). In undeniably attaining to Cavell’s ideal type, Poitier would seem to have turned dream back into nightmare. As “icon and model” Poitier was expected to be “representative of [his] race,” but in becoming “black [man] as image” he did little more than imitate, and, in the process, became a stereotype of the “‘type’ that imitates” while simultaneously becoming the type *to be imitated* (Marriott *Men* 44).

### **“I Am Not Myself Today,” Or, Any Day**

In an admittedly obscure way, Everett’s novel *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* dramatizes the “ambiguities that inhere in diasporic thought” (Warren 303). In staging ambiguity as a condition of possibility, Everett’s novel fleshes out the idiomatic phrase “your reputation precedes you.” The reputation preceding Not Sidney’s, however, is Sidney Poitier’s. Inasmuch as he is “tall and dark and look[s] for the world like Mr. Sidney Poitier,” Not Sidney’s interactions with the world cannot escape the logic of recognition; encounters are impossible (3). In placing Not Sidney into a world in which Sidney Poitier’s reputation precedes him, the novel dramatizes the “comedy of misrecognition” critic Kenneth Warren defines as the existential “conditions of the diasporan subject” (400). To be clear, on Warren’s account, recognition is an ideal condition of intersubjectivity. While Warren’s sense of recognition here is deeply connected to regional and

geographic identity, for obvious reasons, the point is taken that, in the case of his diasporan subject “recognition can never preclude misrecognition because one can always be identified as other than what one claims to be” (400). Granted, Warren may be right; but the rub comes in being misidentified and having, subsequently, to fight against the (inevitable) act of misrecognition committed. In a phrase, demanding recognition in the first place invites misrecognition. And while some may be compelled to defend against such misrecognitions, Warren makes a case for misrecognition as an existential condition. Is this condition unavoidable? Perhaps, in some cases, but Warren remarks “to be cognizant of oneself as a diasporan subject is always to be aware of oneself, no matter where one is, as from elsewhere, in the process of making a not quite legitimate appeal to be considered as if one were from here” (400-401). Warren’s formulation is necessarily vertiginous, for the condition he is describing is marked by vertigo. Yet, Warren describes “subjective vertigo,” which Frank Wilderson characterizes as “a dizzying sense that one is moving or spinning in an otherwise stationary world.” Without denying its dizzying effects, Wilderson suggests this condition stops with the subject experiencing it. Wilderson contrasts this feeling to objective vertigo, characterized as a condition in which “one’s environment is perpetually unhinged” wherein “a life [is] constituted by disorientation rather than a life interrupted by disorientation” (3). It would seem Warren’s aim is, in part, to search for and indict instances of illegitimate “group identification” inasmuch as they are rooted in a mythic land to which its members perhaps had never been. The simple remedy, for Warren, for the diasporic subject’s vertigo is to “subsume race within an interracial class identification.” Yet, the diaspora remains a “thought whose closure cannot be seen by any one individual nor imagined by any single text” (404-405). If the thought persists, however, it does so insofar as it refuses closure. The thought persists in a figure of transition and passage—

and not in the figure of “passing” Warren’s examples describe. If Warren’s critique rests on the ambiguities inherent to the diasporan condition as he describes it, then his solution remains entangled in the kinds of group identification that a novel like *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* itself identifies with the circumscribing violence a world committed to identity does to the inherently vertiginous processes of identity formation. In short, if, on my account, Warren’s critique refuses in a certain sense to analyze the vertiginous, Wilderson’s essay restores vertigo to its rightful place in a world where “there are no cognitive maps, no conceptual frameworks of suffering and dispossession” capable of bridging the gap between the is/is not of the diasporic subject as Warren describes it and as Not Sidney lives it (Wilderson 4).

In trying to understand the continued relevance of an “aesthetic of cognitive mapping” we should bear in mind the old existentialist problem regarding the difference between the subject of experience and the subject of knowledge (Jameson “Cognitive” 347). Even if ours is an index of the impossible convergence of these two poles, it will serve us well to remember that a certain commitment to political art—or the demand for cognitive mapping—has its basis in identifying a moral subject—one in which actions square with the “desire at work to transcend or overcome a ruined or unjust present” (Bové 80). Or, more formulaically, where action takes place in political space, interpretation, and more specifically, allegory takes place in imaginative space. In short, to be political art should be allegorical. And such art depends on the very distinction between the subjects of experience and knowledge—even if negatively—to establish its realization in a more morally enlightened world. I want to begin with questioning the assumption that such a distinction is possible or even desirable if we are to understand better what it means to be human. And then what it means to produce “political” art, or art invested in

the world on the level of practicable change rather than merely being in some more basic way interpretive.

I want to offer an all-too-brief history of the literary device defamiliarization—ostranenie—derived from Carlo Ginzburg’s distinction between its uses in Tolstoy and Proust. The Tolstoy tradition is traced back to Marcus Aurelius where it is understood to be a technique for “wip[ing] away the impress of imagination” on the way toward a more “exact perception of things, and thus in the attainment of virtue,” identifying “true causal principles as an antidote to false images” (4-5, 18). Ginzburg’s genealogical work reveals how certain characters come to embody an epistemological privilege—in some stories it’s the savage, another a peasant, and in the final case an animal. Each of these gives an instance in which this privilege is translated into the character’s ability to “turn upon society a distanced, estranged, and critical gaze” (12). Distance from—an “original naivety”—is the proper orientation for establishing these abilities to criticize; “to understand less” “may lead us to see more...to take account of what lies deeper, what is closer to nature” (13). But this is Tolstoy’s camp, not Proust’s. The former is indeed the object of my critique, in part because of what I see as its continued use by authors and critics—as well as its central role in what has recently been an intensified ethical turn in aesthetic practice and theory that I want to counter. That is not to say, however, the Proustian version is necessarily better; in fact, for a Hegelian, Proust would appear more problematic; but let us, for a moment, be less than orthodox Hegelians. Rather, instead of assuming the necessity of mediation and disparaging immediacy, defamiliarization can work in quite the opposite way by privileging effects over cause—what Ginzburg calls “impressionistic immediacy”—and what I want to conscript for an argument in which social and moral critique are deemphasized as being what might save art from being rendered utilizable, a goal that arguably accounts for the ethical turn in

aesthetic theory and the emphasis on something like the “sweatshop sublime” or the “commodity recognition scene.”<sup>21</sup> Again, we see the opposition between experience and knowledge evident in Proust but this time privileging effect, the “illusion that strikes us” rather than trying finally to eliminate the immediate and false image.

In short, this is the world provided by Percival Everett in his novel *I am Not Sidney Poitier*; where we never learn if, in fact, Not Sidney is the son of Sidney Poitier, who gives him the uncanny resemblance nonetheless. Apparently it is not because of his father at all that he looks like Sidney Poitier; no cause is ever given; instead we are provided only the effects of the resemblance which leave Not Sidney throughout the novel, including at the conclusion, disoriented, unsure of who he is having finally to proclaim “I am not myself today.”

Rather than being entirely complacent with late capitalism what has variously been named most imprecisely the “neoliberal novel” and subsequently qualified as the “identity” or “multicultural novel” has assumed a central position in contemporary cultural imaginative production.<sup>22</sup> Which is not to say it is inherently complacent or critical. Instead, I would argue that distance can no longer be understood to provide a privileged or even necessary point from which to criticize a given set of representations. Instead, for someone like John Gray, it is Dostoevsky’s own millenarianism that allows him to represent it so well, much like it is for Proust that to describe things “as if one were seeing them for the first time” is not tantamount to favoring immediacy but instead captures the essence of what aesthetic mediation can be expected

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<sup>21</sup> This is a phrase Bruce Robbins has used to describe “scenes [in literature that] are epiphanies in which some familiar consumer good is suddenly recognized as coming from a distant place of origin and from the labor, perhaps the coerced or otherwise unpleasant labor, of the distant inhabitants.” For more, see “All of Us Without Exception”: Sartre, Rancière, and the Cause of the Other.”

<sup>22</sup> See Jeffrey J. Williams’s “The Plutocratic Imagination” for more on these terms and the novels he thinks fit those categories.



to do. In short, Everett's novels stage a world guided by the truth that "all representations are now ones which correspond only to other representations" that leads to a kind of "ironic self-consciousness" and "self-reflexivity first and foremost" (Docherty 123). These aesthetic commitments lead Everett often to produce characters living ambiguous, contradictory, and unsettling lives. By taking identity, selfhood, and the very possibilities of authenticity and autonomy to be subject to the same logic of representation, Everett dramatizes the difficulties of maintaining any semblance of coherent selfhood. The novels make an effort to expose the wires making up the networks of recognition of which individuals are expected to become a part, only to delight in their short-circuiting. When a subject cannot maintain a grip on that which enables its subjectivity, when it loses its positionality, it is threatened by the prospect of being treated like an object; or, perhaps worse yet, the question concerns the difference between objects and things.

Novels, generically, often concern the conflict between individuals and their social conditions, illustrating the fraught relationship between the possibilities of conceptualizing one self and the increasingly determined conditions under which such conceptualization can occur. I cannot help referring to Jameson's essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" to articulate the problem he raises regarding the schizophrenic. My disagreement with and interest in the essay come from the very moment at which Jameson makes the claim that the schizophrenic "does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the 'I' and the 'me' over time" (119). A coherent personal identity defined as non-schizophrenic requires a particular relationship to temporality—one in which distinguishing between past and present is prerequisite for imagining a future and therefore having the ability to "do something." Contrary to Jameson's claim that along with having "no

personal identity” the schizophrenic is also “nothing” I would suggest what the schizophrenic does is precisely raise the question regarding the relationship between humans and things. In so doing, perhaps the schizophrenic appears to have little ability to act into the future beyond the immediate present; but taken more seriously, such a categorization of human existence reconsiders the very notion of human authenticity and raises the question, to paraphrase Ronald Judy, whether a commodified identity can be authentic (“Authenticity” 214).

Hence, the title of this chapter turns Marx’s footnote from the first chapter of *Capital Vol. I* into a negative question. Am I not I, rather than an affirmative ‘I am I,’ poses the question of identity within logics of circulation and exchange whereby emphasis is placed not on the political import of individual cohesion but rather on the disruptive moments within expected cohesion. I take seriously Marx’s analogy between men and commodities without, however, forthrightly rejecting it or repurposing the identification in the fashion of Fred Moten and others who take up the identification between humans and things to imagine what Marx could not: the speaking commodity which thereby establishes a site of resistance to capital by developing a theory of intrinsic value in the very materiality of speech. But at the same time, Moten critiques the notion of humanity as it is tied to the capabilities of reading and writing, which at their most fundamental are the techniques of self-referentiality and denote the possibilities of self-representability that to this day often define the difference between humans and animals, if not still machines.<sup>23</sup> Collapsing the distinction between humans and things allows such a demarcation to come to be and come to be negated. Marx’s footnote poses the identification between humans and things without, however, being able to anticipate fully the degree to which

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<sup>23</sup> See Moten’s *In the Break* for more, especially 1-24.

the analogy characterizes social relations in today's post-race, post-identity politics stage of capital.

One common thread running through the two Everett novels I've discussed here is the presence of a doppelganger. More than just an easy literary technique used to establish dissonance in the process of self-identification, the doppelganger embodies the impossibility of exchange between different instantiations of oneself over time. What is more, the doppelganger operates in a temporal configuration beyond that of experience as it represents an ever-accumulating series of self-consciousness without coherence; while at the same time it depends upon an empirical immediacy that short circuits the logic of exchange that founds the recognition configuring Marx's analogy between commodities and humans: "a man first sees and recognizes himself in another man." The doppelganger confirms this but replaces the one with the many of one. Everett's novels, then, play out the contradictions of De Man's "dialectic of self-destruction and self-invention" thereby establishing, I would argue, irony as their primary mode of figuring self-identification's relationship to the experience of temporality (de Man 220). Much like the doppelganger is a repetition with difference, irony, as lived experience, is also repetitive; the difference in one's lived experience is generated by the repetition and accumulation of self representation that leads to an impractical knowledge—to know one's inauthenticity is not the same as being able to act against such inauthenticity. But the novels of Percival Everett would seem to achieve exactly such ironic authenticity by using fiction to account for the often horrifying work required to achieve recognition as a subject. Exposing this "narrative labor" is arguably part of the work done by the sort of post-identity politics novels of identity Everett writes. In the recognizable forms and figures of literary tradition of *Erasure* and the scandalous ironies of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* we can see how these novels themselves achieve a kind of

formal short-circuiting akin to what they do at the level of character. In willing not only to maintain an intimate relationship with the objects of their critique, Everett's novels orient themselves ironically and attain a standpoint necessary for the kind of theoretical work they set out to do. In arguing against the foreclosure postmodernism has taken to signal for literature within literary criticism, Timothy Bewes claims "that contemporary literature is engaged primarily with the question of the possibility of the literary itself." There is little doubt that Everett's novels are doing the kind of work Bewes suggests many contemporary novels are doing, and Everett seems to be doing it in a similar way, too. On Bewes's account, these novels do so by "contrast[ing]...writing and another art form which is able to achieve something—some degree of immediacy of presentation—that writing cannot... as in so much contemporary fiction, the form which is subject to writerly envy is cinema" (10). Except, in Everett's case, it seems less a case of envy than it does contempt.

*I Am Not Sidney Poitier* arguably takes on a most linear and imperialist, if not to say theatrical, form of literature—the *bildungsroman*—only to compose its own negative image of that form. The novel begins at Not Sidney's birth, follows him through childhood before he "lights out for the territory...to leave my childhood, abandon what had become my home, my safety, and to discover myself" (43). But I want to jump to the end of the novel where Not Sidney stands before the likes of Harry Belafonte and Elizabeth Taylor holding his award for "Most Dignified Figure In American Culture." Before coming to Los Angeles Not Sidney is imprisoned in Peckerwood County, Georgia (*The Defiant Ones*) and accused of murder (*In the Heat of the Night*) in Smuteye, Alabama only to find the dead body "looked just like me...I wanted to say, 'That's me.' The thought of saying it was strange feeling and scary...I was lying in the chest, and I wasn't...if that body in the chest was Not Sidney Poitier, then I was not Not

Sidney Poitier and that by all I knew of logic and double negatives, I was therefore Sidney Poitier. I was Sidney Poitier” (211-212). Not Sidney is certain of one thing as the story of his development concludes: “What I did see clearly was the murder of the doppelganger of Not Sidney Poitier” (218). Arriving in Los Angeles Not Sidney tells his audience he has returned to “find something lost, to reunite if not with my whole self, then at least a piece of it.” The trouble is, he goes on, “this thing is not here. In fact, it is nowhere. I have learned my name is not my name. It seems you all know me and nothing could be further from the truth and yet you know me better than I know myself.” The novel concludes with Not Sidney—in an echo of *Erasure*’s own death-dealing suicide note-like form—announcing an inscription for his tombstone: “I Am Not Myself Today” (234). Because of the novel’s invention of a character whose sense of self comes as a result of the way others see him rather than from any sense of what could be taken for his own dignified choices, who is marked always and immediately by the contradiction between physical likeness to the actor and the negative NOT as a mark of the contradictions immanent to the principle of identity—A is A—as well as the once again heavy-handed way in which the novel references its own fictionality, Not is given the only chance in the novel at least to “accept...my place in this world. I was a fighter of windmills, I was a chaser of whales, I was Not Sidney Poitier.” The temporality of the final declaration requires us to read it again as a flagrantly intentioned rebuke of a sense of linear, coherent, and lasting development the bildungsroman desires. Instead, Not Sidney remains an incomprehensible, if not uncomprehending fiction.

Or, to put all of this another way, once you have successfully turned yourself into a thing vis-a-vis Hegel, how do you turn yourself toward being a no-longer-thing? There’s a way in which the misery of *Erasure*’s narrator indexes the possibilities that come with the end of so-

called “African-American Literature” by pointing to the impossibility of emerging unscathed from the abortion of the pursuit of recognition characteristic of Du Bois’s propaganda machine of literature. What looked like a project turned out to be another kind of bondage in which authors weren’t so much bound to the market as they were bound to represent; today, however, the expectation is to produce for a market that exceeds the market; which is to say to make things that are not just a thing, but are deeply connected to oneself as a committed person, and thereby, connect with and commit to others to help form a collection of people. But I want the characters to have the final words: Monk Ellison’s horrifying scream that closes *Erasure* “Egads, I’m on TV,” succeeds in collapsing the difference between Monk and Van Go Jenkins who, in being arrested and brushing off the blows, exclaims “I don’t care. The cameras is pointin’ at me. I be on TV. The cameras be full of me. I on TV.” And Yet, perhaps all difference between the two is not expunged if we read Monk’s “egads” as having a particular sense of intentionality that leaves one capable of feeling aghast looking for an audience unable to erase either them or you or whatever thing it is you will make for them and they will have made of you. And yet, after all of this, the author remains dead, but the cameras are still on.

## **Richard Wright and Chester Himes Picturing War**

Those works grouped together to illustrate an aesthetic of misrecognition exhibit a common interest in using multimedia forms to address problems of representation. While film, painting, sculpture, along with other forms of representation appear throughout these work, photography remains the most insightful example of how authors use various media to address changing demands of representation. With the rise of documentary photography, for example, works by Richard Wright and Chester Himes demonstrate the degree to which the verbal and visual arts can respond to one another while relying on one another's unique relationship to representational demands. Both authors are keenly aware of a tendency to associate photography, especially of a particular documentary type, with immediacy and transparency. At the same time, Wright and Himes use photography for its narrative potential understanding the photograph as site at which to study the ways in which narratives compete with one another. Even more than studying, these authors looked to intervene in the process of mediation by engaging both visual and verbal forms as a way to combat the presumption of immediacy in all forms. As photography became "a primary medium through which Americans made sense of new and alien spaces and places," authors began using narrative to supplement visual representations of reality as well as influence how reality would be processed after photography's rise (Entin 26). This strategy had less to do with criticizing or discounting photography's association with immediacy and more to do with creating multiple layers of mediation between sensorial input and cognitive faculties. As photography proved its ability to circulate images widely and quickly, narrative arguably became an important means of not only describing what the photographs documented but also explaining and interpreting the images as well as heightening or augmenting their impressions in some way.

Upon returning to Chicago in 1949 after many years of travel, Richard Wright began writing a photo essay titled “The Shame of Chicago.” In it, Wright uses what distance those travels put between him and the city he left in 1937 to respond to the “profound civil disorder” with “eyes [that] had been schooled to weigh and compare” (25-27). If Wright’s eyes are capable now of better judgment, the photos accompanying the essay serve as evidence of the conclusions to which his essay comes. Chicago mirrored what Wright had seen in Paris during a garbage collectors strike. In the case of Chicago, however, there was no strike to blame for what Wright could only identify as a “natural” condition of “chronic dirt and disorder” that “after a day or two...even began to seem normal to [him]” (27). Yet, Wright uses the photographs and the narrative he constructs around them to contest the naturalization of the conditions causing the “poverty and disorder” of which the photographs are clear and immediate depictions. Rather than being caused by a presumed temporary condition like a worker strike, Wright describes the prevailing conditions of the city as giving a “single impression of industrial dominance that spelt a kind of queer and unique poetry” (27). Seeking the “condemned, empty buildings, the kind [he] had written about in *Native Son*,” Wright is surprised to find none and begins to wonder what had come of those dwellings that had “constituted a danger to life and health.” He learns from his friend St. Clair Drake that those buildings were now full again after “many thousands of Negroes flocked into the South Side to do war work.” Moreover, Wright finds “the South Side was still a Black Belt, but it had swollen and burst it banks.” But even as some prosperity had come with the war effort, the Black Belt “had not shed its skin; it still remained an undissolved lump in the city’s melting pot” (28).

While Wright found much had changed in his absence, Chicago remained a city plagued by racial discrimination, suspicion, and hostility. The extent to which things remained unchanged



became clearer to Wright once he began filming scenes for the cinematic adaptation of *Native Son*. Met with a guarded suspicion by populations in predominantly black neighborhoods and outright hostility and deeply embedded corruption on the part of police in white neighborhoods, Wright tells of one particularly illuminating exchange with an “intelligent” police captain. After recognizing Wright as the author of “that damn book...about Chicago,” the cop threatens to “break” Wright and “run you [Pardes and Chenal, the film’s producer and director] foreign bastards out of the country.” The captain’s outrage stems from the novel’s clear indictment of American racism. As he understands it, Wright is there “filming the Negro problem” and in the meantime managing to “[make] monkeys out of you,” his fellow policemen. In making the novel into a film, the captain recognizes the power of distribution. Allowing his threats to speak of the fear that is left unsaid, the captain embodies the extent to which the “racial situation here is an intentionally fabricated one and the whites want to keep it that way” (32). Wright, in turn, speaks of the collusion between city officials, police, and “mobs of white hoodlums” to maintain conditions of poverty to the extent that they remain “natural.” But Wright and others are intent on revealing the intentionality of those conditions. These intentions are clear to the captain who opposes the film, and they are clear in Wright’s multimedia assault on the structures and agents who would sustain the dominant order’s claim of a natural state of disorder.

Many of today’s situations that reveal continued discriminatory police practices and document instances of state violence that results from the fatal joining together of militarization and racialized thought are able to circulate widely and quickly with digital technologies and the internet. Despite his novel’s popularity, Wright could not expect his protest to reach everyone and so used forms beyond the novel to circulate ideas that would trouble the naturalized state of things in the U.S. and throughout the world. Photography afforded Wright a medium with wide

appeal and distribution as well as a perceived sense of being somehow closer to reality, or at least with a potential to effect a greater sense of immediacy and therefore more forceful impressions. But wider distribution guarantees nothing more than simply increasing the number of individual moments of impression; it does not follow as a consequence of a wider distribution of the objects of sensible that the “eyes” will be “schooled to weigh and compare.” Rather than aiming solely for wider distribution via his use of photography, Wright is interested in transforming the ways in which people see the world in which they live. Therefore, he takes photography as an important tool to use in this reshaping precisely because of the common notion of it being attached to immediacy. Wright puts these common notions to use, again not to discredit these associations per se, but to exploit them and extract from them their potential in effecting the changes he wishes to make in the processes of perception and understanding that would leave more eyes attuned not to the natural conditions of poverty and disorder but rather to the machinations that would have such conditions be recognized as natural in the first place. Despite the natural order that “still grudgingly withhold[s] from the Negro the right to living space, full citizenship, job opportunities,” Wright finds “the Negro in Chicago was still alive despite all his problems and difficulties” (32). That life is particularly evident for Wright in the fact that “from the South Side jazz and blues have gone to the four corners of the earth and made known the humanity of the Negro and have quickened and lifted the sense of humanity in countless others.” So rather than dismissing the powers of circulation, Wright finds great potential in the wider distribution of cultural production as well as great promise that, as evidenced by this music, “the Chicago Negro still wills, desires, dreams, aspires, works, and builds” (32). However much he may have already known these things, Wright’s point as I see it remains one of making contradiction visible and using the senses and the technologies of their

expression to do so. No matter the deplorable conditions of life to which the photographs are meant to give immediate form in the essay, Wright knows they must be accompanied by song if they are not to be taken as a kind of marker of death. The photographs collect images of dilapidated homes and garbage-strewn streets, makeshift churches and funeral ceremonies, infants and juvenile delinquents less in an attempt to make the deplorability of any one of those things more immediate and more as a way to make visible the need to see all of these things differently. Namely, they are evidence gathered as part of an argument against their being looked at as depicting a natural order of things. Wright's accompanying narrative makes his strategy clear insofar as mediation is a weapon to be used against those who would claim there is anything natural to be seen in the photographs.

His 1951 *Ebony* essay was neither the first nor most famous instance of Wright mixing prose and photography. In 1941 Wright published *12 Million Black Voices*, a multimedia work that sets out to show and tell the story of Black migration in the midcentury U.S. And Wright's telling is inflected by a deep personal connection to the story of migration as Wright himself had left the South for Chicago in 1927. In his Preface to *12 Million*, the author David Bradley notes that "while the sum of [Wright's] experiences had shown him exactly where and what he was in the world, the faces in the photographs showed him clearly where and what he could have been. Each of the faces in the FSA photographs could easily have been his face, perhaps had been" (xvi). Wright's text notably uses the collective pronoun "We" throughout less as a way to claim any preexisting collective and more as a strategy to assert the emergence of a new collectivity against "received notions of geography, history, and identity" (Allred 550). As Allred's essay argues, Wright's narrative is one of "passage" in which histories from "slavery through Jim Crow to (proleptically) full citizenship and equality" (Allred 550) are taken to be parts of an

ongoing process of transition beginning with being forcibly removed “from our native soil” (Wright 12). Wright’s narrative continues, after being “dragged...across thousands of miles of ocean, hurled...into another land, strange and hostile, where for a second time we felt the slow, painful process of a new birth amid conditions harsh and raw” (12). The text juxtaposes this narrative with the “rebellion against tyranny” in Europe that would found the U.S.’s national commitment to freedom and liberty but paradoxically led to the “buying and selling of our human bodies” (12). Indeed, Wright hinges these two histories together on his way to challenging notions that the all the world had embarked on the same “road of progress.” For, as Wright puts it in describing the pursuit of a new world of freedom in America, “their leap was the windfall of our tragedy.” What becomes evident in this telling is the degree to which Wright’s “we” is certainly less grounded in any strong belief in a common cultural heritage and instead begins as an attempt to articulate those conditions that occasioned a “new birth” as much as it signaled a common death. So that while Allred’s essay advocates reading *12 Million* as an occasion to “recognize African Americans as a collectivity on the national and international stage” and through this “process of recognition” arrive at an “encompassing we,” I take Wright’s project to be one that begins from such a position of recognition insofar as Wright’s addressee is not “dominant whites” and his goal is not a “demand for recognition” (Allred 550, 557). And while Allred has in mind Wright’s desire to construct a “we” that transcends “race-based...orders of affiliation,” I take such an objective to be present already in Wright’s narrative of slavery as being one of passage. Indeed, Wright’s text seems to be hardly concerned with “cultural capital and its egalitarian distribution” except insofar as he recognizes the degree to which such things characterize the failure of those discourses of recognition Allred takes to be the object of the text’s desire. While I do take Allred’s point that Wright’s project is an

undertaking of self-narration and asserting authority over the materials with which history is told, I think Wright's text is less concerned with questions of who is doing the looking than it is with questions of what is being looked at. Whereas Allred's rather conventional reading of the photographs finds in them "a self-possessed gaze that demands recognition," I take the photographs and the text accompanying them to interrogate the very notion of self-possession (578). After all, if we turn to Wright's Introduction to *Black Metropolis* carrying with us what *12 Million* teaches us about living as a continuous series of transitions, of unending passage without ultimately arriving home, we get a better sense of what Wright is really trying to articulate. Namely, Wright seeks to construct a different image of history constructed against those stuck "defending a reality they loved" in the face of the evidence that tells of a different kind of history that shows us all "that we are living through a series of revolutions" (xxiv). It may be on the indeterminate promise of revolution that Wright stakes his claim about history, but it is in the embodiments of passage and the sites of transition from which those claims emerge. Less than from a state of mutual recognition among equally self-possessed I's does Wright's "we" struggle to coalesce and more from the passage that opens when those things are held in abeyance because Wright knows, from the beginning, how those "basic facts are assumed" (xxix).

Knowing how "whites and blacks view each other through the lenses provided by the visual culture of the modern mass media," Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, was a missile launched onto an already raging symbolic field of battle (Entin 215). Having had his novel *Native Son* attacked by many for contributing to and reinforcing negative stereotypes of blacks in the U.S., a more thorough study of his work offers a different picture and reveals the extent to which Wright's "awareness of the deeply contingent and dialectical quality of racial identity" and understanding of how "racial images are produced through a complex visual economy that

generates, even as it seems to reflect, the ontological naturalness of race” (Entin 219). Thinking about his works as being part of a constellation of attempts to explore as well as influence dominant modes of racialized thought provides a better sense of the degree to which Wright’s project is a critique rather than endorsement of forms of recognition. Indeed, the extent to which we understand Wright to “interrogate and challenge the cultural production of reductive racial images” depends on the extent to which recognition is the object of critique rather than desire (Entin 219).

In more and less subtle and direct ways does Wright’s critique of recognition appear throughout *12 Million*. Given my comments above, it may come with lessened surprise that this critique begins with a defamiliarizing reading of the natural world. Despite being grounded by the documentary photographs, Wright turns immediately in the Preface to figurative language to describe the project. Wright’s point is to intervene immediately in how the text will be read. “While purporting to render a broad picture of the processes of Negro life in the United States, [this text] intentionally does not include in its considerations those areas of Negro life which comprise the so-called ‘talented tenth,’ or isolated islands of mulatto leadership...[who] formed a sort of liaison corps between the whites and the blacks.” Furthering his desire to distinguish disparate elements within what would otherwise be taken to be a homogenized whole, Wright claims “those few Negroes who have lifted themselves...[are] like single fishes that leap and flash for a split second above the surface of the sea” and are identified as being “fleeting exceptions to the vast, tragic school that swims below in the depths, against the current, silently and heavily, struggling against the waves of vicissitudes that spell a common fate” (xix). Wright qualifies his decision to focus on “the plight of the humble folk who swim in the depths” because it is here that he might be able to “seize upon that which is qualitative and abiding in Negro

experience.” Wright names the quality of this condition as being a “costly and tortuous upstream journey” that a vast majority will not be able to complete.

While oceans and streams provide Wright with figures for depicting a collective site of struggle, the school does something different. The “tragic school” is a figure of collective struggle in individual story. The sea is a medium for competition, currents and waves carrying a strong sense of relentless fluidity, but also relentlessness. What is lifting but elevation? And who would ever want to return to the tragic school?

The sea serves as a common and collective figure, but also allows for distinction among the swimming bodies. It is Wright’s intention to understand how a population adapts to large-scale legal, economic, and social transformations and endures “their costly and tortuous journey upstream.” Whereas the sea is used for its commonness, as a place of cohabitation for a people, the stream is claimed space, a place of contentious and contemptuous force with an orientation toward boundaries and frames rather than the sea’s vastness and schooling pockets of life. If the stream works this way spatially, its temporal orientation is often one of duration and becoming, the space of eddies and folds in a process. Insofar as he uses different variations of water to express transitions and abiding economic and social transformations metaphorically, it is Wright’s understanding of history, and modernity in particular, as a series of violent passage and change that challenges the charges leveled against his work.

Wright’s writing matches the photographs’ visual rhetoric—the figures in the photographs being embodied verification of the quality of history the text wishes to show. Given what Wright writes in the Preface, it would seem the relation between text and image is one in which the photograph provides visual verification for a theoretical account of historic change as it appears in a particular population over a period of time. No matter if Wright believes the story

demands pictures to apprehend its totalizing ambitions, his language reflects a desire to deploy the figurative—i.e., water—as a strategy for articulating the total historical process of which he is attempting to draw one particular picture. But Wright quickly leaves one metaphor behind for another in pursuing the interpretive work of the text. Wright’s metaphors will seek to re-describe the photographs. Language mediates the image’s immediacy and reroutes the “majority” presented in the photographs not as fish in an ocean or stream but, if not quite yet soldiers, then for now a population “terrified,” where “fear is with [them] always” (46). Wright now mixes metaphors of water and war in attempting to defamiliarize and re-describe what the pictures present. “Two streams of life flow through the South, a black stream and a white stream, and from day to day we live in the atmosphere of war that never ends.” This sentence combines metaphors of water and war in a description of social life divided across racial lines. The sentence succeeds insofar as it defamiliarizes the natural world and at the same time naturalizes the condition of war. Despite their separate streams, both forms of life inhabiting those streams struggle to swim toward the same destination. And yet, only one will arrive. “For them life is a continuous victory; for us it is simply trouble in the land” (46). Just as the forces of currents and waves carry a strong sense of fatefulness, we see Wright use war in a similar way, with an even stronger sense of it having collective catastrophic effects.

With the use of metaphor, Wright works against the immediacy of the photographs. As a result of the mediation of the war metaphors in the text, the clichés of war photography distort further what the photographs depict. In one sense, the photographs begin to work against Wright’s critique of the ordinariness and naturalization of war once re-described as war photography. In another sense, however, such warping enables the critique. Wright’s text re-describes everyday life for a large population—12 million—of American citizens as war which



deepens the tension between what the photograph depicts and their relation to the story Wright enlist them in telling. His metaphors begin to challenge the photographs' ability to maintain their status as documentation as they take up greater figurative meaning. As much as resting men, working women, and dancing youth are not pictures of war, they are what war came to look like in Richard Wright's picturing the U.S. While it is largely the work of language that transforms these pictures into something other than what they are, cliché works against their documentary nature inasmuch as war photography achieves generic status. Under Wright's metaphorical pinning the photos become not an index of the world pictured but rather records of a world transformed through language. Language transforms pictures of Black American life in migration not only during tremendous changes in capital-labor relations in the present but also in the long history of capital's relationship to labor. The photographs become documents of a generalized, yet historical, condition of migration and transition that describes life bending to and breaking under capital's demands. This history, in Wright's telling of it in the U.S., continues from slavery to abolition to war. As the photographs undergo the process of transformation, they come to signify more than what they depict. In forcing what is depicted to undergo this passage, pictures of kitchenettes become those of the trenches and the lynched bodies become the shrapnelled and sniped war dead.

Wright's combination of documentary photography and figurative language starts a complex process of meaning. The juxtaposition builds tension between the simple realities of photographed subjects and the Wright's effort to transform straight photography into a vehicle for abstract thought. As the text draws a totalizing picture of history that speaks in terms of conquest and tragedy, Wright's narrative drives a wedge between the photographs and the viewer. That wedge transforms the pictures and their subjects. These photographs are not of war;

or at least not immediately so. But in not being photographs of war Wright sees the opportunity to enfold them into the historical narrative the text builds. Here's Wright: "Even when the sprawling fields are drenched in sunshine, it is war. When we grub at the clay with our hoes, it is war. When we sleep, it is war. When we are awake, it is war. When one of us is born, he enters one of the warring regiments of the South." In attempting to give an historical account of the conditions under which the subjects in the photographs live, Wright's vision assimilates those whose lives he sees in the photos as well as the organizing principle of those lives left unseen in the photos. He gives that which is unseen the name of war and seems to leave no place for peace.

Wright's totalizing picture of history winds up at the figure of totalized war. Whatever "days of peace" there may be, Wright cautions it is "a peace born of a victory over us." Attempting to fight against the reality of war brings "open violence." And if the horizon of better race relations remains a problem of class warfare, Wright insists on the persistence of divisions across race lines: "the poor whites are warned by the Lords of the Land that they must cast their destiny with their own color, that to make common cause with us is to threaten the foundations of civilization." While Wright wants to illustrate the illogic of intimidation and privilege problems of wealth and property over those of race, his text nonetheless affirms the illogical condition of fear that remains—that "breeds in our hearts until each poor white face begins to look like the face of an enemy soldier" (46). Wright's America is a nation divided—a division linked not only to the "ordinary" laws of Jim Crow, however, but also now a national division across enemy lines. Wright's rhetoric, paired with the historical narrative and photography on offer, performs a kind of universal conscription. Ultimately, the "Lords of the Land" bear the responsibility for the persistence of war. Looking at all life as a site of surplus value, the Lords of the Land turn the struggle for work into a competing struggle for life. Where a common struggle

against ownership should flourish, the white and black poor “stay fixed in attitudes of opposition.” Despite knowing that another world is possible in which the “spell from which we cannot awaken” is finally broken, Wright contends that pursuing this alternative would have catastrophic consequences. Daring “to ask questions, to protest, to insist, to contend for a secure institutional and political base upon which to stand and fulfill ourselves” Wright understands “is equivalent to a new and intensified declaration of war” (47). Aspiration is war.

The photographs’ sociological import remains, even if their objectivity is written over by metaphor. Neither sociological study nor the photographs as they stand match the significance achieved by the re-descriptive work of war. The threat lurking behind Wright’s rhetorical hyperbole is to expose lines already drawn. These lines have turned any opposition to the abiding order into an act of war. In turn, divisions are reinforced, institutionally, publicly, privately, and the space between loses its potential to redraw the lines that stand.

In danger of losing sight of his intentions to map historic, geographic, economic, and cultural changes in the US, it helps to read Wright across texts to understand better how his use of war to re-describe the rhythms of ordinary existence develops. Before turning to Wright’s 1945 introduction to *Black Metropolis*, I want to focus on perhaps the strongest evidence of Wright’s vision of total war in *12 Million*. The example comes in Wright describing the effects soldiers returning from WWI had on social life, as well as the troubles they face returning to the homeland. With the war effort, many blacks head north in search of work to “help turn the wheels of industry.” Wright’s text ventriloquizes for the workers while maintaining a distant but enduring relation between generations: “At the thought of leaving our homes again, we cry: ‘What a life it is we live! Our roots are nowhere! We have no home even upon this soil which formed our blood and bones!’ But hundreds of thousands of us get on the move once more” (86).

The battle described in the earlier section between white and black streams of life turns now to a battle over black labor between the Lords of the Land in the south and the Bosses of the Buildings in the north. As personal demands and institutional pressures turn the north into “a land of promise,” many go, “facing the unknown” but understanding that “life has already prepared us for moving and drifting” (87). Wright contrasts two interrelated images of displacement and promise in describing, on the one hand, the Great Migration and, on the other, black soldiers returning from Europe. Upon their return, the soldiers tell of being “jim-crowed...in the trenches even when they were fighting and dying.” The veterans “walk the streets with quick steps and proud shoulders. They cannot help it; they have been in battle, have seen men of all nations and races die. They have seen what men are made of, and now they act differently.” Despite their immediate experience of war’s carnage, the soldiers remain unprepared for the particularly vengeful and ironic violence they now face at home. Driven still by possession, profit, and oppression, “the Lords of the Land cannot understand them. They take them and lynch them while they are still wearing the uniform of the US Army.” The ironic figure of the lynched soldier allows Wright to transpose foreign sites of battle to the domestic sphere. He goes on, “Our black boys do not die for liberty in Flanders. They die in Texas and Georgia. Atlanta is our Marne. Brownsville, Texas, is our Chateau-Thierry” (88-89). Wright’s narrative strategy strips these battles of their particular geographic locations in France but maintains its focus on the historic events of WWI. The black soldiers returning from the war posed a particular threat to the dominant powers at home. Having served abroad and defended the future of democracy, black soldiers would be right to expect different treatment upon their return. Paradoxically, for many the situation was now even more terrifying. As the NAACP saw a spike in its memberships, the fears white southerners’ had of the black soldier were stoked. Having a

history of “[symbol[izing] a social order turned upside down,” the black soldier was a particularly threatening figure to the dominant order. During this period, the military radically—if somewhat unintentionally—reconfigured the social landscape of the U.S. Military service became yet another site of recognition for black citizens. As a comprehensive study of the issue of black military service during the era puts it, “black soldiers became potent, albeit unstable, symbols of African American patriotism, racial pride, manhood, and citizenship” and for the black community “represented an opportunity for the race to demonstrate its loyalty to the country in its hour of need” (Williams 16). As the Red Summer of 1919 raged, black veterans were frequent targets of white vigilante mobs. And despite the fact that in many cases “no definitive causal relationship exists linking the lynching of these men to the fact that they served in the army” those deaths nevertheless carried an “extraordinary symbolism” (Williams 237). Taken as a collective, black veterans represented a grave threat to the racial hierarchy in the south and, more implicitly, the U.S. as a whole. As tensions swelled, the hierarchy’s fragility became increasingly apparent. Using the veterans’ homecoming to issue a call to arms at home, W.E.B. Du Bois was quick to seize the moment’s potential for empowerment: “we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land. *We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting*” (“Returning Soldiers”, emphasis original). As Wright would do again around midcentury, Du Bois used the occasion of war to identify its enduring condition and the tendency that war not only influences the structures of collective institutions but also helps to determine the parameters of social tension and ease.

Wright uses the irony of a lynched soldier to give further credence to the argument that simmers throughout the narrative he lays out. In the process, Wright's intentionally hyperbolized rhetoric develops a forceful critique of the situation it poses in which returning US veterans are murdered at home by enemy forces in their homeland. At the same time, Wright depends on past wars to describe present struggles in an effort to reveal the totalizing extent to which structural violence has permeated the collective social consciousness in the U.S to a point that war becomes a useful organizing principle for the total picture of social life. Perhaps, on one hand, Wright's strategy looks naïve, or at least uncritical, inasmuch as he depends on a kind of allegorical thinking that leads him to turn the concrete events of battle into abstract pictures of struggle.<sup>24</sup> Yet, on the other hand, Wright's strategy exhibits a hallmark of misrecognition as it appears in literature insofar as the plausibility of his narrative depends on collapsing distinctions between different spaces and times to present its total picture. In suggesting "Atlanta is our Marne," Wright begins creating unexpected affiliations across space and time that are meant to reveal a common underlying structure of war. Rather than looking at this strategy as dangerously stripping particulars of their particularity, understanding misrecognition as a literary device allows us to see the benefits of a kind of abstraction that not only does not throw away the imperative to historicize and instead recommits to the imperative in refusing to restrict historical analysis by relying on limits of period and place.

Turning now to *Black Metropolis*, we pick up Wright's interest in illustrating transformations in daily life brought on by major shifts from agricultural to industrial work and rural to city life. Wright's most primitive subject matter precedes not just slavery but capitalism as he describes the entirely basic ways in which the "advent of machine production altered his

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<sup>24</sup> On this use of allegory, see R A Judy's "Introduction: For Dignity; Tunisia and the Poetry of Emergent Democratic Humanism" 9-10.

[man's] [sic] relationship to the earth, to his family, to his fellow men, and even to himself"

(xxii). Wright's attention turns away from race relations in American cities and focuses on more basic configurations and the relationship between natural and social life. In what he describes as the "bewilder[ment]" that follows modernization, Wright expresses a reluctant nostalgia for folk life. He insists what causes the uneven ways in which these changes register at individual and collective levels is the "war of impulses" that divides America in his time yet emerged long before from within humanist philosophies that held "dignity and nobility a given human right" but nonetheless were used to rationalize African enslavement. Most often, what is implicit at the collective level emerges on individual levels as violence. Wright identifies times of "violent jumps and leaps" and opposes them to "static periods, lulls," neither side exactly arriving at war or peace but still alluding to such dichotomies. To live within the modern is "to accept uncertainty as a way of life, to live within the vivid, present moment and let the meaning of that moment suffice as a rationale for life and death" (xxiii). Living through modernity on Wright's account means paying witness to and engaging in the struggles between residual and emergent forms of life. Those individuals who remain enthralled by the prospect of a future freedom yet live in the present under unequal conditions of exploitation and oppression, however, mark a site of resistance against those who wish to "make what is *presently* real the only and right reality" (xxiii). Because of their commitment to the ontology of the present, Wright believes those who "run our industrial world cannot see what really *is*" and choose "not to accept [that] we are living through a series of revolutions" potentially and promisingly led by the "world's dispossessed" (xxiv-xxv). If the text shows how Wright had permanent revolution on his mind, today it demonstrates a desire for an adequate description of war both permanent and total. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in searching for the embodiment of this historically abstract, yet totally present,

condition, Wright identifies “the American Negro” as a “child of the culture that crushes him.” In this moment we see one of America’s most prominent writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century commit to using war as a figure of life and struggle, in order to construct a plausible account of the ongoing evolution of a conspiracy of forces at work against universal liberation. From this standpoint, permanent war reflects Marx’s stronger sense of permanent revolution, which is total revolution as the final destruction of not only the ruling classes but also their structures of value as well as the institutional sites of that value. In effect, Wright’s picture of total war delivers the prospect of not just the collapse of the State but also the wholesale destruction of its institutions and perhaps even the disappearance of the desire to rebuild.

And yet, while permanent revolution is really aimed at total revolution, permanent war is not quite total war. So that while Wright’s text appears an illustration of permanent war, it articulates better a sense of war all the way down. Totality provides a sense of ongoing completeness while permanence implies unspecified duration. For as much as permanence partly registers the ongoing, it does not also see the thoroughgoing. What Wright calls “social maladjustment” can be taken to be a general index of asocial behavior. This kind of behavior is the form of appearance of social exclusion coming to the surface and into visibility and, therefore, in need of policing. Understanding that “those forms of social maladjustment which are recorded in courts, prisons, clinics, hospitals, newspapers, and bureaus of vital statistics” are merely those instances officially recognized and accounted for, Wright claims attitudes and actions persist below the surface that attest to the “brutality” that anchors the “nature and quality of our everyday American experiences” (xxvii). A final opposition emerges from within Wright’s characterization of American social life: the brutality that occupies the deep recesses of individual daily life threatens the very idea on which collective life is founded. These kinds of



cruel and violent encounters between individuals, no matter how real, are often repressed, invisible, systemic, and hidden within networks and institutions of capital. So the process by which these affiliations come into sight is one of recognition but with the caveat that what enables recognition in this instance is a willingness to misrecognize history and its lived experience. In regarding the accuracy of Wright's distorted picture of the photographs in *12 Million*, and their unveiling of those conditions that enable a "seemingly normal, ordinary American [to be] capable of such brutality," we must accede that Wright aims to "preclude the deep, organic satisfactions necessary for civilized, peaceful living" and "to condemn the system that provides those experiences" (xxvii). Finally, for Wright, if sociological study is a didactic genre that approaches its subject as if already having "constituted an alien realm for white Americans," of already being "unreal to them," then literary description offers an alternative method of meaning making that leaves open greater possibilities of affiliation beyond the familiar as opposed to the alien, for example (xxvii). If sociology threatens to reduce individuals to figures, then the way forward for literature becomes "paint[ing] in the shadings, the background, to make three-dimensional the personalities caught in this Sargasso of racial subjugation" (xxxii). In concluding, Wright resists the injunction to "find a meaning in his humiliation" in which the proper response to the violence of oppression, exploitation, and alienation would be to "make his slums and his sweat-shops his modern cathedrals." But, alongside William James, he entertains the problematic subject position of the excluded:

There can be, of course, no such thing as a *complete* rejection of anybody by society; for even in rejecting him, society must notice him. But the American Negro has come as near being the victim of a complete rejection as our society has been able to work out, for the dehumanized image of the Negro which white Americans carry in their minds, the anti-Negro epithets continuously on their lips, exclude the contemporary Negro as truly as though he were kept in a steel prison, and doom even those Negroes who are as yet unborn. (xxxiii)

The twin forces of inclusion and exclusion—rendered here as an experience of contradiction brought on by a kind of inclusion by exclusion, where the mode of inclusion is an effect of the mode of exclusion—have led to a “gradual estrangement...in the Negro over a period of 160 years, an estrangement from complete identification with the nation to atomized and despairing rebellion” (xxxiii). While “complete identification” overstates the case and the moral chiding he closes with promises nothing more than to repeat again and again the empty refrain of the tired discourse of recognition that blacks, too, are “human beings,” taken together Wright authors a program of thought that urges us to alter the ways in which collective social life is lived and imagined. In doing so, Wright lays bare the degree to which war structures history and social belonging. And while, in real forms of chaos and destruction, it threatens the very possibility of collective coexistence, in an imagined sense, war offers a potential exit from the “steel prison” in which the born and unborn masses of exploited are doomed to live.

**Mediating the Immediate: From Prison to War in Chester Himes’s *Yesterday Will Make You Cry***

If Wright’s *12 Million* is an example of how to use metaphor and misrecognition to temper the promised sensational immediacy of photography, then Chester Himes’s *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* offers a different but parallel example of the ambiguously mediating effects photographic representation can have. On the one hand Wright uses the structure of war to transform photographs of “black folk” into an occasion to lay bare the facts that tell of a “history [that] is far stranger than you suspect,” make clear that those depicted “are not what we seem,” and present an alternative account that tells the story of an “uneasily tied knot of pain and hope whose snarled strands converge from many points of time and space” (10-11). Wright’s narrative must construct the “steel prison” threatening to remain invisible. On the other hand, Himes’s

novel's setting is a prison, and its protagonist, Jimmy Monroe, is at the beginning of a twenty-year bid. Himes's novel would seem to demonstrate no need for metaphor, instead placing its characters and readers immediately in a space of control and confinement, if not one directly identified with the structures and institutions of war. And if on Wright's account combining sociological facts and literary figures could render a more complete picture of how common conditions of social life were not just like war but were, in total, war, then Himes's novel is an outstanding example of wanting to render the "tied knot of pain and hope" in three dimensions.

Originally the novel *Cast the First Stone* published in 1953 in fundamentally different form, the narrative of *Yesterday* begins the first night of convict Jimmy Monroe's twenty to twenty-five year prison sentence for robbery. The first few sentences tell the reader Jimmy found "it was strange. Everything was strange" (25). In one of the first psychological portraits given of him, the narrator describes Jimmy feeling as if the dormitory was unreal, as if "everything was a tableau," marked by a strangeness that precludes Jimmy's ability to configure his sensations into a comprehensive story. In those first days, prison poses a serious challenge to Jimmy as he struggles to maintain a sense of both self and reality. His confusion and bewilderment are described as if being the result of not having the ability to maintain a continuous sense of time: "every time he blinked his eyes it was another tableau." As his "mind had stopped working," Jimmy's senses overwhelm his mind: "Everything came through his senses and then stopped as though it had come into a mirror and there was nothing but the reflection caught in the mirror with no meaning" (26). Jimmy's sensations and the narrative voice merge as the next sentence reads "It was funny being there and not feeling it." The narrative commentary on Jimmy's experience of prison—of adjusting to spatial confinement and a new social structure—tells of a contradictory state of feeling too much and knowing too little; in a word, echoing Wright, Jimmy

is left bewildered and beginning to see things “for the first time in a hard, cutting clarity” (27). As “it came close and enveloped him,” Jimmy’s experience of prison can only be described as defamiliarizing. After four days, he begins “seeing things which he had been looking at unseeingly.” Jimmy’s senses are primarily responsible for enabling this new kind of seeing. Everything from seeing duffel bags and photographs, hearing “yells, curses, off-key ballads,” and smelling “unwashed bodies,” contributes to Jimmy losing a sense of self and his place in the world. Prison has forced Jimmy’s mind to reconfigure itself, “and in the closeness he could neither see nor smell nor hear...anymore—only feel” (28). Himes’s narrative provides a paradigmatic example of the failure of recognitive functions resulting from not merely the onslaught of sensational input but more so the consequence of that input bouncing between surfaces of a mirror without recourse to a conceptual self to order them.<sup>25</sup> But the narrative betrays real concern for Jimmy’s being unable to think; as fear and despair become “too great...thought stopped.” Jimmy finds refuge from the crushing fear and confusion of prison when he can “escape into the present tense. That was best—when thought stopped. He would go automatic” (31). As the novel goes on, however, Jimmy proves to be a sensitive thinker despite the conditions of the prison and hours of solitary confinement he endures. To think, for both Himes and Jimmy, would seem to depend on allowing a bruised body to bruise the mind. While Jimmy knows it is better to “live it all today” so “you wouldn’t have to worry about tomorrow,” his mind in prison, where he could not escape the thoughts of yesterday, today, or tomorrow, refused him the opportunity to do so (134).

While he is well known for his work in genre, Himes’s *Yesterday* shows him using biographic and historic materials to construct characters and setting as well as comment on both

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<sup>25</sup> In this sense Jimmy is an embodiment of the breakdown of the kind of subject Deleuze describes as that which grounds recognition.

real and imagined intersections between life in prison and life as war. Not only, because it is clearly so on its surface, is *Yesterday* a stunning work of prison literature, I want to claim it is also a stunning work of war literature. What is more, it understands itself as a work of war literature insofar as it is identifiable as such only in another form. Beyond the appearance of his work *in* genre, it is Himes's work *on* genre that arguably crowns his legacy in American literature today. That is, Chester Himes is a preeminent example of an author who may have always been reduced to and therefore dismissed as a genre author, while his writing always refuses to accept that genre could ever limit authorship in such ways. Himes's writing exists not only at the intersection of genres, but is also interested in the frames of genre insofar as works of literature can spill over such attempts of confinement. What Wright's writing does to the photograph, Himes arguably does to genre—both writers turning depictions of a world into descriptions of a war; or, alternatively, both authors find in war a strategy toward depicting better the worlds they set out to describe.<sup>26</sup>

Himes is never as direct in *Yesterday* as Wright was in any of the works discussed earlier. One chapter begins with a particularly dreadful but beautiful passage:

Those were the days; the moving, living, endless days with legs that dragged but yet kept marching through the stone and steel, and five-foot thickness of concrete walls. The days with bloody guts filled with the gory slime of degeneracy, enclosed with the grey stone blankness of walls, lashed with the bars falling in steady monotonous blows—the bleeding, living, peopled days of convicts doing time. (226)

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<sup>26</sup> I think both Wright and Himes offer compelling case studies of the difference between, what Lukács called, narrative and description. Rather than being clear examples of one or the other, it would seem the work of both authors offer test cases for the difference Lukács identifies between the two. See Lukács's "Narrate or Describe?" for more.

The opening sentence's allusion to a recognizable cliché of nostalgia influences the entire passage by at once pointing to this significance while also pointing away from it. It is to be taken quite literally—as an opening to a description of the days spent in the prison. Yet, while the days may belong to the “slime and dirt and indifference of the peopled prison,” the nights are when Jimmy's thoughts can reach beyond the confining walls and terrifying monotony. Moments when Jimmy finds himself beyond the prison walls also exist during softball games and film screenings, the latter paid for from the “convicts' amusement fund” and linked to rehabilitation efforts by the warden, but also indirectly tied to in the text to corruption and laundering. Nonetheless, Jimmy is struck by a particular scene in the 1930 film *Laughter* in which he takes literally the line that describes the woman character “dying for want of laughter.” It offers a circumstance of death Jimmy finds “a hell of a thing to contemplate” but a situation in which Jimmy cannot help but see himself (240). Feeling “as if he [is] awaiting something, but could not think of what,” living in prison leaves Jimmy aware that to look out the window too long is to lose sense of the walls that frame the windows. His desire for unthinking, to feel only the present, Jimmy comes to realize, is an effect of the process of identifying himself as a convict. Pursuing this moment of self-recognition as a convict, Jimmy refuses to show the fear he harbors at the circumstance in which he now lives. But a letter from his mother finally cracks open that stoic and stolid figure the prison tries to make of him. Feeling comes “oozing out” of him as well as the “days filled with dullness and sameness and death and violence and absoluteness; the brooding eternal and the same; the mocking days and the indifferent days and the deliberate days with their pieces of sunset wedged in between two buildings, with their distances horizoned by a wall, with their bar-checked squares of stars and their three-foot parades of moons from window casement to window casement” (248). All is confined; for anything to appear it must travel

through the window enframed by the wall. The letter produces in Jimmy a crisis, as past and future, outside and inside, peace and war become entangled and bleed into one another “fusing together into red hot chaos, like a furnace in his brain” (248-249). The letter’s intrusion reveals the deadening routine. Spatial and temporal confinement fuse in an “unvarying monotony: Up at six; breakfast at seven; dinner at eleven; back in the dormitory; lights out at nine; then the gnawing silence until six” are mirrored by the “angles, stone, brick, bars!” (249). The conformities of identification swallow the vicissitudes of identity: “Convicts—all alike. You knew what a guy was going to say before he said it. An endless cycle, as unvarying as eternity...All Alike! Dead days!” (249). Unbreakable recognition threatens to freeze everything into a state of impenetrable indifference—as the opening section’s title has it, threatening a world of “Gray Clothes and Gray Lines.” The scene would have the reader believe prison has had the effect of dehumanizing Jimmy and reducing him to a simplified and manageable category of identification—the convict. Himes’s novel nicely demonstrates the extent to which prisons are a primary site of social contention and a place in which norms are both established but also challenged. Indeed, Himes’s Jimmy embodies the contentiousness of social definitions of human belonging. Following from Caleb Smith’s literary history of prisons in the U.S., Himes’s novel shows exactly how “prisoners do not occupy a zone of exile outside the circle of juridical and philosophical humanity” but instead embody contestation. Namely, with the prison as its institutional site, the prisoner—as a category of identification—is the embodied site at which “the very idea of modern humanity is imagined and contested” (199). Indeed, in many ways *Yesterday* is yet another example of a novel whose protagonist is the site of struggle between modes of identity and identification. From the novel’s beginning, Jimmy cannot see himself as a convict; as the novel progresses he waivers between identifying himself as a convict

among other convicts and, at times trying to distance himself from them, identifying convicts with characteristics such as detestability, degeneracy, and immobility. While Jimmy's internal struggle makes for a compelling novel, of greater interest here is the insight those internal struggles lend to understanding better the collective struggle of identity versus identification. For as much as prison walls are meant to exclude those inside and seem to represent a space apart from the norms of social exchange, it is arguably more insightful to understand how the "wall between the captive and the world at large" is not so much an impenetrable barrier of exclusion as it is a "medium of their contact" (199). Much like the story Wright tells of black migrants, the convict "embodied in a single figure the opposition between bondage and freedom...he inhabited a threshold, a tunnel of passage" (13). Yet, while some believed the convict "bore a temporary abjection" and the prison was a penitential site of redemption, from the standpoint of both Wright and Himes, the conditions of captivity and terror are anything but temporary; instead, both authors portray their characters living at a dangerously dynamic threshold that exposes them to great violence and precarity, and predisposes them to the psychological effects of a persistent unmooring. Yet, both authors avoid clearly distinguishing sides between victors and victims (despite Wright's rhetoric at times), and instead focus on the degree to which the space between the two sides remains fluid despite all appearances to the contrary. It's not the case, however, that either Wright or Himes offer any precise subject position beyond the oppositions. But I want to argue that this is the force behind their narratives—to interrogate, to fascinate over, to sensationalize the struggle of the oppositional to survive. Instead of taking either the indivisible or the invisible to be their primary concern, both authors take on a much more difficult task of narrating and describing divisibility and dislocation, telling of the spaces and subjects between those more easily identified, if sometimes still left un-visible or disavowed, categories populating



the social imaginary. Their projects continue a tradition of showing and telling how, as Ralph Ellison put it, “‘high visibility’ actually rendered one un-visible” (xv). I think it is clear how Wright used photography as way into this tension, and I have set to show how Himes’s identifies the prison as a disciplining institution as well as the psychological struggles of the convict as primary sites of establishing social norms and punishing individuals. In concluding, I want to show the essential, if seemingly minor, role photography plays in Himes’s novel.

As Jimmy’s rage over the neglect and mistreatment of prisoners following a massive fire at the prison boils he searches for targets, wanting to “lose everything that held him to the semblance of a human being—a convict. He wanted to become a blankness, unrestrained, unemotional, so he could do a blindly dangerous act. He wanted to kill someone. He wanted to shoot some one in the guts, watch them bend over and take their guts in their hands, watch them topple over and die” (251). Finally feeling as if he has enough gumption to hit a guard—to attack the total system that confines him as it appears in the uniformed clothing on an individual body—the only guard he finds is the one he considers a friend whose wife often asks about Jimmy’s wellbeing. Just as the final layer of order is to be wiped away in Jimmy’s violent act, a flash of intimacy keeps Jimmy from acting out. Yet, even as his desire for violence subsides, time’s relentlessness wears on Jimmy, the hollowness of days matched by the loneliness of nights; Jimmy finds in prison, in being a convict, there is no peace to be had.

Yet, Jimmy’s tightly confined world opens as he cultivates an intimate relationship with a fellow convict named Rico. The two develop conversation and camaraderie while watching films and reading magazine stories. Sharing a love for reading, their relationship becomes intimate. As the relationship blossoms, Jimmy’s stoic façade begins showing cracks. As Rico tells Jimmy of spending time in an asylum for the criminally insane, both men conclude they had “lost [their]

perspective” (317). The novel associates Jimmy’s vulnerability with increased sensation and threatening his ability to separate himself from his environment. As he loses this ability to mediate the impressions of his surrounding, “everything touched Jimmy...at the slightest touch he’d bubble over, like foam” (317). While he “had seen a lot of things happen in prison that hadn’t made sense...they were just beginning to touch him.” The novel presents this as an awakening akin to “coming to life” after Jimmy’s prolonged psychological and emotional atrophy; yet, the need remains to put something between the world and him, especially since, as we’ve already seen, time has failed him.<sup>27</sup>

In a scene central to the claims I make in this chapter, Rico and Jimmy find Laurence Stalling’s war photography in a newspaper.<sup>28</sup> Making a strong impression on Jimmy, one of the

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<sup>27</sup> As a primary mode of orientation, time, and the struggle to keep track of it with instruments used to do so, is of utmost importance to understanding the aesthetic modes of misrecognition. It is often when instruments of keeping time—whether natural or prosthetic—break down that moments of misrecognition occur.

<sup>28</sup> In recent years the work of many scholars have drawn elaborately detailed pictures of the relationship between war and prisons. In no uncertain terms Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* is a paradigmatic case. While the premise of her book begins with an inquiry into the (putatively) metaphorical war of the War on Drugs, Alexander is quick to show how what begins as an “ambitious federal policy” blooms to the point of being identified as an “actual war” and draws a direct correlation between the U.S. incarceration rate being “six to ten times greater than that of other industrialized nations” and the “drug war” (5, 8). Alexander goes on to establish how the so-called war on drugs had “little to do with public concern about drugs and much to do with public concern about race” (49). Additionally, Alexander makes the strongest argument for the connection between war and incarceration when she writes “nothing has contributed more to the systematic mass incarceration of people of color in the United States more than the War on Drugs” while showing the degree to which “few legal rules meaningfully constrain the police in the War on the Drugs” (60-61). Finally, Alexander demonstrates the intimate relationship between the war on drugs and the common sight of today’s militarized police forces from the beginning of SWAT teams in the 1960s to their primary role enforcing the war on drugs in the 1980s (74-78). In challenging the dominant paradigm she’s identified, Alexander calls for no less than another civil war at the same time that draws the lines of historical affiliation between slavery and mass incarceration using the tremendously effective recognizability of Jim Crow discrimination to frame the tradition she wishes to bring to light (235-236). In his study *Forced Passage: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*, Dylan Rodriguez dedicates an entire chapter to

photographs is of “a careless scatter of rotting corpses on a patch of utter desolation” accompanied by the caption “No more parades.” The landscape’s barrenness outweighs the photograph’s depiction of the amassed dead, however: “The death touched him, but the desolation touched him more” (320). Urged on by the photo, Jimmy reassesses the world he daily sees and begins thinking of “the condemned men strolling across the yard at sunset.” The photograph forever alters how Jimmy will think of convicts, who are now living the life of “no more parades.” Another published photograph leaves Jimmy feeling “insecure, as if no tomorrow is promised,” and he begins to “see himself dead and rotting in the oblivion of a grave, never having been anything but a number on a board in a prison” (321). The photograph’s caption—taken from John McCrae’s poem “In Flanders Fields”—is “ten words” that read as a “complete story of life and death, or war and heroism, indifference and finality.” The thin lines of distinction drawn in the war photos—as well as in the poem between the living and dead—give visual form to Jimmy’s estrangement and confusion in prison. Furthermore, Jimmy recognizes the “life” in the photos as being analogous to his incarcerated life. Throughout the

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arguing the point that prisons are “domestic warzones.” In elaborating the connection, Rodriguez claims “*the specificity of the prison regime as a production of state power is its rigorous and extravagant marshaling of technologies of violence, domination, and subjection otherwise reserved for deployment in sites of declared (extradomestic) war or martial law...It is through this state mobilization that the prison (re)composes as a surface and site—a dominion—of domestic warfare*” (45, emphasis original). In drawing a distinction between domestic and foreign space only to bring them together through the figure of war Rodriguez echoes many others including W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and John Edgar Wideman. In a similar vein of thought, but this time with direct literary interest, in his book *Slaves of State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary*, literary scholar Dennis Childs argues “the northern prison, like its more notorious southern counterpart, amounted to a regime of domestic warfare against those branded as contaminating elements within the social body” and suggest that Himes’s novel demonstrates the “insidiously successful migration of putatively southern models of racial capitalist misogynist homo/transphobic imprisonment into northern topographies of neoslavery” (23-24). Childs, too, makes claims toward the total picture this nexus of state power provides insofar as his study, through an “unhistorical reentry for neoslaves ranging back to 1865,” exposes “our current moment of prison-industrial genocide” (24).

novel, Jimmy has felt as if living in prison has been a kind of living-through-death. Yet, while Jimmy's feelings may bring "him into perilous experiential identification *with* the dead," it is thinking that provides the moment of misrecognition and sustains the conditional relationship between Jimmy and the soldiers while refusing their identification (143). The photographs provide Jimmy an alternative source of orientation. They help Jimmy comprehend the process of becoming convict in making available an analogous experience of becoming soldier. In offering this analogy, the photograph emphasizes the tension between recognition and misrecognition by opening the space between identity and identification to thoroughgoing, and not merely temporary, conflict. This strips both identity and identification of objectivity and replaces experience as such with lived experience. Himes's novel, in this sense, is concerned with what it is like to be a convict. And the provisional, or analogical, answer it provides is being a convict is like being a soldier—where both sides can touch the others' "facts" of life and misrecognize in them their own.<sup>29</sup> In some way, the photos in Himes's novel mirror Wright's characterization of the sociological study as concrete pictures of life misunderstood. For both Himes and Wright, the gap between immediate image and mediated meaning produces pictures of life as, as Wright described, a "series of revolutions" prone to misunderstanding. Himes uses war photography as a way to approximate—if not completely identify with—the conditions Jimmy and fellow convicts live in prison. It is this ambition toward analogy, and the role war plays in establishing these connections, that we can begin to see how a concept like total war takes material form in both photography and literature alike; what is more, illustrating the concept demands not only

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<sup>29</sup> It may be apparent that I'm drawing here on the fifth chapter of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Originally translated as "The Fact of Blackness," it has more recently been retranslated as "The Lived Experience of the Black." Several scholars have found this to be a significant and important revision. Simone Browne, for instance, associates the first version with telling of an objective fact of Blackness while the latter "focus[es] on the imposition of race in black life, where one's being is experienced through others" (7).

multiple media, but depends on the possibility that no one form of mediation captures (or unleashes) the conceptual force behind total war; all forms of mediation are enlisted in the effort to make total war available for thought.

The most affecting photograph Jimmy looks at importantly fails to depict the same death and destruction found in the others. Instead, the photo is “just a scraggly line of soldiers with rifles shoulder high, standing in a trench in the immense, eternal desolation, waiting for something.” Repeating Jimmy’s earlier sense of lying in wait for some unknown event, the soldiers appear “in the middle of eternity, like microscopic atoms in the universal scene...so insignificant, so shockingly ridiculous” (321). Given the outsized spatial and temporal orientation, “waiting for the order to go out there and die” is likened to waiting “for the war to end” at the expense of one’s own life. Each circumstance tells of fatalism maintaining a hold on any likelihood of agency, even if it is in the very redaction of choice that affords one the opportunity to see what frames choice. Unseen bullets aimed at their lives, fired “by an enemy which they didn’t hate,” the soldiers in the photo are line up “waiting for anything” making a desperate plea that whatever is to come it come in a “hurry” (322). The photos finally reveal the absurdity of the “system of punishment” that condemns individuals to spending entire lives serving sentences doled out before any offense is committed, living with a common fear of their own desolation and despair. They remain entrenched against a fear that is so complete as to permit no life other than that which lives through the conditions of its own condemnation. In this case, the photo’s caption performs an interpretive work similar to Wright’s metaphors. The simple caption, “Ennui,” brings to the photograph’s subject a sense of tedium that echoes the earlier passage about countless convicts living among uncounted days; but here those countless days are those spent in the trenches cut out from the barren earth, convicts and soldiers shifting

positions but sharing a common shelter. Unlike other captions appearing in Stalling's work that do little to affect the subject, the captioned "Ennui" transforms this photo's reference, divesting war of its exceptionality and reinvesting it with a sense of tedium to the degree that existential listlessness and drudgery can be achieved despite such supposedly extraordinary conditions. Moreover, perhaps in the collision between these two registers another one is made to appear. While the caption looks to strip war of its exceptionality, it in turn leaves it a banality. Life survives despite such exceptional conditions. But Himes and Wright both ask at what cost is life transformed by the banal experience of living through the exception? There provisional answer remains that the cost to life is a life of war.

Moving beyond its original context, the caption provides the title for a story Jimmy writes that is described as a "freak of literature" and "impossible" and ultimately rejected for publication because it's "too hysterical" despite its "excellent prison atmosphere" (322, 327).<sup>30</sup> While the story's details remain untold, it recalls the novel's preoccupations with the freakish and hysterical, as well as the relationship between immediacy and mediation and the place of literature (and other forms) in the processes of thought. Nevertheless, looking at the war photographs gives Jimmy his first real recognition of prison life quite late in the novel. The story's "excellent prison atmosphere" can be partly attributed to the photograph's inspiration in that the photograph depicts the "atmosphere" of war without the generic conventions of the first; sure, what the photos depict is absolutely recognizable as war—unlike the Wright examples—but the photographs are also pictures of the routinized life of trench warfare— snapshots of a day

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<sup>30</sup> There are many instances that show the extent to which *Yesterday* draws on biographical details from Himes's own life. While spending time in an Ohio prison for robbery, Himes began writing. Interesting enough on their own, I do not pursue these coincidences further than first, noting them in Himes's writing at a time when auto-fiction has become a dominant mode of contemporary fiction writing, and, second, suggesting a relationship between auto-fiction and novels as works of theory.

in a life living in a world at war much too big for any one to life—let alone human life in total—to be of value. Jimmy’s story echoes Wright’s characterization of the photographed figures living in an “atmosphere of war that never ends” and reiterates the analogical structures of both photography and total war, while also drawing the dividing line between prison and trench, war and living, showing that line to be a threshold and medium of contact, and enfolding both into a common space of misrecognized thought.

While Jimmy is left “touched” by the world beyond the prison, that “normal world” filled with “normal people,” which he hasn’t seen since nineteen, life inside is given new meaning by the newspaper’s reprint of the WWI photos; he uses the photos to turn a convict’s life into a soldier’s; not for its glory, but rather for the way in which war—at both individual and collective levels—always poses problems for orientation, identification, and representation. Both spatially and temporally, as it was for Wright and Himes then and is arguably the case now even more, we see the crisis of the everyday appear as the “everyday” is further assimilated into the “rhythm of capital.” Despite it long being associated with boredom, trench warfare is also connected to some of the first wartime experiences where those you were fighting could remain unseen. Soldiers could spend entire campaigns without seeing enemy faces on the other side. But as “the everyday has become the site of struggles invested with the task of simply getting through one day at a time,” it also “remains our most basic temporal unit—and the most basic unit of social life” (Allison, et al. 20). The photo Jimmy thinks best analogizes the prisoner’s life is one that depicts neither the glory of war, nor immediately its gore, but instead shows how the exceptional condition of wartime collides with a need or desire—especially at times of great crisis and threat—to resume everyday life. The absence of both glory and gore points up a negative relation to generic expectations of war photography. This absence contributes to articulating an

analogical relationship between life and war, war and prison, soldier and convict, and so on where affiliation rests on a shared structure of feeling capable of locating the threshold between everyday tedium and the existential threat posed by capturing the tedium of the everyday. The open field in front of the soldiers would appear a complete opposite of the cell if not for the Jimmy's moment of misrecognition. In this moment, the soldier and convict are drawn close, and their individual sites of immiseration become an intimately related "no man's land." In a final reversal, Jimmy's interest in the photo is a result of looking alike, of misrecognizing the empty fields in front of the trenches as a common metaphorical site of battle for soldier and convict alike. It is not the simple metaphor of "trench is cell" that fascinates Jimmy, but rather the space surrounding the trench that enables its form that draws his attention. The lived experience of the convict emerges out of the empty days inside the cellblock that are nonetheless the same days to world beyond the walls, just measured differently. It's in finding common measures that Jimmy finds the common space of trench and cell. And he uses the instruments of war to measure this common space drawing a no man's land from a picture in which no men would stand to be seen. Jimmy nonetheless sees them there hiding and seeks shelter among them from the winds of war.



## John Edgar Wideman and John A. Williams Fighting War

As the previous chapter only briefly noted, Frantz Fanon's work has profoundly influenced this project and the arguments it tries to make across a range of texts. While I can only begin to address Fanon's work and the scholarship that engages it, it's important to note at the outset that what interests me most about his work and subsequent scholarship on it has to do with what Fanon wrote about recognition and its relationship to lived experience and self-consciousness. Moreover, Fanon's works have a common preoccupation with the promise of violence and the "determination to struggle" and take seriously forms of struggle and acts of violence that "may be symbolic only" (Zolberg 53). In giving forms of symbolic violence a central place in articulating a theoretical account of present social forms and the possibilities of future formation, Fanon was wholly conscious of the degree to which recognition asserts power over the processes of consciousness—both individual and collective. Furthermore, in attempting to understand the present better so as to articulate a path out of it, Fanon took those "symbols of social order" to be primary sites of the struggle against domination in all its forms. Those symbols Fanon includes will by this point be quite familiar to the reader:

The symbols of social order—the police, the bugle calls in the barracks, military parades and the waving flags—are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating: for they do not convey the message "Don't dare to budge"; rather, they cry out "Get ready to attack." And, in fact, if the native had any tendency to fall asleep and to forget, the settler's hauteur and the settler's anxiety to test the strength of the colonial system would remind him at every turn that the great showdown cannot be put off indefinitely.  
(*Wretched* 53)

As institutions of social order, the police and military are by now familiar sites at which to locate contests over recognition. Indeed, such institutions—appearing in his work as various ideological apparatuses acting on individuals with institutional support and reinforcement—give credence to Althusser's claims concerning the function of ideology being primarily one of recognition; that

is, ideology is tasked with “constituting concrete individuals as subjects” (116). Subjects are both constituted by and constitutive of ideology. Althusser suggests this claim has a certain “obviousness,” similar to the way Fanon uses “fact” to describe the lived materiality of the individual in society. Insofar as both authors put forward claims that point simultaneously toward recognition’s hegemony as well as its fragility, their frameworks of resistance depend on subjects with a particular understanding of the symbolic order of violence. In assuming subject positions of this sort—in making the case of ideology an obvious/factual one—both Althusser and Fanon show how subjects qua subjects “constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition” and, further, that these rituals are part of our “most elementary everyday life” as subjects experiencing the fact of our own subject positions, that is, our positions as subjects within whatever social order identifies us and with which we obviously identify. Althusser’s theory of ideology depends on there being both individuals and subjects insofar as the former is the raw material of consciousness while the latter names the process undergone by the individual upon entering the symbolic social order of ideology. No matter the Althusser’s distinction between State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses, however, ideology entails individualized forms of violence and so develops a need for those symbols of social order Fanon identifies in, for example, the police and military as well as the “rituals” that establish and reinforce their symbolic force. If, as Althusser argues, “ideology is eternal” and thereby “omnipresent, trans-historical” (109), then Fanon tells us not only that “the showdown cannot be put off indefinitely” (53) but also begins to map the sites at which the showdown takes place as well as unveils that the showdown is always already underway. And if Althusser is right in claiming that “all ideology is centered” by an “Absolute Subject” and thereby “*subjects* the subjects to the Subject” as part of its “mirror-structure,” then Fanon’s work is the source to which we can turn to

understand better, at least from a theoretical standpoint, if not an aesthetic one, the paradoxical condition that when “we cannot ‘recognize’ ourselves...we can *know* ourselves” (Althusser 122, 165, emphasis original). But if it looks as if Althusser invests more here in knowledge than experience, Fanon reminds us of their inseparability as well as the tension between them that characterizes the struggle between a social order built on recognition and its enforcement and one that pursues those opportunities of misrecognition that harbor visions of liberation and at the same time entail forms of self- and social destruction. However, Althusser, too, demonstrates the need to identify the simultaneity of experiencing and knowing the ideological order as a condition of its potential unraveling. Insofar as he understands his example of ideology—the police hailing, ‘Hey, you there!’—as staging the subjective process of being captured within ideology rather than a pure mimesis of the process, he locates the effect of its action in the “mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion” in which the individual transforms into the subject (118). Inasmuch as the subject responds without thought, ideology has successfully captured him and believes it has apprehended another “suspect”. Inasmuch as he responds in thought, however, the subject demonstrates an order of knowledge and self-consciousness, enabled by misrecognition, capable of (mis)recognizing ideology’s “false and provisional totalization” (Butler 11). Misrecognition, from this standpoint, if it is to be understood as an injury, would be one that refuses both to scab and scar. Finally, as my project attempts to understand it, misrecognition names a form of consciousness occurring in history that emerges out of the intimate relationship between recognition and violence as well as at the intersection of individuals, collectives, and the rise of the social as a framework for understanding this relationship and the problems arising from it.<sup>31</sup> In other words, inasmuch as “social discourse

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<sup>31</sup> As terms that emerge out of a specific historical context and used with specific strategic

initially developed to *counter* insurgencies” (Owens 19), Fanon’s term sociogeny looks to identify where insurgency might establish its resurgence: namely, “‘the black must wage war on two levels’: the subjective and the intersubjective, lived experience of social-historical reality” (Gordon 76).<sup>32</sup>

If it is true that, under the prevailing order of recognition, “people have the right to be acknowledged publicly as what they already really are,” then the work of Althusser and Fanon offer a rejoinder inasmuch as neither author grants the kind of “ethics of authenticity” to which Anthony Appiah here refers and of which he is directly critical (149). Instead, both Althusser and Fanon see such processes of recognition as the enemy against which “the determination to struggle” is perennially aimed. Appiah’s rejoinder lends precision to the work of Althusser and Fanon inasmuch as their work concerns the very order that would normalize the desire and expectation of recognition to which Taylor refers and against which Appiah is arguing. While there is certainly reason enough to draw a wide network of affiliation among those scholars who have taken up the problems of recognition, it is equally important to mark the contending conclusions at which some arrive and keep those differences in sight when working through numerous examples at once. Chief among these differences here regards the problem of “authentic” identities and the extent to which struggles for recognition that begin by presupposing a value inherent to these identities foreclose the possibility of genuinely novel insights into the formation of subjects. Insofar as these “authentic” identities are those that are

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purpose, society and “the social” are often associated with being “timeless and universal.” I acknowledge both these facts and gesture toward an outstanding study of them in Patricia Owens’s book *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social*.

<sup>32</sup> While I prefer individual/subject and collective/social to Gordon’s “subjective and intersubjective,” the point remains in showing the extent to which Fanon understands the contentious and even traumatic relationship that exists between individual subjects and forms of social organization that plays out at the level of social structures and institutions.

“forgotten, ignored, suppressed, or distorted...movements for recognition struggle” to recuperate the equal status of these identities as well as hold the belief that “misrecognition is such a serious form of injury” inasmuch as it “oppresses by molding identity itself” (Markell 41). What Markell identifies as Taylor’s oscillation between two different understandings of recognition—one “cognitive” the other “constructive”—indeed remains the central problem dogging every discourse of recognition; namely, the tension between recognition as passive or active process. The two sides are easily summed up in two competing phrases: “I recognize” versus “I am recognized.” On the one hand, the latter expression names the social processes by which subjects come to be recognized only insofar as others recognize those subjects *as* subjects. This process is imbued with “unpredictability, contingency, and riskiness” and foregrounds the degree to which to misrecognize—in this sense by way of being ascribed a mistaken identity or even being refused recognition altogether—is to cause injury to an equal (Markell 59). On the other hand, the former expression names that cognitive capability of the “thinking subject [who] claims to master meaning” beginning from a perceived sovereignty of the acting subject or proceeding toward such a status (Ricoeur 248). For Ricoeur, the “course of recognition” unfolds between a point of “I recognize” to “I am recognized” in which the presumption of “recognition-identification” in the former is tempered by the “mutual recognition” and “relationship of reciprocity” of the latter (248). Recalling Althusser’s ideological function of the police, Ricoeur, in attempting to account for the degree to which “misrecognition finds itself incorporated into the dynamic of recognition,” identifies “crime” as the “expression par excellence of the famous ‘work of the negative’” (258). In moving from the “threat of making errors” to the “negative feelings” whose “emblematic sense” is captured by the word “contempt” Ricoeur comes to understand the extent to which the ideal of mutual recognition and reciprocity wishes to

eliminate the “asymmetry that [it] would like to forget itself in the happiness of ‘each other’” (260). In those feeling of contempt that he associates with misrecognition I think Ricoeur inadvertently points back to an earlier moment in the text in which, reading Hobbes on war, he writes “misrecognition knows itself to be a refusal of this recognition called peace” (164). I take Ricoeur’s point to be that whatever an established order recognizes is simultaneously incorporated into that order. Especially in cases of criminality, as Ricoeur has shown, recognition works to incorporate those acts of contempt he associates with willful misrecognition in which there is no longer a fear of mistaking that which ought to be recognized but an intentional act of mistaking that which is recognized, i.e. the order/ordering of law. Insofar as “recognition is never referred to apart from its negative shadow,” the criminal offers an interesting site at which to study the struggle over recognition. And inasmuch as Ricoeur refers to “crime as the refusal of recognition,” the criminal act marks an agency that the order of law is made to incorporate but cannot, insofar as it stands to be an order that grants or refuses recognition, preempt those forms of contempt at work against the order that would deny them the will to act precisely in identifying them as a criminal element within society in need of discipline instead of acknowledging the intelligence that motivates the willful opposition to the dominant order.

I will return to Fanon in a moment, but to do so I will take up the intersection between criminality and war as it appears in Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s collaborative book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. One of the primary strengths of the project is the extent to which it locates institutions as social sites of struggle against dominant social orders. In the university, for example, there exists a kind of negative labor Ricoeur identified with the criminal that in many ways chips away at institutional foundations. Understanding it as a place that affords one the position of being “in but not of,” the university is “like the colonial

police force [that] recruited unwittingly from guerrilla neighborhoods.” In its paradoxical status as both “refuge” and site at which the “life stolen by enlightenment [is] stolen back,” the “university harbor[s] refugees, fugitives, renegades, and castaways” (28-29). In an era of mass professionalization, the university safeguards itself against such criminal elements “who exceed and by exceeding escape” the regime of professionalization. Met with the “counterinsurgency” forces of the “critical” university that nonetheless remains “built upon the theft, the conquest, the negligence of the outcast mass intellectuality of the Undercommons,” the criminal element is forced underground where they are “always at war, always in hiding” (30-33).

Professionalization is a weaponization of enlightenment inasmuch as professionalization incorporates disorders of thinking into identifiable orders of thought. In this sense, professionalization exhibits imperial and acquisitive impulses. Inasmuch as this is true, Moten and Harney argue it is “unwise to think of professionalization as a narrowing and better to think of it as a circling, an encircling of war wagons around the last camp of indigenous women and children” (34). Wherever the “outcast mass intellectuality of the undercommons” remains, there it will be targeted, understood, organized, encircled, incorporated, and rendered recognizable—by way of assimilating it into an established social order as a means of pacifying it. Moten and Harney call this process one of conquest insofar as they seek to give a name to the “unspoken war that founded, and with the force of law, refounds society” (40). Rather than embodying the “asocial” forces that mark their criminality, the “crack dealer, terrorist, and political prisoner share a commitment to war, and society responds in kind with wars on crime, terror, drugs, communism” (40). In a convoluted but incisive phrase, Moten and Harney call the counterinsurgent tactics associated with the ongoing imperialist project of conquest a “war on the commitment to war.” Out of this constellation of discourse and practice, we get a sense of

the total picture that reveals the “idea that war is the uninterrupted frame of history” and makes up “the matrix for all the forms beneath which we can find the face and mechanisms of social warfare” (Foucault 59-60). It should come with a kind of “obviousness” similar to Althusser’s that Foucault associates this war that goes on under the so-called peaceful cover of society with “race war” (60). Of course, Foucault’s concept of race war is multilayered and thoroughly historicized and therefore avoids the threat of reducing the explanatory force of the phrase to those “biological-racist discourses of degeneracy” and instead points to “those institutions within the social body which make the discourse of race struggle function as a principle of exclusion and segregation and, ultimately, as a way of normalizing society” (61). As a way of clarifying Moten and Harney’s argument about the shared commitment to war, Foucault’s formulation tells the story of society defending itself from those elements at war against it operating from within it; these are not asocial forces, but rather forces of sociality struggling against the conquest of society. That is, for Fanon, this is the struggle of the facts of lived experience rising up against the forms of “collective unconscious” that compel the “unreflected imposition of a culture” (*Black* 147). In a certain sense we can read (out of historical order) Fanon responding to Althusser. Where Althusser has it that “hailing as an everyday practice subject to a precise ritual takes a quite ‘special’ form in the policeman’s practice of ‘hailing’ which concerns the hailing of ‘suspects,’ Fanon understood that the process of sociogeny transforms subjects into suspects (Althusser 118, n. 18). So, it would seem, Fanon maintains the prospect of the “commitment to war” Moten and Harney speak of and for which Althusser’s purely recognizable and recognized subject seems to leave no place:

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was *really him* who was hailed’ (and not someone



else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by 'guilt feelings', despite the large numbers who 'have something on their consciences'. (118)

In short, as a concept sociogeny helps make sense of the contradictions that emerge from the dialectic of recognition and misrecognition insofar as misrecognition becomes a strategy useful in escaping out from the encircling and assimilative force of recognition grounding the establishment and defense of society. Using Foucault to follow Fanon, the black becomes embodied war. Where Fanon claims "the Negro symbolizes the biological" and therefore poses a "biological danger," we are already operating in the symbolic realm and so, too, is the image of the (social) body under attack (*Black* 127-128). On the one hand, one version of the split Fanon describes between embodied experience and image offers a picture of foreclosed totality: "being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*" (*Black* 87). On the other, another version offers quite a different picture: I resolved, since it was impossible for me to get away from an *inborn complex*, to assert myself as a BLACK MAN. Since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known" (87). The act of making oneself known in spite of the technologies of recognition that may "hesitate" but in hesitating signal the present danger of coming into contact with something not quite right, is an act of willful misrecognition that aims at a kind of "negation of the negation" that constitutes the hesitant act of recognition. The act of willful misrecognition is, therefore, an act of war in the sense of being at war against society, but not identifying as asocial." This act refuses the imperative that "[the black] must be black in relation to the white" and instead posits oneself through an act of "denegation" that encompasses "the process of becoming that is the consciousness of the black" being freed from the looks of the "only real eyes" of the white gaze

(Judy “Body” 56). This complex process of coming into consciousness becomes, at Fanon’s urging, a subjective imperative. As to its importance for elaborating the process of misrecognition, this process describes a determinate negation—a structure that it shares with misrecognition. Insofar as denegation and misrecognition can be understood as being instances of determinate negation they both conceptualize those consequences entailed when “in the process of coming to know itself, consciousness distinguishes itself from something, while at the same time relating itself to it” (Judy “Body” 58). Moreover, “the denegation (misrecognition) of being black is the moment in the process of the black experience of consciousness in which it unburdens itself of the appearance of being something else” (Judy “Body” 60). Self-consciousness, then, is a process characterized by disavowing the moment of recognition insofar as a subject acknowledges another through a process “acting on and responding to” what it knows (Markell 34). Knowing oneself to be “a problem,” and having the will to act on that knowledge, is alienation raised to a conscious level. Rather than being an ideal of rising above the struggle for recognition, misrecognition names a process of undergoing, or living through, recognition as a socializing process without termination but instead always in transition.

To exhibit a capacity for this kind of critical “second sight” is an arduous task. Where social management is everywhere, recognizing and being recognized is a refuge. To choose to remain a problem is to court conflict and wage war. For all the arms with which social order reaches into individual minds and all the images with which it shapes the collective unconscious, it remains a privilege of the fictive to imagine empty and excessive forms working within and against prevailing orders. I turn now to two examples of novels that I argue take up the problems of recognition and imagine the possibilities of the project of misrecognition.

Published within a year of each other, John A. Williams's *Captain Blackman* (1972) and John Edgar Wideman's *The Lynchers* (1973) turn the dialectic of recognition and misrecognition into sensationalized and totalizing pictures of the institutionalizing violence of social warfare. Both authors use war as an organizing principle for understanding historically particular orders of social life and their mechanisms of enforcement. In using fiction to stage the commitment to war, both novels compose complex and critical pictures of society as an order that not only depends on war but also, in the meantime, manages to tend toward the militarization of everything. From a post-9/11 standpoint, these works seem prescient. But I want to stress their connection to problems of war, race, and militarization as they existed at the time of their publication, as well mark how they contribute to an ongoing project of rending the veil that would maintain war as a state of exception rather than admit war as that which "is going on beneath order and peace" (Foucault 59). Imagining society as the process by which sociality undergoes pacification, both Williams and Wideman use misrecognition as a way to crack the veneer of peace used to cover over the perpetual war that founds and refounds society. To that end, I would suggest both authors weaponize fiction as a way to combat society's tendency toward militarization in pursuit of defense and security. In this sense, in these novels misrecognition begins to look less like a social or psychological phenomenon and more like a narrative strategy. For both authors, as a narrative strategy, misrecognition entails a willful confusion of time and space as a way to tell a kind of trans-historical story of war using a particular historical moment of its appearance. Moreover, novels of misrecognition tell stories about individuals as much as institutions inasmuch as the two are inseparable following the sociogenic principle.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, those symbols of social order Fanon talked about are primary

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<sup>33</sup> For more on this variation on Fanon's sociogeny, see Sylvia Wynter's essay "Towards the

sites of the dialectic between recognition and misrecognition and, therefore, are indispensable to these novels. For Wideman's novel, it's the police; for Williams's novel, it's the U.S. army. Below I will offer separate readings of each novel's relationship to misrecognition as I see it before concluding with an attempt at synthesizing the two different, but related, pictures of total war each novel provides in deploying misrecognition as strategy for narrating that which presumably can only be imagined, i.e. total war, but yet remained the "lived experience of the black" in the U.S. without much need of imagining but instead demanding fictional treatment to be made sense of.

**"You with that silly broom when you ought to have a rifle": Wideman's *The Lynchers***

John Edgar Wideman's novel *The Lynchers* tells the story of four black men and their plot to murder a white police officer. To carry out the plan, Thomas Wilkerson, Graham Rice, Leonard Sanders, and the plot's mastermind, Willie Hall, aka "Littleman" will use a black prostitute to get to the officer. Knowing about their relationship, the men plan to kill the prostitute to frame the cop. Anticipating enough community outrage over the murder of a black woman at the hands of a white cop, the men envision the culmination of their plan as the cop's lynching at the hands of the community. Despite the plan's ultimate, and perhaps predestined, failure, as one critic put it, Wideman's novel "takes the subject of lynching beyond its gruesome

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Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, *The Puzzle of Conscious Experience*, of 'Identity' and What it's Like to be 'Black.'" She provides this description of the term: "the analogue, at the level of human identity, of the genomic principle, at the level of purely organic forms of life. Further, that it is also this *sense of self* as a sense of *being-in-the-world* that Thomas Nagel identified in his 1974 essay, as the indispensable prerequisite of "conscious experience", that is, a non-reducible and basic feature in its own right, one, with whose contemporary form, culturally elaborated as the identity or sense of the *self* of "Man" (i.e. the human in its Western-bourgeois or ethno-class conception), black thinkers from Dubois to Johnson, to Fanon have found themselves in painful, even anguished, conflict."

brutalities to a level of philosophical reflection” (Harris 129). Indeed, while the reader gets a sense that Littleman fully intends to carry out the plan, the other conspirators seem more reluctant to engage in the steps necessary to enact its brutal vision. We get this sense because of Littleman’s precise attention to detail when discussing the plan. “*Lynch*. Wilkerson remembered how he had laughed, had believed Littleman would laugh at the joke with him. But now he knew better. Littleman had never uttered the word lynch in jest” (438, emphasis original). Perhaps Littleman is a “curiosity” just as much as his plan is “theoretical and abstract,” but it is intentionally so (Harris 136). Harris’s essay is rightly critical of the degree to which Littleman’s plan “too consistently uses whites as the model for change” and goes on to suggest that “no matter how powerful the reaction may be, it is still imitation, not creation” (134). But if she thinks the plan depends too much on theory and imitation, then Harris seems to have missed the point of Wideman’s novel in the first place. As Ashraf Rushdy has argued, “Wideman is more interested in exposing than celebrating the idea of retributive violence” (110). In contrast to Rushdy’s reading, Harris’s characterization of the plan as “theoretical and abstract” is meant to diminish its importance; but the plan’s success depends less on its actual realization than on its capability “to interrogate the meaning of resurrecting a historical practice of anti-black violence in order to promote [a] nationalist agenda” (110). Whereas Harris’s reading tends to criticize the novel’s willingness to engage intimately with forms of racial violence, Rushdy understands the novel’s intention to be interrogation and critique as well as “discern[ing] the ways that previous forms of social control continue to exert power over aggrieved communities in sometimes new forms” (110). On Rushdy’s account, imitation remains a mode of critical thought. Rather than being purely derivative, imitation takes form seriously and understands it as a powerful source of collective meaning making. While Harris may condemn the imitative for not being “creative,”

Wideman's novel makes a strong case for expecting too much of and putting too much value in creation as such. In fact, the novel contains a thoughtful critique of imitation as it exists in architecture and other forms of social management; it seems Wideman's relationship with imitation is more nuanced than Harris would have it. This nuance, furthermore, is an important part of the novel's intention to think through the problems of liberation rather than model ways to achieve it. In doing so, the novel offers itself as an outstanding example of the complex and intimate relationship between recognition and misrecognition. Moreover, Wideman's novel provides a complicated picture of misrecognition's potentially liberating effects at the same time that it explores its connection to what others have called the martial imagination and the increasing extent to which the martial saturates the imaginary.

Littleman appreciates the symbolic significance of lynching. More than mere murder, a lynching builds community, while, of course, aiming to tear another part with terror. In cultivating pacification, it is an effective means of social management. Littleman gets this; and in recognizing these things about this particular form of violence, he devises a plan:

What this town needs is a good old fashioned lynching. The real thing. With all the trimmings. It would be like going to church. Puts things in their proper perspective. Reminding everybody of who they are, where they stand. Divides the world simple and pure. Good or bad. Oppressors or oppressed. Black or white. Things tend to get a little fuzzy here in the big city. We need ritual. A spectacular. (438)

Inasmuch as lynching was a form of community building for whites, Littleman recognizes its equal potential to do the same for blacks. He aims for broad appeal while also framing the plan as an intellectual exercise as well as a history lesson: "We must learn to do a thing correctly, with style for immediate appeal and depth for the deep thinkers, the ones who concern themselves with history and tradition." Yet, the plan is not to target "just any old body." Rather, Littleman insists it must be a white police officer if the ritual is to achieve its desired effect. And,

as Littleman sees it, this is “a world away from the crudities of your poor white vigilante necktie parties...go to the South where tradition means something” (438-439). In opposition to such crude violence, Littleman likes to think his plan will display “absolute power,” which in the context of his explanation seems to be analogous to the kind of “terror of being destroyed” Baldwin identified with the pure existential dread of being left powerlessness to fight back. Aiming at the “dramatic,” Littleman conjectures “a great artist must have conceived the first lynching. As a failed poet myself I envy his sweet touch, the sure hand that could extricate a satisfying, stable form from the raw fantasies of his peers” (439). Not only does form enable recognition, it also transforms raw emotion into dramatic effect. For black communities the lynched black body, in being recognized as one of their own became recognizable as being everybody. Littleman paints a disturbing picture with the equally disturbing defamiliarized image of the black body: “Forked log swaying in the heavy air, black pendulum tolling power, power, power. White power”. Littleman’s defamiliarization continues as he describes the “poor lynched darky” who “blinks his message like a lighthouse through the misty countryside. Beware. Nigger beware...Witness your brother, our sport with him, how we make poetry from our power” (439-440). If Littleman’s plan is imitative it is to the extent that he understands “the symbol matters, the ritual” (440). Lest the poetry metaphor would confuse his co-conspirators, Littleman ensures them that as much as it may resemble “a passion play” the lynching will be “more engrossing because with each enactment a fresh sufferer is delivered to the mob. Real blood. Undignified screams and writhing.” Reiterating his earlier comparison to church, Littleman adds this “maybe even more holy and sanctified since each actor is bound to his role not by some compact with a distant abstract deity, but by the same circumstances which tie man to wife, children to families, families to the community which they have created” (440). While his plan sounds like a purely

secular ritual, Littleman will later reveal it aspires to the divine. But for now the plan remains an attempt at community building. Inasmuch as this is the goal, then “the victim would have to be a white cop” with everyone “not looking at the beast but eating chicken from picnic baskets, sitting on fences munching watermelon. Dancing, singing, playing ball. Blasé as could be...black cops all around...no white faces in sight” (441). With these elaborations, Littleman looks to distinguish his lynching from those of the past. Yet, it seems the only distance he is capable of creating is purely rhetorical. After all, as much as the community building and blasé attitude reflects the “traditional” lynching, Littleman’s vision is by design and, in being imitative, necessarily ironic.

If white lynchings of black bodies were instances of how ritualized violence could be used to establish social order, then Littleman’s version sets out to achieve the exact opposite effect. Yet, Littleman’s ironic ritual remains intimately connected to the symbolic order inasmuch as it aims directly at one of those “symbols of social order” identified by Fanon. Against such mere symbols of power, Littleman seeks absolute power. And he finds the potential of achieving this power in the chaos the lynching would cause. If white lynchings blacks meant to encircle chaos, then Littleman wishes to unleash it. Sylvia Wynter should help to clarify the force of Littleman’s plan, if not dispel its association with pure imitation. Wynter claims “different forms of segregating the Ultimate Chaos that was the Black—from the apartheid of the South to the lynchings in both North and South, to their deprivation of the vote, and confinement in an inferior secondary educational sphere, to the logic of the jobless/ghetto/drugs/crime/prison archipelagoes of today—ensured that...the ‘active creation’ of the type of Chaos, which the dominant model needs for the replication of its own system, would continue” (“Ceremony” 37). Littleman’s plan intends to unleash the chaotic force the dominant order orders itself against.



Blacks lynching a white cop would do this certainly in a direct way, but as much as Wynter's essay is focused on the symbolic order Littleman's aims are in concert with the importance Wynter invests in the symbolic. In Littleman's poetic imagination we can see his attempt not only to give form to chaos—his is neither a “crudity” nor simply those “raw fantasies”—but also show how chaos is capable of form-giving, too. Littleman aims to unveil the domesticating process by which power is embodied in the white cop. From the ““outer view”” of chaotic force, “the grammars of regularities of boundary and structure-maintaining discourses are perceivable” (39). Read alongside Wynter's analysis Littleman's plan appears to be more than the theory or abstraction Harris would have it be. Instead, in understanding and deploying lynching as ritual, the plan makes “perceivable...the founding Order/Chaos oppositional categories which underpinned the boundary/structure maintaining dynamics” of the dominant social order Littleman is in revolt against. Yet, it's more difficult to imagine Littleman's ceremonious lynching leading to anything more than chaos—even if that is its force. And inasmuch as Littleman deploys a nationalist rhetoric in describing what he imagines, we begin to understand better how ritual, nation, epic, and total war all inform the violent vision he dreams up.

Rather than concede that the plan would be mere spectacle and have little transformative effect, Littleman defends it as an act capable of interpellating a collective already alive but not yet born. Although “we will lynch one man,” Littleman explains, “in fact we will be denying a total vision of reality”—a false vision of reality he associates with an unlocatable, conquering, surgical and dissecting gaze Fanon talked about. Despite the conditions of its emergence, “the plan begins by sweeping aside what is past” and declares “our scorn for it, our disregard for any consequences that the past has taught us to fear.” The plan orients itself to a future “conditioned by new definitions of ourselves as fighters, free, violent men who will determine the nature of

the reality in which they exist. Or die in the attempt. There won't be a South or a South Street for these new men. They won't be taught to bow before the symbols of their humiliation" (495). On the one hand, Littleman's discourse speaks of a certain creative project growing out of the failures of past national imaginaries. The "new" men will not be held captive by past promises and unrealized dreams of the nation. From his vantage, Littleman sees those symbols of nation and liberty as contributing instead to fear and humiliation:

A Liberty bell, a white hand holding the keys to the kingdom. When did the bell ring. Who did it ring for. I was on a boat while their liberty bells were ringing. All I heard were pipes and whistles calling us on deck to exercise, the rattle of chains when we danced...three thousand miles from my home...And I've been listening ever since. To bells and bullshit. (495)

But if Littleman decries the symbols of one nation, on the other hand, he remains committed to the nation as the ideal image of the collective he seeks to bring to life. Moreover, his vision of the nation is equally committed to a necessary violence as part of its becoming. "When one man kills it's murder," Littleman explains. But "when a nation kills murder is called war. If we lynch the cop we will be declaring ourselves a nation...They must attack us or back off and either way they must recognize our sovereignty" (495). What Littleman expects the nation to give him—and his nation—is the recognition of being a historical actor. While it will expose the "total community" to "mass retaliation, undifferentiated slaughter of community members," the lynching will be "a declaration of war, an acknowledgement of the separateness of the community" (495-496). Littleman shows the extent to which he understands war as an effective means of nation building. To act as a nation, within another nation, is to act against that nation. At the same time, the act of war is how "our community becomes defined, becomes separate" and declares its right to defend itself as a nation. "No more slow attrition of our best men," Littleman declares, and "no more battles in which only one side is allowed to fight" (496). In

rejecting past terror, Littleman targets a white cop. And in embracing a process of national formation in order to fight against another instantiation of the form he seeks for his collective, Littleman declares total war and follows the “total war doctrine” that “instruct[s] one nation in prevailing over another” (Saint-Amour 261). If Littleman’s imagined lynching plans to show how no nation can claim “a total vision of reality,” it can do so only inasmuch as it understands fighting for the alternative means “You will die or we will die.” “We have chosen,” Littleman says, and the evidence of the decision to accede to total war is “swaying in the breeze” (Wideman 531). And the reason for this choice is embodied by the prostitute, Sissie, whose murder will lead to the ceremonious lynching, which will lead to nation being born—a nation at war. Sissie, Littleman reasons, “was dead already” (531).

If the nation is the political form of Littleman’s imagined collective, epic is its literary cultural form. As Saint-Amour’s study of the literary history of total war brilliantly shows, total war and epic—although presumably separated by some distance historically—are deeply compatible. Turning to Hegel, Saint-Amour shows how “a hundred years before the expression’s [total war] first use, something like total war is presupposed in Hegel’s characterization of epic: a nation wholly animated by war produces epic accounts of itself as an integrated, self-identical, self-fulfilling totality” (184). With this description we can see better the epic dimensions of Littleman’s plan and its imagined effects. While it presumably will declare a nation coming into existence, the plan also signals the collective’s prior existence: “The lynched white cop will not only be an ineradicable element in the future, but it will seem as if he and his lynchers have always existed, patiently waiting to be perceived, a mystery to be worshipped” (Wideman 550). In taking the cop to be a symbol of the existing state of total war, Littleman looks to respond in kind. In so doing, he understands war to be “both the crucible and the connective matrix of any

given national totality.” Inasmuch as this characterizes his sense of the nation as collective form, Littleman—and effectively Wideman too—seems to concede that “full militarization is the best, and maybe only, occasion for world portraiture” (Saint-Amour 185). Littleman appears to appreciate the scale of violence the act entails and recognizes its necessity: “the total community gives its sanction in a lynching...If a white woman was molested or a slave struck his master and ran away, the South reacted by killing any niggers who happened to be handy. No question of justice, of catching the offender. All black men were responsible and the rules of war meant all were guilty” (Wideman 496). Littleman’s “total community” reflects the “self-identical, self-fulfilling totality” that grounds epic form and identifies the martial imaginary that fuels the national one. On Rushdy’s account, the lynching aims to “create the conditions for African-American self-definition” as it transforms a ritual “of white terrorism to a site of black affirmation” at the same time transforming “a destructive ritual to a unifying one” (112). Rushdy correctly identifies “nationalist” as one of two discourses Littleman uses in imagining his plan. Whereas Rushdy identifies the other as “religious” I want to suggest epic is more precise. Before saying more about epic, however, let us first deal with the relationship between nation and total war. On Rushdy’s reading, in the novel we see “Wideman...meditating profoundly on this painful tension between a desire for unity, modeled on the idea of the ‘nation,’ and the violence exercised against its would-be citizens in the effort to bring it to birth.” The connection between unity and violence described here echoes Wynter’s exploration of Order/Chaos as Rushdy helps to demonstrate further the extent to which Littleman’s vision depends on an already enclosed “self-identical, self-fulfilling” collective whose sense of unity comes only insofar as it aims to exterminate its other. The nation remains a seductive discourse inasmuch as it gives form to “the idea that the emergent nation breaks away from the past and inaugurates a new moment” (115).

Throughout the novel Littleman's musing reflect a commitment to the new and its ability to provide the self-sacrificing motivation necessary to fight. Asked what happens after the lynching's cleansing act, Littleman responds, "it won't be a time for memories... You can peek through these ruins and get a glimpse. Let's think about now. About what ails now. Let's make sure this won't be here tomorrow. Then let tomorrow take care of itself" (492). Later, he imagines "the wings of some gloriously colored bird relentlessly ascending, fanning with its beating wings the smoldering city below" (501). Rushdy's—and presumably Wideman's as well—criticism of this genocidal imaginary at the bottom of Littleman's version of nationalism focuses on the degree to which such desires for unity depend not only on one's enemy's death and destruction but also the self-destruction entailed in a commitment to total war. In the "desire for an impossible purity," Littleman fails to live up to his own expectation of transcending the order that binds him to war and so, therefore, is condemned to repeat it.

I want to pick up on the other discourse Rushdy identifies as being an active part of Littleman's vision, religion. My point is not to contend that religion is not a part of it; Littleman himself suggests the analogy between the lynching and church, and his numerous invocations of form, ritual, and ceremony in describing the plan lend the comparison further authority. But stressing epic over religion gives a better sense of the intensely martial imaginary at work in the need Littleman feels to declare war through action and use violence to bring the new nation into existence. Again, Saint-Amour's work provides an accurate picture of the relationship between war, nation, and epic: "For epic, a people are crucially renewed and defined by conflict" (198). Moreover, he argues, "epic is the default genre" of a "notion of organic national totality" (185). Inasmuch as this characterization of epic is true, Littleman seems deeply indebted to the epic imagination. And his various references to poetry and theater throughout the novel are only part

of the evidence for the debt. Later in the novel one of his coconspirators, in describing the plan as a “lynching in blackface” reminds the reader that the “words were Littleman’s. Littleman the poet” (597). Indeed, throughout the novel Littleman is a figure of the epic poet and has the divine visions of a nation born out of war to prove his worthiness of comparison.

If, as Lukács claimed, “the novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God,” then Wideman’s *The Lynchers* is a novel about those attempts to invite God to reenter into the world (88). Indeed, inasmuch as it wishes to enact a kind of ceremony-in-parody, Littleman’s plan is thoroughly ironic and signals how “irony...is the highest freedom that can be achieved in a world without God” (93). The vision Littleman has of the birth of a “Black god” seems equally ironic as it begins, in epic fashion, “I dreamed I was lying on a rock.” As everything around him is “quivering” in “ceaseless animation,” Littleman’s dream intimates the eternal before “everything stopped. I felt a birth. A god donning skin” (564-565). Littleman goes on to speak of the mind of man being a “breeding ground [to] nurture some possibility of itself...until the thing it could never be has a throbbing potential life.” As the “spiritual incubus...float[s] immune to time and space in a vast blackness” it will soon “unite with a human form” to experience its “second accidental birth.” Describing the process from conception to birth, the novel offers the following:

A sputtering urge to rebel that seemed lost in the flesh of a slave tossed overboard to lighten the Spanish galleon in a stormy sea will be reborn wire taut and indestructible in the soul of an infant whose first home is 125<sup>th</sup> Street, a drawer in a vermin infested bureau. As there is no fixed interval between the two conceptions, neither is there continuity of nation, race, sex” (565).

The image of the slave thrown overboard recasts the dream’s beginning and suggests a parallel between the slave’s “sputtering urge,” the “wire taut and indestructible” soul, and Littleman himself. It forces the reader to ask, if not to answer in any definite way, whether Littleman is that

overboard slave washed ashore now in its new form. The novel would seem to suggest so. The scene continues: "A god is created when the will and spirit of the many focus repeatedly on a lack, an emptiness each senses in himself. The collective energies are projected with such force that the god achieves an existence whether or not a co-incidence with flesh has occurred." Even if the "imminent messiah remains incomplete...until he has been a man," the importance of becoming flesh is supplanted by the need to "converse with some storyteller who can spread the news abroad." Deferring any clear path toward identifying him with any one of the figures, it would seem Littleman could potentially be all of them: the mind responsible for the original conception, the overboard slave, the impoverished but indestructible infant, as well as the god himself. The passage's ambiguity continues: "Though the many create the possibility of a god, one man must dream a human guise the god can assume. Stretched on the slanting rock I know I watched the Black God pass to manhood" (565). Littleman becomes "aware of the transition first as an absolute stillness, then a flood of patience, an unquestioning certitude." As the unceasing movement with which the dream opened stops, the only way Littleman could "comprehend ...the transition was [how] it filled the space between not there and there." Knowing that he "had assisted at the birth of a God," Littleman is made aware that despite having "been born" and, therefore, knowing he "would die," these were the "arbitrary limits" of the flesh that nonetheless "guarantee...the parenthesis which contained me was not entirely opaque at either extremity" (566). In other words, the dream reassures Littleman that, despite his fleshiness, or, in fact because of his fleshiness, his ambitions of war are those of a god called forth by "collective energies." In the dream, Littleman becomes the protagonist of his own epic story. As it aims to invite god to reenter the world, this epic remains intimately connected and deeply indebted to the marital imaginary that itself informs the birth of a nation moving full-throttle toward total war.

Littleman wakes from the dream with his “contentment...spoiled” as it ends “without a revelation of the God’s precise human shape.” He “wanted to be able to recognize him if [he] passed him on the street. As he begins imagining the possible “vulgarized form of his mystery,” Littleman sees a “face teasingly close and unreadable. Perhaps some tall, straight, brown-eyed handsome man who would stride from the crowd roaring like a lion as he feeds upon the body of the lynched cop.” Indeed, in taking Littleman to be the vulgar form he himself cannot recognize, it would seem the face is closer than his imagination is willing to allow. Rather than those collective energies calling forth the god, Littleman’s god looks to unleash those energies in calling his congregation into existence with a ceremonious, but ironic, enactment of the kind of ritualized violence that founds the nation and gives content to epic’s form. In a final, if unwilling, recognition of the inclusive/exclusive logic driving the collective fantasy of total war that is his plan, Littleman knows that “Whatever, wherever, whoever, I can no longer doubt the spirit has been released and received, a new man born” (567). It would seem Littleman is left unable to understand fully his own plan. What he took to be the birth of a god was really just a product of man’s epic imagination, and what he took to be the birth of a nation was just the guarantee that choices the world he sought to destroy gave him—“destruction of others or destruction of self”—left him with no choice at all (Rushdy 124).

### ***Captain Blackman and War, and War, and...***

If Wideman’s novel affords the opportunity to think about the relationship between epic and total war, then Williams’s *Captain Blackman*, I would argue, provides an opportunity to think about the relationship between the encyclopedic and total war. In his study, Saint-Amour pits these two forms against one another, looking to argue that the encyclopedic “did not decline *from* epic but simply declined it.” Instead of “mourning” epic’s absence or unavailability, the



“distended interwar works” Saint-Amour attends to (*Ulysses* and *Parade’s End*) take it as the “object of their resistance” (185). It seems that inasmuch as Williams’s *Captain Blackman* is a war novel that tells of a soldier fighting many wars, it could easily fit with epic in theme if not exactly in form. But if epic is understood as “the genre of organic national holism galvanized by war,” then it seems fair to call *Captain Blackman* not only not an epic but, more strongly, an anti-epic. Furthermore, following Saint-Amour’s distinction between the two forms as they relate to total war, it seems *Captain Blackman* follows a certain kind of encyclopedic form. For the novel tells not of war’s glory, but its destruction, identifying America’s proclivity for war with potentially the “greatest single threat to a society’s defining achievements” (198). If Williams’s novel doesn’t seem to exhibit the same kind of catastrophic vision that drives the encyclopedia’s “impetus for amassing knowledge,” I would suggest its veritable cataloging of America’s wars along with its literalized vision of what Saint-Amour calls the “perpetual interwar” places it quite nicely within the encyclopedic tradition. This further suggests how the novel takes up the problems of total war in a much different way than Wideman’s; and yet, I want to underscore the extent to which both novels are compelled to think through common questions about total war inasmuch as they are both concerned with ritual and racial violence as well as focused on making visible the psychotic effects of war in real situations as much as those that emerge with the “rehearsal for war” that best describes the liminal space terror occupies between relative peace and full out war (Saint-Amour 6). As the novel’s protagonist is transported through time to serve in the American military, the novel is itself a veritable encyclopedic account of America’s war history. Captain Blackman, the character, becomes a kind of personified encyclopedia. In an even more literal way, Blackman is known among his fellow black soldiers in Vietnam, and scorned by the white ones, for teaching a class on black military history in which “told

them...that they were not the first black soldiers to do what they were doing.” The class, beginning with the American Revolution, tells of “Prince Estabrook, Peter Salem, Crispus Attucks, and all the unnamed rest; from there to the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Plains Wars, the Spanish-American War—all the wars” (2). Using both plot and character, *Captain Blackman* becomes an interesting example of the kind of encyclopedic narrative impulse Saint-Amour identifies as being so important to the interwar period. Despite falling outside this particular historical period, Williams’s novel fits well with the category. Or, from another standpoint, because it falls outside the historical period between WWI and WWII that Saint-Amour associates with the encyclopedic novel, *Captain Blackman* (1972) revels in thinking through a kind of “perpetual interwar” Saint-Amour associates with late modernity. As he conceives of it, “interwar” is to be taken “phenomenologically” insofar as it is taken to name “the real-time experience of remembering a past war while awaiting and theorizing a future one” (305). Again, I want to stress how I take *Captain Blackman* to literalize—in both plot and character—of the phenomenological experience characterized by “expectation, anxiety, prophecy, and anticipatory mourning” as well as an exploration of the kind of ““collective psychosis”” emerging from “the highly automated ritual of anticipation, dread, and mass traumatization” (306, 6). As an outstanding example of how literature faces the social totality of war, *Captain Blackman* uses fiction to tell a history not only of the military service of black men in America but also, and on my account more importantly, a story of the perpetual interwar of total war from a phenomenological perspective.

As the novel begins, Abraham Blackman is injured serving in Vietnam. Later, we’ll learn he enlisted just before the Korean War began. And yet, within the first two pages of the novel, Blackman and the reader arrive in Colonial America. Blackman’s injuries have left him

unconscious. Just as his face turns “skyward toward the bright blue Vietnam sky,” Blackman finds himself “as in a dream...these men in their wigs” (2). But the dream is of the waking kind, leaving Blackman self-aware but disassociated, imploring himself to “*Wake up! Wake up!*” as he notices the “powder horn” at his side. As he’s mistaken for a slave, Blackman is told “the British’re [sic] coming and we need everyman.” Noticing a “line of blacks...armed with stakes, spears, and clubs” Blackman is struck by the “adequately armed” white mob. Nevertheless, he walks on and finds, among others, Peter Salem, a black soldier who would eventually fight in the Battle of Bunker Hill. Of course, given his historical knowledge, Blackman recognizes Salem and begins to make sense of his whereabouts: “this is 1775 and you’re on your way to Lexington because a cat named Paul Revere rode through these parts last night talkin [sic] about the British’re [sic] coming” (5). Blackman remarks, “the British are going to win at Lexington,” and his new acquaintances take him for a “voodoo priest.” Assuring them that “that’s what *all* the books say,” the men talk of the freedom they were told would be theirs if they fight. Blackman assures them “there’re gonna [sic] be damned few of you who gonna [sic] get this freedom they’re preachin [sic].” As the others begin to laugh, Blackman continues his prophecy: “Eighty-eight years and another hundred and eight years. You git [sic] in this dream with me and see what’s really goin [sic] down. Dumb-ass niggers. Never learn nothin [sic]” (5). Blackman’s dissociative relationship to time and history enable his prophecies and further the argument for the novel’s encyclopedic form. Despite the “common portrait of the encyclopedist as one who sifts and condenses present knowledge for present readers,” the “proleptic imagination” of the form demands writing “as if...from the future.” Under these authorial demands, encyclopedists are “not the contemporaries of their contemporaries” (197). *Captain Blackman* makes Blackman into precisely this kind of prophetic figure throughout the novel as he drifts in and out of

consciousness and travels through numerous periods and to various places to take part in the battles that constitute the history of American warfare.

In his introduction to the book, author Alexs Pate highlights the importance of the novel's historical project. As Pate sees it, *Blackman* is "Every-blackman. A soldier in each and every army America has sent forth—marching and killing—in defense of democracy" (i). While Pate's account is certainly plausible—and the novel does little to discredit it—I find the book's to be more interesting as a literary project and not primarily as a historical one. Certainly, these are not mutually exclusive projects and are in many ways complimentary. But Pate's reading, unsurprisingly by now, sticks to the conventional narrative that tells of the pursuit of recognition. Wherever blacks sought "respect, wholeness, and love," they found "racial bigotry and irrational fear." And the U.S. military was not only no exception to this, but became a particularly important site of struggle to prove their "valor and bravery" and cement "proof of [black] humanity and equality" (ii). Indeed, the story of blacks in the military certainly tells of a progressive attainment of incorporation and recognition. So that while one side of the story tells of "the racism within the army that tried to undermine and/or limit...success at every point of upward movement." Pate feels "lucky...that Abraham Blackman is always there to bear witness" to the history of not only the incorporation of black Americans into the military but also the collective recognition that followed with each war. There is little doubt that Williams's novel is a kind of history lesson about the initial involvement and eventual incorporation of blacks in U.S. military activities. Yet, while Pate takes this history to be a story of success, I want to suggest an alternative reading that focuses less on the successful incorporation of blacks and more on the use to which Williams puts war in order to render a picture of social totality. On this account, Pate's narrative remains, but the success it shows is much more grim than he renders it. Pate

erases the particularities of any single war in suggesting that black soldiers were joining “in the defense of democracy.” Ideological to its core, from this standpoint Pate necessarily misses the point of total war. For if total war is that order of war in which “risking one’s life, being exposed to total destruction” is the “principle” upon which obedience toward that order is placed, then black participation in military campaigns tells not of the defense of democracy but of an increasing totalization of war (Foucault 259). More specifically, *Captain Blackman* tells the story of total war as a story of race war from a global perspective. The novel tells of a race war different from that conventional figure of black versus white that haunts the U.S.’s collective imaginary. Indeed, Williams again proves in some way to be prophetic insofar as his novel figures total war as race war but does so “using a strong chiaroscuro, in order to highlight, differentiate, and define what, in reality, are only ambiguous shades of gray on gray” (Galli 137).

Throughout the novel, Williams offers scenes that are almost impossible to square with Pate’s reading. One of the clearest examples comes during Blackman’s transport back to the Indian Wars of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the forced removal of tribes from their ancestral lands. The scene tells of Blackman’s reluctance. Upon looking at a map that reads “Indian Territory,” Blackman notes it “was already occupied” and so did not seem to need the “beating murdering, sundering...noise and motion of thousands of machines and hundreds of thousands of people who were willing, *eager*, to claw its wealth from between the stones that nestled on it like miniature tombstones.” But with the Civil War’s end came western expansion spreading “like a small stream of water seeking the path of least resistance.” The settlers on the move “had to be protected, more or less, as they ventured unwashed, unschooled, and uncertain to places where they could finally carve up the land and insert into it their bruised and ragged roots” (69). Despite his reluctance, Blackman recognizes himself through his duty to enforce the law: “it was

the soldier's job to enforce and protect the rules of the time in which he lived—if there was nothing he could do about the rules” (70). But Blackman's rationalized compliance, to the native, looks like complacency with the ensuing genocide. While delivering mail to another post, Blackman is visited by two Comanches. By this point, Blackman had achieved a certain U.S. military consciousness, having been “made [to] believe [by] the officers, that you couldn't trust Indians. The only good Indian was a dead Indian. (And the only good nigger was a dead nigger.)” (75). It's unclear if the parenthetical is the text's or Blackman's, but given how the exchange goes, it seems the text is here commenting on the success of Blackman's ideological capitulation that leaves him blind to the analogy the text makes explicit between Indians and blacks. The natives go on to interrogate Blackman about his service. Telling Blackman stories of “your brothers often [coming] and [living] with us,” they ask him why he is now “here like the white soldiers killing us.” Blackman responds with a set of questions: “Does a brave dare defy his chief? Does he ride off to start his own war?” In a way similar to the scene of Blackman at the start of the Revolution, one of the natives offers his prophecy:

I see the end of the Indian people. I see them inside reservations that're [sic] bordered with wire and rope...herded into places by soldiers, black and white, carrying their rifles that shoot many bullets without loading; I see them pushed there by missionaries who talk of the love of Christ, but do the work of the Devil. White men who say they came to help us in the Agency are another instrument of our destruction. Those long lines of covered wagons filled with weary, frightened men and juiceless women and mewling babies who believe their god better than our's [sic] will fasten the gate on the reservation...Buffalo soldier Abraham, it's strange. Once we roamed this land from ocean to ocean, the old ones tell us. We'll be exterminated trying to hold on to a small part of it. You black people who have nothing, who let yourselves be dragged from far, far lands in chains, and who've believed that the white god was also your god, will survive us, multiply, because you *do not fight*, will not fight the white man. (76, emphasis original)

The native's speech is an indictment of the democratic principles Pate defends insofar as the native takes Blackman's individual instance of complacency to be representative of an entire

group. While perhaps the indictment is unfair, the diagnosis is not inasmuch as the native names extermination as the terminal condition of total war.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the native is able to name the total war that Pate's—and Blackman's to an extent—ideological commitments leave him incapable of seeing. Whereas the pursuit of recognition characteristic of Pate's assessment of black participation in U.S. military affairs leads to an ideological blindness to total war, the native compels Blackman toward misrecognition as a strategic position from which to fight ideological commitments that entail commitments to the kind of total war the native sees leading toward their extermination. Demonstrating the kind of proleptic imagination Saint-Amour associates with the encyclopedic project, the native goes on: "one day you'll tire of the white man killing you one by one, like stragglers on a buffalo herd, and you'll fight. That will come long after you've helped him to kill me. But it will come" (76). Such moments of clarity in the novel are far outnumbered by those telling of the trials and tribulations of black integration into the U.S. military. Indeed, the latter take up most of the novel's space; but I don't think they account for either its greatest insights or lasting significance.

If the novel's ambition is to tell the story of black experience and service in the U.S. military, *Captain Blackman* uses the mediating capabilities of literature to tell the story of total war from the standpoint of the perpetual interwar that is the lived experience of blacks in America both inside and outside of military experience. From this standpoint, the greatest contribution Williams's novel makes is to a literary tradition of total war in black American literature that plausibly begins with Wright, Baldwin, and Himes and continues through the works by Wideman and Williams. If Wideman's novel warns against the collusion between epic

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<sup>34</sup> For more on the relationship between total war and extermination—from a Cold War perspective—see E.P. Thompson's "Notes on Exterminism: Notes on the Last Stage of Civilization."

and national imaginaries, then Williams tells the encyclopedic story that fights against the collective exterminations of total war. The same gravitational pull toward total war is at work in both novels. I've tried in this chapter to offer evidence that however different the two novels may be they each mark the ongoing historical struggle between calls for and against recognition—each inciting and compelling its readers—and characters alike—to see the field of battle and take a side.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> On history and taking sides, see Fredric Jameson's *Valences of the Dialectic*, 546-612.



## The ‘War on the Commitment to War:’ On an American Literary Tradition of Total War<sup>36</sup>

In an essay published in the March 2002 issue of Harper’s Magazine, American author John Edgar Wideman confesses to his readers “I’m sorry. I’m an American of African descent, and I can’t applaud my president for doing unto foreign others what he’s inflicted on me and mine” (34). As leaders urge citizens to remain calm while the nation faces the immediate and present dangers of terror after the 9/11 attacks, Wideman balks, “it all sounds too familiar. I’ve heard the thunder, seen the flash of his terrible swift sword before.” Alongside “all my fellow countrymen and women,” even those who cannot recognize the bond, Wideman claims, “I am an heir to centuries of legal apartheid and must negotiate daily, with just about every step I take, the foul muck of unfulfilled promises, the apparent and not so apparent effects of racism that continue to plague America” (34). As a then nascent Global War on Terror was being sold as a “crusade against terror...a war of good against evil, forces of light versus forces of dark,” Wideman cannot help but notice how to “colored folks” such war cries “chillingly [echo] and [resuscitate] the Manichean dualism of racism” (35). If he characterizes the problem of racism as being one of dualism, the range of those affected during the “episodes in a long-standing vicious competition” for resources, profit, and power resist such binary distinctions. Naming “*terror* as the enemy,” according to Wideman, as the Bush administration did then and the Obama administration has revised to no significant effect, “reveals a crisis in America” indicating a society willing to risk “an exchange of principles for goods and services.” Fed on an “addictive mix of fantasy and propaganda,” American society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century thrives on “new versions of freedom” whose achievements have done more to subjugate the people of the world than to liberate them from the legacy of war Wideman describes (36, emphasis in original).

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<sup>36</sup> My title borrows the phrase in quotations from Stefano Harney’s and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*.

Indeed, for Wideman, there are two wars going on—one foreign and one domestic, one “phony” and one “real.” Turning his attention to the significance of language during times of war, Wideman argues that terrorist does nothing more than act as a “negation of the other,” seeking to exclude others from normative notions of human worth and dignity. Despite the shifting sands on which the meaning of the word stands, Wideman argues “terrorists are those who have no official standing, no gaze, no voice in the established order, those determined by all means possible to usurp power in order to be seen or heard” (35). While his assessment updates a counter tradition in which the terrorist is identified with the revolutionary, it is the wish to name epistemological uncertainty that signals Wideman’s greatest contribution to understanding the present use to which terror has been put. Because “terror manifests itself at this primal juncture between sleep and waking” and gives a name to the feelings of being “beyond the protections and consolations of society,” it marks those moments at which familiar ways of knowing and recognizing the world begin to unravel. Wideman casts a wish for a world in which it is impossible to see only the “hooded, barbaric, shadowy other” as bearing the responsibility for the universally “abiding principle of uncertainty governing the cosmos.” In the present age of “the great unraveling,”<sup>37</sup> Wideman’s call to “own terror” seems more important than ever before (38). To own terror would mean to replace a prevailing belief that terror resides somewhere and in someone else. Instead of taking 9/11 as America’s moment to refortify itself and extend past imperial ambitions into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Wideman urges the acknowledgement that terror is a feeling of uncertainty both universal and personal. It is a feeling that emerges from the insecurities of a world where the separation between them and us no longer holds and the “shadowy other” becomes the mirror into which we all must look (Wideman 38).

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<sup>37</sup> This is Whitehead’s phrase. See *Zone One*, 14.

While his scrutiny does a lot to unseat an abiding commitment to look at the world in perilously simplistic ways, Wideman's essay depends on its own dualistic sense of reality. The "phony" war in Afghanistan will be used to keep the American public "tuned in, uninformed, distracted, convinced a real war is taking place" (36). The real war to which Wideman refers is a domestic one—a fog of war hangs over the ongoing constitution of democracy in America. In describing his experience of looking onto the smoldering ruins of American freedom and democracy after 9/11, Wideman places himself in a lineage of Black American writers searching for a language to express existential conditions of terror that exceed both conventional notions and nationwide feelings of wartime.<sup>38</sup> The metaphors of war make expressing these conditions

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<sup>38</sup> Sixty years prior to Wideman's *Harper's* essay, another Black American writer addressed the U.S.'s propensity for war. In a speech to the Writers Congress in 1941, Richard Wright issued a "report" on the "state of feeling that exists among the Negro people in this country toward the current war" (8). Wright suggested that as a writer addressing other writers, some in the audience might find his choice of topic a bit of a surprise. It is his contention, however, that at present "war overshadows and dominates all other meanings and activities." He goes on to make the claim war "is hourly changing the look of reality...[and] creating a new and terrifying subject matter for writers." Of course war had long been the subject matter of literature. More recently, according to Wright, war had lost its glory and the trust of those who at one time maintained faith in the democratic objectives guiding wars abroad. While some may still wish to maintain such convictions, Wright suggests it is "Negro memory" that carries the power to disillusion those who want to preserve faith in war's ability to promote equality and support democracy. It is also in this collective memory's power to show how wars abroad distract from the war at home. Just as Wideman wants to claim the Afghan war is a phony one sold to the world using the rhetoric of "righteous retaliation" and "self-defense," Wright looks to unveil how the supposed pursuit of universal ideals leads to "protracted conflict whose outcome is not in sight" (35, 8). Whatever promises officials made during previous times of war, Wright insists "insofar as the Negro is concerned, it *is* an imperialist war, a war which continues and deepens discriminatory tactics" against oppressed and marginalized groups everywhere (9). As much as Wright's address wants to maintain that the problems he confronts are "domestic" and "concerned with the processes of democracy at home," from the present historical standpoint we are able to see the difficulty of maintaining any clear distinction between foreign and domestic conditions of democracy. While he notes periods of "progress and security" coincide with moments of nonintervention abroad, Wright is quick to point out the obverse implication that "during periods of imperialist war adventures and reaction, the Negroes have been the first to feel the oppressive restrictions." Perhaps the first, but not the only, as Wright warns, "a wave of terror impends, not

possible. More specifically, over the course of a few generations, Black American writers have used metaphors and fantasies of war to gain access to a condition of existence that exceeds any particular historical war but that nonetheless reflects those structures of feeling that accompany not only periods of wartime but also perhaps all of time.

Writings by Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, John Williams, John Edgar Wideman, Colson Whitehead, and others are arguably the greatest contributions to a literary history and tradition of wartime writing. Exceeding any one period of war, these authors, whose collective oeuvre spans the entire second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, use expanded notions of wartime to show how broad frames of war characteristic of the collective expressions of national wartime obscure often invisible and ongoing war-like conditions. In these cases, war provides authors with what Michel Foucault calls a “principle of intelligibility” to identify and describe collective living conditions not immediately recognizable as those of wartime. This essay argues the best approach for reading this archive is one that emphasizes the degree to which war drives these writers’ imaginary and understands that war becomes increasingly tied to matters of imagination throughout the period, as well as begins to exceed geographic and temporal frames unlike any prior wars. For these writers, war is a means toward constructing an adequate conceptual frame for race relations, helping them to think through institutionalized, invisible, and emergent forms of conflict and violence. While each author constructs different images of the relationship between race and war, all use writing to give form to increasingly abstract modes and methods of violence present in both domestic and foreign spaces. Varying degrees of cataclysms are invented, and various historical and fantastic wars are invoked and imagined, but the clearest picture to emerge from this group of writers comes from

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only against us, but against you” (9). Whatever reservoir of faith in democracy Wright drew from at the start of WWII has by today dried up.

looking at how actual forms of racialized violence come in contact with imagined forms of war to describe the “state of feeling”<sup>39</sup> associated with both. These authors fulfill one imperative of so-called total war insofar as they participate in the demand to imagine the very limits of war’s potential destruction. But even more, such writing aims at not only imagining the potential destruction of war but also depicting the experiences of wars that remain if not in the realm of imagination then at least are relegated to the category of fantasy.

In suggesting the figure of total war as a way to read a selection of Black American literature written during and since WWII, I take these works to illustrate how war provides a useful conceptual order to describe chaotic and estranging experiences associated with extreme violence. War provides economic and legal frames for life and death. But it also structures our sense of time and is often used to calibrate entire epochs (Dudziak 15). It names an abstraction and at the same time produces undeniable and complex consequences. The tension between “actual and imagined violence” in total war registers most intensely when facing imminent annihilation—or even believing in the imminence of destruction. On one hand, the actual business of waging war is a massive effort in preparation that defies adequate accounting, and the actual violence and destruction carried out is subject to varying points of accuracy. On the other hand, as a conceptual tool, total war is understood primarily an activity of the imagination. Even as it is identified with “an ideal that may never be realized in practice,” total war implies an eternal sense of potential (Mieszkowski 147). While it may never come to be, total war is nevertheless always underway.

The literary history of total war bears the marks of precisely this paradoxical condition in the experience of living through wars at once both imagined and real. That history is most

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<sup>39</sup> This phrase comes from Richard Wright’s speech “Not My People’s War.”

evident in the work of those Black American writers whose efforts to apply frames of war to describe racial violence cover individual as well as collective psychological effects. As a concept, total war provides more than a name for wars left imagined or unrealized. Instead, the literary history of total war in America shows how total war contributes continuity to discontinuous events and establishes a common ground on which to build a literature adequate to the myriad and mundane forms of racial violence that at every historical point exceed accepted notions of life during wartime. Yet, inasmuch as it is almost always associated with an interruption of “regular time” and the “idea that battle suspends time itself,” wartime offers an inadequate temporal frame for not only total war but also the seemingly ironclad grip war has had on global history in the 21<sup>st</sup> century thus far (Dudziak 3). The literature of total war is a formidable critical tool leveraged against an overextended and inadequate image of what constitutes not only wartime but also more crucially the experiences of life during wartime.

### **Total War’s Beginnings**

Since its theoretical beginnings in France,<sup>40</sup> the concept of total war has signaled the collapse of a tenable distinction between soldier and civilian life. As a figure of thought, total war accepts the disappearance of this difference. The battlefield spreads across the globe, in the process turning homes into military targets and civilian life into fair game. In thinking of a nation’s entire population and resources of wealth as enlisted in the war effort, total war aims to identify a disorienting condition in which the logic of war subsumes the most basic relationship individuals

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<sup>40</sup> For more on the conceptual history, see Paul K. Saint-Amour’s book length study *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*. I am unable in this chapter to develop the connections between what Saint-Amour describes as “pre-traumatic syndrome” and the literature of total war in the Black American tradition. As a “collective syndrome...instigated by expectation...by the eventuality of a future-conditional war or attack as much as the actual event of violence,” there are potentially illuminating intersections with what this chapter does with the works of Black American authors, and more specifically to do with Whitehead’s use of PASD.

have to collective social life. Under total war, all work sustains the campaign; anything else is enemy labor. Following from this “complete militarization of existence,” war captures the routines of everyday life (149). Insofar as this arrangement of total war extends past its initial historical context, it is impossible to comprehend not only when wartime begins and ends but also who, what, and where make up the field of battle. Finally, as it threatens to impose itself in total, war infiltrates not only collective sites of social life—places of employment and education, or city sidewalks, for example—but also the interior places that constitute the life of the mind, now under constant threat from outside, and thus at constant battle over what is in and what is out, what is known and unknown.

The extent to which the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries are a history of proliferating militarization across the globe is acutely evidenced in the literature of Black American writers. Novels by Chester Himes, John Williams, and Colson Whitehead, for example, all fulfill “the perceived need for all war machines to establish a vision of what the ultimate war might look like.” As the realities of increasingly destructive weapons intersect with the effects of a militarized society in which “the human subject does not necessarily enjoy a stable vantage point from which to contemplate internal or external events,” there emerges a new emphasis on the “imaginative logic” of war; from strategic and tactical standpoints, the virtues of virtual reality supplement, if not entirely supplant, any actual realization of destruction (Mieszkowski 158). The same could be said for war literature of the sort highlighted in this essay. No longer is the literature’s primary goal to depict war, but to imagine it; that is, to imagine it represented—as a thing always not yet here but always still immanent to the social field. Himes, Williams, and Whitehead all, in their different ways and as part of their different eras, use fantasies of total war to establish a critical

vantage point on the historical wars of their time. In doing so, their novels fight back against a historical trend toward one kind of totality with the weapons of another.

While Colson Whitehead's 2011 novel *Zone One* is crucial to my argument about the contemporary scene, the novel's place within a proposed tradition of total war literature is of equal importance. *Zone One* is a total war novel in both historical and conceptual terms. *Zone One*, written during the contemporary period, is also a novel about the contemporary period; more precisely, it is a war novel insofar as the U.S. has understood and fought it not only since 2001 but also arguably for the better part of an entire century. If *Zone One* is war literature, it is also not immediately recognizable as such. But as a "war stor[y] in the era of total war," *Zone One* is "distinguished by [its] allegorical indirection" (Mieszkowski 156). Arguably, too, the novel's roaming flesh-eating dead are given almost total referential freedom. The animated dead have become a genre in themselves, with identifiable and recognizable conventional characteristics that make them ideal specimens for a novel about total war; they are often both protagonists and antagonists in the same work. As several recent writings on the varied forms zombie subjectivity takes point out, direct reference is arguably least within the capabilities we think of zombies possessing. In the zombie, Whitehead finds the kind of multidirectional meaning on which novels of total war depend, and at the same time places a finger on the pulse of contemporary forms of collective anxiety and fantasy.

And yet, while I want to claim *Zone One* is an outstanding example of Jan Mieszkowski's generic description that war stories written after the modern conception of total war are marked by allegorical indirection, I also mean to carve a more direct route to *Zone One*'s importance for understanding war stories that have a dual function both to produce fantastic images of total war and to describe its real historical, although often invisible, conditions. Finally, with a specific and



more specifically Black American literary tradition in mind, *Zone One* appears as part of a project by Black writers going back to the 1940s to invent ways to describe empirical conditions of life in modern America. Giving the alienating and estranging experiences of American racism fictional form affords Black writers during this period a power over their experiences unrealizable in reality.

Whether imagining a world of tremendous destruction and social dissolution to illustrate the logic of total war like the one in Chester Himes's *Plan B*, or describing the transhistorical experiences of the eponymous protagonist of John Williams's *Captain Blackman* to exploit and undermine familiar narratives of social inclusion associated with life in the military and lend coherence to America's imperial project across the world, Black American writing is intensely attuned to the spectrum of war. From the same desire for the immediately devastating and catastrophic capabilities of nuclear weapons emerges *Plan B*'s absurd dream of "atomic bombs that could be used to destroy one black bastard with a gun without subjecting the entire community to danger. An atom bomb that could be carried in a policeman's pocket with his blackjack" and the undeniably prescient vision of "midget helicopters" used to bomb America's streets in the hunt for individuals fleeing underground (137-138, 186). Read within this lineage of writers who use experiments in form and genre to represent existing but incoherent structures of power, Whitehead's *Zone One* continues a tradition of total war writing that does not fit so easily into Mieszkowski's description. Reading *Zone One* alongside other works by Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, John A. Williams, Walter Mosley, and arguably others, shows the strength and limitation of reading literature allegorically during times of war. Mieszkowski's description highlights the central role imagination plays in erasing the difference between virtual and actual combat, and his book does an outstanding job showing how literature

manages to represent the “delicate balance between mutually assured survival and mutually assured destruction” that fuels visions of total war. But the strong connection Mieszkowski draws between total war and imagination does not capture the use to which Black American writers arguably put the concept. While allegorical indirection remains a distinct characteristic of total war literature, total war is not always a virtualized or imagined condition of war. The total war novel becomes a framework writers use to gain access to unsanctioned and ubiquitous forms of low intensity conflict waged against American populations that manage to burrow into the social and psychological spaces it can find. Within the Black American literary tradition in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries we find a set of novels that use the totalizing conditions of war to build a framework adequate for expressing empirical conditions external to conventional understandings of wartime. These works demonstrate that while forms of state sanctioned racial injustice disappear from official records, works of literature can make visible how unjust practices outlive unjust institutions. Literature becomes an effective means to give form to those experiences of both extreme and mundane violence that characterize not only Richard Wright’s narrative of midcentury urban migration in *12 Million Voices*, but also Himes’s *Montgomery, Alabama canebrakes*, Williams’s imperial military institution, as well as Whitehead’s litany at the end of the world in which we are reminded that if bureaucratic machinations of management could be reanimated, so too could racial prejudice and violence.

### **Not My People’s War; Or, My People At War**

For Richard Wright, war structures the contention between a promise of emergent forms of social relation and those who fight against revolution. If his work suggests he had permanent revolution on his mind, reading Wright today shows better the attempts he made to find a language adequate to a state of total war. The protagonist of the condition of total war for Wright

is the “Negro in America.” As a particular historical figure produced within a history of economic and institutional conditions of exclusion, the “Negro” is capable of “containing and telescoping the longings in the lives of a billion colored subject colonial people into a symbol.” A national figure as well as a “child of the culture that crushes him,” in the “Negro” Wright sees “a surviving remnant, perchance a saving remnant of a passion for freedom, a passion fanned by their national humiliation” (“Introduction” xxv). In his *Black Metropolis* “Introduction,” Wright reduces “American thought” in the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century to “trying to ‘tell what time it is’ and ‘making ourselves feel secure in an arid and senseless world.’” All mere “intellectual labors to allay the anxieties of modern man, adjurations to the white men of the West to accept uncertainty as a way of life, to live within the vivid, present moment and let the meaning of the moment suffice as a rationale for life and death,” philosophy is inadequate to Wright’s project to describe the consequences of modernity he sees coming to fruition in total war. As much as his work employs sociological methods of study, Wright’s favored mode of representation remains figurative and literary. Most directly, Wright uses irony and metaphor to construct a fictional frame appropriate to empirical forms of total war. As imagination is the structuring faculty of total war, fiction remains an important site at which to study the consequences a prevailing environment of violence and conflict have on civilian life.

While popular consensus tells us the world changed dramatically after 9/11, those changes look less dramatic when viewed through Black writers’ attempts to represent conditions of war in 20<sup>th</sup> century America that often challenged available mode of representing wartime experience. As I tried to argue in a previous chapter, the need to experiment emerges early in this tradition with Richard Wright’s photo book of 1941, *12 Million Black Voices*. While Wright is known as a writer of both fiction and nonfiction, *12 Million* is his most compelling attempt to

bring these two modes together. Important critical work has been done to place this book within Wright's oeuvre. Yet none of the work thus far pays adequate attention to the book's prevailing theme of war. Some critics draw attention to the text as an "act of protest" against institutional forms of racial discrimination while also "interrogat[ing] and incorporat[ing]" the failures of WWII era ideals of civic nationalism.<sup>41</sup> Others similarly focus on the "collective identity" constructed by the text's narrative "We" alongside the "photo-documentary" images throughout. Jeff Allred's brilliant reading of *12 Million* argues the text "partakes of and critiques the era's characteristic emphasis on collective identity" while also "seek[ing] out new ways of seeing and saying *we*" (551, emphasis original). Allred's essay turns to *12 Million* for a pedagogical model for how to compose collective narratives. I focus on Wright's incorporation and privileging of the black soldier as a liminal figure whose predicament illustrates the complexities of life during total wartime. Wright spotlights the Black American soldier, both real and imagined, in portraying the violence that undergirds American social life and national behavior abroad. Wright wishes to illustrate the complex relationship between American foreign wars and domestic economic and institutional violence and social inequalities. In the Black American soldier Wright finds an ironic position from which to launch his description and critique of American belligerence, both foreign and domestic.

Contrary to putting allegory to use to evade contact with the unknown, the literature of total war uses allegory as a way to redirect attention toward reality using the tools of redescription. This strategy proves important for other authors who try to work real historical conditions into forms to make structural conflict and violence visible as well as to take the ability of language to construct realities as the potent weapon it is. The moment at which *12 Million*

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<sup>41</sup> See Dan Shiffman's essay in *African American Review*.

*Black Voices* most directly addresses its own wartime reality, it runs back through history to locate a place of legibility—and finds it on the battlefields. Moreover, insofar as it conceives of history as a series of battles and sees everywhere the killing fields, Wright's *12 Million* should be read as an early attempt at using total war to construct a field of intelligibility from which to evaluate the violence that characterizes everyday social relations under total war. Additionally, Wright's text presents a larger shift away from thinking about war as having the capability to define clear epochal shifts and toward an understanding of war as a fantastic order of our shared sense of the structures undergirding—or undermining as it were—empirical reality.

A brief look at the work of two other authors will help to measure the significance of Wright's metaphors of war. The first is Michel Foucault's lectures published under the title *Society Must Be Defended*. While I cannot cover Foucault's extensive commentary on the historical emergence of the use of war as a "principle of intelligibility," it is enough to point to the centrality of what Foucault broadly calls "racism" in composing his conceptual picture of the logic total war follows. Whereas Foucault's image of racism remains tied to his sense of biopower, the way Wright and others think of racism's relationship to war does not require drawing in biology as much as it does rely on understanding how race reveals the work nationalist and capitalist discourses perform in establishing the conditions Wright describes. Insofar as "racism justifies the death-function in the economy of biopower," it helps to explain the risk this kind of war poses for "those whose lives it had, by definition, to protect, manage, and multiply" (Foucault 258). While it would take more time than I have here to explain the relevance of Foucault's following analysis what I am calling a literary tradition of total war in Black American fiction, it should suffice for the moment to point out that when Foucault says "the most murderous states are also, of necessity, the most racist" he is making a claim not

particular to the historical referent he gives in Nazi Germany but instead one that begins to explain the degree to which imagining the condition of war at the present moment remains indebted to the genealogy Foucault traces. This genealogy neither begins nor ends with WWII Germany but gives the best historical example of the extinctive drive behind the logic of total war in which victory is underwritten by the “exterminate[ion] or enslave[ment]” of an enemy force, a victory which nevertheless entails an equal risk for those on the defense (Foucault 260).

The link Foucault draws between extermination and enslavement invokes not only previous claims Rousseau makes about war and enslavement but also contemporary writing on the relationship between global capital and the threats its spread poses to all forms of social belonging—especially those whose bonds are believed to precede or exist somewhere beyond capital’s reach. To understand better Wright’s use of war I want to go briefly to Ronald Judy’s essay “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity.” A landmark essay in the critical study of Black popular culture, Judy’s essay begins with a parable about the incoherence of any standpoint that refuses to relinquish categories like “black folk” in an era of capital’s global expansion. Published in 1994, the essay sets its opening parable in 1991. As the story’s protagonist, the “hard-core OG,” would have it: “this [is] the era of the nigga... ‘It is the end of black folk, and the beginning of global niggadom’” (Judy 211). While the OG’s further point is to connect “black folk” to work and to differentiate the “nigga” from “folk” insofar as the “nigga is unemployed, null and void, walking around like... a nigga who understands that all possibility converts from capital, and capital does not derive from work” (Judy 212, ellipsis in original). The OG does not proclaim the extinction of black folk as much as he does their capitulation to become “modern subjects” and surrender to work—a work he looks at with derision:

‘There is a motto circulating these days: Real Black Folks Work. And where else can you find real black folk except in the killing fields, which is, by definition, the place for

nonproductive consumption—the end of work? The killing fields, then, are the place of non-work for complete consumption of needless workers. Real black folk are already dead, walking around consuming themselves in search of that which is no longer possible, that which defines them. Understand that the killing fields are everywhere; and whoever is born after us in the killing fields will belong to a higher history, the history of the nigga.’ (212)

I refer to Judy’s opening as a parable not only because it is prescient but also because it is allegorical. When the OG claims the “killing fields” are everywhere, he makes a claim about the world that exceeds any particular historical referent while also using a particular historical referent—the end of slavery and the subsequent forms of exploitation under capital faced by all workers—to make that broader claim. In much the same way Wright uses the “Negro” as a particular formation in the process of dispossession that can nonetheless “symbolize” the entire world’s dispossessed, Judy uses the “nigga” as a historically particular form arguably part of the same processes of dispossession to which Wright’s *12 Million* is a rejoinder. Judy’s fabled 1991 serves as a periodizing frame that arguably marks the beginning of America’s relationship to war in the contemporary period. The essay provides a further example of the refusal to accept any one particular historical referent when making historical claims about war in the literary and critical tradition of total war. While Judy may ultimately want to describe the “moral malaise engendered by the condition of capitalism’s hegemony over all aspects of life,” we need not rely on his essay to provide that picture—as a similar one can be found in a multitude of places today. Instead, Judy’s essay offers a glimpse into what it means to take the contemporary world as a killing field and to wonder, as the OG posits, what a “home invasion” would look like today. Or,

to put it a bit differently, would home invasion be a right moral choice to make under the current conditions of capital?<sup>42</sup>

To put a too-fine point on it, when Mark Spitz decides at the conclusion of *Zone One* to give up the fight and leap into the sea of walking dead descending on Manhattan, he affirms every suspicion that while the novel has used allegorical indirection to make it nearly impossible to pinpoint the dead's referent, it is in accepting referential excess that the novel achieves its clearest picture of who the dead may be meant to symbolize. The dead are the consequence of a condition of "global niggadom." Moreover, the novel's dead can be identified with present attempts by critics like Fred Moten and Robin D.G. Kelley to conceptualize life under the conditions of global capital, to see how "insurgent black social life" remains a threat to state power in 2016 as much as it was in 1969 when James Baldwin claimed that while growing up in New York you watch "literally—and this is not a figure of speech—the corpses of your brothers and your sisters pile up around you." Baldwin goes on to say that Black culture has never been "just the innocent expression of a primitive people, but extremely subtle and difficult, dangerous, and tragic expressions of what it felt like to be in chains." For Baldwin, this realization—much like the one Judy's OG urges his audience to come to—produces a will to power divorced from the merely affective passion behind believing any kind of life exists beyond the pale of power. The consequence of this realization as Baldwin lays it out remains cogent in 2016: "Then by one's presence, simply, by the attempt to walk from here to there, you've begun to frighten the white world. They have always known that you were not a mule...that no one wants to be a

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<sup>42</sup> I am intentionally sticking to Judy's deployment of morality in constructing his arguments while also being aware that more recent work done by legal scholar Jody Armour upsets any clearly decipherable position on morality or immorality. Indeed, challenging these categories show the promise of something called a home invasion. See Armour's 2015 "Nigga Theory" for an elaborated picture of how Armour uses "nigga" in a parallel way to how Judy uses it twenty years prior.



slave...that the black was not doing it out of love; he was doing it under the whip, the threat of the gun” (*Baldwin’s Nigger*). Baldwin’s urging achieved only its most recent manifestation on August 9, 2014 with the murder of 18 year-old Michael Brown in Missouri. This event made all too visible the state’s continued monopoly on violence and its sustained war against the dispossessed. As it spurred the kinds of social unrest that testify to the intersections between total and asymmetric warfare, turning U.S. cities and police forces into war zones and quasi-military forces, “impoverished communities across the country, did not have to endure tear gas or face down riot cops to know that they were already living in a war zone” (Kelley “Why We Won’t Wait”). The responses from many of today’s critics and writers prove still a need to place these events within a framework of total war parallel to the work done by Wright, Himes, Williams, and many others.<sup>43</sup>

### **Zone One and the Problem with Indirection**

In a pair of recent essays, literary critic Ramón Saldivar characterizes an entire generation of contemporary minority writers whose work relies on “historical fantasy” to “[think] about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction. Historical fantasy is a “new ‘imaginary’” writers use to navigate the shifting terrain “between race and social justice, race and identity, and indeed, race and history.” For Saldivar, these writers use fiction to “stage fantasy” on their way toward unveiling ideological fantasies; the notions of post-race with which these novels work are not those of the public. Contrary to the ideological belief that race in the era of neoliberalism no longer functions to exclude individuals from markets but can instead

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<sup>43</sup> Robin Kelley’s work has been especially incisive and forceful in pursuing the intersections between U.S. foreign wars and domestic policing, tracing historical precedents back to the era of slavery up to the present. The recent collection of essays *Policing the Planet* includes Kelley’s essay “Thug Nation: On State Violence and Disposability” among other essays that attempt to connect the dots between networks of power and state violence.

become a valuable commodity in the various forms diversification takes, these novels “show the *parabasis* of *constant* and *complete* rupture between the redemptive course of American history with its origins in conquest and the psychic facades that bar the way to memories of that traumatic past” (“Historical” 593). On Saldívar’s account, these novels use fantasy to “[compel] our attention to the gap or deficit between the ideals of redemptive liberal democratic national histories concerning inclusiveness, equality, justice, universal rights, freedom guaranteed by rule of law, and the deeds that have constituted nations and their histories as public collective fantasies” (“Historical” 594). In other words, these novels set out to challenge still the very ideals that writers like Wright, Baldwin, and Williams in the 1940s, 1960s, and 1970s, respectively, looked at with great suspicion.

What one is left wanting after reading his account, however, is an alternative social vision to the one Saldívar ascribes to the literature he describes. This vision in which fiction uses fantasy to stage future conditions of justice simply does not seem to apply to the literature of total war. What happens in his own account of post-race is Saldívar begins to confuse fantasies of post-race as they appear in the fictions he reads for a desire for a world without the injustice of race.

In the second essay, in which he uses Colson Whitehead as a case study in the post-racial imaginary in fiction, Saldívar largely replaces his earlier term “historical fantasy” with “speculative realism” in order to capture better the “inventions of new narrative modes in contemporary fiction” (“Postrace” 3). In explaining the term, and utilizing all of its present philosophical and political currency, Saldívar makes sweeping claims about an entire generation of contemporary writers who wish “to construct the possibility of a weird kind of realism that posits the speculative possibility that we may be able to imagine the conditions under which the

thing in itself and its phenomenal form might coincide” and turn toward this “speculative realism” to do so (“Postrace” 14). By the essay’s conclusion, Saldívar settles on allegory as one form of speculative realism’s appearance. What Saldívar writes of allegory here, however, can show the difference between how I suggest we think of the allegorical work contemporary literature performs. Put most simply, but perhaps not with immediate clarity, on the one hand, Saldívar understands allegory to work directionally. On the other hand, as this essay argues, allegory works by indirection. Saldívar appears committed to the possibility that the speculative pictures of the present these novels offer might be transposed to the real world, all along wishing that, read allegorically, speculation could serve as “a basis for recognizing and understanding the construction of the new political destinies we may witness taking shape among diasporic groups in the US today” (“Postrace” 14). But when Saldívar concludes with a question about representation, we must ask ourselves what answers remain untold on his account: “How are life experiences such as migration, diaspora, the history of economic, social, and legal injustice, constant surveillance, and access to safe living and working conditions in the Americas represented in fiction?” If we look seriously at *Zone One* not from the standpoint of the present but rather as part of a prehistory of the post-racial imaginary, Whitehead’s novel offers a fantasy contiguous with but significantly different from the one seen in, for example, *12 Million*. For what Wright saw as a shared struggle down the road toward prosperity, Whitehead sees, at the end of that road, nothing but a traffic jam of the inglorious walking dead. Saldívar is correct to say today “it is necessary to focus anew on racial symbolism” and produce better accounts of the transformations happening in how literary form and history relate to one another, but how to locate the direction in which to take this symbolism remains for me a question, and it seems location matters in how we look for the direction a novel wishes to take us (“Postrace” 15).

Regarding *Zone One*, I would say that while this imaginary appears several times throughout the novel, the most concrete and convicted post-racial picture it provides comes at the conclusion with Mark Spitz diving into the river of dead. The truly post-racial fantasy is not, for example, Gary's inability to recognize the prejudicial racial stereotype behind Mark Spitz's ironic name, nor is it in the distance at which the novel holds the reader from Spitz's race throughout. Instead, we should think of Whitehead's undead as being analogical figures to Judy's "nigga" with a similarly sinister—if not all that desirable—sense of home invasion. As it appears in *Zone One*, the "promise of a "postracial tomorrow"" is indelibly linked to yesterday's "myth of this melting-pot city" ("Postrace" 15, Whitehead 303). Whereas an "earlier regime of ethnic fiction" may have been concerned with "alienation and reification in the daily lived, and felt, experience of the racialized worker protagonist," my readings of Wright and Judy set out to establish the importance of alternative "states of feeling" like disorientation, vertigo, absurdity, and horror to the literary history of total war.

Insofar as the animated dead, in being "neither mortal nor conscious," are a "boundary figure," *Zone One*'s walking dead are allegorical figures for life under the conditions of total war. Lauro and Embry's "The Zombie Manifesto" is one of the most important texts in the recent "zombie renaissance."<sup>44</sup> And we can use it to think about the Saldívar's political fantasies in relationship to *Zone One* to produce a significantly different picture of post-race. As "The Zombie Manifesto" argues, "the zombie can be made to speak only as a somewhat ironic discursive model" insofar as it "cannot call for positive change, [but] calls only for the destruction of the reigning model" (91). From this standpoint, Whitehead's novel stands firmly on the side of destruction without the hope—no matter how ironic Saldívar hopes that hope to

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<sup>44</sup> This phrase is Mark McGurl's. See his "Zombie Renaissance."

be—that tomorrow promises new political formations. Unless, of course, we come to see the animated dead as quite literally the political formation Whitehead’s novel points toward for those who still hope tomorrow will be better than today.<sup>45</sup> If so, I would suggest the best analogical political formation we have for thinking about the fantasy of Whitehead’s novel requires universalizing gestures on the scale seen in work by both Judy and Fred Moten. After all, Judy’s “global niggadom” finally has nothing to do with blackness as a biological or racial category, but instead points to the structural necessity such forms of life have under capitalist exploitation—antebellum, postbellum, neoliberal, whatever. Inasmuch as Judy’s “nigga” figure could be said to inhabit a form of life, I argue the conditions to support such life are precisely those of total war. As Fred Moten describes it, “black life” aims at naming a condition of existence that “anybody can claim” and that “can claim anybody,” effectively universalizing a mode of subjectification too often taken to be a mode of identification. As much as critics like Saldivar use the fiction of authors like Whitehead “as a basis for recognizing and understanding the construction of the new political destinies we may witness taking shape among diasporic groups in the US today,” they risk misrecognizing those formations already present whose emergence remains *in potentia*. The work of critics like Judy and Moten offers a better way to approach universality without recourse to a politics of recognition, the differences of identity, or even “the heart’s fantastic aspirations for substantive justice, social, racial, poetic, or otherwise” (“Postrace” 15).

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<sup>45</sup> While the novel is clearly indebted to recent popular images of the zombie, a more complete historical picture of the zombie shows how Zone One might be thought about within the longer zombie tradition. Again, “The Zombie Manifesto” provides a good starting point; however, I must leave this reading for another time. It may enough to offer this quotation from the essay as a way of gesturing both backward and forward historically: “The zombie has thus transitioned from a representation of the laboring, enslaved colonial body, to a dual image of capitalist enslavement: the zombie now represents the new slave, the capitalist worker, but also the consumer, trapped within the ideological construct that assures the survival of the system.”

*Zone One* maintains a skeptical view of aspiration throughout. Although often implicitly, the narrative develops from this general critique. Near the novel's beginning, there is mention of where the hero was headed before the plague. "If you'd asked him about his plans at the time of the ruin, the answer would have come easily: lawyering." The novel's opening ode to youthful wonder puts the reader in both temporal frames. The Spitz family's visits to New York City prefigure the present. We are told the boy is smitten by the view of the monstrous machinery of America's largest metropolis provided by his uncle's apartment. While the passage's language is itself worth praising, it is what the narrative reveals about Spitz's bourgeois upbringing and social position that draws our attention here: "adrift on that gentle upper-middle-class current...far from the shoals of responsibility. It was time to stop drifting. Hence, law" (8). This is not the only time in the novel where law is used to signal broader frameworks of social management. The narrative tells of many collective forms of social organization before the collapse. From the reappearance of "the concept of the weekend" tied to the institution of a forty hour work week, to the central role communication technologies could play in "mending civilization," *Zone One* is a novel invested as much in cataloging collapse as it is in indexing the possibilities behind the plague's precipitation, without giving an unequivocal answer.

One early example of the various kinds of reanimation driving the narrative includes using the legal apparatus to reestablish order after the collapse. This law is not of the courts per se, but law in a most basic form of authoritative establishment of normative rules of order. Indeed, law can operate metonymically, and in *Zone One* it does exactly that, insofar as the constitution of law describes one of the holdovers from the previous order—and stands in the novel as an institution better off dead. As his team of sweepers moves through a law office, Spitz notices "for all that had transpired outside the building in the great unraveling, the pure industry

of this place still persisted. Insisting on itself” (14). While Spitz lingers over the office’s relics, his teammate Gary shoots through a locked door. This is behavior the provisional government is making efforts to eliminate during the interregnum to curtail “brutalizing, vandalizing” property with the prospect of future inhabitants. Gary’s excuse as he “vaporize[s]” and “dematerialize[s]” apparently empty walk-in freezers and bathroom stalls exploits the ever-present threat the sweepers face: ““Coulda been one of them in there trying to remember how to take a piss”” (15). It is less Gary’s belligerent and reckless use of force and more the provisional government’s attempts to curtail such behavior that gives insight into where the novel directs its allegorical indirection. “Buffalo printed up No-No Cards—laminated instruction squares that the sweepers were supposed to keep on their persons at all times. The broken window with the red circle and diagonal line across it was at the top of the deck” (15). While the method by which allegorical indirection achieves meaning is to be found in allegory’s capacity to speak otherwise, in these brief couple of pages the novel establishes its firmest ground on which to build allegorical meaning. Namely, the broken window image at the top of the deck of No-No cards is not only Whitehead’s nod to the constitutional function law serves in establishing social order, but also, and I argue more precisely, is an intentioned and calculated reference to broken window policing tactics that characterize law enforcement strategies in New York as well as now in many cities across the globe.<sup>46</sup> *Zone One*’s allegorical indirection realizes its most antithetically direct allegorical meaning when read from within the Black American tradition of total war literature. Reading Whitehead’s work without the frame of war threatens to erase what is truly significant about the novel’s contribution to a literary history of total war not yet told.

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<sup>46</sup> For a sense of the policies beginnings, see Kelling’s and Wilson’s “Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety.” For a sense of its present iterations and spread across the world see Mike LaSusa’s “Giuliani in Rio” and the already mentioned collection of essays *Policing the Planet*.

From the provisional government's standpoint, Gary's belligerence is no longer just unchecked destruction but is affiliated with the kinds of disorder that precipitated such law enforcement practices and earned them notoriety. Gary's excuse, built on the threat of uncertainty, looks less like an individual propensity for destruction and more like the trend in policing the world since the 1980s. Following Foucault's point that in a state of total war no subject can remain neutral, today police vision is distributed—however unequally—across populations in an effort to mislay doubts about who constitutes the enemy force. Often while attempting to clarify the boundaries between friend and foe, police force instead demonstrates its inclination to “openly [riot] upon the void” into which it cannot see. The “militaristic language of mastery and conquest” reveals a commitment to a “war on the incomprehensible” in which the “elimination of doubt” propels reckless belligerence (Bell 7). In these cases, it is never the doubt of an enemy presence—the enemy is always potentially everywhere and everyone—but more how to identify the present enemy. Violence emerges out of “terror and ignorance” and an inability to exhaust all the potentials of enemy force (Bell 7). Eliminating ambiguity tends toward identifying another's mere presence as constitutive of enemy force.

The broken window reappears later in *Zone One* when describing the practice of throwing bodies from windows rather than carrying them down flights of stairs. Despite complaints of it being “disrespectful,” “unhygienic,” and “frankly...unpatriotic,” the practice continues. Not until distributing the No-No card does the practice begin to change: “The broken windows put an end to the practice. Disposal could whine until doomsday, so to speak, about contamination risk, but Buffalo wanted the city habitable for the new tenants.” What was once excusable during the “marines' rampage through the zone” is not permissible under the “new era of reconstruction...The order came down: No more assaults on the windows of the fair city”



(75). And yet, it is still not until its conclusion that the novel offers its most direct and strongest indictment of an entire discourse of law and order used to justify policies and actions that constitute the state's monopoly on violence and undermine the notion that such actions are exceptional. These policies provide the groundwork on which the defense of "the drone" is laid and that turn "mobile black sociality" into "insurgent black life walking down the street" (Moten "Do Black Lives Matter?"). This creates a paradoxical condition in which the kind of community broken windows policing wants is one in which the fix requires seeing a community of broken windows as being in need of further breaking.

Despite being published just five years ago, *Zone One* has already become a touchstone for contemporary literature. It has received much critical attention and is often a crucial work used when making claims about the potentials for contemporary literature. To take the boldest claim first, Andrew Hoberek calls *Zone One* the "greatest American novel of the twenty-first century" not only because of its author's formalist acumen but also because of the novel's thematic content. The novel refuses to make too much of the difference between the plagued world and the previous one, telling us the end was always here, we just refused to read it for what it was. The novel is most remarkable, according to Hoberek, because Whitehead's prose is not only "meticulously crafted" and demonstrative of the author's "distinctive and recognizable" style but also because it successfully combines various levels of significance in tightly controlled sentences that cannot help but overflow immediate referential frames. Indeed, these sentences arguably compose a linguistic analog to the hyperbolic significance of the zombie figure. Hoberek finds Whitehead's sentences pleasing because they do not do one thing but many. This plurality of action in the sentences maps onto the novel as a whole. Hoberek's review, in the end, explores how Whitehead's novel criticizes from various angles the tendency toward

“deindividualization” by not only using the zombie as emblematic of the kinds of threats posed to individualization by political, economic, and social processes of homogenization, but also by parodying modernism’s penchant for trauma narratives as a device used to ward off threats against the uniqueness of individuality. In the fictional world of the novel, trauma sheds itself of any power of particularization. “Everyone suffered from PASD” (Whitehead 67). Narrative strategies once used to save individuals from being lumped into a hording mass become what lumps them into a hording mass. Whenever a person is believed to have a unique trait or characteristic way of acting in the new world it is rationalized as being symptomatic of her individualized “brand of PASD” (175).

The best example of this attempt to categorize individuals comes toward the end of the novel after one of the undead bites the minor but important character, Gary. Here, the narrative includes the conclusion to Mark Spitz’s earlier story about a fellow worker named Quiet Storm. The story and its central character are both important for many of the claims made by critics about the novel’s remarkability. Spitz is struck by Quiet Storm’s individual approach to clearing the roads of abandoned cars. While working to clear streets to open routes into the city, Spitz observes Quiet Storm being “quite particular” about the way in which she wanted to park the cars. “She’d order them parked perpendicular, or perhaps at a forty-five degree angle, even though the shoulder had plenty of room for bumper-to-bumper.” Spitz’s attempts to conceptualize Quiet Storm’s intentions fallback on effective strategies used to manage the roving dead: “this latter placement would, like a breaker, impede the swell of dead attracted to the noise a convoy.” Yet Quiet Storm’s desire for order appears to exceed such rationalizing logic when sometimes she “even tow[ed] a car for miles to fulfill her conception.” Finally, Spitz figures her one word explanation, “Orders,” could be attributed to either “pointless military

micromanagement or her brand of PASD,” these being two of the rationalizing logics Spitz has ready at hand (Whitehead 175).

The narrative reveals, however, that there are other possibilities behind Quiet Storm’s choices. “It wasn’t until later that [Spitz] saw the truth of it” (175). Whatever “truth” these forms offer, however, is unrecognizable not only to Spitz but also anyone else who looks upon them from within the Zone’s limits. To recognize the order, one needs to be elevated above it. This elevation is taken to mean both literally and figuratively. It is not until Mark Spitz is airlifted into the Zone by helicopter that he sees “what she had carved into the interstate.” While the “other survivors could only perceive the wasteland on its edge, the Quiet Storm was in the sky, inventing her alphabet” composing “a sequence of black-and-white luxury sedans” where “grammar lurked in the numbers and colors, the meaning encoded in the spaces between the vehicular syllables” (289). Finally, this “was one volley of energy, uncontained by the routes carved out by settlers two hundred years before, or reified by urban planners steering the populace toward the developers’ shopping centers” (289). These sequences provide a model for alternative visions applicable to both pre- and post-plague worlds.

While telling the story, Spitz is met by his colleagues’ confusions: “What’s that supposed to mean?” He directs them to consider Quiet Storm’s intended addressee. While the sequences may resemble “the fletching of an arrow,” the target was concealed. Perhaps an arrow, then, but “aimed at—what? “Tomorrow? What readers?” Spitz goes on: ““We don’t know how to read it yet. All we can do right now is pay witness.”” The narrative voice lends its own angle: “She wrote her way into the future. Buffalo huffed over its machinations and narratives of replenishment, and the wretched phenies stabbed their bloody knees and elbows into the sand as they slunk toward their mirages” while Quiet Storm “carved [her] own pawns and rooks out of

the weak clay and deployed them across the board, engaged in their own strategic reconstructions” (290). While efforts by the provisional government and the American Phoenix brand are suspect throughout the novel because their plans aim to restore the old world rather than constitute a radically new one, by novel’s end these visions for the future are finally put to rest. Spitz knows not whether “the world was doomed or saved, but whatever the next thing was, it would not look like what came before” (320).

Quiet Storm’s compositions have provided critics the warrant to claim *Zone One* to be a narrative about the promise of the unknown and the possibility of other worlds. Indeed, it is Quiet Storm’s work that grounds Kate Marshall’s recent essay praising *Zone One* as a quintessential novel of the new era of the Anthropocene. In her essay, Marshall argues Quiet Storm’s “highway-as-manuscript envisions a new alphabet, grammar, and significantly, readership of the Anthropocene” (535). In its “experiments with non-human points of view,” Marshall locates contemporary literature’s engagement with the “reflexively human time of the Anthropocene” (529). Where she argues *Zone One*’s “alternative form of historical periodization...[is] tied to geology and geological time,” and looks to Quiet Storm’s “message for gods and aliens inscribed on the geological layer of the Anthropocene” as those requiring “alien” or “nonhuman” readers, Marshall moves in the wrong direction. From the standpoint of this essay, Marshall’s desire to read for the nonhuman in *Zone One* and to identify a similar desire in both Quiet Storm and Spitz, recasts an all-too-familiar mistake in which a human is taken for a nonhuman, a subject is taken for an object. Read from the literary historical standpoint of this essay, Quiet Storm does not rely on a nonhuman audience in the way Marshall or Spitz would suggest. Instead, Quiet Storm’s ambitions are more humble—and, perhaps, more human. Imagine Quiet Storm not as someone working to move disabled cars but bodies, her

messages not for anyone else but *Zone One*'s own readers. From this standpoint, an admittedly allegorically indirect one, *Zone One* wants its readers to imagine Quiet Storm to be someone who plays music for an unknown audience—an audience who is already dancing but who needs still to build their dance floor or is just too afraid of the heat from the spotlight.<sup>47</sup> Quiet Storm's is not a language, after all, but only its potential—a potential the novel renders by using the parlance of policing against itself: "Best to let broken glass be broken glass, let it splinter into smaller pieces and dust and scatter. Let the cracks between things widen until they are no longer cracks but the new places for things" (321). This is an imperative that follows reading the literature of total war from a human perspective.

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<sup>47</sup> The reference here is to the popular Black radio format that came to be known as Quiet Storm. This reading of the novel's character has been notably absent from all of the reviews and critical assessments of the novel thus far precisely because, in part, of the refusal to read Whitehead as an author or *Zone One* as a novel as important contributors to Black American literary history. For an informative history of Quiet Storm programming, see Mark Anthony Neal's "Postindustrial Soul."

### **Coda: Sights and Sites: Machines Across Mediums**

In her recent book *The Miracle of Analogy*, which is the first book in a two part history of photography, Kaja Silverman argues that photography is “the world’s primary way of revealing itself to us,” of assuring us of both its existence as well as its externality to us (10). Photography shows the fundamental structure of the world to be analogical, by which Silverman means the “authorless and untranscendable similarities...that give everything the same ontological weight” (11). While this equal weighing of objects is a positive effect of photography’s analogical relation to the world, as well as the work it does of revealing this fundamental character of relations in the world, that same equal weighing threatens to turn to an extreme of either sameness or difference. The work of disclosure, however, is never complete because the photograph is always caught up in the capture of presence—that is, in presenting something absent as present. It is because of this sense, then, that Silverman titles her book after a passage from Proust in which the “miracle of analogy” is described as a process in which object/subject, past/present, world/psyche, and non-human/human binaries are eclipsed and each term runs over its borders into the other’s, making of these relations the possibility of new ones. But what should we make of those relations? What happens when, for instance, relationality appears as an extreme form of undifferentiation? That is, what kind of picture do we get when analogical relation makes apparent neither sameness, otherness, nor similarity but instead the indifference that comes with indistinguishability?

Silverman turns to the photographer Jeff Wall to approach this question. In particular, Silverman takes Wall’s oppositional conceptualization between what he calls liquid and optical intelligence to say something about the camera’s dual function—of making possible both the experience and feeling of being viewed as well as the feeling and experience of viewing. For the

sake of simplicity these two notions roughly map onto two different ways of understanding relations in the world—the first, as they would be viewed and shown as fluid and under constant transformation; the second, as they would be viewed and shown as plotted and static. Optical intelligence is tagged as a particularly “human” intelligence, used pejoratively, to talk about “‘the projectile or ballistic nature of human vision...augmented and intensified’ by glass and machinery” that takes on a distinctly instrumental and militaristic meaning when opposed to liquid intelligence as that which is “photographic,” and so still chemical and mechanical, but nevertheless attains a standpoint capable of “experiment[ing] on the experimenters.” As both Wall and Silverman have it, “the liquid studies us” by “returning” to the present “in perfect detail,” in the form of photographic images, “memories...in which people from the past” must be “related to again, perhaps in a new way” (Wall 218). But while Wall and Silverman want to make something of photography here, I want to suggest that both writers are actually describing a conversation art has been having with itself for some time now, but has come into clearer focus in the contemporary as that conversation has both proliferated and become more contentious.

What Wall suggests and Silverman argues is that the mechanisms of photography demonstrate concretely an ideal of the work of art as possessing a capability of being utterly self-conscious. What Wall describes as the capability liquid intelligence has to “experiment on the experimenter” turns on a nonhuman kind of intelligence—present in what Wall calls the “symbolic meaning of natural forms” captured in images of, for example, turbulence patterns—aware of its place in moving relations; what Wall describes as the “cool manner” in which optical intelligence approaches the “fragile phenomena” it captures demonstrates the way in which machinery continues to provide a way to talk about the “nonhuman” kind of the work art tries to do. Ideally, for Wall, liquid intelligence produces not just clear photographs but those that

pass for “hallucinations;” that is, drawing on etymology, the photographic image returns to the “cool” mind a picture of itself as “wandering mind” (Wall 218). This wandering, however, describes not the division between the two intelligences but rather their analogical relation to one another, their tendency to spill over into one another; art becomes, then, a place where this tension is most evident and becomes an object of great attention.

With the problem set up, I want to turn to a recent memoir written by poet Brian Turner. Former U.S. Army member, well known for his poetry collection *Here, Bullet*, Turner’s memoir begins in a dream. “I am a drone aircraft plying the darkness above my body,” the narrator proclaims, as he finds security in the sky from “the shells of Bubrovnik and Brcko and Mosul...projectiles filled with poems and death and love” (ix). The narrative uses the drone as a way to figure occupying a standpoint above oneself and the world, effectively and simultaneously erasing and maintaining perspective by turning oneself into the object of one’s own observations. The drone here functions as a literary device to represent the desire and ambition to occupy both the machine and human without exactly privileging one over the other, but instead using both to facilitate wandering the hallucinatory no-man’s land between them by being both at once. As Turner’s dream sequence unfolds, the drone closes large geographical distances and brings far-flung war-torn countries together as various historical periods collapse into various battlefields and several generations of soldiers. The narrator describes the work of his nightly ritual as “gathering circuit by circuit the necessary intelligence.” But what is he interested in making intelligible? The narrative turns around common questions concerning the status of responsibility in a world of automation—taking the drone to be the best disembodied embodiment of these issues in the present. Turner’s drone serves as a way not to judge actions, however, but to account for them, to make action intelligible when that which acts is a machine.



His narrative turns tired concerns about the irresponsibility of unintentional machines into a response to the way in which humans use machines to shape the world and how those machines afford us different ways to reshape the world as well. Put simply, Turner's use of the drone dramatizes the tension between machines and humans and exploits this tension to show how art remains a technology for thinking through this tension without resorting to a moralizing defense of the human and instead looking to embody more fully the kind of "machinery" artistic practice imagines itself to be—namely, a technology that allows the experimenter to be both—experiment and experimenter—at the same time.

Whereas Turner's memoir begins with the narrator as a drone, at its conclusion the point of view shifts to a kind of posthumous narration in which "Sgt. Turner is dead," with death making possible a standpoint similar to that of the drone, where the ambling dead sergeant "considers the world as it carries on" (199). In this sequence, however, the dead sergeant is not the drone itself but rather its operator "in a cockpit in a portable connex...with a bank of monitors arrayed before him, [with] streams of remote data computed and digitized." This time "radio traffic" augments the drone's vision bringing together "in-country language" a "language from another time" with "language from back in the world," alluding to the domestic space of the target house on the ground. The target of the dead Sgt. Turner's drone turns out to be Brian Turner's house in Orlando, FL. As easy as it would be to say wartime Brian Turner is the cool machine and peacetime Brian Turner the liquid human, such a reading would risk drawing conclusions too hastily. Instead, in order to understand the way in which Turner's memoir approaches the work necessary to the work of art, it is important to maintain not only the dynamic relation between the two positions, or perhaps even their opposition, but also the fundamental ambiguity between the two and even the complicity with which both approaches the

other. Turner's narrative use of the drone shows how it is a mistake to think that optical and liquid intelligence are oppositional to one another; and instead makes clear how they are indeed analogical, in their similar desire to mediate the relationship between mechanization and human thought about and the possibilities of acting in the world.

Wall calls the "mechanics and optics" of photography the "dry" part, while water makes up the "wet" part and points at photography's "prehistory" in what Wall calls "very ancient production processes of washing, bleaching, and dissolving" in which nature's fluidity is captured and controlled and the incalculable can be calculated and contained. As much as the camera wants to calculate the incalculable by transforming the fluidity of the world into intelligible forms, the threat remains that water will "spill over the spaces and moments mapped out for it...and ruin the picture" (218). This threat of ruin, as Wall identifies it, however, looks more like the promise of art in Turner's literary imagination; or, the conceptual work of Robert Smithson's nonsites; or the cinematic work of Harun Farocki—particularly in works collected for the exhibition *War At A Distance*, such as *Serious Games and Eye/Machine*. Indeed, as artist Trevor Paglen has it, Farocki is one of the first artists to understand the moment when "the machines were starting to see for themselves," which led to a new "visual regime" in which machines begin not only to "read" the world for themselves but also gain a capacity to act in the world, to "'do' things in the world." Farocki's avant-garde status emerges alongside his desire to "learn how to see like a machine." Farocki himself uses the term "operational image" to describe types of images "made by machines for other machines." Paglen argues that in the decade since Farocki made *Eye/Machine*, the "operations" of "operational images" have become increasingly invisible as machine reading made human mediation and interpretation superfluous. Paglen's arguments are echoed by critic David Golumbia asserts that political action depends on a

capability of seeing the process of computation. Without such capabilities, human reading practices are potentially rendered unnecessary while increased machine capabilities allow for greater communication between individual machines at the same time that they shut out opportunities for human intervention. Whereas Golumbia focuses on finance and law to make his claims, I want to press the issue using art and literature, and more particularly writing, as the way to mediate the problem of human being, seeing, and reading in a world of such astonishing technological mediation.

Rather than conclude with a closer look at one of the previous examples, I will focus on the work of contemporary British author Tom McCarthy to give an example of how art looks at those spilled-over edges that threaten to send the desire for form back into the world's formlessness and finds there the promise of form's own liquidity. In a couple of recent articles, McCarthy responds to the proliferation of data and machines that read one another's data and information by proclaiming the "death of writing" only to follow with the suggestion that writing is now happening always and everywhere; that in the age of data saturation and proliferating surveillance technologies that make up the strange network of the "internet of things," the writer is "redundant." In a parody of Mallarmé's ideal of the book-to-come that would contain everything, we are living within the "soft walls" of an "expanded, omnipresent, omniscient 'book' or data tomb." Where McCarthy identifies the writer's past responsibilities as "working through the fragmentations of old orders of experience and representation, and coming up with radical new forms to chart and manage new, emergent ones," he now understands these to be taking place in such "cultural avant-garde" places as corporations who "narrate" our world today better than any writer could; it is "corporations" who not only study "symbol networks at their most dynamic and incisive" but also "generate, work through, and transform" those networks.

Just as machines are capable of intervening in the world rather than merely observing it, corporations do not merely cater to consumer preference but rather are just as capable of shaping those preferences as observing them.

It should be noted that McCarthy's recent work obsesses over the figure of the anthropologist—only to have the anthropologist stand in for the writer *tout court*. In romanticizing Levi-Strauss, McCarthy depends on a vision of the deeply embedded reporter who, nevertheless, must remain apart from those on whom he reports—someone who has recourse to that place that affords him a path toward interpreting what he's written; that is, one who has a way out, one who tries to claim to be both “from here” as well as somewhere else. Lest we think the corporation could or even has replaced the writer, however, McCarthy offers a more benign answer: “Who, nowadays, maps our tribe's kinship structures, our systems of exchange, the webs of value and belief that bind us all together? Software does... a neutral and indifferent binary system” that performs a kind of “automatic reading”<sup>48</sup> of everything—which means every possible thing—that it writes in the eternally-expanding “Great Report.”

So where does this leave McCarthy? Or, more specifically, where does this leave McCarthy, the novelist? While I've been quoting from essays published in 2015 around the same time as McCarthy's 2015 novel *Satin Island*—in a well laid publishing plan—I will close with what I find to be McCarthy's most brilliant and complete work of fiction, the 2010 novel *C*. The

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<sup>48</sup> In her essay “Close Reading and Thin Description,” Heather Love pursues some of the themes present throughout this brief chapter. In one particular passage, Love describes thin description as a method in which an observer “[takes] up the position of the device; by turning oneself into a camera, one could—at least ideally—pay equal attention to every aspect of a scene that is available to the senses and record it faithfully.” Without pursuing them in any detail here, there would seem to be interesting methodological questions for literary critics and others to consider in the notion of becoming a device. These problems would appear to be central to understanding both McCarthy's and Turner's texts.

scene describes the main character's (Serge is his name) first combat flight mission as part of the Royal Flying Corps. With ground targets in sight, Serge "feels an almost sacred tingling, as though he himself had become godlike, elevated by machinery and signal code to a higher post within the overall structure of things, a vantage point from which the vectors and control lines linking earth and heaven, the hermetic language of the invocations, its very lettering and script, have become visible, tangible even, all concentrated at a spot just underneath the index finger of his right hand which is tapping out, right now, the sequence C3E MX12 G..." As Serge communicates enemy coordinates to ground artillery, "whole swathes of space become animated" as "trajectories of plans and orders metamorphose into steel and cordite, speed and noise. Everything seems connected...like limbs reacting to impulses sent from elsewhere in the body." Idea becomes material, plan becomes action, book becomes life, and Serge feels himself as being a part of war's larger structures while "black chrysanthemums"—a euphemism of course for explosions and their human shrapnel—bloom below (141-143).

McCarthy's description should remind us of Farocki; but this time it's Farocki's writing, not the films, offering clarity. In an essay titled "Reality Must Begin," Farocki takes up the architectural and military histories of photography in order to make the claim that the "photographic image as a measuring device" is a way not of eliminating the incalculable nor finally subjecting everything to the logic of calculation, but rather as a way of registering the "impressions of the actual at a distance." Interested in the dual function of the photographic as a technology with both preservative and destructive capabilities, Farocki demonstrates a fundamental ambivalence of the analogical. Photography is not only complicit with a desire both to form and deform the world, but also provides a technology whose capabilities afford the formation and deformation of perspective.

To clarify what I mean, let us return once more to McCarthy. As he continues the mission, Serge's plane flies beside a howitzer shell, described as "placid," "companionable," and a "harmless block of matter;" Before the shell continues on, Serge has what we might call a "miraculous experience of analogy" where Serge's perspective from the air, quoting Silverman here, is "ontologically democratizing" in such a way that, again Silverman here, "everything matters." Indeed, everything matters here because everything is matter—and just that. So the narrative goes: "it seems to Serge that the shell and the plane are interchangeable—and that the shell and *he* are interchangeable...within the reaches of this space become pure geometry, the shell's a pencil drawing a perfect arc across a sheet of graph paper; he's the clamp that holds the pencil to the compass, moving as one with the lead; he *is* the lead, smearing across the paper's surface to become geometry himself." Upon landing, an officer asks for Serge's flight narrative—a war relic from the days before cameras and automated data collection—chiding him for always having to be reminded of it. Characteristically, Serge's response points at the superfluity of narrative after having had such a miraculous experience of oneness: "We went up; we saw stuff; it was good" (143).

The sparseness of Serge's narrative sounds like defiance, but is really a testament to the problem I've been dealing with throughout: What of perspective? What of a narrative of indistinction? Let me close with another postwar scene—this time Serge after WWI. Struck by the many ways in which the world is transformed by his wartime experiences, leaving everything seemingly a part of some great machine, Serge enrolls at London's prestigious Architectural Association, hoping to achieve again the sense he had in flight of being "a fixed point in a world of motion." Called into the Provost's office, Serge is asked for drawings to show his progress. All of the drawings, however, are in plan view. Asked what these are of, Serge responds, "plans

for...memorials,” landing on the last term because it “seems most current;” and indeed it is. The school is holding a war memorial design contest; pressed by the Provost, Serge explains, “I find perspective hard, sir” (213-214). Serge’s ideal, then, is a kind of flat aesthetics, the ideal of which he finds on a stele in a tomb while in Alexandria, Egypt on a mission to set up communication technologies for the British empire. The egalitarian sense the stele provides—where all kinds of life coexist on the flattened surface—looks to make everything matter equally, but can also be made to show that everything, equally, is merely matter. In Serge’s words, the stele is an ode telling of “death around the world” in a form that flattens all life, making every one thing analogical to another. In his final fevered dream just before his death, Serge “feels himself rushing backwards, through a black and endless void...merging with the void: seared, shot through, carbonisé; he’s become the sea of ink...like time itself, he’s flattening, turning into carbon paper...the surface through which things repeat, CC themselves, but that will itself always remain black, and blank” (308). Self and world, part and whole, life and death, preservation and destruction, are written on a single flat page; and Serge—as carbonized human machine—finds, much like Sergeant Turner surveying his own home, “there is nothing strange in this at all” (201).

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<b>University of Pittsburgh</b> English Literature May 2006	<b>M.A.</b>
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**Dissertation:** Sites Of Recognition: Literature and Social Form After WWII (Committee: Nicholas Brown [director], Walter Benn Michaels, Rachel Havrelock, and Anna Kornbluh)

**Specializations:** 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries American Literature; African-American Literature; Multiethnic American Literature; World Literature; Literary Criticism; Critical Theory; Modernism; Postmodernism; Narrative Theory; History of Mimesis; Visual Cultures

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### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

**University of Illinois at Chicago:**

Adjunct Instructor, University of Illinois at Chicago, Graduate College, AY 2016-2017  
Research Assistant, University of Illinois at Chicago, Institute for the Humanities, AY 2016-2017  
Teaching Assistant, Department of English, Fall 2008-Present

Graduate Courses:

GC 512: Written Communication and Presentation Skills (Fall 2016, Spring 2017)

Undergraduate Courses:

ENGL 160 Academic Writing I (Fall 2008, Fall 2012, Fall 2015)  
ENGL 161 Academic Writing II: Writing After Globalization (Spring 2009, Fall 2010, Fall 2011, Fall 2013)  
ENGL 101 Understanding Literature (Fall 2013)  
ENGL 105 English and American Fiction (Fall 2009, Spring 2010, Fall 2010, Spring 2011, Fall 2011, Spring 2013, Summer 2014, Spring 2016)  
ENGL 109 American Literature and Culture (Spring 2015)  
ENGL 113 Multiethnic Literature in the United States (Summer 2011, Fall 2012, Fall 2014)  
ENGL 241 English Literature Beginnings-1660 (Spring 2014)

**Oakland Catholic High School, Pittsburgh, PA**  
English Teacher 9-12, August 2006-May 2008

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**AWARDS AND HONORS**

ACLA Horst Frenz Prize nomination for best graduate student paper, 2014

Travel Awards provided by Graduate Student Council and Graduate College, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2012, 2013, 2014.

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**PUBLICATIONS**

"The Road Is Mapped: Cormac McCarthy's Modernist Irony" *Mediations* 28.1 (Fall 2014)

"The 'War On the Commitment to War:' On an American Literary Tradition of Total War" (Revised and Resubmitted)

"The Cathedral of Contemporary Art" (Submitted for Initial Review)

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**INVITED PRESENTATIONS**

"Site Specificity: Art History Between Modernism and Contemporary" Seminar Participant: Site-Specificity Without Borders, The Association For The Study Of The Arts Of The Present, ASAP/7 Clemson University, September, 2015

"From Recognition to Misrecognition" School of Literatures, Cultural Studies, and Linguistics Summer Seminar: Languages of Conflict: Interventions in the Contemporary Humanities, University of Illinois at Chicago, May, 2015

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**PANELS AND CONFERENCES ORGANIZED**

Organizer and Moderator, A Conversation with Fred Moten, Institute for the Humanities, University of Illinois at Chicago, May 4, 2016

Organizer and Chair, Co-Organizer Mathias Nilges, *Capital and Aesthetic Forms: Mediating Totality Today* American Comparative Literature Association, New York, 2014

Co-Organizer, Marxist Literary Group, Institute On Culture And Society, University of Illinois at Chicago, June 2011

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**CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

"The Novel Approaching Totality" American Comparative Literature Association, Harvard University, March 2016

"Sites and Sights: Machines Across Mediums" The Association For The Study Of Arts Of The Present, ASAP/7 Clemson University, September 2015

"Mediating Medium: Theory in the Contemporary Novel" American Comparative Literature Association, Seattle, March 2015

“Sites/Sights and Specificity” Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, February 2015

“Of Essays And Fragments, Or Seeds And Ruins: Totality, etc.” American Comparative Literature Association, New York University, March 2014

“‘Am I Not I?’ Cultural Commodities Speaking Ironically” Midwest Modern Language Association, Milwaukee, November 2013

“Of Guns And Bunkers: Negative Social Spaces In *The Road*” The Association For The Study Of Arts Of The Present ASAP/5, Wayne State University, October 2013

“‘Am I Not I?’ Cultural Commodities Speaking Ironically” Marxist Literary Group Institute On Culture And Society, Ohio State University, June 2013

“Geographic, Formal, Imaginative, and Temporal Spaces in Cormac McCarthy’s Novels” American Comparative Literature Association, Toronto, April 2013

“‘Is Achilles Possible With Shot And Lead?’ Or, Against Monumental History” Marxist Literary Group Institute On Culture And Society, Vancouver, 2012

“Appearance And Phantasm: Reconfiguring Misrecognition” Marxist Literary Group Institute On Culture And Society, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2011

“Disciplined To Control: The Human Of Capital” Rethinking Marxism, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 2009

“Americanism And Ethopoietics: Gramsci, Foucault, And The Historical Self” Rethinking Marxism, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 2006

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