

**Views from Exile:  
Creating Political Possibility from Impasse**

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## **Dedication**

For Alice, Matilda, & Kathleen—my home.

## Abstract

In this dissertation I develop a framework of exile to examine how novel forms of individual and collective action centered on return, repair, and liberation can counter political problems of impasse. I argue that the exile has three fundamental pathways of action: accept one's liminal state and resign oneself to the impositions of the powerful, seek refuge in continued flight or evasion, or seek to impress change on the system in which one is caught. In following this final option, the exile seeks to transform the structural conditions that produced their exilic condition. In this dissertation I argue that three thinkers, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, and Aimé Césaire, offer important insights into building transformation amidst such moments of impasse. I argue that each thinker enlarges the view onto the different impasses and roadblocks that stunt political action from the margins. Baldwin focuses on how the individual is constrained by the force of racial, sexual, and cultural repetitions. Césaire illuminates how the force of historical and cultural inheritance imposes notions of heroic action and rupture that overly circumscribe understandings of liberation resulting in movement that is self-defeating. Finally, Hansberry, shows how entrenched notions of family, property, and home can be challenged and perhaps remade.

This dissertation contributes to larger discussions of political change by attempting to elucidate the connective tissue between thought, or internal regeneration and development, and collective actions that can engage the mechanisms of political change. This dissertation claims that the experience of exile shared, yet idiosyncratically lived, by Baldwin, Césaire, and Hansberry, produced a way of seeing that infused their own writing, and from which, we, living in a similar political moment of frustration and stasis, can utilize to develop new political instincts and movements.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	i
Dedication.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction: <i>Pessimism, Freedom Dreams, and the View from Exile</i> .....	6
Chapter I: James Baldwin and Building Love out of Chaos.....	49
Chapter II: Aimé Césaire, King Christophe, and The Twin Horizons of Abolition.....	95
Chapter III: Lorraine Hansberry: Exile and the Dislocations of Home.....	139
Conclusion: Looking onto a Burning House.....	176
Bibliography .....	197

***Introduction: Pessimism, Freedom Dreams,  
and the View from Exile***

*For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have.*

~James Baldwin

*You cannot think of Black time as a narrative arc of progression. You have to think of Black time as historical stillness, a time that is flat, where nothing essential ever changes.*

~ Frank B. Wilderson III

**I. Introduction: Exile, Antiblackness, and Liminal Choices**

Contemporary political thought centered on various projects of racial liberation and political transformation is increasingly pressed under the weight of the failures, frustrations and exhaustions carried forward from past efforts.<sup>1</sup> This weight is felt both materially and internally, in both the perpetuation of institutions and structures that past movements sought to overturn, and in the psychological burdens incurred from the faded hopes of past struggles.<sup>2</sup> As David Scott argues, this combination works to produce a sense of “the present as ruined time,” a sense that is accompanied by disbelief for future positive possibilities.<sup>3</sup> This sense of ‘ruined time,’ is frequently expressed across

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<sup>1</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010); David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 6.

contemporary thinkers working in the tradition of black political thought. As George Shulman argues, contemporary thinkers varyingly express this dynamic within the framework of impasse.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, from contemporary theorists such as Fred Moten, Frank Wilderson III, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe to public intellectuals like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Ibram X Kendi there exists a shared sense of a profound brokenness where efforts at racial liberation and political transformation are stuck and repeatedly defeated and coopted.<sup>5</sup>

These contemporary expressions of impasse reveal both a judgment on the present moment as well as the past. In reading this literature, these theorists often present themselves as the first generation to accept our political reality as it really is, and they ground this acceptance in a particular reading of the permanent problems that face political actors focused on racial justice. Looking at the historical record, these theorists ostensibly encounter a sequence of inevitable repetitions of racial hierarchy and gendered exploitation, which produce the failed revolutions and radical movements whose weight burdens the present so strongly. In Wilderson III's introduction to his influential 2010 work, *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, he exemplifies this propensity in his reading of James Baldwin. Wilderson III provides a

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<sup>4</sup> George Shulman, "Fred Moten's Refusals and Consents: The Politics of Fugitivity," *Political Theory* 49(2) 2021: 272–313.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Moten. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003; Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau: 2015); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Hartman, Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments : Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020); Lewis R. Gordon, Annie Menzel, George Shulman, and Jasmine Syedullah. "Afro Pessimism." *Contemporary Political Theory* 17, no. 1 (2017): 105-137.

cursory reading of Baldwin's essay, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," which recounts Baldwin's up and down relationship with Norman Mailer. Wilderson III begins his analysis by identifying Baldwin's initial interest in Mailer, and Baldwin's frustrated attempts to have Mailer not simply see black emancipation as a type of secondary project used to reinforce Mailer's own righteousness within a white, structured society. This was a view that permitted Mailer to criticize white society from a place of safety and security without threatening its coherence and dominance. Baldwin recognized in Mailer the common white aspiration to assuage one's own guilt by supporting black liberation projects, while still protecting their own privileged position and the safety that such a position provides.

The move that Wilderson III makes is to describe this encounter as emblematic not of a particular historical moment, existential tension, or fundamental problem of the human condition. Instead, Wilderson III argues that while Baldwin is writing about, "Blacks and Whites in Paris and New York in the 1950s... he may as well be writing about the eighteenth-century encounters between Slaves and the rhetoric of new republics like revolutionary France and America."<sup>6</sup> Here Wilderson III articulates the fundamental contention of a certain strand of radical black political thought, which is that antiblackness, here expressed as the master/slave relations, is the fundamental, structuring ontological force of white society and politics. It is this force that Baldwin confronts in Mailer, and the immovability of that force which Baldwin, according to

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black*, 11-12.

Wilderson III, is forced to grapple with and face himself: “It was not until 1967–68, with such books as *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*—after he had exhausted himself with *The Fire Next Time*—that Baldwin permitted himself to give up hope and face squarely that the Master/Slave relation itself was the essence of that ‘something to save.’”<sup>7</sup>

For Wilderson III, only belatedly, and perhaps only expressed in exhaustion and frustration, was Baldwin able to face himself what Wilderson III presently sees all too clearly. The view articulated by Wilderson, expressed cogently by Fred Moten as an organizing “intractable structure of antagonism,” has increasingly become the fundamental proposition of black radical thought since the 1980s, to the point that it enjoys an almost “hegemonic authority.”<sup>8</sup> Even if the assumption is not articulated directly it functions as the increasingly default position of writers and theorists working in the arena of racial and decolonial politics. There is certainly no shortage of evidence that one can gather in support of the position, and it is precisely the brutal repetition and remaking of black subjugation that gives this assumption so much weight and force. This force refuses traditional electoral politics, explains the failure of Baldwin and the larger 1960s civil rights and international decolonial movements, and offers a piercing explanatory tool for dissecting western society’s most egregious ills and political failings. Out of this formulation emerges a wide body of work centered on refusal, insurgency,

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<sup>7</sup> Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Shulman, “Fred Moten’s Refusals and Consents,” 276. Coates is perhaps the most powerful articulator of this position, and certainly the writer with the widest reach. Coates’ memoir, *Between the World and Me*, conceptualizes a type of ‘galactical divide’ underlying U.S. society: “I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not. I knew that some inscrutable energy preserved the breach.” Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 23

flight, fugitivity, and evasion, where black life is sustained outside of any attempts to make itself legible within the pervasive master/slave antagonism.<sup>9</sup>

This work is unquestionably powerful, emotional, and evocative of the transformative potential in refusing received categories of politics and recognition. However, my concern is that a partiality for escape, fugitivity, refusal, and evasion lends itself to both a type of theoretical abstraction and performance that undermines the radical hopes for alternative arrangements for collective action and belonging that such theorizations seek, as well as the tendency to get stuck in performances of escape and evasion as the end goal. For example, Moten writes about flight and escape as permanent states to ascend and survive. My concern is that outside of graduate seminar rooms a language of permanent flight and escape in the end engenders a type of pessimism and resignation to the status quo, because the purported routes of action are either categorized as nonviable [e.g. traditional politics] or reserved for the theoretically adept and sophisticated. My secondary concern is that the explanatory diagnosis is too clean, it allows all historical movements to be subsumed within it. There is no room for excess, and the historical record, as exemplified by Wilderson III's reading of Baldwin, morphs into an expression of contemporary theory.

Out of this concern I turn to the framework of exile, as it holds together the fundamental political dynamic expressed by Wilderson III and the wave of post-1980s black radical thought identified above and seeks novel pathways of individual and

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Iton, *In Search of The Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, (New York: Autonomedia, 2013)

collective action centered on return, repair, and liberation. At their core, the exile has three fundamental pathways of action: accept one's liminal state and resign oneself to it, seek refuge in flight or escape, or seek to impress change on the system in which one is caught and thus seek to transform the structural conditions that produced their exilic condition. Those structural conditions are not assumed to be fixed in perpetuity.

The three thinkers examined in this dissertation, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, and Aimé Césaire, were selected for two principal reasons. First, each occupy similar positions when viewed from the present. Any three of these thinkers could easily fit into Wilderson III's analysis outlined above, where their personal growth would be read as moving from a type of naïve optimism, fostered in a belief that larger structural transformation of their respective societies could be driven out of liminal spaces, into a hardened pessimism that these earlier hopes neglected a fundamental reality that could not be overcome. Second, each thinker enlarges the view onto the different impasses and roadblocks that stunt political action from the margins. Baldwin focuses on how the repetitive force of racial, sexual, and cultural norms function to constrain and limit one's self-perception and assumed relationship to otherness. Césaire illuminates how the force of historical and cultural inheritance, in his example, the weight of the Haitian Revolution, impose notions of heroic action and rupture that overly circumscribe understandings of liberation in a move that is self-defeating. Finally, Hansberry, shows how entrenched notions of family, property, and home can be challenged and perhaps remade.

## II. The Pressures of Failure and Dislocation

This is a dissertation about the weight of failure and dislocation on acts of political transformation. As such, it is also a dissertation about hope. From the U.S. civil rights movement to the decolonial movements across Africa, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century tested the intransigent power of the West.<sup>10</sup> Following the postwar moment, Western power, with its attendant institutions and ideologies, appeared waning and its fate indeterminate. Indeed, without irony or naiveté in 1963, James Baldwin declared that “the West as we know it is dying. There’s no question about it.”<sup>11</sup> The Bandung Conference of 1955, which brought together leaders of newly independent African and Asian states, as well as the Congress of Black Artists and Writers first held in 1956, and subsequently in 1959 and 1968, reflected Baldwin’s impulse that the various peoples who long suffered under the control of the West could begin to collectively forge their fates outside of Western colonial control.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately this moment of decolonial hope for establishing a new world order crested and waned, and, “crashed against the

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<sup>10</sup> James Baldwin encapsulated the political energy of this moment thusly: “There’s a fantastic amount of energy on the part of people who have *never* ruled the world and that never ruled the world in the memory of anyone *living*, which is coming into the world. I mean the people previously subjugated...I mean all the people who, according to our peculiar theology, are not white. You know? Whom we, in the West, defined and described for so long. Who always resented that definition and that description. And are about to correct it.” In Fern Marja Eckman, *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* (Lanham, MD: M. Evans, [1966] 2014), 177.

<sup>11</sup> In Marja Eckman, *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin*, 179.

<sup>12</sup> Eds. Quỳnh N. Phạm and Robbie Shilliam, *Meanings of Bandung: Postcolonial Orders and Decolonial Visions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); James Baldwin, as a journalist, covered the 1956 Conference of Black Artists in an article entitled, “Princes and Powers.” The conference attendees included writers and artists from across the African diaspora, including Aimé Césaire, a focus of this dissertation, as well as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Alioune Diop, Richard Wright, and George Lamming. See James Baldwin, “Princes and Powers,” in *Collected Works*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 143-169.

rocks, wrecked by various internal and external forces.”<sup>13</sup> This dissertation is an effort to weigh the impact of that lost moment on contemporary efforts of political transformation.

The assumed possibility that Baldwin, and others of his generation, recognized in this political moment appear somewhat enigmatic when viewed from the scope of contemporary political imaginations. The type of deep, structural, and ideological transformation assumed possible are out of step with many contemporary sentiments centered on pessimism, escape, and fugitivity, where political horizons appear obdurately circumscribed.<sup>14</sup> In 1959, Baldwin’s contemporary and friend, playwright Lorraine Hansberry affirmed this implicit hope embodied in Bandung and the Congress of Black Artists and Writers:

I think that for me this is one of the most affirmative periods in history. I’m very pleased that those peoples in the world whom I feel closest to, the colonial peoples, the African peoples, the Asian peoples, are in an insurgent mood and are in the process of transforming the world, and I think for the better. I can’t quite understand pessimism at this moment unless of course one is wedded to things that are dying out which should die out like colonialism, like racism, and so forth.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, Baldwin and Hansberry’s belief in a waning order should not be taken as an assumption that something better was sure to take the place of Jim Crow, or the other Western colonial orders built on racial oppression. Rather, Baldwin and Hansberry’s sentiments reflect a resolve that they were taking part in a moment of tremendous

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<sup>13</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination, Revised and Expanded* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), 5.

<sup>14</sup> The fixity of political horizons is analyzed by David Scott in his work *Omens of Adversity*, where Scott characterizes emancipatory politics as staring into, “a stalled present, a present that stands out in its arrested movement.” *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 3. The perceived dynamism inherent in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, misdiagnosed or not, is now rarely felt.

<sup>15</sup> Ed. Mollie Godfrey, *Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2021), 70.

instability and thus urgency, built on the sense that something was about to break. There was a debt to be paid.<sup>16</sup> The existing order would either resolve that debt or reconstitute itself to avoid a reckoning.

Out of this moment, I isolate a set of thinkers, two U.S. writers and activists, James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry, and the Martinican poet and statesmen, Aimé Césaire. I argue that what holds these three thinkers together, despite their differences across personal, cultural, and political contexts, is an experience of exile that each leveraged to garner instructive political insights into how to navigate the indeterminacy of their respective moments and efforts to fight against structures of power enforced through regimes of racism, sexism, and political domination. In this dissertation, I seek to dramatize exile not simply as a disconnection from home, where often the operative question is one of citizenship or (re-) attachment to something lost. Demonstrative of this point, in the scattered contemporary work the concept exile is often collapsed into ostensibly analogous concepts like statelessness or migration.<sup>17</sup> Following the theorizations of Edward Said, I expand exile as a type of permissive condition that can sharpen thought in unexpected ways. As Said writes, “exile can produce rancor and regret, as well as sharpened vision.”<sup>18</sup> However, in contrast to Said, I do not seek to conceptualize exile as a type of ideal intellectual disposition, which is not to discount

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<sup>16</sup> The explication of this debt, and the consequence for not addressing it, is most forcefully addressed in Baldwin’s famous essay, “The Fire Next Time.” Baldwin concludes the essay with the cautioning: “If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time! And they would not believe me precisely because they knew what I said was true.” Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time,” in *Collected*, 348.

<sup>17</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration: Playing Chess with History from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2001), xxxv.

those possibilities.<sup>19</sup> Instead, I argue that exile holds together both the problem and potential solution. The problem is whether liminal actors can impress change on an unjust system or are their efforts bound to be coopted. The difference between the exile, as I conceive here, and say the fugitive of Fred Moten or the pessimistic refusals of Frank Wilderson III, is that exile wants their respective condition to end. The exile attentive to the differing forces of repetition that produced their condition seeks novel ways to coopt those same forces to open new spaces that were presumed impossible.

Exile can result from a lived, physical reality as in the case of Baldwin, who fled the U.S. for Paris. Or exile can manifest within one's own personal, cultural, and historical dislocations as experienced by Hansberry and Césaire. In my analysis, exile is not akin to notions of diaspora or statelessness, where there is an extent community to which one can attach oneself. Rather, in my conceptualization, exile involves an act of self-imposition, where different valences of dislocation are accepted and examined to slow down the movement of one's present and to seek new relationships. Exile represents the effort not simply to return home, but to construct new notions of self, relationality, and shared identity that can manifest alternative spaces and notions of home.

As I noted at the beginning, this dissertation is also about navigating efforts of political transformation in the wake of failure. Within this wake hope feels extremely distant and abstract, in a way distinct from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when a type of hope in radical, large-scale transformation appeared feasible. Indeed, that lost hope is a

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<sup>19</sup> Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1933 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage, 1996)

tremendous roadblock for contemporary politics. Aimé Césaire's efforts at departmentalization, which sought categorical legal equality for four former French colonies, within the legal framework of the French state, to better pursue internal projects of liberation and autonomy, illustrates the contemporary's relationship to the past and the problems therein.

Following the second World War, with France still destabilized from the German occupation, and the French Communist Party (PCF) growing in influence within the French parliament, the *vieilles colonies* (the old colonies) of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion, and Guiana saw an opportunity to transform their relationship to the metropole. The basic proposition of departmentalization was to democratize existing colonial structures by removing colonial administrators and replacing them, "with structures systematically equivalent to those of the Métropole: the *préfet*, *conseil général*, and an identical legal code and judicial system."<sup>20</sup> The law established Martinique, Réunion, Guyane, and Guadeloupe as French departments. The law stipulated that all standing and all future laws passed in the metropole would apply equally and without qualification in the colonies. As Gary Wilder argues, Césaire and his colleagues' aim was to challenge "metropolitan France to democratize the plural reality its own imperial history had created," which would at once remake the former colonies along with the French state into a unified federation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Nick Nesbitt, "Departmentalization and the Logic of Decolonization," *L'Esprit Créateur* 47(1) 2007: 32.

<sup>21</sup> Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of The World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 110.

Departmentalization was an abrupt failure. No such radical democratization within the *vielles colonies* took place. The status quo continued under a new guise, and Césaire was criticized as an assimilationist and seen as naïve to the realities and brutalities of the French colonial project.<sup>22</sup> I do not wish to adjudicate the politics of departmentalization here. The point I want to stress is that departmentalization is representative of a particular moment, whose historical particularities appear increasingly foreign to contemporary eyes. As Wilder notes, departmentalization was an act of timing, of syncretic craft, that took advantage of a weakened French state, the unusual strength of the Communist-Socialist bloc in the French Assembly, and a burgeoning coalition of black anti-colonial, radical, intellectuals organized through the burgeoning *négritude* movement, who sought to claim and rupture French ideals and governmental systems as their own. As Wilder notes, departmentalization perhaps could only have happened in 1946, in that moment structured by these historical contingencies, and required “a properly timed revolutionary act.”<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, and to invoke Baldwin’s language, the debt was *not* paid, and the conditions of racial exclusion and exploitation, endemic to the French empire, made themselves anew.

Even if one is unfamiliar with the particulars of departmentalization, the outlines above resonate with a commonsense notion of the politics of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. From

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<sup>22</sup> Maryse Condé, “The Stealers of Fire: The French Speaking Writers of the Caribbean and Their Strategies of Liberation,” *Journal of Black Studies* 35(2) 2004: 154-164. Conde is quite forceful in her depiction of Césaire as an assimilationist elite:

“...the least of their [the French Antillean Islands] historical paradoxes is this dependency that is stifling them today was petitioned for one of their greatest intellectuals, Aimé Césaire...Let us say, in defense of Césaire, that he was merely implementing what the middle classes had been demanding for a very long time...Césaire belongs to a generation destined to become a docile elite, a cog in the conveyor belt for French values.”

<sup>23</sup> Wilder, *Freedom Time*, 119.

this vantage point, of course some gains were made, but the promise of a more radical transformation was not fulfilled. The essential structures of racial and gender inequality remained in place and the dominant order persisted.<sup>24</sup> This failure to achieve *more* fundamentally altered perceptions of political hope. As David Scott argues, contemporary political actors rarely gaze backwards onto a past that presents itself as a decipherable sequence of events, building to some distant transcendence, which contemporary action might actualize. Rather, people find themselves in a stalled present that looks back onto a ‘semi-autonomous’ past saturated with a trauma from which we cannot escape and to which we also turn, “as a radiant source of wisdom and truth,” that sheds light on the pain incurred in the present. The notion of Scott’s that this dissertation seeks to hang on to is his assertion that from this change in how we experience our temporality, we no longer see the past as a social fact [intelligible sets of social relations which manifest historically specific oppressions, inequalities, and injustices] but as a pathological one, “as a wound that will not heal,” and which continually reasserts itself to disrupt and cause havoc on the present.<sup>25</sup>

I claim a particular relationship between this mid-20<sup>th</sup> century period and the contemporary. As I discuss below, for U.S. minded theorists focused on politics of race

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<sup>24</sup> The story above could be told from many different angles. For example, there is a famous 1963 meeting where James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte, and other prominent artists and intellectuals involved in the U.S. civil rights movement met then Attorney Robert Kennedy Jr. in his New York City apartment to discuss what the Kennedy administration should do to quell the racial violence in the American South following the Birmingham bombing. The meeting was a disaster and degenerated into a shouting match. Reflecting on the meeting, psychologist Kenneth Clark noted: “We were, after all, saying something quite un-American. We were talking against tinkering. We were saying that even the most effective political manipulation is basically unacceptable to Negroes. It didn’t mean anything for him to tell us that this Administration has done more in this area than any other Administration. We were asking him to stop thinking about this as the special problem of a particular group of people and to begin to think about it as an American problem.” In Eckman, *The Furious Passage*, 191.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 12-13.

and liberation, I claim that this moment can be conceptualized as living in the wake of a second failed reconstruction. Of course, there are certainly analogous structural and ideological facets of say the racial politics of the U.S. in the 1960s to 2020s. Indeed, I trace many of those analogous conditions in the following section. For transitional and decolonial thinkers outside of the U.S., the legacies of the Haitian revolution and failed decolonial movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century weigh equally heavy. The point I want to stress is that the key linkage in my view, beyond whatever material causal relationships one can infer, is the very compulsion to draw those linkages at the outset. As Scott argues, contemporary actors are beset by a parade of shadows, darkening political hopes before they are actualized. As a result, exile holds special potential as an underutilized analytic concept, because, as I show in the works of Baldwin, Césaire, and Hansberry, exile brings with it similar notions of generational, historical, and cultural repetition that ostensibly limits possibilities for new politics, and which must be fought through. Césaire's hopes for departmentalization were overcome by the remaking and repetition of French colonial forms and racial hierarchy. As I examine, that failure and repetition were fruitful in re-analyzing the political problems embedded in decolonization the Césaire struggled with the rest of this life.

### III. The Possibilities in Failure: After the Fire

*“There’s a bill due that has to be paid.”*

*~ James Baldwin*

To contextualize the force of this past moment on the politics of the present, I turn back to the U.S. context. As suggested above, U.S. political life finds itself in the throes of a second failed reconstruction. Since the end of the Civil War, the U.S. has endured two great eras of political ambition that sought to overturn the country’s history of racial hierarchy. This is not to suggest that black resistance was not a constant force; of course, it was.<sup>26</sup> Rather I only mean to suggest that in these two periods—Black Reconstruction and the interwar years spanning the Harlem Renaissance, New Deal politics, and the Civil Right movement—black hope and material and social change moved together, however imperfectly. Tragically, Reconstruction flowed into the expansive brutalities of Jim Crow and a surge of white supremacist violence. Perversely, following the promise of the Civil Rights Movement emerged Reaganomics, the carceral state, and the wholesale implementation of neoliberal policies that re-intensified the segregation of U.S. cities and stripped away previous economic gains and security.<sup>27</sup>

These torrents of aspiration that culminated in the movements of the 1950s and 1960s were replaced by these failed policies, and the U.S. now finds itself lamenting what emerged out of this promise. It is no surprise then that contemporary political

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<sup>26</sup> See Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights 1919-1950* (New York: Norton, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010); João Helion Costa Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Broadway Books, 2017)

language is saturated with connotations of despair, futility, and catastrophe.<sup>28</sup> What remains unclear is whether a third period of hope paired with political accomplishment is possible and sustainable. As Adolph Reed Jr. recently noted in his survey of coming of age in the Jim Crow South, even the most totalitarian of systems has cracks that it cannot see.<sup>29</sup> I turn to a selection of black artists and writers working in the second reconstruction of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, because they are our most analogous forebearers who, I argue, retain not only powerful diagnostic lenses onto the contemporary moment, but because it seems to me that we struggle to make sense of how success and failure sit side by side.

W.E.B. Du Bois characterized the initial period of Black Reconstruction (1867-1877) as the “mystic years.”<sup>30</sup> Given the scope of political problems facing black Americans they indubitably were. As historian Lerone Bennett Jr records, the short-lived Freedman’s Bureau provided, “direct medical aid to some one million freedmen, established hospitals and social agencies and distributed over twenty-one million rations...established day schools, night schools, industrial schools, institutes and colleges.”<sup>31</sup> This sweeping effort to overturn the material deprivations inflicted on black

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<sup>28</sup> As David Kim notes in a conversation with Cornel West, the catastrophic is the saturating feeling of this political moment: “Very few would deny that we're living not just in the midst of a catastrophe but multiple catastrophes. We have financial catastrophe. We have Wall Street with the banking crisis. We have political, military, and humanitarian catastrophes with wars on multiple fronts. And frankly we have a moral catastrophe, where we as a nation have legitimated the use of torture such that we seem to have lost the ability to say ‘no’ to it. So it seems to me that a catastrophic element has found its way into multiple spheres as well into our moral and ethical responses.”

<sup>29</sup> Adolph L. Reed Jr., *The South: Jim Crow and its Afterlives* (London: Verso, 2022).

<sup>30</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: The Free Press, 1988)

<sup>31</sup> Lerone Bennett Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 200-201.

Americans during slavery was matched by swift representational political and cultural transformations.

To pull short examples from a long list: the South Carolina House of Representatives achieved a black majority; in Maine, James Augustine Healy became the first African American Catholic bishop; and his brother, Patrick Francis, became the president of Georgetown University; and of course, Hiram Rhodes Revels and Blanche Bruce became the first African Americans to serve in the U.S. senate. Tragically this attempted social transformation was suppressed in the white-supremacist countermovement enacted through the passing of black codes, the stripping away of newly inscribed political and economic rights, thousands of acts of racial violence, and the instantiation of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>32</sup> The legacy of this countermovement was the formalization of Jim Crow, which was not simply the re-ascension of racial bigotry, but the installation of: “a coherent social order, constructed and maintained by specific social interests through political and economic institutions that channeled the experience of everyone in the region.”<sup>33</sup> Promise and hope, quickly quashed and subjugated, saw black oppression reworked and reinscribed within a new social order.<sup>34</sup>

The first half of the twentieth century characterizes a second wave of abolition that flowed through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and crested in the Civil Rights movement of

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<sup>32</sup> This brief flicker of hope and transformation should not be downplayed, or its significance neglected. As Bennett Jr. summarizes: “These, then, were the legacies, gargantuan on any showing, of the reconstructionist, who made the first—as last—real attempt to bring the American Dream down from its parchment heaven to the hard and defining earth of Black hope.” In, *Before the Mayflower*, 232.

<sup>33</sup> Reed, *Jim Crow*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> See Kris Majapra, *Black Ghost of Empire: The Long Death of Slavery and the Failure of Emancipation* (New York: Scribner Books, 2023).

the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>35</sup> The Civil Rights movement represents then *a second* attempted reconstruction that sought to overturn the totalitarian social order of Jim Crow, seeking both political and economic equality.<sup>36</sup> The movement's achievements, from *Brown v Topeka Board of Education* to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to the Economic Opportunity Act, and the dismantling of the formal structures of Jim Crow, represent a second coming together of black striving with political change.<sup>37</sup> Yet, the de jure defeat of codified white supremacy did not dismantle the stratified class system that Jim Crow worked to maintain, and a countermovement emerged (this time both tragic and farcical) once again to speciously appease while preserving social inequalities by alternative means.<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, and his death, one among many, from Malcolm X to Fred Hampton, marks the symbolic death of this second reconstruction.

Seven months following the assassination of Dr. King, Richard Nixon was elected President and swiftly made Daniel Moynihan, author of the infamous 1965 *Moynihan Report*, or "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," one of his top advisors. The report callously described the black family as "a tangle of pathology," with

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<sup>35</sup> Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights 1919-1950* (New York: Norton, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> As historian Gary Dorrien argues the decades prior to the pinnacle of the civil rights movement represent a "new abolition," which emerged out of the trauma of the first failed reconstruction. Dorrien argues that this movement is most lucidly expressed, but not fully contained, by the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and other practitioners of the black social gospel. Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> As Dorrien argues, this second abolition: "fought to abolish Jim Crow, lynching, and economic injustice. They established that progressive theology could be combined with social justice politics in a black church context. They built up black church communities and urged them to welcome the migrant stranger. They refuted the racist culture that demeaned their human dignity and equality. They paved the way for something stupendous." *The New Abolition*, 483.

<sup>38</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York City: The New Press, 2010), traces how a new U.S. system of mass incarceration, beginning with Ronald Reagan's 1982 War on Drugs campaign, instituted a new system of controlling and managing black bodies that has analogous effects to Jim Crow era policies that sought to contain and control black bodies.

Moynihan ultimately arguing that black poverty and unemployment is caused less by economic structures and is largely the result of black “social and personal consequences.”<sup>39</sup> Moynihan’s ideas represented a shift away from the economic redistribution policies that marked New Deal politics and up through the initial war on poverty initiatives expressed by the Johnson administration.<sup>40</sup> Moynihan’s focus on racial pathology and individual decision making signify the crumbling of the transformative social hope embodied by a second reconstruction. As Bennet Jr. argues: “There were so many hopes and similarities between the 1870s and 1970s that some people said history was repeating itself and that the same forces that killed the First Reconstruction were posed to kill the Second Reconstruction.”<sup>41</sup>

As the 1970s began, the U.S. entered a post-revolutionary decline following a revolution that failed to materialize. In the following years, the federal government slashed subsidized housing by close to 80%, training and employment programs by 70%, and work incentive programs by another 70%. Tragically, the era of social reform had ended, and a new era of deregulation and individualization commenced. This trajectory culminated in Clinton’s 1994 crime bill, which ballooned an already inflated prison population, the deregulation of investment banking built through the repeal of the Glass-Steagall act, and a divestment in industrial American cities through the passing of NAFTA. This transition of eras is perhaps best symbolized in Clarence Thomas’s

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<sup>39</sup> Daniel Geary, “The Moynihan Report: An Annotated Edition,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, May 5, 2021): <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/>.

<sup>40</sup> As Cornel West notes, the black Humanist tradition, which undergirded the ideas leading up to the civil rights movements, argued that the black political struggle most focus on securing democratic control of both political and economic structures.

<sup>41</sup> Bennett Jr., *Before the Mayflower*, 474.

assumption of the Supreme Court seat vacated by Thurgood Marshall; the iconoclastic judge and civil rights pioneer who argued *Brown v Board of Education* in front of the U.S. Supreme Court when he was chief counsel for the NAACP. This second failed reconstruction from Nixon into the Trump years, and now its aftermath, are the paradigmatic expression of this mix of tragedy and buffoonery, out of which political hope and action struggle to reconcile a meaningful reality.

This framing of contemporary racial politics, which, as I argued above, is to also imply the larger state of U.S. politics, through the lens of a second failed reconstruction is likely to induce a skepticism that such a framing omits the stark social transformation undergone in the last seventy years. The general critique offered by contemporary black thinkers who place themselves outside of the black radical tradition,<sup>42</sup> such as Thomas Chatterton Williams, John McWhorter, Glenn Loury, and Coleman Hughes, is that ‘radicals’ undermine the possibilities of adequately confronting extant realities of contemporary racism by overreading the contemporary moment as a type of Jim Crow 2.0., or a continuation of the past where very little has changed.<sup>43</sup> In short, through

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<sup>42</sup> The ‘black radical tradition,’ is of course an amorphous category that contracts and fluctuates based on one’s subjective point of view. But in general, I follow Cedric Robinson’s assertion that the black radical tradition emerged as a response to the practices of racialized capitalism. Robinson argues that the creation and sustainment of ‘black’ as a dehumanized category coincided with the historical trajectory of capital development. Thus, there emerged a fundamental antagonism between black life and the white world. The black radical tradition represents, in Robinson’s view, those artists, political actors, and writers who sought to fight, rebel, or escape that fundamental antagonism. See, Cedric Robinson, “C. L. R. James and the Black Radical Tradition.” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 6, no. 3 (1983): 321–91. There are of course innumerable black writers who push back against Robinson’s notion of this fundamental, ontological antagonism between black life and a white world. A liberal/conservative dichotomy often does not serve in understanding the tradition of black thought, but instead can be read through how different thinkers accept or reject this ontological description, its intransigence, and structuring force. See, Stanley Crouch, *The All-American Skin Game*, or, *the Decoy of Race: The Long and the Short of It* (New York: Vintage, 1997); Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy* (New York: Library of America, 2020).

<sup>43</sup> See Adolph Reed Jr., “Antiracism: a neoliberal alternative to the left,” *Dialectical Anthropology* (2018) 42:105-115. Reed’s essay explores the origins and defense of this position amidst a growing cadre of thinkers, and how it slides between a metaphorical device and a sincere political descriptor. Reed opens his essay with this anecdote: “At a 1991

overstatements and overgeneralizations the subtleties and nuances of particular and idiosyncratic problems are obfuscated and in the wake of possible understanding we are left with indignation and transhistorical abstractions that are only speciously clarifying. Adolph Reed Jr., theorizing from a Marxist perspective, makes this argument most pointedly in his discussion of how, in his view, the lazy deployment of reified transhistorical categories hinder understandings of present injustices:

My point is not in any way to make light of the gravity of the injustice or to diminish outrage about police violence. (I realize, however, that some will impute that intention to me) ... Racism and white supremacy don't really explain how anything happens. They're at best shorthand characterizations of more complex, or at least discrete, actions taken by people in social contexts; at worst, and, alas, more often in our political moment, they're invoked as alternatives to explanation. In that sense they function, like the Nation of Islam's Yacub story, as a devil theory: racism and white supremacy are represented as capable of making things happen in the world independently, i.e. magically.<sup>44</sup>

Reed's cautioning against overreading the present through undertheorized concepts is both methodologically and substantively instructive. Arguing, as I do here, that this political moment ought to be read as the 'wake of a second failed reconstruction,' requires a contextualization attuned to the historical changes and transformation that make our circumstances unique and specific. However, my argument also requires that this historical contextualization is *felt* in the minds and bodies of people who live through

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conference at the Harvard Law School, where he was a tenured full professor, I heard the late, esteemed legal theorist, Derrick Bell, declare on a panel that blacks had made no progress since 1865. I was startled not least because Bell's own life, as well as the fact that Harvard's black law students' organization put on the conference, so emphatically belied his claim. I have since come to understand that those who make such claims experience no sense of contradiction because the contention that nothing has changed is intended as an assertion that racism persists as the most consequential force impeding black Americans' aspirations, that no matter how successful or financially secure individual black people become, they remain similarly subject to victimization by racism."

<sup>44</sup> Adolph L. Reed, Jr., "How Racial Disparity does not Help Makes Sense of Patterns of Police Violence," *Nonsite.org*, Oct. 4, 2020: [https://nonsite.org/how-racial-disparity-does-not-help-make-sense-of-patterns-of-police-violence-2/#foot\\_src\\_1-12551](https://nonsite.org/how-racial-disparity-does-not-help-make-sense-of-patterns-of-police-violence-2/#foot_src_1-12551)

the consequences of the historical legacies I noted above, every day, and as a result influences political assumptions and possibilities for the present. This is to argue that subjective experience and historical circumstance are not reducible to or clean reflections of one another. Yet, the point of import is the degree to which this feeling of repetition and perpetuation of transhistorical categories weigh on contemporary subjects. Despite Reed wishing it otherwise, contemporary subjects feel this way all the same.

As Adolph Reed Jr. argues there is indeed a great risk in forgetting the historical specificity and intensity of the everyday terror elicited by the Jim Crow regime.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the ease at which some analogize between the Jim Crow past and our present, a present that while certainly itself not short on racism and oppressive inequalities, nevertheless erases Jim Crow as a specific, historically contingent period. I do agree that liberals, progressives, radicals, and whoever is concerned with confronting the present iniquities of racism do themselves no favors by arguing that little to nothing has changed for the better. However, as this dissertation argues throughout, success and failure exist side-by-side. Hope can spring out of failure. As I contend below, the success of the Civil Rights movement saw the excising of the cruelest forms of black subjugation and white violence—this is not to suggest that they have disappeared. However, the fundamental structures of economic inequality, political stagnation, and social degradation persist.

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<sup>45</sup> Adolph L. Reed Jr., *The South: Jim Crow and its Afterlives* (London: Verso, 2022). From a Marxist materialist perspective, Reed argues elsewhere that our tendency to treat ‘Racism’ as a sui generis injustice elides the class interest that functions behind U.S. anti-black racism. As a result when racism is conceived as such it allows the confronting of racial injustice to be folded into the existing capitalist economy, and in effect closes avenues for larger social transformations: “this makes identifying ‘racism’ a technical requirement for pursuing certain grievances, not the basis of an overall strategy for pursuit of racial justice, or, as I believe is a clearer left formulation, racial equality as an essential component of a program of social justice.” Adolph Reed, Jr., “The Limits of Anti-Racism,” *Left Business Observer*, 121 (September 2009): [www.leftbusinessobserver.com/Antiracism.html](http://www.leftbusinessobserver.com/Antiracism.html)

This persistence is often hidden by the fixation on past gains, as if failure and achievement are mutually exclusionary. Our contemporary social sickness is, in large part, the effect of this persistence, and the pessimism towards liminal political movements impressing lasting change on a political culture writ large.

#### **IV. Exile and Liberation**

In this section I examine how the above historical trajectory, culminating in a second failed reconstruction, imprints itself on contemporary political thought. My contention is that the dominant consequence is a contemporary mode of political thought that oscillates between accepting a structural fixity that chokes out possibilities for ‘real’ change, and modes of theorization that push political hope far into the abstract, imagination, and futures with little relation to the present. Finally, I aim to situate exile as an orientating concept that does not seek to avoid or downplay the weight of the part of overbearing structural forces but focuses possibility in the present.

I argue here that living through what I conceptualized as a second failed reconstruction produces a twin set of instinctual reactions in contemporary political and cultural theorists. First, as discussed above in the U.S. context, the fits and failings of reconstruction and the civil rights movement, and their respective aftermaths, are demonstrative of the unshakable structural forces of white supremacy and U.S. hierarchy. The literature held loosely, and often somewhat begrudgingly, under the banner of Afro-pessimism expresses the strongest version of this instinct in arguing that U.S. life is

structured by a fundamental ontological divide, where *white life*, or human *being*,<sup>46</sup> is predicated on *black death*: “civil society gains its coherence...through the violence of black erasure.”<sup>47</sup> This reading of identifying ‘white supremacy’ as a type of ‘natural force’ that cannot be overcome was most popularly articulated in the Ta-Nehisi Coates memoir, *Between The World and Me*. In the memoir, Coates describes a ‘galactical divide’ underlying U.S. society: “I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not. I knew that some inscrutable energy preserved the breach.”<sup>48</sup> As a result when Coates, or others, such as Jared Sexton, Sharpe, and Wilderson III, examine the historical record they encounter an almost scientific record of the movements of this structural force, this ‘tenacious gravity,’ that is the foundational structural force of the present, and unavoidably, the future.

The second instinct, not necessarily in disagreement with the general affirmation of white supremacy as foundational to U.S. political and social life, nevertheless refuses the pessimistic resignation of white supremacy as a totalizing force. This instinct seeks methods for piercing its armor to reignite new political hopes at transforming dominant structures and ideologies. Following is the instinct to view the past as both terror and promise. As such, the past is both the force of foreclosure that limits contemporary political possibility, and the holder of neglected truths and lessons that need to be picked

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<sup>46</sup> Christina Sharpe offers the cogent phrasing of: “our [black] abjection from the realm of the human.” *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 14.

<sup>47</sup> Frank B Wilderson III, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society,” *Social Identities* 9(2) 2002: 238-239.

<sup>48</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau: 2015), 23.

open. Emblematic of this view, Imani Perry's 2022 work, *South to America*, locates the American South as the essential location of possibility, where "freedom dreams can be reignited."<sup>49</sup> Perry's work represents the contemporary reflex to reclaim discarded concepts, histories, and/or writers, as types of Atlantean treasures of undiscovered possibility that can pierce through the dark. In Perry's work, *The South* is transformed from the assumed historical generator of U.S. racial hierarchy and violence into a neglected source of insight and hope for transforming the inequities of the contemporary moment.

Extending this drive, myriad political and cultural theorists conceptualized notions of 'fugitivity,' 'refugee,' and '*marronage*,' as liminal and neglected positions, as opposed to the centrality of assumed concepts like 'the citizen', that function to wedge open spaces of movement within an overly constricted political landscape structured by white supremacy, economic inequality, and tired modes of political thinking.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, conceptions of 'escape,' 'exit,' or 'flight,' draw increasing attention.<sup>51</sup> Collectively, these diverse works operate within the assumption that by embracing liminal concepts, such as fugitivity, refusal, and suffering, previous spaces of frustration and stagnation transform into positions of novel and transformative political action.<sup>52</sup> For example, Fred Moten

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<sup>49</sup> Perry, *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2022).

<sup>50</sup> Juliet Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, "Fugitive Justice." *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 1–15 Fred Moten & Stefon Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013); Sojoyner, D.M. (2017). Another life is possible, Black fugitivity and enclosed spaces. *Cultural Anthropology*, 32, 514-536; Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>51</sup> Tina Marie Campt, Black visuality and the practice of refusal." *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*: 2019 29(1): 79-87.

<sup>52</sup> Here the foundational text is: Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997). Hartman's widely informs work across

conceptualizes ‘flight’ as the essential political act for survival; flight not as an avoidance but instead as an activity of novel creation. For Moten, fugitive flights offer the possibility of escaping dominant and dominating constitutive categories and finding new life elsewhere.<sup>53</sup>

The result of these two instincts oscillates between pessimism and projecting any possibility of political transformation far into the abstract and future. In his work *Freedom Dreams*, Robin D.G. Kelley, aims to overcome the pessimism noted above, and to rekindle a radical imagination outside of ossified leftist “orthodoxy and sectarianism,” and in a political climate where “the conditions of daily life...render much of our imagination inert.”<sup>54</sup> The result is a rich historical tapestry of radical movements of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, where it was the most neglected political subjects, whose struggles for racial, economic, and colonial justice, provided clarity to a utopian future. In the end, the effect is a type of whiplash where the present disappears between the richness of the past and the distant promise of a utopian future. In the end, Kelley pushes hope, and the mechanisms for political transformation, into the engines of language, imagination, and fugitive revolts: “This is what revolution looks like. It begins with what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call ‘fugitive planning.’ It is woven from the spontaneous revolts of poets who set the world in motion with their words, their bodies, their songs, their art. Revolutions are not singular events but long dreams.”<sup>55</sup>

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black thought, feminism, and democratic thought. See also, Bonnie Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

<sup>53</sup> Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine: consent not to be a single being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 65-139.

<sup>54</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 11-12.

<sup>55</sup> *Freedom Dreams*, 204.

Kelley's historical survey invaluable excavates neglected riches in the black radical tradition, to reinvigorate leftist thought beyond its stale pessimisms and orthodoxies, to kickstart new dreams for a transformed future, no matter how distant. There is an unquestionable utopian aspect to Kelley's work that functions as a call to arms within the imagination: "[c]all me utopian, but I inherited my mother's belief that a map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us."<sup>56</sup> Here, this dissertation, while sharing a framework and shared aspiration with Kelley, locates moments of possibility not in the imagination, but in everyday efforts to leverage dislocation to open new possibilities of self-understanding, relationality, and possibilities to make home anew. I argued at the beginning of this chapter that the U.S. public is awash in feelings of futility, stagnation, and despair. It seems to me that both the political instincts of pessimism and a radical idealization of a distant future contribute to this stasis: "an end that is infinitely remote is not an end, but, if you like, a trap."<sup>57</sup> Exile speaks directly to this dynamic, by not neglecting or downplaying the intensity of the subjective feelings that produce the feeling of that stasis. Yet, the exile seeks to transform those feelings of stasis and futility into creative potentials. Exile fosters an understanding of how to move amidst the weight of historical, generational, intellectual, and cultural repetitions, and not be overburdened by their immense pressure. Exile ennobles the capacity to transform the received and

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<sup>56</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 6.

<sup>57</sup> Alexander Herzen, *To the Other Shore* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1979), 37.

ostensibly fixed, but seeks not escape, flight, or exile as an idealized permanent condition. The hope for the exile is that it is a condition that ends.

Illustrative of this tension, at the end of James Baldwin's 1961 essay for *Harper's Magazine*, analyzing the efforts of and road ahead for Martin Luther King', Baldwin concluded by noting that whatever lay ahead for King, and the country, was sure to be rough. Baldwin's conclusion was not a presage of failure, but a recognition that even in liberation there will be suffering and fear: "the possibility of liberation is always real and is also always painful... We will need every ounce of moral stamina that we can find...we are certain...to undergo the torment of being forced to surrender far more than we ever realized that we accepted."<sup>58</sup> Here, I think Baldwin offers a way into an aspect of political transformation that Kelley and others neglect, which is the idea that transformation is not achieved, or won, in a distant future. Rather political transformation is something we ask of one another, it is a responsibility, or a demand to live one's life differently, to seek different ends, form new social bonds, and create new possibilities for meaning.

The above analysis is intended to set up a dynamic notion of political transformation that is not predicated on linear trajectory of transformation, or liberatory political change, where one begins in state of deprivation and through some unnamed process, in some unimaginable future state, can be said to have arrived *liberated*. In my analysis of the Martiniquan poet, Aimé Césaire, this dichotomy is set up through Achille Mbembe's notion of a first and second abolition. I argue here that the framework of exile

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<sup>58</sup> Baldwin, "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King, in *Collected*, 658.

illuminates this dynamic and the ambiguous problems that Baldwin gestures, and to which current political frameworks are deficient.

Traditionally exile assumes either a spatial or temporal concept. Considering the proliferation of potentially analogous concepts, exile remains relatively scant in contemporary political and cultural theory. Most recently, Seyla Benhabib's, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration*, provided the most thorough examination of exile's role in shaping 20<sup>th</sup> century political thought through exile's relation to homelessness, feelings of dislocation and split belongings.<sup>59</sup> Benhabib provides a detailed survey of how the experience of exile and statelessness infused the thought of a group of Jewish Intellectuals— Theodore Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Isaiah Berlin, Albert Hirschman, and Judith Shklar. Benhabib provides a rich account of connecting the personal experience with the political thought of each thinker, exploring notions of voice, home, legitimacy, and judgement, among others. But Benhabib does little in the way of isolating exile as a unique concept onto itself, running it alongside conceptions of statelessness, migration, and homelessness.<sup>60</sup> In her treatment, exile is one in a constellation of concepts that are relatively interchangeable.

The other mode that exile is generally analyzed is exemplified in the work of Edward Said.<sup>61</sup> There is perhaps no other contemporary writer more associated with exile

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<sup>59</sup> Benhabib, *Exile, Stateless, and Migration: Playing Chess with History from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Ayten Gündoğdu's, *Rightlessness in the Age of Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) looks to Arendt to trouble the dominant understanding of human rights as more people live in a liminal state of rightlessness devoid of protections from nation states.

<sup>61</sup> There has been a recent re-examination of Said's political thought, often centered on exile, with Jeanne Morefield providing the first book-length examination of Said. See, Morefield, *Unsettling the World: Edward Said and Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022)

than Said. Born in Jerusalem in 1935, Said's family moved to Cairo at the outset of the 1947-1949 Palestine war.<sup>62</sup> Said's biography attests to the notion of exile as a forced displacement, where home is an idea deferred, no longer fully realizable, and one exists within a precarious diaspora. Said experienced and wrote about the legacy of a territorial alienation undergirding Palestinian political alienation even amidst allies and friends.<sup>63</sup> Said is best known for transforming exile into a type of intellectual ideal: "exile [represents], the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives...tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well-being... Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical senses is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others."<sup>64</sup> Said's notion of exile as a permissive of developing a "double perspective that never sees things in isolation," reflects my notion of playing with dislocation.<sup>65</sup> However, I aim to relocate exile away from a type of intellectual ideal and into the realm of everyday political thought and action.

I wish to unpack exile as a concept distinct from ostensibly similar notions of fugitivity, statelessness, or marronage, while also not preferring exile as an intellectual ideal. Instead, I seek to push against conceptualizing exile in terms of space or

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<sup>62</sup> Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002)

<sup>63</sup> "The existential Palestinian predicament has been the felt need for political survival combined with the tangible consequences of territorial as well as political alienation. Even the sense of community between the Palestinian Arab and his Islamic and/or Arab compatriots elsewhere in the Near East carries the distorting imprint of this predicament. For the Palestinian, the other Arabs are fraternal on one level, and on another they are separated from the Palestinian by an unbridgeable gap." Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 150.

<sup>64</sup> Said, "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals," in *Representations of the Intellectual*, 52.

<sup>65</sup> Said, "Intellectual Exile," 60.

temporality. Certainly, this tradition's notion of exile as a dislocation from home should not be diminished.<sup>66</sup> However, I aim to complicate this reading, by emphasizing that exile speaks especially to fraught moment of political transformation, one that is both backwards and forwards-looking, and characterized by a type of stasis structured by the historical, cultural, generational, and gendered repetitions whose presence produce the subject experience that the present is fixed forever and ever. This is the central dynamic captured in the two divergent quotes in the epigraph to this introduction. My claim that exile captures a fraught moment of possibility is reflected in the tendency for prominent cohorts of political, literary, and artistic exiles to arise in moments of crisis and upheaval. In terms of political writing, there are at least four prominent groups of exilic writers: the Russian exiles of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, exemplified by Alexander Herzen, and writing through the 1848 revolutions; the Jewish exile of the 20<sup>th</sup> century examined by Benhabib; the incisive and poetic works of Palestinians emerging out of the Palestinian diaspora, not only from Said, but by others such as Mourid Barghouti and Rashid Khalidi; and finally, the diverse collection of black authors in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century writing across the Americas, the Caribbean, and West Africa.

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<sup>66</sup> As Said argues: "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever." In *Reflections on Exile*, 173.

## **V: The Framework of Exile**

In the 20th century, black writers in the U.S., Africa, and the Caribbean, wrote from positions of exile to highlight the problem-space of living between an ossified order built through their exclusion, and a possible future order whose contours, and any possible attachment to the existing order, remained undefined. Exile involves the lived in-betweenness of this disjuncture, where one seeks a way to sustain life, both individual and collective, under conditions where the stakes and paths of political change are indeterminate. One can either accept their condition, seek to flee elsewhere, or create pathways of action where none seem to exist. My dissertation turns to three thinkers situated in exile: James Baldwin, Aimé Césaire, and Lorraine Hansberry, as exemplars of social actors examining and experimenting with the changes necessary to bring about a new political and symbolic order. I argue that their efforts offer insights into three distinct, yet overlapping, dimensions of action necessary for political and ethical transformation: individual psychology, the political (institutional) conditions of possibility, and (re-)attachments to home.

The post-war moment of the 1940s-60s, in which Baldwin, Césaire, and Hansberry are situated, crystallizes the political stakes of such moments of disjuncture. Prior to the entrenchment of a binary Cold War politics, civil rights and decolonial movements sought to create new possibilities for political freedom, amidst a possible upending of how western states attached themselves to practices of racial hierarchy and economic exploitation. In the U.S. context, Baldwin and Hansberry worked amidst an overdue public reckoning with the legacies of slavery, civil war Reconstruction, and the

endurance of Jim Crow. Concurrently, African and Caribbean states, including Césaire's home of Martinique, sought independence after centuries of European colonization and economic exploitation. International conferences, like the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists, which Césaire and Baldwin attended, sought to connect these individual movements within a global decolonial political practice. Thinkers and activists sought new political coalitions and symbolic orders, built from shared experiences of dispossession, and considered how they might be utilized to reconfigure understandings of selfhood, political coalitions, and home.

Exile provides a lens onto that moment of in-betweenness, where one lives between a crumbling infrastructure of empire and a future that would either transcend and build outside the previous limits of that infrastructure, or tragically reproduce its effects under new forms. Yet, this is a moment of in-betweenness that cannot be transcended or escaped in the immediate, it must be lived through. Baldwin, Césaire, and Hansberry provide insights into the psychological, institutional, and intimate/familial conditions that must be faced in the struggle to move through that in-betweenness and resolve into something unforeseen. Invoking Baldwin, exile situates my analysis in the 'realness' and 'pain,' of transformation and struggle, as opposed to focusing on distant, ambiguous ends.

These moments prove paradoxically difficult because this social deterioration involves the weakening of norms and structures that functioned as both sources of one's disenfranchisement as well as potentialities for a more egalitarian realization. In short, such deterioration equally opens potentials either for one's liberation or a deepening of

one's historical subjugation. Such volatility invokes the famous refrain of Langston Hughes' poem Harlem: "What happens to a dream deferred/Does it dry up/like a raisin in the sun?" A study of their historical moment offers a comparative lens onto the disjuncture of our contemporary historical moment, as the historical forces of white supremacy, racialized economic exploitation, and western political hegemony are distressingly persistent and yet the institutions and norms that mediate them appear increasingly unstable.<sup>67</sup> It remains uncertain whether the volatility plaguing existing political orders will result in the further entrenchment of the racial hierarchies and exclusions on which they were created, or whether new political orders can be constructed within or outside old confines.

So far, responses to this contemporary dynamic of disjuncture have notably probed the possibilities in flight, most often represented in conceptualizations of fugitivity; contextualized the problem of disjuncture resulting from racial domination within general frameworks of existential freedom and choice;<sup>68</sup> situated the dilemma within a pragmatic framework of moral choice and self-creation;<sup>69</sup> and developed pessimistic convictions that little is likely to alter the ontological structure of racism and

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<sup>67</sup> Saidiya, Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016).

<sup>68</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995); --- *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995); ---. *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997)

<sup>69</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance!* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982) ---. *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989)

white supremacy, even when these structures appear vulnerable.<sup>70</sup> These literatures tend to privilege unalterable structural fixities or the possibilities of individual self-creation.

In contrast, my dissertation argues that exile holds both impulses together, while tempering the over-assertion of one at the expense of the other. Baldwin, Césaire, and Hansberry wrestle with the confines of historical forces undergirding their historical subjugation, without assuming their ontological fixity, and focus on the imperatives of human choice and ethical commitment while confronting the severe limitations of one's plane of possible action. For these thinkers, exile results from the immense frustration of confronting a dream continually deferred. Each thinker turns to exile as a space of in-betweenness, where the liminality of their previous experiences of racial domination and exclusion, paired with a disjuncture between shifting political orders, becomes a ground for individual possibility as opposed to overdetermined constraint. This space of in-betweenness is at once a place of both possibility but also one of inheritance and reproduction. Exile has the tendency to make one acutely aware of what has been lost, but also what one is unavoidably left with.

Literary work offers insight that political theory often has a difficult time grappling with. Political theory seeks to reflect on and (re-)conceptualize the political language and symbolic orders that structure collective life. Literary work rather, from novels, to poetry, to plays, (all represented by these three thinkers) seeks to have people feel their place within that dominant social order and symbolic framework differently.

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<sup>70</sup> Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (2020); Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Anti-blackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); ---. "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016).

Literary work often aims to make the assumed known appear strange and unfamiliar, to open spaces for reflection and action that one previously assumed were closed. As I argue below, this parallels the experience of exile, where a shift of location and psychological awareness probes for previously unforeseeable pathways through familiar problem spaces.

My dissertation first turns to James Baldwin to examine the psychological changes undergone in exile and how Baldwin leverages his internal alterations into his understanding of political and social change. I argue Baldwin's exile coalesced around two interlocking dynamics: an initial stillness and separation that allotted necessary space for him to conceptualize his suffering and agency in a new language, and a consistent effort to bring together his own personal suffering and stasis with the larger historical forces driving the U.S. into strife and degeneration. Baldwin sought to draw lines between his own personal suffering and "the disaster overtaking not the black nation, but the white one."<sup>71</sup> I argue that Baldwin's mode of self-reflective critique directed outward is the result of his attempt to induce the personal psychological transformation of his exile within a larger public. In this way Baldwin assumed the role of the exiled Jeremiad, articulating his own personal story as emblematic of the misunderstood racial history of the U.S. that threatened a largely blind public.<sup>72</sup> Baldwin did not focus on the need for institutional reform, but the urgent necessity for Americans to feel their everyday relations, notions of self and other, and social affiliations with a different weight. In the

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<sup>71</sup> Baldwin, "How One Black Man..." in *Collected*, 764.

<sup>72</sup> George Shulman, *American Prophecy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

context of the civil rights movement the choice for white and black society was often presented as one between assimilation (inclusion into the promised deferred) or revolution. Baldwin sought a line in-between both of these paths focused on a return only made possible through the remaking and regeneration of that which one previously assumed to be moribund: “I suspect, though I certainly cannot prove it, that every life moves full circle—toward revelation: You begin to see, and even rejoice to see, what you always saw.”<sup>73</sup> The notion that creation is a way of dealing with the past cut through Baldwin’s personal and political struggles.

Aimé Césaire’s exile begins from a similar confluence between a confrontation with the past as a type of self-creation but leverages this concern beyond the psychological dimension. Césaire’s exile involves his dual alienation from the colonial power of France, the source of both his subjugation and education, and from his home of Martinique, where upon his return after 5 years in Paris he sees the full extent of the emotional, psychological, and material degradation of colonialism. Césaire’s exile, like Baldwin’s, is characterized by an isolated stillness; on his return to Martinique, he moves through the island like a ghost. He searches for anything that may be open to cooptation and reinvigoration. Césaire’s life and writings oscillated between direct, aggressive action, and a type of meditative self-reflection, and critique, as discovered on his return to Martinique and sustained through Martinique’s political and cultural exile. I turn to

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<sup>73</sup> Baldwin, “Every Good-Bye Ain’t Gone, in *Collected*, 778.

Césaire to examine the process of attempting to leverage the gains and insights garnered through an experience of exile into a collective political process.

Césaire conceived of a distinct liberatory politics that sought to overturn the inhumane existence imposed on the colonized, and second, sought to remake individual and social life through new forms of self-determination predicated on invention and creativity. As Frantz Fanon argued, a decolonial liberatory politics must stop nothing short of “set[ting] afoot a new [hu]man.”<sup>74</sup> These utopian dreams proved unfulfilled. Yet the vestiges of this liberatory framework infuse contemporary hopes, if often only as a plaguing deficit.<sup>75</sup> As Achille Mbembe reflects, in analyzing that decolonial moment we are left wondering whether those liberatory hopes were “nothing but a fantasy without substance?”<sup>76</sup> This chapter, through focusing on the life and work of Aimé Césaire, argues that this residual wonder about the merits of decolonial hope pertains to a misapprehension of the different temporal and social dynamics of liberation. In short, I argue that these dynamics can best be grasped through disaggregating the long, amorphous *durée* of liberation into two distinct activities of abolition.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 316.

“It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man... So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies which draw their inspiration from her. Humanity is waiting for something other from us than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature... But if we want humanity to advance a step farther, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries... For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.”

<sup>75</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004)

<sup>76</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia, 2021), 4.

<sup>77</sup> Mbembe, in a discussion of the histories of Haiti and Liberia, recognizes this process as a dual abolition, where the formal and institutional colonial constraints must be eradicated, along with their internalized psychological and social forms. See Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

Thinkers of political change tend to think in terms of macro and structural change. In short, revolutionary political transformation depends on a reorganization of society and its connective tissue. Such modes of analysis tend to overlook the plain fact that everyday life continues even amongst desired revolutionary change. Revolutionary thinkers rarely consider home. Lorraine Hansberry was most assuredly a revolutionary thinker, but her chosen frames of investigation were intimate relationships, rooms, and homes. Hansberry developed her artistic voice as an exile within the American house. Her diaries and letters reveal her deep loneliness and estrangement, emerging from a confluence of her struggle as a black, lesbian woman in the U.S and the idiosyncrasies of her personality. I characterize Hansberry's internal exile through two components: the felt interconnectedness of personal and social struggles, and her effort to place both struggles within the terrain of home. Hansberry is a writer not of large-scale social struggle, but of intimacy, where the constricting forces wrought by history, racial and sexual hierarchies, are challenged in the confines of everyday relationships. In this way, home is not simply the site of domestic life, but an interconnected space that mediates material, historical, philosophical, psychological, and political realities. Hansberry offers no blueprint for dismantling the 'U.S. house,' or the 'heteronormative house.' Instead, she sought ways of construing intimate and domestic spaces that could accommodate the fluidity of life that had been previously discarded.

## VI: The Views from Exile

In reading Baldwin, Césaire, and Hansberry one is struck by their hope, or belief that they might affirm new models of being and building political bonds that might generate lasting political transformations of ideologies, structures, and relationships. As I noted in the beginning of this Introduction, Hansberry qualified her experience of the late 1950s as, “one of the most affirmative periods in history.”<sup>78</sup> Of course, retrospectively, one may dismiss this sentiment as a type of romantic optimism only possible before the assassinations, before the litany of failed institutions and policies that betrayed their original promise, and before the promises that were never fully delivered. Indeed, I argued at the beginning of this introduction that the U.S. finds itself living through the wake of a second failed reconstruction. Part of what makes contemporary pessimism and frustrations so severe is that the hopes expressed above by Hansberry, notes which are similarly found in Césaire and Baldwin, feel so distant; at times contemporary readers seem likely to find them as naïve and misguided.

However, I argue here that Hansberry’s optimism, while of course embedded in 1959 and looking onto the cusp of the early 1960s, is also in part structured by her way of ‘seeing’ the world, which I argue is structured by a type of exile. It may seem odd to structure a political theory dissertation around a novelist and essayist, a poet politician, and a playwright. However, political theory and art share a fundamental core, which is based on the illumination of a certain way of seeing. As Sheldon Wolin argued, “political

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<sup>78</sup> in *Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry*, 70.

philosophy constitutes a form of ‘seeing’ political phenomena and that the way in which the phenomena will be visualized depends in large measure on where the viewer ‘stands.’”<sup>79</sup> The fundamental point that undergirds this dissertation is that experience of exile shared, yet idiosyncratically lived, by Baldwin, Césaire, and Hansberry, produced a way of seeing that infused their own writing, and from which we, those crippled by stasis, frustration, and apprehension that the only possible movement is degenerative, stand to benefit. In this way, my work joins a burgeoning literature that seeks to build political thought from the inside outward, from the intimate to the structural and collective.<sup>80</sup>

Collectively, this vision reorients the levers of historical change away from the moments of great dramatic tension; here may one think of Césaire’s involvement with departmentalization, and places that movement with a procession of unremarkable and small moments. This expansion of the possibilities inherent in everyday, quotidian moments, requires an effort to stay still, to slow things down. This is done not as an effort of retreat or acceptance of the status quo, but to find space to develop new relationships. Caught in the wake of this second failed reconstruction, thinkers like Robin D.G. Kelley seek to rescue an engine of hope that grand transformations are possible, however far off they seem. I have no way of knowing whether such transformations are possible. However, I argue what is perhaps more politically salient is to reinvigorate the democratic hope that small, unremarkable decisions and choices are also an engine of change, if only we may see them differently. These thinkers help the contemporary reader

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<sup>79</sup> Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>80</sup> Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

to see and feel the responsibility inherent in choosing meaning and action in seemingly unremarkable moments.

Lastly, the Baldwin and Césaire chapters put each thinker in dialogue with female contemporaries: Baldwin with Audre Lorde and Césaire with both his wife, Suzanne Césaire, and Guadeloupean novelist Maryse Condé. This framing speaks to unresolved questions of sexuality and gender, which are also picked up in the dramatic work of Hansberry. This method serves two additional purposes. First, exile forces a confrontation of both change and inheritance. The pain of exile is often through a type of realization that the forces that produced and reproduced one's situation are inaccessible. In this vein, Lorde, Suzanne Césaire, and Condé, are not simply correctives to Baldwin and Aimé Césaire, but rather partners. I've argued that exile permits a certain type of *seeing*, where the illusions, habits, and perversities of a political order, say in 1940s Harlem or the French Antilles, are at once falling away yet seeking to reconstitute themselves. Within this mode of seeing, the exile focuses on both possibility and limitation, where one seeks to fortify his or herself in coming to terms with the constraints and narrow channels of possibility in one's given situation. To navigate this situation is not a solitary act, but a collective effort to build a new atmosphere of possibility. This is not created through intellectual effort alone, but must be lived, navigated, and survived through wit, affection, critique, acceptance, and hope.

Purpose two is that these exchanges embody what their respective insights point towards. Living through a historical moment characterized by exile, Baldwin, Césaire, and Hansberry illuminate the psychological, institutional/leadership, and familial

dynamics that must be lived through in seeking political transformation in moments of instability and potential transition. Their writing deals with these themes directly, and their respective exchanges and critiques with one another focus attention on navigating the immediacy of their own respective moments. These are not simply questions for tomorrow. In other words, this dissertation examines how a certain constellation of writers, dramatists, and political actors, through both their creative output and dialogue with one another, illuminated a certain set of dynamics that reappear for us now.

Earlier I made the case for understanding this historical moment as shaded by a second failed reconstruction. Both in contemporary political writing, as well as common sentiments and everyday practices, the U.S. is dominated by a feeling of being caught in a perverse type of stasis, and the result is growing pessimism that political action from the margins can impress larger, cultural and institutional changes. Current pessimism is that all novelty and revolutionary effort, if directed through the medium of traditional politics, is bound to be subsumed and appropriated to perpetuate the status quo. An aim too far off in the distance can often also function as a type of trap, because it reinforces the notion that the present is a lost cause and corrupted, only here to serve a future that those in the present will never realize. Can we keep that horizon, while also increasing the dignity and responsibility contained in the unremarkable decisions and choices that people are being asked to face right now. Change involves both horizons.

## **Chapter 1:**

### ***James Baldwin and Building Love out of Chaos***

*I have been told that there are two human responses to the perception of chaos: naming and violence...There is, however, a third response to chaos, which I have not heard about, which is stillness. Such stillness can be passivity and dumbfoundedness; it can be paralytic fear. But it can also be art.*

~ Toni Morrison

*In France I had to live in a kind of vacuum, absolute silence. I didn't speak French, and I couldn't understand a word. So I had to listen to what I had been avoiding. I had to start facing where I really came from, the speech I really spoke...something about the silence in which I myself was living began to help me because I was able to go back to something in myself in that silence—the silence of living in Paris—which allowed me to write... I could never have written without that silence.*

~ James Baldwin

### ***I. Introduction***

In the above epigraph Toni Morrison identifies two dominant political impulses that arise in times of chaos: naming and violence. Morrison's assertion occupies that paradoxical space of incisive generality; she appears to point to an important truth, but it remains unclear under just what conditions such a truth might apply. I argue here that Morrison's claim is most resonant when thinking through moments of political failure, or immobility, when one's ostensible selection of political horizons appear to be fixed, tried, and futile. From this ground, this essay focuses on the life and work of James Baldwin to explicate the possibilities of stillness that Morrison gestures toward. I argue that Baldwin's early

experience of exile, beginning in his 1948 flight to Paris, prepared Baldwin to think through the problems of failure, isolation, and political frustration that marked his own personal struggles as well as the racial politics of the 1960s and its aftermath. Baldwin's insights into stillness as a response to the political chaos of his moment is instructive for thinking through these problems as they impinge on the contemporary. This invocation of stillness is not a *being* still or being silent, nor is it passivity or paralysis; rather, it is an invitation to take up failed projects of membership and belonging, which Baldwin found embodied in his experience of exile.

In the proceeding sections I seek to examine Baldwin's experience of exile as a type of practice of *stillness* that functions as the condition of possibility for thinking through how love, or erotic knowledge, could be used to forge new bonds of belonging. Baldwin is concerned with how we might cultivate ourselves to differently embody moments of intimacy, so that we may open and create new instincts and capacities necessary for navigating both intimate and political spaces. I contextualize Baldwin in his historical moment less as a reactive political writer, as he was often accused of being, and instead as a writer out of step with his moment. I show how Baldwin utilized his fiction, especially his later fiction, as an experimenting ground for exploring how his ideas of love and stillness might interrupt the deleterious single-minded and ideologically saturated politics of his moment. I then turn to Baldwin's experience of exile as an opening of Baldwin's ability to 'love his own otherness,' which functions as the foundation of building capacities of love or erotic knowledge. It is in attention to these capacities that I hope escape from patterns of naming and violence might be found.

## *II. Baldwin, from his moment to the Contemporary*

The early civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s highlighted the multifaceted ways in which the U.S. racial system of domination, and its resultant material disparities, relied upon deep structures of misnaming, or misrecognition.<sup>81</sup> Baldwin is both of this moment, and its aftermath, when attempts at reparation devolve into continued practices of misnaming and violence. In a 1980 essay for *Esquire* Baldwin lamented what he perceived as the inexorable drift of U.S. racial politics, following the promise and shortcomings of the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s: “*What happens, black poet Langston Hughes asks, to a dream deferred? What happens, one may now ask, when a reality finds itself on a collision course with a fantasy?*” Baldwin’s answer insinuates an odd situation of a fixed, yet relentless, disorder. Baldwin continues: “the white people of this country have become, for the most part, sleepwalkers, and their somnambulation is reflected in the caliber of U.S. politics and politicians. And it helps explain why the blacks, who walked all those dusty miles and endured all that slaughter to get the vote, are now not voting.”<sup>82</sup> Baldwin’s emphasis on the torpor and passivity of the American public directs our attention to a political situation which is at once static, yet latently explosive.

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<sup>81</sup> When viewed in this light, the early artistic movements of the Harlem Renaissance, exemplified by Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes, was a creative explosion built on countering such practices. See, Alain Locke ed. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992 [1925])

<sup>82</sup> James Baldwin, “Dark Days,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 788.

The unfulfilled promise of the civil rights movement: the creation of a multiracial democracy built through bonds of belonging that transcend the racial and sexual violence foundational to U.S. political subjectivities,<sup>83</sup> resulted in a mixture of detachment, indifference, anger, and frustration. In this regard, ‘a failure’ to constitute new bonds of belonging both served to hold existing norms in place, while nonetheless increasing the pressure on the stability of that status quo. This pressure is felt in oscillating practices of naming and violence. Previous political paths, including practices of naming, which as Baldwin suggests, are an attempt, “to control the universe by describing it,” so as to construe alternative horizons, are increasingly seen as futile.<sup>84</sup> As a result, violence offers itself as either a means of control (traditionally aligning more with, but not exclusive to, a conservative politics) or of potential transformation (aligning more with a leftist politics). The U.S. political realities laid bare since 2016 prove Baldwin prescient in this regard.

Nevertheless, what I want to suggest here is that Baldwin’s invocation of chaos, while somewhat counterintuitive, helps to clarify a form of lived experience embodied by living in the wake of frustrated attempts to refashion or make new bonds of belonging. From this perspective, chaos is not simply synonymous with overwhelming disorder, or uncontrolled action, but arises within the frustration of perceiving all potential avenues of action as untenable. The history of black fiction writers, from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to Michael Thomas’s more recent award-winning novel, *Man Gone Down*, has

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<sup>83</sup> Ann Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” *The Journal of American History* Dec. 2001: 829-865.

<sup>84</sup> The increasing appeal of pessimistic political thought reflect this impulse. See, Lewis R. Gordon, Annie Menzel, George Shulman, and Jasmine Syedullah, “Afro Pessimism,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 17, no. 1 (2017): 105-137

sought to recount how such internally fragmenting and frustrating experiences permeate black life.<sup>85</sup> Cornel West argues that this lived internal fragmentation, or the “paradox of Afro-American history,” emanates from structural political conditions that repeatedly close avenues of action for Black Americans even amidst ostensible change: “Afro-Americans fully enter the modern world precisely when the postmodern period commences; that Afro-Americans gain a foothold in the industrial order just as the postindustrial order begins; and that Afro-Americans procure skills, values, and mores efficacious for survival and sustenance in modernity as the decline of modernity sets in.”<sup>86</sup> Baldwin’s writing and thought reflects this disjointedness between black self-actualization and a white dominated world that continually remakes itself, seemingly one-step ahead of one’s process of growth and self-actualization. Of course, this dynamic of striving towards a set of social standards that dissolve once they are reached, in a type of mirage effect, is not particular to the black experience of the 1940s and 1950s, but it is a particular expression of a more general phenomenon. Furthermore, it permits an understanding that alternative avenues of growth, achievement, interpersonal connections, and community must be sought if one is to survive. As I discuss, Baldwin quite quickly realized his individual survival, as well as the larger political struggles of

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<sup>85</sup> The narrator in Thomas’s novel painfully articulates the paradoxical, chaotic feeling of at once being overdetermined and out of control: “I think, though, that it would be hard to be a twenty-first-century hobo, especially one who was badly injured. I should’ve been born somewhere else, sometime else, when I could walk and ride the rails in any direction. But the F only runs from Queens to Coney Island and perhaps not even the blues could sing or heal the damage incurred in a failed escape, a botched suicide—broke limbed, frozen, and mute. And that would matter, being unable to sing but still remembering—riding the F inbound and out.” *Man Gone Down* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 151.

<sup>86</sup> Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance!* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 44.

black peoples in the U.S., would require experimentation outside of traditional norms and structures.

Extending the structural and personal tensions offered by West, a recent and diverse set of political and literary minded theorists have utilized modes of personal self-reflection as a method of illuminating the political and social structures that engender such experiences of fragmentation and the constrictions such realities place on the horizons of hope.<sup>87</sup> Fred Moten's theorizations of fugitivity,<sup>88</sup> the afro-pessimism articulated by Frank Wilderson III and Jared Sexton,<sup>89</sup> the 'wake work' of Christina Sharpe, and Saidiya Hartman's explorations into the possibilities and limitations of pan-African identity and homecoming<sup>90</sup> represent diverse works in contemporary black thought that seek to chart possibilities of belonging amidst the form of chaos, misnaming, and violence. While in conversation with one another, these thinkers offer divergent and idiosyncratic visions onto the limits of political possibility. Nonetheless, what they hold in common is an initial analytical focus on lived, intimate spaces as a lens onto the chaotic contraction of possibility described above—along with the limits of extant political narratives. Each then seeks to abstract away from those spaces and onto a new indeterminate theoretical terrain.

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<sup>87</sup> See: Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007: 38-39); Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World Press, 2019); Frank B Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020); William David Hart, "Constellations: Capitalism, Antiracism, Afro-pessimism, and Black Optimism." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 39(1) 2018: 5-33.

<sup>88</sup> Moten, *Stolen Life: consent not to be a single being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Stefano Harney & Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).

<sup>89</sup> Frank B Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020); Jared Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016).

<sup>90</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

This movement is exemplified in Saidiya Hartman's penetrating work, *Lose your Mother*, which focuses on her journey along the Ghanaian slave route and her reflections on the insufficiency of both American and Pan-African identity. Recounting her experience on a cramped bus with other academics from across the African diaspora, Hartman illuminates the frustrations of encountering the limits of dominant horizons of political possibility (i.e. pan-African identity) in intimate spaces:

The thicket of misunderstanding grew denser and more impassable as our journey continued. Two months of working daily together had only made it more difficult for us to find a common vocabulary about slavery, or anything for that matter. No matter how expansive the category "sister," I always fell outside its embrace. Whatever remained of Pan-Africanism, which had espoused solidarity among all African people, promoted the ideal of continental fraternity and sorority, and encouraged each and every one of us in the diaspora to dream of the continent as our home no longer included the likes of me.<sup>91</sup>

These are the frustrations and complications of the intimate: conversations that misfire, forced relationships, talking past one another, the friction created by ostensibly incompatible worldviews, uneven power relations, the longings for care and connection that are not met, and the realization of unshared hopes. However, is this not also the space of politics?

The dominant impulse in such contemporary theorizations is to look for possibility beyond the intimate confines that ground the initial analysis in search of an elsewhere.<sup>92</sup> The scale of analysis, and thus also of hope, quickly rushes infinitely

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<sup>91</sup> *Lose Your Mother*, 219.

<sup>92</sup> Hartman reflects this desire quite poetically: "It was these shared dreams that might open a common road to a future in which the longings and disappointed hopes of captives, slaves, and fugitives might be realized...It was the dream of an elsewhere, with all its promises and dangers, where the stateless might, at last, thrive." *Lose Your Mother*, 234.

outward towards the unnamed, the global, the slave, and the fugitive, in order to name a future, or a place, and bonds of belonging which one cannot yet fully see.<sup>93</sup> This is at once admirable and stimulating. However, the question remains will that *place*, whenever it is arrived at, be devoid of the endemic problems and frustrations that saturate our contemporary moment. Put another way, what is elided in a movement away from the lived and intimate in order to name the abstract and distant? One possible response is that more of ourselves than we wish is likely to arrive with us.<sup>94</sup>

Baldwin refuses this theoretical move; he remains fixated on the lived and intimate, especially the moments of frustration, stasis, and loneliness, as the disused site of political possibility. It is not clear to Baldwin that any “hypothetical tomorrow” is likely to be devoid of the problems that structure today’s intimate spaces—if one is willing to linger in them a bit longer and put him or herself under a more rigorous examination.<sup>95</sup> The political impulse cannot simply be a call for new names—as not all that needs addressing can be named.<sup>96</sup>

Baldwin’s novels fixate on precisely these moments of frustration, striving, and misfiring. For example, Baldwin’s 1963 novel, *Another Country*, tells the story of a

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<sup>93</sup> See Juliet Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>94</sup> This is precisely one of Baldwin’s critiques of the 1956 “Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists,” where Baldwin writing approvingly of the comments of George Lamming, suggests that little can be solved politically through an affirmation of conceptual agreement: “He [Lamming] suggested that it was important to bear in mind that the word Negro meant black—and meant nothing more than that; and commented on the great variety of heritages, experiences, and points of view which the conference had brought together under the heading of this single noun. He wished to suggest that the nature of power was unrelated to pigmentation, that bad faith was a phenomenon which was independent of race.” Baldwin, “Princes and Powers,” in *Collected*, 160.

<sup>95</sup> Baldwin, “Princes and Powers,” 160-163.

<sup>96</sup> Audre Lorde expands on this notion in “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, Ca: Crossing Press, 2007), 38.

young, black American, Rufus Scott, living in 1950s New York, whose incapacity to work through the hegemonic and racist society that he sublimates into self-destructive behavior including his refusal of homosexual love, his terrorization and violent beating of his girlfriend, Leona, and culminating in his suicide.<sup>97</sup> Facing a similar circumstance of chaos as described above Rufus enacts a series of violent and self-destructive acts. In short, and as will be examined later, Rufus reproduces the violence and domination of the very system of racial exclusion and sexual hierarchy that he attempts to flee. Rufus represents the ways in which the violence of hierarchical systems of oppression tend to reproduce themselves, revealing just how challenging it proves to move outside of them.<sup>98</sup>

These two forms of response to chaos, practices of naming that hope to ‘tether us to particular narratives of the past,’ in hopes of making clearer alternative futures, and self-destructive violence, proliferate in the present. Following Baldwin, I think there is good reason to find this oscillation inadequate. The undesirability of the self-destructive violence of Rufus ought to be apparent enough, and I will later analyze these slippages towards self-annihilation. However, what remains insufficient about current practices of naming? Here, part of the answer is, as suggested earlier, inherent in the transition from the lived to the abstract. However, I also want to suggest that practices of naming often

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<sup>97</sup> Rufus’s suicide, he ultimately jumps off the George Washington Bridge, mirrors the 1946 suicide of Baldwin’s then best friend, who Baldwin was quite cruel to some days before his suicide. See, “The New Lost Generation,” in *Collected*, 659-668.

<sup>98</sup> Recent work on fugitivity by Fred Moten attests to this recurring challenge for black life and how he envisions continued resistance: Fred Moten, *Stolen Life: consent not to be a single being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine: consent not to be a single being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018)

reverse the process of creation, where externally defined categories are sought and solidified. Clarity, the naming of new places, new peoples, new possible bonds, seems to me a necessary and enriching political practice. However, such practices are not a substitute for one's ability to generate self-awareness and mutual understanding, of catching people and relationships under novel moments of illumination. Here Baldwin finds himself near to Audre Lorde's notion of 'erotic knowledge,' where the focus is on fostering capacities and relationships of responsibility as opposed to a shared outlook onto the world:

When we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society.<sup>99</sup>

In this sense then there is little space between the intimate and the political. This is not to suggest that the intimate and the political neatly overlap or can be cleanly transposed onto one another. Rather, I argue that the personal capacities, forms of knowledge, and relationship to otherness required to navigate intimate and political spaces cannot be so easily separated. As Baldwin, repeatedly suggests, it is in this way that private and public failings can be so tightly knit together. As I argue next, Baldwin's later novels represent experimentations in how such activity can be developed in practice.

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<sup>99</sup> Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*. Out & Out Pamphlet; No. 3. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Trumansburg, N.Y.; Freedom, Calif.: Out & Out Books ; Distributed by Crossing Press, 1978.

### *III. Late Baldwin and Experimenting in Love*

“I feel, therefore I can be free.” ~ Audre Lorde

By 1968, five years removed from his most public heights as public ‘witness’ to the Civil Rights movement, Baldwin was increasingly ostracized from both the mainstream left and the growing black radical political movements. The assassinations, frustrations, violence, and disappointments of the previous years resulted in new, and often more militant, projects of naming that sought to redefine and freshly demarcate the limits of political possibility for U.S. race relations.<sup>100</sup> By 1968 Eldridge Cleaver, Amiri Baraka, and Harold Cruse had all quite visibly and quite unsparingly eviscerated Baldwin in print. Baldwin’s artistic work was, and is largely still, read as suffering as a result. Baldwin’s 1968 novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, was dismissed as a poor polemical novel written to appease his young, radical critics. Reviewing the novel for the *New York Times*, Mario Puzo categorized it as “propagandistic fiction,” and argued that Baldwin, perhaps, no longer “believes this is...the time for art... [perhaps Baldwin thinks] art is too strong, too gamy a dish for a prophet to offer now.”<sup>101</sup> Here Puzo is imperceptive. And while it is true that as a cohesive piece of fiction *Tell Me How Long* is not Baldwin’s finest work, it nevertheless represents a transgressive artistic attempt to explore how cultivating erotic knowledge holds possibilities for escaping the cyclical practices of violence and naming that Baldwin sought to escape.

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<sup>100</sup> Kwame Ture & Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage, 1992 [1967])

<sup>101</sup> Mario Puzo, “Review: Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone,” *The New York Times*: June 23, 1968: <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-tell.html>

Before moving to Baldwin's fiction, I want to solidify this point and draw out the link between the intimate and political and its relation to the erotic. In political theory one routine method of straddling this link is through discussions of ideology. Ideologies, such as white supremacy, function to both support and justify the dominant economic and social orders, while also embedding themselves as modes of seeing and interpreting the world. In short, ideologies also function as interpretive shortcuts for translating one's relationships to others and themselves.<sup>102</sup> And as Baldwin notes, these modes of interpretation become instinctive and engrained, to the point where they become quite difficult to cleanly separate as something wholly external: "the world in which people find themselves is not simply a vindictive plot imposed on them from above; it is also the world they have helped to make."<sup>103</sup> The effects of the internalization of that system, and one's attempts to escape it, as Rufus Scott's self-annihilation in *Another Country* reflects, are much more difficult to trace out than the brute external realities of the system. It takes a different kind of work. In a 1981 interview, Lorde speaks directly to this point:

I try to say that the erotic has been used against us, even the word itself, so often, that we have been taught to suspect what is deepest in ourselves, and that is the way we learn to testify against ourselves, against our feelings. When we talk about racism or nationalism we can see it. When we're talking in terms of our lives and survival as women, we don't. The way you get people to testify against themselves is not constantly to have police tactics and oppressive techniques. What you do is to build it in, so people learn to distrust everything in themselves that has not been sanctioned, to reject what is most creative in themselves-to have them reject it to begin with, so you don't even need to stamp it out.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> See Baldwin, in *Collected*, "Stranger in the Village," 117-129.

<sup>103</sup> Baldwin, in *Collected*, "The Crusade of Indignation," 608.

<sup>104</sup> Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, "An Interview with Audre Lorde," *Signs* 6(4) 1981:730.

This distrust of one's own instincts is a problem for both the intimate and the political. Following Baldwin and Lorde, I argue here that this regaining of one's instincts, of one's capacities for creation and action outside of received ideological constraints, is the basis for both the regeneration of personal and political relationships of belonging.

Turning back to *Tell Me How Long*, I argue that Baldwin did not aim to simply echo the then nascent radical political discourse; rather, Baldwin sought to infuse the moment with the attention to the erotic and intimate noted above. Baldwin sought to linger in the latent explosiveness of the moment, in the wake of assassinations, racial violence, and the emergence of a new political language of 'Black Power,' to engage how love, or what Lorde calls, 'erotic knowledge,' might transform one's understanding about the foundational levers of political transformation. *Tell Me How Long* recounts the life of Leo Proudhammer: a nearing 40-year-old, mid-life crisis prone, eminent black actor, who functions as a channel for Baldwin's own self-reflections, recounts the story of his surprisingly ascendant career, bisexual romantic relationships, and his childhood in Harlem, from the confines of a hospital bed where he convalesces from a heart attack suffered on stage. Like the literature discussed above, the novel fixates on how political and social condition's structure and ostensibly overdetermine intimate spaces. Differently however, Baldwin never pulls away from the intimate; his hope remains there. Instead, he utilizes the novelistic form, its ability to quickly shift time, place, and sets of relationships, to examine how love might be accessed to broaden the avenues of possibility in spaces overdetermined by racial and sexual hierarchies.

I focus on one of these instances here to explicate Baldwin's transgressive thought on how erotic knowledge can both be cultivated and deployed to break through the production and reproduction of racial and sexual violence endemic to U.S. society. Baldwin does not seek to add to the language of political structure or identity. Power is not gained from seeking external control or stability. Rather, Baldwin works from "within outward," in order to remake the limits of political possibility.<sup>105</sup> Mid-way through the novel Leo recalls a night as a young teenager of physical love with his older brother, Caleb. Prior to the encounter Leo recounts his feeling of inner stasis, that peculiar form of chaos, and the prospects for his own life: "I was very nearly lost because my elders, through no fault of their own, had betrayed me. Perhaps I loved my father, but I did not want to live his life. I did not want to become like him, he was the living example of defeat. He could not correct me. None of my elders could correct me because I was appalled by their lives."<sup>106</sup> Leo suggests he has no models for how to live, only object lessons in pain. There are no paths that seem tenable, no trodden paths that have proven successful.

Here Baldwin charges the moment with the multifaceted ways in which U.S. racial hierarchy and oppression have constricted Leo's elders, but also how Leo is doubly burdened as both witness to and victim of this same racial order: Leo and Caleb are both subjected to police violence, parental violence, as well as the quotidian practices of everyday racism buttressing the American racial order. Anticipating the disenchantment

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<sup>105</sup> Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]), 53-59.

<sup>106</sup> Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long*, 159.

of the 1980s and 1990s, Leo perceived no avenues in which his dreams and hopes could be realized. It is out of this internal discord that Baldwin depicts the physical love between Leo and Caleb:

I held my brother very close, I kissed him and caressed him and I felt a pain and wonder I had never felt before. My brother's heart was broken; I knew it from his touch. In all the great, vast dirty world, he trusted the love of one person only, his brother, his brother, who was in his arms. And I thought, Yes. Yes. Yes. I'll love you, Caleb, I'll love you for ever... I was full of attention, I was full of wonder. My brother had never, for me, had a body before. And, in truth, I had never had a body before, either, though I carried it about with me and occasionally experimented with it.<sup>107</sup>

I have yet to come across this scene commented upon in the Baldwin literature, which is unusual for this is a daring and radical scene to depict in 1968, especially devoid of any authorial admonishment. So, it is worth ruminating what is one to take away from this scene? It of course does not seem plausible that Baldwin is after a defense of incest, nor does it seem likely that it is simply the result of artistic eccentricity. As will be discussed below, Baldwin was a deliberate and intentional writer and saw himself as strategically offering his artistic intervention against an ideological single-mindedness (both in U.S. liberalism and aspects of the black radical response to it) that was destructive.

This scene is disturbing, for it is irrefutably a scene of abuse and trauma. It is important to stress that the value in examining the scene cannot come from any literal interpretation, but from attempting to understand what Baldwin was trying to artistically

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<sup>107</sup> Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long*, 164.

accomplish. For, of course, Caleb is taking something from his younger brother, hurting him in ways that Leo may not realize for some time, and imposing a trauma that may never leave him. Yet, nevertheless, in the face of overwhelming, generational despair, as Leo recognizes in his father and older brother, Baldwin turns to the physical act of brotherly love: why? It seems to me that Baldwin was searching for a scene in which two young, black men could most exist outside the reaches of the type of ideological interpretative instincts discussed above. Leo does not know how to react, no previous instinct is available to him, so he can only exist “full of attention,” and “full of wonder.” In a sense Leo is *still*, and in so doing, approximates a type of love. Here I take love to be the situation, or “a state of being” where one is most contented in being oneself, in all its incompleteness and fragmentation, yet also remains the most open to change.<sup>108</sup> It is a simultaneous state of comfort and risk, acceptance and growth. The scene between Caleb and Leo manifests these dynamics, albeit in a way that would shock or offend most readers, but also perhaps then designed to leave an impression. This is the moment of transformation of Leo, when lacking elders, models, trodden pathways, or hope, Leo does not name a new identity, a new distant horizon for development, or adhere to a novel authority—but instead, begins to value his instincts. However, the moment has the opposite transformative effect for Caleb. The novel tracks his cratering, diminishment of self-belief, and his ultimate submission to fundamentalist Christianity. The twin arc of the

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<sup>108</sup> Baldwin offers a similar invocation in the *Fire Next Time*: “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. And I submit, then, that the racial tensions that menace Americans today have little to do with real antipathy—on the contrary, indeed—and are involved only symbolically with color. These tensions are tooted in the very same depths as those from which love springs, or murder.” in *Collected*, p. 341

two brothers reveals the twin edgedness of love and abuse, and self-annihilation and empowerment.

Writing later than Baldwin, and with a more developed conceptual language, Lorde affords a sharper insight into the possibilities, and tragedies, latent within the erotic experience of Caleb and Leo. For Lorde the connection between love and abuse is essential. This is not to suggest the love and abuse are themselves imbricated, which would invoke the tired tropes of: 'I hurt you because I love you.' Rather for Lorde, the connection between love and abuse arises out of their shared site of possibility: vulnerability, openness lends themselves to both abuse and love. Despite Baldwin's clumsy handling of trying to create such a moment between Caleb and Leo, their physical exchange functions as such a moment. Leo gives attention to his brother, senses his body, mind, and emotional life that he had no insight into before; this sensation of sensory expanse Leo also experiences within himself. Erotic knowledge, as Lorde argues, emerges from 'within outward,' and exceeds the conceptual and ideological instincts which one holds: "[t]o refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd."<sup>109</sup> The erotic demands the expansion of our consciousness of our own feelings, capacities, and emotions. The inability to commit to the development of such knowledge is the

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<sup>109</sup> Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 59.

acceptance to either perpetuate or accept abuse, to remain in the realm of the ideologically objectified.

Leo glimpses what it entails to collaborate and share as opposed to abuse: “This brings me to the last consideration of the erotic. To share the power of each other’s feelings is different from using another’s feelings as we would use a Kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse.”<sup>110</sup> Such an experience, as articulated here by Lorde, and narrativized by Baldwin, falls outside of traditional practices of naming and violence. For naming and violence work from the outside in, and the more they are practiced, become programmatic, or secondhand, the less each can attend to novelty. Naming and violence become tools of habitual practice. To not use another as *Kleenex*, as a tool, requires stillness, or the deliberate patience to let what is foreign or strange within oneself, or another, act as the creative force within an experience.<sup>111</sup>

#### ***IV. Baldwin and his Critics***

As suggested earlier, Baldwin received harsh and often cruel treatment during his life, where one assumed set of Baldwin’s commitments (e.g. liberal cosmopolitanism) were seen as undermining another set (e.g. black identity). This was perhaps most directly, and

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<sup>110</sup> Lorde, “Uses of The Erotic,” 58.

<sup>111</sup> Roderick Ferguson describes this practice as the development of, “resources for establishing a will to connect, especially in those areas where certain connections were often prohibited.” In, “Of Sensual Matters: On Audre Lorde’s ‘Poetry Is Not a Luxury’ and ‘Uses of the Erotic,’” *WSQ*, 40:3&4 (Winter 2012): 302

painfully, delivered by a now infamous critique from Eldridge Cleaver in his 1968 work *Soul on Ice*. In his critique of Baldwin, Cleaver suggests that Baldwin's homosexuality and white, liberal affinities undermine his aspiration for black radicality:

[I]n James Baldwin's work [is] the most grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in the writings of any black American writer of note in our time... The gulf between an audacious, boot-licking Uncle Tom and an intellectual buckdancer is filled only with sophistication and style. On second thought, Uncle Tom comes off much cleaner.<sup>112</sup>

Cleaver's critique is scathing, personal, and attacks Baldwin on what would become familiar ground: namely, that certain aspects of Baldwin's character: e.g. his affection for whites, his sexuality, his sentimentality etc. led him to sacrifice revolutionary political commitments to art and a politics of reconciliation. What elides Cleaver here is that Baldwin's experimentations with stillness, and the erotic, are attempts to avoid the type of ideological sublimation Cleaver produces in his critique. In his critique Cleaver dismisses Baldwin's racial politics, by not only questioning his black authenticity but his 'manhood'.

By the late 1960s and through the 1970's Baldwin lost his mantle as *witness* to the civil rights movement and found himself displaced by the burgeoning Black Panthers and other young, black radical political movements. Baldwin was passé. Henry Louis Gates Jr. articulates the common interpretation that Baldwin's artistic output suffered as he attempted to wed himself to the radical movements of the late 1960s and 1970s (spurred

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<sup>112</sup> Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968), 99.

on by the type of criticism delivered by Cleaver and other black radicals). Gates contends that Baldwin grew “desperate to be one of us,” and in so doing “lost his skepticism, his critical independence.”<sup>113</sup> Here Gates echoes Puzo’s critique. The effect of Gates’ critique is that it makes Baldwin acquiescent to the bullying of his audience, whether by Cleaver, Amiri Baraka, or countless others, helping to explain his contradictions and tensions, such as the relegation of his sexuality “to his private life”.<sup>114</sup> Or, these modes of critique remove the question of audience altogether, and Baldwin is disconnected from his social context in order to answer questions constructed within theoretical languages which he did not speak.<sup>115</sup>

I want to suggest that this interpretation neglects Baldwin as a thinker speaking to and against an audience. It is revealing that it tends to represent Baldwin as both a man fundamentally divided against himself, and thus whose thought needs a retrospective ironing-out, or at times cleaving apart, as well as a thinker almost wholly reactive to political sentiment (at least later in his life). Yet one should consider that it is after Cleaver’s public attacks (first published in article form in 1966), when Baldwin supposedly was *desperate* for praise from Cleaver and the young, black radical movement of the late 1960s and 1970s,<sup>116</sup> that Baldwin places black, male erotic love, and its possibility for upending heterosexual and racist domination, at the center of his

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<sup>113</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House, 1997), 18.

<sup>114</sup> Douglas Field, “Looking for Jimmy Baldwin: Sex, Privacy, and Black Nationalist Fervor,” *Callaloo* 27(2) 2004: 457-480; William J. Spurlin, “Culture, Rhetoric, and Queer Identity,” in *James Baldwin Now*, 103-121.

<sup>115</sup> See Brim, *Baldwin and Queer Theory*.

<sup>116</sup> Baldwin received public criticism from other prominent black radicals, including Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed, that linked his sexuality with an ostensible sympathy for white liberals. In 1963 Baraka mirrored Cleaver’s critique of Baldwin’s ‘anti-blackness’ in writing of Baldwin, “turned white...there would be no more noise from [him].” David Leeming, *James Baldwin* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1994), 304.

novels *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) and *Just Above my Head* (1979). As opposed to acquiescing to insults about his sexuality and the radicality of his political vision, Baldwin looks to be speaking back to his critics, not yielding to them.<sup>117</sup>

The last lines of *Tell Me How Long*, delivered by Leo hint at Baldwin's own self-understanding: "I went away to Europe, alone. Then, I came back. I first did the movie, *Big Deal*, not a very good movie, really, and then I did a new play, and so found myself, presently, *standing in the wings again, waiting for my cue.*"<sup>118</sup> These lines signal that despite consistently refusing a role as political spokesman, instead holding onto the position of artist, Baldwin saw himself as always performing a necessary, and neglected, social function. For Baldwin, the function of the artist was to grasp the unseen underpinnings of human action, amid their force upon the world, projecting how such underpinnings will escape the assumed pathways guided by human intention:

A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven. One cannot possibly build a school, teach a child, or drive a car without taking some things for granted. The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.<sup>119</sup>

This passage speaks to a fundamental insight, one I have not seen much commented upon, but that cuts through Baldwin's thought, and one he presses upon again and again. Baldwin recognized that purposeful action, especially political action, requires that one

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<sup>117</sup> Scott, *James Baldwin's Later Fiction*, 17, 21. Scott notes that the misinterpretation of the novel reveals a "complete breakdown in understanding between Baldwin and the majority of his critics."

<sup>118</sup> Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (London: Penguin Classics 2018 [1968]), 376.

<sup>119</sup> Baldwin, "The Creative Process," 670.

narrows her vision, or as Baldwin posits, to adopt a type of ‘single-mindedness’, that is at once efficacious and surreptitiously destructive.<sup>120</sup>

Baldwin felt that this paradox of human action was both what white supremacy and the weak critique of the system presented by white liberals, functioned to dissemble and what the politics of black nationalism neglected in their own thought:

Just so, indeed, is the heedless state overthrown by men, who, in order to overthrow it, have had to achieve a desperate single-mindedness. And this single-mindedness, which we think of (why?) as ennobling, also operates, and much more surely, to distort and diminish a man—to distort and diminish us all even, or perhaps especially, those whose needs and whose energy made the overthrow of the state inevitable, necessary and just.<sup>121</sup>

It is this *single-mindedness*, at once necessary and just, that Baldwin attributes to Elijah Muhammad, in their famous meeting recounted in *The Fire Next Time*, as his great strength and appeal,<sup>122</sup> but also stands as the reason why, despite Muhammad’s “pain and his fury, and yes, even his beauty,” Muhammad and Baldwin, “would always be strangers, and possibly, one day, enemies.”<sup>123</sup> Lawrie Balfour interprets Baldwin’s focus on the paradoxes of single-mindedness to be the, “dilemma of the costs of persuasion and political action.”<sup>124</sup> While certainly true, Balfour does not go with Baldwin far enough. Balfour restricts this dilemma to a problem of language: a problem of naming. Baldwin, as I see it, pushes this dilemma to the level of being.

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<sup>120</sup> Baldwin positions a “deadly single-mindedness” as the fundamental psychological obstacle that Leo Proudhammer must overcome in *Tell Me How Long*.

<sup>121</sup> Baldwin, “This Nettle, Danger...” in *Collected*, 689.

<sup>122</sup> “I began to see that Elijah’s power came from his single-mindedness. There is nothing calculated about him; he means every word he says.” In “Down at the Cross,” in *Collected*, 324.

<sup>123</sup> Baldwin, “Down at the Cross,” 332.

<sup>124</sup> Balfour, “Finding the Word,” in *Baldwin Now*, 81.

At this point I want to draw out the political stakes of Baldwin's intention of contrasting black, queer love with the deleterious effects of single-mindedness mentioned here. In his exchange with Cleaver, as well as Muhammad, and other black radical contemporaries, Baldwin ran up against the habit of naming and violence to re-instantiate the norms and behaviors that they are, in part, seeking to upend. Cleaver's critique that Baldwin failed to assert a black radical politics includes a claim that Baldwin is not masculine enough, and as such is subservient to the white gaze. Muhammad's paternalistic attempt to draft Baldwin into his movement, built, enough in Baldwin's eyes, on the shared experience of white supremacy and black fraternity, nevertheless is predicated on asserting a single-minded authority that Baldwin rejected from the church, his stepfather, and a political white liberal consensus. Each critique reveals the necessity of Baldwin's intervention, which is the necessity of a type of 'erotic knowledge,' or the cultivation of new instincts that can supplant the reliance on ideologically driven, single-minded politics.

It is amidst this discourse of the late 1960s and early 1970s that Baldwin's fiction writing experiments with novel expressions of black, male erotic love. It is important to stress that Baldwin makes this appeal in his fiction and thus tries to represent something in motion. Baldwin does not assert the need for an alternative identity but an alternative mode of belonging; he aims to catch this potentiality in movement.

## V. The Demarcation of Race and the Politics of Spaces of Intimacy

In this section I aim to more squarely fit the discussion of the potentials of erotic love as a counter to the impositions of ideological single-mindedness within the context of the racial and sexual hierarchies of the U.S. To begin I ask an ostensibly obvious, albeit imperative question: beyond the physical violence and domination of U.S. white supremacy, embodied in chattel slavery and the Jim Crow South, why is U.S. white supremacy so insidiously menacing? Put more directly, beyond its abuses and oppressions of the body, what are the effects of white supremacy on black being? Les Payne, journalist and biographer, offers a stark and illuminating assessment. Writing in 2008, and reflecting on his involvement with the civil rights movement, Payne asserts:

I'd never met a white person, South or North, who did not feel comfortably superior to every Negro, no matter the rank or station. Conversely, no Negro I'd met or heard of had ever felt truly equal to whites. For all of their polemical posturing, not even Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., or the Great Richard Wright...had liberated themselves from the poisoned weed of black self-loathing.<sup>125</sup>

I have no means to adjudicate the veracity of Payne's assertion, but a painful reality emerges no matter the verdict. If true, Payne reflects the immense psychological and emotional weight imposed on black being and the ostensible impossibility of existing beyond the confines of white supremacy. Similarly, if overstated, Payne's reflection remains a sorrowful feeling to embody towards one's compatriots. What Payne pinpoints is the interconnection between (mis)-naming and (self)-violence: to be caught in "black

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<sup>125</sup> Les Payne, "The Night I Stopped Being a Negro," in *When Race Becomes Real: Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 45.

self-loathing,” is to be unable to extricate oneself from the cyclical patterns of naming and violence, whose effects (self-loathing, self-violence, new forms of misnaming) are often reproduced in a new political struggle. From this perspective it is easy to see why recent discussions of fugitivity, *Maroonage*, and flight hold a great deal of purchase. But counter to these discourses, and their connotations of ‘escape,’ Baldwin fixes our attention on what remains in the frustrated and ostensibly lost.

This is the subject of a now famous discussion between Audre Lorde and Baldwin, where they come together, each from their own experiences within the subjugation of U.S. racial and sexual politics. They are looking for a vocabulary that is adequate to carry their hopes. Lorde echoes the stark reality of internalized subjection offered by Payne above:

But we have to define ourselves for each other. We have to redefine ourselves for each other because no matter what the underpinnings of the distortion are, the fact remains that we have absorbed it. We have all absorbed this sickness and ideas in the same way we absorbed racism. It’s vital that we deal constantly with racism, and with white racism among Black people – that we recognize this as a legitimate area of inquiry. We must also examine the ways that we have absorbed sexism and heterosexism. These are the norms in this dragon we have been born into – and we need to examine these distortions with the same kind of openness and dedication that we examine racism...<sup>126</sup>

This act of redefinition, suggested by Lorde, may at first appear to place us back in the cycle of naming and misnaming. However, I argue here, with attention to Lorde’s suggestion that change develops from ‘within outward’, that this act of redefinition

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<sup>126</sup> Audre Lorde & James Baldwin, “Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde,” *Essence Magazine*, Dec. 1984: <https://mocada-museum.tumblr.com/post/73421979421/revolutionary-hope-a-conversation-between-james>

occurs through intersubjective, erotic relationships of love. At times Baldwin and Lorde get a bit stuck over how this plays out across different gender roles. But I want to stress here that a great deal of the underlying mechanisms of intersubjective love that both Baldwin and Lorde stress are similar.

One of the more pernicious aspects of white supremacy, and oppressive ideologies in general, is that it transforms all that is ambiguous, specifically here I have in mind the human personality, into a form that is instantly readable. In *No Name on the Street*, Baldwin laments the fate of a friend, who, having lived through “the cybernetics craze,” had eaten the afterbirth of his child because “Wilhelm Reich... had ordered it,” and then subsequently lost both wife and child, now existed in such a tragic fate that “he appeared to be able to love only the helpless.” Following this reminiscence, Baldwin proceeds to deliver one of his more crippling pronouncements: “I have always been struck, in America, by an emotional poverty so bottomless, and a terror of human life, of human touch, so deep, that virtually no American appears able to achieve any viable, organic connection between his public stance and his private life.”<sup>127</sup> To be only able to love the helpless is to be only able to love abstractions, that which is instantly digestible and mute—those that can offer nothing in return. To rely on Wilhelm Reich for parenting advice, to love only the helpless, or to embody the logics of white supremacy, self-loathing, homophobia, is to commit oneself to an existence devoid of love. And the essence of love,<sup>128</sup> for Baldwin and Lorde, is the commitment to embrace that which is

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<sup>127</sup> Baldwin, “Take Me to the Water,” in *Collected*, 385.

<sup>128</sup> Lorde blends the idea of the erotic with love noting that the word erotic, “comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all of its aspects—born of chaos and personifying creative power and harmony.” For a

ambiguous, that which can only be sensed: “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings,” in order that something new might appear.<sup>129</sup> In this sense, I again want to invoke the notion of stillness, for Both Lorde and Baldwin are skeptical of the capacity to name or single-mindedly drive new possibilities into being: “Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves—along with renewed courage to try them out.”<sup>130</sup>

Lorde’s differentiation between one’s hope in ideas versus one’s commitment to love—to be, to experiment differently—is perhaps the most succinct, unintentional, introduction one could give on the driving force of Baldwin’s fiction. Here, I return once again to Baldwin’s fiction, this time his 1963 work, *Another Country*, where Baldwin experiments with how individuals might rely upon love, in the manner discussed between himself and Lorde.<sup>131</sup> The narrative arc of Rufus takes up the first fifth of the novel, where the reader encounters Rufus’s psychological pain grown from his inability to navigate, or bear the weight of, his ‘falling down’, loneliness, and isolation. In Baldwinian fashion, Rufus seems unable to sustain any meaningful connection with

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detailed analysis of this aspect of Lorde’s thought see bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, (Boston, Mass: South End Press, 1993), 83.

<sup>129</sup> Lorde, “Use of the Erotic,” 54

<sup>130</sup> Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” 38

<sup>131</sup> Rufus’s suicide, he ultimately jumps off the George Washington Bridge, mirrors the 1946 suicide of Baldwin’s then best friend, who Baldwin was quite cruel to some days before his suicide. See, “The New Lost Generation,” in *Collected*, 659-668.

others. The remaining four-fifths of the novel details the attempts of Rufus's intimate friends and family, similarly, lost and broken for reasons both connected to and separate from Rufus's death, to find an alternate path.

The moment of Rufus's narrative arc worth fixing on, and which crystallizes the themes discussed in this essay, occurs when Rufus is confronted by his best friend Vivaldo about his violent treatment of Leona, who as a result is eventually driven into institutionalization. Despite his violence and self-destruction, the reader's compassion for Rufus grows as he struggles to discern the demarcation line between the forces that have determined him and his own responsibility to negotiate them, however unjust the given terms of those negotiations appear to be. In these moments, Rufus's anger and violent failings give way to human vulnerability. Rufus senses that his life could be different, but he cannot see how:

The eyes of his friends told him that he was falling... Yet, he was aware, perhaps for the first time in his life, that nothing would stop it, nothing: this was himself. Rufus was aware of every inch of Rufus. He was flesh: flesh, bone, muscle, fluid, orifices, hair, and skin. His body was controlled by laws he did not understand. Nor did he understand what force within this body had driven him into such a desolate place. The most impenetrable of mysteries moved in this darkness for less than a second, hinting of reconciliation. And still the music continued.<sup>132</sup>

This moment of reflection occurs on the night that Rufus jumps off the George Washington Bridge, and he feels, perhaps more than ever, his inescapable humanness, which he cannot make bear on the movement of the world. Rufus's pain emerges out of

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<sup>132</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1963]), 60-61.

his self-awareness of his own futility; he is not in control, but he is aware that some control, some unactualized capacity, lay dormant and inaccessible.

One of Baldwin's great insights is that failures of the self reveal the inadequacy of one's relationship to *otherness*. The scene quoted above occurs when Rufus is confronted by his best friend, Vivaldo, about his abuse of Leona. Vivaldo and Rufus both recognize the self-destructive cycle that Rufus is trapped in: "Somebody's got to help me, said Rufus... 'You're destroying that girl. Is that what you want?' She's destroying me, too,' Said Rufus." In this moment of confession Rufus asks Vivaldo what he wants out of a relationship, Vivaldo deflects the question: "'Well,' said Vivaldo, fighting panic, trying to smile, 'I just want to get laid, man.' But he stared at Rufus, feeling terrible things stir inside him."<sup>133</sup> In his moment of vulnerability, hoping to be *seen* by a friend, Rufus is offered crass and stereotypical, masculine humor. Vivaldo, unable to face the reality of a friend in anguish, cannot find anything within himself to offer, nothing of his own experience, but like Baldwin's culinary inclined friend, reaches for tools of deflection and avoidance. Rufus is provided no lens back onto himself that might release him from his imposed psychological shackles that foreclose possibility. Rufus is looked at by the *other* who by looking away, confirms what Rufus feels he cannot escape.

A question that Baldwin asks his readers over and over again: when confronted with the vulnerability of another in need can one offer anything beyond cliché, platitudes, quips, and the blind repetition of the various ideologies that encase us? In short, can one

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<sup>133</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country*, 61, 63.

offer love? Vivaldo failed Rufus in this regard, and it is this intersubjective failure that Baldwin recognizes as so destructive and so pernicious in American life. Baldwin's fiction, as well as many of his essays, although less directly so, is an experimentation for how to break out of these cycles of passivity and avoidance. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin argues that what is lacking in these instances is a type of sensuality, or the willingness to be present, to be *still*, to push past one's first instincts and reactions, and discover what those instincts occlude:

To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread. It will be a great day for America, incidentally, when we begin to eat bread again, instead of the blasphemous and tasteless foam rubber that we have substituted for it. And I am not being frivolous now, either. Something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they begin to distrust their own reactions as deeply as they do here, and become as joyless as they have become. It is this individual uncertainty on the part of white American men and women, this inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own life, that makes the discussion, let alone elucidation, of any conundrum—that is, any reality—so supremely difficult. The person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality—for this touchstone can be only oneself. *Such* a person interposes between himself and reality nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes. And these attitudes, furthermore, though the person is usually unaware of it, are historical and public attitudes.<sup>134</sup>

Indeed, the lack of such sensuality, or more specifically, the ability in a moment of shared vulnerability to be able to put forth something of oneself beyond an instinctual regurgitation of public *attitudes*, is what Vivaldo lacks in his moment with Rufus.

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<sup>134</sup> Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," in *Collected*, 311-312.

Vivaldo could only offer Rufus the crudest form of American masculinity and thus nothing of himself, which is to say nothing that Rufus did not already have.

Baldwin is strongest in his diagnosis of this problem, and the novel is most powerful in creating these moments of vulnerability that go unfulfilled. In a scene shortly after Rufus's death, Rufus's friend Cass argues with her husband, Richard, about her sympathy towards Rufus despite his abuse towards Leona. Richard believes Rufus to be a moral monster. Quickly the argument devolves to the point where both are accusing one another of having "penis envy."<sup>135</sup> It is not clear the relevancy of this line of attack, aside from the fact that Richard assumes that his invocation of psychological buzzwords provides victorious sophistication to his argument. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that husband and wife can do nothing but look past one another. The central relationships that drive the book: Vivaldo and Rufus, Cass and Richard, Vivaldo and Ida, all are imperiled by this same problem.

In the novel, Baldwin struggles more to illustrate what types of actions are available to people locked into injurious patterns of intersubjective objectification. This seems to be the case if only because for Baldwin it was the act of physical and psychological dislocation that allowed for the dislodgement of his objectification under the white, American gaze. During his first years of his exile in France, Baldwin found a stillness that permitted him to explore an inherent love of his own otherness that he previously struggled to grasp, and which permitted him, as will be discussed in the next

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<sup>135</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country*, 112.

section, to approach a figure like Shakespeare as not simply *theirs*, but *his*. In *Another Country*, Baldwin imports the character of Eric to disrupt the pattern of failed relationships that marks the cast of original characters. Eric, a type of mirror of Baldwin's experience of exile, enriched through living beyond the American gaze, is capable of the mode of sensuality that every other character lacks. In an instantiation of this sensuality, Eric has separate affairs with Vivaldo and Cass. Eric's intimacy functions not simply as an act of betrayal for Vivaldo and Cass, who remain in relationships with Ida and Richard respectively, but as an action that might save them. This message comes through towards the end of the novel when Cass divulges her affair to Richard and justifies it thusly: "It's *not* true. I don't believe you. Why Eric? Why did you go to him?" He has something—something I needed very badly. 'What is that, Cass?' *A sense of himself.*"<sup>136</sup> In an act of narrative symmetry, the reader is left to understand that Cass receives from Eric what Rufus could not receive from Vivaldo, which is simply the courage and capacity to be present—to offer 'a look' not completely derived from a "labyrinth of public attitudes."

These scenes are clumsily written, and are overly sentimental, which suggests that Baldwin never quite figured out how to resolve the problem he identified. However, I want to argue that this may also be the case because the areas of emotional and psychological life that Baldwin wishes to examine remain deeply internal and delicate, and as such, are likely to make attempts at its elucidation quite awkward. Baldwin at times surely suffers a bit here. But what makes Baldwin such an insightful writer is that

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<sup>136</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country*, 366.

he does not let this occasional awkwardness dissuade him from pursuing such intricacies. The character of Eric, literally imported from outside of the original narrative structure, can read as contrived or as Baldwin not knowing how to reach his conclusion that intersubjective interactions need not be plagued by objectification and alienation as they so often are. However there remains something inescapably honest about Baldwin's reliance on an outside character to provide that which his cast of characters cannot find amongst themselves. Specifically, it is honest if only because such an event was necessary for Baldwin's own survival; Eric is the source of *stillness* for Cass, in the way that Paris was for Baldwin.

Baldwin's exile to Paris, the risk and precarity that journey took, and his ability to re-approach his relationship to his father, the church, Shakespeare in the silence that he found in France, reveal the immense effort and fortune that coincided for Baldwin. Indeed, if the U.S. is plagued by such an entrenched psychological paucity that forecloses an edifying relationship with *otherness*, then perhaps such effort and unexpected fortune are the only tools available. This new relationship to *otherness* functions as the basis for cultivating 'erotic knowledge.' It is in such appreciation that one opens themselves up to the possibility of cultivating the forms of erotic knowledge advocated for by Lorde and explored in Baldwin's later fiction. Perhaps, at initial glance, this focus appears quietist or a retreat from politics, but I want to suggest that it is this relationship to one's own otherness that functions as the basis of political possibility: "a person's freedom can only be judged in terms of his flexibility, his openness toward life; it is not his situation which makes him free, but himself...Most people are not able to look on each other as human

beings and in spite of everything, to treat each other that way. Until this happens, freedom is only an empty word.”<sup>137</sup>

Put another way, in the political climate of both the U.S. as well as in the larger black decolonial movements that Baldwin observed, Baldwin witnessed the exchange of one single-minded system for another.<sup>138</sup> This is the crux of Baldwin’s critique of Elijah Muhammad, as outlined in *The Fire Next Time*, that despite a justified, righteous moral indignation and legitimate demand that oppressive systems be overturned, Muhammad’s single-mindedness, his disconnection from his own otherness, was in effect a perpetuation of the same root ideology that he struggled against. In his observations of African and Caribbean decolonial actors at the 1956 Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists, Baldwin was struck by the Barbadian writer, George Lamming’s admonishment that he feared the horse which he saw many of his contemporaries “hoping to ride to power... would be in no way distinguishable from the power they sought to overthrow.”<sup>139</sup> For Baldwin and Lamming, a respect and engagement with ‘erotic knowledge,’ or loving one’s own otherness,<sup>140</sup> which was they found as ennobling with the exile or black experience, was essential for forging alternative political systems and relations. It is indeed ironic that upon making this point Lamming was interrupted by the moderator and asked to wrap up his talk due to time. The point I want to drive home is not that the personal is reducible to the political or vice versa, but rather new modes of

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<sup>137</sup> Baldwin, “Color,” in *Collected*, 676-677.

<sup>138</sup> For Baldwin’s perceptions of the larger decolonial movements across Africa and the Caribbean see, “Princes and Powers,” in *Collected*, 143-169.

<sup>139</sup> Baldwin, “Princes and Powers,” 161.

<sup>140</sup> In the speech that Lamming delivered he qualified his version of this notion as the “double-edgedness of the Negro experience.” Baldwin, “Princes and Powers,” 162.

political relationality must find some connection or grounding in the modes of knowledge and creation explored by Baldwin, Lorde, and here by Lamming.

## ***VI. Subjectivity and Exile***

If I had never left America, I would never have met her and would never have entered my own life. For everyone's life begins on a level where races, armies and churches stop. And yet everyone's life is always shaped by races, churches, and armies; races, churches, armies menace, and have taken, many lives.

~ "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon"

Baldwin's earliest writing reflects his understanding that one cannot escape the historical forces that produced them, and yet there remains something unlockable, an approach to the self that promises resistance: "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being...in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended."<sup>141</sup> Eric Savoy argues, and quite rightly in my estimation, that it is a mistake to view Baldwin as a thinker focused squarely on 'identity,' which assumes a project of "sameness" and "consistency," even when theorizations of identity portend otherwise. Instead, Baldwin is consumed with the ways in which people are out of step with their own otherness, and always implicated in relationships with others. I argue here that individuals are most nimble, most open to transformation, when they engage and push on this otherness latent within ourselves.<sup>142</sup> Baldwin's approach to identity borders on the pragmatic. Baldwin engages how one's assumptions over identity

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<sup>141</sup> Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *Collected*, 18.

<sup>142</sup> Eric Savoy, "Other(ed) Americans in Paris: Henry James, James Baldwin, and the Subversion of Identity," *English Studies in Canada* 18(3) 1992: 338-339.

facilitate or hinder relationships. This focus remains the theme that cuts through all his novels, most pertinently, *Another Country*. This section contextualizes this aspect of Baldwin's thought by focusing on his period of exile.

In 1948, at the age of twenty-four, "and with forty dollars in my pocket," Baldwin sought a refuge from the danger of his life in New York and fled to Paris: "My journey, or my flight, had not been to Paris, but simply away from America."<sup>143</sup> From this point forward Baldwin would never again develop a prolonged, domestic life in the United States, but only sojourns amidst his exiled life in Paris, Turkey, Switzerland, and St. Paul-de-Vance, where he would live the last seventeen years of his life. By 1948 Baldwin was a young man internally scattered, angry, and new to the realization that his life could not continue within the institutional structure presented to him:

by the time of November, 1948...[I] trusted no one, and knew that [I] trusted no one, knew that this distrust was suicidal, and also knew that there was no question any longer of [my] life in America: [my] violent destruction could be taken as a given; it was a matter of time...I was a survivor—a survivor, furthermore, with murder in his heart. A man with murder in his heart will murder, or be murdered—it comes to the same thing—and so I knew I had to leave. Somewhere else, anywhere else, the question of my life might still be open, but in my own country that question was closed.<sup>144</sup>

Baldwin indeed found an opening for his life in Paris, but perhaps not in the way that he anticipated.

In 1948 Baldwin immersed himself in the Parisian café scene full of black and white ex-pat American writers, including Richard Wright and Chester Himes, and

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<sup>143</sup> Baldwin, "Take Me to the Water," in *Collected*, 376.

<sup>144</sup> Baldwin, "Every Good-Bye Ain't Gone," in *Collected*, 774.

aspirational French writers dominated by the existentialism of Sartre and de Beauvoir.<sup>145</sup> But, while Baldwin certainly enjoyed his time in the bustling cafes, he found no idealized community<sup>146</sup> and he was occasionally the target of light ridicule.<sup>147</sup> Despite whatever fun could be had within the budding literary community, Baldwin attributed his subsequent psychological transformation to the silence that he encountered: “ In France I had to live in a kind of vacuum, absolute silence... I was able to go back to something in myself in that silence.”<sup>148</sup> Exile for Baldwin did not consist of the simple disavowal of a previous community, nor the uncovering of an idealized new one, but instead offered a type of practice that facilitated a new responsibility towards the self.

It is tempting to read Baldwin’s chosen exile as the materialization of his desire to throw off all external controls: his stepfather, U.S. racism, the church, and his literary father Richard Wright. When Baldwin writes that “exile saved my life,” one assumes this to be the case because it at once removed Baldwin from overly oppressive circumstances and allowed him the independence to carve out his own literary voice.<sup>149</sup> Baldwin needed to breath. Baldwin’s famous refusal of Elijah Muhammad is structured around such a

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<sup>145</sup> Baldwin never engaged much with French existentialism, despite a good deal of seeming overlap and their connection with Wright, but his quip about Sartre and de Beauvoir is revealing: “there was very little they could give him [Wright] which he could use. It has always seemed to me that ideas were somewhat more real to them than people.” Baldwin, “Alas, Poor Richard,” in *Collected*, 249.

<sup>146</sup> “My flight had been dictated by my hope that I could find myself in a place where I would be treated more humanely than my society had treated me at home, where my risks would be more personal, and my fate less austere sealed. And Paris had done this for me: by leaving me completely alone.” Baldwin, “Take Me to the Water,” in *Collected*, 376-377.

<sup>147</sup> As James Campbell documents: “[An] acquaintance of the time recalls him as being ‘very ugly’: ‘put a bone through his nose and it would’ve made sense,’ says Ann Birstein... The business of dreaming up titles for books that would not get written seems to have been popular. ‘I remember,’ says Birstein, ‘that the one we thought of for Jimmy was ‘A Negro looks at Henry James,’ which was a big joke at the time.’” In *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 58.

<sup>148</sup> David Leeming and James Baldwin, “An Interview with James Baldwin on Henry James,” *The Henry James Review* 8(1) Fall 1986: 55. See the epigraph for the full quotation.

<sup>149</sup> Baldwin, “The New Lost Generation,” in *Collected*, 667.

refusal of external authority. Baldwin observes and is charmed by Muhammed's magnetism: "I knew what he [Muhammad] made me feel, how I was drawn toward his peculiar authority, how his smile promised to take the burden of my life off my shoulders." But ultimately Baldwin flatly refuses Muhammad's political vision and leadership: "because there are some things (not many, alas!) that one cannot do twice."<sup>150</sup> Baldwin refused the power, cleanness, and coherence of Muhammad and the Nation of Islam for the ambiguity and paradox of the human condition, which in his first published essay he staked out as the moral imperative and responsibility of the artist.<sup>151</sup> To borrow the language of the existentialists, human responsibility and action emerges out of the ambiguous space of constriction and choice, or an historical, thus arbitrary, boundedness and freedom. Limitation elicits possibility: "You accept life as it is, you see it as it is before you can change it. In order to change myself, I have to admit that I am not six feet tall, I'm not blue-eyed. I've got to accept limitations before I can discover possibilities."<sup>152</sup> Baldwin saw the power of strong external authorities (his father, the church, the Nation of Islam) as damaging not only because of their domineering power, but also in their attempts to offer a false unity, or single-mindedness, that can never be responsive to that fundamental interplay of human ambiguity, which offers itself as the groundwork for human action. Yet, whatever his initial impulse in flight, Paris allowed Baldwin not to destroy these connections (of course Muhammad is a later example of

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<sup>150</sup> Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," in *Collected*, 323.

<sup>151</sup> See Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *Collected*, 11-18.

<sup>152</sup> Baldwin, *Conversations with James Baldwin*, 105.

these initial relationships) but to rework them, outside of the controls of an assumed authority. Baldwin sought to counter their damaging single-mindedness.

It is in France, seemingly having no need for the oppressive constraints of the church or for the language of the white canonical masters that Baldwin was drawn to both: “It is probably of some significance, though we cannot pursue it here, that my first real apprehension of Shakespeare came when I was living in France, and thinking and speaking in French. The necessity of mastering a foreign language forced me into a new relationship to my own. (It was also in France, therefore, that I began to read the Bible again.)”<sup>153</sup> Baldwin discovered in his stillness in France that subjection and resistance are always bound together, imbricated in a type of excess, where one’s own self-understanding is recognized as productively deficient.<sup>154</sup> Which is to say that one’s creative potential, one’s capacity for growth, lies in encountering his or her own otherness: that which at any one time is occluded, inarticulate, or ambiguous within one’s current self-perception.

Baldwin’s early relationship to Western canonical figures like Shakespeare is that he is closed off from them, irrevocably distant. As he recounts of his impression of rural, white Swiss villages in his early essay, “Stranger in the Village,”: “the most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo...”<sup>155</sup> In Paris, over time, Baldwin’s relationship to these artifacts began to change. In a 1963

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<sup>153</sup> Baldwin, “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare,” in *Uncollected Works: The Cross of Redemption* ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2010), 67.

<sup>154</sup> Savoy, “Baldwin and the Subversion of Identity,” 339.

<sup>155</sup> Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” in *Collected*, 121.

essay, “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare,” Baldwin recounts this transformation as one from condemnation to affiliation. Baldwin reflects: “I condemned him [Shakespeare] as one of the authors and architects of my oppression...His great vast gallery of people, whose reality was as contradictory as it was unanswerable, unspeakably oppressed me.”<sup>156</sup> For Baldwin Shakespeare appeared to speak a “language that was not my own,” and this apparent distance can be mobilized as a weapon against him.<sup>157</sup>

However, it was in France, locked in a type of stillness, in learning a new language, in breaking the constraints of externally imposed assumptions, that Baldwin’s vision on the nature of his problem began to change:

What I began to see—especially since, as I say, I was living and speaking in French—is that it is experience which shapes a language; and it is language which controls experience...An immense experience had forged this language [with which I had grown up]; it had been (and remains) one of the tools of a people’s survival, and it revealed expectations which no white American could easily entertain. The authority of this language was in its candor, its irony, its density, and its beat: this was the authority of the language which produced me, and it was also the authority of Shakespeare.<sup>158</sup>

Baldwin contends here that one’s ability to engage Shakespeare is not dependent on cultural, racial, or historical *nearness*, or any other lazy claim meant to snatch easy pieces of authority. In short, in the language of Shakespeare, Baldwin saw himself: the density of language, the wit, the irony, and brutal honesty which Baldwin identified as the language best representative of the black experience was there in Shakespeare.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Baldwin, “Shakespeare, in *Uncollected* 65.

<sup>157</sup> Baldwin, “Shakespeare,” 67.

<sup>158</sup> Baldwin, “Shakespeare,” 68.

<sup>159</sup> See, Baldwin, “Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption,” in *Uncollected*, 145-153.

Shakespeare *was* his, and far more so than any white European whose only recognition of attachment remained obviously superficial, and he need not fight for the right to make Shakespeare bear the burden of his experience. The process was open if Baldwin wished to engage it. Baldwin recognized how far the ambiguities of self permeated beyond the borders he had previously internalized and assumed. Shakespeare proved the inescapable doubleness with which one must contend and shape their moral life around: for Shakespeare did not necessarily stop being an ‘architect of Baldwin’s oppression,’ the nature of ‘the canon’ would not permit such an easy elision. Yet, nevertheless, Shakespeare also presented Baldwin with a moral viewpoint antithetical to the evasions of white American reality, and which Baldwin could use to develop his own.

Baldwin, having fled to Paris to save his life, refused to cloister himself in shields of innocence or safety, which he recognized as the underlying corrupting force of white America.<sup>160</sup> In the stillness of exile, Baldwin confronted and demanded to investigate his situatedness and own otherness. In locating himself in history, inextricable with the forces that produced him, Baldwin recognizes that his *self* is always partially outside of his own momentary understanding, and thus Europe revealed to Baldwin his *otherness*. Baldwin in refusing his instinctive reactions to his father, Shakespeare, his own racialized experience, began to probe at possibilities to which he was previously blind. This transformation of Baldwin’s involved no new language, no repudiation of community

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<sup>160</sup> “In the truly awesome attempt of the American to at once preserve his innocence and arrive at a man’s estate, that mindless monster, the tough guy, has been created and perfected; whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elementary externals and whose attitude towards women is the wedding of the most abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust.” Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence,” in *Collected*, 597.

past or present, nor the adaptation to new institutions or theoretical lenses. It occurred through a type of recognition, or acceptance, that transformed both seer and object. It seems to me that so often it is these sorts of personal, psychological transformations, unnoticed because their particularities are so difficult to articulate and often only grasped retrospectively, that are the generative engines of large social change. As Savoy argues, Baldwin leverages this experience and seeks to overcome a “narrowness” of perception, or single-mindedness, which, “arises from the American failure to accept the lessons of history, which culminates in the twentieth century in ‘a dangerous disrespect for the personalities of others. The consequence of disrespect for otherness — the abysmal failure of imagination — is the inability to sympathize or to love one’s own otherness.”<sup>161</sup> Baldwin’s reflection on his early exile describes this widening of perception towards otherness.

This understanding is not a ‘theory of the self,’ but a particular view onto the self that centers love, otherness, and risk as latently powerful political potentialities. I also want to stress that the object of Shakespeare is largely irrelevant to the dynamics described; there is no reason that Baldwin need privilege this relationship or engage Shakespeare at all. Indeed, Baldwin describes similar transformations to his stepfather, Richard Wright, and other relationships he felt to be broken, stagnated, or irreparable. What Baldwin offers in this approach to stillness, the relationship between himself and Shakespeare, which is to say himself and otherness, is much closer to what Cornell West

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<sup>161</sup> Savoy, “Baldwin and the Subversion of Identity,” 343.

differentiates as “existential wisdom,” in distinction to social theory. Borrowing from West, this type of existential wisdom is becoming increasingly detached from our political theories and ideas regarding political transformation. And just as, “those wisdoms that try to shun theory usually subordinate people to the political powers that be,” our increasing instincts to proffer theories that make no room for such wisdom [here we can think of Baldwin’s critique of protest literature] disempower the people we care about so deeply, as we abstract solutions to their problems away from the planes of daily, intimate action.<sup>162</sup> In short, the risk is to transmute intimate or social problems into abstractions. Such ‘existential wisdoms’ easily slide away amidst the pressure of immediate political necessity and the humdrum of facing daily life. In this sense and like Baldwin’s re-appropriation of Shakespeare, political thought must be reinvigorated through a delicate process of transmuting that which was always there, like the thawing of frozen fingers.

## **VII: Conclusion**

Baldwin’s experience of exile emerged out of fear and regret. Fear that the country of his birth would crush his own life and regret that the same pain that menaced Baldwin drove his contemporaries to terrible fates. Exile afforded Baldwin a stillness, a reprieve from that very fear and regret. Exile also afforded Baldwin an escape from the process of naming and violence, expressed by Toni Morrison at the beginning of this chapter, and

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<sup>162</sup> Cornel West, “The Making of an American Radical Democrat of African Descent,” in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Civitas Books, 1999), 13.

illuminated in Baldwin's critique of Elijah Muhammad's single-mindedness. Exile afforded Baldwin an opportunity to escape these oscillations between naming and violence, and experiment with alternative understandings of self, otherness, and relationality that had not been afforded him otherwise. These 'experiments' loving one's otherness or erotic knowledge are not in and of themselves political acts. They remain intimate and internal. However, they possess a necessary creative energy that ought to infuse not only political thought, but new modes of interpersonal relationality that function as the building blocks for new political forms.

Last, I want to note that the investigatory framework of this chapter is focused on the internal consciousnesses of individuals. This framing is not meant to replace an attention to the larger structures, institutions, and buttressing ideologies of oppression and stratification. It is to say, however, that I am concerned with how individuals internalize the ideas and logics proffered by such forces and their *perceived* sets of choices. I take up this concern to investigate how individuals imagine what is possible, what pathways of action and affiliation are open to them in the world.<sup>163</sup> In short, I seek to build from the bottom up. Following Baldwin, I am concerned with what is at the root of spurring novel forms of human connection amidst fraught circumstances.

The imaginings and experiments, here expressed by both Baldwin and Lorde, are not shaped by material conditions alone, and while they are certainly shaped by history, they are also not pre-inscribed. There is room to move if one can find and create it.

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<sup>163</sup> In this way political theory and literature come together in a shared concern. As Ralph Ellison states: "the novel is obsessed with the impact of change upon personality." In *The Collected Essays*, "Society, Morality and the Novel," ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 702.

Rather, as Baldwin argues, defining what is possible within our received circumstances is a practice of ongoing human effort: “human imagination is perpetually required to examine, control and redefine reality...Nature and revelations are perpetually challenging each other; this relentless tension is one of the keys to human history.”<sup>164</sup> This chapter focused on how individuals face the paradoxical feeling of living within an ossified world, of predetermined outcomes, while also feeling themselves to be internally fragmented, shifting, and incomplete.

This focus on individual consciousness permits a detailed analysis of how one can build novel relationships and, “more readily and ably dig into the stuff of our moral lives,” especially the felt despair and disorientation felt by black and brown men and women attempting to live in, against, and outside this “confused nation.”<sup>165</sup> Baldwin’s thought does not simply provide “opportunities for conceptual reconfiguration,” but a visceral demand to feel ourselves, our connections to others, and the moral demands we place on one another differently.<sup>166</sup> The principal question that runs throughout Baldwin’s fiction and essays is: how can fractured, confused individuals, living in an ossified, restricted, and ideology-laden social world, accept both their history and contingency, and begin to place new sorts of moral demands on one another in an effort to create new forms of affiliation. His principal disquiet is that in a nation saturated in mendacity, single-mindedness, and obfuscation, “we live by lies”—that mistrust, hate, and

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<sup>164</sup> Baldwin, “Freaks and American Ideal of Manhood,” in *Collected*, 814-815. This essay was originally entitled, “Here Be Dragons,” and is listed as such in Baldwin’s self-curated non-fiction collection, *The Price of the Ticket*.

<sup>165</sup> Chris Lebron, “Book Review: A Political Companion to James Baldwin, by Susan J. McWilliams,” *Political Theory* (Sept. 2019):6.

<sup>166</sup> Jack Turner III, “Democracy, freedom, and Afro-modern political thought,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 16(4) 2017: 532-540.

pessimism cripple any potential for the creation of novel relationships and political forms which are not simply creative perpetuations of the same.<sup>167</sup> Baldwin's principal hope is that, despite everything, it remains possible for broken people to heal one another. The hope of an exile indeed.

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<sup>167</sup> Baldwin, "Nothing Personal" in *Collected*, 698; Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," in *Collected*, 684. "Where all human connections are distrusted, the human being is very quickly lost." p. 701

## Chapter 2:

### Aimé Césaire, King Christophe, and The Twin Horizons of Abolition

*That's where we are now. What is even worse, the people no longer perceive any solution to their problems outside of the existing framework... Yet one cannot say that the level of national consciousness has regressed. They have a consciousness, but it is paralleled, if you will, by a feeling of impotence. It's true, we are Martinicans, yes, but what can we do [with that fact]?*

~ Aimé Césaire [1982]

*too bad if the flag is hoisted only on a withered pole  
too bad  
too bad  
if the water thickens into poisonous latex  
protect the word  
render appearance fragile  
capture in scenery the secret of roots  
the resistance resurrects  
around a few ghosts more real than they appear  
incongruous builders*

~Aimé Césaire [1983]

#### I. Introduction

The métier of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century decolonial politics, generated throughout the African diaspora, was its refusal to see full political liberation as anything short of a full remaking of human society.<sup>168</sup> A refusal not just of colonial institutions, legal

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<sup>168</sup> A romantic notion, as David Scott cogently argues, that no longer can cohere within present decolonial horizons. In other words, are we fixed in a “post-utopian moment”? See David Scott, “Revolution/theory/modernity: Notes on the cognitive-political crisis of our time,” *Social and Economic Studies*, (1995)44: 1–23; Scott, *Omens of Adversity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). Achille Mbembe echoes this sentiment postulating that “if decolonization was an event at all, its essential philosophical meaning lies in an *active will to community*.”

codes, and formalized political relationships, but also a refusal of the value, standards, and modes of consciousness that accepted and naturalized colonial social relationships. The intellectual leaders of these movements, such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Leopold Senghor, conceived of distinct liberatory politics that first overturned the inhumane existence imposed on the colonized, and second, sought to remake individual and social life through new forms of self-determination predicated on invention and creativity. As Fanon argued, a decolonial liberatory politics must stop nothing short of “set[ting] afoot a new man.”<sup>169</sup> These utopian dreams proved unfulfilled. Yet the vestiges of this liberatory framework infuse contemporary hopes, if often only as a plaguing deficit.<sup>170</sup> As Achille Mbembe reflects, in analyzing that decolonial moment we are left wondering whether those liberatory hopes were “nothing but a fantasy without substance?”<sup>171</sup>

This chapter, through focusing on the life and work of Aimé Césaire, argues that this residual wonder about the merits of decolonial hope pertains to a misapprehension of the different temporal and social dynamics of liberation. In short, I argue that these dynamics can best be grasped through disaggregating the long, amorphous *durée* of liberation into two distinct activities of abolition: the

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<sup>169</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 316.

“It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man... So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies which draw their inspiration from her. Humanity is waiting for something other from us than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature... But if we want humanity to advance a step farther, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries... For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.”

<sup>170</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004)

<sup>171</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia, 2021), 4.

negation of external domination and the undoing of the engrained colonial logics and presuppositions that deftly coopt decolonial efforts to make society anew.<sup>172</sup>

Second, I want to argue that Fanon’s invocation to ‘set afoot a new man,’ is easily misunderstood as individualistic and possessive, and better framed in the language of creating a new atmosphere. What is necessary to ‘set afoot’ is not individual, but a new atmosphere of responsibility to one another, an atmosphere not simply built upon the artifices of a colonial structure through acts of repetition and camouflage. As the Barbadian novelist George Lamming contends, “democracy is an atmosphere and a future towards which you work.”<sup>173</sup> I argue that exile opens conditions necessary to bring about this new atmosphere. As I argued previously, exile is a deliberate effort to play with dislocation. As this chapter argues, Césaire’s exile permits different experiments with dislocation as his writing develops to confront this problem of creating a new atmosphere. This notion of creating a new atmosphere, as opposed to a ‘new man,’ is productive in confronting the challenges that face the political confluence created in bringing into being a new people, along with new positions of authority and political institutions. This formulation maintains a focus on the I/We relationship inherent in any joint political project, and to which Césaire gave increasing attention in his writings on

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<sup>172</sup> Mbembe, in a discussion of the histories of Haiti and Liberia, recognizes this process as a dual abolition, where the formal and institutional colonial constraints must be eradicated, along with their internalized psychological and social forms. See Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

<sup>173</sup> George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, [1960] 1992), 158.

Haiti and King Christophe. Second, it helps to clarify the distinction between liberation and abolition.

Traditionally, liberation is something achieved and arrived upon at a point in the future; it is something to be secured and held. For example, one can achieve liberation from an institution like colonialism or slavery, that nevertheless persists. I argue in contrast, abolition contains a twin focus on overturning structures of oppression (first abolition), while also demanding a second focus on not simply identifying and overturning the habits of both mind and practice, which constituted the colonial relationship, but also how those habits so often return camouflaged in new clothes. This second abolition is collective, as opposed to potentially individually secured, and it cuts across power dynamics, it demands a shared responsibility to always keep the health of ‘the people’ as an orientating principal. There is of course a temporal element of progression between the first and second notions of abolition, although the borders often bleed into one another. However, I want to emphasize that the point of importance is not necessarily a temporal progression, but the tasks, relationships, and commitments between the first and second abolition are distinct, and at times divergent. The dislocations of exile, as represented in the progressions in Césaire’s poetry to his dramatic writing, sharpen those distinctions and divergences.

Attention to Césaire, Martinique, and the larger Antillean decolonial context of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, reveals how this distinction manifests in practice. Undergirding this history is the legacy of the Haitian revolution, interwoven into

the creative and political imagination of Césaire, Martinique, and the greater Caribbean.<sup>174</sup> Which as Césaire notes in his study of the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint Louverture,<sup>175</sup> Haiti was the first nation to confront, “in all its complexity, social, economic, and racial, the great problem the 20th century is trying hard to resolve: the colonial problem.”<sup>176</sup> At its core, the colonial problem involves the twin movement of eradicating oneself as colonial object in order to transform oneself into an active political subject.<sup>177</sup> The overriding liberatory framework expressed by the Haitian revolution and implicit in Césaire’s early philosophy of negritude is that these twin objectives flow from the same energy and are confronted simultaneously.<sup>178</sup> In this chapter I aim to show how this assumption veils the ways in which these processes are actually distinct and often involve divergent and opposed commitments, values, and time scales. My argument is that shifting from a framework of liberation to one of abolition permits a sharper analysis of the distinct dynamics and processes involved in this twin movement.

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<sup>174</sup> Philip Kaisary & Mariana Past, “Haiti, principle of hope: Parallels and connections in the works of C.L.R. James, Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire, and Édouard Glissant,” *Atlantic Studies* (2019) 17:2, 260-280; E. Anthony Hurley, “Césaire’s Toussaint Louverture: A Revolution in Question,” *Présence Africaine* 2004(1), 169: 199-209.

<sup>175</sup> Along with *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, Césaire produced a long account of the role of Toussaint Louverture in the Haitian Revolution and the construction of the new state; Aimé Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture: La révolution française et le problème colonial*. (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1961).

<sup>176</sup> Translation Quoted in Hurley, “Césaire’s Toussaint Louverture,” 209. For original see Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture*, 24.

<sup>177</sup> See, Robert Bernasconi, “Identity and Agency in Frantz Fanon,” *Sartre Studies* 10(2) 2004: 106-109.

<sup>178</sup> This is the problematic the Césaire’s *Christophe* confronts again and again: “the human material needs recasting. But how? I don’t know. We’ll do what we can in our nook of the world. In our little workshop! The smallest county in the universe is immense, if the hand is broad and the will does not falter. Forward march! Césaire, *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, trans. Paul Breslin & Rachel Ney (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 31.

Utilizing Haiti as the paradigmatic model, Achille Mbembe highlights this knotty terrain of assuming that these twin abolitions flow through one constant movement of liberation:

Decolonization, in its primitive sense, begins with the liberation of slaves and their emancipation from a vile base existence. This emancipation happens through a play of forces anchored in both matter and consciousness... The postcolonial history of Haiti shows, however, that this first abolition is not enough to establish new relations of mutuality between former slaves and former masters. A second abolition is necessary, which is more complex than the first... It is no longer simply a matter of abolishing the Other: it is a matter of abolishing oneself by ridding oneself of the part of oneself that is servile, and working to realize oneself as a singular figure of the universal.<sup>179</sup>

Here Mbembe isolates, yet too quickly glides over, the crux of the matter in his identification that the first abolition, the dissolution of oneself as colonial object (the struggle against an external colonial apparatus), is not enough to establish the second abolition, or seeing oneself “as a singular figure of the universal,” a ‘dis-alienated’, active political agent.<sup>180</sup> Moreover, as I argue here, when these abolitions are not grasped as distinct movements, and instead treated as a singular unfolding of the same process of liberation, attachments to values and methods elemental for success in the first abolition come to undermine possibilities for a second abolition. This is an immensely delicate terrain,<sup>181</sup> and one I argue is given insufficient attention.

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<sup>179</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 49-50. My own emphasis.

<sup>180</sup> This emphasis on dis-alienation is more explicitly attended to by Césaire’s student and contemporary Frantz Fanon but is nonetheless a consistent concern of Césaire throughout his life. As the English translators of *Christophe* argue, the central thematic of the play can be read as asking: “How is Haiti to de-alienate itself, discover its own voice, and enunciate its independence?” “Introduction,” in *Christophe*, xiv.

<sup>181</sup> How this transition onto the second movement of liberation, what I am labeling a second abolition, is to take place is the terrain of a great deal of cross-critique from Caribbean writers, across contexts and generations. Maryse Conde’s simultaneous appreciation and biting criticism of Césaire’s negritude is emblematic of such debates: “Let us thank Negritude, however, for giving us the *Notebook*... perhaps the most beautiful poem written by a colonized subject... then let us relegate it to the rank of non-essential props of an obsolete melodrama. Our liberation goes though

Evidence of this scant attention is shown through the insufficiency of concepts available to articulate and examine how this movement from a first to second abolition might occur. As the epigraph to this chapter demonstrates, the Martinican decolonial project faces the problem of how, following centuries of French colonial rule and domination, Martinicans are to develop an active sense of a ‘people’ a community of multi-generational, distinct persons who nonetheless share a feeling of an active, shared moral commitment to one another that can stand up to the external world? In other words, a second internal abolition of the psychological, moral, and social effects of colonialism that fragment and stifle Martinican collective life is needed. Generally, such notions of moral repair are only conceived across clear cut and intransigent power dynamics, say between colonized and colonizer, and usher in familiar concepts of resentment, forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation.<sup>182</sup> Or such work asks how previously coherent and organized communities can create new moral obligations and sources of meaning in the face of ongoing cultural devastation.<sup>183</sup> However, both of these frameworks fail to adequately capture what a second movement of abolition would mean in the decolonial context of Martinique, where, as Césaire demonstrates, the emphasis is on creating and activating ‘a people’ that has yet to be.<sup>184</sup> This chapter looks at how

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knowing that there have never been Negroes—that there have only ever been exploited men.” Maryse Condé, *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer* (London: Seagull Books, 2020), 88.

<sup>182</sup> Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2008).

<sup>183</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>184</sup> Césaire, and other Caribbean thinkers as well, occasionally conceptualize this ambiguous relationship, historically caught between Europe, Africa, and North America, as a type of “void.” See, Mireille Rosello, “‘One More Sea to Cross’: Exile and Intertextuality in Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*,” *Yale French Studies* 83(2) 1993: 176-195: “The native land is a ‘nothingness,’ a ‘void,’ and therefore in leaving, Martinicans and Guadeloupeans leave nothing towards which they could eventually return. It is only later, retrospectively, that Antillean intellectuals can

Césaire plays with his different personal and cultural dislocations, the French culture and language, an imagined African home land, his connection to other Antilleans, as well as to the past revolutionaries of the Haitian revolution.

Césaire and black Antilleans were acutely aware that there was no necessary correspondence between political form, in this case French Republicanism, and racial emancipation.<sup>185</sup> Over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the second and third French Republics proved adept at granting ‘formal’ French citizenship to black Antilleans while then undermining the de facto status of that citizenship through bureaucratic processes of economic redistribution across racial lines, informal racial codes, and harsh labor regulations.<sup>186</sup> Similar to other Caribbean writers of his generation,<sup>187</sup> Césaire utilized the notion of exile in order to articulate both a form of lived experience of Caribbean life as one of continual ‘wander,’ between different cultural orders, languages, and histories, which serves to condition political possibilities. When framed through the idea of exile, Césaire’s work materializes as a grappling with the problem of liberation, with his later work reflective of a coming to terms with the divergent processes of this second abolition.

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rediscover a ‘homeland’ by representing the people of the Antilles as already exiled-uprooted from Africa and from themselves.”

<sup>185</sup> Outside of the Antillean context, Françoise Vergès provides a personal-historical account of how this legacy transpired within the former French colony, and now overseas department, Réunion. Vergès documents the political and personal realities of living in this double bind condition of living both inside and outside France—politically, economically, socially, and racially. See Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Metissage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>186</sup> See Gary Wilder, “Race, Reason, Impasse: Césaire, Fanon, and the Legacy of Emancipation,” *Radical History Review* 90(Fall 2004): 31-61.

<sup>187</sup> John Drabinski, “Aesthetics and the Abyss: Between Césaire and Lamming,” *CLR James Journal* 18(1) 2012: 126-152.

Here, exile functions as the organizing concept that links Césaire's early writings on negritude, often recognized as emergent with his early political hope for the liberatory potential of departmentalization,<sup>188</sup> with his often neglected later dramatic works and poetry. Césaire's early negritude writings, along with his political engagements with departmentalization, reflect the earlier noted romantic impulse shared across various decolonial contexts 'to create the world anew'. In this sense, Césaire's exile is personalized, and a singular self stands in for an emergent liberated people. The decolonial subject must shed their old skin to become "one's own foundation."<sup>189</sup> Césaire's recognition of departmentalization's failings to deliver Martinican self-determination and exercise new forms of sovereignty and collective will force a (re)-confrontation with the problem of a dual abolition. I argue that his later works, here I focus on his Haitian play *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, along with his later poetry, begin to articulate and think through the conditions necessary for a second abolition. In *Christophe*, the wanderings of exile transcend the individual, and focus on the collective wanderings of a people disjointed across culture, generations, gender, and class. Finally, I argue that the Guadeloupean writer, Maryse Condé, partly resulting from her own experienced generational and gender dislocations in her own confrontations with the legacy of Césaire, illuminates an intimate struggle with securing the conditions of a second abolition.

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<sup>188</sup> For a history of Césaire's role see, Ernest Moutoussamy, *Aimé Césaire: Député à l'Assemblée nationale 1945-1993* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993).

<sup>189</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 55.

## II. Before the Storm: Contextualizing Negritude and Césaire's *Notebook*

By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial conditions facing French colonial subjects in the Antilles and other outer reaches of the empire appeared to be conditioned by political impasse. The prior two hundred years of attempted emancipation, and the ostensible granting of the status of citizen, had been met with the expansion of racial categorization and harsh labor practices.<sup>190</sup> In short, the growth of French liberal society grew alongside the tentacles of racial hierarchization that granted specious notions of freedom to the colonized that masked the entrenchment of status hierarchy and domination. This inside/outside dynamic suffused the Martinican experience, and as a result lent itself to pursuits of Sisyphean acts of assimilation that promoted self-deception and alienation. Suzanne Césaire diagnosed this cultural mindset as “the great camouflage,” where Martinicans consistently playing perpetual games of cultural “hide-and-seek” are caught trying to keep up with shifting French standards that are in fact predicated on black exclusion.<sup>191</sup>

French freedom and Martinican unfreedom existed symbiotically, which, as the Césaire's perceived, manifested in cultural torpor and indirection. Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, first published in 1939, is at once an expression of the stasis and feeling of impossibility of that colonial reality and its effects on the Martinican people, while also serving as an attempted activation of hidden reservoirs of political

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<sup>190</sup> Wilder, “Race, Reason, Impasse,” 2004.

<sup>191</sup> “The Martinican has failed because, unaware of his real nature, he tries to lead a life that is not his own.” Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941-1945)*, trans. Keith L. Walker (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 31.

possibility. As a note, it is somewhat paradoxical that the France that helped liberate Baldwin is the same France that colonized and constricted Césaire. The paradox reveals how exile functions in contradistinction to the valences of flight, escape, and refusal outlined in the introduction to this dissertation. Exile reveals the double nature of constriction and possibility, failure and success, and how they often fit uncomfortably side-by-side.

As noted, the 20<sup>th</sup> century struggle for decolonization pointed towards two horizons of abolition: an abolition of the formal and institutional supports of colonialism and a transition from subjugated consciousness to liberated consciousness. From this twin recognition emerged the notion that cultivating ‘knowledges of the self’ in order to detach oneself from colonial frameworks of understanding and repair the internal wounds of colonization, was a prerequisite for making any formal and institutional transformation of the colonial order consequential and lasting.<sup>192</sup> As Mbembe notes in regard to the history of Haitian revolution, to secure formal and institutional forms of abolition, while neglecting the more subtle forms of colonization’s impact on the mind and interior self, secured only a specious form of liberation: “this liberation of slaves precisely did not lead to a *state of mastery*. To the contrary, this emancipation, negation without autonomy, led

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<sup>192</sup> Mbembe’s recent work demonstrates how such an understanding runs across a wide mosaic of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century African, Caribbean, and diasporic thinkers, especially in the French colonies. Even following the postwar moment of decolonization, such an understanding infused later projects of decolonization. This is perhaps most notable in Steve Biko’s notion of ‘Black Consciousness’, as a response to the Apartheid regime in South Africa, where Biko saw “The interrelationship between the consciousness of the self and the emancipatory programme is of paramount importance.” in Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002 [1978]), 8. With Biko in mind, Nigel Gibson echoes this observation in Biko’s thought, where shifts in consciousness are a requirement for meaningful formal and institutional change: “Consciousness is not merely a passing stage in the revolutionary process . . . [but] an actuality in which the transformation of reality is grounded.” In Nigel C Gibson, “Black Consciousness after Biko: The Dialectics of Liberation in South Africa,” in *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, eds. Andile Mngxitama et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 136.

to reduplication and new forms of servitude—the activities of the Other practiced on and against oneself.”<sup>193</sup> The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century decolonial actors of Césaire’s generation undertook their own causes with the legacy of Haiti imprinted in their minds,<sup>194</sup> and it is within this awareness that Césaire conceived of negritude as a grounding for decolonial action that could ensnare both horizons.

Before proceeding to a contextualization and analysis of Césaire’s *Notebook*, and its expression of Césaire’s understanding of negritude, I first want to emphasize how Césaire’s approach to the problem of decolonization elucidates this twin horizon of abolition. But it was a problem somewhat overlooked in the moment. As the subsequent history of Martinique and Antillean departmentalization demonstrates, the lived negotiation of these horizons slid back into familiar patterns of misstarts, unfulfilled hopes, and lost opportunities. The decolonial hopes expressed in *Notebook* collapsed into unfulfillment. However, I argue that it is precisely in attending to the ways in which Césaire’s *Notebook* both illuminates and distorts that a sharper understanding of the dynamics of liberation emerges.

My argument is that negritude, and Césaire’s subsequent political involvement with Antillean departmentalization, functioned as a heroic attempt to hold onto

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<sup>193</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Knight*, 50. See also, Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Sainte Domingue* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1990)

<sup>194</sup> In the *notebook*, Césaire proclaims that Haiti is, “where *négritude* stood up for the first time.” And as this chapter notes, as Césaire aged, Haiti increasingly occupied a larger place in his mind: “Well, from the moment I discovered the black Northamerican [sic] world, that I discovered Africa, I ended up exploring the whole of the black world, and so it was that I hit on the history of Haiti. I adore Martinique, but it is an alienated land, while Haiti stood in my mind for the heroic Caribbean, and also the African Caribbean...The first black epic of the New World was written by Haitians, by people like Toussaint Louverture, Christophe, Dessalines, etc..” quoted in Gregson Davis, *Aimé Césaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 149. To understand how Haiti has functioned as a point of orientation across the Caribbean see Phillip Kaisary and Mariana Past, “Haiti, Principal of Hope: Parallels and Connections in the works of C.L.R. James, Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire, and Edouard Glissant,” *Atlantic Studies* 17(2) 2020: 260-280.

(ultimately by failing to recognize their fundamental distinction) these two horizons of abolition simultaneously. This logic suggests, as later echoed by Mbembe, that if deficiencies in one plane undermine gains in the other, then both must be held together in constant contact, where achievements in one ratchet up possibilities in the other. This is at once understandable and not without some merit. However, I argue that ultimately this approach fails because in collapsing these movements of abolition within a singular process of liberation, Césaire reinforces the notion that liberation is a distant horizon to be achieved through heroic action and transcendence.<sup>195</sup> This movement towards transcendence privileges single-mindedness, urgency, and grand gestures, i.e. traditional revolutionary virtues suited to securing the abolition of formal and external constraints.<sup>196</sup> I argue that Césaire’s early framing misses the delicate ways in which a second abolition, directed towards internal regeneration and the development of ‘a people’, unfolds unstructured, slowly, and is constantly remade, always subtly evading previous preconceptions. Abolition, in this second moment, requires not revolutionary single-mindedness directed towards a specified target. It instead requires the exercise of one’s freedom in capacities large and small and is a piecemeal business that threads through all aspects of one’s life and is not simply *secured* by a heroic leap through important events.<sup>197</sup> Césaire’s own life can be read as a confrontation with the elusiveness of

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<sup>195</sup> See Maryse Condé, “Why Negritude,” in *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer* (London: Seagull Books, 2020), 89-103. Condé offers a somewhat sympathetic dismissal of Césairian negritude on these grounds of empty transcendence, punctuated by a pithy repudiation: “Allow me not to believe in miracles.”

<sup>196</sup> See Wilder, *Freedom Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>197</sup> Such a view echoes the more romantic confrontations with Césaire’s early writings and political efforts. See, Wilder, *Freedom Time*.

‘liberation’, or a confounding confrontation with how to wrestle these twin moments of abolition together.

*Notebook*, the culmination of his student days in France, represents Césaire’s early expression of negritude, which ought, I argue, partly be read as attacking the twin horizons of abolition simultaneously. Césaire, a gifted student, first left Martinique in 1931, at the age of eighteen, with a scholarship for the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris; he would not return home for eight years. It was these years in Paris, in classrooms, cafes, and cramped apartments, traveling through western Europe, that Césaire embedded himself within a network of young, African and Caribbean students. Césaire’s circle of confrères included the poet, and future president of Senegal, Léopold Senghor; the Guyanan poet Léon-Gontran Damas; his fellow Martinicans, Paulette and Jane Nardal, who edited *La revue du monde noir*, which became the source for black francophones to discover the American, Harlem Renaissance writings of Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neal Hurston; as well as his future wife Suzanne Césaire (née Roussi).<sup>198</sup> This diverse cast worked collectively to compile resources from African philosophy, Nietzschean romanticism, French surrealism, and the Harlem Renaissance, in order as Suzanne Césaire would come to put it: “to know ourselves finally by ourselves.”<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Reiland Rabaka, *The Negritude Movement: W.E.B. Du Bois, Leon Damas, Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and the Evolution of an Insurgent Idea* (New York: Lexington Books, 2016); Tracey Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>199</sup> Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, 33.

This collective reached for the imaginative tools of surrealism, often focused through an anthropological lens that sought to capture Antillean life as a living, collective, organism.<sup>200</sup> As Aimé was working on *Notebook*, Suzanne experimented with language of “vegetation” to illuminate the simultaneous potential and shackles of Antillean richness, whose very beauty and immense potential pacify Martinicans to the realities of the game of ‘hide-and-seek’ that they are forced to play: “if my Antilles are so beautiful, it is because the great game of hide-and-seek has succeeded, it is then because, on that day, the weather is most certainly too blindingly bright and beautiful to see clearly therein.”<sup>201</sup> Along with Aimé, Suzanne struggles with how to overcome this paradoxical bind of French control over Antillean life. But perhaps more than young Aimé, Suzanne showed a perceptive focus on the isolated reality of a second abolition and worked to imagine what forces and social processes would give rise to it. Where *Notebook* expresses the power of negritude and the potential heroic, individual act of transformation, Suzanne’s work offers a counterweight that politicizes the stakes of the second abolition whose only mover can be the Martinican people.

Self-knowledge, inherent in the second horizon of abolition, cuts across a variety of decolonial projects, but here the pertinent question arises: what is it about the particularity of Martinique as a site of decolonial politics—such that the demands of self-knowledge that Césaire advocates for in *Notebook* illuminate new aspects regarding the

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<sup>200</sup> Suzanne Césaire’s writings demonstrate this relationship most consistently, but both Césaires read and were motivated by the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius who saw civilizations as akin to biological organisms that carried within them particular sentiments and expressions of life.

<sup>201</sup> Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, 46.

problem of liberation? The remainder of this section takes up answering this question. My argument here is that the answer only begins to take shape when read within a framework of exile. Césaire's collaboration with the African diaspora, specifically his Caribbean compatriots, reveals an experience with exile that is particular to Martinique, the Antilles, and large swaths of the Caribbean. Traditionally exile denotes a situation of banishment or forced removal from a homeland.<sup>202</sup> And as Edward Said powerfully puts forth, exile holds in the horizon the possibility for a return to that homeland, however distant or unlikely.<sup>203</sup>

This is not the case for the Antillean. In the Antilles, exile was often expressed as a type of 'void,' a home that has never been. Césaire notes that to be Antillean is thus to exist within a caricature of a lost history, and the problem is to try to find a way out of this historical and cultural dislocation.<sup>204</sup> Often the connotation, offered most powerfully by Édouard Glissant, is to think of the Antillean as the paradigmatic wanderer, where repetitive acts of return and detour garner previously unperceived perceptions. However, I think this invocation risks over-romanticizing exile as a type of intellectual disposition. Rather, I argue that exile, especially in the Antillean context, is characterized by repetitive encounters with cultural, historical, and generational dislocations. This explains why for Césaire the legacies of Toussaint and Christophe and their efforts of Afro-Caribbean self-emancipation speak so closely to the situation of Martinique. Similarly, as

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<sup>202</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>203</sup> Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>204</sup> Aimé Césaire and Daniel Maximin, "Aimé Césaire: La poésie, parole essentielle," *Présence Africaine* 1983 (126)2c: 21

I analyze at the end of the chapter, the dislocation of exile is also generational, whereas Condé demonstrates one's sense of self arises through confrontations to a past, in her case, with the legacy of Césaire and negritude, that reproduces the sense of dislocation that one sought to resolve in the first place.

In such a situation the temptation is to reach for solid foundations elsewhere either in an African past or a French future. This constant oscillation, what Condé calls the acceptance of "wandering", points not to an undirected ambivalence but an engagement with the historical, generational, and cultural dislocations that structure one's present.<sup>205</sup> Here, wandering is not simply a romantic conception of the nomad, but a wandering across cultural forms, historical legacies, generational understandings, and workings of power. Devoid of a foundational, stable history how can solid connections and moral commitments be made and sustained? Put another way, can one transform or transcend the ambiguity of wandering into a collective expression that has the potential to create new relations of community outside of the mimicry of assimilation or a misappropriation of a severed past? *Notebook* is then Césaire's initial foray into answering that question and useful in demarcating the stakes of abolition.

### **III. *Notebook: Transcending the Storm?***

As noted above, the twin problem of decolonial liberation is to secure both formal abolition from colonial institutions and practices while growing the self-capacities that

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<sup>205</sup> Mireille Rosello, "'One More Sea to Cross': Exile and Intertextuality in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*," *Yale French Studies* 83(2) 1993: 176-195.

can sustain and grow the gains garnered by formal revolt and liberation. The difficulty is compounded when these new capacities are sought collectively, across generations, genders, and class, and not simply within the arc of the heroic becoming. Césaire grapples with this tension, and as I come to argue, it is Maryse Condé, who articulates these dynamics most fully. As the Antillean connotation of exile reveals, this process is particularly difficult when traditional ideas of home and all the cultural apparatuses that cohere individuals into a *people* are always felt to be adrift. Césaire’s response is to reach for transcendence by creating a utopian imagination of a past Caribbean civilization—often represented by Haiti as the ‘heroic Caribbean’—that can be born as a lived and actualized future.<sup>206</sup> *Notebook*, and its idea of negritude, function as the inventive springboard that can begin to fill in the void that makes such a transcendence from a (re)imagined past to alternative future possible.<sup>207</sup> *Notebook* is a work infused with a forceful creative energy, often collapsing the distance between destruction and creation, as a necessary force for stimulating decolonial liberation amidst a dormant and defeated native population.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Kanate Dahouda, “Aimé Césaire, Paul Chamberland et le pays de l’exil,” *Présence Africaine* 164-164(1-2)2001: 158-167.

<sup>207</sup> Dahouda describes this transcendent function thusly: “l’inspiration utopique jouit d’une fonction précise: elle permet d’exorciser, de transcender le temps de l’exil vécu dans le giron du pays natal, par une opération compensatoire de l’imaginaire animée par un idéal.” My translation: Utopian inspiration serves a precise function: it allows one to exorcise and transcend the time of exile experienced in the bosom of the homeland by means of a compensatory operation of the imagination animated by an ideal.

<sup>208</sup> *Notebook* furthers many of the ideas Césaire experimented with in his student essays. In one of those early student essays, Césaire implores the black youth to get a metaphorical ‘hair cut’ emphasizing that it is only in struggles against the self, destroyed through colonial assimilation, that a new black culture and politics is possible. Destruction is necessary for creation. Césaire, Aimé Césaire, “Nègreries: jeunesse noire et assimilation,” *Les Temps Modernes*, vol. 676, no. 5, [2013]: 246-248

*Notebook* functions as a long narrative poem that imagines Césaire's return home to a dormant Martinique in need of regeneration. Penned from the shores of Europe, upon an imagined return, Césaire enacts Conde's metaphor of the permanent wanderer, whose exile, characterized by detours and returns, functions to open avenues of understanding that were previously foreclosed. Axiomatic of this fact is that Césaire never considered himself an exile until he imagined a return to Martinique. Similarly, the torpor, alienation, and stagnation of Martinican life only cohere upon oscillations of departure and return. The early sections of the poem are saturated with the language of stagnation, psychological and emotional torpor, and despair:

At the end of first light, this town sprawled—flat...  
It crawls on its hands without the slightest desire to drill the sky with a stature of protest. The backs of the houses are frightened by the sky truffled with fire, their feet by the drownings of the soil, they chose to perch shallowly between surprises and treacheries. And yet the town advances, yes it does. It even grazes every day further beyond its tide of tiled petty hushed-up scandals, petty unvoiced guilts, petty immense hatreds knead the narrow streets into bumps and potholes where the wastewater grins longitudinally through the turds...

And the end of first light, life prostrate, you don't know how to dispose your aborted dreams, the river of life desperately torpid in its bed, neither turgid nor low, hesitant to flow, pitifully empty, the impartial heaviness of boredom distributing shade equally on all things, the stagnant air unbroken by the brightness of a single bird.

Césaire recounts Antillean life as tragically torpid where the only movement is a deeper sinking into the petty scandals, guilts, anger, and hatreds of daily life—a sinking down into the wastewater.

As the poem moves forward, Césaire meets others who illuminate the effects of colonial domination and racism on the condition of their lives. Césaire encounters a homeless man, “comical and ugly,” where “poverty...had knocked itself out to finish him,” cutting into his body, bending his back and hollowing his eyes, while decimating his “panicked” heart.<sup>209</sup> Césaire, disgusted by the man’s condition, turns away from the man, “my eyes proclaiming that I had nothing in common with this monkey,” and in this turning away, recoiled in shame: “my cowardice rediscovered!”<sup>210</sup> Colonialism served not only to deteriorate the physical, emotional, and economic condition of Antillean life, but it also served to alienate the people from one another. Césaire must find a way to resist and overthrow the shackles of French colonialism while simultaneously seeking to cultivate pathways of connection amongst the islands downtrodden. The twin horizons of abolition are brought together requiring a unifying effort to drive towards both ends.

It is out of this life of languor that Césaire announces negritude as that which will resuscitate Martinique and Antillean life.<sup>211</sup> Prior to the 1939 publication of *Notebook*, Césaire articulated his philosophy of negritude in two 1935 articles for his own student run journal, *L’Étudiant noir*, “Conscience Raciale et Révolution Sociale,” [Race Consciousness and Social Revolution] and “Jeunesse Noire et Assimilation” [Black Youth and Assimilation]. It is in “Conscience Raciale,” that Césaire provides perhaps his most direct description of *negritude*:

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<sup>209</sup> Césaire, *Notebook*, 31.

<sup>210</sup> Césaire, *Notebook*, 31.

<sup>211</sup> “My negritude is not a leukoma of dead liquid over the earth’s dead eye/my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral/it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky/it breaks through opaque prostration with its upright patience.” *Notebook*, 37.

“Act!,” they say to the Negro. But since acting is creating, and since creating is kneading and leavening your natural substance, our Negro at home will not take action if he is distracted from himself and if he lives apart from himself. A strange disorder, in effect, consumes us in the Antilles: a fear of ourselves, a capitulation of being to appearing, a weakness that makes an exploited people turn their back on their own nature, because a race of exploiters makes them ashamed, with the perfidious purpose of eradicating “the self-consciousness of the exploited.”<sup>212</sup>

To act is to create. However, the Antillean, “prostrate” and abused has been stripped away from him or herself and thus rendered immobile. Negritude is the philosophic and artistic effort to reinvigorate those severed connections so that once again the Antillean can act. Negritude is a process of active mediation, which does not seek to rediscover a lost, nativist identity, but instead seeks to discover the active black presence alive in the world: “And I say to myself Bordeaux and Nantes and Liverpool/ and New York and San Francisco/ not an inch of this world devoid of my fingerprints and my calcaneus on/the spines of skyscrapers and my filth in the glitter of gems.”<sup>213</sup> The task then is to, “plant our negritude like a lovely tree so that it can bear its most authentic fruits.”<sup>214</sup> This romantic inspiration makes it possible to overcome the void of Antillean life, the experience of exile that marks the identity of the country, by creating an ideal that functions as a previously ungraspable motivating force.

There is much to be said about the diagnostic power of *Notebook*, and the passages quoted above are meant to show how Césaire sought to illuminate the space at

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<sup>212</sup> Césaire, Aimé Césaire, “Nègreries: conscience raciale et révolution sociale,” *Les Temps Modernes*, vol. 676, no. 5, [2013]: 250.

<sup>213</sup> Césaire, *Notebook*, 21.

<sup>214</sup> Césaire, “Nègreries,” 251.

the heart of Martinican life. The power of the poem lies in its ability to reveal how both institutional and cultural forms of colonization work to rob the colonial subject of body and voice.<sup>215</sup> This robbery is represented through the notion of a permanent Antillean exile, where divorced from an African past, and subjugated to a Martinican identity built through acts of French exclusion, the colonial subject is mute and shapeless. What forms of abolition are possible from such a situation? As noted earlier, the traditional framing of liberation creates too much space between the needs of the present and the promise of a distant future, where quotidian human action no longer seems to have any role to play. Daily life (see footnote 48 below) transforms into routine horrors and any decisions made can only serve to reinforce the existing structure.

As poetry this is perhaps beautiful; as politics it seems to never fully arrive. It is never made clear how the narrator of the poem transcends his initial degradation, shame, and self-consciousness, nor is it clear how this is meant to influence his compatriots. It is only ever made clear that this transformation does occur. The end of the poem declares a breaking from. Both colonial essentialism and black nativism, and the arrival of a new, liberated consciousness and the fetters of the colonial past rot and fall away: “I say

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<sup>215</sup> Gary Wilder, “Race, Reason, Impasse: Césaire, Fanon, and the Legacy of Emancipation,” *Radical History Review*, 90 (Fall 2004): 31-61. Wilder argues that at the center of the poem is always the problem of voice: “From the outset, in other words, Césaire indicates a relationship between speech and complicity. Voice is posed as a problem, and the possibility of antiracist discourse is placed into question. The rest of the poem will seek to work through precisely this issue. The dilemma confronting colonial intellectuals is crystallized in the following passage: “And neither the teacher in the classroom, nor the priest at catechism will be able to get a word out of this sleepy little nigger, no matter how energetically they drum on his shorn skull, for starvation has quicksanded his voice into the swamp of hunger (a word-one-single-word . . . you-should-see-this-little savage-who-doesn’t-know-any-of-the-Ten-Commandments.)” Here the silent child confirms particularist racist stereotypes of native ignorance and godlessness, even though his silence is an effect of poverty created by colonialism. Yet if he were to obey the teacher or the priest, his speech would sanction the universalist racism of assimilation. Either way he is complicit with a colonial order whose authority is secured through the paternalist and improving mediation of evangelists and educators targeting indigenous consciousness.” 39.

hurray! The old negritude [previously cling's to essentialism] progressively cadavers itself/the horizon breaks, recoils and expands/and through the shredding of clouds the flashing of a sign/the slave ship cracks from one end to the other...standing and free/and the lustral ship advances fearlessly over the crumbling waters/and now our ignominious plops/are falling and rotting away."<sup>216</sup> That point I want to stress is that Césaire can only show what needs to happen, but never how. At the heart of the *Notebook*, and the mode of decolonial politics it advocates, rests a certain circularity of action.

In demonstration of this point, I want to highlight a reflection of Césaire's that he gave in an interview towards the end of life. Asked about the motivating force of negritude, Césaire's reflection encapsulates the multifaceted dynamics of decolonial liberation discussed above. As such it is worth quoting at length:

If Senghor and I spoke of Négritude, it was because we were in a century of exacerbated Eurocentrism, a fantastic ethnocentrism, that enjoyed a guiltless conscience. No one questioned all that-the superiority of European civilization, its universal vocation-no one was ashamed of being a colony. Europe really had nothing on its conscience and the colonized readily accepted this vision of the world; they had interiorized the colonizer's vision of themselves. In other word, we were in a century dominated by the theory of assimilation...So Négritude was for us a way of asserting ourselves... Négritude provided me with clues in order to read Martinique, its mirror. The Martinican grievance that we wanted to voice out forcefully is not so much physical misery, economic exploitation, even if this was really the case, as the *alienation* which as policy has made the Martinican conscience founder. And, believe me, this fight against alienation is never totally over.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Césaire, *Notebook*, 53-55. There is no shortage of lines evoking this sentiment: "Suddenly now strength and life assail me like a bull/ And we are standing now, my country and I, hair in the wind, my hand puny in its enormous fist / and the strength is not in us but above us, in a voice that drills the night."

<sup>217</sup> Charles H Rowell & Aimé Césaire, "It is through Poetry that One Copes with Solitude: An Interview with Aimé Césaire," *Callaloo* 31(4) 2008: 992-993.

Here Césaire links the formal apparatuses of colonization, physical misery’ and ‘economic exploitation,’ but he places them alongside the issues of assimilation and alienation, even insisting that alienation proves a thornier problem to Martinique realizing its *full* liberation. Césaire is not alone here. C.L.R. James echoes Césaire’s emphasis in seeing the problems of Caribbean decolonization as inhibited by a “broken” and “twisted” political consciousness.<sup>218</sup> The people must first be ‘set right’, or rather must first undergo a psychological abolition to produce a political one. However, is this not simply an inversion of the problematic that beset the Haitian revolution where political abolition did not condition a second, subsequent abolition of the self? Here a pernicious problem of circularity emerges, where political liberation requires a liberated consciousness, and thus *liberation* is required to produce itself. This circularity emanates from a failure to recognize that no singular, universal energy can link these two processes of abolition together. In fact, as I argue below, attachments to the values and political capacities necessary to achieve an initial institutional and formal abolition are often antithetical to the capacities necessary to conceive and move towards a second abolition.

#### **IV. Haiti, King Christophe and Returning to Abolition**

The Haitian revolution provided Césaire with a springboard into first thinking about how to articulate and overcome the knotty problems of Antillean colonization. Following the quick failings of Antillean departmentalization, Haiti offered insight into potential

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<sup>218</sup> C.L.R. James, “The Making of the Caribbean People,” in *You Don’t Play with Revolution* (London: AK Press, 2009), 48.

misapprehensions of the decolonial problems facing Martinique and potential paths forward. Shifting from surrealist poetry to drama, Césaire moved the dilemmas and choices of decolonial politics into lived, daily human reality. Transcendence is no longer an option. The dilemmas of assimilation, cultural regeneration, mimicry, and the stitching together of a political community out of the wreckage of colonial reality are the problems to be negotiated interpersonally, not only on the grand stage of international politics, but in classrooms, marketplaces, and living rooms. These problems place exile on a different register, where exile is not simply the problem of an individual facing disconnected cultures, languages, and histories. Instead, exile represents the dislocations that exist amidst and between a people that are hoping to build a new notion of themselves together.

The previous section aimed to accomplish two fundamental movements. First was to set up the basic decolonial problem space that is moving from colonial object to active political subject can be structured along two axes or horizons of abolition. Second, I aimed to show how Césaire, and the colonial experience of the Antilles, structured by a particular experience of exile, embarked on an effort to heroically define a poetic-political project that could structure a political response capacious and nimble enough to attack both horizons. I praised the diagnostic power of this project, recognizing its deep illumination of the layered nature of colonial subjugation, while critiquing it for falling into patterns of circularity that cloud the lived experience of moving from object to subject, and present liberation as a product of a transcendent arrival. In the section I also noted how Antillean exile is marked by a ‘wandering’ where the exilic experience of the

Antillean induces the same objects or ideas to be repeatedly approached from new directions. Césaire's very notion of *A return to the native land*, a return first imagined and penned from the shores of Europe, and consistently updated during his life, is emblematic of this fact.

I now want to utilize this framework of return and detour to approach the idea of liberation, and the two horizons of abolition, from a new angle. One thing that is often lost in analyses of Césaire's thought is the temporality of his life, the failures and stalled hopes that he lives through, reexamines, and returns. The hopes for abolition and Martinican liberation are not simply poetic dreams, but political attempts best represented in Césaire's attempt at Antillean departmentalization. The law of departmentalization established Martinique, Réunion, Guyane, and Guadeloupe as French departments. The law stipulated that all standing and all future laws passed in the metropole would apply equally and without qualification in the colonies. As Gary Wilder argues, Césaire's and his colleagues' aim was to challenge "metropolitan France to democratize the plural reality its own imperial history had created," which would at once remake the former colonies along with the French state into a unified federation.<sup>219</sup> Césaire's view, and certainly he had Haiti in mind here, was that state sovereignty was no guarantee of self-determination and freedom. Formal abolition in no way necessitated achievements within the second horizon of abolition. Of course, the law was a relative failure, and full abolition for Martinicans remained unachieved on both fronts.

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<sup>219</sup> Wilder, *Freedom Time*, 106.

However, as mentioned above, what is often lost is that Césaire continues to live, write, and work in Martinique amidst these failures. It should be instructive that in grappling with the failures of his own policies, Césaire returns to Haiti and again confronts how the twin horizons of abolition were approached in the past and how they may be thought anew. Here the concept of return is important. As Mireille Rosello notes the idea of return in Antillean thought connotes the notion of “putting into relation,” where every return enlarges and deepens one’s relational understanding: “Every displacement, every attempt to return, every new departure renders the ‘I’ more and more aware of the gap, of his or her difference.”<sup>220</sup> Here the image of the kaleidoscope is instructive, where every turn of the device both sharpens and transforms the image seen. Returning to Haiti as the paradigmatic model for Caribbean decolonial politics, Césaire stages a clearer distinction between moments of abolition as constitutive of a general politics of liberation.

As argued in the last section, in decolonial politics, liberation is thought to entail both formal abolition of colonial structures and institutions, as well as some form of reclamation of the self, the birth of more *authentic* and humane ways of being in the world. The history of the Haitian Revolution, as Achille Mbembe makes clear, is a lesson regarding how the abolition of formal colonization has no necessary impetus to unfold into the deeper abolition regarding the power and political agency of the new decolonial self. Césaire’s *Notebook*, negritude, and his efforts and departmentalization can be read

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<sup>220</sup> Rosello, “One More Sea to Cross,” 181.

as a recognition of that lesson and an attempt to grasp both horizons of abolition simultaneously. Put another way, following Haiti, and opening a second wave of Caribbean decolonial politics, Césaire attempted to develop a political paradigm that never let either horizon slip from focus and insisted that they cannot be thought apart or approached in contradistinction from one another. The question that this section asks is whether this was really the lesson to be learned about the nature of liberation? Returning to Christophe allowed Césaire to move backwards and forwards at the same time, to put past and current failures in relation to one another, to widen his understanding about the nature of securing liberation beyond formal and institutional transformation.

Before proceeding to an analysis of Césaire's play, *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, it is first necessary to offer a brief historical contextualization of the person. The historical Christophe ascended to become President, and eventually king, of the State of Haiti following the assassination of Jean-Jacques Dessalines in 1806. Following Dessalines's assassination, a civil war raged between supporters Christophe, who controlled the northern province, which Christophe officially declared a kingdom in 1811, and supporters of Alexandre Pétion, who was elected President of the south. During this period, from 1807 to Christophe's death in 1820, Christophe displayed a cunning brutality that saw him build endless châteaux and palaces, construct a replica royal court, all the while enforcing a compulsory and violent system of plantation labor. Christophe possessed a relatively elite and idiosyncratic background. Born in Grenada, and achieving his freedom in 1791, Christophe worked aboard transport ships as a major-domo, and managed a hotel, before he became an esteemed general in the revolution.

Christophe sought to obtain Haitian abolition at all costs, was often blind to the damage he inflicted on his people and was enraptured by the transformative potential of his own power. Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot recounts an early episode of the revolution that puts Christophe's panache and cunning on full display:

When the French forces reached the port of Cap [1802], Leclerc [General of the French forces] promptly sent Christophe a written ultimatum threatening to invade the town with fifteen thousand troops if the blacks did not surrender by daybreak. The letter Christophe wrote to Leclerc was characteristic of the man: "If you have the means with which you threaten me, I shall offer you all the resistance worthy of a general; and if fate favors your weapons, you will not enter the town of Cap until I reduce it to ashes and, then and there, I shall keep on fighting you." Then, Christophe set fire to his own sumptuous house and prepared his troops for combat.<sup>221</sup>

In this episode Christophe displays the heroic impulse to craft dramatic and rupturing acts meant to transcend the immediate conditions that appeared to limit his possibilities. As Trouillot notes, Christophe grew to maintain a belief in himself as "one notch above most mortals," and "his reliance on transformative rituals, his desire to control both humans and death," carried throughout his life and culminated in his suicide by silver bullet.<sup>222</sup>

Christophe is at once ridiculous yet sympathetic, if only for his display of the pains of solitude and helplessness that often face revolutionary leaders. As Césaire reflected years later: "Christophe was viewed as a ridiculous figure, a man who spent his time aping the French. There's truth to this, and this is what people focused on, but I'm also a black man [*un nègre*], and this black man [*ce nègre*] could do more than just 'ape.'

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<sup>221</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 38-39.

<sup>222</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 59-60.

This ape was a deep thinker who suffered real anguish; I wanted to find the tragedy behind the ridiculousness; *The Tragedy of King Christophe* isn't a comedy. It's a very real tragedy, because it's ours."<sup>223</sup> I take this to mean that this tragedy is *ours* in the sense that Christophe crystalizes that fundamental problem of decolonial politics, of transitioning from object to subject, and attempting to participate, and perhaps even drive forward, that second abolition, collectively. In short, that tension space between the first and second abolitions is often filled by a tyrant. So, the question becomes, how can that through line between the two abolitions be navigated differently?

Césaire's *Tragedy of King Christophe*, first published in 1963, focuses on the political stage of Christophe's career, tracking his rivalry with Pétion, and his attempts and frustrations in his incapacity to rally a cohesive social body against Pétion's southern republic, and culminates in Christophe's suicide. The thrust of the play centers on Christophe's attempt to reject and transcend the limits imposed on him, and his Haitian empire, by resorting to ever increasingly grandiose attempts at remaking the psychological makeup of the Haitian people and erecting grander and grander monuments to his own glory. Christophe's imaginings for what Haiti might become cannot be achieved within the scope of the world as he finds it, so Christophe must *craft* a new world out of all the raw material ("stone" and "cement") that he can secure.<sup>224</sup> And

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<sup>223</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Resolutely Black: Conversations with François Vergès* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Books, 2020), 32.

<sup>224</sup> As Davis argues: "The very scope of Christophe's rebellion necessitates a vain attempt to construct a 'substitute world', for he comes to regard the existing Haitian polity as fundamentally inadequate to the measure of his grandiose dreams." In *Césaire*, 144.

yet, all of Christophe's heroic movements and brashness only appear to sink Haiti deeper into conflict and despair.

One way to read the play is as Césaire reconfronting the tensions inherent between the first and second horizons of abolition. The dynamic that Césaire helps to establish is whether the two should be approached together at all. Christophe's actions reveal a sort of visceral negritude that seeks to impose a new foundation from which the recently freed Haitian people can liberate themselves from the internal damage and control of colonial subjugation. Throughout the play Christophe is spoken of as if he were the head of a strict hierarchical family, where all movement and development must emanate from his own hand. Early in the play, Vastey, Christophe's secretary, compares the task of Christophe to that of a potter: "There is one who instinctively understands it: that is, Christophe. With his magnificent potter's hands, kneading the clay of Haiti, he at least...I won't say he knows, but better still, he senses—smelling it, the serpentine path of the future—the form itself."<sup>225</sup> Christophe accepts this task, and vision of himself, as head "of the great Haitian family," who alone can erect the Haitian people to face the world: "To do, to construct, to build/To be, to name, to bind, to remake—Well, then I will take it all, I well understand its weight/And will carry it."<sup>226</sup> What is worth emphasizing here is that the task of cohering and cultivating a new collective of disparately united people is conceived of as only requiring explicitly direct acts: do, construct, build, name, bind, remake, take. What is omitted is any real sense that much of

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<sup>225</sup> Césaire, *Christophe*, 18.

<sup>226</sup> Césaire, *Christophe*, 22.

the vagaries of cohering a nation remain unknown, mysterious, fickle, and outside the grasp of any singular individual. This is the tragic task of the revolutionary actor, who despite their necessary imperative to construct, build, craft, the impossible into being, must nevertheless remain open to forces outside of themselves.

The play wrestles with Christophe's misapprehension of liberation, and in so doing, begins to pull apart the divergences between the first and second movements of abolition. In my reading of the play, it seems that there is a connection but at most it is a negative one: meaning that how the first stage of abolition is secured sets the possibilities for the second, but they remain relatively independent. In a scene early in the Play, the character Metellus, leader of a rebel group opposing both Christophe and Pétion, is being questioned about the nature of his opposition to Christophe. Metellus responds by decrying the double tyranny imposed on the Island by the dueling leaders:

We were going to found a country that was shared among all of us, not just the landholders list on this island! Open to all of the islands, to all of the black! All the blacks of the world! But then came the procurators, dividing the house, laying their hands on our mother, debasing her, in the eyes of the world, to a trivial, contemptible puppet! Christophe! Pétion! I turn my back on this double tyranny, that of the brute, and the sneering skeptic—who knows which side does more harm? Great promised land, to salute you with a man's salute we have kept watch on the crest of the *mornes*, in the hollows of the ravines. Kept watch on this black soil we stand on, reddening it with our peasants' blood, to follow, instead of a king, the hypnotic spell of the imperious conch.

Following this speech, Metellus is put to death. Here, I want to draw attention to two aspects of this speech. First, Metellus, functioning as a voice of reason, an interruption of the chaotic and spiraling energy of Christophe, is not permitted to remain on the stage long. Other minor characters of the play serve the same purpose, of offering alternative

ideas to how newly liberated Haitian life might proceed, but they are sidelined by demands of a revolution that demands transcendence, romantic upheaval, and the power of great individual acts. Second, part of the problem of Metellus's demands is that they are ambiguous and somewhat non-political. Metellus ends his proclamation with an appeal to the persistence of the Haitian peasants to remain on the land despite everything and to follow the "hypnotic spell of the imperious conch," as opposed to the actions of either leader. Metellus hints that the liberation, here invoking the second horizons of abolition, sought by the Haitian people is by nature mysterious, and somewhat outside the nature of traditional politics.

The most important character who provides a similar function to the structure of the story, and the only one who is allowed to remain through the play, is Madame Christophe. Madame Christophe, Christophe's wife, functions as the caution against Christophe's excesses. In an exchange between the two towards the end of the first Act, Christophe implores his wife that he cannot slow down and must exert more control over the course of events, "if we want to climb out again, see what demands that lays on us—the foot aching, the muscles straining, teeth that can grip and hold!...one must demand more of blacks than of others: more work, more faith, more enthusiasm, a step, another step, and yet one more step."<sup>227</sup> In response to this tirade by Christophe, the Queen provides a poetic answer that stresses not the obsessive activity of a king, but his grace and nurturing capacity towards others:

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<sup>227</sup> Césaire, *Christophe*, 38.

Christophe, do you know how, in my little Woolly head, I think of a king?  
I'll tell you! In the midst of savannahs ravaged/By spiteful sun, he's the  
full and vigorous leaves/Of the great mombin tree, under which/Cattle,  
thirsting for shadow, take refuge. But you? But you? Sometimes I ask  
myself—Because you try to do everything, to control everything—if you  
aren't instead/The great fig tree that takes all the plants/Growing around it  
and strangles them!<sup>228</sup>

Here Madame Christophe provides a depiction of leadership of restraint, patience, and acceptance. She also echoes Metellus's notion that by attempting to control and direct the abolition of his people he is likely to stifle and destroy it.

I want to highlight here that the play works towards creating a rift between the first and second waves of abolition, that they are of entirely different sorts and that while connected through the tendency of deficiencies in one realm to limit possibilities in the other, they remain distinct. Returning to Haiti, his original inspiration, Césaire recognizes limits and possibilities that went unnoticed before. I want to conclude by highlighting two of those dynamics here to set up their analysis in the proceeding section. First, Césaire's treatment of Christophe illuminates that in moving from the first to second horizon of abolition something must be let go, as opposed to being built upon. There is something about the imaginary created through the invocation of 'creation,' 'invention', 'transcendence,' that is intimately destructive and limiting in negotiating the terms of the second abolition. Second, this (partial) abandonment of the ideals, strategies, and energies that helped to arise the initial liberation requires a humility and commitment to growing one's perception and vision. The end of the play concludes with this sentiment.

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<sup>228</sup> Césaire, *Christophe*, 38.

The last lines of Madame Christophe reduce Christophe back from his desire to be ‘the extender of boundaries,’ and the creator of nations, and to be simply recognized by his wife, though her eyes, using his original name: “O man, extender of boundaries, O man, forger of stars, fierce, hot-clenching embrace, great and devoted heart, already grown cold in the distance, cast off your habit of stony pride to dream of a small old woman who limping through dust and rain in the broke day will garner, at journey’s end, your name!”<sup>229</sup> As such, the focus shifts back onto the shifting valences of liberation, which I argued can be best represented within the twin horizons of abolition. Césaire opens the problem but is unsure of how to negotiate its terrain. In the next section, I turn to Maryse Condé to examine the space that Césaire opens.

## **V. From the Other Shore: Condé, Césaire, and Abolition After the Storm**

In previous section, I stressed that there are two processes of revolutionary abolition and that they embody distinct and often divergent logics. An initial revolutionary logic is both diagnostic and prescriptive. Diagnosing both the physical and psychological toll of the colonized, an initial revolutionary diagnostic can often seem a harsh indictment of one’s own compatriots, the very people whose lives one is hoping to change. Suzanne and Aimé both wrote of the “mediocrity” and “torpor” of Martinican townships to stimulate revolutionary ferment. In the *Great Camouflage*, Suzanne reserves her most scathing indictments for the Martinican, upwardly mobile, black bourgeoisie:

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<sup>229</sup> Césaire, *Christophe*, 96.

Here is an Antillean, great-grandson of a White colonizer and a slave Negres. Here he is deploying, in order “to get up and running” in his island, all the energies formerly necessary to greedy colonizers for whom the blood of others was the natural price of gold, all the courage necessary to African warriors who perpetually earned their living from death. Here he is with his double strength and double ferocity, in a dangerously threatened equilibrium: he cannot accept his négritude; he cannot whiten himself. Spinelessness takes hold of this divided heart. And, with it, the usual trickery, the taste for “scheme”; thus blossoms in the Antilles this flower of human baseness, the colored bourgeoisie.<sup>230</sup>

When the goal is to dismantle an oppressive colonial order this language and indictment of the psychological and moral status of one’s own compatriots is affective and effective at stimulating vital urgency. Here, Suzanne displays a similar fiery denunciatory spirit to Aimé’s Christophe: “What is this people, which has, for a national consciousness, only a pudding-stone of assorted gossip? Haitian people: Haiti has less to fear from the French than from herself! The enemy of this people is its indolence, its shamelessness, its hatred of discipline, its spirit of sensual torpor.”<sup>231</sup> This is energy to provoke a crowd into an unavoidable storm. What ought the crowd to achieve when it emerges on the other side?

The Guadeloupean writer, Maryse Condé, confronts this question throughout her writing, but perhaps never as personally or directly as in her memoir, *Tales from the Heart*.<sup>232</sup> A theme of Condé’s novels, echoing her noted emphasis on exile as wandering, is an effort to rename and reexamine the familiar and banal. Like many Caribbean writers, Condé’s post-secondary education and writing success brought her away from her island; after the age of thirty-three she didn’t return for more than fifteen years and

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<sup>230</sup> Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, 43.

<sup>231</sup> Césaire, *Christophe*, 15-16.

<sup>232</sup> Condé, *Tales from the Heart: True Stories from my Childhood* (New York: Soho Press, 1998).

noted the impact on her thusly: “For thirty-three years, therefore, living on my island for me was a fantasy, a dream that haunted me. When in 1986 I decided to return and settle on the island, I had to rediscover it and for me that was a totally new experience.”<sup>233</sup> Here Condé invokes the processes of detour and return, where even home is not stable, and the unavoidable act of wandering makes one return to it with fresh eyes. At the age of forty-nine, Condé was tasked with the act of relearning:

I had to rediscover this nature and name every tree...And this re-appropriation of nature went hand in hand with a re-appropriation of the language because, of course, the trees have erudite Latin names but also, in most cases, Creole names. I had to relearn as well these unfamiliar Creole names and the poetry that went with them. I listened... And this reminds me of a kind of African animism...an animism I knew when I lived in the Sahel which teaches you to come to terms with nature...And all this pantheism, this animism which I knew nothing about while I was growing up in Guadeloupe, I felt like re-inventing it. I felt like re-inventing the mysterious links between everything round me and the temple of nature.<sup>234</sup>

Here Condé merges the tasks of listening and re-invention. She is open, slow, and patient.

I cite these passages here to clarify what I perceive Condé to be doing in her memoir, which, taking this approach of listening and re-invention, Condé opens herself up to the familiar which she had previously closed. The opening of Condé’s memoir recounts the birth of her childhood perception of her parents as ‘alienated’ petty bourgeoisie, government workers, who, as Condé notes, expressed the period of the Second World War as the “darkest period they had ever known,” because they could not

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<sup>233</sup> Conde, *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*, 112.

<sup>234</sup> Conde, *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*, 113.

take their annual trip to Paris.<sup>235</sup> Here Condé's parents are not far removed from the Martinican petty bourgeoisie condemned by Suzanne Césaire. It is from her older brother, Sandrino, that Condé first learns where her parents fit within the political landscape of French Empire: "His voice turned serious. 'Don't worry your head about it...Papa and Maman are a pair of alienated individuals.'"<sup>236</sup> Condé implicitly understood that to be 'alienated' represented "a type of shameful ailment like gonorrhea, perhaps even fatal," and she swore to herself at a young age that she would never herself be alienated.<sup>237</sup>

These passages are revealing not because they offer much clarity on what it means to be alienated necessarily, but rather, because of the power such political labels impose on shared reality. The political categories initially generated to diagnose and propel a community through a first horizon of abolition nonetheless remain in that horizon's wake, whether that abolition is fully successful or not. The labels serve to narrate and govern the movements of one's social reality, translating what was at first perceived, from the perspective of a child, as personality quirks and the mysteries of parental personality, into a political vantage point. I want to stress here that such categories as alienation, and other psychological diagnostics, are often necessary and helpful. Late in Condé's memoir she even recounts how a fear that Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks* with 'her in mind' motivated her to a new politics, 'opening her eyes' to the closed off nature of her previous social milieu.<sup>238</sup> Indeed, it is hard to imagine

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<sup>235</sup> Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 3.

<sup>236</sup> Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 6.

<sup>237</sup> Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 7.

<sup>238</sup> Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 111.

Césaire's negritude, or the revolutionary psychological insights of Fanon, without the power of 'alienation' as a diagnostic and motivating tool. However, I aim to consider here not only how they hold little leverage in stimulating a secondary abolition, necessary for the long durée of liberation, but how such concepts often impede such possibility.

The young awareness of her parents' as 'alienated' morphed into vitriol: "I can't remember why we [Condé and her mother] constantly squabbled. I can only remember I always had the last word. I lashed out at her with my sharp tongue and she invariably ended up in tears sobbing."<sup>239</sup> Now of course, Condé was certainly not the first child to make their mother cry. But I do want to stress that Condé's vitriol towards her mother emerges out of a sharp judgement rooted in a type of submerged embarrassment about how her mother is in the world, the status that she occupies. This reflects the simple fact, especially true in hierarchically rigid social structures predicated on norm adherence and understanding un verbalized social cues, that personal relationships are unavoidably political in nature. Or rather, it is extremely difficult to avoid rendering one's personal relationships along political lines. However, one of the memoir's final moments, and most moving passages, comes when Condé returns from school one day, sweeping past her arthritic and frail mother "without a glance." Once locked in her room Condé could hear her mother, out of breath, struggling to simply move around her bedroom, finally finding her bed, "which creaked like a boat being put to sea."<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 124.

<sup>240</sup> Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 127.

The younger Condé assumed what she felt in that moment a type of pity and embarrassment and went to comfort her mother. Years later, in writing on this incident, and now writing from the vantage point of an older woman herself, having returned to her island with new ears and an openness to reinvent the familiar, recognizes that it was love not pity that pushed her into her mother's room. Here it is necessary to quote Condé at length:

Lying in the middle of her bed she was propped up against a pile of pillows, she complained of breathlessness during the night...She was old and alone. My father had left for Sarcelles at the beginning of the week. Alone and old. I climbed onto the bed like I used to do when I was small, when nothing was refused me, when nothing was out of bound. I hugged and hugged her and showered her with kisses. Suddenly, as if a signal had been given, we both began to cry. For the beloved Sandrino who was dying so far away. For the end of my childhood. For a certain life we knew was over. For happiness of sorts. I slipped my hand between her now withered and useless breasts which had breast-fed eight children, and we spent the whole night together, her clinging to me and I curled up against her side amidst the smell of old age and arnica, lost in her warmth. This is how I want to remember her.<sup>241</sup>

There is a danger in reading too much into such a personal and delicate moment, but it nonetheless is unavoidably revealing that Condé is only able to connect to her mother when her mother's suffering, which invokes the memories of childhood simplicity and a lovingly given maternal care, rise to the surface.

The passing from the first abolition to the second is akin to the dissolution of one world from another. In this framing it becomes clear why the political language that motivated the first abolition is detrimental to developing a second abolition. As argued,

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<sup>241</sup> Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 128.

the outlook necessary for achieving a first abolition is strident, uncompromising, and single-minded. ‘After the storm,’ such a view, when taken towards fostering new moral relations and commitments amidst ‘a people’ who have yet to fully come into being, is self-destructive. In Césaire’s rendering, one of Christophe’s fundamental flaws is his lack of warmth and sympathy toward the life around him. Perceiving only indolence, ‘dust,’ and ‘shit,’ he is attempting to move through and create a people in a world in which he does not fully see. Christophe, here again exemplary of the revolutionary mindset, always sees the current moment as preparatory for a more perfect later stage yet to be realized. Christophe perceives his fellow citizens as piano keys, which only need to be struck correctly to complete the final harmony. Indeed, even contemporary theorizations that focus on untimely acts, sudden ruptures, and the possibilities inherent in violent attempts at seizing moments to remake ossified people and political institutions repeat this same dynamic, albeit in a softer valence.<sup>242</sup>

## **VI: Conclusion**

In framing Césaire within a broader framework of exile, I argued that Césaire’s intellectual development is best viewed as a sustained evolution in reflecting on disaggregating the long *durée* of liberation across two overlapping yet divergent processes of abolition. I argued that both *négritude* and Césaire’s commitment to departmentalization represent his understanding that the constellation of formal legal

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<sup>242</sup> As Gary Wilder argues, “through departmentalization [Césaire] hoped to ‘inflect’ existing relations to the point of rupture.” In *Freedom Time*, 106.

equality, socioeconomic security, freedom, and the cultivation of a cultural identity were mutually engendering of one another.<sup>243</sup> Both *négritude* and departmentalization represent Césaire's grappling with a "heroic persona"<sup>244</sup> that can open spaces of political possibility assumed to be dormant, neglected, and, or impossible. In short, it was taken that liberation could be initiated in one fell swoop. Here Césaire functions as a type of syncretic craftsman who can invigorate spaces of stagnation and bridge divides across incommensurate political and cultural spaces. This syncretic space is where most recent work on Césaire situates itself.<sup>245</sup> This focus is reflected in conceptual appeals to 'poetic knowledge,' 'untimeliness,' 'impossible futures,' 'radical literalism,' and other enigmatic couplets that are meant to represent Césaire's ambition to cohere ostensibly divergent political aims, such as a politics of assimilation and liberation, to open new spaces for political freedom.

In this dissertation I argued that the experience of exile involves acts of self-imposition, where different valences of dislocation are accepted and examined to slow down the movement of one's present and to seek new relationships. Exile represents the effort not simply to return home, but to construct new notions of self, relationality, and shared identity that can manifest alternative spaces and notions of home. Here the experiences of exile, perhaps best expressed by the personal reflections of Maryse Condé,

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<sup>243</sup> See Wilder, "Departmentalization and the Spirit of Schoelcher," in *Freedom Time*: 106-132.

<sup>244</sup> See A. James Arnold, "Introduction," in *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry 1946-82*, ed. Clayton Eshleman & Annette Smith (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1990).

<sup>245</sup> Scharfman, Ronnie Scharfman, "Aimé Césaire: Poetry Is/and Knowledge." *Research in African Literatures* 41(1) 2010: 109-20; Wilder, *Freedom Time*; --, ---, "Here/Hear Now Aimé Césaire." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 115(3) 2016: 585-604.

lend themselves to infusing a deeper appreciation for the tactics, strategies, and dispositions necessary to engage what I labeled as a second wave of abolition and move along the continual process of liberation.

The difficult component of this dynamic is that the dispositions and strategies that are so often useful to secure a first abolition of colonial structures and oppressions, a single-minded drive to negate oppressive outside forces, the delegation of that responsibility to a heroic individual or vanguard party, begins to erode the capacities necessary to secure that second abolition. I know that the individual examinations of this dissertation often appear to privilege the individual experience over the collective or social. There is a danger that this emphasis can lose site on the collective, participatory nature required for promoting a democratically shared politics of abolition. Nonetheless, I find this focus on the individual and internal important because political commitment, the acceptance of novelty and risk necessary to commit to new political relationships, inescapably requires individual commitment and belief that one maintains some capacity, however small, to choose an alternative—even if that alternative, can only begin with reorganizing one’s perception of self and their most intimate others. They cannot simply be handed down from above. As Achill Mbembe argues: “the project of decolonization can have appeal only if it refers to a set of continued topological *folds of the whole*. For ‘decolonial acts’ to achieve their maximum effect, they must work through connectivity and elasticity, continuous stretching, and even distortion.”<sup>246</sup> In contemporary moments

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<sup>246</sup> Mbembe, *Out of the Dark*, 89.

every day political actors are so often paralyzed by feelings of stasis, pessimism, or resignation that little can be done to transform the structures that dominate their lives. My aim in this chapter, and with this dissertation's larger focus on exile, is that flight, escape, and refusal are not the only political possibilities available. Equally powerful are notions of return and remaking of one's inheritances and all that is received.

### Chapter 3:

#### Lorraine Hansberry: Exile and the Dislocations of Home

*This house is on fire.  
I, for one, will probably stay here to help try and put it out.*

~Lorraine Hansberry

#### I. Introduction:

There exists a latent assumption in this project that there is always a potential next step, an unexamined way forward, an unforeseen space of transformation that was overlooked. I am forced to confront the possibility that this project is as much a dispositional reflection of my own instincts and desires, as it is as an excavation of a set of thinkers, the concept of exile, or the spaces of possibility that they open. In this chapter, focused on the life and work of Lorraine Hansberry, I contrast two of Hansberry's dramatic works, *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Les Blancs*. Holding *Raisin*, the play that made her famous, alongside *Les Blancs*, a posthumously performed production initially met with confusion and indifference, produces a space to confront the possibility that perhaps the fire is too strong, the debt too large, and one's desires for it to be otherwise insufficient.

This dissertation situated the historical moment of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as a period of indeterminacy and flux, where the dominant racial and colonial orders sat on the precipice of potential change or re-entrenching those orders under new camouflages. I

argued that this moment produced a certain experience of exile, often at least partly self-imposed or embraced, and which focused on using one's own dislocations to find alternative spaces of movement and possibility. As I will argue, *Raisin* fits into that story quite neatly, where Hansberry utilizes radical notions of home, relationality, and identity to challenge and remake traditional American notions of home, safety, marriage, and hope. *Les Blancs*, at first glance, could not read more differently. *Les Blancs* is an examination of a wide array of actors, colonists, colonized, and intruders, who seemingly talk, argue, and lament while the colonial city that surrounds them descends into turmoil and violence. The play ends when the ostensible protagonist, Thsembe, the prodigal son who has returned to heal a broken family and people, is unable to find a pathway forward and watches his surroundings burn. There is no redemption, no dramatic shift in momentum. The play is claustrophobic in the sense that all avenues of escape are removed, and the fire of violent revolution that increasingly encircles the cast of actors only grows until they are consumed. In so doing, I argue that Hansberry intentionally demonstrates the insufficiency of transporting domestic concepts and ideals transnationally. Hansberry struggled writing *Les Blancs* until the end of her life, and part of this struggle, it seems to me, rests in trying to honestly wrestle with how radical forms of dignity, home, and relationality that was the focus of her U.S. centric work can be applied, challenged, and reworked in an international, decolonial context.

Up to this point, I argued that exile functions as both a personal experience, as well as site of historical socio-political conditions that structure paradoxical spaces of constriction and possibility. Again, Baldwin provides a lens into

the individual experience of living within such a moment, and Césaire provides an experience of how one attempts to undertake projects of liberation, through twin projects of abolition, when a novel notion of ‘a people’ remains undefined. A politics of transformation fundamentally involves the mutual responsibility to make claims and demands of another.<sup>247</sup> Politics constitutes a struggle, or a demand, to change and be changed. Politics is never simply constrained to mere acts of acquisition or refusal.<sup>248</sup> I argue here that this point is crystalized in the work of Hansberry. In Hansberry my conceptualization of exile emerges through Hansberry’s conceptualization of home, where Hansberry’s notion of home, as the paradigmatic site of politics and intimacy, embodies the various registers of dislocation that afflict the exile.

In Césaire there is a fundamental tension between the individual effort needed to liberate oneself from a type of cultural and historical exile, and the aspiration that out of this struggle can emerge a newly ‘liberated’ public. The work of Lorraine Hansberry extends this impulse. However, rather than embedding questions of liberation, hierarchy, gender inequality, and material struggle into past historical struggles, Hansberry situates these struggles in cramped apartments and intimate spaces of home. In the dissertation’s Introduction, I argued that contemporary attempts to overcome political

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<sup>247</sup> In the Introduction (see p. 18) I referenced Baldwin’s essay on Martin Luther King Jr and Baldwin’s discussion of politics involving tangible sacrifice in one’s immediate and lived reality, not simply for an abstract future. As Baldwin’s notes in that essay, “salvation humanly speaking, is a two-way street.” Baldwin, “Martin Luther King,” in *Collected*, 647.

<sup>248</sup> Sacrifice cannot be avoided. Here Hansberry is helpful in arguing against the types of liberal politics of assimilation that she was often accused of: “white backlash is inevitable and it can be expected to grow increasingly ugly as this white, truly white, American realizes the hard fact that in order for the Negro to participate fully in the American life, he, the white man, will have to relinquish some part of his comfort, and that the system which has permitted him a privileged place at the expense of the Negro will have to undergo fundamental changes.” Hansberry, ed. Mollie Godfrey, *Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2021), 179-180.

stasis and pessimism frequently oscillate between mining the past to project utopian dreams forward into the future. Paradoxically, by eliding attention to the political choices and changes available to people in the present, this style of political thinking reinforces the effects it is trying to escape. Hansberry balances this mode of thinking, as her work illuminates the structural political forces of racism, economic inequality, sexism, and colonialism within the intimate. For Hansberry, home becomes the paradigmatic political space. In so doing, Hansberry challenges preconceived conceptions about the spaces and actions that constitute political struggle, resistance, and rupture. In short, Hansberry asks what constitutes political revolt in the collective spaces of everyday life as confronted in the quotidian aspects of the intimate.

In Hansberry, home functions as the site where, “different systems of oppression are produced, interrogated, challenged, and transgressed,” and imposes forced choices, limits, contradictions, and slivers of possibility inseparable from the global political forces that create such spaces.<sup>249</sup> Hansberry does not offer a romanticized notion of home as a sanctuary or source of protection, and she refuses the distinction between public and private spaces.<sup>250</sup> In so doing, Hansberry predates Iris Marion Young’s defense of home as an unavoidable site of political struggle that can support radical subjectivities and alternative modes of relationality, “where the subject is understood as fluid, partial, shifting, and in relations of reciprocal support with others.”<sup>251</sup> Beginning with her most

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<sup>249</sup> Begüm Adalet, “An Insurgent Mood: Lorraine Hansberry on the Politics of Home,” *American Political Science Review* (2024): 1–14.

<sup>250</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

<sup>251</sup> Iris Marion Young, “House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme,” in *Intersecting Voices* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 156.

famous work, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry saw home both as a lived intimate site and as an aspiration embedded in American mythology, as a site of struggle, contestation, and opportunity to create new possibilities for human dignity. As I will argue, in *Raisin*, Hansberry sought to dramatize the significance and weight of seemingly small decisions, and their potential to usher in new modes of being and political commitment. As Soyica Diggs Colbert argues, Hansberry's work is of an "artist activist, Hansberry set ideas and concepts in motion; she animated freedom."<sup>252</sup>

Hansberry's early work, *Raisin* and her journalistic work for *Freedom Magazine* in the late 1950s, focused on the black struggle in the U.S. context. However, as others have recently argued, Hansberry's work is far more internationalist than was often assumed. In her later dramatic work, *The Drinking Gourd*, *Les Blancs*, and *What Use are Flowers?* she sought to connect the political struggle of black Americans with the decolonial struggles across Africa and the diaspora. I argue that contextualizing this work within the framework of exile highlights the ways that Hansberry sought to overcome American impulses for self-possession, individual acts of liberation, and rigid hierarchical politics. Indeed, part of this response emanates from the reception of *Raisin* as assimilationist and reflective of the dominant strand of white, liberal politics.

As shown in my analysis of Baldwin and Césaire, exile disabused both thinkers of a liberal politics of self-possession, and each struggled with how to re-fashion one's own self-understanding to make possible new modes of political encounter and commitment.

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<sup>252</sup> Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Radical Vision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 104.

Hansberry meets them on this terrain. In *Les Blancs*, Hansberry dramatizes the political upheavals and revolt in the fictional African country of Zatembe (modeled after the decolonial politics occurring in Kenya) and different political actors' attempts to overthrow the white, colonial authority. In this context, far from the U.S. dreams of homeownership, the valences of home appear distant and unfamiliar. As Margaret B. Wilkerson argues, *Les Blancs* was an effort to "anticipate the future," of where the civil rights struggle, comprised of "heroic" and "foolish actions," was likely to take us.<sup>253</sup> Hansberry disabuses the efficacy of the individual hero as an answer to decolonial struggle. Instead, she offers imperfect encounters between colonial and decolonial actors. It is in *Les Blancs* that Hansberry provides her richest understanding for the struggles, contradictions, and possibilities in transnational political action.

Lastly, what is most powerful in Hansberry's work in *Les Blancs* is that ultimately what she dramatizes is failure and imperfection, nonetheless, identifying in this failure and imperfection encounters of political hope. I argued in this dissertation's Introduction that contemporary thought focused on political transformation tends to oscillate between excavating the past and opaque projections into a distant future. It seems to me that this tendency often reinforces the political apathy it is meant to counter, because these efforts project solutions into the realm of the abstract. In contradistinction, Hansberry is interested in locating hope and possibility within the muddled, quotidian realities of everyday life. Hansberry dramatizes the present slow, stuttered, small, decisions that

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<sup>253</sup> Margaret B. Wilkerson, "Introduction," *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 21.

individuals choose and live-through as they fumble towards political change. As Hansberry reflected on the final scene of *Raisin*, where the son Walter walks towards his new home, “there are no waving flags and marching songs at the barricades as Walter marches out with his little battalion, it is not because the battle lacks nobility.”<sup>254</sup>

This chapter proceeds in three sections. First, I examine Hansberry’s notion of home and how the framework of exile helps to elucidate Hansberry’s later focus on international decolonial politics. Second, I turn to Hansberry’s *Raisin* and early writings, to show how Hansberry sought to capture the entwined politics of gender, sex, race, and capitalist inequality within the intimate spaces of home. Finally, I examine Hansberry’s posthumous play, *Les Blancs*, arguing that exile illuminates Hansberry’s dramatization of a politics of encounter. Through these shifting valences of home and exile, Hansberry helps to elucidate the ways the gender, inheritance, sex, racism, and colonial legacies shape both domestic and international political horizons, and the embedded possibilities contained within fraught relationships of encounter.

## **II. Exile and the Politics of Home**

This dissertation is concerned with identifying how the received, inherited, and repetitious can be reimagined not only as points of impasse but as possibilities for creating new paths for action and growth. I argued that often, in the necessary effort to reignite progressive aspirations, what Robin D.G. Kelley labeled, ‘freedom dreams,’ the

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<sup>254</sup> Hansberry, *Conversations*, 97.

past is seen as the gateway to a future that seems unimaginable in the present.<sup>255</sup> My contention is that this corpus of theory, while rich and useful, has the unintended consequences of swallowing the present and capturing the present in a type of stasis. In contrast to the abstract language of fugitive escape, ‘surrealism’s transformative mindscapes’, and deconstruction while infusing the imagination with possibility, nevertheless, clouds the possibilities inherent in quotidian and intimate spaces that structure the everyday realities of the present.<sup>256</sup> As Hansberry reveals, politics structures intimate space, the kitchens, bedrooms, and living rooms of cramped apartment buildings. Those intimate spaces then become the grounds for contestation, and potentially transformative acts. In this section I turn first to Hansberry’s conceptualization of home as the paradigmatic political site, and finally argue how exile serves to best capture her expansion of the politics of home into the space of international politics.

Recent re-appraisals of Hansberry’s work seek to rightfully situate her within a dynamic political milieu of black, feminist thought that emerged in the 1940s and through the 1950s. This work seeks to correct the initial public response to Hansberry’s work following the success of *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959. *Raisin* was predominantly received as a type of apologia for white liberal society and black integration into it. Both the

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<sup>255</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination, Revised and Expanded* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022); Perry, *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2022)

<sup>256</sup> Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, “Fugitive Justice.” *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 1–15 Fred Moten & Stefon Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013); Sojoyner, D.M. (2017). Another life is possible, Black fugitivity and enclosed spaces. *Cultural Anthropology*, 32, 514–536; Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

subject matter and artistic mechanics of the play were celebrated in mainstream media as a type of affirmation of the liberating potentialities of the American Dream. However, the artistic merit of the play was often minimized in the face of a claimed broader social significance. Writing for the *New York Daily News*, John Chapman wrote: “If one sets aside the one, unusual fact that it is a Negro work, *A Raisin in the Sun* becomes no more than a solid and enjoyable commercial play.”<sup>257</sup> Relatively unknown prior to 1959, *Raisin*, and the initial public perception it received, came to stand in for Hansberry’s assumed political commitments. Hansberry’s subsequent battle with pancreatic cancer and death in 1965, during the run of her second and final staged play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window*, gave little time for the contestation of the liberal assimilationist projection of Hansberry.<sup>258</sup>

Until recently, mainstream accounts of postwar political activity presented the 1950s as a period of deflation for leftist politics. The anticommunist instincts that infused mainstream U.S. political life were assumed to have silenced the organized left and encouraged an era of conformity, buttressed by swift economic growth and U.S. materialism.<sup>259</sup> However, as the work of historian Dayo F. Gore examines how, acting within this historical moment, was a vibrant community of black, feminist activists and artists who sought to claim a space that cut across black liberation and women’s equality,

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<sup>257</sup> Quoted in, *Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry*, 64.

<sup>258</sup> *Burstein’s Window* ran for 101 performances from October 1964 to January 1965. The play received poor ticket sales and mixed reviews, and the run was only extended an epic campaign by its supporters. Hansberry passed away two days after closing night, on January 12, 1965.

<sup>259</sup> Gerald Horne was perhaps the first scholar in the black radical tradition who pushed to correct this narrative and illuminate the black, radical activity of the 1940s and 1950s. See Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B Du Bois and Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986); *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988).

in the face of a rising U.S. conservatism and mythologizing of domesticity as a pinnacle social achievement in and of itself.<sup>260</sup> Gore's work examines how an intimate network of black women activists, artists, and writers emerged out of the political dynamism of the 1930s and assumed a shared political project within the U.S. left that continued to fight for black resistance to U.S. racism, worker protections, and women's liberation.

Beginning in the 1920s a generation of black women radicals emerged during the conflux of the great migration and a rapid growth of leftist U.S. politics, both of which were exacerbated by international political upheaval and the economic crisis of the Great Depression. A generation of Black women such as the journalist Claudia Jones, novelist Alice Childress, and radical organizers Louise Thomsen Patterson and Maude White, sought college degrees and entered the urban white-collar work force as journalists, labor organizers, and college professors. Through this movement into what was traditionally the white spaces of leftist organizing, these women confronted racial violence, and sexual and racial prejudice within leftist organizations in which they worked and collaborated, such as the Communist Party, the International Labor Defense, and the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE).

By the 1950s, this constellation of women confronted both the layered inequalities built into left organizing as well as the rapid growth of cultural conservatism that emerged in the economic boom of the 1940s and 50s. Their political activity is perhaps best represented in the poet Beulah Richardson's reading of her poem, "A. Black Woman

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<sup>260</sup> Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

Speaks...of White Womanhood, of White Supremacy, of Peace,” at the 1951 *Women’s Workshop of the American People’s Peace Conference*, in Chicago. Over 500 women attended the conference, mostly white, and Beulah set out to dismantle the racial and sexual hierarchies embedded in leftist organizing: “in searching honestly...it seems to me. White womanhood stands in bloodied skirt and wiling slavery...white supremacy is your enemy and mine...What will you do? Will you fight with me.”<sup>261</sup> As Gore notes, her reading received a standing ovation and conference prize.

It is within this cultural context that Lorraine Hansberry developed as an essayist, activist, and dramatist. Beginning in 1951, following her undergraduate work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Hansberry moved to New York City and began working as a staff writer at the black newspaper, *Freedom*. Hansberry worked alongside W.E.B. Du Bois and Alice Childress and networked with other black activists and writers such as Claudia Jones.<sup>262</sup> In short, Hansberry emerged as a young political activist through working alongside and in conversation with the preeminent black radicals of the 1950s. As recent scholarship argues, it was out of this political and intimate work that Hansberry’s dramatic work emerged.

Hansberry’s political and personal life during the 1950s is a rich and diverse tapestry of personal development, international activism, artistic striving, and struggle. For my purposes here, I aim to highlight two aspects that are relevant to Hansberry’s

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<sup>261</sup> Quoted in Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 46.

<sup>262</sup> Mary Helen Washington, “Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front,” in Bill V. Mullin and James Smethurst (eds), *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism and 20th Century United States Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

development of her notion of home and her understanding of a politics of the intimate. First is the sexual and gender politics that Hansberry experienced across her roles as a young, black women living in New York City under the white gaze, a black woman working amidst black and white radicals striving for political transformation, and her personal struggles with living in a heterosexual marriage as a queer women struggling with a life of domesticity and political struggle. I then identify the home as the space where Hansberry located her exile. Second, I move to situate Hansberry in the black, feminist conversations centered on articulating representations of black womanhood in white, leftist spaces to rupture liberal, bourgeois ideals of what constituted women's liberation.

Hansberry's first published writings sought to open a similar space of analysis as Beulah Richardson's poetry reading at the 1951 Writer's Workshop. There Richardson sought to demonstrate the bias and fraught conceptions of liberation and equality proffered by liberals, Marxists, and other white radicals that neglected race and gender in their examination of oppression and visions of liberation. Hansberry's first published writing was a 1951 poem titled, "Lynchsang," published in the Marxist periodical *Masses and Mainstream*. The poem is a short expression attempting to highlight extreme violence brought upon black bodies that was not captured by Marxist categories or other radical, white conceptions of oppression.<sup>263</sup> It is important to note that Hansberry's poem,

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<sup>263</sup> "I can hear Rosalee/See the eyes of Willie McGee/My mother told me about/Lynchings/My mother told me about/The dark nights/And dirt roads/And torch lights/And lynch robes/The faces of men/Laughing white/Faces of men/Dead in the night/sorrow night/and a/sorrow night." Lorraine Hansberry, "Lynchsang," *Masses and Mainstream* 4(7): 1951, p.31.

published in a small radical journal, sought to engage a radical left audience, intervening in the space of race and gender politics.

Similarly, Hansberry's subsequent published work in *Freedom* frequently sought to analyze the ways in which structures of racism, sexism, and homophobia gave shape to the experience of black female life in the U.S. In Hansberry's rendering, the intersecting markers of race and sex erased all individuality for black women, making them legible only as hypersexualized beings devoid of any social protections, no matter any gains in economic or social status. In the piece, "Light Up on First Black Woman, a *young domestic worker*," Hansberry dramatizes the experience of being called into the sexualized gaze of young, white men:

All right. So now you know something 'bout me you didn't know! In these streets out there, any little white boy from Long Island or Westchester sees me and leans out of his car and yells—"Hey there, *hot chocolate!* Say there, Jezebel... Follow me sometimes and see if I lie. I can be coming from eight hours on an assembly line or fourteen hours in Mrs. Halsey's kitchen. I can be filled up that day with three hundred years of rage so that my eyes are flashing and my flesh trembling—and the white boys in the streets, they look at me and think of sex. They look at me and that's *all* they think.<sup>264</sup>

In this striking passage, Hansberry brings together the economic conditions faced by a black woman, the weight of slavery, lynching, and overt sexualization and how that weight manifests in flesh and mind, while finally articulating the anger in confronting how the legibility assumed under the white gaze erases black individuality. These

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<sup>264</sup> In Lorraine Hansberry, adapted by Robert Nemiroff, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black: An Informal Autobiography* (New York: Signet Books, 1970), 98.

crosscurrents of race, gender, and sex were the focus of Hansberry's political and journalistic life throughout the 1950s.

Hansberry also faced these crosscurrents within the confines of her own domestic and intimate life. Hansberry's approach to her own marriage is demonstrative of this fact. In June of 1953, Hansberry married Robert "Bobby" Nemiroff, a white theater producer and songwriter. The couple sought to balance their inherent affection for one another and the trappings of 1950's American domesticity against their radical political commitments, and the mutual recognition of Lorraine's bisexuality. Hansberry's diaries are filled with a frustration with the drudgery of domestic life, its routines and chores, and spousal obligations. Writing of her domestic life, Hansberry was candid about the sacrifices and lived contradictions required to sustain living as a queer, black woman married to a white man:

I returned [home] and watched Robert wash and shower and shave and listen to disc jockeys at that strange hour...Then I vacuumed the rug and the corners of the house where the dog hair collects in pounds between times when am finally motivated to clean...And then I scrubbed, not well at all, the bathroom and the kitchen and spread paper on the floor...I did not answer the telephone, except once before ten thirty, that was Joan about an apartment...and then I read Simone [de Beauvoir] in frustration again and slept.<sup>265</sup>

Here again, Hansberry infuses a short description of routine with a tremendous amount of emotional and psychological weight. Hansberry infuses the scene with impositions and drudgery required to sustain domestic life in the specious American

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<sup>265</sup> Quoted from Diggs Colbert, *Radical Vision*, 69.

shean of the 1950s. As Diggs Colbert argues, here Hansberry demonstrates “the restlessness with women’s roles” existing alongside a commitment to develop a “political understanding of how to become free within the given structures as one worked to dismantle them.”<sup>266</sup> Hansberry’s marriage is demonstrative of this struggle. Hansberry had relationships with women, while also attempting to manage an intimate and intellectual relationship with her husband that was not contrived through the heterosexual and material norms of 1950s U.S. society.<sup>267</sup>

Hansberry’s personal life reflects her political engagements, where the political project is identifying practices of dignity within oppressive structures, while working towards projects of liberation aimed at dismantling the structures that one is caught living within. In both her professional relationships, situated within a network of black, feminist radicals, and her personal romantic relationships, Hansberry sought to develop practices and notions of intimacy that could accommodate alternate emotional and political relationships that traditional U.S. life did not permit. The notion of home provided Hansberry the site where the confluence of political and personal tensions arises and are struggled over. To grapple with these confluences, Hansberry embodied the experience of exile of testing one’s own dislocations to open presumed foreclosed spaces of possibility.

Hansberry’s personal experience of home was not simply a domestic refuge, but a physical site to be struggled over, whose possible attainment, value, and derived sense of

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<sup>266</sup> *Radical Vision*, 69.

<sup>267</sup> Hansberry and Robert ultimately divorced in 1964, and they remained intimate friends and intellectual interlocutors until her death. Hansberry’s marriage and relationship with Robert are embedded in her efforts to find space in mid-century to live as a queer woman when the language and spaces of U.S. life did not accommodate Hansberry’s intimate reality.

self-worth was infused with a capitalist, American ideology of individual self-possession. As demonstrated above, home also contained the valence of intimate negotiation and encounter, whose structures and limitations were equally infused with U.S. political struggle and history. Hansberry's father, Carl, fought a long sequence of legal battles, challenging the racial housing codes of Chicago, to move the Hansberry family to a 'better' neighborhood. Carl deliberately moved the family to an all-white section of Chicago challenging Chicago's racial segregation covenants, which brought acts of mob violence onto the Hansberry home. Ultimately the case, aided by the NAACP, rose to the U.S. Supreme Court after the Illinois courts upheld the legality of the covenants and evicted the Hansberry's from their home.<sup>268</sup> In 1940, while the case was under deliberation by the U.S. Supreme Court, Carl Hansberry, feeling that he could never be fully free in the U.S., sought to move the family to Mexico. In 1946, Carl died in exile before he could be joined by his family. In a 1964 letter to the *New York Times*, only months before Hansberry's death, she reflected on the political lessons she learned from her father's experience:

My father was typical of a generation of Negroes who believed that the 'American way' could successfully be made to work to democratize the United States. Thus, twenty-five years ago, he spent a small personal fortune, his considerable talents, and many years of his life fighting... That fight also required that our family occupy that disputed property in a hellishly hostile 'white neighborhood' in which, literally, howling mobs surrounded our house. One of their missiles almost took the life of the then eight-year-old signer of this letter... The fact that my father and the NAACP 'won' a Supreme Court decision, in a now famous case which bears his name in the lawbooks, is—ironically—the sort of 'progress' our satisfied friends allude to when they presume to deride the

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<sup>268</sup> See Ed. Mollie Godfrey, *Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2021), xi-xx.

more radical means of struggle. The cost, in emotions turmoil, time and money, which led to my father's early death as a permanently embittered exile in a foreign country when he saw that after such sacrificial efforts the Negroes of Chicago were as ghetto-locked as ever, does not seem to figure in their calculations.<sup>269</sup>

Hansberry captures the fraught nature of pursuing radical transformation within the conditions and ideology of the dominant society. Home as an ideal of safety and attainment is undercut throughout Hansberry's life, and the intimate possibilities that are possible within the confines of home are limited by U.S. racism, materialism, and patriarchal conceptions of gender, sex, and reproduction. Nonetheless, home remains the space of contestation and possibility.

Home is thus transitory, unstable, even often illusory and serves as a site where labor, gender, sex, race, and social production are chased, reproduced, and often contested. In her first two dramatic plays, *Raisin* and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, Hansberry problematizes traditional understandings of home as attained safety to explode the political assumptions and boundaries that naturalize and engrain these instincts towards safety and the drudgeries of capitalistic domesticity. In this early work, Hansberry is already pushing towards something outside of the U.S. context, as her own father pursued a home outside of the U.S., Hansberry sought to connect the black American struggle with an internationalist conception of liberation and political hope. This thematic runs through her work from *Raisin* through *Les Blancs*, and in so doing

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<sup>269</sup> Hansberry, *To be Young, Gifted and Black*, 51.

Hansberry offers not an articulation of home, or a redesigned version, but an elaboration of the sufferings, contradictions, and constrained choices that must be faced and endured.

Hansberry offers something quite distinct or absent in contemporary trends focused on radical transformation; instead of flight or escape from the present, Hansberry sticks. The action of Hansberry's dramatizations of the drudgeries of daily life are never assuaged by abstract appeals to a better future. In so doing, Hansberry slows down to linger in delicate and fraught moments, not to downplay their oppressiveness or drudgery, but to attempt to tease out moments where home can transform into a site of mutual transformation and growth. Exile captures this sense inherent in Hansberry, where one is caught in an in-betweenness, within the disjuncture of the present, and one must find a way to sustain life, both individual and collective, under conditions where the stakes and paths of political change are indeterminate. Hansberry dramatizes not a way out of that indeterminacy, but instead, models the courage, commitment, and belief to seek new encounters to build together.

### **III. *A Raisin in the Sun* and a journey from Home**

*A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in the Spring of 1959, and dramatizes the political vision that Hansberry developed throughout the 1950s, as detailed in the previous section. *Raisin* takes place on the Southside of Chicago and follows material and intimate problems faced by the Youngers, a working-class black family. The action of the play centers on a family disagreement on how to use \$10,000 of insurance money awarded to them upon the death of the family's father. The son, Walter Lee, aspires to

open a liquor store, while the mother, Lena, hopes to buy a house and set aside money so that the daughter, Beneatha, can achieve her dream of going to medical school. In the play the family negotiates whether to move into a new, white neighborhood. Lena places \$3,500 on a downpayment for a new house in a white neighborhood. Lena relents and gives the remaining \$6,500 to Walter Lee to invest, but with the provision that he saves enough money for Beneatha's schooling.

Walter Lee quickly loses the remaining money, and the family argues whether to continue with the move or try to recoup the down payment to pay other practical needs such as Beneatha's education. Ultimately the family reconciles and move into the new home in the white neighborhood. Each character in the play represents different ideological attachments to notions of the American Dream, freedom, or independence, and the play's dialogue centers on their efforts to clarify the content and stakes of their aspirations to one another, and to themselves. For the purposes of this section, I want to highlight two different scenes in the play and examine how they prefigure the questions of decolonialism and liberation that Hansberry later addresses in *Les Blancs*.

The first scene occurs between Walter Lee and his wife, Ruth. Walter expresses no commitment to abstract ideals and views his pathway for social and familial betterment in purely economic terms. As Hansberry notes, Walter is "an American more than anything else," and he has "no values which have not come out of their culture, and to a significant point, no view of the possible solutions to their problems which do not

also come out of the self-same culture.”<sup>270</sup> Walter has no aspirations to change himself, at least internally. His aspirations are purely one of material ascendancy and he views this ascendancy as the mechanism which can change his social status, but also the nature of his intimate relationships, specifically with his wife Ruth and their young son Travis. Towards the end of the play Walter accepts a financial offer to not move the family into the new house secured by his mother:

There ain't no causes—there ain't nothing but taking in this world, and he who takes the most is the smartest—and it don't make a damn bit of difference how...I didn't make this world! It was given to me this way! Hell, yes, I want me some yachts someday! Yes, I want to hang some real pearls round my wife's neck. Ain't' she supposed to wear pearls in this world. I tell you I am a *man*—and I think my wife should wear pearls in this world.<sup>271</sup>

Ultimately, Walter's aspirations, coupled with his dismissal of the arguments and viewpoints of the women in his family, serve to reinforce the social order that created his position and frustrations.

Ruth shares Walter's aspirations to escape their dilapidated, cramped apartment on the Southside of Chicago. However, Ruth cannot afford to subscribe to Walter Lee's attachment to the American Dream and material acquisition. Ruth's view of the family's situation is imbued with her awareness of the layered binds that are placed on poor, black, women. The tension between Ruth and Walter's shared and divergent positions is realized in the following argument at the family breakfast table, where Walter tries to convince Ruth to speak to his mother about asking her for a share of the \$10,000 to invest

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<sup>270</sup> Hansberry, *Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry*, 95.

<sup>271</sup> Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 127.

in a liquor store with his friends. Ruth is dismissive, attempting to end the conversation by telling Walter, to eat his eggs:

**Walter:** DAMN MY EGGS—DAMN ALL THE EGGS THAT EVER WAS!

**Ruth:** Then go to work.

**Walter:** (Looking up at her) See— I'm trying to talk to you 'bout myself— (Shaking his head with the repetition)—and all you can say is eat them eggs and go to work.

**Ruth:** (Wearily) Honey, you never say nothing new. I listen to you every day, every night and every morning, and you never say nothing new. (Shrugging) So you would rather *be* Mr. Arnold than be his chauffeur. So— I would rather be living in Buckingham Palace.

**Walter:** That is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world...Don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something.

**Ruth:** (Drily, but to hurt) There are colored men who do things.

**Walter:** No thanks to the colored woman.

**Ruth:** Well, being a colored woman, I guess I can't help myself none. (She rises and gets the ironing board and set it up and attacks a huge pile of rough-dried clothes, sprinkling them in preparation for the ironing and then rolling them into tight fat balls)

Walter and Ruth's disagreement typifies the tension that socio-economic inequality places on the black family, which is both shared and divergently dispersed across genders. Both Walter and Ruth feel alone, misunderstood, and retreat into group identity as opposed to leaning into their shared commitment and intimate reality as a couple. More importantly, however, the disagreement demonstrates the incursion of (re)-production on family life, where Ruth is the engine of social reproduction in the house:

feeding Walter his eggs, raising their son Travis, engaging in the routines of home maintenance, and viewed by Walter as an instrument to further his own material advancement. Hansberry dramatizes how politics impinges on the most intimate of moments, while reproducing the dominant ideological instincts. Are there pathways within this intimate space to seek something different?

The second scene of import occurs between Beneatha, the daughter of the Younger family, and her potential romantic interest George Murchison. Beneatha is unattached to the more literal notion of home that is contested between Walter and Ruth. Beneatha is unencumbered and throughout the play searched outside the intimate space of the Younger home for new attachments that might fill the void and disruptions of home. Earlier in the play, Beneatha is attracted to the Pan-Africanism offered by the Nigerian, Joseph Asagai, who encourages Beneatha to stop straightening her hair, and teasingly mocks her for her attachments to American assimilation: “But what does it matter? Assimilation is so popular in your country.”<sup>272</sup> Joseph promises to teach Beneatha about “identity and time and all that,” and bring her into the intellectual fold of Pan-Africanism and black radical politics. Joseph’s encouragement of Beneatha is undercut by his paternalistic teasing of her naivete and serves to reinforce the gender dynamics demonstrated by Walter and Ruth, albeit not on the plane of material and physical reproduction, but intellectual reproduction.

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<sup>272</sup> Hansberry, *Raisin*, 47.

Following her conversations with Joseph, Beneatha is meant to go to the theatre with George, a wealthy, educated, and aspirational black man who has little time for ideological strivings. In this way, George and Walter share a similar ideological space, though from different vantage points. In the scene, Beneatha emerges with a newly short haircut, which catches George by surprise, and he labels Beneatha “eccentric,” and is quickly rebuffed by Beneatha. Ruth interrupts asking why everything must come to an argument in the Younger family. Beneatha, responding to Ruth, drives the scene towards its crashing point:

**Beneatha:** Because I hate assimilationist Negroes!

**Ruth:** Will somebody please tell me what assimilationist-who-ever means!

**George:** Oh, it’s just a college girl’s way of calling people Uncle Toms—but that isn’t what it means at all.

**Ruth:** Well, what does it mean?

**Beneatha:** (Cutting George off and staring at him as she replies to Ruth) It means someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case *oppressive*, culture!

**George:** Oh, dear, dear, dear! Here we go! A lecture on the African past! On our Great West African Heritage! In one second we will hear all about the great Ashanti empires; the great Songhay civilizations and the great sculpture of Bénin—and then some poetry in the Bantu—and the whole monologue will end with the word *heritage!* (Nastily) Let’s face it, baby your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts!<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Hansberry, *Raisin*, 65.

George's comments are cruel, smug, and reproduce the same sense of male intellectual superiority produced by Joseph. However, the argument does pinpoint another point of concern for Hansberry, which is the utilization of home, either in the materialistic, possessive sense, or in the sense of an inaccessible lost past, as illusory methods of escape that do serve to obfuscate the real scope of action available to the Younger family. Indeed, Lena Younger's (Mama) Christian attachments serve the same function. So, what possible actions are then available to the Younger's, beyond disagreement and family friction?

The play's resolution provides a hint of an answer. Ultimately, Walter rebuffs the man's offer for financial payment to remain in the black neighborhood: "we have decided to move into our house because my father—my father—he earned it for us brick by brick...And that's all we got to say about that. We don't want your money."<sup>274</sup> Walter is the unexpected hero of the play, who, at least for a moment, overcomes his own personal shortcomings to find a moment of intimate, political resistance that he uses to both empower his family and himself, and resist the racist housing assemblies that structure the political/personal tensions that the Younger's navigate throughout the play. Hansberry countenances this reading of the play, reflecting that the "symbolism of moving into the new house is quite as small as it seems and quite as significant...For if there are no waving flags and marching songs...it is not because the battle lacks nobility...he has finally reached out in his tiny moment and caught that sweet essence

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<sup>274</sup> Hansberry, *Raisin*, 132.

which is human dignity.”<sup>275</sup> Walter’s actions do not usher in the dawning of a new day. It is not a violent rupture that makes another world possible; however, it is as significant. For in the context of his intimate, shared life, infused with oppression, pain, and inequality, Walter was able to isolate a moment to both affirm a different kind of being in the world, not alone, but with his family. Walter takes the first step in marking out a new home.

It is important to stress that Walter is not a stand in for the existential hero, affirming himself against the world. Walter, instead, models a type of intimate and political relationality that grapples with how to seek dignity within overly oppressive and degrading circumstances that do not bleed into assimilation or acceptance. Walter still seeks struggle. As Diggs Colbert argues, Hansberry did not countenance individual enlightenment as an act of liberation or model for freedom: “she thought that individuals had the capacity to enact transformation but that each individual act participated in a longer movement within a long historical period—working together, resulting in a totality of action that enabled becoming free. She saw individual action in relation to long histories of insurgency.”<sup>276</sup> The struggle is both in the individual act, but also in the capacity to commit to such a long arc of liberation, where small acts are both profound and insignificant on their own. The inability to accept this realization lays the grounds for pessimism and stasis that anything better is possible.

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<sup>275</sup> Hansberry, *Conversations*, 97.

<sup>276</sup> Diggs Colbert, *Radical Vision*, 23.

Following the success of *Raisin*, Hansberry increasingly focused her attention on the international struggles that connected the liberation movements of black Americans with other decolonial struggles around the world. However, home becomes too capacious, too loose of a concept to travel across the diversity of contexts and histories. Indeed, my discussion of Sadiya Hartman's work in Chapter 1 reflects this inability of home to transfer internationally. I argue instead that exile, with its focus on the dislocations and ruptures inherent in particular political moments, can extend the insights of Hansberry's notion of political action into the struggle to formulate transnational bonds of commitment and intimacy.

#### **IV: Les Blancs and the Tensions of Exile**

Far afield from the U.S apartment buildings, and notions of home, of Hansberry's earlier work, *Les Blancs* situates its political struggle in the fictional African country of Zatembe, where a full-scale decolonial revolt appears inevitable. Struggling with completing the play during the 1960s, Hansberry expected the play to be her most significant work and hoped that it would proceed *The Sign of Sidney Burstein's Window*, on stage.<sup>277</sup> The colonial situation of Zatembe proves to provide a political context where home is even more elusive, with the colonial authorities imposing an outside order and the colonized struggling to make sense of a life where they have been rendered homeless in their homeland. I argue here that exile clarifies the stakes of Hansberry's political

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<sup>277</sup> Robert Nemiroff, "A Critical Background," in *Les Blancs* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 33. The play was incomplete during her lifetime, with Robert Nemiroff ultimately making the final edits and getting the play to stage in 1970.

vision and permits the extension of her political vision to an international and decolonial context.

The narrative of *Les Blancs* follows the arrival of American journalist Charlie Morris at the hospital and mission run by Torvald Neilson, who, for four decades, has been treating and assisting the Kwi Tribe in Zatembe. Morris's expectations are to write a cover story about Neilson, who from the western outside perspective, carries a saintly aura. Instead, Morris finds the British colony in a near state of war, where killings and assassinations are increasingly common, and the political situation seems ready to explode. The Kwi insurgency is justly single-minded in expending the white British colonizers, formal colonial officials, and the white missionaries and hospital workers. The white settlers are increasingly paranoid, and the hospital is rife with tension and paranoia. The protagonist of the story is Tshembe Matoseh, who, after years abroad in the West, has returned home to attend the funeral of his father. Tshembe is initially standoffish about the politics of the conflict and maintains an abstract hope for a peaceful solution. However, over time Tshembe learns that his father was the leader of the rebellion and decides to join. After the arrest of a key negotiator for the rebellion, Reverend Neilson is killed, launching a violent revolt. The play ends with the previously detached Tshembe killing his own brother for betraying a member of the resistance.

Throughout the play, the white settlers insist on the colonial claim and outside imposition of home. Major Rice of the Colonial Reserve insists that "this is our home... They had it for centuries and did nothing with it." Marta, a nurse at the Mission hospital, proffers the view that home created by the colonists is an extension and improvement of

the native land: “here the native should feel that the hospital and the church are a part of the jungle, an extension of his own villages.”<sup>278</sup> This self-belief of the white colonists, both the missionaries and political officials, is shattered in the violence enacted by the revolutionaries. From the perspective of the revolutionaries the reclamation of land constitutes the first act of home building.

The drama of the play is not contained in these large, explosive events. Indeed, each one of these events happens off stage, and Reverend Neilson exists only in the dialogue of other characters. Hansberry’s preference for dialogue in lieu of dramatic scenes of political action led one contemporary reviewer to lament that the play is a bit of a dud: “there is no story to the play, really...a didactic play, existing for its ideas rather than its theatre.” Another reviewer found it a “malodorous, unenlightening mess.”<sup>279</sup> The drama of the play is entirely dialogical. Moreover, the most pressing conversations, most especially those between Charlie and Tshembe, are those that misfire, where potential alternative points of view are turned away from and disregarded. Like *Raisin*, the characters represent competing ideological commitments that never can fully reconcile. In short, the play dramatizes the difference between the pains, frustrations, and possibilities of coalition versus a colonial notion of home building predicated on the supremacy of an “authoritative self.”<sup>280</sup> Traditionally, theorists like Bernice Johnson Reagon held the politics of home building and coalitional politics in sharp distinction.

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<sup>278</sup> Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 46.

<sup>279</sup> Hansberry, “Postscript” to *Les Blancs* in *Les Blancs*, 131-133.

<sup>280</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George, “Homes in the Empire, Empires in the Home,” *Cultural Critique*, 26(26) 1993: 95–127; Bernice Johnson Reagon, Coalition Politics: Turning the Century. *Feministische Studien*, 33(1) 2015: 115–123.

The former sought safety, and colonial politics requires the commitment of imperfect relationships in order to create a new space: “There is not going to be the space to continue as we are or as we were.”<sup>281</sup> It seems to me that Hansberry is interested whether or not the practices of home building she sought in *Raisin* are feasible in the international, decolonial space, where previous practices of home building have been so destructive.

Robert Nemiroff notes that, despite the shift in context, the narrative arc of *Les Blancs* shares a great deal with *Raisin*. Nemiroff argues: “It is part of the ping of *Les Blancs* that, in spite of the three hundred years, men must talk; they must establish a dialogue whose purpose is neither procrastination nor ego fulfillment but clarity, and whose culminating point is action: to find the means, in an age of revolution, to reduce the cost in human sacrifice and make the transition as swift and painless as possible.”<sup>282</sup> The violent eradication of the white colonists is at once just, understandable, and, from the perspective of the revolutionaries, unavoidable. But if the revolution only exists on this plane of understanding, then something fundamental is obfuscated. For the fundamental problem is one not between abstracted categories that can simply be erased or exchanged for one another. Decolonization is not a process simply thought, but lived:

To have to deal with *human beings*... would have been to confront Guilt with a greater imperative: the necessity for action—that is, to *do* something about it. The too easy purgation of the Whites—self-condemning and self-absolving—the untouched remoteness of the Blacks—would be nullified by a drama wherein we were forced to confrontation and awareness.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Johnson Reagon, “Coalition Politics,” 120.

<sup>282</sup> Nemiroff, “A Critical Background,” in *Les Blancs*, 33.

<sup>283</sup> Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 32.

In an overdetermined political colonial context, Hansberry struggles to answer whether the moment identified by Walter in *Raisin*, an action of immense smallness and significance, can be isolated within the colonial struggle. If those moments cannot be identified, then one's desire to secure an efficacious political agency is overwhelmed by an overdetermined political moment.

In the play, the gauge for whether such action is possible is represented by the role of the Modingo— 'one who thinks carefully before he acts'— who functions as the pivot point between deliberation and revolutionary action. The metaphor is delivered by Peter, the head servant at the mission, who, while appearing as a friendly, unassuming sympathizer with the white missionaries and medical personnel is also secretly an important member of a revolutionary terrorist group. Peter speaks to Tshembe to try and convince him to join the revolutionary group, as there is a power vacuum following the death of Tshembe's father. In response, Tshembe initially refuses, as a half outsider (he has not been home in many years) who has close relations with some of the well-meaning white missionaries: "Ntali, there are men in this world—I don't know how to say this so you will understand—who *see* too much to take sides."<sup>284</sup> Peter rejoins by recounting the folk fable of the Modingo, a "wise hyena" who lives between "the lands of the elephants and the hyenas," who were quarrelling over how to regulate the space between their two lands.

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<sup>284</sup> Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 95.

The Modingo, “a friend to both, understood each side of their argument,” demanded time for deliberation. While the hyenas sat in deliberation, the elephants eventually decided to march on the hyena land and drive them out of the jungle altogether. This leads Peter to conclude: “That is why the hyena laughs until this day and why it is such terrible laughter: because it was such a bitter joke that was played upon them while they reasoned.”<sup>285</sup> Peter asks that Tshembe cede to the overwrought determinism of their respective historical moment. However, when the injustice is stark, and the refusal to confront change seems intractable, what ends does deliberation serve other than to leave oneself open to being further taken advantage of? As Peter concludes: “You are full of what Europeans have. It is a good thing to discover the elephant has a point of view, but it is a crime to forget that the hyena must have justice on his side! Your people need you!”<sup>286</sup>

In Peter’s metaphor the Modingo represents the ethical dilemma of the individual actor, as a type of ultimate choice: should I deliberate further or act now? However, I argue that in the full context of the play, the Modingo embodies the ethos of the exile, who, when confronted with a social momentum that seemingly cannot be changed, nevertheless seeks ways to create space and slow things down. I want to contrast the notions of political action articulated by Peter with Hansberry’s commitment to the notion that “community and communion emerged through political and personal intimacies.”<sup>287</sup> Can such radical intimacies

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<sup>285</sup> Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 95.

<sup>286</sup> Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 96.

<sup>287</sup> Diggs Colber, *Radical Intimacies*, 23.

be forged amidst a home that is literally burning and falling apart? What would it mean to forge such intimacies amidst the conditions in which Tshembe finds himself, which, while regulated by analogous structural forces of white paternalism, violence, racism, and sexism, seem far afield from the Southside of Chicago? It is not clear that Hansberry herself had an answer, and the play is a type of intellectual struggle to see if such intimacies are possible. If they are not, the resultant is the arrival of fatalism, and the disappearance of responsibility and human choice.

The other set of dialogical exchanges that drive the action of the play occur between Charlie Morris and Tshembe who, both functioning, who arrive ostensibly open to deliberation and the search for pathways of action not represented by the single-minded ideological visions of the mission or the acts of terrorism committed by the violent revolutionaries. What is noteworthy about their conversations is how their own misperceptions and inattentive acts of listening to one another serve to force them towards more extreme positions than they held previously.

An emblematic example comes in the first act, during their first meeting, when Charlie opens the conversation by admitting to his appreciation of the mystic of the mission and their attempt to build connections: “Tshembe, if we can’t find ways to build bridges—to transcend governments, race, the rest of it—starting from whatever examples we have—then we’ve had it.” Tshembe understandably reads a level of patronizing and naïve earnestness that he finds off-putting. In turn Tshembe dismisses Charlie’s hopes unequivocally:

Mr. Morris, I am touched, truly. But tell me, when you passed through Zatembe, did you just happen to see the hills there and the scars in them. The great gashes from whence came the silver, gold, diamonds, cobalt, tungsten? (Charlie nods) Then answer me this: are there scars in the hills of Twin Forks Junctions—cut by strangers? Well, that, you see, is the difference: we *know* you are, and we have known it for a very long time! I like your glistening eyes, dear man, and your dream of bridges, but the fact is those great gashes have everything to do with this Mission—and the “other part” virtually nothing!<sup>288</sup>

The conversation quickly devolves into one another attempting to hold the other down by the imposition of “yesterday’s catchwords,” with Tshembe quipping about Charlie’s imperialist mindset, which is met by Charlie inquiring about Tshembe’s ties to communism and sympathies with Russia. Ultimately the conversation ends by seemingly reinforcing the futility of these types of exercises in the first place: “You demand respect, and then return with your own simple-minded... You do not listen at all. You really do not want to hear beyond a point at all.”<sup>289</sup>

However, two moments occur during the conversation, which are strikingly the most eloquent and yet the most quickly passed over and dismissed. After Charlie pithily asks if Tshembe “hates all white men,” Tshembe offers a cogent rebuttal that shifts the terms of the debate:

Oh, dear God, *why?* Why do you all *need* it so?! This absolute *lo-o-onging* for my hatred! I shall be honest with you, Mr. Morris. I do not “hate” all white men—but I desperately wish that I did. It would make everything infinitely easier! But I am afraid that, among other things, I have *seen* the slums of Liverpool and Dublin and the caves above Naples. I have *seen* Dachau and Anne Frank’s attic in Amsterdam. I have seen too many raw-knuckled Frenchmen coming out of the Metro at dawn and too many

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<sup>288</sup> Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 78.

<sup>289</sup> *Les Blancs*, 92.

hungry Italian children to believe that those who raided Africa for three centuries ever “loved” the white race either. I would like to be simple-minded for you, but...I cannot. I have—seen.<sup>290</sup>

Charlie then asks Tshembe if he is a communist and any potential momentum is lost. The second exchange comes a few verbal volleys later with Tshembe again lamenting Charlie’s liberal over-earnestness: “You thought! You thought. Because I am a black man I have answers that are deep and pure. I do *not!!*” Charlie then quickly notes the signal for the village curfew, and the conversation falls apart.

These exchanges model acts of misperception and inattention. The two noted passages of Tshembe quoted above, despite their eloquence and because of their unexpectedness on the part of Charlie, prevent the type of immediate, common abstractions that would permit the verbal sparring to continue. Both times Tshembe infuses the conversation not by doubling down on ideological points, but by infusing their exchange with felt observations that broaden and cannot be easily categorized. Tshembe functions as the Modingo would, seeking not simply to appease either side with soft appraisals of understanding but moving beyond the terms of the colonial debate as they have become entrenched. Race is certainly a predominant component in the colonial problem, but despite Tshembe’s just indignation he refuses to read colonialism as a conspiracy of a single cause, and hints towards the driving force of capitalist exploitation, and the supporting acts of social reproduction that Hansberry explicated in her earlier work.

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<sup>290</sup> *Les Blancs*, 122.

The play does not have the optimistic conclusion of *Raisin*, no matter how small and fleeting that optimism is meant to be. The contestations of home, saturated in violence and exploitation, do not seem sufficient to support the forms of intimacy that Tshembe and Charlie, or Tshembe and his brothers grope for and fail to produce. In the context of the play, perhaps no other actions were possible. However, one is left to consider how accurately the overdetermination of structural forces in *Les Blancs* are analogous to contemporary situations. To make these judgments one must act like the Modingo, unless we are prepared to cede the grounds of action to fatalism and pessimism.

Might these judgments be better served as well, if the frame of reference is shifted from home to exile? Exile involves the lived in-betweenness of historical disjuncture, where one must find a way to sustain life, both individual and collective, under conditions where the stakes and paths of political change are indeterminate, at once static and falling apart. There is an overriding political sentiment that contemporary politics, both in the U.S., and in forming transnational coalitions that can sustain fights against capitalist inequality, racism and sexism, is infused with such disjuncture. Adopting a framework of exile helps resist both the longings for attachments to a home that cannot be, as Hansberry demonstrated in *Raisin*, as well as seeking to survive as Modingos for as long as we can bear it. Hansberry sought to illuminate the charged instances where human beings oppress one another, not to minimize the suffering or dereliction, but instead to show these moments as when the mechanisms of oppression are most stark and

unveiled. In this unveiling and confrontation, novel plans of relationality and coalition might be achieved.

### **Conclusion:**

Iris Marion Young noted that “home is a complex ideal,” with its connections to identity and the relationships that it encourages ambiguity.<sup>291</sup> In her effort to reclaim ‘home’ as an ideal for both feminists and radical political actors, Young seeks to overcome home as a sight of nostalgia, as it existed in both the U.S. and European colonial contexts, demonstrated across Hansberry’s works. For Young, and like the white doctors, missionaries, and colonial officials that control the colonial landscape of *Les Blancs*, the white colonists seek “to return to a lost home by making buildings.”<sup>292</sup> Similarly, in *Raisin* Hansberry seeks to confront the racial, gender, and sexual tensions that constitute U.S. political life and define the boundaries of home. In *Les Blancs*, Hansberry challenges the colonial nostalgia that correlates between home and nation, dissecting if home is even salvageable or desired in such a context. In both plays home, both in its reconstruction and desolation, becomes the paradigmatic site of political struggle and contestation.

Within these different indeterminate moments of struggle, Hansberry seeks to find ways in which to identify points of strident conflict, and then slowdown that momentum, to linger in explosive spaces. The Modingo functions as this ideal and offers

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<sup>291</sup> Young, “House and Home,” 164.

<sup>292</sup> Young, “House and Home,” 140.

a model for defining a space of movement in conflict, not to find a quick resolution, but to avoid capitulating to an overbearing sense of overdetermination.

## **Conclusion: Looking onto a Burning House**

*And there seemed to be no way whatever to remove this cloud that stood between them and the sun, between them and love and life and power, between them and whatever it was that they wanted. One did not have to be very bright to realize how little one could do to change one's situation*

~ James Baldwin

## **Introduction: Landing on the Other Shore**

In analyzing the lives and thought of James Baldwin, Aimé Césaire, and Lorraine Hansberry, this dissertation attempted to fix points of hope in the ordinary and the relational, which arise during times of distress and uncertainty. Hope in the idea that one can forge new identities, new modes of relationality, to impose change on dominant structures and institutions. In short, they hoped that their experience of exile could end. I presented a cast of characters, both in the thinkers themselves, their respective historical interlocutors, and the fictional characters of their imaginations, who struggle to secure new relations of being amidst structures whose control is pervasive but stability is uncertain. The Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and the decolonial context of Martinique both present historical moments where oppressive racial, hierarchical systems were caught between a possible structural transformation or retrenching of their force under new guises. The promises of both historical aspirations were not quite fulfilled, and part of contemporary political pessimism and frustrations are wedded to living in the wake of those moments. I labeled this moment, in the U.S. context, as living in the wake

of a second failed reconstruction. Living in this contemporary moment means living with the inheritances and repetitions of these ‘not-quite’ moments of transformation, both in terms of fashioning new modes of political thought and the emotions and psychological burden of attempting to begin anew.

The characters analyzed, historical and fictional, were each caught in a series of repetitions and inheritances that defined, controlled, and intermittently held possibilities for transforming their lives. For example, Baldwin’s “flight” to Paris was an instinct to get “away from America,” away from the repetitive projections of race and sexuality that drove his best friend to jump off the George Washington Bridge, Baldwin’s stepfather to beat and resent him, and “the catalog of disaster...the millions of details 24 hours of every day which spell out to you that you are a worthless human being,”<sup>293</sup> The weight of his friend’s suicide, his father’s anger and pain, which policed and reinforced the politics of race, gender, sexuality, and class, drove Baldwin to pursue a cessation to all of the repetitive forces that structured his self-perceptions and daily life. It is through this lens of understanding that the full force of Baldwin’s claim that “exile saved my life,” comes home.<sup>294</sup> I presented exile as both a personal experience that is representative of a larger political moment of opportunity, where there is a break in the forces of inheritance and

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<sup>293</sup> Baldwin, ed. Toni Morrison, “Take Me to the Water,” in *Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 376; Baldwin, “The American Dream and the American Negro,” in *Collected*, 715. Baldwin wrote of how finding decent work as a young man in 1942, before leaving for Paris, destabilized the repetitive mechanisms that gave structure to his father’s sense of himself as a man and father. Even though those repetitive structuring mechanisms were destructive, their erasure was nonetheless painful: “I earned about three times as much in a week as my father ever had. This was not without its effect on my father. His authority was being eroded; he was being cheated of the reality of his role. And I, of course, had absolutely no way of understanding the ferocious complexity of his reaction. I did not understand the depth and power and reality of his pain.” Baldwin, “Dark Days,” in *Collected*, 792.

<sup>294</sup> Baldwin, “The New Lost Generation,” in *Collected*, 667.

repetition noted above and symptomatic of larger political impasses. This connection lends exiles to perceive the remaking of their personal problem of exile as instructive to solving larger political problems.

However, Baldwin does not retreat into claiming exile as a type of disenchanting purview to serve as a model for the archetype intellectual disposition, as others would come to do.<sup>295</sup> Instead, Baldwin sought new political modes of thought, senses of self, and modes of being in the world through testing alternative modes of relationality. His discussion with Audre Lorde, as well as the experiments he portrayed in his fiction (see Chapter 2), models this practice. The chapter on Baldwin, along with the analyses of Césaire and Hansberry, present a series of couplets that extend this model within different political horizons. Baldwin and Lorde, Caleb and Leo Proudhammer in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, along with Vivaldo and Rufus, Cass and Richard, Vivaldo and Ida, in *Another Country*, are experiments in forging new models of self, sensuality, and intimacy within a post war U.S. context sustained through the degradation of black life. Similarly, Césaire and Christophe, Césaire and Toussaint, Martinique and Haiti, and Condé and Césaire represent efforts to think through the formation of new modes of leadership and conceptions of a shared identity within a decolonial context under the weight of the repetitions of history and generational inheritance. Finally, Hansberry's life and writing through her own efforts at marriage, and the couplets that saturate her writings, Walter Lee and Ruth, Beneatha and George, Tshembe's different sets of

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<sup>295</sup> See Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

relationships with his brothers, as well as with Charlie, represent efforts to remake intimate and political relationships within overdetermined racialized and colonial contexts.

Exile functions as a sudden interruption from social and political structures, which overdetermined the conditions that previously gave these relationships their shape and intimate feeling.<sup>296</sup> There is an immediate feeling of ennoblement within this initial cessation. Baldwin described his first days in Paris as one of invisibility, an interruption of repetition.<sup>297</sup> But this break is temporary, a disruption as opposed to a complete stop. The task of the exile, the task of Baldwin, Césaire, and Hansberry is how to create an alternative out of this personal and political moment of possibility. Through an analysis of Baldwin, I argued that this project begins by building from “within outward,” where the break of repetitive forces permits a type of internal movement that previously did not seem possible.<sup>298</sup> Césaire’s example of the twin horizons of abolition shows how this interior experience of exile permits a reexamination of liberation as a shared political project under the weight of historical and generational inheritance. Hansberry reorganizes this project of liberation within the intimate confines of family and personal relationships. As her biographer Soyica Diggs Colbert argued: “she thought that individuals had the

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<sup>296</sup> In *Another Country*, Rufus is the character that most starkly embodies this phenomenon. Baldwin describes Rufus, as such: “Yet, he was aware, perhaps for the first time in his life, that nothing would stop it, nothing: this was himself. Rufus was aware of every inch of Rufus. He was flesh: flesh, bone, muscle, fluid, orifices, hair, and skin. His body was controlled by laws he did not understand.” Baldwin, *Another Country* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1963]), 60-61.

<sup>297</sup> “Through this deliberate isolation, through lack of numbers, and above all through his own underwhelming need to be, as it were, forgotten, the American Negro in Paris is very nearly the invisible man.” Baldwin, “Encounter on the Seine,” in *Collected*, 86.

<sup>298</sup> This is a consistent theme of Baldwin’s essays and political writing: “Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world.” Baldwin, “What it Means to Be an American,” in *Collect*, 142.

capacity to enact transformation but that each individual act participated in a longer movement within a long historical period.”<sup>299</sup>

Undergirding these investigations was the larger claim that exile helps to fill a void between our attentions to the past and projections of hope into the future. In other words, I argued that, within a contemporary political moment saturated with pessimism and apathy, these investigations spoke to the neglected realm of present intimate and political action within the scope of everyday life. The introduction to this dissertation also noted the underlying themes of the current U.S. presidential election of pessimism and stasis and its connection to larger cultural, political, and intellectual developments. Since that introduction was first written, this presidential election has seen an ostensible transformation that I fear nonetheless leaves the fundamental conditions unchanged. Indeed, the sudden infusion of an abstract, nondescript hope and ‘joy’ whose substance is nothing more than the force of its own proclamation is reminiscent of the mood of 2010 as to the point of parody. This hope may yet deliver, but it asks little of people except to hope and wait for transformations to occur far outside the confines of their own individual lives. This dissertation concluded by lingering on this question of how to build in this new contemporary moment. To address this question, I first offer a summarization of the chapters and main claims of the dissertation. Following, I turn to potential criticisms of the project, and through my consideration of those potential criticisms seek to return to the beginning posited here.

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<sup>299</sup> Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Radical Vision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 23.

## **II. Structure and Summary**

This dissertation situates itself within that very space of disjuncture between past and future, abstract hope and contemporary pessimism, to outline the spaces of present moments of possibility to begin. To accomplish this, I argued that the civil rights and decolonial moments of the 1940s-1960s, in which Baldwin, Césaire, and Hansberry are situated, can be viewed as a political moment of disjuncture that reflects the personal disruptions and dislocations of the individual authors. Exile provides a lens onto that moment of disjuncture, or in-betweenness, where one lives between a crumbling infrastructure and a potential future that can either transcend the current order, or tragically reproduce its effects under new forms. I argued that, at least in part, the contemporary moment, tinged with pessimism and political stasis, is structured by the reproduction of the structures of racism, sexism, and economic inequality struggled over previously.

In Chapter One, I turned to James Baldwin to examine the psychological changes undergone in exile, and how the potential internal changes experienced during exile offer foundations for reimagining political possibility in times of stagnation. I argued Baldwin's exile coalesced around two interlocking dynamics. First, for Baldwin, exile consisted of an initial stillness, which provided necessary space for him to conceptualize his suffering and agency in a new language. Second, I argued that from this understanding, Baldwin sought to refashion previously broken and fraught relationships on new registers. Contrary to common implications of exile, Baldwin did not seek escape

or flight per se but sought new (internal) terms and conditions to begin anew. Baldwin acknowledged the need for institutional reform but prioritized the urgent necessity for Americans to feel their everyday relations, notions of self and other, and social affiliations with a different weight.<sup>300</sup> In the context of the civil rights movement the choice for white and black society was often presented as one between assimilation (inclusion into the promised deferred) or revolt/refusal. Baldwin sought an alternative between assimilation and revolt, focused on a return only made possible through the remaking and regeneration of that which was assumed to have failed.<sup>301</sup>

In Chapter Two, I examined the work of Aimé Césaire. I argued that Césaire's exile began from a similar confluence between a confrontation with the past as a type of self-creation but leverages this concern beyond the psychological dimension. Césaire's exile involves his dual alienation from the colonial power of France, the source of both his subjugation and education, and from his home of Martinique, where upon his return after five years in Paris he sees the full extent of the emotional, psychological, and material degradation of colonialism. Césaire's position as a political actor, statesman, and poet led him to confront a different set of pertinent political questions focused on the construction of a liberatory politics that could build and sustain a new 'people' built out of a degraded colonial framework. With the legacy of the Haitian Revolution weighing

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<sup>300</sup> Baldwin's, and thus this dissertation's focus on the psychological or internal is not meant to replace attention on structural and institutional reforms. As Baldwin wrote, "Now there is simply no possibility of real change in the Negro's situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure." Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," in *Collected*, 335.

<sup>301</sup> A persistent theme in Baldwin's writing is recovery and repair of the forgotten or neglected. Speaking on his fraught relationship with Richard Wright, Baldwin wrote: "Our reconciliation, anyway, never took place. This was a great loss for me. But many of our losses have a compensating gain." Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," in *Collected*, 259.

on the decolonial trajectory of Martinique, Césaire examined the ways in which early achievements on the pathway of liberation are quickly degraded and lost. I argued that the mechanisms of this process of liberatory degradation is clarified by disaggregating liberation into two distinct activities of abolition.<sup>302</sup>

The first notion of abolition reflects the immediate and most urgent needs facing decolonial subjects: the overthrowing of colonial governments, structures, and impositions. This first abolition functions as material and institutional corrective to oppression and degradation, where the focus is on the immediate securing of rights, privileges, and material gains denied under the colonial order. The operative factors are often force and immediacy, which is often why charismatic leaders such as Toussaint and Christophe are initially needed and temporally successful. The legacy of Haiti, especially Christophe, weighed on the political thought of Césaire. This issue of legacy and inheritance opened a new vantage point to examine the second abolition, which focuses on the development and sustained practice of new democratic dynamics of relationality. I concluded by arguing that Césaire helps to open this framework of a twin abolition in his dramatic work. To clarify the appropriate mechanisms and processes involved in the second abolition, I turned to the work of Maryse Condé to show how the characteristics required to achieve the first abolition, stridency, inflexibility, and a maniacal single-mindedness, if left to fester, are destructive in achieving the second. Condé's own experience of exile, her own generational and geographic dislocations, which cut through

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<sup>302</sup> Mbembe, in a discussion of the histories of Haiti and Liberia, recognizes this process as a dual abolition, where the formal and institutional colonial constraints must be eradicated, along with their internalized psychological and social forms. See Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

divergences in race, sex, and class, expound on the characteristics and practices salutary for creating the conditions for a second abolition.

Finally, I examined the life and work of Lorraine Hansberry, whose experience of exile is fundamentally distinct from Baldwin and Césaire. Working within the domains of the intimate and domesticity, Hansberry does not need to travel far to encounter exile. For Hansberry, to exist as a queer, black, woman in 1950s America is already to embody a certain type of exile. This internal exile was compounded by the experience of her father who died an exile in Mexico attempting to secure a new home for his family after fighting housing segregation in Chicago. For Hansberry, exile was both a familial and psychological experience. I characterized Hansberry's internal exile through two components: the felt interconnectedness of personal and social struggles, and her effort to place both struggles within the terrain of home. Home is not simply the site of domestic life, but an interconnected space that mediates material, historical, philosophical, psychological, and political realities. Hansberry's personal, professional, and artistic life functioned as an attempt to mediate new possibilities for fraught relationships within a dilapidated American house.

Hansberry's personal experience led her to identify home as transitory, unstable, even often illusory, and which often served as the site where labor, gender, sex, race, and social production were reproduced and enforced. Hansberry, thus, does not offer a romanticized notion of home as a sanctuary or source of protection, and, as feminist theorists argued, erases the distinction between public and private spaces, in order to

claim the home as a site of politics and contestation.<sup>303</sup> Hansberry saw home both as a lived intimate site and as an aspiration embedded in American mythology, as a site of struggle, contestation, and opportunity to create new possibilities for human dignity. Finally, I argued that in her posthumous work, *The Drinking Gourd, What Use are Flowers?* and specifically in *Les Blancs*, Hansberry sought to connect the political struggle of black Americans with the decolonial struggles across Africa and the diaspora, while attempting to hold onto the notion of home. I argued that contextualizing this work within the framework of exile highlights the ways that Hansberry sought to overcome American impulses for self-possession, individual acts of liberation, and rigid hierarchical politics.

Beyond these theoretical excavations of each author's work, along with their contemporaries like Audre Lorde and Maryse Condé, I argued that each thinker serves as a political model of action within the purviews identified above: psychological and internal development, institutional reform aimed at social cohesion, and the intimate politics of home. This is done for two principal reasons. First, the thinkers discussed are not traditionally seen as having much to offer in the way of political theory. This traditional exclusion unfolds onto the second reason, which was an effort to contribute to a much wider effort to redefine what constitutes political thought and action. The thinkers addressed help to bring politics, and thus political theory, down into the realm of

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<sup>303</sup> Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

everyday life, thought, and action—precisely in a moment when this divergence is acutely felt.

Lastly, I have sought to hold this analysis alongside and against a dominant mode of thought in contemporary black political thought focused on notions of flight, fugitivity, and escape. Certainly, the negative force of afro-pessimism, its skepticism towards traditional politics, and its focus on an intractable ontological divide, has increasingly permeated beyond the boundaries of academia. Outside of the academy, Ta-Nehisi Coates most robustly articulates a variant, albeit with important differences, of this position.<sup>304</sup> Coates' memoir, *Between the World and Me*, conceptualizes a type of 'galactical divide' underlying U.S. society: "I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not. I knew that some inscrutable energy preserved the breach."<sup>305</sup> Again parallel to the position articulated by Wilderson, there is little 'political' work to overcome the "tenacious gravity" of white supremacy. No substantive public is available, nor likely to develop, and only through a type of apocalyptic annihilation can something else be born: "[t]he answer to black suffering is not a public roused, but... a public annihilated."<sup>306</sup> Similarly the impulse towards deconstructive critique, and its effort at distancing and destabilizing dominant categorical designations is no longer a strictly academic exercise. But as Bruno Latour quipped, deconstructive critique itself has

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<sup>304</sup> And to a far wide audience than most academic works. As of 2017 Coates, *Between the World and Me* had sold over 1.5 million copies and been translated into 19 languages. Concepción De León, "Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Making of a Public Intellectual," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/29/books/ta-nehisi-coates-we-were-eight-years-in-power.html>.

<sup>305</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau: 2015), 23.

<sup>306</sup> Coates, *Between the World*, 23.

undergone its own process of normalization: “critique has been miniaturized like computers have. I have always fancied that what took great effort, occupied huge rooms, cost a lot of sweat and money, for people like Nietzsche and Benjamin, can be had for nothing, much like the supercomputers of the 1950s, which used to fill large halls and expend a vast amount of electricity and heat, but now are accessible for a dime and no bigger than a fingernail.”<sup>307</sup> Both of these impulses, once restricted to the margins of academia, are increasingly animating the cultures they originally sought and continue to critique.

The growing discourses surrounding conceptions of ‘fugitivity’ and ‘flight’ within contemporary political and literary theory are natural extensions, albeit with important differences, of these impulses. If one cannot survive, be heard, or act with effect within the dominant discursive and political worlds, then one must subsist underground, in the margins, and through continual acts of evasion.<sup>308</sup> Fred Moten, working in the vanguard of literary theory, articulates this mode of project most forcefully by evoking the notion of fugitivity as the perpetual act of resisting enclosure, or external constraints. Fugitivity offers the possibility of escaping dominant and dominating constitutive categories and finding life elsewhere and holding onto the life that has yet to be captured by ‘politics’.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 230.

<sup>308</sup> Again, this tradition is partly rooted in the novels of Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin that in their idiosyncratic styles grappled with how to refuse, evade, and work outside the structures of white supremacy. Before deciding to take up residence underground, Ellison’s ‘invisible man’ reflects: “I had not longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of the American identity and mine.” Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 450. Although these men were certainly not the first to examine such issues, see Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988 [1892])

<sup>309</sup> Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine: consent not to be a single being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 65-139.

Writing with Stefano Harney in their collaborative work, *The Undercommons*, Moten argues for a perpetual effort to evade, resist enclosure, resist participation in ‘politics, and fight against the affirmation of any stable form: “We’re already here, moving. We’ve been around. We’re more than politics, more than settled, more than democratic. We surround democracy’s false image in order to unsettle it. Every time it tries to enclose us in a decision, we’re undecided. Every time it tries to represent our will, we’re unwilling. Every time it tries to take root, we’re gone (because we’re already here, moving).”<sup>310</sup> Here, and in Moten’s larger project, his aim is to resist transparency, both as ‘an autonomous self’, a self-determining subject, as well as to coercive external forces and structures (police and state violence, white supremacy, capitalist economic structures). The aim is to never be settled, constrained from the outside, or fooled into believing that one is self-determining. One can only stay alive on the move, in flight. The point to emphasize is that the intrinsic desire of this sort of dispositional fugitivity, as Moten proffers, as opposed to the lived experience of historical fugitives, is to grow and perpetuate fugitivity as an ethos, as opposed to seeking an end to the fugitive condition.

Moten, and the larger discourse of fugitivity, is skeptical of that which is received and inherited. Fugitivity is consistently seeking an outside to inhabit and grow into. Exile works from a somewhat similar yet in the end different valence, where the goal is to not inhabit an elsewhere but transform the spaces that one currently inhabits. Unfortunately, this is a painful process, fraught with errors and loss, and it begins from the internal

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<sup>310</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 19.

outward. This does not mean that the internal development of self is the end goal, but it is to suggest that personal and political agency, especially when agency is assumed to be corrupted and constricted, if not wholly absent, is first located internally. The exile, through a process of dislocation and experimentation, learns to reject the calls of a social discourse predicated on an ideology of negation and inferiority. In its place, the exile begins to move again, reshaping one's inner capacities, connections, and variance, as a novel source of human action.

### **III. Anticipating Criticisms**

I anticipate two general criticisms to this study, both of which could take on a variety of more specific iterations. I will address these in turn. First, I imagine that some readers will find my arguments lacking sufficient bite. In other words, despite my effort to 'open alternative spaces' of movement, my arguments reproduce assimilationist tendencies out of a personal apprehension for calling for more radical and material change. The most forceful of these objections would emerge from readers more sympathetic to the position of Afro-pessimism and other black radical thinkers. To address these criticisms, it is necessary to provide a quick summarization of what I see as the key claims of this position, to contrast these with the claims of this dissertation.

Afro-pessimism advances two principal claims. First is that *white life*, or human *being*, is predicated on *black death*: "civil society gains its coherence...through the

violence of black erasure.”<sup>311</sup> Resulting from this ontological *erasure* is the social fact that black subjectivity is not analogous with other subordinate and oppressed positionalities, such as ‘the proletarian worker,’ the colonized, or other ethnic minorities.<sup>312</sup> The worker remains positioned “as a positive term in a counterhegemonic struggle,” and thus audible within and under hegemony. In contradistinction, *blackness* remains outside, inaudible, an ‘ontological negation’ that lacks a coherent subjective position within hegemonic discourse.<sup>313</sup>

As such, ‘traditional’ forms of counterhegemonic politics remain closed off to *black* bodies, and the focus shifts to acts of critique, insurgency, refusal, and flight. Jared Sexton conceives contemporary acts of coalition building, ‘pragmatic politics,’ and ‘counter-hegemonic populism,’ as blind to the structuring effects of the Manichean black-white relation, and as such remain political efforts, “more egregious than intellectual faux pas or public disservice. It is a modality of complicity, or better, fraud.”<sup>314</sup> Extending from this positional singularity is the viewpoint that Afro-pessimism asserts a cultural antagonism that cannot be transcended by coalitional politics of resistance, but only by

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<sup>311</sup> Christina Sharpe offers the cogent phrasing of: “our [black] abjection from the realm of the human.” *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 14; Frank B Wilderson III, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society,” *Social Identities* 9(2) 2002: 238-239.

<sup>312</sup> “Whereas Humans exist on some plane of being and thus can become existentially present through some struggle for, of, or through recognition, Blacks cannot reach this plane. Spillers, Fanon, and Hartman maintain that the violence that continually repositions the Black as a void of historical movement is without analog in the suffering dynamics of the ontologically alive. The violence that turns the African into a thing is without analog because it does not simply oppress the Black through tactile and empirical technologies of oppression, like the “little family quarrels” which for Fanon the Jewish Holocaust exemplifies. Rather, the gratuitous violence of the Black’s first ontological instance, the Middle Passage, “wiped out [his or her] metaphysics . . . his [or her] customs and sources on which they are based.” Jews went into Auschwitz and came out as Jews. Africans went into the ships and came out as Blacks. The former is a Human holocaust; the latter is a Human and a metaphysical holocaust.” Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 38.

<sup>313</sup> Wilderson III, “Black Marx,” 234. See also Sharpe, *In the Wake*, Ch. 1.

<sup>314</sup> Jared Sexton & Huey Copeland. “Raw Life: An Introduction.” *Qui Parle*, 13, No. 2 (2003), 54.

the ‘end of the world,’ or a war against [the concept of] ‘humanity.’<sup>315</sup> Pessimism thus implies, “a language of impossibility ... [that] becomes the final word in any utterance.”<sup>316</sup> In summary, my efforts to locate sites of possibility within the small spaces of everyday life are at once futile and insulting to the reality of the Manichean situation. Furthermore, my writing this dissertation as a white man, on the other side of this Manichean divide, is in and of itself revealing of the unwavering entrenched, ontological divide at the head of political life.

I do not have space to delve into an analysis of the ontological critique outlined above. However, what I do argue here is that such ontological commitments and starting points are choices and commitments that cannot be proven or disproven, only weighed against whatever evidence one is able to usher in. My commitment is that the life and work of Baldwin, Lorde, Césaire, Condé, and Hansberry, the movement and change that they developed from within, outward is a testament to the fact that more movement and possibilities for change exists than positions of pessimism permit. Here Baldwin is instructive:

Circumstances, furthermore, are complicated, simplified, and ultimately, defined by the person’s reaction to these circumstances—for no one, no matter how it may seem, simply *endures* his circumstances. If we are what our circumstances make us, we are, also what we make of our circumstances. This is, perhaps, the key to history, since we are history, and since the tension of which I am speaking is so silent and so private, with effects so unforeseeable, and so public.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> ‘The end of the world,’ meaning the end of ‘the white system of reality’ is a phrase borrowed from Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire and is frequently invoked in the afro-pessimist literature. See Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black*, 120.

<sup>316</sup> David Theo Goldberg, “The Reason of Unreason: Achille Mbembe and David Theo Goldberg in conversation about *Critique of Black Reason*,” *Theory, Culture, & Society* 35(7-8) 2018: 219.

<sup>317</sup> Baldwin, “Every Good-Bye Ain’t Gone,” in *Collected*, 776. Baldwin expounds on this distinction as the ‘demarcation line’ of perception forged during his exile: “There was a demarcation line, to be walked every hour of

Baldwin here does not aim to downplay the burdens and oppressions of his experience, or of the historical experience of black Americans. What Baldwin does highlight is that acts of interpretation, even of material circumstances, involve creative efforts predicated on freedom and movement. Here the movement is particular, because it often involves the effort to destabilize and remake the inheritances and repetitions that are the seeds of your oppression. Here, Baldwin's relationship to Shakespeare exemplifies this dynamic.

Where it is only in France, in a type of stillness, that Baldwin was able to reappropriate Shakespeare, not as something foreign or outside himself, but as something belonging to Baldwin. However, paradoxically, it is only from a position of exile that such a process made itself possible. The delicate balance of that process is partly what this dissertation aimed to highlight.

The second principal objection is of a slightly different order than the first, but I imagine they are not mutually exclusive, and that objection is that I focus too much on the interiority of subjects, too much on the psychological, and neglect larger structural and institutional effects. My response is that this dissertation is not meant to be exclusionary but supplementary. I agree that efforts at political transformation cannot but involve larger structural and institutional transformations. However, I have tried to not be trapped by that binary and show how the psychological and structural, the intimate and the political, flow together. The discussion in the chapter on Césaire is meant to highlight

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every day. The demarcation line was my apprehension of, and therefore, my responsibility for, my own experience., the chilling vice versa of what I had made of my experience and what that experience had made of me.”

how an overattentiveness to the structural and dramatic changes wrought by revolution can cannibalize themselves when the psychological and intimate are neglected.

Nevertheless, I imagine that other readers may find that I overstate the political nature of small, intimate moments, and that the individual experiences modeled by this collection of exiles does not scale into real political change and represents a type of artistic digression. My aim in this dissertation is partly to recalibrate our political horizons, and redirect focus to how the levers of political change are found in the seemingly small and inconsequential. I think this is important precisely because that is the reality of most of our lives, short, stuttered, and often insignificant. However, if we accept that distinction, then political action and commitment is relegated to historians and theorists mining the past, politicians' proclamations about an ambiguous, overly romanticized future, and the persistence of the structural status quo. Hansberry's dramatization of the present, the small decisions that individuals choose and live-through as they fumble towards political change, where "there are no waving flags and marching songs at the barricades," is the reality the individual and a people face when they aim to instantiate something new.<sup>318</sup> In other words, this dissertation is not an outline of a comprehensive resolution, but a model and survey of first steps. This model is useful because in this moment, living in the wake of a second failed reconstruction, any movement seems so difficult, impermanent, and fleeting.

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<sup>318</sup> Hansberry, *Conversations*, 97.

#### **IV: Where to Begin**

This dissertation contributes to larger discussions of political change by attempting to elucidate the connective tissue between thought, or internal regeneration and development, and pressing on the mechanisms of political changes. The dissertation claims that the experience of exile shared, yet idiosyncratically lived, by Baldwin, Césaire, and Hansberry, produced a way of seeing that infused their own writing, and from which we, living in a similar political moment of frustration and stasis, can utilize to develop new political instincts and movements. My apprehension is that formulating the discussion of these thinkers within the framework of exile would either romanticize the experience of exile or result in drawing too clean of parallels between that mid-20<sup>th</sup> century moment and our own. I do, as I argued here, think there are analogous structural forces that allow for a useful comparison, which I tried to contain within the language of a second failed reconstruction. However, I think it is also important to stress how little of that world remains. To adapt the language of Baldwin, “the world which produced,” this constellation of thinkers, “has vanished and will never be seen again.”<sup>319</sup> The world of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is gone, and we can only take so much from it. But it is in precisely dealing with both the repetitions, inheritances, and historical divergences that we may adapt these models to contemporary circumstances.

The novelty of this dissertation is that it is an investigation into the personal, relational, and small acts that must be lived through in the carrying out of political action.

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<sup>319</sup> Baldwin, “Alas, Poor Richard,” in *Collected*, 257.

I've maintained that exile permits a certain type of *seeing*, where the illusions and habits of one dominant society are at once falling away yet seeking to reconstitute itself. This effort is not a solitary act, but a collective effort to build a new atmosphere of possibility, which can only be lived, navigated, and survived through wit, affection, critique, acceptance, and hope. These thinkers are models of that wit, critique, acceptance and hope. Moreover, exile holds together the experience living with and within the historical inheritances and repetitions inherited from the past. The repetitions of Christophe, Césaire, and Condé demonstrate how the impositions of historical inheritance, racism, colonialism, gender, and the passing of generations structures particular political horizons. Condé, through her personal, professional, and political life wrestles with the revolutionary mindset embodied by Christophe and the youthful Césaire, which always sees the current moment as preparatory for a more perfect later stage yet to be realized. In its place, Condé helped to develop a political language and scope of action that included self-critique, grace, and care.

This dissertation argued against a utopian mindset that seeks to transform the present into a simple grounding stage for the future. It is somewhat counterintuitive to offer exile as a corrective to that mindset, since one might assume that the exile is only attended to the future and return, no matter how distant. However, exile, precisely because the future is distant and unforeseen, shortens their political horizon to the smallness of the present. I did not aim to argue against the need for 'freedom dreams,' or large-scale future orientated projects, but to supplement those horizons with a model and

language that can help negotiate the lived, mundane realities of the present; a present without drums or flags to usher in the new day.

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