

BEYOND THE BODY;
A DISCURSIVE CONTEMPLATION OF
BLACK AMERICAN IDENTITY

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Abstract

Beyond the Body; A Discursive Contemplation of Black American Identity is a meditation upon the discursive underpinnings of racial identity within the American consciousness and its transformation over a hundred-year period. Through a close reading of *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, this paper seeks to explore the discursive evolution of Blackness across three historical moments when the Black American identity was under threat. The author of each text bestows the reader with a vision of America's future that is at once fragile and entangled with the memory of the nation's past. To sift meaning within this entanglement of memory and intention, *Beyond the Body* situates the study of the above texts within the broader discursive framing of the American identity through the American Dream.

Dedication

To my mother, who is my rock.

To my husband, who gave me the gift of time.

To my son, who brings the promise of an unbridled future.

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I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Arthur Redding, whose graduate course, *Twentieth Century American Intellectuals*, introduced me to the authors that are the subject of my study. This course, which was the starting point to my journey of exploring Black American literature, gave me the opportunity to fine tune my literary interests and discover the questions that truly captivate me as a literary scholar. Through my many conversations with Dr. Redding, I have learned to centre my work around not only the questions for which there are no easy answers, but the questions that one fears to ask. Finally, I am indebted to Dr. Redding not only for his breadth of knowledge, but for his inexhaustible wit and humour.

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Introduction

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter around it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

-The Souls of Black Folk

The passage accomplishes several things. It introduces the topic of concern for the author and establishes that an effective way to talk about it is by telling a story. In the choice to present the situation anecdotally, Du Bois imparts a context and allows the reader to imaginatively render the story credible through personal experience. We learn that the topic is difficult to talk about and is, therefore, frequently approached in a roundabout way; uneasily. We learn that the inability of words to satisfy speakers' intentions creates the desire to find other avenues of communication – furtive glances, gestures, further anecdotes. We learn that the topic is potent with meaning but that meaning is difficult to arrive at and what is unspoken amplifies the silence, for a response made at face value would throw into jeopardy the very tenuous social compromises that allow decency to skirt around the wrongs it can in no easy way correct. Such is the way of living through language, in which the ability to contest and contend with multiple truths bestows upon us the paradoxical function of storytellers. Yet storytelling, or wading through paradox, seems to be exactly what we do in the search for a personal and a shared identity.

In *The Educated Imagination*, Northrop Frye writes about language and the crafting of myth as the basis for understanding where we come from, who we are and where we are headed.

Frye posits that a world without language, “may have a shape and a meaning, but it doesn’t seem to be a human shape or a human meaning” (Frye 3). It seems inconceivable that the colonizing of planet earth could have taken place without language or human narrative to shape our destiny while also shaping the world around us. In this, I share Frye’s outlook that the act of storytelling is humanity’s way of defining reality and of creating a mirror or portal between us and the external world. It is simultaneously a method for identifying with the world and for imprinting ourselves upon it.

In *Discourse*, Sara Mills writes "The discursive is a socially constructed reality which constructs both the real and the symbolic and the distinction between them. It assigns structure to the real at the same time as it is a product and a moment of real structures." (Mills 45) It is in this transformative ebb and flow between the imaginings of reality and its representation that my research finds nexus. My study of the discursive underpinnings of reality takes place through an exploration of comingling voices in an ongoing conversation on Black identity spanning centuries in the making. This conversation surpasses individual human timelines and geographies and is spurred by an ongoing and unresolved need to be seen in the flesh and beyond the flesh. The historical lineup of discourses that comprise this conversation draw, dissolve, reinforce and absolve us of the need for a colour-line.

In this project, I engage in a close reading of three canonical texts of Black American literature which address the enigmatic quality of the Black identity. They are: *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. With a visionary bearing, these texts represent three distinct journeys toward a reified American consciousness in which each author, through personal and ideological struggle, confronts the limitations of Blackness as a linguistic paradox in which a system of

competing narratives serve to imprint contradictory identities upon a broadly conceived “Blackness.” Each text therefore sets out to contest the fate of the Black American through the discursive contemplation of personal and national liberty.

Three Texts

Writing in the early years of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois, a newly emergent voice in Black American letters, passionately pens *The Souls of Black Folk* while looking back on the decades since the emancipation that came “— suddenly, fearfully, like a dream” (*Souls* 5-6). Through his writing, Du Bois implores a sensible American audience to apprehend the conditions of life for a people whose eagerness to embrace a hard-won freedom is dampened by their inexperience within the American socioeconomic system; having been excluded from the workings of the very system that benefited from their exploitation. It is the innocence of inexperience, maintains Du Bois, that hampers Black Americans’ entrance into American society and renders them ready prey to further exploitation. *The Souls of Black Folk*, then, aims to redeem the Black American subject from the inheritance of an abject historical fate and, instead, to propel him onto the path of self-determination. Du Bois insists that the survival of the Black American depends on the cultivation of the “dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another,” (*Souls* 8) such that the Black individual’s political salvation becomes situated in the struggle of identity.

Sixty years after *The Souls of Black Folk* is published, the intellectual landscape for debating identity across the colour-line has taken on broader and deeper dimensions. Within this transformed discursive milieu, James Baldwin writes lucidly about the problems facing America at the height of the Civil Rights Movement; challenging Americans to confront the reality of

their nation in a willing state of wakefulness. In comparison to *The Souls of Black Folk*, *The Fire Next Time* is written in the speech of a new age. Pushing the conversation of Blackness beyond the imploring tenor of *Souls* authored by a young Du Bois, Baldwin, with self-assured charisma, speaks to the disparate halves of America on the need for mutual recognition; ultimately, interrogating the idea of what it means to be American.

Fast forward another half century and Ta-Nehisi Coates raises his voice amidst the din of a renewed crisis of identity in America. The digitization of global consciousness which catapulted a worldwide awareness of State sanctioned police brutality has transformed the American public imagination, reified old divisions and added new dimensions of concern to complicate the question of Blackness. Simultaneously, irreconcilable developments in political discourse such as the worldwide expansion of ultra-conservatism juxtaposed with America's unceasing amplification of the freedom myth casts a state of ephemeral unreality upon the times. To aid his then fifteen-year-old son in this troubled age, Coates pens a letter to Samori after the manner of Baldwin's letter to his nephew. Scanning the past for answers to America's future, Coates aims to jostle the reader into a state of wakefulness by rejecting the very premise for dreaming.

My reason for choosing these texts is twofold. Firstly, all three authors perform the essential task of modeling a stance of critical interventionism with an aim to guiding the discursive evolution of Black identity by both interrogating our understanding of Blackness and by preventing the Black identity from being annexed by hegemonic discourse. Secondly, in their own way, each text exemplifies an exceptional articulation of the aesthetics of language that bestows both lyrical grace upon the ear and an expanded horizon upon the literary imagination.

Each text wrestles with the Black identity during a period in American history in which Black lives and identities are under threat. Du Bois appeals to a broad American audience to understand the difficulties facing the Black populace, particularly the Black rural population, in post emancipation America. Baldwin works to unify the nation by arguing against the polarizing sentiments of the Civil Rights Movement. Coates amplifies the message that Blacks are not safe in a country beset by a dream sustained at the expense of the Black body. In each case, it was necessary to tackle, through discourse, the enigmatic nature of the Black identity enshrouded by a field of dreams. It is the purpose of my project, therefore, to examine these texts as three contemplations of Blackness across the span of a century and as three unique endeavors of writing Black consciousness into being. Historically situated, the texts seek to transform the American consciousness through the discursive reconstruction of self and nation.

In my chosen list of primary texts, I am aware that I have selected works written solely by male writers. While provocative to their intended audiences on the issue of racial equality, the texts reflect the foregoing attitudes of their respective times on the topic of gender equality. The perspectives of Blackness described in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Fire Next Time* speak almost exclusively to the male experience. Being a product of the twenty-first century, Coates is careful to weave female characters into his text. However, intended as a letter from father to son, *Between the World and Me* still tells the contemporary story of the Black American from a fundamentally male perspective. Therefore, I acknowledge that the absence of the female experience of Blackness coupled with the tendency of the male voice to supersede broadly in matters of representation means that important questions may be left unexamined in this paper. However, since it is my aim to study the texts as a discursive evolution of consciousness through textual conversation, I find that by limiting the list to male authors, the historical scope of my

project is reduced to enable easier comparative analysis. However, a more ambitious project that incorporates a gender diverse study of the experience of Blackness may broaden the scope of the conversation further.¹

Research Perspective and Methodology

In developing a definition of discourse, Mills discusses the fluidity of scholarly research on “discourse studies” and the challenge of arriving at an inclusive definition of discourse, explaining that, “It is largely the constraints created by academic disciplinary boundaries which demarcate the various meanings of the term” (Mills 3). Owing to the French origin of *discours*, which refers to speech, historical characterizations of “discourse” tended to focus on the distinction between oral and scriptural language use, with oscillating perspectives on the extent to which each should be encompassed in discourse studies. In addition, theorists from numerous disciplines have broadened or narrowed the scope of discursive study to include considerations such as linguistic structure, context, audience and intent according to their specialized perspectives. My own delineation of discourse for the scope of this project is defined rather broadly. Since I am working with written texts, I am limited to investigating instances of discourse which have been subjected to the rigors of publication. However, the strength of authorial voice and the qualities of the “Talking Book” exhibited render orality a central aspect of the works that I have selected to study. Therefore, I take discourse to refer to all uses of language to express intention and construct a world view or evoke a particular depiction of reality. Broadly, discourse refers to the manner in which representation is affected through language.

Bakhtin

My conceptualization of discourse is heavily influenced by *The Dialogic Imagination*, in which Mikhail Bakhtin expounds a social theory of language. His ideas, which privilege the unique and nuanced variations of utterance over the view of language as systematic, grammatical and silently monolithic, leads to an insistence that language cannot be conceived outside of its speakers. For Bakhtin, “language is always in a ‘ceaseless flow of becoming,’” (Allen 18) a quality naturally compatible with Black identity. This transitive perspective on language is exhibited by a quality of internal dialogism, in which the historical development of words and languages carries within it the unmistakable imprint of past utterances. This internal dialogism not only emphasizes the ability of speech to simultaneously store and generate meaning but implies an ongoing process of interaction in the meanings embodied by words and the possession of a deep coherence in which the cumulative effect of utterance acts as a form of conscious memory that fuels the life and character of a language.

In addition to shaping our understanding of the world, language serves as the means to understanding the self. Bakhtin complicates the relationship between language and identity by emphasizing the abundance of variation in linguistic expression within communities speaking a single national language, thereby grounding the production of meaning in the social act of speech. The exchange of words between speakers and listeners, whose roles must reverse and oscillate during the flow of dialogue, permit the internalization of another’s discourse and transforms the human mind into the site of linguistic evolution. In fact, “[t]he ideological becoming of a human being,” writes Bakhtin, “is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others” (Bakhtin 341). To focus on words as the means of one’s “becoming” signals a

perspective that takes language as the fundamental medium for consciousness. Bakhtin goes on to write,

There are no ‘neutral’ words and forms—words and forms that can belong to ‘no one’; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life, all words and forms are populated by intentions (Bakhtin 293).

The languages of social groups, then, each made up of a particular vernacular and manner of speaking, simultaneously comprise a multiplicity of world views and spaces in which to exist. Language is no mere web of linguistic associations, a lifeless system of signs and signifiers. It is proof that humans must exist in a space of sociality. As the metaphorical link between us and the external world, language is the conduit for meaning. Intertwined with the desire to create a familiar shape in the world, the discursive agent of our intentions define who we are through storytelling.

In the epigraph of the first chapter of *Signifying Monkey; A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. quotes from Bakhtin,

. . . language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes one’s own only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention . . . it exists in other

people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own (*Signifying Monkey* 1).

In borrowing of Bakhtin's model of language, Gates Jr. suggests a resonance between Bakhtin's dialogic imaginings and Black America's journey towards discursive representation. Bakhtin's model which describes an ever shifting and negotiated relationship between speaker and the word, in which a speaker's "possession" over language is transient and subject to a "collective" manner of ownership, describes the Black struggle to control the inscription of meaning upon Blackness.

Barthes

In addition to seeing language as the vehicle of consciousness, my textual analysis is framed by a mythological interpretation of the American Dream as a means to crafting one's identity. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes elaborates a theory of myth as a method of developing an enlightened skepticism towards the distortions of representation. Barthes defines myth as "a system of communication . . . a message . . . [not] an object, a concept, or an idea; [but] . . . a mode of signification, a form" (Barthes 217). As a mode, myth does not create ideas anew but works upon existing texts by diluting their original meanings and superimposing upon them an ideological glossing over reality.

While Barthes insists that an indelible link exists between myth and human history, in that "myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it [nevertheless] cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature of things,'" (Barthes 218) despite the common association between myths and origin stories. Rather, by transforming meaning into form, myth compromises texts by turning them into vehicles for the proliferation of ideology. Myth therefore reproduces meaning by colonizing historical language.² Barthes further writes,

myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were . . . A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a hemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence (255).³

In this way, myth blurs the boundary between memory and ideology and intercepts the ability to distinguish between true and altered narratives. To this extent, Barthes explains “myth is speech *stolen and restored*. Only, speech which is restored is no longer quite that which was stolen: when it was brought back, it was not put exactly in its place. It is this brief act of larceny, this moment taken for a surreptitious faking, which gives mythical speech its benumbed look” (Barthes 236).

Framed in this way, myth can be understood to function as a method of storytelling that dilutes history of the artefact of human memory and replaces it with nostalgia. This is possible because, “the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations. One must fully stress this open character of the concept; it is not at all an abstract, purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function” (Barthes 229). The transformation from historically specific meaning to broad ideological forms, then, allows for the creation of nebulous associations and the distortion of historical truth with romanticized visions of the past. Therefore, myth creates false anchors for consciousness and un-lodges subjects from the historical conditions for their representation.

What I Mean by the “American Dream”

First coined by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America* published in 1931 to bolster the American spirit, the phrase “American Dream” has since survived to merit a lively discussion in etymology. Over time, conjurers of the phrase have, under notably different circumstances, used it to evoke considerably different vistas of the future. While the phrase did not exist at the turn of the nineteenth century, I argue that the spirit of its essence was, even then, in the making as Du Bois’ writing was haunted by the dream of a nation that was bigger and better than the one he saw. By the time of Baldwin’s writing, the American Dream had become an ideologically indispensable part of the American identity. Certainly, the meaning and usage of the phrase, “American Dream,” has evolved over time, from its naissance to the new millennium, or the eighty-year period which saw the publication of both *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me*.

Alexis Downs writes in “The American Dream and the limits of transparency,” “The American Dream is an element of the ‘cultural stuff’ whose singularity (‘dream’) rapidly breaks down into a variety of interpretations about the American nation (‘dream’) (Madriaga, 2005)” (690). Further, in “Reclaiming White Spaces: Reading Trump’s Inaugural Address as a Eulogy for the <American Dream>”, Joshua Guitar comments on the shifting meaning of the phrase “American Dream” by analyzing oratorical performances by American presidents in which the “American Dream” is used to represent different ideals.

U.S. presidents have a unique power in rhetorically situating the <American dream> (Fisher, 1973) and often use oratory to shift social conceptualizations of it. For instance, President Ronald Reagan articulated the <American dream> as a neoliberal concept, stressing individualism and wealth acquisition through free markets (Rowland & Jones, 2017). Obama began to shift the narrative of the <American dream> through his keynote

address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, and then furthermore throughout his presidential campaign as he associated the <American dream> with collectivism and equality (Rowland & Jones, 2011) (Guitar 304).

The study above shows that by detaching the phrase “American dream” from a specific historical moment and making it applicable to all moments that require a renewed zeal for “Americanism,” an elastic and expansive field of meanings becomes attached to the phrase, thereby endowing it with a longevity and immortality of spirit. This same shapeshifting ability has catapulted the American Dream from mere rhetoric into myth. “A catalyst for cultural identity, the <American dream> governs perceptions of reality, despite its inherent opacity” (Guitar 303).

It is helpful to consider the American Dream through the Barthesian model of the tri-dimensional mythical structure of form, concept and signification which correspond respectively to the linguistic triangulation of signifier, signified and sign. As the established symbol of American pragmatism and enterprise, The American Dream plays the role of the signifier. What it signifies is a naturalization of and a sentimental attachment to the existing hegemonic social order. Finally, the believers and patriots of this order embody the sign for they represent the usurpation of a nation in need of enlightenment by the forces whose power depends on the very incoherency of the masses for sustainment.

By displacing meaning of its historical specificity, myth renders the signifier ubiquitous. As a signifier, the American Dream is versatile; rather than being associated with a specific form, it draws its power from the national ethos for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The ambiguous quality of grandeur carried by these ideals romanticizes the American identity and bestows upon the mantle of Americanism a versatility that makes it perfectly suited for mass

consumption by a wide-ranging audience whose belonging is granted by the exhibition of a uniformity of ideology. Myth, which relies upon broad tropes of storytelling, seeks to communicate and persuade through metaphor rather than historical memory, a narrative strategy necessarily relies upon the pathos embedded within its rhetoric.

As a work of pathos, the American Dream, which establishes ideology as the basis for identity, heightens yearning while diminishing perceived distance between dreamers and dreams. As myth outpaces memory, identity becomes dislocated from the specificity of the individual's historical context, taking root in metaphor. Barthes writes, "the ubiquity of the signifier in myth exactly reproduces the physique of the *alibi* . . . in the *alibi* . . . there is a place which is full and one which is empty, linked by a relation of negative identity" (Barthes 233). The nature of living through *alibi* permits a dreamer to exchange an identity whose origin is inseparable from the historical events that shaped it for one that is fabricated in an alternate reality.

In this way, "[n]othing prevents [myth] from being a perpetual *alibi* . . ." Barthes writes, for "the meaning is always there to *present* the form; the form is always there to *outdistance* the meaning. And there never is any contradiction, conflict, or split between the meaning and the form: they are never at the same place" (Barthes 233). Within this formulation, the desire to maintain the status quo reinforces the urgency and plausibility of the dream. As a fabrication of ideology, the dream continues to outstrip real life. Within this perpetual oscillation, the narrative of the American Dream effectively creates the discursive dimension to not only normalize and glorify the existing social order, but to permit the defense of an ideology at the expense of a moment-by-moment consciousness.

As an *alibi* for engaging with one's world, the American Dream is free of content. Comprised purely of form, it lives on with steadfast momentum. Steeped in monologic discourse,

the dream is sheltered and sanctified by a language of forward-looking reverie. Fablelike, the American narrative paints history in broad brushstrokes, breaking the world into either or, us and them, Black and White; re-imaginings of enlightened Christianity civilizing barbaric strongholds. As a cultural discourse, it is enclosed and rejects both nuance and the arrival of non-centric heteroglossic consciousness.

A Barthesian reading of the American Dream would suggest that the mythologizing of America's past allows for the transformation of a turbulent history into the great American pastoral. The purpose of the myth of Americanism is to impoverish the moment-by-moment memory of slavery etched upon the lives of Black folks and, instead, to instill a dreamlike quality, a pragmatic idealism which purports to have not only *got over*, but to have become *better than* the mistakes of its past. The myth tells us that this is the true Americanism. In a manner that resembles the fading of one's dreams upon waking, the transformation of historical remembrance into ideology requires the dilution of the precision of memory. On this, Barthes writes, "However paradoxical it may seem, *myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (Barthes 231). Therefore, the establishment of the authoritative discourse of Americanism requires that – rather than outright erasure – the memory of slavery must be unseated from the annals of human inheritance to take on the quality of myth, thereby allowing America to avert its eyes from history and gaze headlong into an endless mirror of dreams.

Through the discursive colonization of historical memory by the rhetoric of naturalization, a mythical narrative of plausible innocence in the nation's long compromising trajectory to the present is achieved. However, the myth of America, which can be seen, for Blacks and Whites both, only through the distorted view of the veil, must be revealed for its act of robbery, not simply of historical truth but of human potential.

The American identity, then, must be established in terms which are parenthetical to the discourse of the American Dream, which is ever subject to renewal and reinvention. Noting this premise, the texts by Du Bois, Baldwin and Coates, by virtue of engaging with the problem of the Black American identity must engage in a discursive tussle with the discourse of the American Dream.

Literature Review

This project required me to read broadly. My foray into Black American identity required an appreciation of the historical development of the discourse of Blackness for which Curran's *The Anatomy of Blackness* became an indispensable resource. I learned that the discourse of Blackness did not originate from Black thinkers but from European ones, emerging first as a coveted prize of European exploration, then as justification for the manufacture of a global slave economy. In the age of colonial rule, the hegemonic discursive formulation of Blackness commonly used tropes of dehumanization to imprint upon the public consciousness a version of Blackness that is both legible and appealing to Western minds for servitude. The struggle for the right of self-representation, then, carries its own history, one that parallels the struggle for emancipation. To this end, works such as Crawley's *Black Pentecostal Breath* and Gates Jr.'s *The Black Box* and *Signifying Monkey* invigorated me with an appreciation for a fully embodied Black American prose.

Next, my desire to engage with the visionary aspect of each text by reading it alongside the American Dream, a national discourse with its own trajectory of evolution, required a better understanding of the nature of hegemonic discourses and the literary morphology of the American Dream. The researchers I consulted, whether approaching the American Dream from a

sociological, economic or humanities perspective, focus on symbolic malleability as a primary feature of the Dream, which transforms it from tangible vision to a myth inducing tool. Further aiding my analysis is Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, which distilled for me an intellectual apparatus for visualizing consciousness that, when coupled with Barthes' *Mythologies*, allowed me to understand the metaphorical potency of the dream state.

Du Bois' long and prolific career presents a daunting challenge to summarize, for in addition to publishing copiously, his political views continued to evolve, interestingly, towards greater radicalization as he aged. *The Souls of Black Folk*, written early in his career, shows the formation of a formidable intellect at a time of pivotal change. Broadly integrationist and mildly timbered, *Souls* remains the most widely read among Du Bois' corpus. Being the object of broad intellectual interest, *Souls* garners an impressive body of scholarly criticism from diverse fields. Reed's chapter on double consciousness, which offers a historical overview of the intellectual application of Du Bois' famously coined term shows that his work has been repeatedly adopted, over time, in the reiteration of Blackness.

Many scholars were also drawn to the charged antithesis between Du Bois and his symbolic depictions of freedom with Book T. Washington's measured, conciliatory approach. Central to their disagreement was the topic of Black education. Whereas Du Bois insisted that a classical Western education was necessary for uplifting the Black population, Washington emphasized the more cautious approach of an industrial education which would produce economic stability for Black Americans while incurring minimal political repercussions.

Finally, the profoundly human nature of Du Bois' vision coupled with the coinage of terminology that would prove essential to the field of Black Studies such as double consciousness, veil and colour-line, has elevated *Souls* to the status of a classic text, holding a

central position in the Black American literary canon. However, due to its politically charged nature, *Souls* is less frequently the subject of literary criticism than sociological and political ones. Those who would dabble in an aesthetic interpretation of *Souls* have in common the aim to unravel the mystery of the epigraphs that frame each chapter, for Du Bois' pairing of musical notations from the Sorrow Songs with lines of Western poetry seem to mesmerize as much as they baffle. In this way, despite decades of scholarship, *The Souls of Black Folk* remains ripe for further study.

Two themes run, intertwining, through my research on *The Fire Next Time*. The first contemplates the state of rapture that lingers in Baldwin's authorial voice and the second focuses on the way in which his writing is effusive with the quality of love. For the latter, Farred's article on the asymmetry of Baldwin's philosophy of love, a love that is unmistakably Christian in nature, was highly influential in my evaluation of the text. Notably, this penchant for love moved Hannah Arendt, for whom America represented a safe harbour from a very different set of historically fraught circumstances, to communicate her concerns via letter. Arendt's passionate disavowal of Baldwin's love infused vision reflects their disparate histories and how these historical differences shaped each thinker's views on the individual's place in society.

Equally notable in the research is the theme of Baldwin's turbulent relationship with Christianity. By Baldwin's own account, the church presented him with deliverance from the external forces against which one is vulnerable in youth; however, a realization of its corrupt nature and an unabating inner struggle with his sexuality led to rapid disillusionment. Despite his exit from the church, researchers remark on the resonance between Baldwin's visionary ethos and Christianity's moral code. Certainly, the undulating lyrical beauty of the King James is ever present in Baldwinian prose. However, the true impact of Christianity is seen in the shaping of

Baldwin's conceptualization of love as a means to national transformation, for in the assertion that Black America must "with love" provide the path of salvation to their White counterparts is a beatified vision of love modeled after self-sacrifice.

Understandably, in comparison to Du Bois and Baldwin, the body of writing on Coates is much smaller. Writing as a journalist in the digital age, Coates provokes a different kind of response. While one finds official criticism in journals, one also encounters an accumulation of responses, like that of Cornel West, hovering watchfully online. Those who evaluate Coates' writing tend to focus on his journalistic roots. Reviewers of *Between the World and Me* also commonly assume its comparability with *The Fire Next Time*, leading them to criticize Coates' cynicism while praising Baldwin's optimism. So common is this line of commentary that one expects, at any moment, the antithetical revelation of Coates as Baldwin's younger, un-achieving cousin and *Between the World*, a deflated sequel. This approach seems, to me, rather short-sighted since it fails to evaluate Coates both on his own merits and as the product of his environment. Surely, by now, we can see that the sense of hope and the certainty of a better future that fueled the Civil Rights Movement is no longer visible on the American horizon. Even the accusation of an inexhaustible case of cynicism seems to fall flat, for in twenty-first century America, cynicism is long out of vogue. In an era of Trumpian arena politics and the regression of human rights seen in the reversal of *Roe vs. Wade* and attempts to delimit gerrymandering and voter suppression through efforts to weaken the Voting Rights Act, it has been altogether replaced by suspicion and incredulity as the *de jure* sentiments of the nation. In this dark hour, Coates' survivalist literature speaks to a rising inner clamour of fear.

Detailed Chapter Description

I present my interpretations of my three chosen texts in three chapters.

In Chapter One, I consider Du Bois' explication of the paradox of Blackness in *The Souls of Black Folk* as underscored by a state of voicelessness when faced with the problem of the colour-line. To illustrate Du Bois' perspective on the enigmatic nature of Black identity, I contemplate various interpretations and responses to Du Bois' double consciousness. Next, I explore the democratic thrust of the text by applying Rogers' analytical framework of the descriptive and aspirational dimensions of the dream as a system of transcendental change. It is my position that the act of bridging the gap between these two dimensions leads to a transcendence of the American dream and reveals Du Bois' final vision for national emancipation. Specifically, I draw upon Bakhtin's explication of the tension between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse to elucidate the constraints of the Black identity. I postulate that the liberation of the Black identity is reliant upon the development of an internally persuasive language as the symbolic outcome of Black striving. Finally, I read the chapters "Of Alexander Crummel" and "Of the Coming of John" by assessing Du Bois' use of tragic storytelling as a rhetorical technique for humanizing Blackness.

In Chapter two, I examine Baldwin's use of the mirror motif to illustrate racial alienation within America. By transforming the text into a looking glass which simultaneously gazes out at and turns the reader's gaze upon himself, Baldwin tells the story of America's racial strife while blending the nation's past with the writer's past; the historical and personal entangled, utterance and memory coalesced, each indistinguishable from each. Yet Baldwin's focus is not fixed in the past, for *The Fire Next Time* is written with an urgent forward-looking aspect, with the author's *bildungsroman* foreshadowing America's own, much anticipated, coming of age. The union of

these two tales is found in Baldwin's beatific vision of salvation structured upon an ethos of Christian love.

In Chapter three, I explore Coates' explication of the Black identity which returns to the tradition of situating Blackness within the body. I read Coates' conceptualization of Blackness as a response to the discursive hegemony of the American Dream which enshrouds both Black and White consciousness. I identify two primary influences that embolden Coates' vision. One belongs to Richard Wright's image of a lynching from his poem *Between the World and Me*, after which Coates' text is named. The other is found in the moving speeches of Malcolm X. By resituating Blackness within the body, Coates asserts that trauma dominates the Black consciousness. By depicting the Black body as vulnerable and under siege, Coates seeks to advance humanizing portraits of the Black figure and to delegitimize the hegemonic discourse that teaches America to fear the Black body. However, for all Coates' anger, he does not advocate a collective response to ameliorate racial injustice. Instead, Coates suggests a path of personal struggle against the persistence of a dreaming nation. He aims to depict that which has been discursively robbed of the Black body – a place of belonging – can only be recovered on an individual basis, through the lifelong personal devotion to the curation of an uneasy consciousness.

By traversing these texts and the historical moments they inhabit, it is my aim to connect them through the dialogic quality they each bring to the idea of Blackness. To return to a Bakhtinian view on language as an interconnected web of consciousness allows the reader to imagine these texts as singular points of awareness in the heteroglossic architecture of the space-time continuum in the journey of human sentience. The conversations in which these texts are engaged, with each other, with the reader, with future civilizations join countless others to form

the communal story of human striving. To stand before these texts and unravel the strands of their conversation is to invite the discursive imprinting of a multitude of utterances upon one's consciousness in the ever-undulating struggle to discover the nature of our collective humanity.

Chapter 1: Du Bois and the Dream Immersed Consciousness

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a particular sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in aroused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder

-*The Souls of Black Folk*

Like a ghostly apparition, the pulse of human yearning echoes through Du Bois' revelation. In it, the Black American is suspended between two halves of a fractured identity; a figure held captive in a reflected gaze between a self which is yet to be fully formed and a world that denies its very formation. Within the doubling of consciousness is manifest the warring ideals and the enigma of an identity that finds itself weighed down by the difficulty of navigating between two opposing worlds. His struggle is entrenched in a wrestle between wakeful consciousness and the lure of dreams; the nature of which is mirrored by Du Bois' writing, for as one traverses the pages of *The Souls of Black Folk*, one enters upon a dreamscape.

Hauntingly does the image of Black American toil imprint itself in the minds of readers. For Du Bois' portrait of America's children who with "misty minds" and darkened sight trudge onwards as "tired climbers, [where] the horizon was ever dark, the mists were often cold, the Canaan was always dim and far away," (*Souls* 8) was painted to unveil the burden of the Black soul whose dream fraught consciousness is the outcome of an impeded vision.

Souls depicts two ways of seeing for Blacks within the American dreamscape. The first – a seeing from without – describes, through the metaphor of the veil, a thwarted sight belonging

to the Black American which fragments both self and consciousness and is the offspring of the colour-line. The second – a seeing from within – calls forth a revelation of futurity in which Du Bois, with the faith that dreams could birth nations, writes to imprint upon America’s social imagination a reshaping of the nation’s polity and a legitimization of Black citizenship, the realizations of which would transform America into a leader among nations.

In “The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*,” Melvin L. Rogers explores the author’s transformative vision for America through the idea of the reconstitution of citizenry. This Du Bois insists must not be undertaken through a change in demographics, but through the heartfelt adoption, by each waking American, of the virtue of democracy as the foremost guiding light for America’s becoming. In his reading, Rogers distinguishes between the “descriptive” and “aspirational” dimensions of “the people,” stressing the importance of the latter as a way to draw inspiration from the text. Whereas the descriptive dimension takes a legal definition of “the people” based on possession of citizenship, the aspirational dimension is a beatific reimagining; a democratic utopia reified through devotion to the striving of ideals.

Building upon Rogers’ reading, I liken the descriptive dimension to Du Bois’ invocation of the veil as a means to elucidate the paradox of the Black identity. I then compare the aspirational dimension to Du Bois’ work of dream building as a model of emancipation; a gesture at an American Dream before the birth of the phrase in 1931. While Du Bois uses the former to remove the mask of alienation and bestow the face of human recognition upon the Black subject, with the latter, he seeks to transport America beyond the colour-line.

The Veil and Double Consciousness

In his account of the “descriptive designation” of the people “as the ultimate source for conferring legitimacy” (190), Rogers is exceedingly brief. Citing only the ascertainable and legally pronounced, he points “to those with the rights and privileges of citizenship, enshrined in a constitutional structure” (190) as the sole designates in possession of the status of belonging. The descriptive dimension, therefore, functions as a fixed position, a starting point, from which metamorphosis beyond established reality can take place. By taking a legal perspective, Rogers starts with the narrowest permissible understanding of “the people”, thereby leaving the entirety of the imaginative range to the elucidation of the aspirational.

When reading *Souls*, however, one’s imagination must be ever active. For the essence of the Black identity can neither be represented through an aspect of disciplined legal restraint nor through a commitment to exhaustive description alone. The difficulty of representing Black struggle defines the very striving for legitimacy that confronts Du Bois as one of the founding voices of Black American literary consciousness. Faced with these challenges, Du Bois imbues the force of his rhetoric with metaphor. Guided by a storyteller’s deftness, *Souls* persuades by aligning the struggle of Black Americans with truths already known for they have long been situated in the canon of the nation’s social imagination. Du Bois achieves this, circuitously, by recasting Blacks as the protagonists of the dream narrative.

Through the metaphor of the veil, Du Bois bestows upon the common reader a manner of seeing that is inaccessible to most Americans. Aimed at obscuring and darkening sight, the veil suggests the muted passivity of a sleepwalker whose alienated inner gaze leads to a severed ability to articulate the self. “Gifted with Second sight”, the Black American must perceive himself indirectly, *re-presented* through the eyes of “the other world,” for the act of “always

looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (*Souls* 3) estranges one from the self and forces one to see double. The internalization of this alien gaze leads one to adopt the identity of Other.

Through deft descriptive rendering, readers are granted a visit beyond the veil that shields White Americans from the difficult truths of Black life. In *Du Bois: A Critical Introduction*, Reiland Rabaka who discusses the many sociological contributions Du Bois made writes, "The concept of the color-line is one of the many ways Du Bois sought to make post-enslavement forms of anti-black racism at the turn of the twentieth century visible to those who live 'without the veil'" (52). For the image of the divide, held up by the veil, lends credibility and immediacy to the imaginative enclosures of disparate worlds and humanizes both the impeded Black consciousness and the invisibility and negation of Black skin as conditions worthy of rectification. Anchoring the colour-line to the image of the veil, then, makes the disparate realities of Blacks and Whites visible to readers who have never contemplated the insecurity of approaching one's identity through a question or the struggle to come to terms politically, economically and privately with the legacy of disenfranchisement that Black Americans have inherited from their historical exploitation and enslavement. By lifting the veil, albeit temporarily, Du Bois inserts doubt into the familiar narratives vindicating America's social fabric and stirs into awareness the presence of a double in consciousness.

In the epigraph atop this chapter, a reverie diffused passage transports the reader into a mind disarrayed by double consciousness. By juxtaposing the Black American consciousness with the limited awareness of a dreamer, Du Bois depicts the Black subject as passive and alienated from his consciousness. Like a dreamer of torpid dreams, he loses not merely the ability to control his actions, but his very thoughts become veiled by that quality of dreamlike incoherency that turns one into an observer of himself. Alienation in turn, gives rise to the

yearning for the eyes of “the other world” to turn upon oneself in recognition, rather than in “aroused contempt and pity”. Through hazy dream studded eyes, the Black American subject peers at the other world and finds there a distorted image intended to serve as a reflection of himself. Just as in a dream state, in which one finds oneself simultaneously actor and spectator, double consciousness inflicts passivity upon the actor by transforming him into an observer of himself. The alienated inner gaze splits the self into the mirrored partitions of unreconciled worlds, projections of the disparate realities of Blacks and Whites.

Venturing beyond an interpretation of double consciousness as an expression of alienation are the multitude of readings that cascade and diverge across scholarly disciplines. Adolph L. Reed Jr. attributes the epigraph, which opens his own chapter on double-consciousness in *W.E.B. Du Bois and the American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line*, as “probably . . . the most widely known and most frequently cited statement of any in Du Bois’ entire corpus. Indeed, it is quite likely one of the most familiar in all of Afro-American letters” (91). Praising Du Bois’ contribution to sociology, Rabaka writes, “Du Bois developed the concept of double consciousness to capture the excruciating anguish that the diabolical dialectic of white superiority and black inferiority inflicted on blacks” (57). In *The Black Box*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. examines the influence of double consciousness as a motif upon the Black literary tradition. While examining varied re-imaginings of Blackness as expressions of “doubling,” he stays his analysis on Zora Neal Hurston whose fiction moves double consciousness beyond affliction, towards transformation. He asserts, in *Their Eyes were Watching God*, the manner in which Hurston affects “the recognition that one is made up of many consciousnesses, not just two . . . is the beginning of freedom, of genuine self-knowledge, of the ultimate liberation” (177).

In “W.E.B. Du Bois’ misrecognition,” Kwesi Thomas ambitiously sets out to disassociate the Du Boisean double consciousness from its generally ascribed Hegelian origins, venturing to propose instead that Du Bois modeled African American two-ness after Adam Smith’s impartial spectator found in his 1759 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Thomas contends that rather than Hegelian double consciousness which is defined by an internal struggle of the mind to see itself as both of the world and existing independently from the world, a condition immanent to all consciousness, Du Bois “offers us a *spectator theory* insofar as his psychological model features a subject appraising themselves by their internalized conception of the normative judgement of their social world . . . However, [Du Bois] breaks from the inherited view insofar as he rejects the appeal to an impartial spectator under conditions of prejudice” (13). Thomas’ preference for the Smithian model over Hegelian double consciousness signals a response to Hegel’s position that all consciousness must struggle with a manner of alienation from the world in which it exists. If alienation is present within all consciousness, then Hegelian double consciousness cannot satisfactorily describe the unique state of Black alienation. Rather, Smith’s model, built upon sympathy between members of a society, posits a consciousness that seeks to grow through its situatedness in the world. This position allows Thomas to attribute the development of double consciousness to the disparate realities between Black and White worlds such that the disparity of political power between the two groups coupled with the influence of White normative culture turns the internal spectator residing within the Black mind *partial* in judgment against the self. Thomas therefore asserts that Du Bois expands upon Smith’s model by positing a *partial spectator theory*.

While innovative, I disagree with the tenor of Thomas’ readings of both Smith and Du Bois. For if the purpose of the impartial spectator is merely to observe and render judgment, then

its purpose becomes indistinguishable from that of original consciousness. The unique nature of Smith's model is predicated upon the presence of a force that refines society through *sympathy*. For the Black American, who is fragmented in identity and disenfranchised in political agency, it is meaningless to describe the state of his alienation within a framework of sympathy, for the absence of sympathy is exactly that which thwarts Black striving. The world of the impartial spectator assumes a society of equals or near equals in which the free association of individuals guided by ubiquitous social ideals form the invisible underpinnings of a self-regulated society – a state which, to my knowledge, has never described America and certainly did not describe the America to which Du Bois appealed for humanity.

Another considerable and provoking analysis is offered by Reed in his historically situated examination of the “appropriation” of double consciousness or “two-ness” in the “characterization of the black American condition . . . by observers identified with widely different intellectual and political projects” (92). Reed's evaluation, which spans seven-decades from the 1920's through the 1990's, identifies three broad periods in the intellectual appropriation of the phrase, which are motivated, respective of historical chronology, by integrationist, Black nationalist and institutionalized academic impulses. Of the three periods identified, Reed is most critical of the academic appropriation of double consciousness, which in spite of thriving in the university setting, is absent of efforts to inform policy, influence public opinion or challenge the momentum of hegemonic agendas, a direction contra to Du Bois' own trajectory of political inclinations. Having become less politically charged and more theoretical in scope, (Reed 94) scholarly output on double consciousness has in recent decades reoriented its aim to focus on resituating philosophy to account for the contribution of Black thought and to re-catalogue Black intellectualism historically via a phenomenological approach (Reed 95).

Of Reed's historically based criticism, his central concern rests with the bias of presentism which uproots text and author from their historical contexts in order to generate momentum for widely disparate arguments or agendas. Reed also criticizes the historical inaccuracy of portraying thinkers as working in isolation, producing a tendency to exaggerate the contributions of individuals when ideas tend to develop and cluster in historical periods as part of communities of discourse. When studied alongside his cohort, Du Bois' ideas did not stand out but typified the concerns of the liminality of his age.⁴ Reed likens Du Bois' "two-ness" metaphor to the work of thinkers, from sociologists to feminists to psychologists, whose focus on the social manifestation of uncertainty in a time of transformation produced a significant body of literature on the fragmentation of identity and the struggle to simultaneously inhabit two states. Finally, Reed warns that to extol a thinker's ideas outside of the historical context of her situatedness could lead to the illusive projection of both a visionary prescience and an inexhaustible progressiveness that are absent from the imaginative landscape of the originator. For while Du Bois argued passionately for equality by movingly exhorting Black humanity, he did not explicitly refute the idea of Black inferiority. Reed points to Du Bois' choices for the discursive representation of Blacks which included such phrases as "credulous race-childhood," "world's undeveloped peoples" and "like all primitive folk". Reed further asserts, "[Du Bois'] description of black essentiality was steeped in what contemporary observers uniformly would have recognized as the feminine principle. At the defining core of black life Du Bois found a 'deep emotional nature which turn instinctively toward the supernatural . . . a rich tropical imagination and a keen, delicate appreciation of Nature'" (Reed 122).

While Reed insists his objections are founded upon historical and empirical considerations, one cannot help but detect within his tone an empiricist's intolerance for grafting

the shapeless morphology of metaphor upon the variegated permutations of human consciousness. While I do not pretend to defend Du Bois' views as eternally progressive, I am persuaded that his desire to reach White and Black readers alike, with *necessarily* duplicitous messaging, demands an authorial voice that resonates with timeless veracity while lending itself to a broad field of interpretation.

To interpret invocations of double consciousness as acts of "appropriation" summarizes Reed's deeply critical stance on the widespread acceptance of alienation as the persistent and enduring descriptor of Black American identity. Furthermore, Reed's empirical objection seems futile when subjected to the exacting standards of scientific verifiability, for how *is* alienation to be measured in a population? Rather, a reading of *Souls* made in absence of the metaphorical dimension would seem to evade the difficulty of Du Bois' undertaking. For it is no easy task to represent the truths of millions when the story being told belongs to an identity enshrouded in paradox whose anti-chronological nature is the outcome of the necessity to revise established history. Du Bois' choice to embed the essence of his message within the metaphor gestures at a deep-seated faith that the universal recognition of humanity is sufficient for the transformation of self and nation. Rejection of the same not only prevents one from fully communing with the text but leaves one bereft of the ability to dream.

Finally, one needs simply permit oneself a moment of aesthetic submersion to linger upon the beauty, both subtle and sweeping, of Du Bois' text to be persuaded that the author took great joy in the potency of the word as a way to elucidate meaning and reality. Just as an emancipatory American history defies linear narration by demanding that the singular voice of hegemony be drowned out by the cries of a cacophonous past, the use of metaphor which juxtaposes the already known with the nearly unknowable animates a limitless range of Black experience within

the mind of the reader through the provocation of imagination. For stories force readers to inhabit characters' lives within both the infinitesimal and the sublime dimensions of reality in such a manner that eludes the parameters of scientific empirical studies. It is for this reason that "Of the Coming of John" is placed among the final chapters of *Souls*, so that America's dream can be shaped through the yearning voice of its enduring protagonist.

Through the combination of metaphorical and descriptive rendering, therefore, the descriptive dimension of *Souls* allows Du Bois to bestow recognizability and a human face upon the Black American subject and to establish an understanding of the obstacles that stand in the way of self actualization.

Reshaping the Polity

If the first way of seeing within the dreamscape described the boundaries to oneself, the second, with aspiration, asserts that liberation might yet be achieved through the humanitarian application of social and economic policies to grant closure to the unfinished work of emancipation. The aspirational dimension in *Souls* is itself divided into two parts. The first requires the universal acceptance of democracy as the unifying force of the American people and the second concerns the nature of striving.

On Democracy

Democracy forms the backbone of Du Bois' vision for *Souls*. Rogers writes, "Du Bois' democratic vision aspires to affect a transformation at the deepest levels of the self, so that democracy becomes, in John Dewey's . . . language, 'a way of life'" (Rogers 192). To conceive of democracy as a way of life stretches its meaning beyond the domain of political government, transcending it into an ethos. The uncompromised adoption of democratic idealism is so

instrumental a catalyst in the formation of Du Bois' vision that he does not contemplate individual liberation without the accompanying transformative spirit of the nation. Within an America divided by the colour-line and alienated by Jim Crow segregation, Du Bois' transformative vision is submersed with a complexity of feeling that can only dwell within the aesthetics of the sublime. For the terror that rears up at the finale of "Of the Coming of John" is matched in intensity only by the tragedy it evokes at the death of a dream. The juxtaposition of the beauty of John's soul with the wanton destruction of his body and dream animates the reader's unconsolable lament.

For Blacks, then, emancipation must involve internalizing and *insisting* on the attainability of the ideals of democracy. While Du Bois writes to persuade a general readership that Blacks are worthy of and equal to the task of nation building, his text also functions to embolden and teach Blacks how to reconstitute the self by displacing the fogged vision of alienation with aspiration for a future of self-possession. He insists that to be salvaged from the problem of the colour line, Black men must emerge from the darkened sight of the veil and see themselves inheriting the dream of the nation.

For Whites, "*Souls* is an attempt to persuade [them] to embrace an alternative view of America" (Rogers 195) through the exercise of that quality most intrinsic to the spirit of democracy: judgment. Rogers concludes from his rhetorical study of *Souls* that "the key . . . to widening the judgment of the white reader – is the emotional states of sympathy and shame," (198) both of which are elicited liberally throughout the text.

Inviting the White reader to peer behind the veil, *Souls* is diffused with various forms of language that begets sympathy. Passages eliciting a sympathy resembling pity proliferate the

chapters describing Du Bois' travels through the South. In "Of the Black Belt," Du Bois describes the desolate poverty that seized the American South following the end of slavery.

A resistless feeling of depression falls slowly upon us, despite the gay sunshine and the green cotton-fields. This, then, is the Cotton Kingdom, – the shadow of a marvellous dream. And where is the King? Perhaps this is he, – the sweating ploughman, tilling his eighty acres with two lean mules, and fighting a hard battle with debt (*Souls* 113).

I think I never before quite realized the place of the Fence in civilization. This is the Land of the Unfenced, where crouch on either hand scores of ugly one-room cabins, cheerless and dirty. Here lies the Negro problem in its naked dirt and penury. And here are no fences (*Souls* 115).

A sympathy founded upon approval is affected in "Of the Training of Black Men".

problems of work and wages, of families and homes, of moral and the true value of the things of life . . . the Negro must meet and solve largely for himself . . . Is there not, with such a group and in such a crisis, infinitely more danger to be apprehended from half-trained minds and shallow thinking than from over-education and over-refinement? . . .

We shall hardly induce black men to believe that if their stomachs be full, it matters little about their brains. They already dimly perceive that the paths of peace winding between honest toil and dignified manhood call for the guidance of skilled thinkers, the loving, reverent comradeship between the black lowly and the black men emancipated by training and culture (*Souls* 104-105)

Sympathy arising from pathos is depicted in "Of the Passing of the First-Born".

He died at eventide, when the sun lay like a brooding sorrow above the western hills, veiling its face; when the winds spoke not, and the trees, the great green trees he loved, stood motionless. I saw his breath beat quicker and quicker, pause and then his little soul leapt like a star that travels in the night and left a world of darkness in its train. The day changed not; the same tall trees peeped in at the windows, the same green grass glistened in the setting sun. Only in the chamber of death writhed the world's most piteous thing – a childless mother (*Souls* 204).

Finally, a more complex manner of sympathy, shadowed with regret, is elicited by “Of Alexander Crummel” and “Of the Coming of John”, which I will examine in a later section in further detail.

Rogers writes, “the capacity for sympathy is constitutively connected to the ability to *re-present*,” (198) for sympathy elicits recognition in place of alienation. Therefore, by instrumentalizing sympathy as rhetorical device, Du Bois brings about the discursive reframing of Blacks under the guise of the recognizable American.

In my own reading, Du Bois' use of sympathy returns me to Kwesi Thomas' Smithian analysis of the text. For the democratic spirit which resonates through both works positions Smith's model an apt pairing with the aspirational dimension of *Souls*. As Rogers asserts, sympathy when coupled with shame has the capacity, like the impartial spectator, to correct social behaviour.

The work of sympathy, then, is hastened by the feeling of shame. In “Everyday Shame,” Elspeth Probyn writes, “If shame is felt as ‘a sickness of the self’ (Tomkins), it is also the affect most clearly based in the positivity of interest. As Tomkins clearly argues, without interest there cannot be shame” (Probyn 329). The connection between interest and shame emphasizes their joint productive potential as the impetus for change and as Probyn argues, for “advancing a

project of everyday ethics” (329). For one must be interested, or invested in the daily executions of life, to experience shame. The possession of interest demonstrates a desire to be attuned to social norms and to present one’s habitus, or one’s way of being in the world, within the bounds of normalcy to maintain a sense of security in one’s belonging.

In *Souls*, the productive capacity of White shame is readily leveraged by Du Bois in his paring of shame with sympathy to motivate the recognition and acknowledgement of historical responsibility for human atrocity, a prerequisite gesture to coming to terms with one’s identity. However, Du Bois is also sensitive to the complex nature of shame experienced by America’s Black population, which manifests as a victim’s shame, for being on atrocity’s receiving end. It is a shame beyond one’s control for it is the outcome of intentional acts of humiliation and denial of human dignity.

Du Bois’ explicit descriptions of Black shame are, in fact, essential to the productive capacity of White shame. For “shame always plays on that doubleness of the public and the private . . . It is perhaps the most intimate of feelings but seemingly must be brought into being by an intimate proximity to others, Shame makes our selves intimate to our selves” (Probyn 331). In this way, Du Bois confronts White Americans with the consequences of its past, reigniting an intimate recollection of historical memory.

In “Of the Coming of John,” shame takes on a didactic dimension, for it is paired with revelation; John’s ejection from the theatre juxtaposed with the elevating effect of the *Lohengrin*, his humiliation in Judge Henderson’s parlor exposing the quality of the judge’s character. Each encounter with shame motivates John to acquire dignity and individual sovereignty. Through John, Du Bois illustrates the productive capacity of shame, which can be transformed into motivation.

Finally, Du Bois' rhetoric of shame and sympathy presumes interest on the part of his fellow Americans. It is a collective interest, shared by both Blacks and Whites and devoted to the growth and evolution of the American nation. It is perhaps this presumption, above all others, that grounds his vision in utopian fantasy.

Souls, then, which effects a manner of rhetorical disarmament leads White America across the veiled chasm "in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack" (*Souls* 10). Having come face-to-face with the humanity of his Black brother, White America, as invited voyeur, becomes confronted for the first time by the disparity of their worlds. The internal struggle that accompanies the attempts to reconcile the contradictions of history with the view from behind the veil leads to a state of psychological bafflement that becomes entangled with the shame of admission. In this way, a mimicry of double consciousness and a fragmentation of reality is thrust upon White consciousness which can only be lifted by the relinquishment of the fairy tales of old. In this way, *Souls* relieves White America of the need to propagate a narrative of hegemony, rendering its nascent consciousness free to pursue the aspiration for a transformed America. The transformative work of sympathy and shame which relies on the radical shift of the White perspective for national salvation anticipates Baldwin's later assertion that in order for America to be free, Whites must willingly become Black. In this way, I propose that if Du Bois was influenced by Smith's text it was to inscribe, through rhetorical mimicry, the function of the impartial spectator upon the modulating themes of sympathy and shame as a means for transforming White consciousness.

Du Bois' rhetorical strategy of sympathy and shame is finally a declaration of faith in the American people for "his rhetorical stance emerges from a belief that democracy's logic of

legitimacy is fundamentally tied to a vision of contestation over who constitute the people” (Rogers 189-190). The ability to contest through a proliferation of utterance lends democracy its legitimacy. By “honor[ing] the judgment of the reader [and] leaving his or her reflective agency intact,” (Rogers 194) Du Bois gambles that democracy will prevail against the bewilderment of history.

On the Nature of Striving

The portions of *Souls* devoted to describing Black life are written with care and a writerly sense of internal tragedy. With reverence, Du Bois paints the portrait of Black consciousness amidst a myriad of systematic and quotidian obstacles. These range from the bureaucratic blunders of the Freedman’s Bureau, the lack of national support and resources and a general disagreement on how to best administer Black education, a general lack of political agency within the Black populace, the debilitating and openly discriminatory Jim Crow laws, a general atmosphere of discrimination and the ensuing bilateral mistrust between Blacks and Whites, a commonplace naiveté found amongst Blacks in business dealings exposing them to fraudulent and illegal business practices, among others.

Stretching interminably forward towards the promised inheritance of a dream, the chapters on the quotidian striving in the agrarian South illustrate Black sharecroppers, labourers, farmers and landowners striving in parallel to shape the destiny of self against an uncertain future. Beginning with “Of the Meaning of Progress,” Du Bois returns to his days as a young teacher in the “hills of Tennessee,” (*Souls* 58) to capture, with delicate poignancy, the portraits of the beating hearts “where the broad dark vale of the Mississippi begins to roll and crumple to greet the Alleghanies” (*Souls* 58). Over the course of many more pages and the passage of a decade in the author’s life, Du Bois’ testimonial of the life of the Black rural labourer casts a

shadow of familiarity and humility upon America's unassuming veiled face proliferating the land. With weary fatherly regret, he writes of the Black populace of Dougherty County in Georgia,

over eighty per cent, are poor and ignorant, fairly honest and well meaning, plodding, and to a degree shiftless, with some but not great sexual looseness. Such class lines are by no means fixed; they vary, one might almost say, with the price of cotton. . . nearly two-thirds of them cannot read or write. . . They are ignorant of the world about them, of modern economic organization, of the function of government, of individual worth and possibilities – of nearly all those things which slavery in self-defence had to keep them from learning. Much that the white boy imbibes from his earliest social atmosphere forms the puzzling problems of the black boy's mature years. America is not another word for Opportunity to *all* her sons (*Souls* 138).

The chapters from “Of the Meaning of Progress” to “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” confer recognizability upon the faces of those who strive in the shadow of a dream. The Black folks encountered in these chapters enter the cotton market from different vantage points; some with more advantage, some become submerged in debt, many wrestle against luck or trickery. Yet, small pockets of wealth accumulate in the population.

In order to broaden life's prospects beyond the endurance of cotton, Du Bois argues for the need for institutions of higher learning so that Blacks might be known for more than their deft, labour-ready hands. He asserts that to be rid of the veil is a matter of rising above it rather than dismantling it from below. What is needed are Black universities to “furnish the black world with adequate standards of human culture and lofty ideals of life” (*Souls* 94) so that Blacks might learn how to dream. For “It was not enough that the teachers of teachers should be trained in

technical normal methods; they must also, so far as possible, be broad-minded, cultured men and women, to scatter civilization among a people whose ignorance was not simply of letters, but of life itself” (*Souls* 94). In this way, Du Bois asserts,

[Education] must develop men. Above our modern socialism, and out of the worship of the mass, must persist and evolve that higher individualism which the centres of culture protect; there must come a loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it; that seeks a freedom for expansion and self-development; that will love and hate and labor in its own way, untrammelled alike by old and new. Such souls aforesaid have inspired and guided worlds, and if we be not wholly bewitched by our Rhine-gold, they shall again (*Souls* 104).

With a fatherly concern, Du Bois puts forward his vision for the sociopolitical uplift of the Black populace as symbolic of a national reaching for higher moral ground. For the virtues that Blacks seek to embody are the very virtues that are emblematic of American freedom. In this way, Du Bois neatly positions the Black struggle at the centre of America’s narrative of becoming. “By the force of his mythmaking imagination,” writes Rampersad, “[Du Bois] thus taught [Blacks] how to think of themselves and how to celebrate themselves, for the portrait was immediately recognized as an inspired reflection of the deepest level of the black American heritage” (89).

The Language of Freedom

Du Bois’ view of the transformative nature of Black spirit in which the “sovereign human soul . . . seeks to know itself and the world about it” is compatible with Bakhtin’s transformative model of language which is “always in a ‘ceaseless flow of becoming’” (Alan 18). Just as

change is embedded within the very nature of language, a transformative model of self requires that meaning and identity be situated at the nexus of an intertwining between change and truth. Like the internal dialogism of the word which is comprised of a conflation of signifying and signified intent through time, the Black soul must internalize an alternate discourse to guide the development of an emancipated identity. For if the “[t]he ideological becoming of a human being is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others,” (Bakhtin 341) then Du Bois trains the Black ear to be sensitive to a discourse of empowerment rather than hegemony as its guide.

Read in this way, *Souls* takes on a didactic quality. Through a training in rhetoric, Du Bois readies Black America for the possession of political power. Rogers, who speculates that Du Bois was influenced, during his time at Harvard, by Adams Sherman Hill’s *The Principles of Rhetoric and Their Application* which teaches that rhetoric ““uses knowledge, not as knowledge, but as power,”” (Rogers 194) is of the same view. The effect of Du Bois’ rhetorical aesthetic, therefore, not only avails him the opportunity to flaunt the intellectual prowess of the Talented Tenth but, more importantly, allows him to show Blacks how to use language as a tool for empowerment and as an instrument for achieving a desired reality. In this way, Du Bois shows that the reward of emancipation is not limited to ameliorating the physical dimension of life but realizes its true form in the birth of the Black political imagination.

The road to Du Bois’s alternate narrative can be read meaningfully through a Bakhtinian lens which perceives the trajectory from a hegemonic monologic discourse to an internally persuasive one to demarcate the struggle towards a liberated identity. Bakhtin explains, “[i]nternally persuasive discourse – as opposed to one that is externally authoritative – is . . . tightly interwoven with ‘one’s own word’” (Bakhtin 345). This occurs from the situatedness of words within the specific cultural manifestations that surround their utterance, shaped by every

facet of life, from the linguistic habits of individual speakers to the official line of state censorship. Bakhtin elucidates further,

the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's . . . such a word awakens new and independent words . . . organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition . . . it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts. More than that, it enters into an intense interaction, a *struggle* with other internally persuasive discourses (Bakhtin 345-346, italics in original).

Without an internally persuasive discourse, one is an *other* unto one's self, for one has not a language – or even a fully formed consciousness – upon which one can be made legible to oneself. The development of an internally persuasive discourse bestows the ability to recognize the self and excises the presence of the other from one's mind, for one has fully assimilated a language that represents the essence of one's being. The internally persuasive self, comprised of an admixture of one's surroundings, is a heteroglossically constituted self for it is an accumulation and a synthesis of the multitudes of consciousnesses that have come before.

In contrast, being “fully complete, [monologic discourse] has but a single meaning” (Bakhtin 343). It is, in fact, threatened by all alternate meanings, the presence of which would lead to an inevitable reinterpretation of reality, a lifting of the veil, a collision between the worlds of heroes and villains, saviors and outcasts. The function of monologic storytelling, then, is to sustain a dichotomous system of being and of conceiving the world; a manner of ideological becoming which is pure and free from the need to assimilate the words of *any* others.

While the racial Other is restricted to seeing narrowly through the eyes of an alien gaze, the veil cannot permanently obstruct sight, for a veil, by its very nature invites lifting. Therefore, embedded within Du Bois' chosen image for the colour-line is the promise of its eventual lifting

and a wakeful yearning to be transformed from the subject condemned to see “one’s self through the eyes of others” (*Souls* 3) into an actor made whole and one with the “revelation of the other world” (*Souls* 3).

The adoption of an alternate discourse, then, occasioned by the vision of a new democratic national bearing, leads to a reconstitution of the American social imagination, for citizens, regardless of race, must simultaneously inhabit the nation in the present-day and in an aspired future. Through this formulation, Du Bois has effectively restructured the nature and the demographic expression of double consciousness pervading the minds of Americans. In this newly acquired, ameliorating, doubled state of self, the two disparate visions of reality seek unification, with upturned gaze, towards a beatific vision of America. With sacred feeling Du Bois evokes the sonorous language of the King James. Declaring with exaltation that Black American’s rightful place at “the end of his striving; [is] to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture,” (*Souls* 4) Du Bois bequeaths the mantle of the promised land upon America’s shores and the attainment of political emancipation with that of spiritual salvation.

The Personification of the Veil

In the above sections, I have considered the descriptive and aspirational dimensions of *Souls* as two distinct constructs. I will now consider how Du Bois unites them in two short stories. The first, “Of Alexander Crummel,” a fictional reimagining of a life of spiritual striving, is a lead up to the second, “Of the coming of John,” in which the protagonist’s “dark body, [with] dogged strength . . . [clashed against the colour line till it was] torn asunder” (*Souls* 3).

The switch from essay to short story is a rhetorical strategy Du Bois employs that achieves a change in narrative modality which deepens the reader’s focus and relationship with

the text. From the perspectives of two men drawn to an aspirational future, the stories relate – with increasing pathos – the failure to emerge from the veil. The penetrating experience of tragedy in the stories draws the reader deeper into the imaginary plane and entangles her within the protagonists’ struggle in a manner that obliterates the colour line while essentializing its unbudging significance.

In “Of Alexander Crummel,” a man devoted to the selfless pursuit of God is blocked from his aspirations by the rigid walls of an institution whose dogmatic refusal of outsiders positions it resolutely beyond the reach of those behind the veil. The story tells the life and work of Alexander Crummel, who, through repeated trials, peers from behind the veil at the “the revelation of the other world”. With each attempt ending in frustration, the totality of his life’s work amounts to an accumulation of disappointed striving for “[h]is name to-day, in this broad land, means little” (*Souls* 219). Steeped in good works and pure intentions, Crummel as a protagonist of tragedy allows Du Bois to demonstrate that the colour-line is indiscriminate in its broad sweep against Black lives. He concludes that the final lesson to be taken from Crummel’s life is “Not that men are poor,— all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked,— who is good? Not that men are ignorant,— what is Truth? Nay, but that men know so little of men” (*Souls* 219). For a measure of Crummel’s inner struggle must be found in the hardened soul of “corpulent, red-faced” (*Souls* 215) Bishop Onderdonk, who refused Crummel’s final entreaty to join the ranks of those who would preach in the name of God. Du Bois therefore shows that tragedy lies on both sides of the colour-line, for to hold fast to divisions amongst men requires the steeling of oneself against the outstretched humanity of a fellow being. Upon the beleaguered holy man, then, Du Bois crowns the thorny raiment of Christ – “a dark and pierced Jew, who knows the writhing of the earthly damned,” (*Souls* 219) for the endurance of one’s

thwarted pure intentions must earn the favour of God's indiscriminatory recognition in the life hereafter.

If "Of Alexander Crummel" is intended to engender the reader's sympathy for a man of pure and unselfish motives, then in "Of the Coming of John" Du Bois extends the breadth of the reader's sympathy to an ordinary figure. An anti-*bildungsroman* of sorts, "Of the Coming of John" personifies, through the destruction of one man, the collective grief of the Black American psyche. John's "coming" signifies in several ways. On the level of narrative, his homecoming as a university graduate – a hard-won status that came at the expense of a simpler self – is the pride of family and community; a triumph that must be divided amongst a people who, with daily toil, looked towards the horizon for the coming of a promise. Formally, in John's death is a defiance of the coming into oneself that typifies the *bildungsroman*. Finally, extending the symbolic trajectory of Alexander Crummel's return to the arms of the Almighty Father, is the gesture at a second coming that heralds the promise of a final salvation.

John's formation, which bears the unmistakable mark of the Talented Tenth, takes place over years of studious self application and finds its culmination when John unexpectedly stumbled into a performance of *Lohengrin*. The performance imparts upon John a longing to assume the very consummate form of the ideals gleaned from his years of study, for it belongs to the view of one unencumbered by the veil. Enveloped in its transcendent beauty, John is granted a vision of himself transported in bodily form into the figure of a man who gains recognition in such a world.

A deep longing swelled in all his heart to rise with that clear music out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled. If he could only live up in the free air where birds sang and setting suns had no touch of blood! Who had called him to

be the slave and butt of all? And if he had called, what right had he to call when a world like this lay open before men? (*Souls* 228).

Lohengrin instills in John a vision of unhindered political freedom. By gaining access to the concert hall, John gained, for a brief moment, a sense of self possession as a temporary equal within the exclusive realm of White cultural refinement, thereby securing a taste of dignity. The experience transforms John's consciousness by simultaneously lifting him to the heights of aspiration while submerging him within the depth of a dreamlike longing for the perpetuation of an accidental occurrence. This newly birthed self, embodying innocently the fantasy of equality, cannot tolerate the tarnishing of the newly acquired dream. Upon his return to Altamaha, John confronts with anger and despair the prejudice and inhumanity that was the daily burden of his childhood. In his previously ignorant state, John was insensitive to the injustice around him. However, with the gift of sight, a newly transformed self yearns to cross the colour-line and mend his fractured soul.

Nowhere is John's duality more evident than in the strength of his veracity as a protagonist, for in him is a figure whose tragic radiance touches all readers. On John's fragmented existence, Rampersad writes, being "[n]either a hypocrite nor a rebel, he stands frozen between two worlds, isolated from everything but his capacity to dream," (76) a quality that bestows upon him the quintessence of Americanness, for in him is a man who seeks after the dream as a means to life.

Drawing on Du Bois' philosophical formation as a student of German philosophy, Paul E. Kirkland addresses the tragic slant of *Souls* while treating the text as a work of aesthetics rather than politics. Responding to Rogers, Kirkland comments, "Rogers subordinates the aesthetic aims of *Souls* to its civic republic rhetorical effort to reconstitute a people via sympathy and

shame” (Kirkland 414). In contrast, Kirkland stresses that the text might be “[r]ead in a broader way than through a lens of racial identity, [for] *Souls* includes a reflection on the deepest human strivings and the capacity of political life to fulfil them” (Kirkland 414). Kirkland observes that Du Bois’ vision of aspiration stretches “[b]eyond political goals, the longing of spirit is for a place above life, a place of knowledge and contemplation” (Kirkland 426).

While the richness of Du Bois’ discursive style naturally beckons an aesthetic evaluation, I am troubled by Kirkland’s assertion that “[through the] pairing ‘Of Alexander Crummel’ with ‘Of the Coming of John,’ Du Bois points toward tragedy in which political aspirations are not met, and . . . reveals the aspirations that cannot be met politically” (Kirkland 420). To distill the essence of authorial intention to an aesthetic reading of two short stories in a mix-genre work suggests a deliberate disregard of the majority Du Bois’ carefully crafted the text comprising of essays on the daily strivings of Black folks as a result of their historical and political circumstances.

Furthermore, Kirkland also fails to consider the stylistic juxtaposition of fiction with essay as rhetorical strategy. For the flexible nature of fiction allows the author to re-present the structured delivery of arguments typifying the essay through the fluid language of heteroglossic utterance, which renders a text more accessible while creating meaning on a deeper, emotional level. Instead of enumerating the difficulty of living behind the veil through sociological references, the story allows the author to personify struggle through the eyes of characters imbued with a life-like familiarity, thereby reifying the humanity of those who are afflicted.

Furthermore, the language of the story, animated by metaphor – the mark of poetry and myth – need not adhere to the stipulations of reason. Just as hegemonic discourse relies on the proliferation of myth, the story, likewise, must evince truth through the metaphor, which bestows

clarity not through the verifiability of facts and rationale, but through the affirmation of a shared humanity. In this way, Du Bois' use of the short story must not be read independently of, or as counter-assertion to the other chapters, but in complement to the strident voice of the essayist.

Finally, one finds in nearly every chapter *except* in "Of Alexander Crummel" and "Of the Coming of John," the author's explicit appeal for the political emancipation of Black America, calling repeatedly for accountable government and the need for reform. That the political transformation of the American consciousness forms the conceptual backbone of *The Souls of Black Folk* and defines its very purpose is affirmed by Du Bois's final declaration in "The Afterthought" to "Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth, and seventy millions sigh for the righteousness which exalteth nations, in this drear day when human brotherhood is mockery and a snare" (*Souls* 257).

I am still more perturbed by Kirkland's later insistence that "[a]s important as civil rights and political inclusion are, the fuller spiritual task involves the preservation of a culture that allows *cheer* in the face of the *necessary suffering and disappointment* of human life" [my italics] and that "[a]rt provides the reconciliation that may not succeed on an institutional level" (Kirkland 435) – a position, voiced with the staunch authority of privilege and institution, that not only denies historical accountability for human atrocity but robs a people of humanity by belittling their daily striving towards a better life. Suffering from an over zealousness to revive an expired intellectual vogue for romanticising the suffering of colonized peoples, Kirkland's analysis may be cured of oversight through the recognition that Du Bois' aesthetic performance within *Souls* is contrived, in the first place, to acquire universal recognition for the paradoxical conditions thwarting Black existence and, in the second, to persuade the audience of the imminent need for political reform by revealing the untenable view from behind the veil. While I

am in agreement that “Du Bois advocates a culture that prepares for confrontation with necessary disappointment,” (Kirkland 435) I am in utter disagreement that disappointment should suffice as the final outcome of striving. Conceivably, the following passage in *Souls* anticipates readings such as Kirkland’s which reinforce instead of abolishing the veil: “We seldom study the condition of the Negro to-day honestly and carefully. It is so much easier to assume that we know it all. Or perhaps, having already reached conclusions in our own minds, we are loath to have them disturbed by facts” (*Souls* 132).

Nevertheless, the importance Kirkland accords tragedy is essential, for tragedy is the very instrument of persuasion that Du Bois relies on to defend his opening declaration that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colour-line” (*Souls* v). Tragedy in “Of the Coming of John” is found not only in John’s death but in its inevitability since an identity forged upon dreams from beyond the veil is incompatible with “[a] country [where] the Negro must remain subordinate, and can never expect to be the equal of white men” (*Souls* 234). The reversal of John’s fate requires nothing less than a transformation of the American political consciousness in keeping with Du Bois’ vision of aspiration. The destruction of John represents the death of a dream and the reification of the colour-line. As the efforts of his striving and ascension to manhood in the White world are denied, John assumes the figure of a tragic hero. The trajectory of his fall is both physical and spiritual, for while John’s lynching typifies the quotidian violence inflicted upon Black lives and bodies in the American South, the refusal to acknowledge his intellectual achievements amounts to the delegitimization of Black spiritual striving which underpins Du Bois’ vision for the actualization of self.

Therefore, to read “Of the Coming of John” as an affectation of aesthetics is to un-situate the author’s use of tragedy from its intended rhetorical function and to ignore the skillful

aesthetic articulation that both persuades and provokes the audience. For tragedy, which must touch upon human truths to bear relevance, oft needs contextualization within the story of a life. Fiction, which permits the intimate recognition of humanity between reader and author, does away with the excesses of reality while transacting unequivocally in the coinage of truth.

By situating his analysis on the aesthetic romanticization of Black struggle, Kirkland undermined the political dimension of *Souls* and reduced the symbolic power of its characters to silent depictions on the page. In my perspective, tragedy in both “Of Alexander Crummel” and “Of the Coming of John” is intended to incense political change, for both stories end with the protagonists’ death as the symbol of an unyielding resistance rather than acquiescence. Accepting death, John bids his mother farewell.

“Mammy, I’m going away, – I’m going to be free.”

She gazed at him dimly and faltered, “No’th, honey is yo’ gwine No’th again?”

He looks out where the North Star glistened pale above the waters, and said, “Yes, mammy, I’m going – North.” (*Souls* 239)

Within this momentary dialogue, time simultaneously expands and collapses. For just as the reader’s mind swells with the many implications of “North,” the clarity of John’s fate comes into focus, reducing reality to a single point of inevitable horror. As John performs, in the momentary deception of his mother, the final act of love that is within his possession, he emerges fully unveiled and alive before the reader, his eyes becoming the eyes of the world.

As his trajectory is in the direction of freedom, John attains, although only metaphorically, a measure of freedom in the choice of a dignified death over an undignified life. Instead of running, John protects his humanity by returning to the foot of the “twisted oak,” and by spilling his own blood over that of White John’s, makes his final stand. This he does –

accompanied by the tremorous emotions of the reader – with tragedy in his own heart, bringing to life the author’s despair “that men [should] know so little of men” (*Souls* 219). Standing smiling before the specter of death, “the world whistl[ing] in his ears,” (*Souls* 240) John’s metamorphic transcendence in the final scene returns the reader to a state of sublime enchantment in the lure of a melodious dream. For the conflation of terror, tragedy and beauty combine to overwhelm the senses and, rather than a fixation upon John’s death, turns the mind’s eye towards to the horizon and sets one’s gaze upon the path to a consecrated salvation.

In John’s death, then, is reified “[t]he shadow of [the] mighty Negro past . . . [where] the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness” (*Souls* 4). Having witnessed life and death through John’s eyes, the reader inevitably arrives at a position of condemnation. “*Souls* honors the judgment of the reader,” Rogers writes, “leaving his or her reflective agency intact” (194). The judgement of the reader, then, is crucially juxtaposed with that exacted by Judge Henderson – a man whose judgment is unfit.

Du Bois and the Black Woman

Finally, Du Bois’ lament on America’s racial divide between men calls into question the fate of the Black woman. In *Souls*, the reader encounters no woman straying beyond the borders of archetypal feminine virtue. A backward glance through the text recalls a near universal portrayal of women as the victims of circumstance. One recalls Josie, a once inspired schoolgirl longing for “the great school at Nashville,” (*Souls* 62) working tirelessly to amend poverty, trouble and disappointment – who lay, finally, spent and dying in the arms of her mother. Du Bois’ own wife, remaining nameless but lovingly illustrated for her motherly devotions, was

shown “unfolding like the glory of the morning” (*Souls* 201) upon the birth of her son, only to become “the world’s most piteous thing – a childless mother,” (*Souls* 204) upon his death. Finally, John’s sister, Jennie, a young kitchen maid who lacks even the means to defy her rapist, represents the pinnacle of an agency-stricken woman.

In “Black Male Feminism and the Evolution of Du Boisian Thought, 1903-1920,” Nneka D. Dennie writes, “When Du Bois discusses black women [in *Souls*] he does not address structural oppression, but rather focuses on their representation by discussing black women’s social status, morality and respectability” (Dennie 7). The glaring absence of a single case of female assertiveness in *Souls* betrays the gendered prejudice in Du Bois’ political outlook. No woman encountered in *Souls* is positioned as ready or capable of inheriting the dream of the nation. While Du Bois writes lovingly of Black women and certainly recognizes the difficulty of work performed by women in the family and community, they are finally represented as incapable agents of destiny.

Evoking the Talented Tenth, Du Bois declares that “The negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men” (*Talented Tenth* 2). By essentializing the Black American within the form of the Black man, Du Bois sustains the doubling of invisibility upon Black women. For not only are Black women, like their male counterparts, relegated to living behind the veil, but the widespread sexual subjugation of female slaves has imprinted upon the Black female identity a considerably greater extent of tragedy and complexity in comparison to the Black male identity.

While this describes Du Bois’ outlook at the time of *Souls*’ publication, Dennie asserts, by 1920 Du Bois’ politics of gender, despite oft times being conflicted and contradictory, had undergone significant change, for exposure to “black women’s writing and activism at the turn of

the twentieth century radicalized Du Bois” (Dennie 2). Dennie therefore confers upon Du Bois the title of *black male feminist* which describes “black men’s attempts to advocate for black women’s rights and freedom by simultaneously critiquing racism and sexism” (Dennie 4). Du Bois’ earlier feminist leanings focused on protecting Black female virtue in public discourse and elevating the dignity of the middle-class, educated Black woman; the female version of his Talented Tenth. During this phase of his feminist outlook, “Du Bois locates women as important actors in the home for their ability to support and maintain families, but does not acknowledge their ability to perform meaningful work outside of the private sphere” (Dennie 8). By 1917, Du Bois becomes a vocal advocate for women’s suffrage, often using *Crisis*, the magazine he cofounded, as a medium for airing his support. Finally, by 1920, in “The Damnation of Women,” a chapter from *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, Du Bois writes, ““despite the noisier and more spectacular advance of [his] brothers, [he] instinctively feel[s] and know[s] that it is the five million women of [his] race who really count”” (Dennie 2).

Du Bois’s transformed outlook on the nature of the Black woman’s struggle with the colour-line, which comes to fruition in pace with the realization of woman’s suffrage across the nation, indicates his sensitivity to the ever-evolving character of the times. Four years after the maturation of Du Bois’ feminist leanings, America looks to the emergence of another great thinker, one James Arthur Baldwin, born in 1924 who would take up, once more, the problem of the colour-line with a renewed vision of salvation.

Chapter 2: *The Fire Next Time* – To America with Love

a vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man's profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of the white anguish is rooted in the white man's equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror

-*The Fire Next Time*

Just as Du Bois calls upon the image of the veil to explicate a kind of erasure of the Black American, James Baldwin employs the mirror as simile for his White counterpart's obstructed ability to behold and be seen in the world. Baldwin's conception of the mirror is complex and psychologically layered. A mirror obstructs the viewer's ability to observe the world outside her mind, for that which resides in a mirror is not reality, but a projection of light, a facsimile of expectation, *re-presenting* as the real thing. Yet a mirror's trickery does not work on refracted reflections but a thwarted consciousness, for the very desire to find one's veracity within a mirror signals the fear lodged within the recesses of one's clenched psyche; a fragmentation of the self caught between the image suspended in the reflective surface and the version one longs to see in its place.

This disjointed doubling of identity exposes an anguished psyche arrested between the desire to protect the power to fabricate reality and the desire to revolt against the macabre part one must play to maintain the order of the original cast. Fear prevents one from gazing with discernment into the mirror, erases the distance between dreams and an unfettered judgment and imparts a sense of displacement from historical reality. "Most people guard and keep:" Baldwin writes, "they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be" (*Fire* 86).

The act of gazing into a mirror, then, leads to the rejection of external sensation for a hyperbolized fixation upon the self. Instead of casting one's gaze externally at the world, the mirror reflects the viewer's gaze back upon his own baffled, gaping expression. By allowing the viewer to see only what he has seen before, the mirror cocoons the American consciousness within a dream in which a proliferation of mythologized images, narratives and convictions animates the entirety of his senses. The quotidian assertion of his own face, a White emblem of America, transforms the promise of a unique topography into the undifferentiated aspect of myth. Like a well rehearsed narrative, the repetitive, undifferentiated gaze bestows a legibility upon an alienated countenance. It is only upon the promise of waking that one encounters the jagged contradictions of memory, expanding the interpretive field of one's signified dreams. In this way, the mirror acts to suppress consciousness by allowing one to look without truly seeing.

Through an intricate conflation of symbolism, Baldwin illustrates how, in its simultaneous capacity to arrest historical momentum by deepening America's euphoria with the dream and to become the catalyst for national awakening, the mirror brings its viewer to a standstill at the crossroads of signification. Towards this reckoning, Baldwin casts White America as protagonist, thereby granting narrative circularity by charging the author of historical discombobulation with the task of its restoration. It is for this reason that in *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin bequeaths his vision of salvation upon an anguish-donning White America.

Discourse on Dreams in 3 Parts

As a formidable storyteller and arbiter of words, Baldwin pens *The Fire Next Time*, a collection of two epistolary essays addressed to his then fifteen-year-old nephew in the loving voice of an uncle conferring wisdom about what it means to be Black in an age at once rife with possibility and hypocrisy. Baldwin's words to his young nephew, heavy with intimacy, finds

resonance first with a New Yorker readership, then with America at large. Both essays arrive at the same conclusion. However, whereas “My Dungeon Shook” summarily delivers Baldwin’s outlook, “Down at the Cross” evolves as an emergence of consciousness from a series of identity fraught dreams.

Starting with his own coming-of-age story, Baldwin elaborates on the theme of identity to provoke the fostering of a rapturous fixation on America’s future. Through an undertaking of iterative storytelling, from *bildungsroman* to spiritual crusade, Baldwin’s text calls America to account by unveiling its decaying, attic ridden portrait to a nation yet clinging to the nostalgic splendor of a fierce and marauding youth. By forcing America to meet its own penetrating gaze, the reader is jolted out of the mire of dreams into a state of wakefulness, coming face-to-face with one’s own probing gaze.

As a master orator, Baldwin chooses to convey his concern for the fate of the nation by telling stories. Originating from utterance, stories essentialize the question of identity and mediate the historical transfer of consciousness by passing down a sense of who we are. Even while historically situated, the essential truth of a story lies in establishing a universal human understanding. Characterized with a sense of timelessness, then, stories bridge divides by reaching disparate audiences across time and civilizations. Finally, stories provide a textual mirror for seeing oneself and facilitate the conception of the self both as a product of an intricate past and as a constantly evolving entity. In this way, Baldwin uses the narrative act to interrogate storytelling as a vehicle for shaping both individual and collective identities. Through the momentum generated by three impassioned narratives of identity, each moving like concentric circles further from the epicentre of individual consciousness towards a deliberate sense of national being, Baldwin ushers the American audience towards a liberated vision of itself.

Dreaming the Self

Drawing from the confessional form, Baldwin begins with the story of self. The choice to open the narrative with a recounting of personal awakening sets the tone for the remainder of the work. The flight from a childhood clouded by fear and hate humanizes and bestows upon the text an emotional authority that transcends race. As the first of three identities subjected to rhetorical scrutiny, Baldwin's use of interior narrative illuminates the passage towards the disentanglement of identity from dreams and of consciousness from fear.

Baldwin fell into a dream as a fourteen-year-old youth in Harlem when he came to the realization that the eventualities which lay before him led either to a life of debauchery or of crime. Faced with these circumstances, the dream first appeared as refuge to the question that haunted young Baldwin of how to survive the "long, hard winter of life" (*Fire* 18). The transformation, then, from beleaguered youth to "the young Brother Baldwin," (*Fire* 38) amounted to the hasty adoption of a false identity as escape from the original crisis of Blackness.

Baldwin's account of preaching flows like a dream. From his euphoric surrender into the fold of a charismatic pastor to the feverish trance on the threshing floor; from the visions of sermon writing conjured in the heat of passion to the self-loathing that mounts from working "a congregation until the last dime was surrendered," (*Fire* 38) each change of scene unravels seamlessly like the fluid movements of a dreamer's consciousness. Equally surreal, the promise of safety seems to rise only to recede from view as young Baldwin becomes increasingly entrenched in the church, until finally – he admits, "I was even lonelier and more vulnerable than I had been before. And the blood of the Lamb had not cleansed me in any way whatever. I was just as black as I had been the day that I was born" (*Fire* 39). Harkening back to the title, "Down at the Cross; Letter from a Region of my Mind," Baldwin's confession suggests that his flight

into the church was a distraction from the region of his mind that cried out in blind fear. The later need to escape from the church represents the beginnings of wakefulness and the recognition of the unsustainability of fabricating one's identity upon the illusions of ready-made dreams. For finally, the church was no refuge for what *life* could not give.

Through his personal confession, Baldwin prepares the American audience for the remaining stories, which by transporting readers through the winding annals of history, breaks the spell cast upon memory by myth and delivers them upon the doorstep of revelation. Discursively, the intimate act of confession removes all distance between reader and writer, frees words from the material barrier of the page and alchemizes them into a purity of sentiment. Within the intimacy of this aesthetic, Baldwin's preacherly oratory evinces a striving towards a manner of truth that is at once universal and honest. It is through this medium that Baldwin's admission of fear humanizes weakness and renders credible the lure of dreams. For the oratory of confession beguiles and transfixes the readerly gaze and bestows, through empathy, a universal recognizability upon the wandering, estranged speaker. Since the recognition of fear transcends race, the American reader, both Black and White, sees herself reflected within the text, takes on the crisis of identity as her own and inhabits the story as personal encounter. In this way, Baldwin's *bildungsroman* not only illustrates the intimacy between dreams and the shaping of individual identity but trains the reader to develop a sympathetic ear for the inflection of the author's utterance and sensitizes her to the likelihood of disenchantment as an eventuality to dreaming.

Black and White Dreams

Having unveiled his own passage adrift, Baldwin proceeds to interpret the remaining identities beset by dreams. Following an internal struggle not unlike the one experienced on the

threshing floor that compelled him to leave the church, Baldwin takes up reckoning with Christianity at large. In an abbreviated shout of sentiment and judgment, Baldwin condemns the church for the role it played in centuries of global conquest which he asserts is realized through a double narrative. Like the pastor doubling as shepherd and swindler, the Christian narrative oscillates between devotion and conquest. “The Christian church” Baldwin writes, “. . . sanctified and rejoiced in the conquests of the flag, and encouraged, if it did not formulate, the belief that conquest, with the resulting relative well-being of the Western populations, was proof of the favor of God” (*Fire* 46).

Instead of the voice of interiority typifying his personal narrative, Baldwin projects his message on Christianity outwards to give voice to centuries of suppressed memory. This shift in perspective is accompanied by a change in Baldwin’s inflection in the mirror’s function. The reader is cajoled from the open-handed invitation of trust bestowed through confession and plunged into a confronting gaze with racism as an original and founding sin for America⁵. Baldwin’s challenge to demythologize American identity with reference to Christianity is intended to prepare the nation for its final reckoning with history: “If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him” (*Fire* 47). For the surrender to mythical narratives prolongs the obstruction of gaze by alleviating the weight of historical memory and bestowing a panacea upon a fragmented, anguished psyche. Finally, Baldwin illustrates the persuasiveness of the Christian dream as an alibi for identity. He writes, “the schizophrenia in the mind of Christendom – had rendered the domain of morals as chartless as the sea once was, and as treacherous as the sea still is” (*Fire* 47). For the myth of the intrepid men of Europe, the emboldened foot soldiers of the one true God, civilizing barbaric lands is far more palatable a

version of events than the naked admission to greed for gold, flesh and the lushness of conquest. In the twentieth century, the diminishment of Christianity's institutional authority has occasioned the American Dream to take up, in large part, the legacy of the crusading American spirit which continues to function as the discursive vehicle to justify the vanquishing of the unknown.

Just as the Christian dream fortified Europeans in their mission to conquer the world, the Nation of Islam's teachings carry the power and vibrancy of a dream that emboldens Blacks to envision release from oppression. The teachings, which promise both the spiritual and political liberation of Blacks, permit individuals to look past the conditions of their immediate surroundings and situate their identities upon the arrival of destiny. Of the movement's finer details, Baldwin remarks, "The dream, the sentiment is old; only the color is new" (*Fire* 57), for the promise of deliverance is structured upon a discourse that, for centuries, was used to justify the subjugation of Blacks. Just as the marauding Christians were reassured of the righteousness of conquering pagans who were less than human, the faith of The Nation of Islam relies on othering Whites as the pivotal resolve for Black salvation. The insistence that only Blacks are worthy of deliverance relies on the same argument of naturalization used to justify the fate of the children of Ham: "There is . . . by definition, no virtue in white people, and since they are another creation entirely and can no more, by breeding, become black than a cat, by breeding, can become a horse, there is no hope for them" (*Fire* 57).

Nothing is achieved for political consciousness when the only change in narrative is found in the reversal of victim and oppressor. In the perpetuation of skin colour as a marker of Black racial superiority is found the selfsame shape of monologic discourse reminiscent of the American Dream operating to reinforce the colour-line and the narratives that reduce existence to binary identities.

Baldwin reveals that the argument's effectiveness in persuading and uniting the disenfranchised, therefore, relies not upon its ideological credibility but on its ability to restore one's sense of self worth.

This is the message that has spread through streets and tenements and prisons, through the narcotics wards, and past the filth and sadism of mental hospitals to a people from whom everything has been taken away, including, most crucially, their sense of their own worth. People cannot live without this sense; they will do anything whatever to regain it (*Fire 76*).

The momentum of the Nation of Islam movement, then, represents the spirit of a people on the threshold of change, for the infusion of self worth transforms the inner gaze from a passive to an active one. By depicting its followers as maneuverers of historical narrative, capable of the very human folly wrought upon their brethren, Baldwin restores a measure of recognizability upon the members of its beleaguered congregation. By humanizing The Nation of Islam movement, Baldwin bestows narrative agency upon the Black American subject straining to be seen, rendering him the hero of his own tale⁶. The elevation of the Black American from obscurity to the architects of destiny, then, bestows a measure of symbolic equality upon political motivations gazing across the mirrored divide.

The principal means by which Baldwin humanizes The Nation of Islam is through his treatment of Elijah Muhammad. For here is a face whose "central quality . . . [being] pain . . . pain so old and deep and black that it becomes personal and particular only when he smiles," (*Fire 64*), that surely it alights only to cast judgment. With "nothing to lose since the day he saw his father's blood rush out – rush down, and splash, so the legend has it, down through the leaves of a tree, on him," (*Fire 76*) he stands with America's legacy etched into his face. He is,

therefore, the embodiment of the Black gaze of America, transformed into an agent of memory and judgment, determined to rain down retribution as the last and only thing worth doing.

In so portraying Elijah, Baldwin removes the mask of father, spiritualist, revolutionary; leaving America's eyes locked tremulously upon the face it has shaped through pain – a face hardened at the moment of his ruptured childhood. To accept *his* humanity is to be transported through history, to stop discrediting the violence of his judgment, to surrender to the “need to be seen . . . to be released” (*Fire* 95) into the baptismal force of a relinquished power.

Through the portrait of Elijah, then, Baldwin transforms the mirror, yet again, from an instrument of confrontation to a site of awakening. The struggle within the mirror threatens to topple the very fragility of being that White America seeks to protect. Seen thusly, the discursive villainization of Blacks reveals that “[t]he danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity” (*Fire* 9). It is therefore *White* consciousness, Baldwin argues, that must be set free to pave the way for the liberation of Blacks. For long enough has White America avoided the gulf of its fragmented realities by inflicting masks on the other.

Lamenting his nation's weakness, Baldwin writes, “White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this – which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never – the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed” (*Fire* 22). Refusal to relinquish the dream of White innocence, then, cocoons America within a historical vacuum, prolongs its love affair with fantasy and traps the nation permanently behind the fixture of its mask.

Baldwin in conversation

In his willingness to perceive the White face trapped within a tyranny of its own making, a reflected double of his Black counterpart, Baldwin diverges from his predecessor. For Du Bois' explication of double consciousness, which soulfully depicts the Black American psyche yearning for Reconstruction, looks to union with the White world – unencumbered by the colour-line, as the final emancipation. With the transcendence from flesh and circumstance etherealized by *Lohengrin's* soaring melodic line, it is yet White America, which represents a desired and fixed reality into which Blacks can integrate.

Departing from Du Bois' appeal to the American ethos for the nation to rise to the rank of one worthy of the dream of democracy, Baldwin speaks to an America yet beset by dreams. Significantly, Baldwin contests Du Bois' assertion that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line” (*Souls* v), since “[c]olour is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality” (*Fire* 104). Baldwin's vision stresses that the intersection between reality and the dream borne identities of nations is situated in the narratives that echo in the public consciousness, which either question or excuse the existing social order. Whereas Du Bois' social vision presumes that Blacks and Whites are divided in their partitioned experience of a singular reality, Baldwin's view reflects a heteroglossic model of consciousness whereby reality's fabric is tenuously held by a system of discourse, comprised of competing and interdependent narratives. Meaning or signification, is inherently subjective and inseparable from the moral inflections of the storyteller's utterance.

While Baldwin diverges from his predecessor in his explication of the problem of Blackness, his solution for the crisis of American identity echoes Du Bois' vision for an uplifted nation in which tangible changes are the result of the metaphorical reimagining of reality. Like

Du Bois, Baldwin's revelation is centered on the individual and relies on consciousness as the driver of social change. Just as Du Bois implores the nation to adopt a state of double consciousness, Baldwin urges White Americans to "become" Black to unburden the White psyche from the illusion of White innocence. Whereas Du Bois assumes that the White world of opportunity is desirable for all Americans, Baldwin's urging of White Americans to become Black suggests a difference of perspective on where the heart of a nation resides. Finally, Baldwin's formulation of love would also seem to gesture at Du Bois' use of *soul* to describe the indefatigable might of Black perseverance, a perseverance that, against all odds, reaches for individual narrative agency and the right to self-proclamation.

Overcoming the Myth

During the Civil Rights era, America's public imagination became the battleground upon which the struggle to reconstitute the American identity was fought. The parties fighting across the colour-line to either decry or defend its existence are each moved to protect a particular version of American history and identity. In the din of this clamour, Baldwin voices an objection to America's conjecture of itself as a White country. "[W]e [Americans], who can scarcely be considered a white nation, persist in thinking of ourselves as one, we [therefore] condemn ourselves, with the truly white nations, to sterility and decay, whereas if we could accept ourselves *as we are*, we might bring new life to the Western achievements, and transform them" (*Fire* 94). For Americans to accept themselves "as [they] are," Baldwin reflects, requires that they first accept that the foregoing narrative of American history is a lie. Americans must reject the rhetoric of national mythology which bespeaks of an America with

ancestors [that] were all freedom-loving heroes, that [Americans] were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honorably with Mexicans and Indians and all other neighbors or inferiors, that American men are the world's most direct and virile, that American women are pure (*Fire* 101).

Instead of seeking refuge in the pastoralization of the past, Americans must bravely decouple their sense of self from established narrative and resurrect a historically situated consciousness within the annals of memory. In demonstration, Baldwin situates himself as follows:

I am called Baldwin because I was either sold by my African tribe or kidnapped out of it into the hands of a white Christian named Baldwin, who forced me to kneel at the foot of the cross . . . this is what it means to be an American Negro, this is who he is – a kidnapped pagan, who was sold like an animal and treated like one, who was once defined by the American Constitution as “three-fifths” of a man, and who, according to the Dred Scott decision, had no rights that a white man was bound to respect (*Fire* 84).

Identity must therefore be implicated from within and wrestled from without the troubling waters of America's turbulent history. In contrast, refusal to interrogate the past signals a passivity that seeks to protect the status quo through the retreat into a narrative of innocence in exchange for a prolonged alienation from oneself.

The yearning for historical innocence, then, cries out for the mythologizing of national conscience; a call the American pastoral answers by supplanting the dreamer's identity with the ubiquity of a promise. The dream of White innocence which operates as a symbol of all that is pure and wholesome and good must be sustained by a perpetuated fear of the Black skin to safeguard Whites from the gaze of history. The ubiquitous marking of the Black skin as a site for

the reproduction of fear is foregrounded by the four-hundred-year history of the Western discursive villainization of Blackness⁷. Today, in 2025, this project continues with the American Dream, symbolically absolving the nation's past by replacing history with a rhetoric of forward-looking reverie, thereby generating an alibi for consciousness. The surrender of an individual for an archetypal identity grants the discursively embedded American the freedom to thrive within the pre-defined bounds of a ready-made identity whose very universality dispels all questions of its legitimacy. In place of individual consciousnesses, then, America dreams of a collective identity of indefatigable virtue. Mesmerized by nostalgia, it removes the need to contend with reality on individual terms.

In *The Black Box; Writing the Race*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes with a concern that resonates over six decades on the question of what it means to be American. In the following passage, Gates addresses image-based representation as a means to discounting generational memory and creating new and alternate versions of reality through the inundation of the senses.

The original Aunt Jemima, Mammy was the safe, grandmotherly type of Black woman, someone who was imagined to love her white enslaver's children more than she loved her own. The image romanticized slavery, stripped it of its brutality toward women (beatings, sexual exploitation, rape), and fabricated nostalgia. This was all happening precisely as white people were sanitizing memories of the Civil War; it was, after all, no longer recalled as "the war to end slavery" but as a war over states's rights (*Black Box* 108).

What Gates points out here is the manufacture of reality through the dissemination of myth into popular culture. For the propagandized dissemination of Jemima represents an intentional overshadowing of the memory of slavery in The South with associations of southern comfort.

[T]his is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it . . . [For] it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime (*Fire* 5-6).

Baldwin responds to the mythologization of national discourse by lifting the essence of Americanism out of the nebulous mythology of nationhood and anchoring it within the self, thereby disrupting the oscillating power of the alibi and dispelling the spell, or the “benumbed look” of myth. In opposition to myth, which “has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance,” (Barthes 255) Baldwin reinserts complexity into the American identity by grounding his perspective in the specificity of the individual. Rather than an ideological glossing, Baldwin seeks to de-mystify Whites and Blacks from each other by exposing that what motivates both sides of the colour-line is fear.⁸

Echoing Du Bois’ call for transformation, Baldwin focuses on turning the searching gaze inwards, so that humanizing the self leads to an estimation of self *and* nation. By situating his narrative on the self and asserting the individual’s ability to personify the essence of society, Baldwin unfetters the question of identity from the opposing sides of a binary divide and recenters it upon the individual.

The lure of the great American pastoral myth, then, lies in its power to transform storytelling into a means of masking one’s fear. One awakens from the Dream by cultivating a personal narrative of meaning that overshadows the need for myth. Just as Bakhtin insists that a language is shaped through its speakers, historical memory and the guardianship of truth must be shaped through the revival of remembrance, whose spirit finds resonance in the internal

dialogism of the word. Since the meaning amassed by words is built up over time, utterance-by-utterance, the individualization of narrative connects speakers as discrete points of expression in the continuous timeline of the historical evolution of consciousness.

Love Shall Overcome

In “Love is Asymmetrical: James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*,” Grant Farred reads Baldwin’s polemic as a sermon on Christian love, asking “what could be more Christian and more ethically hyperbolic than to love those who hate you?” (288). The observation aptly describes a Baldwin who, having cast off his preacherly robes, is yet unable to wed the power of his voice to a cause other than that of human salvation. With his writer’s gaze locked on the future of the nation, Baldwin swaps pulpit for pen in his consignment to shepherd the American masses towards the “mak[ing . . . of] what America must become” (*Fire* 10). Central to Baldwin’s vision for the nation is a Christian sensibility of interiority in which the individual acquisition of faith unlocks the doors to the Kingdom. Christianity, which relies on the parallel progression of two fragmented timelines, anticipates, in its final hour, the unification of a finite consciousness with an eternal incarnation of sight.

Just as Christian salvation is grounded in the recognition of an inward state that restores the individual to the eternal, Baldwin envisions the catalytic capacity of love to release America from the lure of a myth drawn alibi and bequeath the richness of an unadulterated historical remembrance upon its believers. Mirroring the wrestle upon the threshing floor, Baldwin’s vision for America’s emancipatory emergence calls for the willingness of its dreamers to – through an act of *love* – undertake a visionary reckoning into the narrative of its national identity, for

“[White Americans] are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it” (*Fire 8*).

It is with resignation and love that Baldwin embraces the contradictions inherent to the struggle for the American identity. While imploring his audience to see “that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon” (*Fire 10*), Baldwin nevertheless insists that salvation from the colour-line, tenuous as it seems, depends on a kind of heroism on the part of Black Americans. Far from relying on the acceptance of Blacks by Whites to turn the tide on racial inequality, Baldwin insists the reverse must take place. Writing with a preacher’s attachment to both worldly wellbeing and poetic discourse, Baldwin entreats Black Americans to “with love . . . force our [White] brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it” (*Fire 10*).

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 America today have little to do with real antipathy. . . [but] are rooted in the very same depths as those from which love springs, or murder (*Fire 96*).

Like Christian love, Baldwin’s definition demands grit and sacrifice. For the “state of grace” needed to, “with love,” subdue the fear in one’s “lost, younger brothers” (*Fire 9*) recoiling from judgment, who are also the “authors of devastation,” (*Fire 5*) calls for the unthinkable turning of yet another cheek. Yet this is precisely the historical asymmetry that Baldwin demands of Black Americans. For his appeal of love as transformational force compels a Christlike forbearance that, with patience and conviction, persuades America to shed its mask of Whiteness and with

eyes wide open to the terror, step boldly out of the world of myth and into the plane of possibility.

The only way [the White American] can be released from the Negro's tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power and, armed with spiritual traveller's checks, visits surreptitiously after dark (*Fire* 96).

This means relinquishing the hold on the official narrative of the country; to transcend the voice of authority by becoming the characters in *other* stories; Black stories. For the absence of power equalizes the gaze and democratizes narrative. Baldwin writes, "the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations" (*Fire* 9). The internalization of the Black gaze by White Americans, then, the upheaval of the pillars of reality, results in the evaporation of myth, for "[t]he American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed that collection of myths to which white Americans cling" (*Fire* 101). By relinquishing the safety of his story, the White American opens the doors to love. "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within" (*Fire* 95). In this way, Baldwin sends America an ultimatum with love: remain trapped within a dying dream or confront the anguish of judgment by shattering the mirror from within. Look upon one another anew so that, brother alongside brother, re-emerges with memory unified and consciousness intact. Vitality, Baldwin asserts that salvation cannot be found by either side of the colour-line alone, that the liberation of the one depends upon the salvation of the other. He concludes, "[t]he

price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the blacks-the total liberation, in the cities, in the town, before the law, and in the mind” (*Fire* 97).

Love’s Critic

The Fire Next Time’s publication led to a surge in readership and praise such that “Baldwin became the most widely read black author in American history” (Watkins 178). Yet his appeal that America’s future should be shaped through the aperture of love was not received without criticism by fellow intellectuals. In a letter following its publication, Hannah Arendt expresses to Baldwin that his “gospel on love” “frightened” her.

In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy. All the characteristics you stress in the Negro people: their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity, are well-known characteristics of all oppressed people. They grow out of suffering and they are the proudest possessions of all pariahs. Unfortunately, they have never survived the hour of liberation by even five minutes. Hatred and love belong together, and they are both destructive; you can afford them only in the private and, as a people, only so long as you are not free (Arendt’s letter).

In “A Different Price for the Ticket: Hannah Arendt and James Baldwin on Love and Politics,” Martin Caver argues that “Arendt mistakenly conflated Baldwin’s invocation of love with a plea for mere compassion, failing to appreciate the political register in which Baldwin argues for love’s necessity” (37). I am not persuaded by Caver’s position. Rather I am sceptical that a thinker of Arendt’s sophistication would confuse Baldwin’s definition of love, which he openly proffers in the text, with “a plea for mere compassion”. Rather, Arendt’s apprehension

seems to stem from disbelief; both in love's capacity to exert itself outside its opposition to the destructive force of hatred and in its power to overcome the wretchedness of human nature which can only commingle with beauty in times of suffering. It may be arguable that beauty, joy, warmth, and humanity "are well-known characteristics of all oppressed people" (Arendt's letter), but can't they *also* be traits of the unoppressed? It occurs to me that the difference between Baldwin and Arendt's perspectives is not only rooted in an ideological divergence on love but is founded in the differences of their historical situatedness.

In contrast to Baldwin's conception of love modeled after the spirit of Christian sacrifice, Arendt's framing of love bears the necessary aloofness of a suppressed passion intent on keeping chaos at bay. Caver explains that Arendt's conception of political love, *amor mundi*, or a "love of the world," (39) provides a model for staying passion in order to protect the erosion of the public sphere. The public sphere, which Arendt envisions to represent the world at large, must be protected from being "hijacked by the exigencies of a bare, substantive equality – a sameness – instead of respecting the plural differences of individual citizens made equal for the purposes of politics" (39). Critically diverging from Baldwin, then, who condemns the colour-line as an artificial assertion of an imagined difference, for Arendt, it is individual *difference* which must be protected from incursion by the forces that devastate us, such as love. For Arendt love is a catalyst that destabilizes society's delicate system but for Baldwin, it is the cohesive force that brings us together through the gift of sight.

Arendt and Baldwin's disagreement on love as a political force can be examined through the lens of Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of the Other. In his "Philosophy, Justice, and Love" chapter in *Entre Nous*, Levinas contemplates the self through the visage of the Other, "so that the Face, with all its meaningfulness . . . is the beginning of intelligibility" (Levinas 103). As the

trigger of intelligibility, the Face, like the mirror, becomes a surface for reflection, both for allowing the recognition of oneself through another and for internalizing the imagined other, thereby opening the doors to mutual recognition. Levinas' model which is anchored upon the Face as the trigger of consciousness, or intelligibility, reverberates with Baldwin's use of the mirror.

In developing an ethics of the Other, Levinas conceives of the role of love as the "taking upon oneself of the fate of the other" (Levinas 103) such that one enters upon a "relationship with the other [that] is not symmetrical" (Levinas 105). This asymmetrical aspect is precisely what moves Baldwin to demand of Black America to "with love . . . force our [White] brothers to see themselves" (*Fire* 10). In his piece devoted to the asymmetry of love, Farred writes of Baldwin, "He takes responsibility for loving the Other. Nothing could be more Christian. [For] [a]symmetrical love expects no reciprocation" (Farred 301).

In *Multitude; War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Hardt and Negri write:

People today seem unable to understand love as a political concept . . . The modern concept of love is almost exclusively limited to the bourgeois couple and the claustrophobic confines of the nuclear family. Love has become a strictly private affair . . . We need to recuperate the public and political conception of love common to premodern traditions. Christianity and Judaism, for example, both conceive love as a political act that constructs the multitude (Hardt 351).

It is this very constitutive power that animates Baldwin's vision of salvation. For his conception of love, which is not limited to "the infantile American sense of being made happy but . . . [stresses] the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth," (*Fire* 96) is the

challenge to reconstitute the self, by using love as the fuel of courage, to relinquish the alienating mask of fear.

In contrast to Baldwin's love infused politics that relies on a reciprocal recognition of humanity, then, Arendt's *amour mundi*, a love of the world – demanding the restraint of passion, seeks to secure structures and institutions in order to prioritize the form of society over the people that, in their flawed, impassioned assemblages, bestow upon it the texture of reality.

Finally, Levinas argues, “Justice comes from love . . . Politics, left to itself, has its own determinism. Love must always watch over injustice” (Levinas 108). Levinas' model, which entails a loving regard for the world as a collective of disparate minds striving towards a social architecture rich in its assortment of variegated humanity resonates with Baldwin's Christian ethos of selfless love. From the contemplation of this loving aspect stems wisdom and the desire to turn one's gaze away from the internal mirror that obstructs sight, towards a gaze of mutual recognition.

In addition to their polarized conceptions of love, Arendt and Baldwin's different historical situatedness evokes incompatible readings on American history. I agree with Caver's assessment that “[Arendt] did not fully appreciate the effective denial of political personhood to African Americans” (37). For Arendt's portrait of humanity betrays a fundamentally European sensibility whose gaze towards the future is burdened with the memory of two world wars. In America, whose institutions had not by the mid-twentieth century fallen under the sweeping forces of fascism, Arendt seeks the fortification of a final refuge. Her willingness to defend public institutions over social equality exposes an impulse to thwart the incursion of a repeated Europeanist totalitarianism that stripped away individual freedoms from citizens with full political agency. However, this is a fundamentally different situation from that of Blacks in

America, who far from being in the position of defending liberty from the encroaching forces of fascism, are yet seeking the full possession of those liberties for the very first time.

For Baldwin, there can be no distinction between public and personal, for the visceral divide of the colour line which distinguishes using the hue of skin *makes* the personal political. In contrast to Arendt's reliance on institutional remediation for racial injustice, Baldwin's vision of the future must come to fruition first in the minds of individuals, where the recitation of the personal narrative performed with love acts as an essential test of truth. For something to be accepted as true, it must be imagined, experienced, felt on the plane of ordinary sensual life, where one can "respect and rejoice in the force of life . . . to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread" (*Fire* 43).

Baldwin and Arendt's divergent positions on love interestingly resituates Baldwin's arguments and reinforces his leanings as an American. For Baldwin's arguments, delivered with American pragmatism, are contrasted by Arendt's European reticence. *The Fire Next Time* is, therefore, a decisively American text in which Baldwin speaks and writes to his fellow countrymen. Baldwin's project is to overturn the racial divide within his own nation, not to eradicate global racial injustice. He writes, "we must avoid the European error; we must not suppose that, because the situation, the ways, the perceptions of black people so radically differed from those of whites, they were racially superior. I am proud of these people not because of their color but because of their intelligence and their spiritual force and their beauty" (*Fire* 101). Baldwin therefore urges America to rid itself of its colonial attachments and situate its consciousness within its own historical circumstances. By framing his text as epistolary to his nephew, Baldwin invokes a familiarity with his readership in which a presumed intimacy confers

a secret confidence between reader and writer, a shared knowledge between countrymen whose gaze, one fears to meet.

Baldwin's revelation, then, is a direct conveyance of love for America's masses. Truth, which Baldwin renders sound on a theoretical *and* a personal level, is the selfless act of love that he confers upon America. In its sincerest rendering, story metamorphoses into prayer and anguish is transformed, through love, into poetry for the masses.

Chapter 3: The World Between Me and My Black Body

*And one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly upon the thing,
Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks and elms
And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves
between the world and me . . .*

-Richard Wright

The opening lines of Richard Wright's poem, "Between the World and Me," form the epitaph that usher readers into Ta-Nehisi Coates' epistolary by the same name. In Wright's poem, a wanderer stumbles upon a scene buried in "sooty details" which "rose" upon him and "thrust" themselves between him and the world. The ease with which the speaker imagines his own body hanging in place of the desiccated one before him tells the reader that Blackness is central to his persona. Swaying silently in the mind, the image of the aftermath of a lynching essentializes Coates' contention that the experience of Blackness is rooted in the body. The vision that "rose" and "thrust" itself between the wanderer and the world – a vision recalling the muted rage of Elijah Muhammad – stands impenetrable before its conjurer, a visceral reinstatement of the colour-line.

Trauma and the Black Identity

The invocation of Wright's vision gestures at the veil, for both impede sight and obscure one's ability to perceive. Just as the veil signifies a doubled consciousness and a fracturing of the self into mirrored halves, Wright's vision, which arrests the senses and immobilizes the mind with the looming spectre of death, splits the wanderer's awareness across mirrored scenes in the forest; the silence of "the morning air [in which] the sun poured yellow/surprise into the eye sockets of the stony skull" (Wright 20-21) shattered by the visceral reimagining of a killing in

the heat of a trembling mob. Coates' vision unseats the reader in time, insisting that the enactment of violence upon the Black body demonstrates the persistent will of the nation for "[i]n America, it is tradition to destroy the black body, it is *heritage*" (*Between* 103, italics in original). Ensnared by tradition and frozen before the distortion of time, the wanderer's consciousness stretches both interminably back – to the dark ships ferrying black memories and forwards – towards an ever-impenetrable America. His immobility epitomises the Black body's sense of unbelonging; the sensation of living with danger, with "eyes blindfolded by fear" (*Between* 126), as one's primary experience of life.

To accept this vision as truth is to suffuse consciousness with the aesthetics of despair, is to "accept half as much" (*Between* 91) by accepting the perishability of the Black body. Coates' mission to situate Blackness in perishability calls for the need to understand that the Black body is framed, physically and discursively, by trauma. He writes,

It is hard to face this. But all our phrasing – race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, face profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy – serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth . . . [that] the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body (*Between* 10).

If Du Bois lauded commitment to the democratic ideal and Baldwin staked America's future on its willingness to love, then Coates' sight is trained on an America ensnared within a persistent nightmare. Just as Wright's wanderer becomes trapped within a singular moment of recognition, Coates asserts that the dream of Whiteness – sanctified by unleashing an endless nightmare of violence upon the Black body – subjects Black Americans to a disjunction of mind and body and robs him of the ability to take possession of his body⁹.

“White America” is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies. Sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining). But however it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, “white people” would cease to exist for want of reasons (*Between* 42).

By putting Wright’s poem front and centre, Coates formulates the most consuming and enduring question of his existence: “how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream” (*Between* 12). Whereas Du Bois and Baldwin make the case that Black Americans are in essence no different from their White counterparts and that skin eschews the real issues of identity, Coates insists on confronting the disparate lives of Blacks and Whites on the physical plane. Departing from Du Bois and Baldwin, then, who stressed the importance of the social imagination as an instrument for constituting individual and national identity, Coates insists that the physical defines the parameters of what is real. He writes, “Our world is physical. Learn to play defense – ignore the head and keep your eyes on the body” (*Between* 33).

The American Dream and Other Myths

Coates’ drive to situate reality within the body defines his path to answering the essential question of how to live with his Black body within the euphoric White dream.

I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a

blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies (*Between* 11).

Spoken in a voice of childlike rapture, the images of America's suburban utopia conjure a state of innocence incapable of existing within life's blemishes. Much like Du Bois' illustration of the view from behind the veil, Coates' rendering of America's dream exposes a psyche that demands to be sheltered within a mythical narrative in order to be unburdened from the weight of historical memory. The images that follow, harkening to fields of cotton stretching unbroken to the horizon and the cruelty that broke bodies and darkened sight amidst the swaying sea of white, crash down upon the reader in shocking juxtaposition. The Black body's glaring absence in the first half of the passage is explained by the reader's abrupt jolt into a state of wakeful realization: Black is the name given to the beleaguered masses who, with body and flesh, sustain the dream of Whiteness. Coates' explication of the role of the Black body in America's dream therefore announces his denunciation of the Dream as a disguised form of the colour line.

For Coates then, the Dream oscillates within the polarizing expressions of the nightmare animating Black reality and the euphoric dream sheltering America's White consciousness. Its lure, explains Coates, stems from its implicit sanctioning for escaping reality, made possible because "the [American] dream persists by warring with the known world" (*Between* 11). Waged with fervency and dedication both from within and without its borders, war is fundamental to the American identity. For not only does war readily create borders, it insulates by imparting a state of disbelief upon the nation's outward facing gaze, rendering the known world unknowable.

The cultivation of this insular frame of mind is essential both for bolstering the ideology of American exceptionalism and negating the nation's guilty conscience as it traversed an unwavering trajectory to become the world's most powerful nation. "America believes itself

exceptional, the greatest and noblest nation ever to exist, a lone champion standing between the white city of democracy and the terrorists, despots, barbarians, and other enemies of civilization” (*Between* 8). By permitting a revision of national memory through selective forgetting, the Dream functions as the vehicle by which America absolves itself of historical culpability. The dissociation from an accountable historical narrative removes America’s discursive connectivity with the rest of world and heightens the subjective nature of its reality.

In his retelling of the story of Prince Jones, whose tragic death at the hands of police was quickly forgotten within public memory, Coates claims that forgetting is what America does best¹⁰. He writes, “[t]hey have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them . . . to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs. They have forgotten, because to remember would tumble them out of the beautiful Dream and force them to live down here with us” (*Between* 143). Forgetting is, therefore, necessary not only to remove history’s objections to the dream’s unwavering story, but to bestow dreamers with the illusion of freedom. Metaphorically expansive, the promise of freedom imparts the fantasy of unrestricted personal will, the victory of a spirit beyond vanquish and the immortality of the American soul. So fundamental is the idea of freedom to the American identity that it has, in the nation’s increasingly polarized consciousness, come to signify as America’s most prized possession. Potent in feeling, it forms the unalterable aspect of the Dream and performs as the mythical backbone of the nation.

However, like all myths in the Barthesian sense, the content of the American Dream is secondary to its form, its elasticity serving to bolster essentialist concerns about American identity. For “[n]ational dreams . . . are not just a celebration of success, but a response to a

crisis: political crisis, economic crisis and cultural crisis - which are all framed as a moral crisis” (Callahan 253). In “The American Mythos,” Jay Parini writes,

Americans, having no ethnic uniformity, depend on myths, which lend an aura of destiny to our collective aspirations. We have numerous stories (true or – more typically – half true) that help create a sense of national identity; taken together, they form a narrative that posits the United States as “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” as our national anthem suggests, a nation with the best intentions in the world (141).

In this way does the nation’s collective consciousness¹¹ find itself submerged in a prolonged reverie for a non-existent past. Coates explains, “This is the foundation of the Dream – its adherents must not just believe in it but believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the Dream is the natural result of grit, honor and good works” (*Between* 98).

Forgetting, then, is a privilege; one that permits a minority to perpetuate life within an alibi. Coates’ explication of America’s alibi describes an oscillating dance between the discursive and physical enactments of violence. Simultaneously inhabiting meaning and form, the alibi distorts the perception of reality by entrapping the perceiver in a state of constant diversion. The blood-soaked aftermath – whether from police violence, gang violence or simply violence to dull the unrelenting ache of hatred, rises to confront the American public, thrusting itself between them and their world. The violent act which immobilizes the mind and temporarily disengages the dreamer from the dream, alerts America to the presence of a question for which the very words to pronounce its existence hovers just beyond reach. For, instead of bestowing clarity, America’s discursive response to violence, being a function of myth rather than pragmatism, has always sought to restore the status quo rather than impart meaning. As the voice of the nation, the president’s speech – officiating a habitual drone of “thoughts and prayers” – renders one

tragedy indistinguishable from the next in the recurrent performance of ceremonial gravity. Prescriptive in form, the presidential performance which absolves blame by impersonating an afflicted consciousness, shifts the focus from national dilemma to personal tragedy. Therefore, bypassing the confrontation to action while extoling visions of national regret and unity. America's discursive response to violence discombobulates and uproots the equilibrium between words, the signifiers of meaning, and the material world, so that, the American consciousness – left bereft for meaning – returns to the fold of the Dream for comfort.

In this way, the violent act creates “[t]he meaning [that] is always there to *present* the form; the form is always there to *outdistance* the meaning” (Barthes 233). The physical and discursive planes of violence therefore work upon the Black body in tandem, so that, while each stoking the life force of the other, the impact of successive incursions dulls the senses until only ubiquity remains between violence and Blackness. By stressing the complexity between the discursive and physical faces of violence, Coates imprints the “physique of the *alibi*” (Barthes 233) upon America's dream. Coates' position that Blackness is rooted in the physical is a response to this dance of meaning. For while discourse, emergent from human imagining, coaxes meaning into the aftermath of the world as it unravels, it is in the physical immediacy of the act – within the anguish-filled moment of destruction – that reality takes root. In this way, “there never is any contradiction, conflict, or split between the meaning and the form: they are never at the same place” (Barthes 233).

Like Baldwin's evocation of the mask, then, Coates depicts the dream as an escape from America's past, a refuge with exclusive rights of entry. However, whereas the mask remains an inanimate tool in the hands of its possessor, deployed for its ability to shield, those who would transact in the currency of the dream must give up something of value in exchange for the

promise of unwavering euphoria. For the adoption of a mythic state of being relieves Americans of the need for individual becoming.

In contrast to both Du Bois and Baldwin, then, who are willing to inscribe at least a partial vision of hope in the dream motif, Coates stresses the corrupting nature of the dream as a purveyor of false narratives. He writes, “The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing. And it became clear that this was not just for the dreams concocted by Americans to justify themselves but also for the dreams that I had conjured to replace them” (*Between* 50). Coates’ understanding of Blackness is therefore complicated by his simultaneous refusal to romanticize the past and to be swayed by the apparition of hope. His stance – alert, informed, invective – reflects, in part, the formation of a worldview within the select environs of an elite institution in which the crucial conversation of Blackness is embedded within its very cultural fibre. In Howard, Coates found a structured path to continue the “unceasing interrogation of the stories told to [him] by the schools” (*Between* 34) and other authoritative voices of his childhood. Reflecting back on his search as a young man to make sense of his world, he writes, “My great error was not that I had accepted someone else’s dream but that I had accepted the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and the invention of racecraft” (*Between* 56). Accepting the need to dream therefore represented the acceptance of the oppressor’s conditions for constructing one’s reality. Having rejected this premise, Coates reflects,

It began to strike me that the point of my education was a kind of discomfort, was the process that would not award me my own especial Dream but would break all the dreams, all the comforting myths of Africa, of America, and everywhere, and would leave me only with humanity in all its terribleness . . . [for] Being black did not immunize us from history’s logic or the lure of the Dream (*Between* 52-53).

In “Everybody’s Protest Narrative: ‘Between the World and Me’ and the Limits of Genre,” Dana A. Williams evaluates the extent to which *Between the World* fulfills the genre of epistolary memoir as protest. Scanning the intellectual landscape for reactions to Coates’ work, Williams starts with the most biting, from Cornel West via Facebook. West’s post on *Between the World* reads, in part,

without an analysis of capitalist wealth incongruity, gender domination, homophobic degradation, Imperial occupation . . . Coates will remain a mere darling of White and Black Neo-liberals, paralyzed by their Obama worship and hence a distraction from the necessary courage and vision we need in our catastrophic times (Williams quoting West 180).

Meditating on West’s commentary, Williams concludes, “Coates’ decision to situate his critique of racism in America as a personal conversation with his son is also a decision to deal with racism on an individual basis, not a collective one” (180). As a reader, I am moved to reject not only the spirit of West’s criticism, entitled “In Defense of Baldwin,” for Baldwin’s desire to be recognized simply as a writer and not a *Black* writer comes with readymade contradictions of its own¹², but also Williams’ observation of the inward turn of Coates’ narrative as one that suffices as criticism.

While it is indisputable that *Between the World* represents a personal response to a collective problem, Coates’ text nevertheless stands as a political assertion, an active declaration of individual intent rather than a passive moan of hopelessness. For the journey towards a reified identity must be travelled within the turbulence of one’s own mind by wrestling with the discourses of one’s past toward achieving the refinement of an internally persuasive narrative. *Between the World* can therefore be read as the discursive reinvention of self, writing oneself into

being. In many ways, this mirrors Baldwin's insistence on being conferred the title of writer without the disqualifying disclosure of race.

The Evolution of Blackness

Published more than a century after *Souls*, Coates' work is released into a world vastly different from that of Du Bois. The century that stands between the two works is marked by the transformation of America's discursive landscape through the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, Second Wave Feminism, hip-hop culture, the growth of Black intellectuals within public media and scholarly institutions, among others. These changes mark Coates' writing with a post-colonial perspective that seeks to unseat the West from the epicentre of intellectual discourse. Moving away from Western standards in matters of judgment, Coates describes, with elation and awe, the one-of-a-kind beauty exhibited by the Black diaspora at Howard, his Mecca.

... out on the Yard . . . I saw everything I knew of my black self multiplied out into seemingly endless variations. There were the scions of Nigerian aristocrats in their business suits giving dap to bald-headed Qs in purple windbreakers and tan Timbs. There were the high-yellow progeny of AME preachers debating the clerics of Ausar-Set. There were California girls turned Muslim, born anew, in hijab and long skirt. There were Ponzi schemers and Christian cultists, Tabernacle fanatics and mathematical geniuses. It was like listening to a hundred different renditions of "Redemption Song," each in a different color and key (*Between* 40-41).

Yet Coates' conception of Blackness is not entirely cast in celebration, for even while his representation, spilling over America's borders, is more global in reach and less encumbered than

that of his predecessors, his insistence that Blacks cannot ignore race in the formulation of identity discloses a twenty-first century's mistrust of authority and a wisdom gained in bitterness that the world is far from free. While asserting that struggle is yet a defining aspect of the Black American identity in the twenty-first century, Coates joins the discursive evolution of Black identity by entering into conversation with the ideas both from the past and beyond America's borders.

Signaling an increasing polarization in national race consciousness, Coates' choice to return to the body as the anchor of identity is indicative of a decisive rejection of the historical voices urging integration. Within himself, Coates nurtured the "[s]eeds planted in the 1960s" (*Between* 34) such as his bodily explication of Blackness which can be traced directly to Malcolm X's "declaration of equality rooted not in better angels or the intangible spirit but in the sanctity of the black body" (*Between* 35). In Malcolm's 1964 speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet" delivered to an expectant audience at the King Solomon Baptist Church, in which he declared: "If you're black, you were born in jail," (*Between* 36) is situated Coates' determination. Malcolm's message, which conveys not salvation but a clarity of purpose, resembles, for Coates, the voice of uncompromising honesty.

He was the . . . first honest man I'd ever heard . . . If he was angry, he said so. If he hated, he hated because it was human for the enslaved to hate the enslaver, natural as Prometheus hating the birds . . . Malcolm spoke like a man who was free, like a black man above the laws that proscribed our imagination (*Between* 36).

From Coates' admiration for Malcolm emerges an indestructible portrait of Black freedom and a means of reclaiming the self and the Black body. He writes,

If I could have chosen a flag [in my youth], it would have been embroidered with a portrait of Malcolm X, dressed in a business suit, his tie dangling, one hand parting a window shade, the other holding a rifle. The portrait communicated everything I wanted to be – controlled, intelligent, and beyond the fear (*Between* 35).

Malcolm's mission, which prioritizes overt political action over more passive forms demands the rejection of a dreamlike mentality for a radical acceptance of the risks and dangers inherent in the possession of a liberated consciousness. However, Coates' adoration of Malcolm creates a curious tension in the work, one that would seem to admonish Baldwin's ethos of Christian love.

While *Between the World's* structural resemblance to *The Fire Next Time* suggests that Coates writes in tribute to Baldwin, in the many instances in which he pays homage to past thinkers, one finds scant mention of Baldwin save for a single quote on the illusiveness of Whiteness, a point without contentions between the two authors. In fact, Malcolm marks only one of many points of contention between Coates and Baldwin. I explore this tension by endeavoring to achieve a broader character sketch of Malcolm X so that I may engage in a more thoughtful contemplation of Malcolm as a source of inspiration for Coates.

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin referred to Malcolm as a speaker of truth despite "disagree[ing] with his conclusions" (*Fire* 59). However, Baldwin wrote plainly of his disagreement with the Nation of Islam, where "Malcom X . . . is considered the movement's second-in-command, and heir apparent" (*Fire* 58). On the night of Baldwin's meeting with Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam's leader, the young man who was Baldwin's driver spoke movingly of "the Muslim temples that were being built, or were about to be built, in various parts of the United States, of the strength of the Muslim following, and of the amount of money that is annually at the disposal of Negroes – something like twenty billion dollars" (*Fire* 79). At

the young man's unfaltering conviction for the birth of a Black nation that bears an eerie resemblance to the very America thwarting Black ambition, Baldwin reflects forlornly,

How can one . . . dream of power in any other terms than in the symbols of power? The boy could see that freedom depended on the possession of land; he was persuaded that, in one way or another, Negroes must achieve this possession. In the meantime, he could walk the streets and fear nothing, because there were millions like him, coming soon, now, to power. He was held together, in short, by a dream (*Fire* 80).

Baldwin's reaction to the young man's words, encompassing his disavowal of The Nation of Islam, occasions an interrogative glance at Coates' portrayal of Malcolm. For Coates' description of Malcolm as the benefactor of an austere, uncompromising truth would seem incompatible with the charismatic rhetorician whose words resonate with a power that seems little diminished in their ability to elicit rapture in the fifty year expanse that elapsed between the crowd standing before the King Solomon Baptist Church and the boy wandering the streets of Chicago in search of himself; words that would seem to hold the keys to a dream of self possession, a dream of renewed nation.

While Malcolm broke ties with The Nation of Islam one month prior to "The Ballot or The Bullet," the backdrop to Coates' intellectual *bildungsroman*, in order to advance a more politically centric Black Nationalist agenda,¹³ it is my perspective that being a public figure and a Black Nationalist activist regardless of affiliation, necessitates an unbroken course of rhetorical performance required to instill passion and shift public consciousness. In this way, Malcolm's rhetoric is both infused with an evocative bluntness that penetrates like truth and an expansive manner of empowerment that negates fear, elevating one's desires to meet the very crests of possibility.

In this way, Malcolm's discourse would seem to hold the power to both illuminate the dreams of Blackness and to motivate the rejection of dreams shaped by the myth of White exoneration. The ability to simultaneously move and dispel the imagination through the symbolic maneuvering of dreams bespeaks a mastery of oratory to which Coates is no stranger, for Coates is also a habitant of contradictory realities. In "Ceding the Future," Derik Smith comments,

Commingling atrocities of the present and the past, [*Between the World*] compresses American history into a timeless "now" and thus deploys a major motif of post-civil rights-era literary and scholarly production . . . [through] a theory of temporal compression to emphasize that contemporary racial trauma cannot be disentangled from historical origins" (188).

However, the same process "tends to homogenize black time and space, thereby muting discourses of intraracial difference" (Smith 188). Smith's observation describes an essential tension within the text whereby, presuming to speak on behalf of Black Americans even while challenging Blackness as racial category, Coates is unable to choose between an individualist consciousness and a collective Black imaginary.

Coates claims that "[his] reclamation would be accomplished, like Malcolm's, through books" (*Between* 37). However, Malcolm's transformation through the written word, after losing the care of his parents at a young age, becoming a high-school dropout and imprisoned for seven years during America's conservative post-war years, attests to the rare possession of unwavering inner strength and ironclad determination that is a far stretch from a childhood spent in a rough Chicago neighbourhood under the care and tutelage of liberal educated parents. One wonders if, as a successful public intellectual, a prestigious winner of the National Book Award and the MacArthur Genius Grant and a recently appointed lecturer at Howard University, Coates has

been, in fact, rewarded with his own “especial dream,” one that aligns his outlook more closely with Du Bois’ Talented Tenth than Malcolm’s salvation, wrested from the tides of history.

Smith observes that in place of “the 1960’s construct of the colossal ‘white man’ whose operations create a universal black predicament . . . [Coates] substitutes the more euphemistic and versatile concept of the “The Dream” (*Between* 189-190). While Smith’s observation resonates with poignancy, Coates’ choice to target the dream instead of the “White Man,” can be interpreted in two ways. Certainly, Coates would not want to risk alienating White readers. However, more importantly, in his aim to “achieve the velocity of escape” (*Between* 21) against “the invention of racecraft,” (*Between* 56) Coates expresses a perspective that sees Whiteness not as the demarcation of an unbudging divide but as the destination towards a total dissolution of reality. Coates’ description of the diversity with the student body at Howard which shows a rejection of race as a legitimate classification foreshadows his later assertion on the illusiveness of the White identity. Smith writes further,

Coates’ ‘Dream’ and Malcolm’s ‘white man’ are not interchangeable signifiers . . . If Malcolm’s oppressive ‘white man’ was a foil-figure against which black people could be organized into a national bloc poised to advance economic and electoral politics, the Dream of Coates’ narrator is a post-modern power-force, dauntingly protean, diffuse, and seemingly unassailable (*Between* 190)

In Coates’ commitment to struggle against a force dauntingly undefeatable, echoes a fatalistic spirit unwilling to relinquish the wanderer’s state of bafflement at the “stony skull staring in/yellow surprise” (Wright 20-21). Coates tells Samori, named after the struggle, that “[t]he birth of a better world is not ultimately up to you,” (*Between* 71) but insists, “And still you

are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life” (*Between* 97).

Coates’ practice of unceasing interrogation of the self, therefore, represents a rhetorical refrain to Du Bois’ “How does it feel to be a problem?” in which the relationship between the question and the bearer of the question is reversed. Instead of using the silence that surrounds the question as a space to amplify contemplation for transformation, Coates turns the question upon himself, turning it into a vehicle for self-discovery rather than an emblem of alienation. Through the textual transfer of consciousness, Coates passes onto his son, a manner of becoming that is “a constant questioning, questioning as ritual, questioning as exploration rather than the search for certainty” (*Between* 34). “[N]othing about this world is meant to be,” Coates writes, “So you must wake up every morning knowing that no promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope” (*Between* 71). To Coates, then, the constancy of the struggle, both through necessity and as a personal disciplined practice, is more real than the future, which wavers uncertainly upon the horizon.

Coates and Baldwin

Finally, this chapter would be incomplete without further consideration of the relationship between Coates and Baldwin and the tensions and similarities present in their texts. The central question that informs my analysis is: does the spirit of Baldwin live in *Between the World and Me*?

Certainly, in the lyrical quality of Coates’ storytelling and in the earnest desire to speak plainly and to be seen for who he is, one hears in Coates, Baldwin’s echo. Like Baldwin, Coates

enriches his text with personal narratives. Like Baldwin, Coates begins with a self portrait, a retelling of the difficulties of childhood and the evolution of his worldview. While Baldwin reckons with the atrocities of Christianity on a personal and global scale, Coates denounces the State for the intentional enforcement of a system of total immersion that seeks to permeate the lives of Black Americans in violence. He writes,

the police reflect America in all of its will and fear . . . [just as] the sprawling carceral state, the random detention of Black people, the torture of suspects – are the products of democratic will. And so to challenge the police is to challenge the American people who send them into the ghettos armed with the same self-generated fears that compelled the people who think they are white to flee the cities and into the Dream. The problem with the police is not that they are fascist pigs but that our country is ruled by majoritarian pigs (*Between* 79).

However, whereas Baldwin ends his final narrative in wistful avuncular tones of regret for the misguided belief in any dream of liberation save for that of a unified America – a position that ultimately attests to Baldwin’s unwavering Americanism – Coates strides towards a termination point of the soul with the story of Prince Jones. Holding fast to the image of the perishing Black body, Coates lectures his son, “there is no difference between the killing of Prince Jones and the murders attending [the inner city] killing fields because both are rooted in the assumed inhumanity of black people” (*Between* 110).

The story of Prince Jones affirms that, irregardless of victim or perpetrator, the Black body performs as the site in which violence is enacted and reenacted, for Blackness exists to give Whiteness meaning. Instead of reassurance, Coates confirms that danger surrounds the body of his young son. “There is no them without you, and without the right to break you they must

necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream” (*Between* 105). For Coates, then, the disembodiment of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, John Crawford, Kajime Powell, Tamir Rice, Mike Brown, Prince Jones is a State sanctioned perpetuation of the historical brutalization of Black flesh and the institutional erasure of Black memory.

In “The Uses of Race and Religion,” Courtney Ferriter applies a pragmatist’s lens to Baldwin’s writing, noting Ulf Schulenberg’s research which traces Baldwin’s views to ““a genealogy of black pragmatism that reaches from W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke to [Cornel] West”” (129). Ferriter contrasts *The Fire Next Time* with *Between the World and Me*, asserting that unlike Coates’ pessimistic outlook on the future of racial equality in the United States, Baldwin’s perspective concedes that democracy is a work in progress. Ferriter writes, “the most pronounced distinction between Baldwin and Coates is Baldwin’s emphasis on love and growth as opposed to Coates’s emphasis on fear and stasis” (128). Ferriter further stresses Baldwin’s conception of race as a non-static concept, but rather, “a shifting construct and a political tool” (131) which must mature as America’s democracy overcomes the hurdles of time.

While I agree with Ferriter that pessimism permeates the text, I believe Coates’ outlook is, rather than a reflection of mere pessimism, the product of a fundamental struggle of self, a reckoning with the frame of Blackness which surrounds his identity. For *Between the World and Me* would seem to be diffused with a latent anger only cursorily disguised as cynicism. Whereas Baldwin is persuaded by his widely cast humanism that Americans cannot and must not bear living in a perpetuity of silence, Coates recognizes silence to be America’s refuge. Coates’ anger can therefore be read as a response to the culture of silence that puts barriers in place of honest, heartfelt communication. *Between the World* opens with a description of disappointment in the discursive impasse that lies between the disparate worlds of America’s racial divide. While

Coates' exploration of the makings of America's twenty-first century colour-line is accompanied by an admirable display of vulnerability on a subject that is at once deeply personal and widely consequential, as a whole, the text is undergirded by the steady tread of an unrelenting male anger at the inability to command his destiny and the destinies of those who matter most. Coates' anger is scattered throughout his text and often takes the form of a pronouncement. In the passage below, Coates holds nothing back in warning his son on the vulnerability of the Black body.

The police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. Resent the people trying to entrap your body and it can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions. And destruction is merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations. All this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible (*Between* 9).

By permitting anger to enter his writing, Coates exhibits a natural and relatable credibility, for anger comes with its own candour. Furthermore, Coates' rejection of Baldwin's universal humanism would seem to stem from the effort to calm the tide of a suppressed rage, one that is inherited through the generations. "I am convinced," asserts Coates, "that the Dreamers . . . would rather live white than live free" (*Between* 143).

Stoking an old hostility, Dana Williams cites Howard Rambsy's blog commentary that "Between the World 'merges the spirits of Richard Wright and James Baldwin in a single work" (181). Rambsy continues, "That's no small feat, especially given the tendency of commentators to regularly pit Wright and Baldwin against each other" (181).

I am in disagreement with Rambsy's assessment, for while *The Fire Next Time* provides a narrative framework for Coates' epistolary, it is the Wrightian vision of trauma and destruction that pervades Coates' elucidation of Blackness, which begs the final question of why Coates would fashion his work after a text that espouses a vision he ultimately does not share? One surmises that taking on the form of Baldwin's highly acclaimed *The Fire Next Time* conveniently situates Coates within the vast continuity of intellectuals contributing across time to the growing estuary that is the discursive reinvention of Blackness and neatly informs readers of the seriousness of his task. However, the reader is also hard pressed to not read Coates' rejection of Baldwin's ethos of Christian love as a final refusal to participate in an unrequited burden of love.

All my life I'd heard people tell their black boys and black girls to "be twice as good," which is to say "accept half as much." Those words would be spoken with a veneer of religious nobility, as though they evidenced some unspoken quality, some undetected courage, when in fact all they evidenced was the gun to our head and the hand in our pocket. This is how we lose our softness. This is how they steal our right to smile (*Between* 91).

Finally, a crucial difference between the two texts is Coates' use of photographs. Unassuming and honest, the photos, which are only remarkable in their ordinariness, bestows an additional level of veracity upon Coates' words. Comprised primarily of faces, the photos disrupt the otherwise persuasive performance of a flawless rhetoric to beseech the mutual recognition of

humanity through the transporting mirror of the human face. Significantly, the gesture at the mirror motif is the only un-superficial link with *The Fire Next Time*. By allowing the reader to see herself within the text, Coates urges readers to ground their reading of the text within their external realities. In this way, the photos – a journalist’s instinctive reliance upon artefacts – imprint the Black body, as both fact and metaphor, upon the text.

The central nature of Coates’ struggle, then, cannot be imaginatively contained within the context of race but must encompass the quest to define reality. For Coates’ pursuit of consciousness, which takes a sprawling, circuitous route through body, culture, nation and history before delving back to the inexplicable depths of psyche, is undertaken exclusively for the purpose of discovering the shape of one’s universe. For Coates’ conceptualization of the dream is distinguished by the total absence of hope afforded the act of dreaming. No apocalyptic vision or redemption song awaits the reader’s eager arrival at the final pages. Negating Baldwin’s appeal for change through divine command, “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!” (*Fire* 106) Coates’ returns to “the old fear” (*Between* 152). While driving away from the grief cloaked home of Mabel Jones, the cessation of hope could be seen “[t]hrough the windshield . . . the rain coming down in sheets” (*Between* 152).

Conclusion

The human being is not only in the world, not only an *in-der-Welt-Sein*, but also *zum-Buch-Sein* [being-toward-the-book] in relationship to the inspired Word, an ambiance as important for our existence as streets, houses, and clothing. The book is wrongly interpreted as pure *Zuhandenes*, as what is at hand, a manual. My relation to the book is definitely not pure use; it doesn't have the same meaning as the one I have with the hammer or the telephone.

-Entre-Nous; Thinking of the Other

In the passage above from *Entre-Nous; Thinking of the Other*, Emmanuel Levinas contemplates the relationship between human identity and the written word. He asserts that humans reside not only in the world but within the written word and stresses the part of us that lives within the imagination. As a stand-in for the human voice, a text represents a version of ourselves; one that is ever malleable, open to interpretation and portends to outlast us in the physical world. Within this symbolic realm which is simultaneously saturated by a longing of the future and haunted by a recollection of the past, reality is, just like the evolving internal dialogism of the word, ever on the verge of being. Within this nexus of reality and unreality, an entanglement of words, signification and yearning, is situated the heart of my work.

In this project, it has been my object to examine three texts that seek to answer the crucial question of Blackness, a question that reverberates across generations and is ever present in the minds of contemporary Americans. From Reconstruction to The Civil Rights Movement to the Black Lives Matter Movement, each of *The Souls of Black Folk*, *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me* is surrounded by a set of historical circumstances that finds the Black identity in flux. Each author, as a voice of his era, responds by telling stories to the American readership in order to converse with its social imagination. Entering from different points in

history, each author envisions a different outcome to the conversation of Blackness while emphasizing the importance of cultivating a Black political consciousness.

While each author engages in the discursive crafting of reality through the traditional medium of print, technological changes arising over the century that spans the publication of these texts has significantly transformed the relationship between human identity and the word. While I believe there remains an indisputable bond between utterance and consciousness, the declining status of script, increasingly employed for the archival of memory, would seem to fulfill the prescient anticipations of Marshall McLuhan; in particular, his famously coined phrase, “The Medium is the Message”. In tracing the trajectory of the evolution of media as technological extensions of ourselves, the fallen status of the written word would seem to anticipate an inverse exponentiality, an interminable trailing off, of the decay and fragmentation of the American consciousness.

In my final discussion, I situate each text within the historical discursive landscape that presided at the time of its publication. I then evaluate each text as a medium for transforming the American consciousness.

Du Bois and the Printed Word

In 1903, when *Souls* was published, the absence of electronic media meant that the linearity of print, symbolically linked to the linear perception of history and human progress yet modeled the Western form for the explication of reason. Yet despite the authority of the printed word, one communes with text on a personal level. Each reader creates an intimate relationship with a text so that one’s interpretation becomes uniquely imbued with the hues of personal

experience. The meanings of words, formed through a commingling of memory – part dialogic, part experience – permit multiple readings to emerge from a single text.

Du Bois utilizes this potential to diversify meaning in crafting the figure of John. As a result of his Northern education, John is uniquely situated at a dialectic crossroads. He is equally familiar with the colloquial speech of Black Southerners with whom he grew up and the formal language of Western scholarship. John therefore inhabits a discursive double consciousness as a wielder of multiple types of “speech”. As a character that speaks with ease to both Black and White readers, his story has the potential to evoke wide ranging responses. For while White readers may be primarily affected to feel sympathy for John’s tragic end, Black readers are likely be compelled, as witnesses to the gross violation of justice, to action. In this way, Du Bois’ text has the ability to impart different shades of meaning upon Blacks and Whites so that each consciousness is shaped to play its own role in the realization of a common national goal.

However, the work of texts like *Souls* requires time, for the slow pace of introspective reading is crucial to the ability of a text to impact consciousness. One’s estimation of a text, just like the cultivation of character, requires the prerequisite of time to be internalized as truth or contested as myth. Du Bois’ vision for America, then, which depends on the willingness to provide equal access, across the nation, to an education that uplifts the Black identity cannot be realized in one generation alone, but must, like the word, take on greater dimensions of realization until its value becomes self-evident with time.

Following the publication of *Souls*, Du Bois would experience the rapid pace of technological change that would transform the exchange of ideas and the picture of daily life. Over the course of his career as academic, editor of *Crisis* – the NAACP’s monthly magazine – and public intellectual, Du Bois would align himself with numerous causes, some global in

scope, oft times taking difficult or unpopular positions. In his work, Du Bois continued to wield the power of the spoken and written word, addressing increasingly greater audiences, enchanting minds further ashore from the nation of his birth.

Baldwin and the Ear

In 1963, when Baldwin publishes *The Fire Next Time*, radio and television had become staples in the American household. In comparison to the written word, radio which transforms text into utterance brings both immediacy and distance between audience and word. Even scripted utterance, animated by the human voice, dramatically changes the audience's relationship with the word by moving the instrument of consumption from the eye to the ear. By allowing one to listen while performing other tasks, the radio reduces one's devotion to the word. Television, which replaces word with image as the discrete unit of discourse, creates further distance. Although, television re-animates the eye as the receptacle of perception, meaning becomes divested of personal essence since television's ready-made stream of images replaces the work of the imagination. By broadcasting the exact same visual output to a multitude, television imposes a universal absence while disseminating a ubiquitous monotony. In contrast to the written word, which must be consumed individually on one's own terms and in one's own time, the televised or radio broadcasted program fragments the connection between consciousness and word while imposing a regimented consumption of time.

Baldwin is sensitive to the technological developments of his time. As a playwright and the object of numerous televised and cinematic productions, Baldwin's writing is diffused with the majestic sweep of the camera's all-seeing eye. Irregardless of genre, Baldwin's writing enriches the reader's inner eye. For whether invoking a hallway filled with junkies, one's

trembling rebirth on the threshing floor or a gathering of devotion at a holy man's table, each tableau alights in the reader's mind with nary a detail out of place. Furthermore, Baldwin's writing is imbued with the resonant quality of the human voice. Like the reassuring presence of a radio announcer, one hears Baldwin's voice ringing up at us from the pulpit, from the stage, and from the page with the ever mesmerizing quality of a master orator.

Coates Towards the Future of Oblivion

The decades from the 1960's to 2015 saw the arrival of repeated waves of technological change that transformed the discursive landscape of the world. By 2015, when *Between the World* was published, the steady encroachment upon the written word by visual media had culminated with the proliferation of the smart phone. In contrast with the ancestral television screen, the smart phone is endlessly accessible and infinitely addictive. While television replaces the work of the imagination, the smart phone submerges and reduces the mind to a passive receptacle of virtual stimulation while rendering the body mute to physical sensation. Collapsing one's experience of time, the smart phone generates a need for the constant inundation of myth through the vapid consumption of "content" that is, intriguingly, all form.

If the medium is the message, then the message we send seems to be a desire for the total obliteration of consciousness. For by 2025, the rapidly expanding and predatory digitization of consciousness through vehicles such as artificial intelligence and influencer culture presents a dizzying and contradictory combination of circumstances to behold.

The popularization of AI technology such as the chatbot has presented existential challenges to the survival of human consciousness. AI, whose purpose is to mimic – if not deceive – human intelligence, has undermined the integrity for work that has traditionally

required the vigor of lengthy intellectual study, such as authorship. It has also fundamentally devalued the product of words as an expression of consciousness. With the rapid expansion of AI generated content online and the replacement of human with AI generated data, one fears to contemplate the role of the human imagination in the years to come.

Equally disconcerting is the work of the online influencer. For the influencer replicates, in a virtual space, the disorderly tenor of the town square in which embellishment and artifice accentuate the public discursive performance. While the accessibility of virtual platforms would seem to present an opportunity for the democratization of speech and an enrichment of public consciousness through heteroglossic discourse, their control by powerful corporate interests, in fact, produces the opposite outcome.

Instead of a democratized heteroglossia, what emerges bears greater resemblance to the discombobulated consciousness of the mob; a heteroglossia in the extreme in which the simultaneous clamour of voices results in an uproar that obliterates meaning and submerges consciousness within a totality of subjectivity. Just as a performance in the town square might be judged by the number of spectators it attracts, the success of digital performances is determined, and monetized, by the number of followers and views gained. This ensures that digitized “speech” veers toward inflammation and spectacle rather than stasis and reason.

One fears that within this clamour, the written word becomes a long-forgotten fetish, for the hyper-focus on real-time, individual utterance over slower forms of thought fragments collective identities through the dissipation of consciousness into an endless drone of disconnected subjectivity. In today’s transformed discourse, then, we find ourselves once again confronted by a desolation arising from the unrecognizability of the human face, for rather than the “beginning of intelligibility,” (Levinas 103) the transfiguration of the face into a

performer's mask dons the austerity of alienation and prevents the internalization of the Other through mutual recognition. Within this spiritual ennui, one flees, through the insatiable seeking of the ever-roaming eye over the monotonous glare of the screen, the murmur of an identity in crisis.

Writing in 2015, Coates is attuned to the needs of the eye, for his text is haunted by the form of a corpse hanging in the recesses of America's memory. While Coates' elucidation of America's fragmented consciousness within the dream discourse addresses both America's troubled history and describes the character of an increasingly polarized and isolationist nation, he fails to consider how the Black identity can be transformed in an era in which digital reality splinters the real from the physical markers of reality. Coates' survival manual for his son, a young man born in the new millennium with no recollection of dial-up internet, is glaringly silent on how the conception of race evolves with our tools for imprinting identity. Unlike Baldwin, Coates writes about the obsolete technology of his childhood: listening to Malcolm on his Walkman and the books that shaped his worldview. Coates' blind spot for technology would seem to gesture both at a sentimentality for the past, a longing for the innocence of youth passed in the cocooning corridors of Howard University, and an unwillingness to relinquish an anger that keeps one alert, ready to spring to protect the body.

While the reification of identity within a digital space will not stop the infliction of violence upon Blacks, by situating Blackness within the body, Coates seems nevertheless insensitive to a new generation's language for defining reality and the self, one that roves beyond known borders while structuring new ones.

Dear Reader

Any examination of the text as medium for transforming consciousness would be incomplete without contemplating the role of the reader. Comprising the “multitude” that these texts seek to address, it is the reader’s duty to be moved by the injustice and striving portrayed while contemplating their veracity. Through the exercise of judgment, the reader confers legitimacy and life upon a text by prolonging its existence within living memory. It is by communing with the word that we come to see ourselves as a people, for the word allows one to transcend the physical realm and inhabit a collective and ever evolving imaginary plane. As language is ever warm with the memory of struggle, it is our duty to entangle our internal dialogism with that of the author to find resonance with or to reject the veracity of his vision.

To Hardt’s contention in *Multitudes*, that “[t]his world of rage and love is the real foundation on which the constituent power of the multitude rests,” (Hardt 353) I propose to add the variable of consciousness. In my view, it is a collectivized consciousness, infused with a love of truth which constructs the multitude. We must, therefore, strive to preserve the quality of introspection bestowed upon us by the written word, even if it is by other means. The possession of an unadulterated personal narrative depends upon the untethering of consciousnesses from the narratives, myths and media that distort us. This is necessary not only to protect the integrity of the Black identity, but all identities whatsoever.

Notes

Introduction

1. Some works by female Black authors that can broaden the scope of future research may be selected from the following authors: Sojourner Truth's autobiography, Lorraine Hansberry who worked with Du Bois briefly at the *Freedom* newspaper, Angela Davis among others.
2. In *Mythologies*, Barthes describes the interaction between myth and language as one of theft and colonization. Since "language offers to myth an openwork meaning. Myth can easily insinuate itself into it, and swell there: it is a robbery by colonization" (243).
3. Barthes uses "nature" to contrast with "history". While history represents a truthful representation of memory which is formed in specific historical contexts, "nature" represents an attempt to gloss over the historically specific conditions of life to suggest that whatever has occurred could not have taken place any other way. The attempt to naturalize a certain narrative represents the workings of ideological dissemination.

Chapter 1: Du Bois and the Dream Immersed Consciousness

4. Reed identified Du Bois as belonging to a "cohort of university-trained, reform-oriented, typically eastern intellectuals who mainly came to maturity during the last years of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth and who shared a loosely defined outlook and intellectual and political *problematique*" (107). Through a lengthy synopsis of the work of thinkers in this group, Reed argues that "Expressions of liminality very similar to Du Bois's two-ness passage were common among his white intellectual contemporaries" (108).

Chapter 2: *The Fire Next Time* – To America with Love

5. In "A Different Price for the Ticket: Hannah Arendt and James Baldwin on Love and Politics", Martin Caver reports that from an interview with Black Lives Matters organizers, Hilary Clinton refers to racism as America's "original sin".
6. It can be inferred, not only from Baldwin's gendered description of his encounter with the Nation of Islam, but from the general inflection of his text, that it is expected that the heroes of Black history will be men. As for the destiny of Black women, one finds scant mention. In his gender bias, Baldwin is remarkably similar to a younger Du Bois. While the breadth of Baldwin's writings show that he is greatly attuned to the injustice borne by Black women, both within and without the home, he fails to see them as the architects of their own liberation. In this way, his intellectual universe remains steadfastly male.
7. In *The Anatomy of Blackness; Science & Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment*, Andrew S. Curran explores the four-hundred-year period spanning the Renaissance to the industrial revolution that saw the evolution of European discourse concerning the African continent and the mythologization of the Black body. Beginning in the fifteenth century, Curran reports a broad variation of attitudes towards Africans encountered during European exploration expeditions ranging from exaggerated exoticization to an unexpectedly humanitarian treatment of newly encountered peoples. With the arrival of the Enlightenment era, publications on Africa and Africans turned increasing scientific in

scope, with numerous studies commissioned to discover the “source” of Blackness within the human body. It was the birth of the Caribbean plantation in the seventeenth century; however, that introduced a marked shift in the timbre of European writings on Blacks. The new discourse transformed the signification of Blackness to trigger a foremost association of Blacks with the means of production and the advancement of European trade and commerce. By the second half of the seventeenth century, colonial powers such as England and France had formally institutionalized Blackness and Whiteness through the legal codification of the governance and keeping of African slaves. Finally, the marriage of scientific reasoning with commercial interests at the height of colonialism entrenched the discourse on Blackness within a zoological perspective, justifying the most bestial and objectionable treatment of slaves.

8. In “The Fire Last Time”, Gates explicates Baldwin’s writing on the relationship of White and Black identities as a reflection of mirrored imaginings. He writes “we understand each other all too well, for we have invented one another, derived our identities from the ghostly projections of our alter egos. If Baldwin had a central political argument, it was that the destinies of black America and white were profoundly and irreversibly intertwined. Each created the other, each defined itself in relation to the other, each could destroy the other” (15). Baldwin’s vision of interiority, then, seeks to address the fear of mutual destruction by demystifying through the purifying entity of self, such that what was previously legible gains a new and individuated meaning.

Chapter 3: The World Between Me and My Black Body

9. Throughout his text, Coates writes of the perishability of the Black body. However, his view of perishability is a distinctly male centric one. Coates does not consider the kinds of violence that perish Black female bodies. In spite of acknowledging that a female experience of Blackness would be different from his own, particularly in the pages devoted to Mabel Jones, Coates’ assertions of Blackness are heavily steeped in a male centric perspective.
10. On page 143, Coates reflects that when Dr. Jones’ son was wrongfully killed by a police officer, her country turned its back on her so that her son’s death was forgotten like the deaths of many other young Black men.
11. At our current historical juncture, it is useful to consider whether one can still speak of a “collective” consciousness in America, noting the considerable extent of diversity within its borders. In my perspective, since identity can be anchored on any attributes and are not necessarily dependent on racial or cultural origins, it is not diversity which threatens a unified American identity, but the fragmentation of national purpose through the growth of ultra-conservatism and the accumulation of power by self-interested oligarchical forces. In fact, in today’s politically charged environment, the very question of collectivity dominates the problem of identity. Firstly, I return to Coates’ assertion that “the [American] dream persists by warring with the known world,” (*Between* 11) and the isolationist worldview that emerges from life within a war zone. The Dream, which insists that Americans hold not only an exceptional position in the world but that they are alone in their exceptionalism, brings Americans together through their mutual isolation. Furthermore, rather than a naturalist approach to identity, the increasing polarization within America’s ramparts fortify identity as a reflection of clashing beliefs and mutually

exclusive visions for the future. Within this clash of fates, each faction seeks to assert its unique vision for an enduring America and a sanctioned worldview. While these developments make it hard to talk about a de facto “American consciousness,” I believe the idea of an American collective is very much alive and is situated at the heart of the nation’s struggle. For the goal of each faction is to expand its domain of influence and become the overarching belief system of the nation. Therefore, while America may comprise of many disparate ramparts in the making, they are unified in their dedication to protecting a vision of America that intends to inherit the fate of the nation.

12. In *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin writes, “I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem here. (Sometimes I still do.) I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro: or even, merely a negro writer” (81).
13. The intro to “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech states that Malcolm X broke ties with The Nation of Islam one month prior to the speech. “Malcolm was now free of the NOI's ban on members participating in the mainstream civil rights movement. He encouraged black militants to get involved in voter registration drives and other forms of community organizing to redefine and expand the movement.”

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