Rough Notes to Erasure

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Confusions of a White Man/qué:
An Apocryphal Case History

So we must be careful — lest we lose our faith — and become possessed.
— James Baldwin, The Devil Finds Work

The worst words revivify themselves within us, vampirically.
— Denise Riley, Impersonal Passion

My father was a great lover of imprecation, and a fan of the explicit and the illicit and the tabooed. From him, the Verboten received its due. He cussed like one trying to command, by sympathetic magic, the flesh that bothered and tempted him and crossed his will. Bitch. Cocksucker. Sonofabitch. Motherfucker. Occasionally, the n-word. He would say the last with a grimace, in a sort of sideways whisper, as if to say, though you don’t want to hear it, it has to be said. As if a nod to the impropriety of the word boosted its force. But even as they amplify the feelings they give voice to, slurs tighten the strictures of a basic infelicity. In the act of casting another into the dirt, such speech can expose the speaker as being at the mercy of his own body and its affects, struggling against the difference that he cannot master in himself (the flushed face, the spittled lip). At the end of his life, shrunken inside his frame, my father had lost none of his
flair for cursing. A piece on the news or a reminiscence might provoke it. But the words shook the will that had become too frail for them (or so I imagined) as he bowed beneath illness and old age, tired of that burden that the flesh bears as its gift. And so, I thought, the self closes, in the end, over the riddles and secrets and primal scenes that have sustained it, becoming wholly crypt.

My father died the year white supremacy lost the popular vote but won the election, sounding again that furious nothingness within the white male American soul. My father had retired to Lucerne Valley, California, a sparsely populated stretch of desert, with dilapidated settlements, Joshua trees, and tumbleweeds, a place of bluster and desuetude, like a long, harsh note from the archangel’s trumpet. To drive the four hours from LAX through the San Gabriel mountains to see him was to endure a monotony made for the end of days. Made on a Hollywood sound stage, but all the same. On the porch of the cabin where he lived, a marble bust of Jesus stood, looking in. From inside the cabin, framed by pink drapes, mountains rose behind the Savior’s locks and held the last rays, along brown slopes dotted with brush and boulders, of the evening sun. My father was not a religious man, unless camp counts as a religion. Sentimentality strove in him against an equally strong current of cynicism, producing a sacrilegious bent. But sacrilege is basically nostalgic. As an old man, he slept between zebra-striped sheets on his mother’s antique four-poster bed. When not shuttling between specialists to manage an obscure disease, he spent his last years swearing at the news, watching reruns of Gunsmoke, and coddling and baby-talking to his two small dogs. Aw, there’s a baby, Daddy. Say, who loves you, Daddy? Aw, who loves you?

I wrote this book as a way of talking back to my father. Of addressing the insistent narcissism of that question: Who loves you? Any number of books have been written in the straits of that address. The question doesn’t admit of an answer. Or the only answer is its repetition. Not a rhetorical question so much as a question that installs a rhetoric, it hollows out an interiority as the space of its resound. My father’s demand that I desire his
love remains one of the conditions under which, and against which, I write, since writing, or the ostentatious performance of “being a writer,” was, from quite early on, one of the ways in which I learned to court and weather his approval. All of that would be banal to rehearse here, yet another rerun of the daytime Oedipal drama of the white male bourgeois subject, with its smoking guns around every corner and its sponsorship by psychopharmaceuticals. But I wrote this chapter out of a resolve to tackle the neglected aspects of the question (neglected by the subject in question, I mean). That I am white, cishet, male, and middle-class: as the song says, *What’s love got to do with it?* But love *does* have to do with it. From these social and political aspects of being, which are styles of having a body, of occupying one’s parcel of space and stretch of time, one derives ways of being lovable, along with a formidable sense of where love comes from. And where, or to whom, it returns. James Baldwin’s observation that Black folk know white people “better than their lovers” reminds us that love, under certain conditions, can become an obstacle to self-knowledge. It reminds us that being loved, or seeking to be loved, might, in fact, enact what Stanley Cavell calls the “avoidance of love,” insofar as the conditions under which one seeks love require that one refuse to acknowledge the totality of that love’s conditions.¹ This requirement is love’s pact with power. Perhaps it comes into play wherever loving and being loved get mixed up with enjoying and jockeying for one’s place in the social hierarchy. But the requirement cuts especially close where the romantic and the familial provide cover for that hierarchy and its ravages. And for white Americans, whose place in the hierarchy collectively can be said to rest on what Ta-Nehisi Coates calls “the vending of the black body and the sundering of the black family,” a sundering that continues to this day, to

see oneself as worthy of love in virtue of one’s social position requires a special effort to avoid the truth. This avoidance is a kind of concealment. Baldwin calls it “white privacy.” It entails the idea that one’s “situation must always transcend the inexorability of the social setting.” But it’s a curious kind of concealment, at once spectacular and intimate. A performance in front of others that is designed to persuade the self, to come between the self and the uncomfortable truth. One doesn’t just draw the heavy velvet drapes against the light, one makes a dress out of them. Indicting the Hollywood fictions that sponsor so much of white Americans’ understanding of love, Baldwin writes, “the white chick is always, somehow, saved or strengthened or destroyed by love — society is out of it, beneath her: it matters not at all that the man she marries, or deserts, or murders, happens to own Rhodesia, or that she does: love is all.”

Love here, i.e., the love of the white male subject, ciphers for whiteness, in the sense that whiteness is both all (the social setting for everything that one should aspire to) and nothing (“out of it,” irrelevant to one’s achievement). Of course, whiteness, particularly in its cishet masculine and moneyed isotopes, grants power. But as Kiese Laymon argues, this power is most visible, at the level of the individual, as a kind of absence or negation. The rich white man enjoys “the power to never be poor

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3 Baldwin, “The Devil Finds Work,” 564. By the phrase “in virtue of one’s social position,” I mean insofar as one measures self-worth primarily in comparison with other members of one’s race and class, which remains the typical yardstick for white Americans’ sense of self. It is the opposite of the thought that one might be lovable in spite of some aspect of “the social setting,” such as poverty or another source of stigma. In the latter case, one is painfully aware of love’s conditions. Baldwin’s use of “transcend” points to the particular contradiction of white American subjectivity, which must insist on the meaning of social position while denying the relevance of its wider context, a feat only possible through a kind of willed and aggressively defended ignorance, a tactical forgetting.
4 Ibid., emphasis in the original.
and never be a felon, the power to always have his failures treated as success no matter how mediocre he [is].”

5 His power is evident in all the things that do not touch his life, like lead in the water, like searchlights through the windows at midnight, like whispers and cries you can’t get out of your head. But this power not to fail, or more precisely, to escape liability for one’s mistakes and misdeeds, even when the misdeeds are criminal, remains the outcome of social and political conspiracy. And conspiracy is obviously not the rare metal that is supposed to make whiteness worthy of love. For it shows the heart of whiteness, of what whiteness and white cishet masculinity are, to be the refuge of mediocrity, defended by the redoubt of a collective denial.

6 Love is all. In thrall to its institutional, social, and familial sanction, a white person, this white person, feels that denial itself as the desire for some always elusive sovereignty, the power to decide my own fate. What I have instead is access to power over the fate of others, insofar as I succeed at their expense. But the root of such desire taps into the fear of that which whiteness, as the wages of white fathers, gotten through enough plunder and spilled blood to fill all hell, both ushers in and promises to save me from.

Who loves you? That your white Daddy does, and that his love is all, encodes the power not to fail, the power to decide, as the promise of success. But such success remains a volatile, violent, jealously guarded thing, unevenly distributed even among the white male population. The true meaning of this promise is an open secret, as Baldwin suggests, well known to people of color, and which whites expend boundless energy to conceal from themselves. “Wo Ich war soll Es werden”: the I appears, irradiated, in its place.

7 It is what Hortense Spillers

7 Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
calls “the blankness of ‘race,’” an emptiness “where something else ought to be,” signifying nothing. But the blankness must be covered over; that is the condition of its power. The privacy that covers it, this white privacy, outs itself perpetually. As a fondness for moralizing, as hypocrisy, as brutal pettiness, as self-indulgence, it commits one to “moral mediocrity.”\(^8\) I wrote this book, struggling with my own costive, compulsive privacy. I wrote this book and this chapter in and out of the shadow of my father’s hatred of mediocrity. And as I re-wrote and revised, I have had to reckon with how that hatred, passed on to me, harbors mediocrity within itself. My father was a highly intelligent and charming man, a brilliant architect, a charismatic and hard-working teacher. He loved a lot of Black music, and I think he truly cared about the Black students whom he taught for decades at Southern University in Baton Rouge. At least, I remember his being an advocate for the excellence of their work. But my father could not, or would not, do the work of discernment that his own case required. I mean the work of learning to feel the radical difference between an excellence demanded as the price of survival, and one assumed as the empty sign of membership in the posse. My father devalued Black lives and Black works lest their excellence impugn the deferred promise of his own.\(^10\)

\(^8\) Hortense J. Spillers, “‘All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother’: Psychoanalysis and Race,” in Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 385.

\(^9\) Laymon, Heavy, 190–91.

\(^10\) I don’t mean to suggest that whiteness can be understood dialectically in relation to Blackness. For one, the insights of Black feminist theory remind us that “patterns of subordination intersect,” including race, gender, sexuality, class, and physical ability, such that any person’s experience of having or lacking power is a complex, multifaceted, highly contextual, and embodied process, which explicit categories of racialization alone cannot render intelligible (Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination...
He believed that by talent, one (meaning, primarily, he and his sons) could “transcend […] the social setting […].” Including what Coates calls “the long tradition of this country actively punishing black success.” Such punishment is part of the landscape of whiteness across the US. But in the milieux of southern Louisiana where I grew up (as in many other places), a certain proximity to, and intimacy with, the scenes of that success and its punishment (beginning with the communities whose ability to sustain themselves in the teeth of white supremacist terror includes forms of self-expression deeply woven into the fabric of the local culture) necessitate, in defense of white privacy, intimate practices of misrecognition and neglect. My father’s sense of excellence was founded, in part, on a lie, the lie of whiteness and its negating, neglectful power, and he passed that sense on to me. Likewise, his defensive, spectacular privacy, bound up with a kind of bereaved masculinity, took a serious toll on everyone in his life, especially the women he loved or sought to be loved by, and on his children. He was a loving father. But it’s the nature of that love that I want to understand, and how it failed

Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” The University of Chicago Legal Forum 140, no. 1 [1989]: 139–67.). Or to put it another way, white patriarchal power depends on what Alexander Weheliye calls “assemblages” that deploy race and gender, along with other classifications, to delimit who has access to the full panoply of rights and privileges that are supposed to belong to human beings (Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human [Durham: Duke University Press, 2014]). These assemblages include various interlocking and hierarchically structured modes of racialization, reflective of the entwined processes of settler-colonial occupation, circum-Atlantic slavery, imperialism, immigration, globalization, etc. Whiteness, per Barbara Tomlinson, “is not an embodied identity but a privileged standpoint and structural advantage” (“Wicked Problems and Intersectionality Telephone,” in Antiracism, Inc.: Why the Way We Talk about Racial Justice Matters, eds. Felice Blake, Paula Ioanide, and Alison Reed [Earth: punctum books, 2019], 163). But the identification with whiteness serves those who can afford it as a means not only of enjoying structural advantages, but also of forgetting their foundation in stolen land, labor, and life.

11 Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”
us. And how that failure functions as part of my sense of being (as) a white man.

The sense of having privilege, of having the power not to fail, warps the senses. I am thinking about what the senses have been trained to exclude. Or to enclose. I’m thinking of a term that Kierkegaard uses, “inclosing reserve,” to describe a self constituted by acts of reservation, withholding, and enclosure. A self folded in on itself, as it were. Kierkegaard contrasts inclosing reserve with what he calls “inwardness.” We might appeal as well to what certain Black spiritual and aesthetic traditions call “soul,” the latter signifying the presence of resources that, while housed in the self or the body, realize themselves in performances of shared feeling and desire. In the grip of inclosing reserve, by contrast, one refuses the openness to change that is the occasion for (a) soul. Shunning what is collective, one seeks to protect the sovereign privacy of the self. Although such a person may flout social convention, he (and I use the pronoun advisedly) founds his projects for living and loving on a fundamental failure of nerve. The conviction of one’s own fallenness — of one’s failure to be lovable — can even become the fantastic preserve of a negative freedom from how the flesh changes us, through the wager of loving, into others we don’t yet know how to recognize. Kierkegaard calls the personality prone to inclosing reserve a “demonic” personality. White privacy — some would spell it “piracy” — might be said to make one demonic because it


14 According to Kierkegaard, such a person is nervous or in despair about possibility, but what terrifies him is possibility as embodied, lived, and endured. Kierkegaard writes, “[h]e desires in one way or another to be more than the empirical, historically qualified, finite individuality that he is” (The Concept of Anxiety, 143).
grounds a sense of self-possession in the violence of possession itself. As Fred Moten argues, “[w]hile subjectivity is defined by the subject’s possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed — infused, deformed — by the object it possesses.”

The predatory dream of self-possession passes from one generation to the next. What enables its passage is the scope and encouragement given to habits of possessing, and of wanting to possess, others and the fruits of their labors. Such habits translate flesh and world into the relations between a subject and its objects, relations that become explicit as judgments of value. How does a child of white cishet male privilege come to abide in, and by, his possession? How does the white nuclear family, that supposed crucible of “American wealth and democracy,” stage its sense of love as an intimate drama funded by “the for-profit destruction of the most important asset available to any people, the family”?

I might be asking whether white privacy has a primal scene. But Freud’s talking cure affirms explication (as the unraveling of

15 Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.
16 My thinking on this score is indebted to Shannon Sullivan’s account of the “unconscious habits of white privilege” as a matter of sensory and somatic traces. See Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
17 Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”
18 In his case history of the patient he calls the Wolf Man, Freud posits that his patient’s neuroses stem from a singular event in the patient’s life: witnessing, as an infant, his parents’ having sex (“From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, new edn. [London: Vintage, 2001], 17:3–124). Lodged in the Wolf Man’s unconscious, the scene becomes formative of the maturing subject’s relation to his own sexuality. But the scene sows confusion by scrambling domination, gender, and pleasure. Having seen his father mounting his mother from behind, the child identifies as pleasurable both the dominant (masculine) position and the subordinate (feminine) one. If the Wolf Man’s case complicates Freud’s earlier theories of infantile seduction, it nonetheless remains a story about the ontogeny of the European bourgeois male subject. The subject,
the logic of the symptom) as the destiny of the subject. This destiny, as Hortense Spillers argues in her profound meditation on race and psychoanalysis, by definition excludes “the stigmatized subject […] whose access to discourse must be established as a human right and cannot be assumed.”19 The subject barred from full humanity by the logics and ledgers of empire bears, in their flesh, the traces or hieroglyphics of a very different set of pri-

that is, whose accession to heteronormative sexuality and patriarchal gender roles plays out, on an intimate scale, the management of primitive urges by Western civilization writ large. And since the primal scene produces neurosis, involving the Wolf Man’s psyche in the elaboration of a complicated language of symptoms and dreams whose meanings the analyst alone can unpack, Freud’s story of the primal scene is also a story about the subject’s entrance to discourse.

What happens, then, if we complicate Freud’s explication with the question of sociogeny? If we keep in mind that the Eurocentric category of the human, or of civilization, is overdetermined by its violent emergence on the scene of empire? And that the subject of this discourse inherits practices that have, in the course of prolonging and promoting empire, discursively banished Europe’s racialized others to the realm of the primitive, the primal, and the non-human?

The “sociogenic principle,” taken up by Frantz Fanon in his analysis of colonial oppression, serves as a corrective to what Sylvia Wynter calls “our present culture’s purely ontogenetic and/or biocentric conception of the human identity,” which is at the same time an “ethno-class (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception” (“Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be ’Black,’” in National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America, eds. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana [New York: Routledge, 2001], 49). In other words, the ontogenic/phylogenetic perspective on human psychology remains inseparable from the processes that inscribe race (and a racially inflected gender) as the boundary-line, never stable however violently imposed, between those whose claims to humanity are taken for granted, and those who must fight for this (always revocable) recognition. (Who, as Fanon’s work makes clear, may have to fight for such recognition even from themselves.) The “sociogenic principle” insists that “we can experience ourselves as human only through the mediation of the processes of socialization effected by the invented tekhne or cultural technology to which we have given the name culture,” including the technologies of race and gender (Wynter, “Towards the Sociogenic Principle,” 53, emphasis in the original).

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Such scenes, whose description pushes against the fascia of the imagination, and in which the brutality of plunder becomes, in its recurrence, an engine of both the psychic and the market economy, are a far cry from Freud’s lupine peepshow. But with Moten, we might interest ourselves in the farness of that cry, which is also its closeness under (the) cover(s), in order to trace these scenes’ “ongoing disruption” of the privacy of the white masculine subject. They skid beneath the railings of the Freudian interpretation, which would safeguard the totality and privacy of Daddy’s love. In Freud’s rendition of the Wolf Man’s primal scene, the presence of the parents’ flesh, becoming something else in an act of passion, something other than what their anatomically distinct bodies represent, disrupts the Oedipal trajectory. And yet, the structure remains airtight, a cryptic moment in the individualized, pathologized psyche, as long as we neglect the role of the flesh as vulnerable to a possession that is not only figurative and legible (as in the father’s possession of the mother’s body during sex), but also scandalously literal, legal, and lethal. As the site, that is, of a repeated capture countered by an ongoing resistance. Following Spillers, we could say that “‘individual,’ ‘family,’ and ‘society’ are [...] particles in constant bombardment,” scattered in complex trajectories by the social and material forces that produce the distinctions of race, gender, and class as morally and legally salient in the distribution of wealth and power. The field of that scattering is the flesh. “Before the ‘body,’” the flesh carries forward, across generations, the common energy that animates us in its folds. But empire’s trash talk renders the human cover for the cryptonym of the flesh-as-a-thing. When Baldwin refers to the

21 Spillers, “Psychoanalysis and Race,” 388.
23 The cryptonym, in Abraham and Torok’s re-working of Freud’s case study, refers to a word buried in the unconscious part of the ego, where it
white American public’s refusal “to make black privacy a black and private matter,” he alludes to the fact that white privacy, and by extension, an American public that recognizes itself as white, depends on the regime that once treated Black lives as private property, and which has never stopped devising new ways to keep private property out of Black hands. And Daddy’s love, as the love that has law and power on its side (the law of the father and the power of whiteness), has for its inexorable social setting the scene of untold, unaccounted-for, as yet unreckoned-with crimes. Crimes, as Spillers reminds us, practiced with special force against Black motherhood, with enduring consequences for the situation of the Black family.\textsuperscript{24} To “mak[e] white privacy

performs an “active vital and dynamic function” \textit{(The Wolf Man’s Magic Word, 81)}. Neither literal nor figurative, the cryptonym exceeds the referential model in which the opposition between those terms makes sense. For the cryptonym occupies a site that can be expressed only by a series of detours through a lexicon. The word, rather than the thing to which it refers, eludes consciousness. Like a slip of the tongue in reverse, operative at a more radical level than the metaphorical and metonymic logic of repression, the cryptonym recruits orthographic and phonetic echo-effects, as well as chains of semantic association (synonymy). It belongs to the realm of the “false friend,” the anagram, paronomasia, onomatopoeia, and other ruses that involve a slippage between the matter of language and its formal or semantic dimension. For Abraham and Torok, the cryptonym’s career describes the fate of pleasure \textit{inside} repression: “This particular area within the Ego, the place that shuns symbolization and is the site of the death of pleasure, knows the word that says pleasure.” The languages of patriarchal white supremacy are cryptonymic, perhaps, insofar as the ingredients of fantasy no less than the armature of common sense remain, for those who take up those languages, linked to the buried pleasure of the word as a vehicle of unrestrained power over others (the power to terrorize, the power to possess). Then again, this pleasure is hardly buried in much of the discourse, historical and contemporary, through which the white American public identifies itself and its common interests. Rather, spectacular and mundane forms of degradation practiced against its racialized and gendered others sustain the white patriarchy in the \textit{non liquet} of its own laws about rightful possession and the just exercise of power.

\textsuperscript{24} Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 228. Her analysis focuses on the situation of the enslaved, arguing that “the female” was systematically
real,” then, might mean learning to hear, to stand exposed to, “the broken and irreducible maternity […] of the commodity’s scream.”

In that scream’s haunting of the discourses of political economy, Fred Moten wants us to hear “a literary, performative, phonographic disruption of the protocols of exchange.” Not like cryptic words in a “garbled, private language,” the scream amplifies the voice, in excess of language, as a material, maternal trace. A voice not hidden, but there to be heard. A voice that is here, and if you don’t hear it, then it means that you have been taught to tune it out. Or maybe it makes you a hieroglyph to yourself. Maybe it deposits, among the names you give yourself, “ungendered”—denied even the limited rights of womanhood and motherhood—in the service of her captor’s sexual prurience and his economic interest in her fertility. As a result, writes Spillers, “(1) motherhood as female bloodrite is outraged, is denied, at the very same time that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment; (2) a dual fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father’s banished name and body and the captor’s mocking presence” (ibid., emphasis in the original). The white stereotype of the “matriarchal” Black family thus misrecognizes what is actually, according to Spillers, the legacy of this violation of motherhood and the concomitant erasure of the patronymic by the institution of slavery.

25 Baldwin, “The Devil Finds Work,” 564; Moten, In The Break, 12. Moten refers to the scene of a child’s literal awakening to the terrors of slavery in Frederick Douglass’s Narrative, a scene which is as much seen as heard: “I have often been awakened,” Douglass writes, “at the dawn of day by the most heart rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine” (quoted in ibid., 19). On this scene and “the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave’s ravaged body,” I refer the reader to Saidiya V. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3. See also Christina Sharpe, Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Claudia Tate, Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Weheliye, Habeas Viscus.

26 Moten, In the Break, 10.

27 Spillers, “Psychoanalysis and Race,” 396.
a cryptonym in your inclosing reserve. Maybe the voice tunes you, with a resonance in the gut. This resonance is the “dispos- sessive force objects exert,” an interference you might mistake for white noise when it disrupts the sales pitch, love story, lecture, diagnosis, game show—when it breaks in on Daddy talking out of his hat. But Freud was right about one thing: talking back to Daddy is how Daddy learns to talk. In other words, the appeal to that dispossession force in the service of an Oedipal narrative repeats, in however muted a register, the desire for domination that blinds kings and makes mothers scream. The narrative links a possessive investment in the self to patrilineal descent. On this logic, I am my own man because I am my (white) father’s (legitimate) son. Hilton Als writes of feeling “a horror of my I, since that meant being a him—my father.” If I, as a white man, feel moved to attest to something like Als’s horror, I must also acknowledge how much of it, in my case, stems from my father’s embodiment of whiteness as well as masculinity. Which is to say, his ways of possessing them, of making them his. And this horror, if that word even fits the case, requires a different frame of reckoning with the sociogeny of primal scenes. To assume his position is to learn how to be, at various times, a perpetrator, an alibi, and a bystander. For one is always the potential witness to trauma who has been taught not to see, taught to speak a language that entombs the open secret of his complicity. The subject as witness, as whiteness,

28 According to Spillers (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”), slavery and its aftermath have barred Black families from the patronymic, patrilineal logic that renders personhood legible and verifiable, and which signifies the white person’s exemption from the plight of the commodity.
30 In The Wolf Man’s Magic Word, Torok and Abraham revisit the Wolf Man’s case, imagining that the patient suffered, not from the repressed memory of a spectacle, but from the persistence of a word (the Russian tieret, meaning “to rub”). As a child, the Wolf Man had thought or spoken or heard this word spoken in connection with a traumatic scene, about which he was subsequently admonished by his mother never to speak again. Rather than catching his parents have sex, Abraham and Torok
living for that sense of reckless freedom afforded by the slippage of the tongue, fails to make sense. In what follows, I return to some scenes that fashioned my sense of self as something both more and less than the subject/object of a father’s love, trying to feel the force with which it rubbed me into being, and the loss of what got rubbed out along the way, in pursuit of the question that proves most elusive: “How did it feel?”

31 Brian Blanchfield, Proxies: Essays Near Knowing (Lebanon: Nightboat Books, 2016), 134. I have also taken a cue from Brian Casemore’s call for critical texts that perform “the process of working through a cultural symptom,” and which use the reconstruction of a life narrative as a form of pedagogy (The Autobiographical Demand of Place: Curriculum Inquiry in the American South [New York: Peter Lang, 2008], 5). And perhaps there is a more elusive question still. For someone whose claims to humanity can remain unspoken in every case, because guaranteed by his occupation of the subject-position enclosed by whiteness and cishet masculinity (those rooms of ownership crowding out the world), doesn’t the project of exposure, for someone like that, fail to amount to more than an exercise in self-justification? Another telling of the story of which there are already too many, endless tales of exemption, lullabies for the infantile citizen, Daddy’s baby boy? And doesn’t this impulse to register the question, i.e., to register it explicitly, represent the writer’s gambit to signal his story’s exemption from the ilk of those padded out with the stuff of plunder and oppression, taking up too much space and time? Isn’t it time to give it a rest? In the silence of my failure to answer that question, this book is the blush of an erasure that cannot accomplish itself. (On the “infantile citizen,” see Lauren Berlant, The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship [Durham: Duke University Press, 1997], 25–54).
I was my mother’s first child and my father’s fourth. She wanted to name me Fred, after her father, killed in an industrial accident only a year or two before. This was the man whose death she carried as she grew pregnant with me, whose life she saw in the brown hair and dark brown eyes that announced me a Deshotels. But my father wouldn’t hear of it. Freddy? They’ll tease the shit out of him. He countered with Wolfgang, being okay with Wolfie but conjuring me a Mozart. Dolsy represents a compromise of sorts: the name belonged to my paternal great-grandfather, a Louisiana state senator (a portly man in white linen or seersucker when he was photographed in a friendly handshake with Huey Long). Had I been a girl, I was told — having been delivered one day after the Fourth of July — I might have been named America. I don’t think the idea was an access of patriotism on my father’s part. Rather, a child’s name, like the title of a movie or a show, should be full of marquee potential. During those first years, my mother was my primary caregiver, but my father insisted on feeding me my infant formula every night, pacing the floor of our small New York apartment twelve floors above Times Square, my head resting on his shoulder until I drifted off. Bing Crosby or Al Jolson crooned on the Weltron. Though not a large man, my father possessed a stature magnified by charisma and a hot, jealous temper. His hands, in particular, always struck me as huge, like a physical manifestation of his personality, although I imagine they were also comforting to a small child’s body, cradling my haunches and gently beating time. That tempo would have told me I was his Yankee doodle boy, and with Broadway below and Fifth Avenue nearby, we had white Christmases galore to dream of.

From the beginning, I was my father’s child. In his telling, I popped out of the womb wide-eyed and alert, smiling, and with a head full of hair. In a photo he took of me at age three or four, my eyes are wide for the camera, in a face covered in white grease paint, with a red dot on my nose, and a bright feather headdress. A true paleface, decked out for trick-or-treat like
Hollywood in the spoils of genocide. To my father, I was a cash advance on the possible — *my son, the genius* — and his investment in that service was such that he could ignore whatever evidence to the contrary I might have offered, had I dared. As a toddler in New York, I was his sidekick, and he trotted me off to movies, museums, concerts in Central Park. By his side, on his shoulders, or strapped to his chest, I discovered the privilege of travel, of purpose in the wide, white, masculine world. The horizon pivoted about his shoulders, crowded by skyscrapers, our course interrupted here and there as he hoisted me up to peer through the porthole at a construction site. My father’s stories would fill those years with a mythology of precociousness: How as a toddler, I stood through a long program of Brahms or Mozart, miming the conductor. How I stood, straight as a bolt and giggling, while my father lifted me up in his palm. Though discouraged from playing with children my age, I was flaunted before adults, and it tickled him when, tugging at my leash on the sidewalks near Time Square, I stopped to banter with strangers: a busker, a homeless man selling secondhand paperbacks, the Korean-American woman who ran the produce stand down the street. Our apartment building housed members of New York’s artistic and theatrical unions, and there I was my father’s ticket to an audience with the kinds of people whose friendship he wooed: the burlesque dancer who let me play with the rings on her toes, or the wizened Russian émigré Petroschanko, an auteur of adult movies whose advice my father sought on a film project of his own. *But why do you want to make pictures, when you can make more children like this?* For my father the raconteur, fresh out of Louisiana’s Cajun country, I was his torch song, his lovelorn address to the faint and tawdry starlight of Manhattan in the late 1970s.

My own memories of those years splutter with wonder, flecked by the city’s soot and grit. A pair of hairy legs skids into view as their owner, a tall and bearded roller skater, stoops to indulge my curiosity at the Chelsea Piers. The sweet, fluffy warmth of a corn muffin rises in my mind, something I think we would have bought at Penn or Grand Central Station, but shorn of context,
it arrives like a missive from some transatlantic fantasy, a fleecy golden secret that abridges time. Ditto the taste of kosher hot dogs and orange soda, awash somewhere in the noise of an artificial waterfall. From those years, images of my mother flicker with work and care: trailing after her on our way home from the grocery store, my legs burning with exhaustion, or chasing behind her as she cleaned house, pushing a toy whose wheels tumbled a clear globe full of plastic balls. Of the nearness of her body, I remember less, no doubt because the stories that I heard growing up were those my father told, the photographs those that he took. As she tells it, she was young and alone and inexperienced, with her family far away, struggling to satisfy a domineering older man who demanded her allegiance to the promise, never fulfilled, of Bohemian lives. Lives devoted to flouting social convention and to the pursuit of beauty and adventure. My mother’s plight, as I came to imagine it later, was the disappointment and regret described by Adrienne Rich as “the daylight coming / like a relentless milkman up the stairs.” And as in a naive reading of that poem, I used to lay the blame squarely on my father, imagining my mother and myself as allies against his overbearing need and the threat of his rage. But in a poem in her own hand that I found among my father’s papers when he died, dated from the year that I turned two, my mother writes:

He knows no consideration
Dolsy doesn’t
Never knows when to be quiet
When to be loud
When to absent himself
Or when to be near.
He will talk when you want silence,
Jump and stomp when you want peace.
[…]

The child’s wantonness offsets the wife and mother’s

[...] responsibility
Of seeing to it that
You are silent when silence is asked for,
That you are there when your help is needed,
That you give when a hand is opened to you.

As a toddler, standing up tall, pushing around my noisemakers, I was both my father’s favorite and his factor, embodying a willfulness that was our exclusive privilege. My mother’s poem rehearses what Rich’s “relentless milkman” suggests: the demands imposed by patriarchal logic on women for the care of the law’s vessels. At the same time, my mother herself was compelled to become a kind of vessel, bottling up anger and resentment in her silent, yielding presence. According to Freud’s account of Oedipal dynamics, the impossible demand falls on the son. You must be like your father; you may not do as your father does. The father’s presence casts a shadow that lengthens on a long afternoon into that pointer of bourgeois rectitude, the super-ego, which keeps the self in check until its gin and tonic at five o’clock.33 But what becomes of the super-ego if the son inherits the father’s privilege, including his fantasies of sovereign speech

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33 Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 19:34. The Oedipal super-ego, as theorized by Freud, depicts the psychic economy of privilege as a demand for emulation (you must aspire to be like your social superiors) intertwined with a prohibition (you must respect your superiors and never usurp their place). But the place of the mother/daughter in the Freudian canon, as many of Freud’s feminist interlocutors have argued, remains one defined by a lack. This lack speaks to the patriarchal frame of the theory itself. On Freud’s neglect of mothers, see Madelon Sprengnether, The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). Hortense Spillers goes further, linking Freud’s avoidance of the “dark continent” of female sexuality to the racialization of the non-European man or woman. See Spillers, “Psychoanalysis and Race,” 393.
and action and his sense of entitlement to a woman’s care, while the mother occupies the place from which emulation is forbidden? The self might coalesce around the nub of a different sort of prohibition: you must not be like your mother.

How did my mother’s poem fall into my father’s hands? “The hand […] opened” demands gratification, nutrition, love. It might also be the hand my father raised against my mother at least once. For me, his hands bore gifts, like the new Matchbox car he brought home every Friday evening, a token of masculine power. It was his voice, raised to a pitch indicative of just how much he cared whether the neighbors or anybody else could hear him, that was the instrument of his displeasure. A handsome man, handy with tools and all sorts of manly accoutrements, and like Yankee Doodle, handy with the girls, my father carried himself (or tried to) in that way of white American cis-het men that projects confidence in their right to own the world. In his stories, he carried himself undaunted every morning, on his way to work at 4 AM, through a Times Square rife with prostitution and drugs, down to the subway, where once a teenage girl tried to mug him. You’ll have to kill me, sweetheart, because I don’t have any money. He never said whether, in that moment, he had bothered to put up his hands. In trying to understand how those hands dispensed whiteness and manhood, how they invested me with it, I am thinking of what Spillers writes: that on account of the fraught place that the Black family occupies within the logic of the patronymic and the patrilineal, “[t]he African-American male has been touched […] by the mother, handed by her in ways that he cannot escape, and in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporize by a fatherly reprieve.”34 And I am thinking of this temporality or tempo of the white paternal in terms of another half-memory, a long ride into the Bronx, where the subway line emerges into daylight and the empty lots and broken infrastructure that mark America’s steady war of attrition on Black and Latinx communities. The

34 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 228.
train trundled us through that landscape to the zoo, where I slid down a slide carved out of a tree and poked my head up with the prairie dogs. With our two heads in that scuffed and scratched Plexiglass bubble, we stood looking out, my father and I, a man-to-be of his ilk—a pair of milkmen, looking for all the world. In that bubble blown of privilege and power, we enjoyed a spectatorship perpetually erupting into the midst of what white America would call blight, decay, “the crack epidemic,” without having to notice the suffering that was the opportunity for our opportunity. And oblivious, too, to the resistance and play and labor and care that sustain lives never offered a reprieve.

As a product of that bubble, learning the arts of self-enclosure, my fantasies gave vent to a desire to shrink the world down to a more manageable scale. On a long road trip with my parents and baby brother back up to New York (I was five or six, and we had moved down south a year before), I repopulated the landscape, as it scrolled by the pickup’s window, with people my size. Effacing family, I made the voyage alone, anticipating the white masculine promise of autonomy as my imagined self traveled north among other child-adults, riding in style in the pink plastic big-wheeled trike I coveted but that my parents couldn’t afford or wouldn’t buy. In addition to the other drivers, and the construction crews on the side of the road, and the denizens of towns beyond the interstate, my mind’s eye miniaturized their concerns and their machines, replacing the real thing with the bright plastic or die-cast replicas that, as FAO Schwarz had taught me, were in endless, invidious supply. It was on this trip, too, that my parents impressed on me, the sometime babbler on the streets of the Big Apple, the danger of strangers. At a KOA campground, where we had parked our Airstream trailer for the night, I struck up a conversation with a shirtless man, the proprietor of a massive motor home. Do you want to take a look inside? The magic of such machines was irresistible, like paternal power crystallized, pure, self-contained purpose. But my mother or father intervened, taking the opportunity to equip me with a paranoia that is patriarchal white supremacy’s underside: There are people who will steal children and chop them
into little bits. This was, in a sense, the mantra of the 1980s and 1990s, as the Reaganite consensus replaced the welfare state with a renewed program of assault on poor communities of color. But in the white American imaginary, it was a war for the body of the white, middle-class child. In their fantasized dismemberment, the milk-carton kids testified to more, I think, than a reckoning with the tabooed reality of child abuse. Just as elite white men attacked Reconstruction with the myth of the white woman at the mercy of the emancipated Black man, so white men at the end of the twentieth century, facing social and political challenges to their power, mustered a moral panic over the white man’s progeny. And like the earlier retrenchment around white womanhood, the nightmare of the missing child spoke of threats to the hegemony of the white middle class, threats intensified by the neoliberal program of privatizing public goods. As Frantz Fanon reminds us, a strong, cruel state caters to the father’s fantasies. A meaty threat, a temporizing terror, when the white father’s hands give, their gift becomes the vehicle of a compulsive pleasure. *Fort-Da*, says Freud. The tiny blue Honda Prelude (it had real, working doors!) skids out of sight beneath a chair. The white child vanishes at the end of a street. A vessel we freight with our longing for innocence, the child’s flesh bears, in its imagined voyage toward sacrifice, the proof that our privilege is innocent, or else the expiation of our guilt. To be chopped


37 Richard Dyer writes, “whiteness aspires to disembodiment as the condition of its enjoyment of the privileges of the public sphere (self-determination, negative liberty, etc.)” (*White: Essays on Race and Culture* [New York: Routledge, 2017], 39, emphasis in the original). And Julian Carter, writing about the close association between whiteness and neurasthenia in the nineteenth century, postulates that white people’s “belief in their own weakness helped to excuse them from accountability
into bits: that’s the fate of Bluebeard’s wives. They are captives to a privilege the fee for which is enclosure, a cryptic prohibition, and ignorance of the fate that precedes them and awaits (their coming to) their senses.

They met during a production of Romeo and Juliet. This was in Mamou, a small town on the prairie in southern Louisiana. A son of one of the prominent white families in town, my father in his early thirties cut a vulpine figure in the pages of a local newspaper, looking aloof and androgynous beside an article about the leisure suit. Mamou back then was a town like many other towns in the South, a place whose fortunes had sprung up on the shoulders and backs of unfree labor. A town founded by men wearing white linen suits in the photographs we were shown by our parents, never bothering to inquire about what went on outside the frame. My father belonged to a caste of white men with a towering sense of their own self-importance. Men whose achievements must have seemed larger than life, in a context where, for them, upward mobility promised to magnify a multigenerational sense of ownership over the place, a promise buttressed, of course, by the privileges they derived from Jim Crow. By the time my parents met, my father had established himself as an architect of stylish homes in the region, mid-century modern designs that commanded their surroundings like Wallace Stevens’s anecdotal jar. My mother, meanwhile, was only 17, a child of the prairie and the pine woods, where Cajun and Creole families worked as tenant or small independent farmers on land that the French and Spanish had stolen from Choctaw tribes. Tales floated in our family about a Cherokee (or Choctaw) ancestor somewhere down the line, though that stopped none of us from claiming the advantages of whiteness. Like my mother’s for the suffering that made their privileged positions possible” (The Heart of Whiteness, 155).
father, the white men of my grandparents’ generation had begun to leave the fields for more lucrative work in industry, a path barred to their Creole of Color neighbors. Among the photographs my father took of that production, a number capture my mother alone, posing on a bare stage, her jet black hair curled and bobbed, her lithe figure clad in a short white dress of muslin or some other fabric, tempting and sheer, with a ruffle along the hem. Her knees, of which she has always been ashamed, are bare, and bare her feet, as she clutches with one hand a wooden beam above her head. *He was the first person,* my mother often said, *who talked to me like an adult.* My father had Mercutio’s gift for gab. *He could make you believe it,* she said, meaning his wild schemes, full of moonlight and held together by spiderwebs. Though his idol was Frank Lloyd Wright, I think my father fancied himself a Howard Roark, or Gregory Peck playing Howard Roark in the Hollywood version of that noxious book that I doubt he ever read. And for all his accomplishments as an architect, it was theater and film that called to him, those vehicles for investment in apocryphal selves, telling you that love can be all if only you believe it.

But you had to help him believe it. Or else a plague on both your houses. In his work on irony, Kierkegaard describes a person who pins their sense of self to their power of negation. Their subjectivity depends, as it were, on the availability of the factory reset, the blank slate, the next feature in the matinee. Of course, this power is really a delusion. But delusions have power, and the white man as ironist may need failure, repeated failure,

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39 The ironist “craves the subjective freedom that at all times has in its power the possibility of a beginning and is not handicapped by earlier situations” (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans. and eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989], 253). “In irony,” Kierkegaard writes, “the subject is continually retreating, talking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save itself — that is, in order to preserve itself in negative independence of everything” (257).
as a reminder of his freedom from the circumstances that, for others, might determine or ruin a career or a life. My father’s life and career comprised a string of such failures: two marriages abandoned; a successful architectural partnership dissolved; a movie left unfinished; the union job in New York (painting sets on soap operas) that he quit for the vaporous promise of a commission down South; the rural homestead that he carefully restored, only to abandon it to foreclosure; the fanciful real-estate ventures in Florida and Mexico that came to naught. When he should have been at the height of his architectural career, he built little. True, teaching duties, along with the task of raising a family, got in the way of more creative pursuits. But he hurt his prospects by a sworn commitment to the idea that clients don’t know shit, and he wasn’t afraid to let them know it. (He reserved special vitriol for his clients’ wives. It’s always the bitch, he would say, misogyny providing failure’s perfect alibi.) On top of that, he was something of a sucker. But whenever a project crashed and burned, Queen Mab’s sails whisked him off to another. Such is the stuff of white masculinity. My mother, as long as she believed or wanted to believe that his love was all, must have suffered on account of my father’s fondness for the apocryphal in himself. My mother, who could read people much better than he could, taught me how to read (I am five years old, puzzling out words in the newspaper on her lap), and she tried to teach me the hazards of such self-delusion. We are walking around our tiny subdivision in Lafayette, with its drab townhouses and its streets that force the pedestrian to thread a narrow selvage of grass between asphalt and ditch. I am amusing myself by pulling my shirt up over my face, plunging ahead with a child’s newfound conviction that he knows better than his mother. Don’t do that, or you’ll hurt yourself. Then in that slow-motion agony with which love, as time’s instrument, rakes the flesh, she watches in silence as I walk smack into the side of a neighbor’s mailbox.

Can I expose the apocryphal in myself as the texture of the patronymic, the damage and slippage of its law? What did it sound like, with its hedges and pronouncements, its promises and smack talk and cryptic proscriptions? A frequency haunts
the dial, like a station hard to catch: my father’s voice on the road, driving. I sit beside him, miming him, hands on the wheel of my Fisher-Price dashboard. The road is dark, with the beacon ahead of a Gulf or Phillips 66 sign, its orange globe high and warm in the night. My father’s voice, in this moment, has that warmth and that glow. It radiates security but also the promise of success. Its authority about the world feels like a luxury, like the Cadillac Brougham he owned a bit later, with its Italian leather and its tail fins, and the low growl of its dual-quad engine as we drove into town from the country for orange sherbet on Sunday afternoons. But the voice mystifies, too. It spits commands, demanding that you learn its tempo, like my father in one of his fits of rage. Or like the auctioneers at the rural estate sales my parents dragged us to, looking for antiques. We would follow the dirt roads around Eunice and Mamou to an old house in the woods, after a death had spilled its contents onto the dusty, unkempt yard: a battered and wobbly armoire; frayed folding chairs; a heavy cast iron and enamel juicer whose handle I pumped until I was told to stop; a meat grinder; two enormous and (as we discovered upon bringing them home) afflicted television sets, on which the picture jumped and sizzled; and an assortment of medical equipment (bed pans, a walker, a blood-pressure gauge). Where my parents hunted for treasures, I saw only objects cursed by obsolescence, either their own or that of the bodies they were meant to serve. But under a canopy of oaks, the auctioneer—an elderly white man with a hanky over his microphone and another for his brow—kept the bids coming by an incantatory stammer, in a frenzy of vowels and consonants that turned these objects into cash. As though in the summer heat, something was being lulled to rest there, or conjured to rise from the dust.

A blunted bullet, the Airstream trailer stood in the middle of six acres. Pine woods, threaded by a small bayou, flanked the property on three sides. These were the woods of my mother’s child-
hood, where the pine needles made a pungent floor beneath the tall, resinous trunks and the prickly undergrowth, full of burrs, mosquitoes, and the mites we called red bugs. Trumpet flowers hung at the wood's edge, mingled with the invasive Chinese tallow or “chicken” trees. A dirt road led you to the property from the two-lane blacktop running between Eunice and Mamou. Behind the fishpond, which never lived up to its promise, lay the “tennis court,” a rectangle of grass that, like my father’s ambition, jarred with its milieu. Behind that stood the trailer, where we lived for a year while restoring our “Cajun house,” which my parents had transplanted from some place less auspicious, and which now straddled a hardly green hill that sloped down to the bayou in back. A gravel drive girdled the property, and to the west stood “the barn,” a white half-dome of corrugated metal, full of masculine pleasures, where my father kept his tools and the rusty, disassembled bodies of two antique cars. Originally home, perhaps, to Choctaw peoples, the land had passed to my mother on my grandfather’s death. Here my parents bonded over their commitment to a story about the past, one of those stories that centers settler-colonial experience as authentic in virtue of its connection to the land. My mother had a connection to the land, but for my father, it was something else. I can see the two of them now: Her with a bandanna around her forehead, hardly stopping to wipe her brow as she lays bricks or scrapes the varnish off an old rocking chair. Him in his work boots and painter’s pants, a chunky grease pencil in the pocket of his carpenter’s apron, striding about with a level in his hand. For my mother, the place held a link to long hours of childhood spent hiding in the woods with a book or her favorite cousin, away from the tumult of too many younger siblings. My father had a vision for the place, to be sure, a romantic vision, springing from the chasm of his own archaic temperament. But the place scared him, my mother told me much later. I think he was afraid of the neighbors. Our only neighbors were my mother’s second cousin who lived down the road, and a family of Creoles of Color who had farmed the land across the way for generations. I don’t know, but I can imagine that their holdings
might have shrunk throughout the years under the pressure of white terrorism and subtler forms of white encroachment. So what terrified my father about this place? I don’t imagine that he thought about that history when he glanced across the dusty road at the little house where, as I recall, an elderly woman lived, and where her grandson or great-grandson went every day after school. There was no place for them in my father’s Xanadu. No place for history, either, only for its dress rehearsal (the “Cajun” house, the antique cars). Perhaps it was the woods themselves, with their ancestral voices, that scared him. He could not comprehend their claim upon him, the command of that high, hot silence, and the solace of the shade below.

Neither could I. Shooed out of doors on muggy Sunday mornings, playing on the hard dirt, which, when scratched, revealed red clay, or at the margins of the woods, always on the lookout for fire ants and paper wasps, I found our rural life rife with a savagery that only compounded the anger seething in our home. Fat black ants threaded their way through the bark of the live oak that held our tire swing. After a rain, the crawfish mounds appeared, tidy mud towers in the grass, but always vacant to the reach of prying fingers. Among the heads of the tall grass, dragonflies hovered in pursuit of prey. Dirt-dauber wasps packed any crevice neglected too long with their nests, wombs of baked clay that disclosed, when dislodged, desiccated bodies. These mundane graves filled me with disgust, perhaps

40 As James Dormon explains, the term “Creoles of Color” generally refers to the mixed-race descendants of those who had won their freedom from slavery before the Civil War and “occupied a special, intermediate place in the racial and social order of antebellum Louisiana and the Gulf port cities […]” (“Preface,” in Creoles of Color of the Gulf South, ed. James H. Dormon [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996], 1–27). The social and economic standing of Creole of Color families, many of whom had been self-sufficient or even prosperous farmers and landowners in the antebellum period, came under fierce attack in the wake of Reconstruction and throughout the period of Jim Crow, as whites sought to consolidate their power in part by erasing all gradations of racial and ethnic distinction beyond white and Black.
because they suggested that the only thing harder than fending off all this life (the ants beading their chemical trails across the kitchen counters, the cobwebs in the corners, the mosquitoes at the screen) was to keep death at bay. More than once my brother and I watched a wasp and a daddy-long-legs dance a fatal waltz on a windowsill, as the sun beat through the glass, the one fighting to defend itself, the other to feed her brood.

And then there were the visits and sleepovers at Gram’s. This was not the old house in the woods where my mother had grown up, but a prefab, vinyl-sided affair squatting in mudlogged fields. It was an epicenter of grandchildren (and great-grandchildren) needing a babysitter or a place to crash, large and lonesome-eyed dogs, discarded farm equipment, stray cats, chickens and guinea fowl, and one or two horses, all wandering in haphazard commerce with one another, all of whom could expect from their Gram a minimal standard of attention and care. Hers was a compassionate fatalism that I associate, rightly or wrongly, with the survival of a kind of European peasant culture, simmering with mischief. To provoke in her and our mother a fit of giggling was a child’s delight — next to the eagerness with which my brother and I awaited the Little Debbie snacks, tastelessly sweet, that were Gram’s bribe for good behavior. The house and its grounds seemed untouched by the years, suspended in the boredom of a Sunday afternoon beneath a wide and scoured sky, the domestic quiet inside punctuated by the tick of a grandfather clock. (That tick-tock tortured my nights there, spent tossing between polyester sheets that made me itch and sweat.) We played long hours with our cousin, a plucky, ram-bunctious, troubled kid between our ages, with something in him, an alloy of anger and grief and untaught curiosity, wound tight as the coiled copper in the motors he loved taking apart. From a discarded dryer, a new toy, it didn’t matter. A kind of Cartesian hunger drove him, who was practically an orphan and lived with Gram full time. Playing with him plunged me into a world of physicality to which I was a stranger. To act out our fantasies there (fending off aliens or enemy soldiers) was to embody them, not in a sanitized way, with plastic limbs and
sialagogic sound effects, but by dint of sticks and clumps of dirt, chasing each other across the wide yard or crouching in ambush in a ditch by the road. It was to struggle sometimes to save narrative from the swerve into physical violence, and sometimes to encourage the swerve. And it was a poor moment of triumph when I realized that I was bigger by enough to hurt this cousin whenever he hurt my baby brother, to repay tears with tears, pushing pain down the line. For he (our cousin) was, as a boy, already a casualty of a certain type of white manhood — rural, Southern, working-class — in which boredom and dwindling opportunities conspire to produce a steady pulse of resentment that courts risk and ruin. Perhaps the sense of white masculine entitlement in such places, embattled and desperate, needs the sting of punishment to feel its power.41

Where my cousin and my brother had, as kids, a kind of generous energy written on their faces and in their builds, I was skinny, quiet, and sedentary, physically and socially self-contained, and covetous of my toys. Those I loved best were foundlings or castaways. First there was Benjamin, a thumb-sized Fisher-Price boy with an orange tunic and a cowlick, sole survivor of a plastic ferry that had vanished during our move from New York. He was supplanted by Mr. Peabody, a rotund character I liberated from one of my brother’s toddler sets, and later there was an anonymous G.I. Joe with gun and backpack, the lone hero of my furtive forays into normative masculinity. Mine, after all, was the generation reared in the shadow of Home Alone and Doogie Howser, the generation of the child prodigy and the lost boy. Or did these fetishes stage, in miniature, my father’s desire that I be special, like a Christ, sui generis and at the same time every inch his father’s child? Perhaps I invested them with a child’s intimation of precarity: that my parents struggled

41 Although many white people do get caught up in the carceral system, it is also true that to be poor and white and cishet male and to engage in risky or illicit behavior — at least in the American South — is to conform to the rubric of the ‘good ol’ boy,” i.e., to warrant tolerance from the authorities and often a second (or third, or fourth) chance.
to make ends meet, that their marriage was doomed. We were not poor in those years, or like many white families on the bottom rungs of the middle class, we would not have called ourselves that. My father always lived for the big win waiting just around the bend. In that horizon of entitlement, material straits are less something to reckon with—or even to defy, through the outbursts of recklessness to which, as I watched them grow up, some of my cousins grew prone (hard drugs, drunk driving, petty and sometimes serious crimes)—than the chronic occasion for a melancholy whose lost object is abundance itself. Or to be precise, the promise of an abundance that wasn’t necessarily real to begin with, but a story handed down from one generation to the next, a trove of images on the threshold between memory and desire. To this day, the vacant tree lots after Christmas do the trick. Suddenly, I am remembering things we never, or rarely, had: fancy candies, like creamy swirled peppermints (not Brach’s) and marzipan animals; fresh fruit singly wrapped in colored foil; a large wheel of dried apricots, glossy prunes, and fat dates. And there I am, all through November and December poring over the endless newsprint pages of the Sears Wish Book. Its pictures of boys and girls enjoying their bunk beds, Huffy bicycles, and monumental Lego sets engrossed me more than any narrative of knights and dragons and damsels in distress. Serving not as tokens of what we enjoyed, but as nubs or stubs of what I thought we were supposed to have, these images make concrete a sense of privilege, expressing a child’s feeling of loss in the face of what he does not possess (enough of). Almost as though his parents’ failure to provide it amounted to abandonment. And unlike my father, I could not muster the will to pretend that what we had, we had entirely by choice, and that this spurious choice rendered our lot the best. After years of being played with and carried about in my pocket, Benjamin lost the two dots he had for eyes. Lovingly, tenderly, my father gave him a new pair, using his best India ink. No doubt a magic marker would have done the trick, but when the ink promptly rubbed off, he promised to restore my pilgrim’s sight with his smallest drill bit. Which was, alas, not small enough: Benjamin’s
eyes were not only missing, now they were gouged out, and I cast him off for good.

We were all regular casualties of my father’s love (including the man himself), which, in its pursuit of something that wasn’t there, bored past the envelope of tenderness to the pain and fear where he sought to anchor it. He seldom laid hands on us, although a light rap of his knuckles on my brother’s or my scalp was his preferred method of keeping us in check. But when anything set him off, his voice and posture projected a fury not to be trifled with. Some of my memories of his threats are so outrageous that I almost doubt their veracity. *Open that goddamn door, or your eyeballs will be rolling across the tennis court!* Bombarded by white-hot anger, we were objects in collision. Because my mother (so he said) had left the radio on in the Volkswagen and killed the battery, he flipped over the dining room table where we all sat at lunch. Tomato soup seeped across the floor. My mother stood in a corner of the room, clutching my brother to her side, and I stood in another corner, too afraid to run to her, or too used to the structure into which any other alliance was destined to collapse. My father stood at the apex, dispensing love and discipline, and my mother and I occupied the other vertices, by turns targets of his rage and rivals for his love. Another time, in the tight quarters of the trailer, my slowness or sloppiness at my chores sparked a row, my father and mother shouting at one another until he hauled off and hit her. She crumpled to the floor, her thighs pale and wide and soft where they stuck out from her shorts. A change came over him, and turning on me, he hoisted me into the air and shook me, the trailer’s plastic molding creaking at my back. Neither of my parents is a stranger to anger, but my mother’s has always been slow to develop, proceeding by reasons and cautions, her voice edged with a hardness that lends the image of your fault the finality of proof. In the heat of it with my father, she could, for the most part, hold her own, though I don’t remember that she ever resorted to screaming, or tried to match the insults that he unleashed. *Go to grass!* Maybe she conserved her idioms out of concern for our ears (in earshot of my father’s vulgate, a piece
of parenting decidedly moot). Or perhaps to grass, conjuring an old horse out to pasture, was meant to sting worse than telling him to go to hell. As for my father, he fumed, his anger a prodigious and rapidly rising column of foul matter and wasted energy; the feeling spent, he just as quickly regained his cool. But for the moment, he was a man possessed, and his anger’s “enigmatic messages” shook me longer after the episode had passed.\(^{42}\) But I was fazed in a way that my younger brother, his impishness abetted by a hearing deficit, was not. Well into adolescence, I would wake in a start on a Saturday or Sunday morning to the sound of our father’s tantrums somewhere in the house. I was the rabbit to my brother’s duck, hiding in my burrow while he shook it off, plunging ahead in the knowledge that the noise would pass. More flexible than I in body and temperament, able to bend where I buckled, my brother inherited our father’s artistic ferocity, the severity of the standards to which he was prepared to hold others and himself. To me, our father passed on the liability to anger that roils in the wake of that severity, a surge that renders me a different person, a stranger to myself.

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The land around Eunice and Mamou stragglles past its heyday into the present, its fields littered with oil wells that eke out a profit or have stopped for good; its highways lined with homesteads, some new and ambitious, some modestly hanging on, and some consigned to a limbo of mystery and neglect (their windows papered over with foil, their fences fallen, their yards littered with rusted farm equipment); its pine trees and wildflowers and circling hawks and strutting egrets like ghosts of the prairie to which, one day, this farmland will return. In Eu-

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\(^{42}\) I borrow the term from Shannon Sullivan, who draws on Jean Laplanche’s theory of infantile seduction to argue that habits of racism and white privilege communicate themselves from parents to child via “enigmatic messages that operate in and through the child’s body” (Revealing Whiteness, 66).
nice, white middle-class promise and respectability persist in the wide boulevards, manicured lawns, cement statuettes of the Virgin, and Victorian mansions ensconced in dogwood and azaleas. When I was nine or ten, my parents bought a shuttered building on Eunice’s traditional commercial street—in an effort, perhaps, to give my mother the creative and social outlet she craved, or to distract my father from the disappointment that had settled in, now that work on our Cajun house was done. The building had high, vaulted ceilings and black-and-white tile floors. My mother made special-occasion gowns to order in the back, and in the front, she and my aunt sold handmade crafts on consignment. There were Mardi Gras masks in every medium from porcelain to papier mâché, alongside articles of mass manufacture that someone had taken the trouble to turn “Cajun”: aprons and oven mitts embroidered with crawfish, a barometer mounted by an alligator, a percussive pair of steel spoons. The word had been something of a slur during my parents’ childhoods, an epithet for the uncouth white people who lived off the land, a population whose hard work never rose to the level of respectable living. But by the 1980s, “Cajun” culture had become something to celebrate and commodify.43 In school, we studied the history of the Cajuns in their exile from Acadia to the Louisiana coast, absorbing a narrative of white diaspora that stood in for—effacing white people’s accountability for—the history

43 Although Cajun and Creole of Color communities have historically worked the same lands and occupied, at times, similar positions in the social and economic hierarchies of southern Louisiana, Cajuns can claim the structural advantages of an identification with whiteness, including better access to jobs, education, healthcare, etc. And these advantages extend to the commodification of local cultures themselves. As Sylvie Dubois and Barbara M. Horvath note, “Cajuns have clearly benefited more than Creoles from […] ethnic revival; almost all of the highly prized aspects of the French Louisiana culture are designated as ‘Cajun’ […]” (“Creoles and Cajuns,” 202). See also James H. Dormon, “Ethnicity and Identity: Creoles of Color in Twentieth-Century South Louisiana,” in Creoles of Color of the Gulf South, ed. James H. Dormon (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 166–79.
of settler-colonial expropriation and genocide and the circum-
Atlantic slave trade.44 We celebrated jambalaya and gumbo, ig-
norant that the latter was a Choctaw invention.45 In fifth grade, 
I donned overalls and a straw hat for a class rendition of Ca-
jun life, in a rehearsal of my own ersatz performance of a few 
years before, when my parents had outfitted me in overalls and 
brogans for my very first day of school. (Although a Yankee 
transplant, I had, back then, evidently fooled the principal, who 
shamed me for my Cajun manners: *We say* Yes, sir *around here, 
country boy.*)

My mother’s shop in Eunice, with its trickle of visitors, most-
ly elderly white women who stopped by to finger a few knick-
knacks and gossip with my aunt, was a welcome change from 
our life in the country. Out there we hardly saw our neighbors 
(*country people*, my father sneered), apart from the occasional 
Catahoula hound that strayed onto our property, which my fa-
ther chased off with a slingshot. But in Eunice, our mother in-
troduced us kids to a more sociable world. We visited my father’s 
old friend at Wrights’ men’s clothier down the street, with its 
dark racks of gabardine and its air heady with cedar and leather. 
On weekends we danced to Cajun bands at the Liberty Theater 
or took in a movie at the Queen. While our mother worked, we 
sometimes played in the corners of the florist’s shop next door, 
among roses and gardenias, the shelves full of baubles I knew 
better than to touch, where the staff gave us a faintly sweet lemo-

44 On the recruitment of Cajun cultural identity to shore up whiteness (and 
justify the exclusion of people of color), see Sara Le Menestrel, “The Color 
of Music: Social Boundaries and Stereotypes in Southwest Louisiana 
French Music,” *Southern Cultures* 13, no. 3 (September 17, 2007): 96.

ing interminable summer afternoons up and down and around Park Avenue, from the white concrete municipal building at one end, to the playground at the other in its nimbus of shade, our tires thumping over the seams of the sidewalks where the oak roots had split them, our faces scrunched against the glare from parked cars and mowed lawns. In our roaming, we tethered ourselves, by some force of tacit knowledge, to the white and middle-class parts of town. Our parents would not have been able to afford these homes, but we could afford to play along the streets in front of them, unmolested, without anyone’s bothering to call the cops or ask us where our parents were. There were other parts of town, I knew, neighborhoods where Black and brown folk lived, where mothers also sewed and worked and where children rode their bikes and played. (Just as there was another seamstress on the same block as my mother’s shop, a woman of color, whom I never met.) But that knowledge itself, like the fact of my father’s rage, was a thing not to be scratched at, a blank spot that offered no traction to curiosity, wonder, or critical inquiry in my otherwise fertile imagination. A few years later, I would learn to wonder at and inquire into the sources of my father’s rage, even to devote my energies to escaping its power. By then, I would have formed the habit of treating my life as a story, and my father as one of its main characters. But this other knowledge, more grammar than narrative, or a story in which the character of whiteness blotted out the others, has remained opaque for much longer. It was, and is, a kind of primer of the white self, picked up less through explicit instruction than by what rubs off on the flesh, in the shade under the oaks, on a slow summer day.

It was on top of this priming that I began to fashion an intentional self, motivated, in cryptic ways at first, by a desire not to be like my father. Just as my mother adored the artist in him, and just as he admired and encouraged, if he did not necessarily respect, the artistic streak in her, they encouraged my younger brother and me in our creative pursuits. Indeed, my father expected it of us, and at eight or nine, trotting after him with my kid’s toolbox, I still longed to master those manly arts. But for
Christmas one year, Gram gave me a sewing kit. And it filled me with enthusiasm for the work that I now saw my mother do, in the back of her shop, for hours on end. With my own shears, thimble, and laboriously threaded needle, I made my first creation: a pillow that looked less like the strawberry it was supposed to be than an inflamed kidney. My interest in sewing did not survive the divorce. But I like to think that my mother’s practice offered me a different model of labor and art. For my father, each new project demanded a fresh surplus of passion, and once that was spent, or thwarted, the project fizzled out. The house in the country and the store in Eunice in time grew rank to his tastes and were abandoned to the weeds and the bank. But my mother worked differently, steadily, at a pace marked by the hum, halt, click, reverse, and hum again of the Singer, as the fabric bunched and stretched beneath her fingers, pooled in her lap and at her feet. While my father, hunched over his drafting table or walking around a building site, aspired to an aesthetic characterized by its fascination with the rectilinear control of space, my mother poured herself into a discipline of the sinuous and its interruption. A dance of dart and pleat and hem, creating those accents to the body’s natural beauty that, by covering and constraining, give it new ways to express itself. Just as poetry or prose can recruit the rhythms of speech, rhythms that reveal an allure we had almost forgotten, buttoning to undress the mother tongue, allowing us to revel in her dishabille.

It was around then that I began to follow my own line, and books welcomed me into their dark and private corners. I especially loved The Wind in the Willows and Eight Cousins. The travails of Rat and Mole, and Toad’s reckless adventures with his motorcar, transpire amid the comforts of a scaled-down world. Though already a world beset, in subtle ways, by what lies beyond its borders. As Christopher Bollas writes, describing an early scene in the book, “the reader […] discovers that in fact Rat and Mole are experiencing the sunrise, but they cannot see the sun, they only experience its effect on their environment.
The object casts its shadow on the subject.”46 The shadow of the object could describe how the white cis-het masculine subject, having been taught to make objects out of others—or out of the otherness of others’ flesh, and of his own—is informed and deformed by what escapes a structure of possessiveness. What escapes includes the matter of solidarity and care. As a male child, I was learning that my father’s love, present as “the projection of a surface” of emulation, obedience, and desire, was not all. But as a white child, bred up to feel middle-class, I had only an inkling of how love spreads wider than its entanglement with the nuclear family.47 And like any number of white men or women who grow to adulthood without being able to recall, for instance, the first thing about the women of color who minded them as toddlers—beyond the aura of a smile, warming some Manhattan apartment—I had less than an inkling about whose labor sustained our tidy white version of the world. Perhaps that’s why I took to the stories of orphans, following the hardships of Alcott’s Rose, as a bit later I gobbled up Oliver Twist. The literary orphan-story spiritualizes the privileges of the European bourgeoisie. The white orphan girl, in particular, embodies what the disciplines of capitalist exploitation otherwise repress, her femininity a vessel where passion and vulnerability are transformed, under the pressure of a singular sense of virtue, into nurture and

46 Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 38. Bollas’s work expands on Freud’s idea of “the shadow of the object as it falls on the ego,” the object, in its loss, becoming “the hand of the fate” (34). For Bollas, the first such “transformational object” is the mother, who is “known as a complex process of care […] as the infant develops, the ego assumes the transformational function” (51). In other words, the ego assumes the role of care vis-à-vis the self, “inheriting” from the mother the structure of those early relations. Bollas re-writes Freud’s theory of the ego in explicitly relational terms, focusing on the bond between mother and infant. But this focus can also obscure intimacy’s porosity, how intimacy always carries, as it were, shadows of the wider social world.

47 The quoted phrase is Freud’s description of the ego, as cited in Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 67.
care. Dickens’s novels expose the rifts between moral sentiments and the marketplace, but it is Alcott’s book that I treasured. I can still see myself seeing myself as Rose, waiting all day by the skating pond for her cousin, falling ill with a fever from which her uncle nurses her back to health. With chronic headaches at eight or nine years old, was I waiting for my guardian to arrive and bring me up to a proper, healthy whiteness? As a child, I felt precious and fragile, my privilege an eggshell, awaiting a future of cracked ambition and broken love. (Had my mother, herself the eldest of eight, with a mother who had little time for her older children and a father who worked to exhaustion in the fields, been waiting for that guardian, too, when his flesh-and-blood shadow rode into town?)

In fifth grade, I wrote poems for Ms. L—, and I joined the informal sorority that followed her around the playground at recess. *Girls, Dolsy's a catch.* And oh, how I wanted to be. I desired domesticity’s latch on the self, and I saw, or thought I saw, the way whiteness, economic security, and provincial middle-class values could lock it down. After all, what else secured my classmates’ limbs in that confidence they showed on the soccer field, or when passing notes in class, or when running for class president? When I ran for class president, I lost, and I cried, ashamed to have lost and more ashamed to be crying. But I couldn’t help it. My orphan inside “wept.” There were only two Black kids in my class that year, identical twins who (it was rumored) used to swap places without the teacher’s noticing. I think it was Darren with whom I swapped words at recess, new polysyllabic acquisitions like “persistent” and “perpendicular.” He and his brother were friendly and funny and put words together in creative ways that I didn’t understand, like “jack it up.” I used phrases like “public address system” (borrowed from an elderly substitute teacher). Travis, the one white kid who came from a working-class household or a broken home (to us, they were the same), and who had hung around my mother’s shop in an effort to befriend me before the florist chased him off, got expelled for bringing a scalpel to school. Before that, Travis told the class that he believed in evolution. *Some people think that*
mankind was descended from the apes, Ms. L.—had said during a biology lesson. When I said or implied that I believed in evolution—quietly, to two popular girls over lunch, repeating something I only dimly understood about Carl Sagan and the Big Bang—I was told I might be a Satanist. (There was some shouting, then, and tears, I think, all around.) But I craved the discipline that kept lawns trim, that promised to hold at bay the looks and the questions that my own upbringing seemed to provoke. Who’s your Daddy? That’s what almost anyone in a small south-Louisiana town wants to know upon meeting a child. By the time I learned that the answer to this question was not tautological, I had reason to feel that the patronymic could be an ill-fitting thing. Or an omission that one had to atone for by conspicuous good behavior. I felt sure I would gladly trade the latitude I had to enjoy things deemed by my peers’ parents too “adult” (R-rated movies, staying up late on weekends), for freedom from my father’s eccentric regime: the foods we were not permitted to eat (pizza, hot dogs, chewing gum); the tastes and activities we were dissuaded from by sarcasm and disdain (the Boy Scouts, church, team sports, anything on TV with a laugh track). My white classmates had pizza parties and sleepovers, played sports, and prayed with their families every Sunday. They drove ATVs through the rutted fields and roamed their housing tracts in small groups. What are those? they would ask, pointing at my lunch of dried fruit and nuts (never having encountered, perhaps, a pecan outside of a pie or a walnut apart from a sundae). I didn’t mind how it tasted, but I couldn’t stand my lunch for looking so rustic and austere beside the cafeteria’s spread of roast meat, brown gravy, white rice, and glossy buttered rolls.

My parents were early adopters of what we now call a healthy diet, but as in everything, my father hungered for the fanatic’s monopoly on the truth. To the end of his life, he would cite Arnold Ehret, a turn-of-the-century nutritionist who advocated regular fasts, a diet of fruits and leafy vegetables, and strict avoidance of all “mucus-causing” foods. Ehret’s work, as far as I can tell, occupies a transitional zone between Victorian mores about the body and modern clinical approaches to fitness
and health. In one sense, his prescriptions seem ahead of their time, but they also express the moralism of a deep disgust for the body’s functioning. In the dog-eared, brittle little paperback that my father kept among his books, the following passage is underlined:

Perhaps in an entirely healthy condition the so-called mucous membrane should not at all be white, slimy, but clean and red like on animals. Perhaps this “corpse-mucus” is even the cause of the paleness of the white race! Paleface! Corpsecolor!48

Curiously, Ehret’s prescriptions suggest a desire to purge the white body of what, by homology, makes the body white. In this passage, mucus functions as a metonymy, not for whiteness as a racial category, but for the corporeality of that category, which Ehret figures as a form of corruption and decay. And like any number of white men before and after him, he appeals to an image of the primal, the “healthy condition” of “animals,” as a cure for what ails whiteness itself. But Ehret’s book promotes a return to this primal condition as an ascetic practice. My father’s fasts lasted at most a few days at a time. It was my mother who, not long before they split up, once fasted for nearly two weeks straight, subsisting on water and lemon juice. By the end, she lay in the soft well of their feather bed, unable to get up without assistance, her wan face looking scared and severe. I guess she did it, in part, in order to show up my father, forcing him to reckon with the presence of a kind of stamina, a strength of will, that he never could muster. Such was the resistance she offered to his demand that she occupy or be his shadow. Or maybe she merely wanted (as I, too, have wanted, when drawn toward self-harm) to make the pain visible, to surface it (as the ego is “the projection of a surface”). In her case, that might have meant act-

ing out the anguish of years wasted in the composure of a body and a face never allowed to say no. The composure of someone whom her culture has trained to assent to an effort to transcend the inexorable, an effort that becomes her inexorable condition. Just then, that face, whiter than usual, might have said: To escape this, you have to learn how to disappear. To turn into an object, or take refuge among its shadows. Like those that, after days without food, would have begun to cling to her face, its usual softness sharpened into something I didn’t quite recognize.

When I was ten, their marriage broke up, and a car ride delivered my younger brother and me into a new world. Our father was at the wheel of his cherished cloth-top MG, and my brother, five years old, lay curled up on the coupe’s back seat. We drove through a winter thunderstorm to New Orleans, leaving our mother behind. Our father had decided to move the family again. But she refused. She told him that she wanted a divorce. He left, taking his children, the way one might seize, in a huff, household items (the radio, the electric mixer, the flatware). In the MG, the heater, a noisy red box below the passenger seat, incubated our passage. With his hands looming in that tight space, filling me with the raw material for any number of bad adolescent verses to come, he railed against her betrayal. He swore that he could have killed her. I knew he had at least one gun that he kept out of sight, part of some secret phallic armature. If it wasn’t for you two angels, he said, his voice steely in the effort to persuade himself, I would give them what they’ve got coming. Her and her lover, that goddamn cocksucking bastard. The affair, I knew even then, was an expedient fiction, cooked up in order to dignify, before us and himself and the rain-swept night and no one in particular, the fact of his desertion by a woman. The night before (or was it another night thereafter?) the four of us had spent in a motel, my brother and me tucked into a cot at the foot of the room’s double bed. Our parents were discreet, but I woke in the morning to their bare legs under the covers as they
fumbled for their underwear. At first, they presented the break-up in amicable terms. But as the car spirited us away from, yet deeper into, the threat of our father’s rage, I understood how the stage was set. Understood that I could not, for the foreseeable future, take our mother’s side or cry or call for her. My father was the child needing comfort, the sovereign robbed of his pleasure dome, the man possessed. As for my baby brother (born at home, breast-fed until he was a toddler), even before the divorce he had clung to our mother’s body with a child’s foreknowledge that this blessed intimacy, the best he could know, would not last. After their separation, grief dragged him through a series of ailments, from pinworms to pneumonia. I, on the other hand, would do what I have done ever since: I would pretend to be an adult. I would start wearing suspenders, apply myself even more precociously at school, and for that first year, address every adult woman I met with a plaintive Yes, ma’am and No, ma’am. (Good orphans mind their manners.) But on that night, with the windshield streaming, and the road ahead grayed out by sheets of rain, in which taillights shimmered like the trace of something elusive and deferred, our mother — our mother’s flesh, that zone of wonder and shame — became the object shadowed by loss. But what did any of us know of her flesh, to which we owed the comfort and integrity of our own?

What if Daddy’s love was all you had? He had saved us, so he insisted, from the stultification of small-town life, in the grip of which we were bound to become something awful: Baptists, or Republicans. Our mother’s love became an indulgence, along with fast food and watching sitcoms, reserved for two weekends a month. I said I wasn’t allowed to grieve, but in truth, I don’t remember grieving, so readily did I fall back into a groove prepared during those first years of my life, when my father doted on me and touted me and paced me to sleep across the parquet floor. Being a single parent of two young boys must have been difficult and trying. But it was also a domestic idyll, this household of men, with one son responsible and sensitive and compliant, a wife-and-mother surrogate, and the other a boy after his own heart, mischievous and robust. And our father’s
fondness for adventures, braced by a conviction that brooked no reluctance on our part, was catching. We were Rat and Mole and Badger, arming ourselves with pistols and cudgels. We kept a clean house. We rode in a fine motorcar. He took us with him on trips to Mexico for weeks at a time. And whatever we did, his knowledge of the world, while almost never as sound as he believed, commanded a child’s sense of wonder. Look at this old camera—I used to have one just like it. The Acura is the most reliable modern engine in the world. There’s a great book—you should read it—about a man who turns into a cockroach; there’s another one about a man who eats an entire car. Is your toy broken? Let Daddy fix it. Did you hurt yourself? Let Daddy see. We were latch-key kids, but that suited us just fine. It only whetted our sense of self-reliance in the face of a world whose love could not be trusted. Don’t, under any circumstances, open the door to strangers. Especially if they’re from the sheriff’s department.

Now it was our father’s turn to show us the town. I was generally afraid of or embarrassed by my father’s friends, who came to the fore in his new bachelorhood. Like J.D., a lawyer who kept a fancy Lakeshore house in perpetual squalor, mirroring the man himself, an imposing pale heap with a drunk’s glabrous legs. J.D. always had a new conspiracy theory on tap, or a piece of dubious advice—You should get yourself a second social security number, just in case—or worse, a tale of sadism and braggadocio. That fucking cat scratched me, so, you know, I threw it against the wall three or four times. He was the sort of man who, had he been anything other than white, would have wound up in prison long ago. J.D. drew up the divorce papers for my father, putting down the cause as spousal abandonment. Then there was the washed-up movie producer who beat his wife and called our house collect from a Mexican jail; and my father’s favorite client, a real-estate mogul who treated him to steaks and strip clubs but skimped on his fees. White men with an insatiable appetite for possession, which possessed them in turn, like the flabby leather sofa at J.D.’s house that threatened to swallow me as I sat on it, waiting for J.D. and my father to return. But for them, life could
be an abacus of conquests and off-color jokes, an endless supply of moonlit schemes, a raconteur’s paradise.

One of my father’s favorite spots in New Orleans was the Hummingbird Grill and Hotel, a dive on St. Charles Avenue with an ensemble cast of precarious men (and occasionally, their female consorts) in leather and denim and camo, their beards and hair unkempt, their skin chapped by cigarette smoke and the open road and a wind blowing only neglect from the stars. My father kept a cool distance from these characters, but he loved to brag about being there, with the hairs in the hamburgers and the roaches skittering across the floor. An amateur playwright, his feelers alert, I can see him “stand[ing] proudly inclosed within himself,” “a spectator, even when he himself is the one acting.”

49 Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony. 283. For Kierkegaard, the ironist smuggles egoism into the midst of his vaunted negativity. Hence the ironist’s negativity is but a ruse, its critical incisiveness but a cheap trick: “It cannot really be said that the ironist places himself outside and above morality and ethics, but he lives far too abstractly, far too metaphysically and esthetically to reach the concretion of the moral and the ethical.” For the ironist, the very activity of judging becomes the badge of his superiority, its rabbit’s foot. But the irony that haunts the ironist is that the peerage to which he aspires remains elusive. It cannot, by definition, include those whom the ironist judges as being incapable of irony, the run-of-the-mill, mediocre, Philistine crowd, Hegel’s “honest souls.” Nor can it include those marginalized by the dominant morality. The latter serve merely as objects for his possessive gaze. The ironist may convince himself that he has cashed out of the rat race, but he has not cleared his debt to domination. It’s just that he wants to dominate in virtue of himself. In other words, not on account of his embodiment of the common marks of privilege and power (his whiteness and masculinity). He’s astute enough to feel, in some measure, the emptiness of those. But for him, his own astuteness knows no limits, so he deceives himself still. His identification qua white man hinges on the possession of some cryptic potential. But as Kierkegaard writes, the ironist “continually collides with the actuality to which he belongs.”

Kierkegaard’s critique of irony, and of the concept into which he develops it, the demonic, provides some phenomenological language for thinking about the abstract character of white cis het masculine identities, abstract in their metonymic relation to a nation of universal subjects.
self in pursuit of the real. *Your mother always hated it here.* At ten or eleven, I felt shame in proximity to these tough, ragged customers. I felt my body’s vulnerability, its fragility, as if their looks of having seen the other side of something, the undercarriage of their own desires, might prove contagious. But the budding ironist in me could already trace something similar in my father, with his icy gray eyes and high forehead and prematurely white hair. I squirmed at how those eyes hovered too long over the young women who waited on us at restaurants and department stores. How he called them *sweetheart,* or cracked a joke at their expense, the words spoken with a coyness that masked the care taken to secure his dentures while he spoke. And with a note of desperation, as his cool, aquiline handsomeness yielded, with age, to a hunger more basilisk-like. And like him, I fantasized about the lives of those men who tenanted the Hummingbird Hotel, tramping up and down a dark stairway beside the alcove where I fed quarters to the console that chimed with cheap thrills, playing Spyhunter or Pac-Man. Itinerant and, I presumed, lonely lives, they held out, in my ignorance of whatever hardship or trauma might have hounded them, a different kind of promise. A further edge of disintegration, in the flesh, having the courage to mortify the latter (my mother, fasting) and to sever its ties (my mother, leaving us). They promised,

conceived as equal in rights and opportunities, and equally abstract in their differentiation from others on the basis of a series of metaphoric binaries (white/Black, male/female, etc.) in which one term is imagined as superior to the other. Both of these modes of abstraction collide with the reality down on the ground, where most us have to work for a buck, trying not to get screwed over, fighting back the tears we forgot long ago how to shed, and mistaking our anger for dignity and courage. Or perhaps we should say that these abstractions collide with each other on the terrain of that reality, which far from diminishing their salience, requires it. As Dana Nelson argues, “what men are symbolically promised by national/white manhood is almost never what they get: a space where men can step out of competitive, hierarchically ordered relations and experience the rich emotional mutuality of fraternal sameness” (*National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity the White Men* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1998], 19). See also Wiegman, *American Anatomies,* 170.
perhaps, a primal courtship of the object’s “dispossessive force.” Outside, it was Mardi Gras, the loaded crowd jockeying for a good spot to see the parades, shouting, cursing, elbowing their way to the curb, struggling to keep their costumes together, baring their flesh. Above the other revelers bobbed three giant phalluses of peach-colored foam. The three of us had staked out a booth at the Hummingbird after craning for a glimpse of Zulu along a packed meridian, and now we waited for Rex. At some point that day, a beer can struck my brother in the head. But we toughed it out until the Krewe of Comus, the last parade of the season, wound its way through the emptying and fetid streets, flanked by a troupe of white-clad torchbearers. It was a spectacle of white pride and terror, insisting that “plantation power” prevail even amid carnival misrule.50 And our perseverance paid off, for the thinning crowds meant that we reaped handfuls of loot as Comus rolled through the swill and trash, torch-lit argosies of patrician largesse and jealously guarded power.

50 Clyde Woods, Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta (New York: Verso, 2017). This would have been one of the last public appearances of the “Mystic Krewe of Comus.” After the passage, in 1991 and at long last, of a New Orleans City ordinance mandating the desegregation of the Mardi Gras krewes, this oldest of the officially recognized organizations forewent parading altogether rather than integrate. On the history of Mardi Gras as a legally enshrined institution by which the white elite of New Orleans sought to discipline and displace the carnivalesque traditions of the working classes and communities of color, see Joseph Roach, Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1–25. Writing on the history of Mardi Gras parades and balls, Roach notes that these “upper class performances by a closely knit aristocracy” have served as sites to reinforce homosocial bonds among white men of property, even as they “express a kind of two-faced panic — queasy resignation punctuated by eruptions of outrage — that local government and its laws are passing from the control of white people” (265). Such performances provide a platform “where images of violent ridicule may stand in for violent action.” Incidentally, the torchbearers or flambeaux of Comus were originally enslaved men and later free men of color, although membership in the Krewe itself has always been restricted to whites.
In those years, the movies were our babysitter. Our father would drop us off at Joy’s Dollar Theater for a few hours while he met with a client or went out on a date. Sometimes we missed the first half of the feature and had to watch it out of sequence, or else we killed time in the Taco Tico next door. These were nights of grease and patience, in palaces of sovereign misrecognition. We became adept at waiting. We waited, with the feel of old upholstery pilling under our legs, eating stale popcorn and sucking on the last of the Coke we shared, for an audience with the selves that we longed to be, or that we felt compelled to desire. In the movies we loved, there was no need for patience and no hesitation. The Terminator terminates. With his cape and his scowl, Michael Keaton cleans up Gotham, and Robin Williams as Mr. Keating commands all the white boys’ love, including, one might imagine, Christian Slater’s gleaming skater and those irreverent imbeciles Bill and Ted. Icons of a misfit but saccharine masculinity, these white guys asserted the power granted by their social identity, either by gratuitous violence in a world skewed from the norm, or by irony and humor in world too straight-laced for its own good.51 They promised us that the or-

51 I owe my frame for reading these films to Sally Robinson’s trenchant look at works of literature and film from the late twentieth century that center the angst of white cishet men. Robinson reads these texts as expressive of the ways in which feminism, the Civil Rights movement, and identity politics have rendered the white cishet male body visible as a particular kind of body, thereby marking it as potentially “other” (as opposed to the “unmarked” status of the subject whose race, gender, and sexuality are taken as the universal, hegemonic norm). Robinson argues that these texts take masochistic pleasure in depicting this embodiment as traumatic—a claim compatible with my suggestion that some ways of embodying privilege can be understood according to Kierkegaard’s model of the demonic. See Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). On the uses that such narratives of white male angst make of the representation of Blackness, see Hazel Carby, “Encoding White Resentment: Grand Canyon — A Narrative for Our Times,” in *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education*, eds. Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (New York: Routledge, 1993), 236–48. Hollywood’s sentimental revision of patriarchal white
der that most benefits elite white men might coexist with compassion and justice, spontaneity and love. And when it was over, we waited in the lobby, sometimes with a couple of quarters for the arcade games, which were quickly spent, as though in an airlock where we prepared for re-entry into the hot and motherless night. I didn’t have trouble keeping my brother occupied, for he would sit rapt in concentration, drawing or playing with a toy. Already he showed signs of the physical and mental stamina that, as he grew up, would allow him to take comfort in working himself to exhaustion, a mother’s gift to her stubborn baby boy. His hero in those years was Robocop, the cyborg struggling to retain his humanity in service to corporate greed and the police state. But if my brother would substitute those parts of himself touched by our mother with the hardness and polish of a machine, my most heroic wish was for a different body, larger, older, more capable, more graceful, more lovable. Which was also a wish for disembodiment, or self-effacement, as the prerequisite to self-possession. In sight of the teens and pre-teens who gathered at the movies together, I suffered, not from loneliness, but from the shame of being there alone. I had only the company of this child who, once my partner in mischief and make-believe, was increasingly my responsibility: his feet dangling from the seat, his toes in his Buster Brown sandals a scandal of immaturity. I fidgeted on the bench where we waited, shredding a napkin or empty paper cup, gradually awakening to the fact that Daddy’s love was not, and had never been, all. That it left a large and growing gap that demanded, somehow, to be filled. Around us in the lobby, most of the other kids were Black. In relation to them, I took up, as a foregone conclusion, the white Southern man’s sense that we — the nameless they and the blameless I — could not be friends, that we had nothing in common, ex-supremacy, coming at the tail end of the cokehead decade, as bankers and financiers danced on the grave of the welfare state, dovetails with what neoliberal politicians during this period dubbed “family values,” a renewed investment in Oedipal spectacles that transfigure political and economic violence into narratives of personal loss and private failure.
cept for our common awareness of the history and the current conditions that rendered us socially unequal. And I tasted, and buried in myself, the white Southerner’s embarrassment at this riven commonality, which is the unease with which one makes an object of judgment out of someone whose judgment one is afraid to reckon with. Even as I failed to individuate them, the Black kids, so I felt, could surely see right through me. In their presence, my white flesh felt like some clumsily held secret, a purloined thing. And even as I failed to grasp the extent of the disparity between us — and the forms of violence and plunder that produced it out of white people’s greed and fear — I missed, too, whatever we might have had in common. Like the fact that some of those Black boys and girls had younger siblings in their care, because their parents, not unlike mine, could not afford a babysitter. But solidarity melts into the whiteness whose heir you are, and I stayed put.

A supplement to the “absence of culture” characteristic of middle-class whiteness, Hollywood fantasy, as James Baldwin argues, projects a counterfeit privacy in place of public life.52 With the lights down, the senses are bombarded to create a kind of cult space, a collective form of inclosing reserve. There violence becomes redemptive, romantic love triumphs, and history hardly exists, in an apocryphal, apocalyptic time devoted to the restoration of the secret of whiteness as self-enclosure. Walking out of the movies on a Sunday, with the hammered light

52 In “The Devil Finds Work,” James Baldwin tells the story of American racism and patriarchal white supremacy through the lens of Hollywood cinema, for Hollywood has always taught white Americans how they should understand race. This teaching typically happens by erasing the relevance of race, as white heroes and heroines do their thing in a world devoid of people of color, or where non-white characters are either villains, props, or oracles of a sentimental minstrelsy. They are objects, in short, for the white characters’ and the presumptively white audience’s wish fulfillment. On whiteness and “the absence of culture,” see David Roediger, Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History (London: Verso, 2000), 13. On classic Hollywood cinema and the construction of whiteness, see also Dyer, White.
of late afternoon above the heat-soaked cement and asphalt of
the suburbs, my body ushered me toward a melancholy that
I couldn’t understand, although I dreaded it, whatever it was:
another night of homework, another week of school, another
week without seeing our mother, puberty, adulthood, the final
loneliness of waiting for that thing you always wanted to justify
the strength with which you wanted it. There may have been,
gathering in the lobby, an abundance beyond these returns, but
it was lost on me. When I got home, I devoured the rest of a V.C.
Andrews novel. Its embossed paperback cover promised a B-
movie luridness, and its blue-eyed, blond-haired orphans, at the
mercy of sadistic relatives, pursued an incestuous romance that
would have made my rosy Victorian alter ego blush. A book-
ish Black girl in my class had turned me onto those novels as
I watched them engross her during recess. I wanted reason to
blush. Especially in my father’s presence, I was a put thing, a
kind of human putty, my energies bent on anticipating where
he wanted me to be, what he wanted me to say. As soon as you’re
around your Dad, my mother told me back then, you just shut
up like a telescope. Under my father’s I, I longed for the stars.
But gazing at the stars, we read as destiny a light projected out
of the past. A past that was itself the shadow of something prior.
Or the fold of terror and trauma, the ravages of an insatiable
appetite for domination, and the love and hope that sustain the
resistance to it. A fold compressed, by the persistence of that ap-
petite, into a failure to reckon with any of it.

In this telescoping of the nuclear and the national, in this
tunnel hollowed out by Hollywood in the wreckage of our times,
our mother’s rejection of our father gave him license him to re-
enate a primal fantasy of his own. He was in high school when
he found out that his mother was having an affair with a young
serviceman, hardly three years his senior. His parents were es-
tranged but not yet divorced. My grandfather, an itinerant elec-
trician during the Depression and the War, cut a distant but po-
tent figure in my father’s life. Daddy never laid a finger on us, but
he wouldn’t take shit from any man. He laid flat more than one
boss who spoke to him in a way he didn’t like. As for my grand-

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mother, whom the town knew her whole life as Baby, she spoke to everyone in the way she liked, whether they liked it or not. In her teens, Baby had played piano at the picture show whenever it came to town. And well into her eighth decade, decked out in costume jewelry under Shirley Temple curls, Baby was still a flirt and a card, modeling Hollywood’s “white chick” with aplomb. She was also the family’s matriarch, coddled and defended by her doting sons. On this occasion, however, having caught Baby and her new beau sneaking into the house late one night, my father felt hailed to protect the patronymic. Lacking Daddy’s physique, he fetched the latter’s revolver and aimed it at the beau’s head. I imagine that the scene—lit by an outdoor light outside their big house on the corner, under the magnolias, which would have lent the hot night, full of sweat and feral cat and perfume, a shade of cream—was stolen by Baby herself. For instead of shooting, my father went off to sulk, and he was still sulking many years later when our mother’s No startled him like a cat jumping out of the magnolias. And again, reaching for his gun, he reached for a prop that didn’t fit, in a lovers’ tangle that left him crying out against his dispossession by the objects that he had been taught possessively to desire, and by the self that, as the reserve of those desires, had become objectified in turn. Crying out with no language for what ailed him, except for this confusion of tongues, these apocrypha flanking him—flanking us—on all sides.53

53 “Confusion of tongues”: the phrase comes from Sándor Ferenczi, who reminded Freud that the development of neurosis is not a matter only of the child’s desire. Ferenczi’s work suggests that the self-regulative subject is formed by passionate identification with a desire or need she is not ready for, a desire or need imposed on her by adults, and which comes laden with guilt and habits of self-reproach. What is contagious, on Ferenczi’s model, is desire and judgment (criticism). See Ferenczi, “Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child,” Contemporary Psychoanalysis 24, no. 2 (July 1, 1988): 196–206.
Driving from Baton Rouge toward Eunice on I-10, the Appian Way of south Louisiana's petrochemical empire, you pass above neighborhoods where working-class Black communities live in the shadow of a prosperity that their labor has secured, cut off by the interstate from the wealthy neighborhoods around the university, and sitting downwind from the toxic clouds spewed night and day by Exxon and Dow. Then you traverse a long stretch of swampland submerged by man-made overflow from the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers, the causeway hemmed by a deep silence on either side. We made that trip countless times, barreling or crawling down that corridor of commerce and leisure and contraband. Those weekend visits were over almost before they began, our parents meeting stiffly to hand off the children in the parking lot of a truck stop or at the curb outside a granite-faced courthouse under live oaks. And yet, those weekends with our mother, even more than an afternoon at the movies, offered the reprieve of another kind of privilege, another kind of time. A time not structured by anxiety, but open to other senses dormant in the flesh: silliness and laughter, sadness and grief, excitement, and a serious and honest mutual confidence, in which secrets could be shared. Hers was not our father's privacy, which was neither private enough for me, nor something we were allowed to share with anyone, having been sworn to uphold a paranoid fraternity. Scraping by on Pell grants (she had gone back to college) and a meager income from dressmaking, our mother worked night shifts at Taco Bell, squirting sour cream and guacamole out of industrial-size tubes, before returning to her shop to finish a batch of bridesmaids' gowns, sitting up till dawn under a lamp that, as I imagined it, defied the snug darkness of the town and the wider darkness of the fields beyond. When we stayed with her, for the first year or so, we stayed in that shop, bathing in the bathroom's industrial sink and eating microwave dinners. But we defied the night together, cruising in her used Impala, which was green and barge-like, over the town's quiet streets and along its one commercial strip, and up and down the back roads that held, in the dappled afternoon shade of their curves, the promise of
a fresh start and a new life: the ramshackle Victorian-era mansions in Iota and New Iberia that she loved; the aunts and uncles and cousins whose homes were full of family and food and gossip and lore. Someday soon I’ll buy a house, and my babies can come live with me. In the meantime, as far as she could stretch her funds, our mother attended to our clothes, teeth, haircuts, and other aspects of child-rearing that our father was prone to miss. Of course, my mother’s pluck expressed her privilege, too, particularly in the jobs and loans that she, a newly single woman, was allowed to get, her whiteness ensuring (at least, often enough) that the door wouldn’t be shut in her face. She was encouraged to face forward, to look toward the love up ahead. But in the meantime, we traded stories about our silly crushes, she and I, with Bonnie Raitt’s velvet voice on the tape deck and my baby brother pestering us from the back seat. Always a little heady inside with exhaust fumes, her Impala reminded me of the vintage Cadillac that my father had owned, but it was unencumbered by the latter’s status as a privileged object, something one might be judged against and might not deserve. The car embarrassed my mother but not me, who was by then embarrassment’s boon companion. Riding in that car, I felt somehow free. I’m not sure I ever allowed myself to believe that we would live with our mother again. But those weekends with her taught me how to indulge in fantasies untouched by the desperate edge of my father’s desires. Or rather, in the cut across our lives made by that desire and its despair, my mother and I could find a reprieve in fantasy together. From her I learned what it means to have, and to be, a confidante.

That confidence had to sustain me on the long drive back to Baton Rouge, with the water spreading to the horizon in both directions, a brown-green mirror broken by cypress knees and now and then a solitary fisherman’s shack. With dusk closing in, the gas flares began to burn at the refineries, towers of flame in the night sky. On those drives, the sunset dilated the world into a kind of golden ache, and time bled away from us more rapidly than usual, pooling in our wake as a homesickness we were always running from. A homesickness we were learning to repress.
or to channel into other desires. It was around then, at age twelve or thirteen, that I awoke to the outward shape of my flesh: its willowy frame; its musculature weak and clumsy; and above all, the deformity that pressed my ribs into a peak at the sternum, like a bird’s beak, or a life-form about to burst from my chest. *Bruh, check out this shit! Somebody better call Ripley!* That deformity became, for me, the most acute point on a hyper-sensitive exoskeleton, grafting onto my senses a vigilance about how I looked. I stood with my arms folded across my chest. Walking down a crowded street, I checked my reflection in the store windows, hoping to throw this other character off my track. And now I encountered my father, too, as an explicit object of judgment. Daddy’s love had become a liability, with his penchant for coddling and cursing, and his wiry aging body, and his hot temper, with his silk shirts and zebra-striped sheets, and the leather “purse” he wore slung across his torso, which mortified me less by its presence than on account of his propensity to call it that in public. *Boys, why didn’t you say something? Daddy almost forgot his purse!* Why, indeed. And why can’t Daddy be more like other adults? Like those who I imagined my peers’ parents to be, solid in their whiteness, faithful in their allegiance to middle-class Southern values? Above all, I feared the shades of the demonic in him, suspecting that his strained protest against the world’s good graces would alienate those whose approval I sought. And I disapproved of his disapproval of them, these *fat stupid Americans*, these *goddamn Baptists*, these *bloody Republicans*.

We had moved to Baton Rouge, a bastion of white Southern Baptist Republicans, where we lived in a sprawling apartment complex called Eden Point. Beside its sign’s huge apple, at the edge of a highway without sidewalks and flanked by culverts, I caught the bus to Sherwood Forest Middle School. Such is the mythopoieia of white supremacy with which Baton Rouge abounds: a town of gated subdivisions, flagrant political corruption, and flagrant prejudice; a trading post in the swamp that fancies itself a city on the hill. In New Orleans, I had been learning how to make friends. But now the task was not to make friends but to fit in. The signs of election began with being white and middle-
class, a sorting abetted by the curricular tracking that assigned us “gifted and talented” students to our own classes, segregated from the working-class Black students, whom the school system never bothered to test for talents nor grant an audition for their gifts. Beyond that, election rested on the distinctions by which the white American middle class tries to transcend itself. Who wore Girbaud jeans, with their designer label sewn right onto the fly, and who made do with Lees or Levi’s. Or worse, with Wranglers and hand-me-downs, like polyester pants shrunken in the dryer. *Doesn’t your mom know how to do laundry?* Who had the latest Nikes or Reeboks, and who shopped at Payless. Or worse, whose name-brand sneakers, brought back from a trip to Mexico, proudly acquired by haggling with a street vendor in seventh-grade Spanish, were, in fact, knockoffs. Who didn’t know enough to remove the “fag tag” from his shirts. Who lived in which subdivisions. *White Oaks, Pleasant Pines, White Pines:* their names were homonyms, sharpening the effect. Mastery of the distinctions was itself a mark of distinction. I was never invited to play in those preserves of wealth and spiritual health. To be off-brand, that was my lot.

To be off-brand was to run scared within the ranks of white privilege, praying to pass muster. With limbs flailing to catch the football, to dodge the dodgeball, somehow to stand under but also to avoid the softball in its excruciating, tumescent descent toward the outfield, where I had hoped to escape notice, but now all eyes followed the ball to my failure’s foregone conclusion. Or in the locker room, where my passive disposition provoked a fascinated cruelty; where I could be hoisted by the throat; where I smelled like onion rings; where there was no dodging other bodies, and the flesh was a thing I could get no purchase on, the theme of coded, salacious talk and the object of taunts and terror. To wrest self-possession from there was to train your feelings and fantasies and desires in a direction toxic to them, and to misrecognize this fact, as though toxicity
were sweet. With envy whetted against shame, to listen rapt to cherub-faced white boys wearing leather bomber jackets as they told tales of sexual conquest, and to laugh loudly as they taunted their exes to the tune of Guns N’ Roses: Back off, bitch! And the girls, too, had to laugh it off, learning that white femininity required of them this tolerance for obnoxious behavior that could veer, without warning, into something far more severe. And for me, to be thrilled at being in on the joke — as if cruelty were something that could carry us, our voices giddy and aloft, across the sky, leaving our bodies back on earth — was only to stand, waiting, beside a swagger that did not suit me, longing for an intimacy with these girls on terms that I could not express. Not in my father’s language, not in the language of these boys. With the soft voice on the phone saying, My friend Sarah likes you, do you like Sarah? I felt something like time itself leaking out of my chest, and it left a mother of a hole. And in that hole, I heard myself yelling, I don’t know! Leave me alone! There was an overnight field trip, we were in a hotel. The other boys found a soft-core channel, which cast a blue hush on the room. As when my father, years before, had taken me to horror movies or whatever other R-rated fare he desired, I watched through thatched fingers, seeing nothing but myself on the edge of myself. A boy’s leather bomber jacket lay draped over the back of a chair, its lining silkscreened with a map of the world.

Renunciation became my secret study: to be ready, at all times, to renounce love, for only this readiness can equip you for the

54 Quoting Silvan Tomkins, this desire might also be described as an attachment to “the good scenes that we can never permanently achieve or possess,” but the pursuit of which embroils us in an endless rehearsal: we keep staging what should represent the site of boundless satisfaction, but which inevitably bottoms out in disappointment and/or punishment (Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader, ed. Irving E. Alexander [Durham: Duke University Press, 1996], 183). Tomkins refers to these compulsive performances as “nuclear scripts.” Nuclear scripts trap the self in a “mini-maximizing,” all-or-nothing logic. They urge us on to melodrama, which is, of course, how white Americans shield themselves from tragedy, though they don’t manage to escape farce.
failure that plagues the power not to fail. This thought arms Kierkegaard’s demonic individual. It weaponizes the blankness of whiteness itself. “There was to be no more giving of myself — all giving was to be outlawed henceforth under a new name, and that name was waste.”55 What did I know about waste? But it was my body’s study. Ashamed of being so skinny, and in defiance of our father’s policed portions at lunch and dinner, I turned defiance inward and curbed my appetite. The brown bag lunch he carefully prepared — the sandwich in wax paper, with its single, slippery slice of turkey or ham; the apple, bruised on one side, squishing the sandwich on the other, and filling the bag with a noisome sweetness — got chucked every morning into the dumpster by the bus stop. Daddy’s love came from a place of deep hunger. I knew that much, and I vowed to stamp out the same in myself. You got to step into it, bring it to you, between your right arm and your chest. Put it in the breadbasket. Dolsy, put it in the goddamn breadbasket! Try as he might to teach me, I could never catch a football. My chest, I felt, could hold no bread, nor could it stop a projectile hurled with that love’s force. I taught myself to dodge Daddy’s love, and I shrank into myself. With my backpack heavy with homework, I cultivated Victorian passions. Awake in my lower bunk, my clam-shell headphones throbbing, I thought about certain white girls in my class who seemed, through some rumored experience or secret trauma, to have been stranded ahead of their years, and in my mind, they led me by the hand back to some botanical attic where, in each other’s arms, we could be children again. What did I know about sex, beyond a few verbal fetishes shared with my little brother, like “crotch-piece,” a nonce word borrowed from the partible bodies of our G.I. Joes? But the flesh knew itself as partible, and soggy as bread, and full of a noisome sweetness. I broke my arm and wrote a poem. I held my cast gingerly against the small of a classmate’s back at the eighth-grade prom, our bodies themselves like plaster casts protecting what we didn’t know about

ourselves. I held Sarah’s hand, limply, for the space of a few tight breaths, in the bleachers at the homecoming game. We didn’t know that we already knew what it was to be bruised by love and time. Under the glare of the halide lights, the bodies of the players, mostly Black, collided on the field below.

The radio and MTV sponsored our senses, rallying us with anthems by C+C Music Factory. Crushing, we drank from the gospel swoon of Boyz II Men and Whitney Houston. Bobbing our heads to Bell Biv DeVoe, we tasted something that raised the hair on the backs of our necks, as the beat sent shudders past the edge of what we understood. Our flesh was the hem of a garment that we touched, longing to be cured. But the poison that ailed us wasn’t a girl. It was the distillate of a structure that granted our bodies the power to fail at others’ expense, and to profit by their pain. We consumed Black pain, repackaged and commodified. We white boys sagged our jeans and salted our speech with “bruh.” With the white girls in our grade, we made an enclosure of our bodies on the cement porch of McKinley Magnet High, inside a driveway separated by razor wire from the wooden-frame houses of a neighborhood that stood blocks away from the heart of planter affluence, rife with private security, manicured azaleas, and white colonnades. The vice-principal, a military-cut white man in a Sears-green polyester suit, strode up and down the halls with a wooden paddle at his side. We white boys cultivated cruelty in our voices and our postures — the cruelty that watched behind my father’s eyes, that strikes at the gut, that sounds too much like love. We regaled each other and rolled our eyes, we shoved and joshed and egged each other on. We embodied the logic of “plantation power” that Clyde Woods has written about, keeping to our tight, cruel circle, policing our pyramid, while the meaty paramilitary arm of the state put the screws to all those who, against the white screen of our self-love, passed by in silhouette.\textsuperscript{56} Collectively,

\textsuperscript{56} Woods, Development Arrested, chronicles the struggles of Black communities in the Mississippi delta against the power of white elites in
we ignored, avoided, and neglected our Black classmates, like
the Black neighbors we avoided and the Black workers we ig-
nored or talked down to. I have no doubt that there were more
overt forms of racism at work around me, too, the overtness
of which I was being trained to miss. But from the Blackness
in our milieu, we white kids leached a language and a kind of
hunger for being, which lit up our insides with feelings that we
had no name for. Feelings borne of the radiance of a history of
resilience that held no meaning for us as anything but feeling.
And what was that feeling, for us, but the nimbus of moments
promising a taste of our potential as it evaporated into the pres-
ent? In the foyer of the state capitol, the waxed tiles rang with
the coming and going of a grand old power, a power undaunted
by the scandal of its brutality and proud, even, of its corrupt,
predatory drive. This was the power of “a regime that elevated
armed robbery to a governing principle.”57 There a young white
man in a suit approached our Youth in Legislature group and
singled me out for an officious pump of his hand. Welcome to the
capitol, son. I’m your state representative, David Duke. He had a
voice smooth and dangerous as oil. Did my home-school hair-
cut and hand-me-down cardigan (the dressiest article I could
muster) declare me ripe for radicalization? Or was it something
else? Except when in the classroom, where the allure of being a
white-lady teacher’s pet proved irresistible, I studied how to be
innocuous, inconspicuous, incognito. I gave assent when it was
required, but hardly ever with fervor. I occupied the shadow of
a participatory distance — part envy, part desire to please — that

the South and in Washington, who collude to keep the poor in this fertile
region as vulnerable as possible. Their strategy proves effective in part
by its ability to lure working-class whites away from the solidarity they
should pursue with their Black counterparts. But Woods’s book is also a
paean to the knowledge and spiritual power of those Black communities,
which cultivate ways of knowing that whites appropriate and commodify
precisely because they cannot learn from them, ways of knowing that
threaten white comfort and white profits.

57 Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”
was calculated not to offend, posing no threat to those who felt entitled to be in charge. At the same time, my posture spelled, inside every offer of submissiveness, a refusal to disclose, my shoulders slouched, my eyes trained on the distance or the floor. *Hunched over like a professor,* my father said. And that refusal itself, like a thing soldered to the body, bore the stamp of Daddy’s love.

One need not endorse the likes of a David Duke to profit by the latter’s work on behalf of white privilege and power. The social distance between the devil and a good conscience is often great, but the moral distance is often not. My classmates and I back then knew that we weren’t like Duke or the people who supposedly supported him.58 (*Gross,* they giggled when he was out of earshot. *You’d better wash your hand!*) But some or many of us might have grown up to resemble a different young white man. He is the anonymous bystander, one of the faces in the leering, callous carousel of the mob or the crowd. But he has persuaded himself that he stands out because, although very much a party to the crowd’s violence or neglect, he can play it cool. With his hands clean, he thinks he knows where he stands. James Baldwin describes him well:

> The bar was very crowded, and our altercation had been extremely noisy; not one customer in the bar had done anything to help us. When it was over, and the three of us stood at the bar trembling with rage and frustration [...] a young

58 Even this supposition was a lie secreted by the good conscience of middle- and upper-class whites. In fact, what catapulted Duke to legitimacy in Louisiana politics was the support of suburban voters outside New Orleans, upstanding citizens determined to improve their property values. Which determination has ever been the engine of white supremacy in the United States. Such people might cast their vote and keep their conscience intact in part because the mainstream media persisted in depicting Duke as the standard-bearer for poor whites in north Louisiana, ne’er-do-wells flying Confederate flags from their pickups (rather than business owners and high school principals who kept their Confederate memorabilia at home).
white man standing near us asked if we were students. I suppose he thought that this was the only possible explanation for our putting up a fight. I told him that he hadn’t wanted to talk to us earlier and we didn’t want to talk to him now. The reply visibly hurt his feelings, and this, in turn, caused me to despise him. But when one of us, a Korean War veteran, told this young man that the fight we had been having in the bar had been his fight, too, the young man said, “I lost my conscience a long time ago,” and turned and walked out.59

By making small talk with Baldwin’s group, perhaps this young man wished to affirm his superiority to the racism on display in the bar. But when confronted with his own failure in this instance (a failure of nerve, perhaps, or a failure to be conscientious, but a refusal, at any rate, of the solidarity that the moment offered and demanded), he abdicated responsibility. The conviction of having lost your conscience, answering here to the visibility of hurt feelings, reminds me of what Kierkegaard calls “demonic anxiety” or “anxiety about the good.”60 (Such a conviction, depending on the depth of its hold on you, might also be what, in another work, Kierkegaard describes as the most dangerous form of despair.)61 Preferring a kind of hardened, sclerotic sense of actuality (“I lost my conscience a long time ago”) to the possibility of being otherwise that failure discloses, demonic anxiety, which is the wellspring of inclosing reserve, chooses unfreedom in order to preserve its freedom of choice. In other words, by abdicating your responsibility, you

59 James Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time,” in Collected Essays, 318–19. Baldwin and two Black companions had been refused service in the Chicago airport by a white bartender because, according to the latter, they “looked too young.”

60 Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, 118–54.

seek to protect your sovereignty, denying others any claim on the meaning, or the meaninglessness, of your acts. For the visibility of your feelings, the visibility of your hurt, threatens that cryptic sense of possession, threatens the apocrypha by which you recognize yourself. (Sometimes, staying with our mother for the weekend, we visited other people’s homes. Not the bachelor pads of my father’s bosom friends — J.D.’s Toad Hall, or the Episcopal priest’s hushed house, with its leather-bound classics and operas on laser disc — but the homes of what I took to be typical families. White, ostentatiously middle-class families in suburban enclaves, where the kids played outside until the food was on the table, with plenty for seconds, too. Families, as it seemed, without stories, where happiness was punctual as it is in dreams sometimes, the distillate of moments without precedent or consequence. Playing hide-and-seek by flashlight with kids from the neighborhood. Racing and splashing in the pool. Shooting basketball on a driveway — no gym-class hierarchy, no taunts and jeers. Watching cable TV from a sprawling sofa set while gorging ourselves on pizza. Here, perhaps, was a privacy that didn’t require you to disappear.)

The young man who had conveniently lost his conscience was, Baldwin tells us, “typical.” Typical of a nation founded on the loss or setting aside of conscience in the interest of profit and plunder. A nation committed to its apocryphal stories. If the word “conscience” implies a knowing-with, a sharing or entanglement of knowledge that lays the foundation for responsibility, then I will have lost my conscience whenever I disavow my responsibility for others. Including those whom white America excludes from the stories that it tells about itself. In these stories, privacy is always emerging into the fullness of forgetting what it hides from itself as well as what it excludes. (Such privacy remains a liminal zone. It may welcome you across the threshold,  

62 “[T]he self in despair,” writes Kierkegaard, “wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be, to determine what he will or will not have in his concrete self” (ibid., 69).
but not to stay. Because you are a poor relative or because your mother is earning extra money as the caretaker for the family's adult cousin, and you happen to be white. But you do the dishes without being told, and the white ladies in the house, drinking daiquiris on a Sunday morning, shower you with praise. *You'll make some woman very happy someday.* The demonic promise of having lost my conscience entails a repudiation of my role in history, for the word “history” refers to how I am entangled with all the others, living and dead. My flesh — this flesh, exceeding or escaping the possessive — is the skein of that entanglement. Entanglement is rife with fear and trembling. Such anxiety, for Kierkegaard, is the precondition of freedom. (My brother, meanwhile, would embarrass me by hanging onto our mother, clamoring for her attention, lapsing into the baby talk that made her cross. But he needed her crossness as much as her comfort, needed all of it, squeezed into the space of a weekend twice a month.) But in the demonic subject, this anxiety, this necessarily “entangled freedom,” strives to remain “entangled […] in itself,” turning inward and away from that riskier engagement that m/others us to ourselves as beings in the world.63 As Kierkegaard suggests, anxiety arises because “the individual,” in sinning, replays the history of “the race.”64 Having a conscience does not mean being free from sin; it means confronting it. As a white man, whenever I choose not to confront and contravene the history of patriarchal white supremacy, I prolong and perpetuate it. Choosing not to be tested, having persuaded myself that I am not brave enough.

The story bunches under my fingers, and I risk knotting the thread, breaking the seam. But I am trying to find my way, in words, toward what passes by touch, by the avoided presence and promise of touch. Trying to find my way along the seam traced by James Baldwin when he writes about the white American “terror of any human touch, since any human touch

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63 Ibid., 49.  
64 Ibid., 28–29.
My mother’s touch tried to teach me how to handle my anxiety. (Reaching across the table to squeeze my hand, in a booth at Pizza Hut, tall glasses of root beer between us and greasy pieces of crust.) If a touch changes you, does it do so like “the leap” on which Kierkegaard dwells, whereby sin enters the world, and also faith? Even if you don’t know at the time, or ever, that you have been changed? My mother, who had always wanted a daughter, tried to teach me how to listen to the women who would come into my life. (I wasn’t trying to turn you into girl. I wanted to raise you differently, that’s all. Beyond the windows, beyond the parking lot, spread the darkness of a night whose solitude she knew too well.) Does touch jump the frame in which Western philosophy depicts time as an inner sense, a self-awareness recording the passage of sensation and abstracting from this passage to the idea of an objective chronology valid for everyone everywhere? Does inclosing reserve express the folding in on itself of that sense of time, its buckling inadequacy to how we live and feel? As my mother knew, as her touch testified, typical white men become themselves through performances that defer the anxiety that they cannot escape. Boasting to test your credulity. Ready, always, to make someone else the butt of a joke. Busy explaining the world and themselves so as not to hear what others have to say. Policing themselves and others. It’s like living on the edge of your own body, racing against some secret, on the lam from scenes of unfinished pain. And in hot pursuit, of course, of what Baldwin calls “the guilty, furtive, European notion of sex,” which he relates to the “European dream of America […] a dream which began as an adventure in real estate.”

Under such conditions, love remains bound up with the ideology of whiteness as the right to property, and with white femininity as white patriarchy’s possession.

66 Ibid., 509.
and alibi.  

(Silly boy. For all that, sometimes we stumbled out of ourselves, in the silliness of our flesh, which knows what doesn’t fit. In fits of laughter, with flailing limbs, we danced, my brother and I, our mother and Monica — whom my mother sometimes looked after on weekends, so that Monica’s mother could take time to herself — romping around the living room to the radio. All smiles, Monica and I danced. Serious for a moment, you took me aside: You’re a child, but she is a grown woman, and she knows what she wants.) What does the flesh want? In this story about Daddy’s love, why does a mother’s love wait in the parentheses? Perhaps, like a Hollywood heroine, I have wanted to leave her out of it, vesting her figure in my life with the apocryphal power to transcend love’s conditions. For the knowing of the flesh, which lifts laughter and affection to the surface, warm with excitement and shame, are lessons still ciphered for me. Like the eloquence of a mother’s care, and whose love selvages us, holding us from harm and from the damage we would do, not knowing ourselves.

When my father told me the story of a mother’s betrayal and a son’s near-revenge under the magnolias, the two of us — father and son, engaged in that awkward, desultory bonding in which parents and their adult children sometimes encounter one another as the shadows of what they never knew about themselves — sat perched on shiny vinyl stools in Slim’s Y-Ki-Ki, a zydeco joint in Opelousas. My father pointed out the care with which Keith Frank tuned up his band, standing on the dance floor and listening to each musician in turn. Old age had slowed and mellowed him, my father, though he would still dance with the women who asked him to. He was a good dancer, and a lifelong fan of zydeco and the blues. Like white men everywhere, and especially in the American South, my father took more

from Black cultures than he would dare to admit. If his own manhood had begun in the shadow of those sinecures of whiteness, Hollywood musicals, he believed, like the early stars of that cinema, that his appreciation for this music made him special. When I was still a teenager, he had brought me to Tabby’s Blues Box, in Baton Rouge (Tabby and me go way back. I used to come here long before the LSU crowd discovered it), where we had sat among other white faces as Henry Gray unspooled the way back to truths we would tap our feet to but that our heads were ill-disposed to hear. The blues is, as Clyde Woods puts it, a practice of “epistemology” that has always “held the feet of the community to the fire of African American realism.”68 My father might have thought he understood that realism, with its profound lessons about the erotic life as a dimension of political economy. But in his ironic determination to transcend his social setting, I suspect that the blues became a soundtrack to the apocryphal parts of himself. How did this art touch or haunt my father’s ambition, I mean, his desire to create bold work that made a statement? The signature of that work may have been the catastrophe of those lessons neglected and misunderstood. Like his entry for a 1984 Times Square design competition: a skyscraper in the shape of Marilyn Monroe, with a central suspension structure evoking her flared skirt. The structure was meant, as his application explained, to remind the gawking masses below of the plume of a mushroom cloud. Marilyn’s sexuality blowing up America’s Great White Way, that symbolic epicenter of empire’s weaponized entertainment system, with its guilty, furtive notions of sex on endless, feverish, mercenary display: he must have known it would never fly. He had to settle for the half-naked Art Deco caryatids, made of painted plywood, that flanked the interior of a truck-stop casino he built in Alexandria, Louisiana. These figures consign femininity to its role as a structural principle, but a disruptive one, frozen in a moment of exposure. They enshrine

68 Woods, Development Arrested, 72.
scopic sexuality in architecture, as if the rectilinear could put right some primal swerve.

Hortense Spillers argues that, because of the systematic violation of Black female sexuality and motherhood at the foundation of American economic power,

the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an “illegitimacy.” Because of this peculiar American denial, the black American male embodies the only American community of males handed the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself [...].69

Which suggests that the patronymic, as the sign of white privacy and legitimacy, bars the white masculine subject from contact with the female in himself. “The female” in Spillers’s text is not the feminine, but the one who “stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed.”70 The function of white femininity, on the other hand, is to encrypt the possessive impulse, keeping it at a distance.71 White femininity locates the impulse out there, in space, where the skyscraper or caryatid, like the fashion model beaming from the billboard and the star strutting on the silver screen, monumentalizes sensuality. Otherwise, sensuality appears as a strain on time itself; as the tempo of a touch muffled or lost beneath layers of fear, anger, and shame; as the rap from behind Bluebeard’s door. I’m imagining my father as Marilyn astride Manhattan, standing in for the unfaithful mother,

69 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 228, emphasis in the original.
70 Ibid., emphasis in the original.
71 Richard Dyer argues that “the geographic structure of imperial narrative confirms the binarism […] : the white woman as the locus of true whiteness, white men in struggle, yearning for home and whiteness, facing the dangers and allures of darkness” (White, 36). This narrative is related to “the idea of landscape, framed and perspectively organized” that “suggests a position from which to view the world, one that is distant and separate.”
standing over the neighborhood, now Disneyfied, where years before he and my mother had created me (Why do you want to make pictures, when you can make more children like this?). And then, of course, there was my father’s actual foray into filmmaking, a project that, unfinished, occupied the position of a singular fetish in his life. My movie. He mentioned it often, saying the words with a jealous love. Made during the decade before I was born, it came with him whenever he moved, coiled inside dozens of metal canisters, each one weighing at least fifty pounds. Unable to be viewed (the one good print had virtually disintegrated, leaving only the negatives), it was, and is, the perfect apocryphal text. A musical black comedy of sorts with soft-core elements, Dong! takes place (as it’s been described to me) on the night that King Kong climbs the Empire State Building, with song and dance and shenanigans afoot in an Art Deco bathroom or boudoir, and a pair of giant mechanical googly eyes peering through windows at the back of the set, mirroring the viewer’s own. Husbanding his power not to fail, the movie marqued in my father’s stories about himself. There was the movie mogul in New York who had offered to fund its completion, and the producer from HBO who had promised a distribution deal. I’m gonna turn it into a live-action animated feature, and I’ll get George Lucas’s company to do the special effects. The film was his loot, carried away from the ruins of several professional relationships: the co-producer he had bought out; the cinematographer, just getting started in his career, whose requests for clips my father had refused; the composer whose friendship had

72 Lionel Trilling argues that the modern artist “seeks his personal authenticity in his entire autonomusness — his goal is to be as self-defining as the art-object he creates” (Sincerity and Authenticity [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997], 100). While not wishing to endorse the putative universality of this claim, it strikes me as apt to the aesthetic that my father embraced and bequeathed to me. But this desperate pursuit of autonomy remains, in spite of itself, in contact with those traditions of modernity that don’t disavow, because they can’t afford to, the dependence of the artist on her audience, history, body, milieu — what Fred Moten calls “the black avant-garde” (In the Break, 32).
soured; my mother, who had helped edit the all-but-final cut. Growing up, it mortified me, this “porno” that my father loved like another, secret, prodigal son. I don’t want to hear about that queer movie, I can hear my pre-teen self telling my mother, not really knowing what the word meant. But it amplified my shame that he promised to leave it to us, my younger brother and me. When I’m gone, you boys will have to finish it. I can’t trust anybody else. White privacy, trusting no one, reproduces itself as patrimonial debt.

The brilliance of the “black avant-garde,” for Fred Moten, stems in part from the matricial insurgence of the figure that breaks in on its denial by the American nation, which is also a denial of the rights of figuration. Moten wants us to hear the sounds of that insurgence, which, quoting Spillers, “stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed.”73 Did the defense against that insurgence frame my father’s body of work, his body in life, and the confusion at its center? Or was the work itself the frame, a set of relations that isolated, or sought to isolate, in the midst of its own confusion, a “bereaved relation to […] beauty”?74 This sense of bereavement expresses, by “brushing against” it, “the exteriority of what is internal” to the work, or to the life, which Moten calls “the primordial actuality of its sensory materiality.”75 At pains to escape this actuality, yet drawn back to it, time and again, we sidle up to the tall stools or pull up chairs in the long hall where the music keeps going, where they’re tuning up, keeping time. Without keeping it to themselves or under lock and key. Because this bereavement at the center, this bereavement that de-centers, this “dis-

73 For Moten’s dialogue with Spillers’s work, see In the Break, 15–16. Moten writes, “enslavement — and the resistance to enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness (or, perhaps less controversially, the essence of black performance) is a being maternal that is indistinguishable from a being material” (16, emphasis in the original).
75 Moten, In the Break, 248.
ruptive exteriority” that partakes of the “dispossessive force” of the object, remains exemplary (in the sense of the outwork, the out-take, the fugitive outward movement whereby what is cut off comes back to haunt the inside) in the blues and other art forms forged in the crucible of collective, improvisational revolt against intolerable, impossible conditions. When you hear Lightnin’ Hopkins confide that “the blues is a feeling,” you brush up against an aesthetics that expressive theories of art fall short of. It’s not about something primal in the sense of being prior to, or situated before, reflective consciousness. But something that enacts what the idea of such a consciousness, in its Eurocentric bourgeois guise, would forestall: being as the condition of what feels itself becoming (time and again) a feeling thing. In this becoming, crossed by history, bereaved and on the run, anguish awaits alongside hope. Depriving themselves of that hope without knowing it, “the multitudes who think of themselves as white […] hold this anguish far outside themselves,” as James Baldwin says.

Moten adverts to a “transference, a carrying or crossing over, that takes place on the bridge of lost matter, lost maternity, lost mechanics that joins bondage and freedom, that interanimates the body and its ephemeral if productive force, that interarticulates the performance and the reproductive reproduction it always already contains and which contains it. The interest [of such an analysis] is, in turn, not in the interest of a nostalgic and impossible suturing of wounded kinship but is rather directed toward what this irrepressibly inscriptive, reproductive, and resistant material objecthood does for and might still do to the exclusionary brotherhoods of criticism and black radicalism as experimental black performance” (ibid., 18).


This is the human being in its disruptive guise as what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls an “affectable thing” (Toward a Global Idea of Race [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007], 44). Franklin Rosemont refers to jazz and the blues as aesthetic practices “in passionate revolt against the unlivable,” practices that “demand nothing less than a new life” (quoted in Woods, Development Arrested, 39).

truth, holding on for dear life to the promise of its substitute, wondering whom they can trust.

Truth, beginning with our finitude, which is our affection by and as the flesh, does not conceal itself, hoard itself, or require your acceptance and safekeeping. But trust obeys a logic of scarcity. There just isn’t enough to go around. You have to earn another’s trust by keeping their secrets. Did I write this book to refuse my father’s trust? Or to earn it? I would like to imagine that his movie might have earned, somehow, the queerness that in my callous ignorance I once maligned it with. I’d like to imagine something transgressive in it, a campy antidote to the ponderousness of Dino De Laurentiis, locking arms with the cinema of John Waters and The Rocky Horror Picture Show. But I suspect that, as a sexually explicit musical that borrows its premise from King Kong and Planet of the Apes, the film traffics — how could it not? — in what Spillers has dubbed “pornotroping,” by which “the putative surplus carnality and sexuality of black flesh ungendered” becomes, in the white imaginary, the vehicle of a kind of endlessly repeated primal scene. In this repetition, the white masculine subject inscribes a figuration that projects the subject’s own impulses, impulses weaponized by the political violence sustaining the settler-colonial regime, onto the flesh of those whose dispossession proves indispensable to the blank check of whiteness. Secure in his possession, Daddy walks out of the matinee into the late afternoon light. In the same movement, my own critical or ironic distance from the film invites or indulges in a pornotroping, too. I have never seen his movie, but it remains for me a site of fascination, encrypting what I refuse to see, keeping a lid on the bereaved shame I have mistaken for my inner sense, or for the interiority of sense, as if every moment froze in the effort to capture what won’t stay put. I

80 Weheliye, Habeas Viscus, 106. See also Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 206. Alexander Weheliye argues that “cinema enables the production of bare life as a político-sexual form of life, wherein the remainder that is effected but cannot be contained by the legal order is disseminated in the visual realm” (98).
shouldn’t want to keep its secrets, nor are they mine to keep. No more than they are my father’s. By treating the film as his work, I disfigure the labor of all those who made its half-life possible. Like the aspiring young actors, drawn from New Orleans’s theater scene, whom my father required to work in the nude and sing live on set. Like my mother, in her twenties at the time and devoted to my father in his outré pursuits. Like the librettist, a French Quarter poet whose name my father couldn’t recall, and the well-known Black composer who wrote the score during one hot month spent in my parents’ rickety renovated house on Esplanade. He didn’t want his name on the credits, my mother says. After my father’s death, I hunted for the soundtrack among his things, to no avail. According to her, the showstopper belonged to the role of “Queenie,” sung by a classically trained singer with credits on Broadway. His falsetto could shake the chandeliers. He was, according to my mother, a queer Black man. How would he have inhabited or disrupted his role in this film, its humor rife with racism and homophobia?

He sang, I am told, a piece of his own choosing, one of Salome’s arias from Massenet’s Hérodiade. Would he have chosen the one where Salome intones, “I search ceaselessly for my mother”? Backed by swelling strings, Salome sings of her lost mother’s voice, “melodious” and “tender,” with a tenderness that she transfers to the “serene” words of the prophet. As Salome, would he have sung as the motherless sing to comfort themselves? (Do I sing to comfort myself with more apocrypha? To put to sleep part of what I think I might know but have estranged from myself? And what do I know, really, of how Black lives touched my father’s life, as students, as colleagues, as partners, as friends? Or what intermittent solidarity with them he might have achieved, and how they must have been hurt by and how

they resisted his racism and misogynoir?\textsuperscript{82} Not to mention how those forces of estrangement radiate outward from the individual and his circles of intimacy and acquaintance, being magnified by other ripples of predation and neglect, and becoming, in the aggregate, a power that divides the world. This power goes to work within the confines of the smallest spaces, sifting and dividing. Like the uneven elevations in a city that determine where the flood waters settle, and the policies and assessments that are invoked to decide who in a neighborhood is allowed to return and rebuild. Like the vastly unequal life chances of people sitting in the same classroom or eating at the same restaurant. 

*I'm going out tonight with a friend of mine.* My father looked sharp in linen trousers and a salmon-colored silk shirt. I never asked any questions, and he never brought those friends home. From

\textsuperscript{82} Elaborating on Moya Bailey's coinage of the term, the artist Trudy writes, “While anti-Black sentiments impact all Black people, because of how Black women experience gender — as ‘non-women’ via forceful masculinization as violence […] not via self-identification as empowerment […] and as sexual chattel via hypersexualization that reduces Black womanhood to a sexual object with non-person status because of gender in addition to race — misogynoir is conceptualized as a way to explain how it's more than racist misogyny or even objectification but complete dehumanization as a ‘contradiction’ to White womanhood” (“Explanation of Misogynoir,” Gradient Lair, April 28, 2014, https://www.gradientlair.com/post/84107309247/define-misogynoir-anti-black-misogyny-moya-bailey-coined. See also Moya Bailey and Trudy, “On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism,” Feminist Media Studies 18, no. 4 (2018): 762–68.

Misogynoir, as I understand it, encompasses fetishizing forms of appropriation as well as more overt methods for the dehumanization that Trudy describes. An appeal to Black feminist theory, then, in pursuit of critically understanding my own relation to white masculinity, does not remain innocent of the motives from which my whiteness moves and shakes and for which it consoles itself. As Valerie Smith notes, “[w]hen black women operate in oppositional discourse as a sign for the author's awareness of materialist concerns, then they seem to be fetishized in much the same way they are in mass culture” (“Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the ‘Other,’” in Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women, ed. Cheryl A. Wall [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989], 46).
him I learned, perhaps, how to keep even your friends as strangers, a trick that comes easily when you are a stranger to yourself.) Like the prophet, the stranger is a figure of bereavement, of bereaved touch. The presence of the stranger disfigures what it frames, which is the identity that its invocation was meant to protect. "The stranger’s presence," Baldwin writes,

makes you the stranger, less to the stranger than to yourself. Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which robes one’s nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one’s nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one’s robes.83

Figuration dresses and dissembles. In the possessive figuration of white cishet masculinity, the subject clutches his garment close. Of his nakedness, he is afraid. He remains covered even when seeming to bare it all, terrified that it, whatever it is, might turn out to be the tailor’s dummy (the one my mother had acquired second hand, whose ventral and dorsal halves, gray felt stretched over a rusty metal frame, never made a perfect fit). And yet, this fear comes to feel like insurance. So long as his nakedness might be something inanimate, something mechanical, it can belong to him without his becoming it. Above all, his art and his life must be authentic, which means that they must not be exposed, not subject to change in contact with the world. We found, in a strongbox that our father kept on a shelf above his bed, a letter to be opened after his death. There he stipulated, again, that my younger brother and I should finish his movie, this rare gem that, aside from his children, was his only legacy. Though if not, perhaps that, too, is for the best — let it return to dust. Along with his passport, some old traveler’s checks, and an unsigned will, the box held certificates of divorce from my

83 Baldwin, “The Devil Finds Work,” 537, emphasis in the original.
mother and his previous wives, and documents attesting to the dissolution of some very old business partnerships. Perhaps having them close by helped him sleep at night. The white man would not be who he thinks he is without the power of division, which he holds outside of himself. And indeed, as if my father’s film had sought its resting place, we found fragments of the only extant print, gone bad in storage and tossed out, scattered across the property, wrapped by the wind around rocks like the shed skins of rattlesnakes.

On its lost soundtrack, perhaps that song is the one that Baldwin describes as the “song which Europe let out of its heart so long ago, to be sung on ships, and to cross all that water,” a song “now coming back to Europe, perhaps to drive Europe mad: the return of the song will certainly render Europe obsolete, and return the North American wilderness — yet to be conquered! — to a truth which has nothing to do with Europe.”

That song makes strangers of us, my father and me. And in the years before his death, we kept one another as strangers, my father preferring that distance in which I would always be his wide-eyed baby boy, my son, the genius. (I first felt myself among strangers in the first grade, at Mamou Elementary, with its old, neglected buildings and its dusty yard littered in the fall with acorns and the brown bedroom slippers of the magnolia leaves. Feeling lost, I cried a lot back then, at the slightest provocation: a misplaced jacket, a broken crayon, a shortage of the promised candy.) For my part, I used that distance to hold at arm’s length parts of myself that reminded and remind me too much of my father. Like the sexual jealousy that has roiled my relationships with women, driving me, on occasion, to the verge of self-harm. Like the rage rising in me when I am called on to acknowledge how I might have failed someone I love. Like the ambition, per-

84 Ibid., 510. The point is not, it must be emphasized, to conquer the wilderness. The point is to undo the idea of humanity as the exclusive purview of those who can impose the violence of their will to make profit out of prophecy, those who project, onto peoples and lands around the globe, a fantasy of wilderness that backs a claim to real estate.
petually ashamed of itself, that has touched my creative pursuits, provoking a tortuous dialectic of exhibitionism and self-effacement. (That was when tears still stood available to me—that labor that keeps the bereaved flesh moving—before the flesh itself became a source of panic, a thing to be avoided, neglected, whipped into shape, and shunted into channels of possessive desire. They told me, You can’t cry so much, son. You need to get a hold of yourself. After a while, whatever the cause, my tears themselves became the problem.) These are parts of myself that mark my desire for excellence as his desire. My father and I failed and fail to hear what we cover in covering the sounds of Black cultures, of the matrix of white masculinity’s others, of our mothers, living on stolen real estate.85 (The only voice I remember coming to my defense when I cried at school belonged to a Black girl in Miss Judy’s first-grade class. After solving my dilemma, she had to defend herself against those who knew I needed to get a hold of myself. He’s my friend, and he can have my crayon if he wants it.) Harryette Mullen writes, “the white hand writes for the black voice, turning speech into text.”86 The white man’s hand turns acts of honesty and loving and protest, written or spoken or sung, into the erasure of truth in what the white man thinks he knows, misspelling knowledge as possession. It’s his story to tell, because he knows from experience. That’s what my father always said, whenever I challenged him about his overt expressions of racism, which I did hardly often enough. That’s what he said in our last fight about it, which was our last fight. My younger brother was driving us to the one decent restaurant within twenty miles of my father’s desert cabin, in the battered Volkswagen Golf that, after his death, smelled

85 This idea is indebted to George Yancy’s observation that “white America ‘covers’ the cultural productions of Black people. To acknowledge Blackness, after all, might lead to the uncovering of whiteness” (Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America, 2nd edn. [Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016], 72).

of death, some critter having crept into its innards to expire. (I remember talking with this girl, my friend, on the swings, our feet kicking up dust, just as I remember holding hands with Tabitha or playing astronauts with Richard or being tattled on by red-haired Louis, whose daddy worked at the dump. But this girl who came to my aid, who named me as her friend, I don’t remember her name.) During that drive, the conversation had turned, taking one of those abrupt detours that I dreaded, to the topic of young Black men who can’t stop shooting each other. No doubt it was some talk-radio line item in my father’s litany of complaints about southern California, which had replaced his litany of complaints about southern Louisiana. He had traded one hot and neglected part of the country for its dusty mirror image. Well, I said, maybe we could talk instead about the young white men shooting everybody. Too bad, like most Americans, you’re more comfortable with your prejudice than with the truth.

Dolsy, I’m just trying to tell you what I know from experience. This was no longer the man whose anger, flaring white hot, the skin pulled tight against his jaw, could make me shrink back into myself, his whole body announcing, You will not survive this. With his hands on his bony knees, his fingernails yellow and brittle, his ankles swollen and crippling him with pain, my father’s voice ran ragged in the back seat. Now I was the man I did not find that day in the rearview mirror. His voice had become my voice. His experience, which I was hot to repudiate, was wrapped up, in ways I didn’t want to know about, inside mine. (Another story. I caught the school bus that year every day before dawn, groggy and morose, immuring myself among the high vinyl seats for the ride that jostled us over dirt roads and blacktop highways, trailing dust, taking me from a world where love could be terrible and confounding to a world that felt terrible and confounding and mostly devoid of love.) My brother kept his mouth shut and his eyes on the road. If experience had taught my father to defend, through explicit performances of racism and misogyny, the lie of his sense of superiority, then what of my own sense of superiority (to him, to his type of man)? That is founded on another kind of lie. This lie would
make a virtue of my good white liberal’s studied avoidance of such explicitness, an avoidance shading into an avoidance of experience itself. (But after school the bus buzzed with laughter and riot, as bodies rushed to spend their pent-up energy, and voices, buckled all day into the classroom’s hush and rote recitations, clamored for the vocabulary that felt like freedom and desire. It was a voyage of excitement, made more exciting by the threat of shame and harm. A voyage toward forbidden knowledge. Lurching over a pothole, the bus might plant your lips on the hand of a classmate where she gripped the top of the seat in front of you, as you both scrambled, giggling, to get a better view. It would have smelled, her hand, like chewing gum and a big sister’s lotion and the freight of secrets you already carried without knowing what they meant. If you and she found the nerve, you might even sit in the back with the kids from junior high or high school. Kids who might poke fun at your shaggy bangs and the duck tail tucked into the collar of your shirt. Are you sure you’re not a girl?) Mine is a failure of experience, having failed, for the most part, to entangle my life with Black lives, much less to put my body on the line in acts of organized resistance to white supremacy. What could I say? How could I deliver myself from Daddy’s love? I’m speaking from experience, too. I’m speaking from the experience of a white boy who grew up full of anger and resentment, who grew up hating himself.

We had arrived at the restaurant, a stuccoed Italian joint with wrought-iron accents and Chianti in baskets, out of place here on a service road in the desert. Why would you say that? my father asked. What reason did you have to hate yourself? I could tell it hurt him, to be reminded of what he had known without knowing it. Just as it might have pained him, in a different way, to feel dwarfed now by my larger frame, which after three decades had finally filled out. (Slapping me on the back, Look at my boy! Then with that old edge in his voice, halfway teasing, halfway a threat, Now don’t you go getting fat.) Holding open the door to the restaurant, I said, wanting it to hurt, You could answer that better than I.
That neither of us could answer his question shows how this hurt was and is the language we shared, or a thing coiled around the heart of our language, passed from father to son, a mutual confusion by which you shall know your name. *(I may look like a girl, but I can sure burn your ass with a balloon.* The words came out of nowhere, or nowhere I understood, and made the back of the bus erupt in laughter, as I wagged a red tongue of latex and a big boy’s tongue. But it was less a feat of nerve than an accident of vocabulary. Thanks to my father, my six-year-old self already had a store of threats and curses I had not known the use for until the bus ride knocked them loose. Now they came tumbling out.) Did I write this book to expose how deeply the confusion is mine? *(I must have kept up the act for a while, a bawdy Howdy Doody, ventriloquized by a desire on the edge of my senses, suddenly keen to steal the show. But it didn’t last long. Later that afternoon, or another, after the bus had emptied out — we lived near the end of the driver’s route — a much older boy, sitting in the last seat, leaned toward me. *Now you had better quit cussing,* he said, easing a knife out of the hip pocket of his jeans, *or I’m gonna have to cut off your pee-pee.*) I wrote this book seduced by the apocryphal in my life, which are the stories we tell to cover ourselves, to protect against our uncovering by those whose touch knows the places where we are cut, where we were cut out for this world. I wrote this book sleeved in shame. *(I remember that young man on the bus as handsome, popular, with a mustache that made him look adult and an easy laugh. A cousin, as I think I thought back then or had been told, of the kid who lived across the road from us. A party, in other words, to that ethnic and cultural familiarity, deeply cut by the ravages of white supremacy, in which we would have smiled and nodded and regarded one another, neighbors who never or hardly ever talked, from opposite sides of the road. I do seem to remember his voice, full of a wry warmth, touching something that need not be said aloud. Something whose hard edge could be sheathed in wit. He had laughed at my act, now it was his turn to joke. There was almost a tenderness to this joke, or the promise of one. Perhaps he meant to spare me the indignity of the*
Confusions of a White Man/Qué principal’s finding out, who made the rounds with his paddle every Friday afternoon, or some worse punishment that might have awaited me at home.)\(^87\) I wrote this book to travel again those roads, in an approach to the wisdom in them, winding and unwinding the bobbin of the world. The wisdom of those who live through the needle’s eye, having reason to know that what reason we have is never our own. (I don’t remember his name. \textit{You had better tell your momma, so that she can sew it back on}, someone said. No need. My speech-bubble had already burst, drenching me with shame. Superfluous, too, was the driver’s admonition as, red-faced, I climbed down from the bus. \textit{If you keep cussing, son, I'm gonna have to talk to your folks}. More than anything, I remember the shame, its hot silence settling in. Wrapping this moment in that sense of private failure that white manhood excels at. Who did or said what? Did it unfold that way at all? It matters to no one, except my needful I. But it strikes me now that I can’t remember what else I might have said that day on the bus. What names I might I have called him, whose name I have forgotten.) I wrote this book without hope of writing a conclusion. It may be that this confusion has no end. But as the blues teaches, love is a nonce word. It’s never all there is, not in any transcendent sense, but you can reach for it in a pinch, if you know how. If you have the feeling. And to leap beyond the decision to hide behind failure’s foregone conclusion, which dodges the chance for change, and to confront the history of that failure and its forgetting, beyond explication,

\(^87\) I am aware that my memory and my rendition of it here perform a kind of pornotroping, too. This memory-fragment crystallizes, in miniature, the white patriarchal fear of emasculation by the Black male. It’s certainly not the only time someone told me that I looked like a girl. Nor was this young man’s threat, judging by his tone, and even assuming I’m remembering it the way it happened, severe. (Not compared with what my father threatened me with many times.) But the salience of the memory seems to disclose something about how, as a white man, I learned about the power of words, a lesson intertwined with the desire to assert dominance in situations where selfhood seems to require cutting oneself off from the racialized and gendered flesh of others by cutting them down.
beyond expiation: what would *that* feel like? To dwell with the realization that “black history does not flatter American democracy; it chastens it”? A sense of time beyond Daddy’s temporizing, it might have to *begin* with shame. I don’t mean in the way of some distant, primal signal, but in the way of a cut or a seam that breaches our separateness, in that darkness toward which our flesh gives us passage. And which dispossesses us — including those of us who have been taught to possess ourselves via our power to harm.

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88 Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”