

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: A Black Gay Sensibility:
Art, Affect, and Black Male Relationality

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A Black Gay Sensibility: Art, Affect, and Black Male Relationality is a multi-genre, intragenerational, comparative study between the 1980/90s black gay anthologies *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986) and *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1992) and the black gay male artistic production of the 21st century. The study focuses on affect, or feelings, and how black gay male authors deploy specific feelings methodologically that in the process develops a black gay understanding of feelings that rivals the affective turn.

Chapter 1 begins by placing the anthologies within the tradition of the genre. Anthologies serve a particular function for minoritized groups: identifying the oppressions a group faces, establishing a group identity, and asserting a political or social agenda. The black gay anthologies of the 1980s/90s, which cite the writing by black women as their inspiration, follow that arc through their use of section headers and the texts that they contain, choices that highlight specific feelings. I closely read the section headers alongside a few exemplary texts from each anthology to theorize the feelings that section emphasizes. Loneliness, desire, and hope become my projects primary affective concerns. Loneliness functions as a social imposition on othered identities and develops as a weight, something to rid oneself of to be in community with others.

Desire appears as the flourishing of sociality through friendships and romance; however, it is often interrupted by phenomena as varying as racial discrimination, health precarity, and loss. Hope, the final feeling, is about futurity, a cautious yearning for something beyond the present. The anthological generation demonstrates hope's significance by writing on and through the AIDS epidemic.

Contemporary writers respond to the affective foci of the anthologies and the rest of the dissertation tracks those responses. These writers take up the same feelings and either extend the theorizations found in the anthologies or undermine them towards a different end. In addition, by grounding my project in the anthologies of the 1980s and 90s, I extend the category of "black gay", acknowledging the way that its usage consistently gestured towards the communal adhesion of black gender and sexual minorities, even if in its time, that gesturing was not always consummated. With that history in mind, my project reparatively centers the work of black trans and nonbinary writers within black gay.

Chapter 2 considers Samuel Delaney's *Dark Reflections* (2007) and Michael R. Jackson's play *A Strange Loop* (2016) alongside the poetry of Cameron-Awkward Rich and theories of black transness to query the productivity found in purposefully residing in loneliness, a choice that presents a different relation to the social. Chapter 3 explores neo-slave narratives and mines the theoretical challenges texts like *The Prophets* (2021) and *Insurrection: Holding History* (1999) make with respect to theories of affect that regulate black feelings to the realm of the unthinkable through their centering of desire. And finally chapter 4 situates hope within the midst of discourses of afro-pessimism/optimism as well as the anti-relational turn in queer theory to consider how writers like Danez Smith in *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017) and Jordan E. Cooper in

Ain't No Mo' (2023) reconsider the feeling as an aesthetic through their focus on HIV/AIDS and black queer isolation.

While centering black queer theory and writing alongside affect studies, *A Black Gay Sensibility* joins a cohort of scholarship that highlights the extent to which black feelings are rendered marginal or ignored by white structure most notably by way of Claudia Garcia-Rojas, Jenifer Nash, Tyrone Palmer, and William H. Mosely III. This lack of attention overlooks the way that black queer scholars and writers have theorized affect before and alongside the affective turn within queer studies. Thus, this project theorizes black queer feelings over a range of texts.

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Introduction

“I, too, could not only live with what I feel, but draw succor from it, nurture it, and make it visible”

-Joseph Beam *In the Life: a Black Gay Anthology* (1986)

“We must begin to identify what a black gay sensibility is...”

-Essex Hemphill *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1992)

In the opening pages of his introduction to *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, Joseph Beam crystalizes for the reader the state of gay literature and black gay life writ large. On the one hand, white gay stories populated the literary landscape, leaving out those of black gay men. And although some black gay texts existed, publications like *Yemonja* and *Blacklight* as well as novels by James Baldwin and Yulisa Amadu, their presence paled in comparison to the rest of the gay literary market. Inspired by the writing of black lesbian women, Beam solicited manuscripts for an anthology, one which would “end the silence that surrounds [black gay] lives, as we begin creating ourselves, as we begin to come to power” (Beam xxiii).

By charting a journey from a lack of representation to the fathering of a child in the form of the anthology, Beam cements the centrality of feeling to this endeavor. In referencing the work of lesbians and black women whose characters inspired him, Beam states that “their courage told me that I, too, could be courageous. I, too, could not only live with what I feel, but could draw succor from it, nurture it, and make it visible” (Beam xix). But what exactly does Beam feel? He felt weary about the abundance of blond protagonists and the lack of stories that spoke to his existence as a Black gay man. The weariness becomes a byproduct of the current state of literary isolation, a place of loneliness. Those feelings inspire action if they are drawn from and centered and nurtured. Instead of dwelling in the feeling, Beam uses it as an impetus to lean into his desire for representation, a desire that is fulfilled in the creation of the anthology. Even as the anthology

functions as a repository of stories about black gay life, Beam positions it as a beginning, one that will hopefully result in corporeal and textual survival.

A Black Gay Sensibility: Art, Affect, and Black Male Relationality is a multi-genre, intergenerational study between the 1980/90s black gay anthologies *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986) and *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1992) and the black gay male artistic production of the 21st century. The anthologies set the stage for the kind of theoretical work the later creative texts will take up. The study focuses on affect, or feelings, and how black gay male authors deploy the feelings of loneliness, desire, and hope to speak to their socio-political moment. I argue that black gay feelings reorient theoretical understandings of sociality, humanism, pessimism, and optimism, reflecting trends within black studies, queer studies, and affect studies.

Where African American Literature and Affect Studies Collide

Although my project begins with Joseph Beam's introduction and his situating of feeling as a resource, something felt, leaned into and acted upon, he ultimately builds on the African American literary tradition. In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois published *The Souls of Black Folks*, and in the first chapter "Our Spiritual Strivings" considers feeling, more specifically feeling like a problem. A question is often directed at him, and tangentially toward his Afro-American siblings, regarding their positionality within the US racial economy:

"Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville, or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word" (DuBois 1-2).

DuBois emphasizes the way that feeling, more specifically, feeling like a problem is endemic

to black life because of anti-black racism. However, it would be a mistake to read his claim as solely an antagonistic one, where black feeling is caught in a negative bind: black feeling itself is either unthinkable or exists solely as a rejoinder to the structural antagonisms of antiblackness. Some writings at the intersection of black and affect studies choose to take situate blackness in these terms.¹ However, building on José Muñoz's work in "Chico, What Does it Feel Like to Be A Problem" from the posthumously published *The Sense of Brown* (2020), I would like to think of DuBois' claim as an opening rather than an impasse, initiating considerations of black affects instead of relegating them in the shadow of the structural. For it is after recounting this unasked question that DuBois arrives at "double consciousness," a twoness, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (DuBois 3). One way to approach the question of black feeling by way of DuBois' literary theorization is through the notion of feeling like a problem, a site where "black affective responses are only legible as signs of pathology, further reifying blackness (and I would argue black feeling subjects themselves)-as-subhumanity; as a sign of both excess and lack" (Palmer 32). In this configuration we ultimately lose the feeling black subject because we are focused on the "onto-epistemological framework that structures civil society" (Palmer 32). While this position and its theoretical insights are valuable, I want to approach black affect through the black feeling subject and through a tradition that prioritizes said feelings, what I see as occupying the other side of DuBois' "twoness." I thus read the African American literary tradition, and more specifically black queer writing in the wake of Beam's anthology, by attuning to feeling and centering black and queer approaches to affect to do so.

¹ See Palmer "'What Feels More than Feeling?': Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect", Colin Patrick Ashley and Michelle Billes, "The Affective Capacity of Blackness", Calvin Warren, "Black Care", and Patrice Douglass "On (Being) Fear: *Utah v. Strieff* and the Ontology of Affect."

It is important to note that there is no one affect theory or approach. Instead, much of the field is governed by conflicting definitions of affect. The “watershed moment” in the academy for the turn to affect occurred in 1995 with the publication of Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold” and Brian Massumi’s “The Autonomy of Affect.” These texts define affect as either social emotions or as asocial, autonomous tendencies, and these different ways of thinking still inform the critical deployment of the idea. However, in these texts and many that would follow, there remains an unwillingness to take seriously the assumed white body of the affectively theorized subject. Various scholars have attended to the way that affect studies systematically renders marginal the contributions of scholars of color even as they critique the field’s capaciousness.² Clare Hemmings, in “Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn”, argues that while affect is useful, it is approached naïvely in the belief that affect lies outside of the social realm and thus renders marginal important discussions of race. Hemmings notes two significant under acknowledged sites of affect at the intersection of the field and black studies in the works of Frantz Fanon as well as Audre Lorde, examples that highlight that racially marked subjects “have a critical and affective life that resonates differently” and that “some bodies are captured and held by affect’s structured precision” (Hemmings 564).

What is most of interest to me is the fact that Hemmings reads Fanon and Lorde to emphasize her point, a method that centralizes the importance of literature and close reading practices to alternative genealogies of affect theory. Tyrone Palmer makes a similar move in his essay “What Feels More Than Feeling?” with his close reading of Claudia Rankin’s *Citizen: An*

² See Munoz, *The Sense of Brown*, Claudia Garcia- Rojas, “(Un)Disciplined Futures”, Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004), and Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: Beyond Intersectionality* (2018)

American Lyric (2014) to note the way that, following Hemmings, universal conceptions of affect are unable to account for the structural positioning of blackness. Both Hemmings and Palmer demonstrate that when it comes to the intersection of racialized otherness and gender and sexual diversity, affect not only appears and operates differently, but if we are to excavate the field for its resources, it requires us to turn to different genealogies. For a project that begins with Joseph Beam's weariness and subsequent transformation of that feeling into a resource, we must turn to different "archives of feeling."³ Remixing Jennifer Nash's remarks from *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019) as she considers the felt life of black feminism, I ask what it might mean to tell the story of affect theory centering texts like *In the Life*, *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, and the constellation of black queer cultural production that exists in its wake? How might their inclusion reorient approaches to and understandings of affect theory, particularly if we take seriously the fact that the cohort of black gay men whose writing becomes anthologized in the aforementioned anthologies were contending with affect before "the affective turn" in the academy? And finally, in reading these texts for their affective resonances, how do we better understand the socio-political moment of the long 1980s as well as the contemporary moment?

While I center DuBois' grandiose question as one that captures an explicit relationship between the African American literary tradition and black feeling, his proclamation is followed by a myriad of others. In his 1926 artistic credo which proceeded the issue of *FIRE!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists* by a few months, Langston Hughes situates the new generation of black writing as boldly defying the imposed fear and shame of expressing their full and varied selves. He settles on the feeling of indifference as one that characterizes this work, an indifference to

³ See Ann Cvetkovic's *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Culture* (2003)

artistic receptions and the burden of upholding the “myth” of the negro, the “creature of moral debate and historical controversy; something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down’, or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden” (Locke 442). Hughes’ rejection of the reception of the gaze of the outsider in favor of indifference, coupled with DuBois’ felt twoness, works to decouple black writing from the burden of representation in favor of the self, a self that I think makes a complexity of feeling more readily available instead of needing to render marginal “proceedings too terrible to relate.”⁴ Hughes’s writing and my reading of DuBois through the lens of affect demonstrate a movement toward the black interior, “outside of the parameters of how we are seen in this culture”, or solely the structural, to “our space of the real not real, our own unconscious” (Alexander 5,9).

It is the former impulse to be concerned with the white gaze, one that was necessary if we think of the slave narrative and its primary white readership, as well as essays and publications with similar addresses, that black writers of the later part of the 20th century and into the contemporary moment actively work against. We could return to Beam whose concluding introductory remarks note the way that *In the Life* is “for, by, and about black gay men,” in the same way that the cohort of Black women and lesbians he cites as his inspiration wrote for, by, and about black women (Beam xxiii). In numerous interviews, Toni Morrison discusses her disinterest in the white gaze, and even comments on the way that in canonical texts within the tradition, like Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), the concern and address is whiteness. When speaking specifically about *Invisible Man* in the documentary *The Pieces I Am* (2019) she states, “Invisible Man; invisible to whom” as a way of

⁴ Morrison, Toni, “The Site of Memory” from *The Source of Self Regard* (2019)

acknowledging the novels address, as well as to emphasize her own approach, not to speak for black people but to “speak to and being among” (Morrison 10:34, 12:26). I would argue that the self-revelatory address, for and about black (queer) life makes space for a feeling reading practice, one that centers how the subject fully feels, with and under antiblackness. It means that the approach to affect that I take up here reads not for conscription but for the breadth and wealth of black feeling.

In another vein, Audre Lorde consistently engages the significance of feeling within the African American literary tradition. For example, both “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” and “Uses of the Erotic,” were precursors to Sedgwick’s and Massumi’s texts. In the former essay, Lorde constructs a relationship between her feelings as a Black Lesbian woman battling breast cancer and the necessity of voice, turning the spoken feeling into a personal resource as well as one that bridges the “mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own” (Lorde 16). She speaks to the significance of feeling as a mode to connection, a notion that she elaborates on in the later essay. In “Uses of the Erotic,” she turns her attention to the erotic, theorized through the specificity of (black) femaleness, as a force, relating the internal self to the social world, as a power, a resource, and a signification of the depth of the capacity for feeling, particularly in the western world that tries to devalue it. In positioning the erotic this way, Lorde highlights a desire to take seriously the role of feeling as a daily and social navigational tool, one that is mutually transformational.

If leaning into the knowledge of feeling as a resource is beneficial for the self as well as relationally, then would it also not be beneficial as an approach to African American literature? Margo Crawford moves us in that direction in her book *What is African American Literature?*

(2021) when she takes an affective approach to consider the idea of African American literature. While she does not define what she means by affect outside of the circular flow of affective energy as books are read alongside each other, she opens up the study of the tradition, pushing us to re-feel it “as the sensuous, atmospheric experience of texts”, an archive of feelings, “a tradition of a tension between Individual affect and historical structure” (Crawford 6). Ultimately, Crawford notes the ways that we have not prioritized feeling as a central analytic as it pertains to the tradition, opting instead to focus on historical approaches⁵.

By reading *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother* alongside each other, taking into considering the historical moment as well as the individual affects the various contributors spoke to, collected by Beam and Essex Hemphill upon the death of the former, I argue that we are able to re-feel the tradition and construct a new genealogy in the process through black gay men’s writing. I want to take seriously the specificity of the black gay subject position to considerations of various affects and their relationship to the larger trends in black, queer, and affect studies. I think of black affect as a kind of *move-meant*. The “move” speaks to the specific feelings being contended with—the loneliness, desire, and hope that the project as a whole tracks—and which are felt, hence the emphasis on moving. The “meant” signals how those feelings are usually theorized, often in contrast to the way that black gay writers think and feel them. In other words, black affect presents a tension between how one should feel versus how that feeling is actually harnessed through a black gay orientation.

⁵ Crawford positions her argument against Kenneth Warren’s *What was African American Literature?* (2012), where the tradition is framed through the idea of the historical entity, making the tradition mappable and determining who should and should not be included. By focusing more on a mood specifically the affective atmosphere, Crawford attempts to expose the limits of an historicist approach. She argues that African American literature is best understood “as writers’ and readers’ co-creation of a black mood, of a black feeling world” (Crawford 22).

Throughout this work, I oscillate between “affect” and “feeling” in relation to a tradition of black gay men’s writing. I follow Sianne Nagi’s conceptualization of the relationship between affect and emotion as “a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind” (Nagi 27). With that focus, Nagi highlights the transition from one state to another, affects which are traditionally less object or goal-oriented and emotions that are. In other words, they insist on the productive slippages between the two. The loneliness, desire, and hope that animate this work are felt, resided in and embraced, as well as castigated. They highlight the embodiedness of the feelings as well as their structural orientation. For example, in my discussion of loneliness I note the social imposition of the feeling, how one is made to feel. In this manner, loneliness functions as an affect rather than an emotion because it lacks action. However, my analysis also takes account of the way that black gay men do something with that feeling, or act on it, either residing in it or moving towards something else. With that in mind, I move between the assumed difference between the two terms. The *move*-meant of black affect manifests across the project, pushing us to rethink and consider feels from a black gay perspective.

On a Black Gay Sensibility

From the outset of his introduction to *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, Hemphill solidifies that the problems he is addressing are personal, literary, and social, thus constructing a relationship between the three. He begins with the feeling of regret by reflecting on the anthology’s predecessor *In the Life*. “If I had read a book like *In the Life* when I was fifteen or sixteen, there might have been one less mask for me to put aside later in life” (Hemphill xxxv). Hemphill realizes that the lack of representation impacts the capacity for full living. Without a reflection, the young Hemphill had to resort to living a partial life through the

constructing and wearing of masks to hide his true self. This results from his lack of legitimate information surrounding his budding sexuality alongside the social conditioning of same-sex desire. He knows that if he lived fully, he would bring shame on his family as the elder sibling as well as be ridiculed in the streets, harassed, or even murdered. This self- and socially- imposed silence surrounding his own life compounds when he takes account of the literary. Hemphill recounts how he voraciously read texts about homosexuality at his local library, yet he found no affirming depictions, let alone black ones. When, reflectively, he takes that lack to mean that he should divest his sexuality from his blackness, citing the link between whiteness and homosexuality on the one hand and 1960s black protest novels on the other that “never acknowledged homosexuals except as negative, tragic, or comedic characters,” adult Hemphill moves to highlight the potential transformational capabilities of *In the Life* and the tradition of black gay male literature he will soon recount. By situating the anthology alongside canonical texts within the African American literary tradition like *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*, arguably texts that affirm the lives and experiences of heterosexual black men living under antiblackness, Hemphill notes that *In the Life* works towards presenting “a more whole picture of the black male” (Hemphill xxxvii). This “more whole picture” connotes a striving towards completion, one that thinks about black gay representation as having the ability to complete the limiting heterosexual black male ones and those of white gay men.

To some extent, this is what Hemphill means when later in the introduction he calls for the creation of a “black gay sensibility.” He states, “we must begin to identify what a black gay sensibility is; identify its esthetic qualities and components; identify specific constructions and uses of language suitable for the task of presenting our experiences in the context of literature; and then determine how this sensibility and esthetic relates to and differs from African American

literature as a whole” (Hemphill lii). For Hemphill, a black gay sensibility is ultimately about the creation of a black gay literary and cultural tradition that seeks to depict the complexity of black gay life in a historically unprecedented way. But in order to make his point, he pursues other sensibilities, a white gay one and a black nationalist one, in order to prime them for their limitations and inadequacy with respect to black gay life.

A white gay sensibility is rooted in conscious black fetishization and racism. Hemphill uses his reading of Robert Mapplethorpe to make his point. Mapplethorpe’s photographs, “while technically and esthetically well composed, his work artistically perpetuates racial stereotypes constructed around sexuality and desire” imagines where the black male as subject remains invisible. Instead, he is solely his anatomized parts, rendered as ass or penis for example, leaving out the “whole person” (Hemphill xxxix). This is a byproduct of racist conditioning which ultimately inhibits the possibility of forming meaningful and powerful coalitions. Instead, the black gay male’s presence within or better yet outside of the community, exposes the façade of brotherhood. Read against the grain, Hemphill’s black gay sensibility seeks to depict a full black gay subject, not an objectified one.

On the other hand, a black nationalist sensibility lauds heterosexuality and masculinity to the detriment of black gay men. For Hemphill, the texts “condemns homosexuality, ridicules gays, lesbians, dykes, faggots, bulldaggers, and homos, and positions homosexuality as a major threat to the black family and black masculinity” (Hemphill xlvii). Hemphill doesn’t just critique them for their attacks on sexual diversity, but also for their claiming of heterosexism and its oppressions, specifically the way that white cis-heteropatriarchy works to perpetuate racial, gendered, classed, and sexual oppressions. Conversely a black gay sensibility would seek to center the “possibility of natural variance in the expression of human sexuality” as well as

function as a site of critique, not only of white cis-heteropatriarchy but also the ways that the black communities are often beholden to it.

Ultimately my project serves as a response to Hemphill's call. "A Black Gay Sensibility" seeks to construct a genealogy of black gay men's writing through affect, given that a sensibility operates as a registering of and responding to a complex array of feeling and the relationship those feelings have to the aesthetic. I utilize the term "sensibility" to govern my project because of the way that it signals my investment in feeling. However, it remains distinct from both "affect" and "feeling. Instead, as Hemphill outlines it, "A Black Gay Sensibility" is concerned primarily with a tradition of black gay men's writing and the relationship those texts have to each other and the African American literary tradition writ large. I situate *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother* as the foundation of this project because as Hemphill notes, the 1980s into the 90s serves as a critically important decade for black gay men's literature. Citing the various journals, self-published chapbooks, and writer collectives, the decade functions as a renaissance of black gay men's writing, a tradition. The genre of the anthology is foundational to that given that it serves as a repository of experiences and perspectives that work toward depicting a "whole [black gay] person" amid the debilitating forces of antiblackness and antineeriness. In other words, I see a connection between the multi-genre nature of the anthology and the ability to depict complexity, a complexity of experiences and of feelings. Given that, the dissertation moves seamlessly between various genres, the novel, poetry, as well as plays, to consider the way that black gay feelings register within each.

In addition, Hemphill situates a black gay sensibility between white gay and black nationalist ones. I read this move as a precursor to what we now know to be black queer studies. As an interdisciplinary formation, black queer studies stages an intervention between black

studies and queer studies. While the former often marginalized matters not primarily based on race, the later unmarks difference, thus leaving out “lesbians, gays, bisexual, and transgendered people, of color who are committed to the demise of oppressions in its various forms” (5). In mobilizing the tensions between the two respective fields, E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson extend queer into the service of blackness, simultaneously challenging heteronormativity and heterosexism while resisting assimilation and absorption that the moniker of queer usually carries. Thus, “A Black Gay Sensibility” situates the black gay male subject as a site of critique to disrupt the assumptions surrounding feeling at the intersection of black and queer studies.

[The Long 1980s Black Gay and the Contemporary](#)

Many critics have turned to the 1980s and 90s to consider black gay male writing and cultural production. In *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (2015), Dagmawi Woubshet demonstrates how disenfranchised mourners used literary and cultural forms to grapple with the losses of the AIDS epidemic. The aesthetic qualities of the texts compiled in the study index the governmental and social neglect of those infected with the virus as well as the writers’ personal experiences as theorized through Woubshet’s term the disprized mourner, the bereaved whose losses are shrouded in silence, shame, and disgrace (Woubshet 4). Given the study’s pre-1996 periodization, before the wide availability of antiviral medication, Woubshet notes the way that the AIDS mourners were simultaneously mourning the losses of their friends and loved ones as well as their own impending deaths. Woubshet names that duality a “poetics of compounding loss”, formal characteristics like the leitmotif of inventory taking, relentless serial compounding losses where the subject’s loss is both object and subject, past and prospective. In noting the elasticity of AIDS mourning, Woubshet turns to African American mourning as an alternate methodology to dominant constructions of loss and mourning

most notably popularized by Sigmund Freud. Mourning thus becomes a significant site for political mobilization.

Darius Bost in *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* (2019) contextualizes the work of the period in a manner that specifically addresses the notion of double cremation by focusing on Black gay being, as opposed to an approach to this period that solely centers trauma and grief, byproducts of the AIDS epidemic. For Bost, the writing by Black gay men serves as a way of asserting black gay personhood amid the forces of antiblackness and anitqueerness, acknowledging structural violence's like racism, capitalism, homophobia, and AIDS, and the way that addressing them helped to shape Black gay aesthetics and cultural production. But Bost also takes note of how the Black gay aesthetics of the period "reorient black queer politics beyond the constrained space and time of biological life and social death", a kind of black/queer optimism that centers longings and a future beyond the forces of antiblackness and antiqueerness (Bost 19). The work of both Woubshet and Bost give language to approaches, concerns, and aesthetics of the 1980s, a consideration of Black queer individuals, their shared relation to each other amid double cremation, the effects of AIDS, as the significance of this work as a critique of the world around them and a gesture towards the world they may not physically inhabit.

I build on their insights in my reconsideration of the period. The 1980s and 1990s emerged at the matrix of shifts in US politics, "the rise of the Christian Right, the New Right, and conservative backlash against civil rights gains made in the 1960s and 1970s" and political and cultural movements in Black America that "held complex ideologies about lesbians, gays, and gender nonconforming people"; alongside the solidification of neoliberalism, Reaganism, AIDS, and the crack epidemic (Bost 5). This confluence of social and political instances

inaugurated “black gay.” Black gay then is governed by a series of compounding losses and setbacks, yet harnesses them to further cites of critique through the specific subject positions of gender and sexual minorities.

In our present moment, we might refer to black gay more readily as black queer in order to ensure discursive inclusivity, but in this work, I want to center and honor how black gay communities called themselves into being under the banner of black gay, a banner that consistently gestures towards the full inclusive and expansive understanding of queer. Jafari Allen turns our attention to this history in his book *There’s a disco ball between us: a theory of black gay life* (2022). In his ethnographic and intellectual history of the long 1980s, he tracks what he refers to as black gay habits of mind. Allen notes that the idea of Black gay, “emerges directly out of the political, artistic, and activist work of radical Black lesbians of the 1970s who had cut their teeth in civil rights, Black power, peace, labor, antiapartheid, reproductive rights, and radical feminist movements” (Allen 8). For Allen, black gay functions as an umbrella term, simultaneously indexing the centrality of self-naming as black gender and sexual minorities.

It is important to note that black gay consistently gestures towards community adhesion of nonheteronormative Black folks, even if in its time, that gesturing was not always consummated. The moniker “gay” was widely accepted since the 1950s, “with gay girls, gay women, and lesbian used sometimes interchangeably” (Allen 328). The use and mobilization of lesbian as a political and social category appears more centrally as gay men selfishly centered themselves and, in the process, silenced women, limiting the weight of the collective term. For example, in the first chapter to his book, Allen charts the anthological generation beginning with the writing of black women. Yet when he introduces black gay men, he does so through their limitations, titling the section through Pat Parker’s question from the National Coalition of Black

Lesbians and Gay in Los Angeles in 1987: “I have to ask my gay brothers some questions”.

Parker’s question is about the limited focus of revolutionary change. She specifically questions why, instead of organizing and mobilizing for a national health care system, are black gay men solely focused on their battles with white gay men over the minuscule allotment of AIDS funding. Not only does she call into question the focus of her brothers, she also imbues a weariness into the question when she furthers by asking “if tomorrow I call for a march to raise funds to fight cancer—which is decimating my lesbian community—will the gay men be there?” (Parker 276). Parker’s question brings into consideration the way the way that black gay, its meanings and representations as an umbrella term for the collective did not always fit. But I also read her questions as a way of pushing for better consideration and an expansive understanding of community. My use of black gay throughout the project not only seeks to center the aspect of self-naming, thus building on the periodization of this work, but also to attempt to live up to the gesture that ultimately fell short and, in the process, lacked consistent feminist and trans allyship.

There are limits and tension with respect to black gay. But my use of it emphasizes an anthological praxis. Allen notes how the anthology is the genre of “black gay.” The anthology is a harmonious collective of voices, polyvocal in nature, organized under a specific political or aesthetic statement. In drawing a parallel between the anthology and its significance to “black gay” Allen demonstrates the way that an anthological praxis resists rigidity in favor of flexibility. “A Black Gay Sensibility” utilizes an anthological praxis, thinking across genres and identities, incorporating trans, queer, and nonbinary voices, to explore the theoretical insights to be excavated in loneliness, desire, and hope. Each chapter thinks across genres, the novel, poetry, and the dramatic, noting the ways the various aesthetics register the aforementioned affects. When read together, they provide depth and complexity to each feeling, thus resisting legibility.

While I begin with the long 1980s formulation of Black gay and its relation to the anthological, it is important to note its relationship to the contemporary. For one, through Hemphill's formulation, I am concerned with a genealogy of black gay men's writing beginning with the 1980s call and claiming of a collective black gay literary and cultural identity. But beyond that fact and the way we live in the wake of that period, both the 1980/90s and the cotemporary share striking similarities, beginning with their respective presidents.

The republican Senator of Arkansas Tom Cotton sketched a similarity between the 40th U.S. President Ronald Reagan and the 45th president Donald Trump in 2022 when he spoke at the republican party speakers series at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California. He states that "for all their differences, in temperament and style, there's a deeper continuity in their beliefs", primarily their populist approaches (McCormick). But as we have come to know through Ronald Reagan's famed attacks on "welfare queens", appeals to "law and order" which contributed to the mass incarceration of black and brown people, and his inability to take the AIDS epidemic seriously at its peak which resulted in countless deaths, that his political orientation was often directed towards the "common man", a limitedly constructed collection of people imbued with certain racial, gendered, and sexual biases. The same can be said for Trump. Both presidents ran and worked against the "establishment and sowed the seeds of right-wing anti-elite distrust" (Fried 2).

In *At War With Government: How Conservatives Weaponized Distrust from Goldwater to Trump* (2021) authors Amy Fried and Douglass B. Harris link the two presidents through a framework of distrust. They argue that the weaponization of distrust in government has been a strategic tool in republican politics since the 1950s. This was primarily done by capitalizing on American polarization and the utilization of racial messages in an effort to appeal to the

“common man”. For example, during his campaign and his presidency, Donald Trump voiced overly race based sentiments attacking governmental programs and the people who benefit from them, similar to Reagan’s “welfare queen,” questioned the legitimacy of elections, stirred up anti-immigrant sentiments, and targeted parts of the government like the FBI and the CIA. In each of these instances, Trumps mobilization of governmental distrust helped to secure and bolster his own presidential power and appeal to his base, all the while shifting “the center of gravity of the Republican Party and American conservatism” (Fried 105).

In a project concerned with black gay men’s literary genealogies, one would think that the present is better given the livability of HIV and the general inclusion of LGBTQ people within American culture. However, as Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman notes in *Millennial Style* (2024) “we are living in the future tense of abolition; decolonization; integration; first-, second-, and third-wave feminism; and black power, yet contemporary black [queer] life remains mired in regressive, recursive time” (Abdur-Rahman 29). For while the 40th president did not condone civil rights for LGBTQ people, nor did he expeditiously work to combat the rising cases of HIV/AIDS⁶, his policies did not actively work against LGBTQ people in the way that Donald Trump’s administration has. For example, Trump’s administration has opposed the equality act, appointed anti-lgbtq judges and supported employment discrimination, undermined LGBTQ protections, eliminated guidance for schools on transgender studies, and even refused to recognize LGBTQ people in his National AIDS day address⁷. And while the aforementioned scholars note how these two republican presidents capitalize on general governmental distrust for their own gains, the acts that I have just outlined helps to make a case for why Black gay men

⁶ For more insight into the Reagan administration’s response to HIV/AIDS, see the surgeon general’s reflective remarks see “The early days of AIDS, as I remember them” from the Annals of the Forum for Collaborative HIV Research.

⁷ A full list of the Trump’s LGBTQ policy record can be found at the Human Rights Campaign.

still consider black queerness relationally. Rather it is through focuses on loneliness, desire, and hope or the enslaved past or the precarious future, black gay men's literature of the past and the present disrupt and redefine the dynamics in which they are enmeshed. Their work foils the social configuration of black queer life while also making space for other ways to consider the force of affect.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter, "Reading for Feeling: The Black Gay Anthology" engages the anthologies *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother*, offering a close reading of them for their engagement with feeling. I follow the arc of the anthologies themselves, placing the sections that explore the same feeling in close proximity to each other to illuminate their intertextual affective resonances. In doing this, I make evident the commonalities across the two anthologies and how they speak to loneliness, desire, and hope. Loneliness is explored in the subsection "Barriers to Relation" which blends the sections "Stepping Out" and "Cut Off from Among Their People" from *In the Life* and "When I Think of Home" from *Brother to Brother*. Loneliness manifests as a personal and social weight and functions as a longing to and for desire and sociality. From there, the chapter moves to "Desire and/as Sociality" which centers desire through cross analysis of "Brother/father/lover/son" and "Hold Tight Gently." Desire appears as the flourishing of sociality through friendships and romance; however, it is often interrupted by phenomena as varying as racial discrimination, health precarity, and loss. Finally, hope is taken up in "The Power of Sociality through Futurity" with the help of "Speaking for Ourselves" as well as "Stepping into Tomorrow" and "Absence of Fear," from the two anthologies. In this context, hope functions as a concern and preoccupation with futurity, given the significance of the AIDS epidemic.

Chapters 2-4 shift to critically engage each feeling on its own through texts of the 21st century, combating scholarly inattention to contemporary works in African American literature. In addition, each chapter's centering of the black gay male subject through an affective lens works to reorient approaches to each feeling but also critique and intervene in trends within black studies, queer studies, and affect studies. Chapter 2, "Loneliness as (Non)Movement: Rethinking Relations to the Social," blends critical insights within black trans studies and black studies to consider a loneliness that is not eschewed in favor of sociality or desire. By reading Cameron Awkward-Rich's collection of poetry *Sympathetic Little Monster* (2016) alongside Samuel Delaney's critically neglected novel *Dark Reflections* (2007) and Michael R. Jackson's award-winning play *A Strange Loop* (2019), I argue that loneliness when claimed embraces nonmovement and interiority as productive sites of embodiment within the social world. The chapter works to push us to consider so called negative feelings in the different way, mining them for their usefulness instead of for the ways they inhibit.

Chapter 3 "How Does It Feel?: Enslavement and the Mappings of Black Queer Desire" turns to the neo-slave narrative and approaches to histories of enslavement to consider the movement of black affect. Robert Jones Jr. and Robert O'Hara approach the genre of the neo-slave narrative by center black queer characters and their desire. In the process they take advantage of black queer archival opacity to rethink approaches to the past as well as to how black feelings can and should function. In both *The Prophets* (2019) and *Insurrection: Holding History* (1999), black queer characters openly desire one another, impacting their surroundings and the structures of the text in the process. They work to rethink humanist discourses that render black affect as the site of the unthinkable and the in-affectable. Instead, I offer an approach called *affect from below*, a push to think affectively outside of the structural and towards the relational

or interpersonal. By staging this fictionally through the enslaved, the chapter reinvigorated approaches to the past within black studies, specifically the melancholic turn.

Chapter 4, “Hope Against Hope: Aesthetic Returns and the Black Queer Figure” seeks to detangle hope from its close relationship to futurity. Instead of thinking of it solely as a feeling, this chapter considers hope as an aesthetics of return, a moment constantly returned to and felt differently as a result, a return in difference. I call this aesthetics of return a “hope against hope”, after Craig G. Harris poem of the same name from *Brother to Brother*. Both Danez Smith’s collection *Don’t Call Us Dead* (2017) and Jordan E. Cooper’s *Ain’t No Mo* (2022) rethink hope in the present tense. I make this argument by rereading critical texts in the afro-pessimist traditions as a grieving paradigm, texts that are contending with a history of defeat. By coming to terms with that history and yet still moving towards “an end of the world”, these texts ultimately situate hope within the context of hopelessness.

As I will detail further in the following chapter, *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother* extend the anthological tradition. While canonical anthologies tend to function as arbiters of literary merit, deciding what literature is worthy of study, anthologies created for and by marginalized groups of people approach the genre differently. From the turn of the 20th century, the Harlem Renaissance, The Black Arts Movement, as well as those that inaugurated black gay, the anthologies function as recorders of African American Literature, methods by which we see the tradition broadly. Or in other words I would argue that the closet we get to histories of black writing is through this genre. It is a genre that pushes us to think across difference whether it be generic, differences in identities, or temporally. I understand the African American literary tradition and black gay male writing specifically through the anthology.

With that in mind I offer *A Black Gay Sensibility* as a kind of anthology. Through that frame we are able to see the past in relation to the present, acknowledging change over time as well as continuities between black gay men's writing of the past and the contemporary. But unlike how anthologies are usually approached, I extend my analysis to more than just black gay literary luminaries like Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill, even though they are situated so heavily in this introduction as the period's anthological editors. Instead, the majority of the original anthology's contributors are analyzed in relation to the current generation. The anthological form is African American literary history. For me, this project is a literary tradition of black gay men's writing through feeling.

Chapter 1: Reading for Feeling: The Black Gay Anthology

Print and media depictions of black and gay individuals in the public domain caught black gay men in a double bind: either piece together images of oneself through what is already available or continue to occupy the position of the unthought. Both Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill recount this fact in their introductions to *In the life* (1986) and *Brother to Brother* (1992); they allude to the public domain through references to blond protagonists and the negative representations of homosexuality in black protest literature. Bill Stanford Pincheon in “Mask Maker: The Black Gay Subject in 1970s Popular Culture” charts this terrain. In the essay, Pincheon chronicles the popular images of black gay subjects before the 1980s, the period in which black gay writing began to blossom. Each iteration of black gay subjects presented during this time resulted in flat constructions of the group. Pincheon begins in 1969 with the publication of *Black & Gay* by Victor Dodson. Written by a white man who relies on the blending of case studies and fiction to talk through his black gay subjects, the work, which was widely disseminated, ultimately functions as a text that “purports to detail Black gay lives” and results in the dissemination of “unhealthy symbolic representations without significantly altering or questioning the dominant forms already prevalent at the time” (Pincheon 58). This text’s usage of the popular psychology genre also worked to overshadow fictive works by black gay men like James Baldwin as well as Adrian Stanford’s *Black and Queer* (1977). In addition, Dodson depicts a harmonious queer community which both Beam and Hemphill debunk through their analysis of Robert Mapplethorpe and the critiques of queer night life.

Pincheon then continues by charting film depictions of black gay men—what he refers to as a “mixed bag”—which ultimately determines how black gay men are viewed in the public imaginary. While he views films like Melvin Van Peeble’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Badasssss Song* (1971), as having “positive, undaunted, healthy gay male characters of different races” in a move

that conjoins black and gay communities in opposition to the corrupt police state, other films like *Drum* and *Norman...Is That You?* from 1976 present examples of sexual depravity and complicated family dynamics as a result of having a black gay son. Although late 1970s films like *Next Stop Greenwich Village* (1976) and *Car Wash* (1976) fair better in terms of representation, Pincheon argues that they do little to combat the overwhelming negative depictions put forth by Dodson and *Drum* and *Norman...Is That You?*. These representations, in print and film respectively, put forth by non-black gay writers and directors, determined who the public imagined black gay men to be, diminishing lived complexity. The lack of complexity and true representation impacts the lived experiences of black gay men. Pre-1980, non-black texts and films determined the social legibility of black gay men.

Black gay male writers intervene in the social legibility of black gay men through the genre of the anthology. Their work when read against some of the aforementioned texts undermine black gay social and public representation by courting illegibility. I argue that Black gay male writing of the 1980s and 1990s combats black gay male social representations by undermining legibility in favor of illegibility as a different kind of legibility, offering more nuanced representations of what it means to be black and gay, while refusing to reduce that complexity in service of social discernability. The genre of the anthology is integral to this move. Not only are these texts self-contained and articulated depictions of black gay male experiences, they capture the complexity and nuances of black gay male ontology through feeling. As explored through *In the Life* (1986) and *Brother to Brother* (1992), these anthologies work towards this aim by framing themselves as atemporal affective genres. By concerning themselves with various approaches and perspectives of how it feels to be black and gay in the world, the black gay anthology positions black gay illegibility as legibility: a multiplicity of affective

responses, each one building on as well as undermining what has come before. In addition, by chronicling these affective responses, the anthology makes apparent the black gay affective foci that then becomes traceable in other writing by black gay men subsequently, serving as the foundation of a black gay literary tradition through affect.

To explore black gay affect, as deployed through the anthology, this chapter follows the arc of the anthologies themselves, placing the sections that explore the same feeling in close proximity to each other to illuminate their intertextual affective concerns. In doing this, I make evident the commonalities across the two anthologies that are part of the period named the Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and reveal the connection between loneliness, desire, and hope.⁸ Loneliness is explored in the subsection “Barriers to Relation” which blends the sections “Stepping Out” and “Cut Off from Among Their People” from *In the Life* and “When I Think of Home” from *Brother to Brother*. From there the chapter moves to “Desire and/as Sociality” which centers desire through cross analysis of “Brother/father/lover/son” and “Hold Tight Gently.” Finally, hope is taken up in “Hope and Futurity” with the help of “Speaking for Ourselves” as well as “Stepping into Tomorrow” and “Absence of Fear,” from the two anthologies. Together they make black gay feeling, and consequently identity, legible while the multi-genre form of the anthologies counteracts that, rendering the legibility illegible. To further compound my focus on black gay illegibility as legibility, the individual sections of the chapter will simultaneously move between both anthologies, as one expands the other, offers more insights, or contradicts what came before.

⁸ In using this phrase, I am referring to Darius Bost’s work in *Evidence of Being* (2019). The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance refers to the artistic and cultural/communal productions of black gay men in the 1980s and 90s.

In rethinking legibility in favor of illegibility as a kind of legibility, I am aligning my work with studies on black masculinities and queer historiography. According to Édouard Glissant, legibility results in reduction, which is why he argues for the right to opacity, a push to do away with the obsessive push for transparency (Glissant 19). If opacity is that which cannot be reduced, it stands in opposition to legibility. In *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (2013), Mark Anthony Neal connects black male social legibility to systemic cohesion. Within the social realm, the black male body serves the function of keeping American culture intact, justifying injustices and oppressions like police brutality and the prison industrial complex through representations of black inferiority, criminality, and hypermasculinity. He goes further by citing the study “Literature Review: Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys,” that these media representations directly impact public attitudes and feelings about black males. The results are casual, as in ordinary, links between the images rendered and any black man one may encounter on the street. The same holds true for black gay men whose intersecting identities complicate their public and social renderings.

Black gay men sit at the center of attempts to structure blackness through normativity. It is not completely iniquitous for black people to desire normativity given the ways that academia and governmental policies have historically linked blackness to deviance, yet this desire has consequences for black queer individuals. As Matt Richardson states in *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (2013), “queer threatens mainstream Black political and cultural narratives of racial uplift and achievement, respectability, and civility...Black queer people are dangerous to the collective, for we are a reminder of the accusation of sexual deviance and gender aberrance that we have fought so long to deny, decry, and defend against” (Richardson 4). This desire for a mainstream unification under the moniker

of blackness fails to acknowledge the emergence of intracommunal stratification due to intersecting identities, most notably in the 1960s and 70s where Black lesbians and gays mobilized politically and socially around their identities. Although this may be the case, that didn't overwhelmingly change the general attitude towards black queer individuals where within the black community, silence and invisibility were methods for survival as Cathy Cohen notes (Cohen 94). In the same manner that Hemphill learned that a certain way of being could result in verbal assaults and contained the threats of violence, the way black gay men are painted publicly, whether that be literarily or cinematically, then serves the function of scripting black queerness outside of an acceptable, respectable black identity. This move, like that of legible images of black males overall, impacts attitudes towards black gay men. With respect to pre-1980s media and black respectability, Black gay men were placed in a predicament where it became important to speak for themselves and combat the image of black gay men that was readily available to each other. The black gay anthologies serve a dialogical function of allowing black gay men to speak for and to themselves in relation to how black gay maleness was socially constructed within the public imaginary.

It could be easily stated that the black gay anthologies of the 1980s and 90s simply wanted to make black gay identity legible in a way that combated the dominant depictions, especially given Joseph Beams introduction to *In the Life* where he notes the significance of visibility. I, on the other hand, argue that the multi-genre form of the anthology works against simply making black gay identity legible. With a multitude of perspectives and genres, no one version of a black gay identity is prioritized over others making it difficult for the anthology to serve the function of supporting the aims of American culture that render black men and black gay men, specifically, static, even if culture will move towards its constrictive function. Social

legibility is one of the many deployments of white supremacy that functions to keep the image of non-white individuals in the public imaginary static. Saidiyah Hartman and Frank B Wilderson illuminate this idea effectively: “It is thought in order to come to any recognition of common humanity, the other must be assimilated, meaning in this case, utterly displaced and effaced” (Hartman and Wilderson 189). Essentially, human complexity is effaced and displaced by way of social legibility. As Neal argues in *Looking for Leroy*, there is a radical potential in “rendering “legible” black male bodies—those bodies that are all too real to us” (in the case of black gay men, depictions that “ridicule gays, lesbians, dykes, faggots, bulldaggers, and homos and positions homosexuality as a major threat to the black family and black masculinity” alongside sexual depictions, hinging upon sexual prowess, big dicks, and communal deviance), “illegible, while simultaneously rendering so-called illegible black male bodies—those black male bodies we can’t believe are real—legible” (for black gay men, ones that present a whole black gay being) (Neal 8). The anthology leans into the ambiguity between legibility and illegibility, which I highlight through the cojoining of the two through illegible legibility.

Both *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother* are part of a history of multi-genre anthologies, a form that is integral to the notion of illegible legibility. Traditionally, anthologies function as the arbiters of literary merit and helped to solidify what counted as literature worthy of study. As noted by Henry Louis Gates Jr., “A well-marked anthology functions in the academy to create a tradition, as well as to defend and preserve it” (Gates 31-32). Canonical anthologies do this, while in the process presenting an uncritiqued objectivity of the body of literature assembled, and even with the addition of subsequent voices, often minimal at best, the ideological construction of the anthologies themselves remain intact (Franklin 7). But what happens when certain voices are excluded from that constructed definition of literature? On the one hand, the

notion of literature itself becomes the domain of a select few, often those with some connection to the academy, while others must make themselves palatable in order to be seen or create their own spaces. As Cynthia G. Franklin explores in *Writing Women's Communities: The Politics and Poetics of Contemporary Multi-Genre Anthologies* (1997), contemporary multi-genre anthologies, often created by those from marginalized backgrounds, assert a group identity and politic while also challenging what traditionally counts as literature.

This challenge to traditional anthologies is accomplished not solely through the marginality of those involved, but also through an emphasis on anthological reflexivity and social functionality. Franklin focuses on the multi-genre anthologies by women and how from the prefatory pieces to the texts themselves, the anthologies call attention to the identities within, honoring intracommunal diversity of thought and perspective, while marking their incompleteness. In the process, they “constitute new communities of and for women who share the identities to which the anthologies give voice” and use “a mix of creative and polemical writings to express and directly address their cultural differences, encompassing a variety of voices, languages, forms, and writing styles, so that different pieces of writing often contradict each other and highlight the writers’ diverse identities and concerns” (Franklin 12). Franklin highlights black women/feminist anthologies like *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and *Home Girls: a black feminist anthology* (1983), both of which Joseph Beam notes as references for his anthology. In line with this tradition of multi-genre anthologies, *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother* work to constitute a black gay male literary community, diverse in style and perspective, all towards the aim of visibility as a kind of survival amid the forces of antiblackness and antineeriness.

In my approach to the black gay male anthology, I read for feeling. I see the multi-genre form as containing a central affective component. They are affective in the sense of affects or feelings, as well as how they textually connect to each other towards a certain end. In the introduction to *In the Life*, Beam makes plain that the anthology is “by, for, and by Black gay men” (Beam xxiii). In making this claim, Beam positions the anthology as intracommunal, with its own contradictions and viewpoints, yet this multi-genre anthology, consisting of short stories, poems, essays, interviews, and a play, has a specific arc. Franklin notes that the use of an arc in multi-genre anthologies works to construct a group identity. Anthologies often begin with experiences with oppression, moving to the assertion and celebration of individual identities, and concluding by exploring how the created community can lead to social change or revolution. *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother* use feelings as a way of building this arc. As Claudio Gullien states in *The Challenge of Comparative Lit* (1993), the anthologist “expresses or puts into practice an idea of what is literary, fixing genres, arousing models, affecting the readers sense of the present, and, above all, directing the readers eye toward the future” (328). Beam and Hemphill as anthologist lay the foundation of a traceable black gay male literary tradition through the affective arcs of the anthologies. In doing so, they explore oppression through loneliness, assertion and celebration through desire, and social change and revolution through hope.

The anthology is an intentional genre: from the section headers to the texts within, to the epigraphs and frontal pieces, all the elements convey central concerns and ideas that lend itself useful to understanding what the anthology itself is attempting to convey. With a title like *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986), the anthology explicitly tells its soon to be reader, one that

upon picking up the book is potentially enticed by the unflinching stare of the anthology's editor Joseph Beam, that this is a book about black gay life. As Sylvester notes in the forward, this book serves as "a place to express [black gay] feelings and experiences" (Beam xvii). You may ask yourself, what are feelings that are central to black gay life? And how are those feelings experienced? The table of contexts tells us where to begin, a roadmap of sorts; the texts within metaphorically representing the journey that follows.

Barriers to Relation

"Stepping Out" is the first section of *In the Life*. "Stepping Out" conjures multiple ideas: leaving something behind and entering a new place or space, going outside, or stepping out as in coming out. But what is being left behind for something new? Is it simply a place or space, or can it also be a feeling? Enter Willis, the protagonist of Melvin Dixon's short story "The Boy with Beer" on a crowded Friday night standing alone outside of the club. He is literally at a precipice, a threshold, plagued by thoughts and ideas of his family and previous lover through an italicized internal dialogue that interrupts the narrative. He's worried that by entering the crowded club, his same-sex desire will be found out by those close to him. By staging this hesitation, Dixon makes clear why Willis has truly come to this bar: "the air on the street made him aware of a cool emptiness growing inside him" (2).

An understanding of the "cool emptiness growing inside of [Willis]" can be clarified by the exchange that takes place between the figures behind him. While one person does not want to go out tonight, indicating that it's too much being with the crazy "children," another one brings his personal struggles into consideration. He says, "I've been sitting home all week, let me tell you, waiting for that man to call. That's right. *All week*. And that bum ain't called yet. Bet you I ain't sitting home for nobody no more. I ain't about to rot for nobody" (3). If he had continued to wait for the bum to call him, he may have begun to be plagued by a "cool emptiness." This "cool

emptiness” refers to a feeling that develops because of a withholding, putting something off intentionally or solely because a ‘bum’ has not returned a call you were expecting. The thing that becomes central to this feeling, this “cool emptiness” as Dixon describes it for Willis, is that it develops in the individual it plagues a desire to rid oneself of it. That’s the reason why the person Willis overhears is out tonight and why Willis has found himself out as well, even though he may be hovering at the threshold of the club. Black sociality by way of the night club beckons, pulling Willis inside after the group. As the song on the juke box seems to indicate, coming inside “ain’t easy girls”, but it seems to be worth it.

Willis attempts to alleviate this feeling, even as he is constantly plagued by memories that seem to intensify it. He fights these memories by choosing to remain in the bar. After he gets his Ballantine, the voice of his father interrupts the moment. His exclamation of “*Willis!*” seems to jump out of the past, physically chilling Willis further. His father’s dialogue with his mother exposes his rigid understandings of gender. Because Willis enjoys making a cake with his mother and is caught in the act of doing so by his father while wearing an apron, he is singled out for not adhering to gender expectations. His father says that, “he should be out doing some man’s work like other boys his age. Not laid up in some damn kitchen!” (5). His father others Willis by placing what he appears to like to do (cook) against what other boys his age are doing. Not only does he metaphorically other Willis from other boys his age, he physically does so by not allowing Willis to hang out with his friend Larry.

Even as Willis is mentally assaulted by the past, demonstrated through the italicized portions of the story, Dixon makes plain that the stakes for Willis’ life lie in the present moment. The “cool emptiness” Willis felt at the threshold to the bar is now intensified by his first sip of beer, “so icy it numbed his insides” (5). To some extent, the ‘cool emptiness’ of this present

moment colors the past as Willis reflects on his friend Larry, whose hands are described as cold. Does Willis remember them being cold and hard, a foil to how warm and soft his hands are, because they were or because the image of Larry in his head is tainted by loss; the loss of knowing a sexual intimacy the night they “touched, fumbled nervously and shook”, and then not being allowed to have it again? This history has a weight to it, so heavy that sensorially it materializes quickly, visually, and auditorily and is so harsh that Willis instantly tries to blur the memory, an act that can be read as one that allows him to create some sort of distance between the past and the present.

A list begins to form: the loss of a friend and a lover, othered for his same-sex desires, as well as the “cool emptiness” that led Willis to the bar in the first place. On page 8, Willis names this feeling, whose metaphor helps to demonstrate its elasticity as an atemporal affect that afflicts the one who feels it: loneliness. Following Sara Ahmed, I am less interested in defining loneliness (what the emotion is) and more concerned with what loneliness does (what do emotions do) (Ahmed 8). In this case, loneliness, a byproduct of forced estrangement and isolation, functions as a personal weight, an affliction, something akin to pain, making black gay being difficult, and creating within the individual who is forced to feel it, a desire to rid oneself of it.⁹

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004), Sarah Ahmed explores how emotions shape the surfaces of individuals, the part of them that encounters objects and others. Ahmed’s theorizations are important because they emphasize the movement of emotions through social interactions. In this case, for Willis, loneliness is the byproduct of contact with individuals like his father and the community who gossip about and show a disdain for same-sex attraction, or

⁹ In referring to black gay being, I am referring to Darius Bost’s conceptualization from *Evidence of Being*, an insistence on life and lived experience in spite of double cremation.

better yet the social world and its rigid understanding of what it means it lie at the intersection of black and queer. Essentially, the feeling of an emotion is the impression of an encounter, a kind of residue. In the book, Ahmed explores various emotions, but it is the analysis of pain that I find the most useful in understanding loneliness. It is through pain or painful experiences that bodies materialize and take shape. When one feels pain, “bodily surfaces become reformed not only in instances when we might move away from objects that cause injury but also in the process of moving towards the body and seeking to move away from pain” (Ahmed 26). The “cool emptiness” of loneliness becomes an intermediary state, where on the one hand, an individual deals with the pain that is inflicted upon them for having a stigmatized identity, while on the other side, the individual longs to rid oneself of loneliness in an attempt to move towards something better.

Willis remembers the summer after high school as a lonely one. He is literally by himself in the park, looking at others, watching them. He wishes that those that he looks at will return his looking, and in not having his gazes returned, he wonders if he will always be lonely. His misery grows as he notices the blank stares of others. Loneliness then, while also being akin to pain, is the absence recognition, hence the desire for Willis to be seen. Ultimately, Willis desires sociality, the ability to connect with others, to have his black queer self and the feelings that are a byproduct of this reality recognized. The lack of recognition and connection results in loneliness.

While loneliness can be felt individually, in the case of Willis, it is also important to recognize the sociality of loneliness, its collectivity, how and why it moves. Gilberto Gerald’s essay, which immediately follows Dixon’s short story, helps to unpack this social and structural nature of loneliness through the political contours of his journey to gain American citizenship. In ‘With My Head Held High,’ Gerald recounts his four-year citizenship journey. The journey

demonstrated to him that “we could do more, individually and corporately, to challenge without fear the illegitimate authority of the government on deeply personal matters, such as love and sex, as well as to challenge the government’s lack of responsiveness to basic issues of fairness” (14). Gerald’s declaration, which seeks to encapsulate the individual and political lives of black gay men in relation to the dominant social world, represented by the U.S. government, demonstrates that while a feeling like loneliness is felt, and even imposed on to certain individuals due to their intersecting identities, it does not necessarily have to be accepted.

However, the authority of the government is difficult to combat because, for someone like Gilberto who is black and gay, the government, and the systems of knowledge that have made the government what it is, was not intended to serve him. Sylvia Wynter’s work tracks the emergence of Western humanism and how the invention of the figure of Man, a genre of the human that is coded as white, overrepresents itself as the only human, rendering other genres of the human as deviant. Western law follows the same ideology. In presenting his story as a journey to gain American citizenship, Gerald demonstrates that there are stages and levels to achieving citizenship and specifically highlights those who are excluded from it.

Gerald is an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago and decides to pursue citizenship again in 1978 after bureaucracy issues three years before hindered the application process. The issue is the fact that by 1978 he is completely out as a gay man, not only personally through his intimate relationships, but also politically and socially through organizations like the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays. He decides that instead of lying on his application, an act of perjury that could result in his application being denied and risk deportation, he decides to take pride in his identity, proudly proclaiming his homosexuality. But the day of the interview presents a conundrum: after affirming his gay identity, the interviewer notes that there is an unresolved

public debate on the issue of homosexuality and that, “there could be no certainty that [Gerald] would receive citizenship, because to his knowledge, there were no successful precedents for naturalizing openly gay applicants in the U.S District Court having jurisdiction over [his] case” (16). There seems to be an inherent tension about the intricacies of citizenship, what it means to be a citizen, and ultimately who can occupy that category. It is as if gay troubles the category of citizen, a category cohered by cis-heteropatriarchy and whiteness as the unspoken but apparent representation. Since Gerald is also black, his blackness troubles his citizenship attempt, intensifying his distance from the norm. In making this plain, the interviewer seems to implore Gerald to abandon his attempt at citizenship, especially considering he is not only black but openly gay as well, making citizenship, and thus black gay being, a “series of closures and exclusions” that attempt to “order and constrict” him (Cox 62). Gerald’s essay helps us get to the heart of loneliness as a central black gay affect. Even as loneliness is about how an individual feels, the feeling does not happen in isolation. It is the feeling of being intentionally placed outside the social world, relegated to an underclass, multiply marked by difference, and how painful it feels to be on the outside. To state it plainly, in this case, the state’s attempt to not recognize Gerald and his homosexuality renders him lonely.

Gerald’s piece highlights the fact that affect, and in this case loneliness, cannot be separated from power. This aspect of affect is enlivened by Denise de Silva’s definition of “affectability.” Affectability is “the condition of being subjected to both natural (in the scientific and lay sense) conditions and to others’ power” (de Silva xv). The definition of affectability and its correlation to power helps to trouble the field of affect theory for its lack of serious scholarly attention to blackness and the assumption that every person has the same capacity to affect and be affected. I thus position loneliness as one of the ways in which feeling is exerted and deployed

as a tool of domination. Yet even if this may be the case, I want to continue to honor the significance of the literary, the way that as Barbara Christian states in “A Race for Theory”, literature functions as a site for the integration of feeling and knowledge (Christian 56). While feeling can be a site of capture, rendering minoritarian feelings marginal as Xine Yao demonstrates in *Disaffected* (2022) in her move to consider unfeeling in 19th American literature, I see it as a having the capacity to expose and trouble the worlds logics, especially if we read generatively for feeling. For me, the question becomes: how does literature trouble the world’s logics? Are we to assume that just because a text is written by someone who experiences difference and recognizes how their feelings are rendered invisible or illegible by the world, they cannot conceive of spaces in their literature where feelings can be reckoned with?¹⁰ Black gay affects as I define them seek to recognize the feelings imbedded within black gay literary texts but also to recognize how those feelings cannot be separated from the systems that govern the world and hinder black gay being because of two identities that are situated outside of the norm. Yet, the space of the literary functions as one that allows feelings to flourish to the ends of visibility, community, and self-reflection, as well as a better understanding of how It feels to be in the world.

Coupled with Willis’ story, Gerald’s essay centers how one is made to feel different. One’s difference becomes an antagonism to the coherence of the social world, especially when that social world is governed by whiteness and heteronormativity. In order to have what is deemed normal, those that cross that boundary, only by existing, have to be punished for their difference, regulated, and renamed as deviants or problems. That’s why Willis is othered by his

¹⁰ I am intentionally not calling it a world because from the discourses I see, particularly as it pertains to the responses to Kevin Quashie’s book *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being* (2021) the main contention is his use of literary world, and the argument that there can be no other world outside of the one we already know and experience.

father for his gender performance as well as the unnamed boys who were found fondling each other in the park. They exist outside of what has been deemed acceptable. Yet, Gerald rejects the socially imposed estrangement of loneliness and proudly proclaims the day of his swearing in ceremony that he is a full-fledged citizen who is black and gay, a declaration that also revels in overcoming said impositions. By attempting to eschew loneliness, both stories demonstrate not only that ‘we feel together’, but that we reject societies desire to make us feel a certain way.

If “Stepping Out”, from *In the Life*, explores the personal and political contours of loneliness, then “Cut Off from Among Their People,” the section following it, articulates the varying factors that can lead to loneliness, factors that parallel Hemphill’s introductory distinction between a white gay and a black nationalist sensibility. It is here that two social worlds emerge: the white gay community and the black community. Reginald Shepherd and Craig G. Harris respectfully explore why black gay men are made to feel lonely within these communities, and in the process paint a larger picture of communal spaces and the varying degrees of acceptance, while still gesturing towards the ways that black gay men reject the imposed loneliness that are byproducts of these communities. In terms of the multi-genre anthology, these sections encompass the felt experiences of oppression.

As Kevin Quashie summarizes in *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being* (2021), Shepherd’s essay “On Not Being White” can be described as one that “travels along a speakers’ meditation through various anecdotes of his desire for erotic and affective connection with white men, particularly white gay men [and highlights his] yearning for recognition and the incompleteness of the articulation of yearning” (Quashie 84). At the outset of the essay, Shepherd clearly states that he is a twenty-two-year-old black gay man “with an obsessive attraction to white men” yet this attraction has adverse effects (25). For Quashie, Shepherd centers the topic

of interracial desire “as a mode of pleasurable reckoning with everyday ruin in contemporary black lives under the strain of perpetual chaos and continued diminishment,” after Aliyah I. Abdur-Rahman’s “the black ecstatic” (Quashie 83)¹¹. The pleasurable reckoning, for me, creates space to explore the burden society places on nonwhite individuals and the extent to which this burden negatively affects one’s sense of self.

He approaches this burden by separating black and gay so that he can demonstrate to the reader how both are compromised by his obsessive attraction, yet the majority of the piece focuses on his experiences within white gay communities and how they amplify his black identity. In the second section of the essay, Shephard specifically addresses interracial desire and his own desire for beautiful men, who in his mind, are white, and how his proximity to them personally and socially benefits him. He questions, “how much of wanting another [white] man is the desire to be that man? How much of wanting another white man is the desire to be seen with him? If I am seen with a beautiful man, not only am I thus one who can acquire a valuable prize but I am by the same operation transformed into such a prize myself, sought after and acquired by the man I am with...So by being with him I have him and by being seen with him I manage almost to be him” (31). Shephard depicts the historically mandated, socially accepted and self-imposed affliction of being made to feel less than because one is not white. In not being white, what is one left with? Like Willis in “The Boy With Beer” but with a twist, Shepherd is standing outside the club of whiteness, knocking at the door, unable to get in. But yet he still desires whiteness because through it, he at least is able to have the “correct” object choice, an orientation that aligns him with the normative even as his blackness and queerness are nonnormative. Yet, even as he attempts to align himself with whiteness through interracial desire,

¹¹ In the context of the book, Kevin Quashie analyzes how Shephard’s essay details an “experience of being” of aliveness and a poetic habit of a black world. See also Aliyah I. Abdur-Rahman’s “The Black Ecstatic”.

he is still rendered lonely, without kinship and the type of mutual recognition that Willis ultimately gets once Jerome sits down across from him at the end of the story.

Interracial desire for Shepherd functions as that which keeps him from knowing and loving himself. It inhibits self-valuation and love since interracial desire creates a rift inside of himself, one that is literarily represented through the situation of the essay as “an encounter between writer and speaker”, it subsequently inhibits him from forming community with others like him, thus cutting himself off from his own people, those that lie at the intersection of black and queer (Quashie 85). The essay ends by shifting the focus to the future. Shepherd desires to “be ‘myself,’ relieved of the baggage of my history both as an individual and as a member of an oppressed race and cast, relieved of my self-despisal in the shining warmth of the beloved’s blond approbation” (34). Shepherd’s desire to be himself hinges on distancing himself from whiteness and the way it inhibits him the full embrace of sociality. He ultimately desires to rid himself of weight of loneliness.

Craig G. Harris tracks loneliness’ imposition within the black community and how one black gay man, through the character of Jeff, who is ostracized at the funeral of his lover and is rendered lonely. When the story begins, Jeff is literally alone. Unlike the family of the bereaved, he is not allowed to ride with them to the funeral. Instead, he takes the subway. This separation is staged spatially as Jeff aligns himself ‘opposite the aunts, uncles, cousins, and other distant relatives of the deceased” (40). When he attempts to close the spatial gap by touching the casket, his hand is swatted away by the mother, so upon entering the funeral parlor, Jeff sits in the back. The distance remains intact. But Harris makes it clear that this is not a new occurrence for Jeff. As it pertained to the funeral, Jeff was not allowed to make any plans, even though he was the person that was with his lover during his final days. Only the lavender flowers he ordered to have

placed on his lover's chest serves as any indication that Jeff was there. Whereas race becomes the category that others Shephard in his musing on the white gay community, the category of gay serves a similar function for Jeff.

The minister takes up considerable space within the short story, and it is through his sermon that we see why Jeff is made to feel lonely: anti-gay religious rhetoric. The Reverend Mack points to the bible for the justification of Jeff's unnamed lovers' death. Through a sermon that takes Leviticus 20 as its text, which the undertaker refers to as another "'faggot burns in hell' sermon," the minister essentially concludes that same-sex desire led to the lover contracting HIV and ultimately dying from AIDS-related complications (44). In centering the sermon around what the bible deems to be an abominable desire and the death that comes to those who revel in it, the reverend makes clear that the unnamed lover, as well as Jeff, are outside of respectable grievability, thus rendered expendable and forgotten. In *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and The Breakdown of the Black Politics* (1999), Cathy Cohen notes how AIDS and its association with queerness became a "cross-cutting issue" for black communities because it exposed the rigid understandings of acceptable blackness and masculinities, that which black gay men were already positioned outside of. In the case of the short story, the minister and the family represent the "good and moral" middle class, while Jeff and his lover represent the deviants, those without morals who have been tainted by queerness, and thus rendered expendable black bodies.

However, this sermon allows Jeff a moment to reflect on being cut off from among his people. He recounts the physical isolation of the hospital rooms with his lover, the abusive smell of ammonia and his makeshift attempts at making the room a space of care through his handmade cards scotch-taped on the walls. It is primarily the dearth of visitors during visiting hours, a lack of support, even from his lovers' family, along with the predatory reporters who

want to make AIDS victims a spectacle that show the intensity of being cut off and left behind. Darius Bost in *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* (2019) depicts the communal component of loneliness as a collective black gay affect. As the preacher, the family, and the isolation of the hospital show, loneliness, and the trauma and loss that are a byproduct of it, stem “from a lack of state protection, the absence of community and familial advocacy and support, and institutionalized sexual discrimination [which marked black gay] loneliness as psychic and social, individual and collective” (Bost 51). Jeff is left without a lover, the ability to claim him publicly at the funeral, has to sit through an antagonistic sermon that lacks care and compassion, all because he is black and gay amidst individuals that refuse to acknowledge him.¹² There is a weight to this imposed loneliness, that which stems from societal issues that trickle down and color how individuals interact with each other. But it can be alleviated, if only momentarily through mutual recognition and compassion.

At the conclusion of the funeral, Jeff realizes that no one will offer him a ride to the cemetery to bury his lover. He begins to accept this fact, this separation, the feeling of being an outcast, until the undertaker asks him if he needs a ride. Jeff accepts and feels seen. The undertaker knows his pain, having lost a lover due to AIDS and offers a kind word to Jeff: “my heart goes out to you brother. You gotta let your love for him keep you strong” (44). Through another, Jeff’s loneliness is alleviated, if only for a moment. In noting that his heart goes out to him, the undertaker creates a moment of community based on their shared experience of the AIDS epidemic. He also positions the love lost as enduring, a sustenance that stands in opposition to the imposed loneliness of the family and the minister.

¹² Stephan Lee Dias explores this same idea through his piece “Don’t Turn Your Back on Me”, specifically how black communities view queerness results in black gay individuals feeling rejected as well as results in the community missing out on the various insights black gay individuals can offer the community.

Although this “cool emptiness” as Dixon references earlier, is felt, these texts show not only how it gets to the hearts of the individuals it plagues, but also how mutual recognition, through a shared gaze, a touch, or a kind word can help to alleviate it, if only for a moment. They show the power of a black gay sociality, individuals that share common experiences, and how through each other, relief comes.

While the section “Cut Off from Among Their People” from *In the Life* explores the varying factors that led to a socially imposed loneliness it is important to note that it renders marginal those moments where relief comes. Jerome comes and talks to Willis at the end of “The Boy with Beer” and Jeff has the intimate moment with the undertaker as they ride to the burial site of his lover upon the short story’s conclusion. *In the Life* focuses on those difficulties, the oppressions, which after being highlighted serve as the throughline to constructing a positive group identity within the multi-genre anthology form (the second function of anthologies). On the other hand, *Brother to Brother* does the opposite in its first section “When I Think of Home,” centering more of the relief and community and making the barriers and the imposed loneliness marginal.

These anthologies are connected, in the sense that they are both about black gay life but also because they come from the same mind and hands, that of Joseph Beam. In his introduction to *Brother to Brother*, Essex Hemphill notes how he, alongside Beams parents, completed the second anthology after Beams death from AIDS related complications in 1987. While Beam in *In the Life* talks about the creation of a tradition, *Brother to Brother* works as the extension and solidification of it, especially in the sense that both anthologies highlight the importance of home, or the black community, and how returning home is beneficial for both black gay men and the community at large. If home is so bad, if one is rendered disposable and harmed for one’s

gender presentation and same-sex desire, then why return home? The answer lies in the fact that home was not and is not a space that operates only on extremity, a space of only joy or harmful experiences. The notion of home can be where memorable experiences happen and painful ones exist as well. In the same way that illegible legibility insists on the multiplicity of perspective as a foil to a reducible black gay identity, the anthologies, if taken together, insure the same as it pertains to the notion of “home.” Between *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother*, we gain a more nuanced perspective of black gay identity, the later extending the former.

The short story “A First Affair” in *Brother to Brother* demonstrates the other side of home perfectly. It follows the character of Stanley who develops a friendship with another queer boy, Stacy, and is invited to a party. Charles R. P. Pouncy begins the story with the moment of recognition, a sign of connection between the two boys even before they speak.

At the onset, Stanly focuses on Stacy who is defending himself from verbal assaults by other students due to his queerness. Although we begin with an attempt at an imposed estrangement on the part of the boys, it is minimized by Stacy’s quick wit and physical defense of himself, thus rendering an imposed loneliness marginal. Directly following the altercation, which has drawn a crowd, Stacy visually finds Stanly: “He stopped for a second and looked in my direction I was sure he had seen me staring at him. He raised his eyebrows at me, but continued walking” (13).

This moment serves as the start of their friendship, setting the foundation for the rest of the story.

After being invited to an all-boys party the following Saturday at Willie’s home, Stanly’s family life takes center stage through a reflection of a moment between him and his father, a section that refers back to imposed loneliness. Through his father, it is made apparent that the family does not know that he is queer. In a moment when another boy Willie walks down the street carrying a purse and wearing a scarf around his head, the father comments on his

presentation, noting that it is unnecessary and thus incorrect way of carrying himself. This leads to an internal response by Stanly, one that leaves him feeling hurt and naked. The moment seems to suggest the same kind of response as that of Willis' father in "A Boy With Beer" from *In the Life*, one leaving the black queer boy feeling like he is incorrect and unacceptable due to the ways that gender has been constructed. This is imposed loneliness at work. Although the moment is a formative one for Willie in "A Boy with Beer," structurally "A First Affair" minimizes the negative association between queerness and loneliness to instead focus on the black queer kinship between Willie and Stacy that leads to a flourishing of black queer sociality, a departure from examples from *In the Life*.

At the party, Stanley is introduced to a world that was previously unbeknownst to him, a black queer world that stands in opposition to the imposed loneliness of religious doctrine and his family. Boys he knows, and others he is unfamiliar with, gather at Willie's house to eat, talk, and dance. Willie's mother and her friend, the party's chaperones, become the facilitators of this space, allowing it to exist. It is there that friendships are made, specifically for Stanly through a boy named Paul. Upon the party's end, Paul walks Stanly home, divulging his desire and yearning for fellow black gay friends that he shares interests with. Paul finds that in Stanly, who is on a high, stuck on every word that comes out of Paul's mouth. He knows that the feeling of the night, the black queer community he has found, will linger in him even when he reaches his house, and right before the night and all of its excitement, wonder, and community, ends, Paul consummates it with a kiss that the reader is not allowed to see.

The pleasurable moment is interrupted, punctuated with an em-dash. After kissing, awkward laughter ensues. "Before [Stanley] could nod out another okay, Paul's head turned sharply toward [him] and he gave [him] a little peck on the lips. We both sort of laughed until—"

(30). The em-dash serves as a break from the current action of the story to shift the reader's attention to something else. It serves as an interruption from the pleasure of black queer sociality and intimacy. Danger lies on the other side of the punctuation mark. Stanly and Paul are seen kissing by Stanly's brother who shouts it to their mother. The story ends there. The ending serves as a withholding, not fully allowing the outside world and its ideas to impinge on what has just taken place. Whatever happens next remains unknown although we can surmise it won't be good for Stanly considering his family is very religious. Yet the story does not allow that to come to past. Instead, it remains in the air, held off, forever, for the character and for the reader. In other words, the text leans into illegibility, a refusal of complete transparency, for Stanley, but also for black queer experience overall.

Other moments from this section insist on the movement away from loneliness in favor of sociality and in the process adds layers to more complex understanding of "home." "Adelphus King" lacks any adverse reactions or ideas about same-sex desire allowing the title character and Marcus to enjoy a moment together in the back of the jazz club in a moment of mutual intimacy that shows Marcus that it is okay to love another man. The knowing and acceptance that the characters of Del and Marcus' cousin show him is amplified by Calvin Glenn in "In my own space" where he proudly accepts and lives truthfully as a black gay man, regardless of the intimidation from his roommates. Together, along with Pouncy's story, these texts demonstrate the regimes of power that attempt to render black gay men lonely. Their plots, along with the technique of withholding and rendering marginal systems of gender and sexual oppression that make being black and gay a marginalized mode of being, show that loneliness can be rejected in favor of sociality as well as show how both anthologies approach the affect of loneliness differently yet towards similar ends. The multiple approaches to loneliness, from the personal to

the social, along with how its presented, rather centrally or marginally, demonstrates the usage of the genre of the anthology to make black gay identity in relation to oppression legibly illegible.

Desire and/as Sociality

Loneliness functions as an imposition, a weight, affectively something akin to pain that afflicts black gay individuals. This weight, manifesting as a lack of and yearning for recognition and sociality, develops in the individual a desire to rid themselves of it. There are varying methods to its representations as texts from both anthologies attest: a focus on the “cool emptiness” of loneliness or an attunement to moments of connection and possibility. Rejecting loneliness in favor of sociality, for mutual recognition and community, across various registers, hints at the fullness of sociality that is most apparently represented through the affect of desire.

With a section title like “Hold Tight, Gently”, *Brother to Brother* insists on the urgency of holding tightly, an expression of intimacy, or better yet, a desire to gain something or even a desire not to lose the object(s) one desires. The phrase projects an image of arms tenderly, as well as firmly, holding something else. Whom do these arms hold? Is it simply a lover, or maybe also a close friend? And why must the thing being held be held tightly? Do those being held want to be held or is this embrace needed? *In the Life* points us in the direction of the objects of desire, a “Brother/father/lover/son.” As it pertains to black gay men, the multiple objects presented indicate that desire is a multifaceted terrain and cannot be reduced simply to the desire explored in the realm of the sexual. That would render one too legible, giving into how black gay men are already viewed. Instead, desire, in the context of the anthologies, is a strategic tool that asserts black queer desires that are not reducible solely to sexual desire, even if musings on desire are birthed from it. Desire signals the ways that black gay men are attuned to their relation to others. Rather romantic, sexual, brotherly, or familiar, the constellation of desires presented in the two

anthologies work together towards illegible legible ends by insisting on the multiplicity of approaches to the feeling and various intimate relations.

Desire is expansive. In “Isn’t it Funny” from *In the Life*, Hemphill uses the nighttime escapades between the speaker and another man as the lens through which desire is explored. But just because desire is expansive and serves as a way that individuals relate to each other doesn’t mean that desire, especially when viewed same-sexually, is openly welcomed. The desire is kept secret, only being allowed to flourish with “whiskey on [their] breath” in dark backroads. The coaxing into sex, walking and talking through it, seem to hint at the social stigma surrounding same-sex desire. The speaker’s other is fearful of being discovered, as the following stanza addresses, indicating that he is uncomfortable with fully expressing his same-sex attraction. But regardless of the other’s hesitation, even the fact that he has a female lover across town, he engages with the speaker¹³. Coyly at the end, the speaker questions, “when you reach for her/to kiss her lips, her lips/are thick like mine,/her hair is cut close too, like mine/isn’t it...” (71).

Through this tongue and cheek ending, where “isn’t it funny”, the title of the poem, is inserted at the end, simultaneously stated and unstated, hovering at the edge of the speaker’s tongue but isn’t allowed to come forth, the speaker makes a stunning proclamation about desire. Desire is not same-sex specific. The poem follows the foreplay between two men, but the inclusion of the other’s cross town lover indicates that he is attracted to both sexes. But in folding themselves and the cross-town lover in on each other, whose features are reminiscent of the speaker’s own, Hemphill marginalizes the significance of the body of the one the person desires

¹³ Hemphill does not allow the poem to become one about “down-low” discourse. The fact of the female lover and the same-sex attraction is not judged. Instead, desire itself is emphasized and the social stigmas surrounding it. C. Riley Snorton in *Nobody’s Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* (2014) focuses on DL discourse and how its prevalence at the turn of the 21st century highlights the ways that black sexuality is pathologized alongside how gender and sexuality intersect with race to create a different paradigm outside of the closet episteme.

in favor of a commentary on the foreplay. To complete the phrase that ends with ellipsis, “isn’t it funny that the other has to go through so much: intoxication, walking and talking, in backroads under the stars, simply to express his desire for another man?” Hemphill shows the stigma attached to same sex desire by focusing on the difficulty in getting to the sexual act, a stigma that is reminiscent of the imposition of loneliness. In other words, the stigma of same-sex desire, if internalized, has the potential to close off an individual from desire. The speaker’s other is weighed down by the social stigma of same-sex desire. Just as the social world, systemically and interpersonally, impose loneliness on black gay men, it also makes desire a vexed terrain that must be delicately navigated, hidden and overthought, especially if the one desired is of the same gender.

As Melvin Dixon attests halfway through the section, the poems previously presented are about getting ones rocks off. In “Better Days” Hemphill emphasizes sexual desire, that of a playboy, resulting in impractical relationships, buddies and partners, and “names [he] will forget by sunrise” (72). For others like Donald Woods, desire’s depiction is hinted at yet remains unstated, leaning into the liminality that Phillip Brian Harper in *Private Affairs: Critical Ventures in the Culture of Social Relations* (1999) argues exists in public spaces, where there are attributes of the private within it, while also making illegible its fullness. Essentially these texts speak to the significance of sexual desire and the sexual acts that come from it, as well as the public nature of desire. But in “Getting Your Rocks Off”, Dixon metaphorizes desire, situating it as the weather, the atmosphere under which Black gay men move and navigate. It queers in anticipation what Christina Sharpe terms “the weather” from *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016). For her, the weather can symbolize antiblackness as a totalizing climate under which black individuals constantly exist. In a similar manner, for black gay men, desire is the total climate,

existing everywhere in dark alleys, aboard trains, in public and private, familiarly and romantically. Dixon's poem positions this desire as something that can be read through the relation to clouds which turn into the distance between oneself and another, which is parallel to the intimate bodies, the "rising curves and mountain tug for air, touch release" (81). Essentially the collection of texts that center sex and the knowledge of desire position the affect of desire as a theory in the flesh for black gay men, a theory that centers explicitly sexual desire and all that flows from it.

The phrase "theory in the flesh" is taken from *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color* (1983) and is used to acknowledge the centrality of embodied experiences to the creation of theory, an approach that deconstructs the western dichotomy between the body and the mind. Barbara Christian defines it as "one where the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings - all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (23). The practice of desire, sexually and otherwise, becomes a lens through which black gay men embrace sociality, defiantly rejecting loneliness. As Dixon furthers through "Getting Your Rocks Off", through this desire, the uniqueness of the black gay man is discovered, those who are unlike "granite, shale, deceptive quartz, or glittering layers of mica" (81). Desire becomes a lens through which to see the world. It is shared, given to many, ridden until the clouds break in orgasmic ecstasy. Dixon positions desires utility, in learning to read desires' rain, and following where the rain leads.

Ultimately desire is about movement, a movement beginning singularly and widening out from one person to another, traveling and subverting spaces. Oye Apeji Ajanaku theorizes the movement of desire and its transformative capabilities through a focus on the military, a seemingly unlikely space for desire to flourish. As GerShun Avilez discusses in his book *Black*

Queer Freedom: Spaces of Injury and Paths of Desire (2020), one must simultaneously attend to the queer desire as well as the space in which the desire manifests. He references Marlon Bailey's "Black Gay (Raw) Sex" to show that "desire is always expressed in a sociocultural setting, a setting that may be anti-Black and determined by social and economic disparities" (Avilez 5). The space of the military hinges on a kind of homosociality, a place where men of various backgrounds and experiences come together for the shared or forced investment in democracy. As the poem "Discharge USN '63" demonstrates, queer desire transcends restrictions, and in the process moves or impacts those who have been graced with its presence.

On the USS F.D. Roosevelt CVA-42 and the USS Shangri La CVA-38, the poems speaker recounts the Black masculine multitude, the chocolate sailors with whom he has formed intimate bonds with, drunkenly, sexually, and loving. But the poem also has a melancholic mood because it is about the speaker's time on the ship coming to an end. The poem does not explicitly state why the speakers time has come to an end. It could be that the speaker's time of service is up and now he must return home, or due to the significance of desire within the poem, it could be the forced leave of absence for expressing something that should not have manifested. But even though the time on the sea is ending, the speaker notes that it will remain with him just as even he is leaving parts of himself behind as well.

Desire is not just confined to the moment in which it is expressed or acted upon. Instead, it remains behind like a residue, in excess of the physical body, space, and time, carried in the body and in memory. The speaker of the poem states, "every moment of true happiness/I may ever find,/will be a tender moment,/somewhat akin/to being together with you all again" (77). The speaker injects the future feeling as deeply entangled with those of this past experience. Thus, the feelings of that specific moment exceed the temporal domain of its articulation.

Although every future moment of happiness will remind the speaker of those he felt for and with those on the ship, the speaker provides space to consider desire collectively and in reverse, where he is left behind and felt as well, affecting the countless of men he shared this experience with. This is articulated explicitly through the exclamation of “But O’ what a real and live part of me I am leaving behind”, a push to think the mutually satisfying, desirous exchanges of feeling, specifically how they transform the individual and collective as well as exceeds structural and temporal limitation (77).

Black queer desire, then, is an affective excess, exceeding limitations and in the process returns us to the specificity of how and what the black queer body feels. In her reading of Darieck Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection* (2010), Amber Musser notes how his discussion of abjection is articulated in relation to the excess of blackness via-a-vis normative family structures, “emphasizing the potential for alternate sensualities and genders that emerge from blackness’s estrangement from white normativity” (Musser 82).¹⁴ When read alongside José Muñoz’s articulation of Latina affect, specifically the hot and spicy spic, an excessive affect when positioned against the quiet and boring articulation of white normative affect, we are able to reread structural and affective economies that problematize nonnormative structures of feeling. With respect to black queer desire, more centrally the way the anthologies and the black gay sensibility Hemphill calls for is positioned against “negative” and flat public articulations and depictions of black gay men, particularly as hypersexual, we are able to see the transformative and affecting capabilities of the feeling. Like the weather, that which is ever present, desire moves, reorients, and opens understanding of black queer feeling and sexuality. A felt reading practice makes that clear.

¹⁴ See Musser’s *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (2018)

But like loneliness, more must be accounted for beyond desires affecting capabilities. While *in the Life* emphasizes desire, its expansiveness, utility, and positions it as a way of knowing and navigating the world, the texts that compose *Brother to Brother's* "Hold Tight, Gently" emphasize the stakes of the temporal moment and the delicate balance between the self and others, specifically because of their explicitness with regards to the AIDS epidemic. In other words, desire is not without complications or restrictions. The poem "When My Brother Fell" from *Brother to Brother* which opens the section, highlights the social and in making the poem one for Joseph Beam, uses his death as a launching off point to consider the epidemic. Darius Bost discusses Beams death in *Evidence of Being*, particularly the uncertainty surrounding how he died, as a way to reveal how the "public efforts of black gay artists and activists to transform their social worlds could not alleviate their individual psychic pain" (Bost 58). The tension between the public and the private unearths the presence of certain affective sensibilities. As Bost charts the affect of loneliness as the sensibility that exists between the public and private lives of black gay men, using the middle part of the poem to do so, I emphasize how the way that the poem situates Beam prompts us to hold onto broad conceptions of desire.

The loss looms large as the speaker assess all that is left behind, the "weight and grief, the responsibility he shouldered" (135), the responsibility being a reference to Beam's assertion of a Black gay identity and its relation to visibility and survival, especially in relation to the AIDS epidemic, despite his personal solitude and silence. The speaker does not have time to access whether he can shoulder the weight, "pick[ing] up his weapons", because of the urgency of the war against HIV/AIDS. The HIV/AIDS epidemic, which by the year 1992 when *Brother to Brother* was published, was the leading cause of death for black men aged 25-44, accounting for 25.3% of deaths that year. This is further compounded by the sixth stanza which references the

quilts of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, a memorial for those who had died from AIDS related complications (AIDS Memorial). By noting this, the speaker makes a claim surrounding the inadequacy of public displays and their inability to save, partly due to the compounding losses and how the constellation of social factors like limited access to health care as well as white gay bodies serving as the face of AIDS, result in Black gay men being further marginalized in the war against AIDS.

While HIV/AIDS serves as the context, the environment through which Black gay men of the time navigate and are concerned with, the speaker of the poem shifts the readers attentions to the lessons imparted by Beam amidst the urgency of the epidemic, lessons that firmly center desire. In the same manner that Marlon Bailey's "Black Gay (Raw) Sex" talks about the intricate navigation of desire among black gay men in tandem with the risks of unprotected sex, the lessons Beam imparts, his weapons, focus on the rebellious nature of desire. This desire urges one "not to fear embracing more than sex, for more than kisses and notches in our belts" (135). Embracing more than sex and kisses indicates that desire can be more than what happens in the night, decoupling the feeling solely from the sexual. It connotes a brotherly kind of embrace, one steeped in mutual survival and love for one another, especially because of the double forces of antiblackness and anitqueerness. Embracing more than sex brings "dignity...a chance to love ourselves with commitment" (136). Socially, desire helps to form community, communities that then can fight loneliness' imposition, which stanza five discusses in relation to Beams private life. Like the title of the section, holding tight, gently is of dire importance for black gay men, an embrace that expands desire beyond the sexual to attend to love, care, and survival of the entire group, especially because of "early AIDS discourses, which stigmatized nonnormative expression of gender and sexuality, blackness, and poverty" (Bost 1).

Even as desire is not without its constraints, the turn to other kinds of desire, harkens back to the collective gathering that *In the Life* sets up in the section titled “brother/father/lover/son.” For example, Bobby Smith’s “For colored boys who have considered” approaches desire through mutual care and support when the speaker attends to an acquaintance named Jerry who has attempted suicide. This text highlights organizations like the Minority AIDS Project which began in 1985 and focuses on supporting minority individuals who are HIV positive. The community organization helps to fill the gap in HIV services for communities that usually would get little to no help or access to treatment or support (Minority AIDS Report). The text exposes why this mutual support and care is important because social institutions represented through the figure of the police officers who arrive on the scene, lack care and empathy, thus making communal support imperative.

The speaker of the text morphs into a caregiver. He soothes Jerry when he awakes, dazed and angry, with sweet words to show that he isn’t alone. He calms him, rubs his shoulders, and waits patiently. The desire portrayed here is life giving and sustaining. Conditioned by a melancholic act, it demonstrates how black men can be there for one another, give to each other in their darkest moments. Like the title of the section, the speaker holds Jerry tight, yet gently. He holds him tight out of the urgency of the moment, immediately following the suicide attempt. He holds him tight because as seen from the officers as well as the nosey neighbors, they will not enact the same level of care one will give for one’s own. But what is most inspiring about this kind of desire is that it is compounding. After the end of the story, Smith tells the reader about what happened to Jerry after he left him. Jerry lived for another year and a half and actively fought against AIDS. He refers to this act as “life giving”, helping others, maybe not in the exact same way as the speaker, but in a way that is impactful to others. The care that the speaker shares

with Jerry stays with him, again harkening back to the residue of desire: a desire for life, for care, for encouragement, and more.

In depicting desires multitudes, it is also important to understand that the expression of desire is not always easy, as the epidemic in previous texts demonstrate. It can be a yearning inside of one to express it alongside an inability to let it flourish. Craig Reynolds depicts this in his poem “I Want to Love You”. The speaker wants to love another person, but the use of the word “want” in the title as well as at the beginning of each stanza indicates that there is some distance between the speaker and the other. Wanting to love someone is not the same as doing. In keeping the word “want,” the speaker presents this romantic desire as a kind of ideality. Expressed through metaphors that depict the closeness of objects like the jamb to a door or a hammer and a nail, the speaker expresses his desire for those love, but the ending reinforces a sense of uncertainty. Positioned between two ellipses, the poem ends with “...I want to love you...” (90). He hesitates, a kind of hesitation that is the underside of the outward expression of desire presented through Hemphill and Dixon.

This return to the notion of hesitation is significant, particularly in terms of the notion of illegible legibility. On the level of sentence structure, “...I want to love you...” emphasizes the distance between desire and its actuality, a yearning and a holding off. Through hesitation we find space to dwell in uncertainty. This uncertainty is reminiscent of Glissant’s opacity, which in this case manifests as a lack of certainty or explicitness. By stressing hesitation, Reynolds text resists a fully legible black queer desire. It complicates desire, a complication that is then extended by the final two pieces, both of which exploring father/son intimacy, the final component of the section. In the same way that hesitancy embraces uncertainty and complication, the father/son intimacy explored in poems “Etymology: A Father’s Gift” and

“When I Stopped Kissing My Father” highlights unrequited love and the distance between desire for intimacy and its actuality. Together, along with Reynold’s text, the end of the section titled “Brother/father/lover/son” expand beyond the flourishing of desire that the texts from the beginning of the section highlight (“Isn’t It Funny,” “Subway Trilogy,” and Getting Your Rocks Off”). They don’t resist or undermine them, but instead show that there are multiple expressions of desire. All of them aren’t returned, expressed, or end in mutual care or support.

Like the notion of illegible legibility, desire is expansive and contradictory. It is intimately known and expressed and yet yearned for and withheld. It is a theory in the flesh for black gay men, even while those they may desire with and for may not return their desirous longings. Just like loneliness, it is impacted by the social world, the HIV/AIDS crisis as well as certain stigmas placed on desire that make it difficult for one to share it with a lover, a friend, and even with one’s father. But both sections, “Hold Tight, Gently” and “Brother/father/lover/son,” if taken together give the reader a glimpse into the desirous lives of black gay men, enjoyed, expressed, felt in excess, and hesitant. In other words, there is not one way to approach the affect of desire.

Hope and Futurity

Whereas loneliness signals a yearning for connection and sociality, and desire seeks to shore up the multiple forms of connection possible, even its limitations, the final sections in the anthologies speak to and index the temporal dimension of black gay affect through hope. Hope, as an affect, is extremely significant to black gay life and artistic and cultural production due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the material inequalities it exposed. As Darius Bost notes with regard to Melvin Dixon’s 1992 OutWrite conference speech titled “Somewhere Listening for my Name,” Dixon, while witness to a broken, decaying body as a result of the virus, as well as the effects of antiblack and antigay violence on black gay men, simultaneously bears witness to an

unbroken spirit. Bost dissects Dixons use of “I” in the refrain where the “I” that is about the deterioration of black flesh and the unattainability of black gay personhood is not the same one that will be somewhere listening for his name. Noting that the refrain is birthed from the sorrow songs where collective trauma is the catalyst for fugitivity, Dixon shows how antiblackness and antiqueerness for Black gay men serves as the foundation upon which a better future is hoped for (Bost 3-4). Just as structural loneliness inflects desire, desire inflects a yearning for something else beyond the moment, maybe that which lies just out of reach yet is felt on the horizon.

Ultimately, hope is an affect that encapsulates the feeling of the horizon. Jose Muñoz theorizes queerness as a position or ideality in his book *Crusing Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). For Muñoz, this queerness is a “structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (Muñoz 1). Dixon’s speech encapsulates what the quagmire of the present is while also attuning to what comes next, which for him is concerned with the survival of black gay literature, that which Joseph Beam writes about in the introduction to *In the Life*. Together, *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother* work together to outline what is hoped for as well as the methods by which the yearnings can manifest. In doing so, the anthologies turn hope into a critical affect, not just one about fantasy, but rather one about the entanglements of the past, present, and future.

What is seen on the horizon? Joseph Beam’s essay from *In the Life* alongside the anthologies introduction demonstrate what is hoped for by leaning into the political/social significance of the anthology, the final component of the multi-genre form. On the one hand, the anthology, as referenced through Dixon, serves the function of creating and solidifying a black gay literary tradition. In a listing in the middle of the introduction, Beam states, “together we are making a history... together we are creating and naming a new community while extending a

hand to the ones from which we come” (xxi). The idea of creating a tradition that is also politically charged given the lack of visibility by black gay writers prior, as well as the flat depictions of black gay men in the media, also serves the final function of multi-genre anthologies, where after chronicling the oppressions the group faces (loneliness) and an assertion of a group identity (desire), the created community leads to significance social change. The creation of the tradition challenges dominant depictions by making legible depictions illegible as well as the anthologies emphasis on visibility as a kind of survival, particularly textually.

On the other, it is about how the black gay voices and perspectives that are assembled can traverse the communal silences within the black community or home, a way to relation and sociality instead of black gay men being regulated outside of it. Beam discusses this idea in his essay “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart,” where he emphasizes the importance of black gay men returning to the black community, a kind of relationality that is mutually beneficial. Beam stages this conversation between black gay men and their straight counterparts, but as the title suggests, this connection, one where a level of intimacy is espoused (brother to brother), is birthed out of a care and desire for connection through affects emotionality (from one heart to those that hear it). Beam speaks these emotions into being by recounting various experiences which have the potential to lead to mutual recognition and instead harken back to the structurally imposed loneliness from the beginning of the anthology. Black straight men don’t acknowledge him because of his sexuality, whereas there is a mutual averted gaze between black gay men due to internalized homophobia and the fear of seeing oneself in another. Beam notes how this difference across sexuality should promote dialogue and community, in the same way that the commonality between black gay men should be reason to connect.

But these relations are put off because of the effects of the social world. The essay goes to great lengths to discuss the anger black men carry with them due to racism, a “fiery cool mass of angry energy” that must be molded and directed somewhere, and instead is translated into silence. In taking the time to first discuss the misrecognition of straight black men and then the lack thereof from gay black men, Beam constructs a relationship between the two where it is through the later that the former has the potential to change. Beam hopes and dreams to take the negative affect of anger, that which can’t be washed down and often functions as the sole barrier to relation, and mold it to “create a Black gay community in which I can build my home surrounded by institutions that reflect and sustain me. Concurrent with that vision is the necessity to repave the road home, widening it, so I can return with all I have created to the home which is my birthright” (183). Beam utilizes the metaphors of dreams and daydreams, hopes actual and literary manifestations, to chart the journey home.

That black gay community is represented through the daydream and the figure of Bryan. Postmarked April 29, 1984, the daydream functions as the extension of the dream in the same manner that the black gay community is put in service of repaving the road home, or to the black community. With Bryan, the lover, Beam is open, sharing every part of himself in a manner that he is unable to do in the proceeding sections with his father or others due to the shared feelings of anger and how it hinders open self-expression. But in centering the lover, Beam speaks the unspeakable love that black men can share.

In beginning the daydream and the lover, Beam actively creates what he hopes can come to fruition with black men overall. He uses the reference to black women and black feminist genealogies to demonstrate the lack of an open community among black men that actually allows them to share their thoughts, feelings, and desires. This leads us to the dream on February 15,

1984, two months prior. The setting is a large classroom which functions to emphasize learning and growing. Black men of all kinds are present with no indication that exclusions exist based on sexuality, aesthetic presentations, or socio-economic backgrounds. Together, they are being: the act of sitting and talking, divulging individual stories and histories, a space where no secrets remain; laughter and tears flow freely. This dream propels, making it forward looking despite individual setbacks and hurdles. Beam dares to dream, to hope, out loud, as a way of bringing it into fruition.

A lot of focus is placed on the declaration at the end of the essay. In it Beam states that “black men loving black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties”. This loving results in a mutual survival, especially giving the catalogue of men Beam names who could have benefited from this love. In creating this call to action and centering it in his dream, Beam hopes for a different tomorrow, today. The temporal dimension of hoping for a different tomorrow today speaks to how hope transcends the banality of the present. Building on Ernst Bloch, Jose Muñoz details how astonishment functions as a reprieve from the “darkness of the lived instant” (10). It “helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating present and allows one to see a different time and place” (Munoz 5). In the same way that Muñoz thinks about astonishment as a mode that allows the presents limitations to be transcended, the use of the dream and the daydream hold that function in “Brother to Brother.” Yet while black men loving black men is an affective politic, it is its potentiality, or “a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense” that firmly centers hope as being central to black gay male writing and living (Muñoz 9).

Munoz makes it clear that hope is a critical affect, especially in relation to the overwhelming pessimism of queer studies at the moment of the books writing. He references Lee

Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) specifically for the antirelational thesis which denounces relationality, which is another way to say that it denounces affect. Queerness and hope for Muñoz is about relation and an insistence on the necessity of collectivity, that of being "singular plural" (Muñoz 10). But what he makes clear is the extent to which queer feminist and queer of color critiques are a counterweight to the antirelational.¹⁵ The moment of the anthologies' appearance is important given the antirelational trend. Despite the debilitating forces of antiblackness and antiqueerness, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, as well as the imposed societal and relational loneliness, black gay men still insist on looking towards the horizon. Not only are their gazes directed to what they can feel yet can't or will not see, *In the Life* depicts how they will get there. Hope methodologically invokes a "backwards glance that enacts a future vision" (Muñoz 4). The anthology charts that by temporally receding in time as the anthology begins to move to a close, building the foundation of a black gay affective concerns across the 20th century. While the essay "Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart" is in the final section of the anthology titled "Stepping into Tomorrow", it is the section "Speaking for Ourselves," composed primarily of interviews, where the backwards glance is enacted.

The anthology ends with a range of interviews. With each interview in *In the Life*, the reader recedes into the past in a way that establishes a continuum of black gay experiences pre-1980. Each interviewee is a different age with the youngest appearing first, and upon the completion of each, the reader recedes into history to the beginning of the 20th century. Emmett begins recounts his experiences living in Russell County, Alabama in "Emmett's Story: Russell

¹⁵ In "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" Cathy Cohen talks about how some people of color feel about the label queer. For them, they do not and can not fully accept queer because of the connections they have to other parts of their identity like their race and class status, relations that add to their identities. On the other hand, queer seems to collapse that. I note Cohen for the way in which her argument seems to highlight what Muñoz notes as it pertains to queer feminist and queer of color critiques. There is an instances on being relational because the identities are relational and inform each other. To reject relation seems to be a rejection of parts of the self.

County, Alabama.” He talks about his environment, as well as his various romantic intimacies. Each one profoundly impacts him, regardless of how long the relationship lasts, the physical distance, or the lack of readiness on his part to actively build a life with another man, demonstrating the impact of relation between people and lingering effects of intimacy. Yet Emmett’s account looks forward even as he reflects. When asked why he thinks he has been unsuccessful finding a lover, Emmett does not eschew the possibility that it will happen in the future. Instead, he clings to it, saying that, “I feel that if there’s a lover for me, I can find him. I can find him *here* somewhere. Its just a matter of time” (122). In other words, the weight is not placed on past failures. Instead, the past helps to reify what one ultimately desires and hopes for. But hope is more than an ideality or a position to inhabit to simply make one feel better in the present moment. It is an action. Emmett positively states that he can find this lover, “*here*, somewhere”, where the “find” signifies an active searching and investing in making what is hoped for come to fruition. Emmett demonstrates that what one hopes for must be actively invested in the present for it to see it manifest. There is a methodology to hope.

Blackberri follows Emmett and is also thirteen years his senior. Blackberri’s interview attests to the lengthy journey of hopes and the necessity of resilience. Upon the conclusion of the 27-year old’s musings, Blackberri colors this hopeful, forward focused action by adding to it the notion of growth: growing into one’s identity and craft. Although the road is not simple, its ebbs and flows seem to have a purpose, connecting him to various people and transferring him to places, allowing him to find himself and his voice. Each moment, like the holding off and deference of one’s desires, are inflected with significance as if there is a purpose in waiting, in the same manner that Emmett talks about his past loves. Blackberri demonstrates this by discussing his two-time rejection from a song writing contest. The deferral does not constitute

defeat. Instead, it pushes him forward. As a result, Blackberri invests time and energy into learning new instruments as well as learning how to write music better, reifying his craft so that he can have a better chance of accomplishing what he hopes for. Yet Blackberri ends on the notion of communal relations in addition to his own actions. What matters to him most of all are his support system consisting of his friends and family. Although his own personal strivings and actions are important, they are supplements and supported by acts of relationality through his close friends and family.

Hope is presented as an action, something to be invested in and is enlivened by communal relations of support. Samuel Delany discusses the importance of hope, resilience, and relation, especially within the gay context. Delaney states: “the gay aspects of my life, from the social to the sexual, were the most educational, the most supportive, the most creative, and the most opening parts of my life. Being gay had meant everything to me from the fact that I know I could survive on my own fairly comfortably in just about any medium-sized or large American city, to an exposure to aspect of art, theatre, and literature I simply never would have gotten had I been straight” (149). Operating as a kind of precursor to the argument he makes in his 1999 book *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Delany argues for the significance of gay social and sexual contact because it directly translates into a growth of the self, as well as those involved. Ultimately, what Delany as well as Blackberri and Emmett before him clarify is the relationship between hope and relationality, that whatever is about to be hoped for centers on relationships between people, in the same way that the revolutionary call for black men to love black men is about the affective relations between men and how transformative that love is for the self but also for the communities in that black men are a part of. Thus, there is a tangential relationship between black queer affects (loneliness, desire, and hope) and their communal resonances.

The final interview, “Bruce Nugent: Bohemian of the Harlem Renaissance” which functions as a kind of condensed biography, a callback to the end of Delaney’s piece when he discusses the importance of historical figures, not as a kind of listing but understanding their significance in history and how they relate to us in the present moment. If black gay men of the 1980s were looking for forefathers within literary history outside of Delaney and James Baldwin, then they could find it in Richard Bruce Nugent, one of the first writers to explore homosexuality/bisexuality during the Harlem Renaissance. In this final move backwards before “Stepping into Tomorrow,” Bruce through Charles Michael Smith charts the significance of friends, colleagues, and benefactors to the creation of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement whose cultural and literary impact continues to reverberate even into the present moment. The relationality of hope is not a new concept and these interviews by black gay men demonstrate hopes elasticity, its significance from the beginning of the 20th century to the present moment of the anthology’s publication. By having these interviews precede Joseph Beam’s call for black men to love black men, the anthology demonstrates that black gay individuals have been doing the work of thinking through the contours of affective sensibilities, before and even alongside the affective turn within the academy¹⁶. The anthology becomes a place where various feelings are critically chronicled through multiple genres and experiences.

Brother to Brother picks up where *In the Life* finishes, specifically with regard to the establishment of a black gay literary and scholarly tradition, thus positioning *Brother to Brother* as operating as a critical part of the horizon seen at the end of *In the Life*. Included in the final section of *Brother to Brother* are essays that situate the writing of black gay men within the

¹⁶ Jennifer Nash discusses the significance of attuning to how black feminists and gay individuals have always through about and politicized the significance of various affects in her essay “Practicing Love: Black feminism, love-politics, and post-intersectionality”.

larger African American literary tradition (“Toward a black gay aesthetic: Signifying in contemporary black gay literature”), black sexuality, representation, and gender performance (“True Confessions: A Discourse on images of black male sexuality” and “Black macho revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! Queen”) and iconicity (“Undressing Icons”). The section also includes various interviews with key figures of the black gay cultural renaissance like Marlon Riggs and Isaac Julien and their visuals and a list of black gay authors, journals, and periodicals for reference. This anthology proclaims that a new community is formed, which was one of the aims of the preceding one.

While *Brother to Brother* exists on the horizon of *In the Life*, it also contains a little melancholy. Joseph Beam due to his death was unable to see the second project come to fruition, inspiring Hemphill and Beams parents to work together to finish what he started. By 1992, the publication of *Brother to Brother*, the death rate for black men with HIV was 136% (CDC). The 2007 reprinting of the anthology has a section at the end of updated bios for the contributors, many of which deceased. How does it feel to hope for something and for it to be realized but for you to not be able to see it? Although the final sections of both anthologies move toward a full consideration of hope, as in there isn’t as explicit an underside to it or multiplicity that assists in the understanding of illegible legibility as previously explored through the sections on loneliness and desire, the illegibility of hope is expressed in its absences. Who hoped and didn’t remain, or hoped and lost faith, particularly in relation to ones HIV status? Hope has an underside, encapsulated by loneliness, an unrealized relation, structurally imposed or otherwise. It is to not have sociality or the kind that you would want. It’s haunted by death. So, while I have explored each of these affects separately, loneliness, desire, and hope, remain entangled. Just as loneliness creates a desire for connection and sociality, and desire is loneliness’ yearning realized through

multiple connections and relationality that allows one to hope for something beyond the present moment, hope is also about being lonely, existing on one side of the horizon when you desire to see that thing hoped for come to fruition. The mutual recognition of desire may never be realized. You may hope to rid oneself of loneliness and never do. Even as the subsequent chapters look at each affect individually, the other two linger there, demonstrating that feelings aren't felt in isolation but remain relationally informed.

Chapter 2: Loneliness as (Non)Movement: Rethinking Social Relations

“Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me.”
 “Lonely, ain’t it?”
 “Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely.”
 - Toni Morrison, *Sula* (143)

This chapter’s epigraph, a dialogue between two reacquainted friends, serves as the foundation for my thinking as I consider loneliness as its own feeling, not as it manifests in the black gay male anthologies of the 1980s and 90s but instead in the literature that emerges in its wake. Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) is a novel about female friendship and the bonds between women in relation to the logics of the town named “the Bottom,” yet it is this final moment of attempted reconciliation between Sula and Nel on the deathbed of the former that presents the duo as theorists on feeling. Nel assumes, partly correctly, based on Sula’s lack of friends and loved ones, that she has nothing to show for the life that she has lived. Sula rebuttals that she has herself and her mind, which for her is another way of saying that “I got me,” valorizing and honoring her singularity in opposition to the sway of plurality or being in relation to others. Nel names this state, this singularity, as the place of loneliness, to which Sula agrees. Sula proclaims that her lonely is her own, and even as she overlooks the part that she played in the downfall of her friendship with Nel by lying with Nel’s husband Jude, she regulates the lonely that Nel feels as secondary: “made by somebody else and handed to you.” For Sula, the notion of a secondary lonely is absurd. It is one you have no say in yet its weight is still felt. The later (a secondhand lonely) is placed in opposition to the former (a primary one), a lonely of one’s own making, chosen and claimed, regardless of its magnitude.

The previous chapter highlighted loneliness as a result of one's position within the social world. For black gay men, they are made to feel lonely because of the social structure being white, male, and heteronormative and regulating every other identity to outsider status. Loneliness then is an impression, a painful feeling, projected onto black gay men, thus making it akin to Nel's secondary lonely. *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother* explored how loneliness developed in the individual who is forced to feel it a yearning to rid themselves of it, moving from loneliness to sociality or desire as a way of combating loneliness' imposition.

Here, I want to think about loneliness in the primary sense, Sula's sense, which honors the social imposition of the feeling alongside the desire not to move into sociality's embrace. Instead of querying how loneliness propels one towards movement, I ask how loneliness resists movement toward plurality and, more so, how it moves on or within a person? What does it move a person to do? How can loneliness be claimed as a critical orientation within the social world? If it is in fact claimed, what is at stake by claiming a so called "negative" feeling? What are the stakes of calling it negative in the first place? How can we focus on claiming loneliness without judging what is considered to be a lonely life? And finally, what does claiming it, as opposed to castigating it based off its imposition, offer as a black gay structure of feeling?

In this chapter, following the theoretical push of a character like Sula in relation to the topic of loneliness, I analyze how loneliness moves inwardly, in relation to character as well as structurally in terms of genre. I argue that loneliness, when claimed, embraces (non)movement and uncertainty as productive sites of embodiment within relation to the social. This chapter continues to honor the anthological praxis as methodology, moving from the poetic to the novel and to the dramatic, considering the (non)movement of loneliness across the aesthetic spectrum. The feeling manifests theoretically in Cameron Awkward-Rich's *Sympathetic Little Monsters*

(2016) and is explored in Samuel Delaney's novel *Dark Reflections* (2007) and Michael R. Jackson's dramatic production *A Strange Loop* (2019). Loneliness, in both cases, demonstrates that claiming the feeling opens the characters up to a personal, interior space of deep introspection and reflection. It works on two registers: first it operates as a way of understanding the social imposition of the feeling (secondhand loneliness) through what I term to be an "orienting moment," the moment that an individual first realizes that they have been made to feel lonely, and second, it creates an opportunity to lean into this affective space and claim it as a productive feeling and mode of being (primary loneliness). Moving nowhere, loneliness critiques catharsis, a theoretical move, when thought about alongside the previous chapter, adds depth and complexity to black gay structures of feeling.

Outside of the work of Sarah Ahmed, which I draw from to think through what loneliness feels like and why a person would want to rid themselves of it, other scholars have theorized loneliness. In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), Heather Love focuses on loneliness in relation to the text *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) by Radclyffe Hall, a novel that is associated with the negative past before the flourishing of a gay identity. Through the novel, Love argues for loneliness as a queer structure of feeling, at once complex and historically specific. She offers thinking of loneliness epistemologically as well as ontologically, making the feeling inseparable from the body and the weight of bearing a stigmatized identity, similar to the work that I view Ahmed doing. In the case of the protagonist of the novel, loneliness is understood as "a state of desolation, a deeply felt psychic and corporeal state of abandonment, refusal, and loss. It describes not only a way of life but also a state of being, a social experience insistently internalized and corporeal, felt to be both essential and permanent" (Love 108). Love essentially speaks to loneliness' depth and elasticity, the way in which it

becomes so entangled with one's being that it becomes permanent. As a result, she is able to speak to the necessity of sitting with and not overlooking what she terms to be "negative, shameful, and difficult feelings that have been so central to queer existence in the last century" (Love 127).

In resisting the progressive move towards catharsis and the alleviation of loneliness, Love's analysis is expanded on by work that center black gay male cultural production, showing how it is also a structure of black gay feeling. In *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* (2019), Darius Bost notes how loneliness manifests in myriad ways within black gay male writing of the 1980s and 90s and specifically in the work of Essex Hemphill. There, loneliness functions as a "a politics, a style, a feeling, and a social relation," simultaneously indexing the pain of "alienation, isolation, and pathologization of black gay men during the 1980s and early 1990s" while also functioning as a "form of bodily desire, a yearning for an attachment to the social and for a future beyond the forces that create someone's alienation and isolation" (Bost 49). Bost's emphasis on the elasticity of loneliness, its various representations, gives way to an understanding of the various approaches artistically as well as critically to loneliness. But the loneliness found within Bost's analysis is conditioned by the study's focus: the 1980s and 1990s. The emphasis on bodily desire to circumvent the "alienation, isolation, and pathologization" of the period makes loneliness productive. A larger goal of this project is to illuminate the ways that black gay male cultural producers build on and challenge the affective theoretical impulses across the work anthologized in *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother*. Although the new work still exists in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis, which compounds with antiblackness leading to negative theorizations of black queerness, the works

that this chapter investigates are less concerned with futurity or moving beyond loneliness and, instead, dwell in and reckon with the present moment.

Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman's work on the black ecstatic makes clear this presentism. Although she does not specifically invoke loneliness, she provides a critical stance concerned with hope, futurity, and progress that builds on the work of José Muñoz and proposes a kind of nuanced negativity. Pulling from Muñoz's *Crusing Utopia* (2009) and the definition of queerness, alongside Judith Butler's query that the "presumption that the future follows the past...and that the future is the redemption of the past," Abdur-Rahman's theory "is an aesthetic performance of embrace, the sanctuary of the unuttered and unutterable, and a mode of pleasurable reckoning with everyday ruin in contemporary black lives under the strain of perpetual chaos and continued diminishment...[the black ecstatic] eschews the heroism of black pasts *and* the promise of liberated futures in order to register and revere rapturous joy in the broken-down present" (345). Abdur-Rahman demonstrates that something significant comes from attuning to the duration of negative feelings for black people, primarily that time is not necessarily reparative as the persistence of antiblack violence from emancipation to the present moment has shown.

As an "affective disposition, relational ethic, and aesthetic mode," the black ecstatic sits with the negative, not for negativities sake, but for what's generative in it. Her reading of the black ecstatic locates these generative moments within ecstasy in the film *Moonlight*. She focuses on scenes in which the film slows down time, allowing Chiron to enjoy ecstasy's pleasures, whether that is through the characters of Juan or Kevin, before returning to the everyday ruin that is positioned off screen. Abdur-Rahman reads the black ecstatic by attuning to abstractionism within the aesthetic, a response to how everyday violence has progressively

become more abstract. In that way, meaning is made outside of a purely representational lens, a lens that while attempting to demonstrate the humanity of black people, ultimately reproduces the same violence within the aesthetic.

Abdur-Rahman's work functions as an inspiration for William H. Mosley, III's essay "Ecstatic loneliness: black genders and the politics of affect in Mykki Blanco's 'Loner.'" ¹⁷ After tarrying with the racial blind spots in affect theory, Mosley asserts that "black queer writers have thought black interiority across several registers: sometimes for its own sake, sometimes as a black radical politics and, less interestingly, sometimes as a way to attach themselves to the state," making it clear that although emphasis is placed on the affective turn in the academy, black queer writers have always been concerned with feelings (80). He then uses that history, alongside theorizations of ecstasy from scholars like Jennifer Nash, Mireille Miller-Young, and Amber Musser to argue for an ecstatic lonely, one that originates in black subcultures, is concerned with class, gender, and HIV and eschews oppositions of identity categories to demonstrate how the ecstatic lonely of the contemporary view "identity as mutable, as something to be approached capriciously and as something that can creatively respond to the global yet predictable formations of ableism, anti-blackness and queer antagonism," all the while resisting logics of progress.

Loneliness is many things. It is a black queer structure of feeling that indexes the social's imposition, the weight of baring a stigmatized identity. That feeling is deeply internalized, becomes entangled with one's being, simultaneously shoring up the alienation and isolation from the social and the desire to be in community as Bost demonstrates through Hemphill's bodily desire. What is added to loneliness by way of the ecstatic is the fact that loneliness as a feeling is

¹⁷ Blanco, Mykki, Deaux Jean. *Loner*. Berlin: Dogfood Music Group and Sudio!K7, 2016.

constant and may not necessarily be eschewed fully. I ask, if one moves to sociality as a way of getting rid of loneliness, does it never return? What happens when one is alone again, inhabiting a solitary state that can at times beckon towards loneliness' call, particularly when we consider that the feeling functions as a reminder of ones stigmatized identity? I intend to dwell in loneliness's constancy, a lonely that is not fully eschewed. Harkening back to *Sula*, this is loneliness in the primary sense, claimed and lived in, as opposed to that regulated to the secondhand. The question becomes, how do contemporary black queer writers situate themselves within loneliness and grapple with the effects of the feeling, even if they are made to feel that way?

In order to answer this question, I stage a dialogue between black queer studies and trans studies as a way of theorizing loneliness as a movement nowhere or a (non)movement, where the move in movement signals feeling, moved to an affective state outside of the one already inhabited but choosing to remain in it. In "Troubling the Waters: Mobilizing a Trans* Analytic," Kai M. Green highlights the significance of black queer studies, specifically with regard to exploring the gaps and silences between queer studies and black studies and what a Trans* method offers the field. He states that while black queer studies calls out the missing and the neglected, "a Trans* method further names the work of charting the present absences in multiple sites of intersection by demanding a moment of critical presence" (80). Within that, he argues that a Trans* method opens categories, refuses fixity in order to make apparent the relation between identities, their limits and excesses towards the aim of dwelling in what is possible. I view my work as attempting to "simultaneously deconstruct and reconstruct or reimagine new possible ways of being and doing" black queer studies and approaches to various affects, in a work that focuses on black queer male literary and cultural production and its genealogies post

the 1990s (66). I argue, by way of a Trans* method that black gay feelings are theoretically expanded and reconstructed when looked at through a different lens, specifically with the inclusion of black trans writing.

There is a rich history of scholarship that places blackness and transness in conversation both ontologically as well as epistemically. C. Riley Snorton in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017) thinks race and gender, not within the fixed terms but capaciously where ““trans” is more about a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival, and “blackness” signifies upon an enveloping environment and condition of possibility. Here, trans—in each of its permutations—finds expression and continuous circulation within blackness, and blackness is transected by embodied procedures that fall under the sign of gender” (2). Throughout his work, he highlights moments where blackness and transness come into frame together, primarily through analytics of flesh and transitivity, and focusing on moments of temporal transition that instead of seeking to make blackness and transness fully legible, dwell in the opaque, suspending transparency in way that accounts for a different archive of black and trans historiography. The project essentially heeds the methodological push of Saidiyah Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts,” counterintuitively pushing the available archives to their limits to see what was rendered illegible in the first place.

In a similar vein to Snorton’s introduction, Marquise Bey in *Black Trans Feminism* (2022) argues against the essentialization of ontology to consider what “black,” “trans,” and “feminism” offer theoretically. His larger argument thinks black, trans, and feminism in terms of epistemological and abolitionist orientations to bring about a world after this one instead of an insistence on corporeality. With that in mind, blackness and transness are thought about by way

of their radical capacities. Blackness is about fugitivity.¹⁸ When thought about alongside the escaped slave, they utilized the mutability of gender as the mode of escape. The notion of a “fissured gender,” one that allows one to be and become through it gives blackness over to an understanding of transness, its disruption of bodily coherence and destabilization of destinal desires (Bey 20). Together blackness and transness emphasize the “capacity for deploying mutability in service of exceeding modes of regulatory captivity” (Bey 41).

So why turn to theories of black trans subjectivity in a project that is concerned primarily with black gay male cultural production and the feelings that are a byproduct of a specific experience, despite my own desire to stage a mingling of two fields? Unlike Bey, I insist on the significance of corporeal inhabitation while also thinking about its excesses. For one, we cannot--nor should we--assume the lack of black trans identities from the period known as the Black Gay Cultural Renaissance, nor should we assume that gay functions solely as a signifier for sexuality. In addition, following Jafari Allen, we have to acknowledge the way that while gender and sexual minorities called themselves into being during the anthological generation under the sign “black gay,” community adhesion and coalition building often fell short due to the centering and prioritization of the cis black gay male. With respect to this project, this conscious inclusion and centering of black trans studies functions as an example of the anthological praxis, simultaneously honoring possibilities while also acknowledging missed opportunities from the past. Thinking black gay alongside black trans, as texts by Snorton, Bey, and Green demonstrate, has the potential to be theoretically insightful. This is a push to imagine and consider resonances across and within difference, an idea that is at the heart of the anthological (Allen 32).

¹⁸ Fred Moten discusses the concept of fugitivity in his book *Stolen Life* (2018). He states, “Fugitivity, then, is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It’s a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument” (Moten 131).

On another register, this work is staging a critical intervention within black queer studies. While the field of black queer studies attends to the silences within black studies and queer studies as it relates to matters of sexuality and race respectfully, there are more silences to unearth, primarily with regard to black trans theory and writing as being central to where black queer studies needs to go next, harkening back to Green. Within the founding texts of the field that was anthologized in *Black Queer Studies: An Anthology* (2005), works on trans identified authors or cultures remain absent. Although more scholars who work at the intersection of black queer studies and trans studies comprise the sequel to the anthology, *No Tea No Shade* (2016), I insist on continuing to highlight the connections between multiple fields, black studies, queer studies, black queer studies, trans studies, and even affect. I think of this project as attempting an intellectual and discursive performance of solidarity. In doing so, I am taking seriously Barbara Christian's claim in "A Race for Theory" that "people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. . .our theorizing is often in narrative form, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our linking" (Christian 68). My way of centering black trans studies is to situate black trans writing as the theoretical foundation and launching off point for the subsequent texts that I will discuss. What is unearthed by staging this close intimacy between fields and identities? I don't fully know yet, but I plan to move in that direction by taking seriously the potential to be found in a literarily informed trans* method and to be open to where the work leads.

Not only are blackness and transness mutually beneficial to consider intellectually, but it is also fruitful with regard to affect. Taking blackness's mutability and transness's movement together, they help to articulate that feelings can be inhabited differently, they can change, and

that they can move, even if, as this chapter intends to so, it is not towards a destination like desire or sociality but elsewhere that ultimately remains in the interstice. Snorton, in elaborating the connection between the two ideas, places Neil Roberts's "double movement" alongside W.E.B. DuBois's "double consciousness" to highlight that both blackness and transness, as experiences, are also feelings. This leads Snorton to assert that "to feel black in the diaspora, then, might be a trans experience" (Snorton 8). To argue that the feeling of blackness is a trans experience builds on ideas that Dionne Brand presents in *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes of Belonging* (2001). There, Brand shows how the black diaspora exists without a concrete origin and do not feel congruous in the places they presently reside in, like the United States for example. Blackness thus leads itself to a trans understanding, a movement that is less about an origin or ending and more about what lies in the middle. It is to feel unhoused, as if one does not belong anywhere. What Snorton and Brand show is that the diasporic feeling is one about inhabiting the interstice, the feeling in-between. The work of black trans poet and academic Cameron Awkward-Rich interrogates these ideas in his collection of poetry *Sympathetic Little Monster* (2016).

On the Movement and (Non)Movement of Trans Feeling

Cameron Awkward-Rich is the author of two collections of poetry, *Sympathetic Little Monster* (2016) and *Dispatch* (2019), numerous essays at the intersection of black trans theory and expressive cultures, as well as the monograph *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment* (2022). While the collection *Sympathetic Little Monster*, a finalist for the 2017 Lambda Literary Award, centers a transgender subject and topics ranging from history, family, gender, sadness, and intimacy, it also gives voice to what I am calling loneliness as (non)movement. Although many poems focus on the notion of movement, I closely analyze poems that directly refer to motion like "Essay on the Theory of Motion" and "Theory of Motion

(1 and 3).” Holding tight onto tension as he explores the intersection of race and gender (a direct parallel to the intermingling to transness and blackness that Snorton elaborates upon), Awkward-Rich dwells within the self and the hauntings of the personal and familial past to not only theorize motion but also its affective attachments.

Audre Lorde states in “Poetry is Not A Luxury” that poetry “forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde 31). Lorde elucidates the way that the poetic helps to name an idea or concept so that it can be utilized. With that in mind, I begin with poetry as a way to think through loneliness’ (non)movement. Awkward-Rich’s “Essay on the Theory of Motion” begins that interrogation. In the collection, it is the first text to mention motion specifically, helping to orient the subsequent poems by highlighting how trans experiences are about motion and using the known theories of motion to explain it and problematize it so that it can be more useful. The approach is errant, moving quickly but intellectually deeply from one idea to another in the space of a stanza. By analyzing Awkward-Rich’s poetics, I hope to give name to and explain the currently unthought (non)movement of black queer loneliness.

Although not taking place until stanza 6, the poem gets the obvious out the way, that the speaker was a girl and is presently a boy, moving “into the boy and girl moved into misplaced language, into photographs”, bringing the specificity of the subject position of black transness to bear on the poem (Awkward-Rich 7). What becomes apparent here is that even as movement has taken place, the movement between genders, what existed before is not necessarily gone. The girl moves into misplaced language, language that everyone does not understand because “you can’t

expect everything to speak your language” (Awkward-Rich 7). There is not a simple movement between one state to another. There is still a residue, something left behind but still felt.

That weight of the past or what was left behind is taken into consideration with the notion of motion and its scientific currency. It would be easy for a poem on the theory of motion to focus on scientific theories like Isaac Newton’s ideas and friction, however the prioritization of scientific theories marginalizes other approaches to motion. The speaker upends that hierarchy by pausing briefly on scientific motion after first highlighting their own theory. Awkward-Rich first considers the feeling of motion and places Newton in the second stanza, instead leading with an object that exemplifies motion, like a car. The car becomes the “perfect device for giving a poem the feeling of motion” (Awkward-Rich 6). By considering the feeling of motion itself, the speaker queries what exactly is motion. Is it motion if one ends up where one began as in the case of the journey the speaker takes in the car with their grandmother, moving from yet returning to the grandmothers’ house? Or can we not consider it motion because one is “cross[ing] & recross[ing] the small terms of our own lives”, a notion that gives way to the repetitious nature of motion and thus feeling? (6). Or in the case of the obvious reading of the poem, is it motion if something remains like the girl and misplaced language? Essentially what becomes apparent is that motion is not about beginnings and endings but what takes place in the middle, the interstice between one thing and another, the journey itself, regardless of if it is a seemingly static one, that which begins and ends at the same place. The speaker is centering the (non)movement of motion and thus the feeling that motion invokes.

Toward the poem’s end, the speaker turns to the interstice, the literal space that is conjured between “trans” and “gender” in order to consider how the movement of the former bears on the later. There, gender is imagined in multiples, as “a country, a field of signifying

roses you can walk through, or wear tucked behind your ear” (Awkward-Rich 8). Gender can be lived in like a country, fully inhabited. In this case, gender can be thought through the restrictions or limitations that living in a country comes with, the laws that must be abided by the citizens. In a sense, this is gender’s constructed-ness, created by someone else and imposed on others, similar to the secondhand lonely that Nel experiences by way of her husband’s infidelity. Furthering the metaphor of gender as country, not all laws are followed in a country, and not following them leads to punishment. In some sense, Awkward-Rich is speaking to how gender transgression is punished and restricted. That is why gender is also imaged as a field of signifying roses that one walks through. Walking through something indicates a lack of permanent ties, instead emphasizing the fleeting, coming into close contact with a rose that contains within it one of genders ideas and passing by it towards something more fitting. What exists on the other side? Is it different than what is already here, signified through the metaphor of country? The poem leaves that opened ended, instead taking the reader to the sartorial, genders physical manifestation, adornment displayed delicately for others to see.

But even as the poem metaphORIZES gender, its available inhabitations and options, it ends on a completely different notion: destruction and return. The flower that was taken and adorned behind the ear wilts. Maybe that choice wasn’t final, signaling the significance of choice, moving again from one thing to another, given that one can pick up another flower. But the poem also presents another choice: the destruction of the field itself by way of fire. Maybe nothing that the field of gender held was beneficial to the one walking through it. This notion is paralleled in Bey’s *Black Trans Feminism* through the idea that the worlds constructions, even though we hold on to them and use them to construct our sense of self, are also forms of violence that are not suitable towards abolition. Normative genders for example, those that we can think the field

contains, are a “quotidian kind of violence” because they restrict other ways of being to come forth (Bey 38). Maybe what is desired is not in the field at all. Maybe that is why the poems speaker turns and “run[s] back across the tracks” (Awkward-Rich 8). What is ultimately emphasized by way of the metaphors of gender are movement towards a choosing that is already available, the destruction of what is available, or a return to what was before. All of them present a subject that inhabits movement but also emphasizes choice.

The emphasis on movement that the poem conjures is useful in the context of loneliness because it makes apparent that like the feeling of the poem, feelings move, and those feelings present choices for the subject that are either taken up, destroyed, or ignored. I place less emphasis on the beginning and the ending of those feelings, or in the case of loneliness, being made to feel lonely and the alleviation of that feeling in favor of something else. Instead, I prioritize its inhabitation. What is it like to inhabit it like a country, to live in it, or visually emphasize one’s loneliness? What does it move an individual towards and away from? And like the choices in the field of gender that are hinted at but not specified, what is productive about the entire scenario, inhabiting something and doing with it as one pleases? Ultimately, what is the benefit on centering loneliness in the primary sense, claiming it as Sula does?

If “Essay on the Theory of Motion” meditates on motion and feeling, then “Theory of Motion (1): Birthday 23” puts the meditation into practice. Embodiment is important here. The speaker begins by waking up on the floor of a house that isn’t their own which “isn’t a house for anything but paper” (11). The paper house signals reminiscent of a house of cards, fragile and easily blown away or destroyed. This house seems to be a place of refuge considering that the objects inside it, like furniture, which are described as watching the speakers back, are protective, facilitating an extension of the solitude that the speaker already inhabits. The space

under the desk that the speaker is lying under is described as “uninhabited space over which the body labors” (11). Together these details show how the feeling facilitated by the solitude, that which the speaker loves and brings them joy and pleasure, is also productive, signaled by the use of the word labor and its connotations of work.

When the speaker does go outside, they are looking at the world around them through the lens of the feeling that accompanies the love of solitude. They come in contact with “the emptiness that has been my bicycle,” another detail that extends the feeling of solitude that the speaker recognizes around them (Awkward-Rich 11). The bicycle, not touched or ridden, is reflective of the speaker’s state. From the bicycle, the reader is oriented towards the “untraversable world,” one in which movement is made difficult. Is movement through the world difficult because of the solitude that the speaker is now accustomed to? And why has the world become untraversable and instead joy and pleasure found in solitude?

To be made to feel a certain way, there is always an *orienting moment*. For example, Fanon realizes that he is an object among other objects when he is hailed as a negro.¹⁹ In another sense, Sara Ahmed goes to great lengths to discuss how emotions are felt based on the impression they make on the body, whether positive or negative. Here, the speaker’s orienting moment is not racial in the case of Fanon. Instead, it is situated within a feeling and concerned with the loss of a love. The speaker lost a lover. The poem states, “its been a hard year and now I cant move away from my happiest moment-walking New York City’s streets alone in January, calling you” (Awkward-Rich 12). The speakers’ feelings are attached to this loss, a loss that they

¹⁹ “Look, a Negro” is one of the oft-cited parts from Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). In referencing the text, I want to demonstrate the significance of being hailed in a certain way and how that has consequences for ones understanding of/relation to oneself. The same can be said for the orienting moment with regard to loneliness.

carry with them as they traverse a world rendered untraversable by way of their orienting moment.

Paralleled to the beginning of poem, an unattached state is one in which satisfaction, and sometimes even pleasure reside.²⁰ On the floor of the house, under the table, the speaker explicitly states that they love it, the uninhabited space that they exist in. Thus, loneliness as an affect can be claimed, insisted upon, and positioned plainly, without a negative connotation. Ultimately, the poem speaks to the simple, yet complex, claiming of feelings. As Awkward-Rich states in his interview with Lambda, “I don’t think feeling fragmented is necessarily a thing to seek to eliminate! Feelings, even unpleasant ones, [as loneliness is often presented] can be a source of knowledge and intelligence” (Lambda). The speaker in the poem advocates for a claiming of loneliness in the primary sense, one claimed and used as an orienting and navigational method through the world, turning it into a “source of knowledge and intelligence”.

The insistence on seemingly negative feelings like loneliness is paralleled in Awkward-Rich’s scholarly work, specifically the essay “Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual” and the larger monograph *The Terrible We* (2022). In the essay Awkward-Rich desires to sit with the position of the depressed transsexual, a position that seeks to honor a space that has the potential to not feel good. Ultimately Awkward-Rich focuses on the depressed transsexual and maladjustment intervenes in the way that “the incorporation of *trans* seems to hinge on whether it can be effectively decoupled from pathology, mental illness, and feeling bad”, choosing to dwell in bad feeling in opposition to progress narratives (Awkward-Rich 4). What I find most useful about this position and its relationship to loneliness is its insistence on the mundane. He draws from disability studies, particularly Tobin Siber’s *Disability Theory*

²⁰ Dareck Scott’s book *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality* (2010) parses through the idea of how pain, abjection, and the bottom position, all negative” states, can also be a position of power or pleasure.

(2008) who notes the way negative feelings are always conceptualized as regulatory or resistant, never “mundane, albeit unpleasant, fact of being embodied” (Sibers 59-64). In thinking about depression as a kind of pain or negative feeling that does not give way to pleasure, Awkward-Rich allows space to think about the negative for negatives sake, a feeling that is not eschewed but remains and how to use that space as productive. In addition, he pushes us to consider feelings that are not as readily legible as politically or socially useful, feelings that can become the center of political mobilization. I find loneliness to be one of those feelings, one that is situated between what was and the possibilities of how things could be.

To recount, Awkward-Rich’s “Essay on the Theory of Motion” emphasizes the in-between space or the (non)movement signified by a trans analytic. A trans method when thought of alongside loneliness emphasizes the middle, not the being made to feel lonely, nor the ending, the embrace of sociality and desire, and thus loneliness’ alleviation. Instead, loneliness tarries in the middle of those two end points. I argue that staying in the middle is productive and can be claimed as “Theory of Motion (1): Birthday 23” demonstrates, as a mundane feeling and experience. In a fictional sense, what does it look like to inhabit loneliness, not to eschew it, but to dwell in everything that that comes with it? Is it truly a “negative” feeling to inhabit or something else? Through the character Arnold in *Dark Reflections*, Samuel Delaney investigates these questions through the framework of loneliness. Arnold, a black gay man, is deeply lonely. I intend to explore how he lives with it.

Dark Reflections

Samuel Delaney’s *Dark Reflections* (2007) follows the life of a gay black poet named Arnold. The novel is told non-chronologically with the later parts of Arnolds life opening the novel and the earliest parts ending it. It is ultimately important that the novel begins how it does. Holding off on the orienting moments that lead Arnold towards his lonely life, the reader is

forced to sit with him in his loneliness and consider what the affect facilitates. The later moments move towards his origins, not as a way of escape from the present, nor cathartically, but to provide context as to why Arnold is the way that he is. Part 1 of the novel (The Prize) details the later years of Arnolds life, what I will refer to as his lonely life, with Parts 2 (Vashti in the Dark) and 3 (The Book of Pictures) of the novel helping to contextualize why Arnold has chosen to live this lonely life. In the analysis that follows, I focus on Parts 1 and 3. The novel has been critically neglected, so the first part of this section attends to the development of the narrative before going on to detail the construction of loneliness.

The Prize, the first section of the novel, is situated around Arnold winning the Alfred Proctor Prize. In the grand scheme of the literary world, the prize does not carry much weight, considering that it is “an award given once every three years that concerned a small circle of New York poets and men and women of letters” (Delaney 3). Yet it means a lot to Arnold. He receives the award for his 6th collection of poetry *Beleaguered Fields*. The award, \$3,600 stipend paid out annually over 3 years (1200 each year), isn’t enough to fully support Arnold from 1987-1989, but it will allow him to indulge a little on things he desires like fresh bread and the book in the bookstore he has been wanting to read but cannot because he is unable to afford it. The money will even go towards him consistently paying his \$396.83 rent. Beginning with the prize, the novel emphasizes what Arnold’s work, his poetry, provide him given his lack of sociality.

Arnold associates his work with the reason that he exists. About 20 pages into the novel, Arnold charts his literary history, and within it provides context on the significance of those works, particularly when they highlight his relationship to sex. For example, he states, that his fifth book *High-Toned Homilies with Their Gunwales All Submerged* is the work that he learned the most from. A single book-length prose poem about music, it taught him that “while sexual

love, however unrequited, might flog him toward poetry, for him it could never be the topic of the poem. As a boy he had lived too long and closely with Aunt Bea, and more, had loved her too deeply” (Delaney 26). This passage shows two things: that Arnold had a vexed relationship with sex and sexuality and that that fear is tied to his relationship with Aunt Bea, his primary guardian whom he never tells he is gay. The text’s language makes it seem as if it is Arnold’s deep love for Aunt Bea that keeps him from acting on his desire, but the actual orienting moment that facilitates his distance from his sexuality isn’t clarified until Part 3 of the novel.

Instead, Arnold’s relationship to his work serves the function of facilitating his sexual desire. Arnold initially thinks that his editor, Vikki LaSalle, desires him sexually until he realizes that they share a similarity. The narrator states that Vikki does have sexual desire regarding Arnold but not in the way that one would think: “sexual, yes. But had the object of her desire been the poet, or—as Arnold suspected—poetry? The second Arnold understood and shared” (Delaney 9). Given this fact, we are tasked with focusing on this relationship, that between Arnold and his work, as the governing one, instead of centering his lack of sociality and sexual desire.

But context is important. What informs Arnold’s attachment to his work? A large part of Part 1 centers Arnold’s disgust towards his sexuality particularly with regard to the memory of his Aunt Bea. One moment stands out when Arnold writes a book for a friend, Bobby, and the subsequent nightmare he has about the book after Aunt Bea’s death. Arnold writes an “embarrassing gay pornographic novel” while he is trying to get his first book *Air Tangle* published. It takes Arnold four months to write the book. Arnold’s feelings about the book are exemplified in the language he uses in response to a question from Bobby if he had fun writing the book: “who could have ‘fun’ writing *that*? I just turned my mind off and did *it*” (Delaney 31).

The word “that” is emphasized as a way to show the distance Arnold creates between himself and the work. Him doing “it” also shows that he found no pleasure in the work, only disgust. To compound how he feels about the book, and subsequently sex, the book occupies a hidden space on Arnold’s bookshelf. When he tries to read it he finds himself appalled and unable to continue.

After Aunt Bea’s death, Arnold dreams about her reading the gay pornographic novel and his name being attached to it instead of the “by Anonymous” that the book contains. His name is in all capital letters, leaving no room to doubt that he is the books author. There is an unmistakability to it, although he tries to make excuses as to why he is associated with the pornographic novel. In the dream, Arnold says, “Oh, Bea! It was Bobby’s idea—and the *idea* is what’s important! *You* know that! The language wrote itself—not *me*!” (Delaney 41). Within this justification, Arnold is trying to distance himself from the idea that he could have had fun or pleasure writing the book, an acknowledgement that would signal his comfortability with his gay sexuality, that somehow his personal being is deeply tied to the details the novel puts forth. Deep down, Arnold knows that he is just as much a part of the book, having written it, but also because, as he teaches his students as an adjunct writing professor, “there were no ideas without words” (Delaney 41). The dream of being connected to this gay pornographic novel highlights Arnold deep fear of his sexuality and the distance he tries to keep from it.

It becomes clear that it is through the distance Arnold creates between himself and his sexuality that keeps him by himself, alone and lonely, the former simply being a solitary state while the latter simultaneously shores up the secondhand and the primary lonely distinctions. Arnold views his existence through his work. In relation to his books he states, “because of these, and these alone I exist” (Delaney 32). While friendships are depicted in the novel, particularly in Part 1, they are reflections of the early parts of Arnold’s life. But even when he

had friends, he was a part of the group yet remained apart. For example, Arnold recounts a time that his group of friends discuss planning to change the shelves in libraries across New York City from “Negro literature” to “black literature” in his living room. Arnold does not participate but finds comfort in a relative distance from the friends. I would argue that Arnolds sexual repression, his sense of self, impacts the rest of his life, particularly his relationships to other people, gay or otherwise. His sexual repression, even when he attempts to engage in sexual acts which he ultimately regrets, serves the purpose of keeping him lonely. And while his sexual repression keeps him lonely, there is still a cause, an orienting moment that has facilitated the loneliness in the secondhand sense.

Dark Reflections does not come off as a “positive” text about black gay life. Compared to the texts anthologized from *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother*, this novel is an outlier in its representation, centering a character who is sexually repressed and occupies a loneliness that he does not eschew. The lack of sexual exploration and contact is interesting considering that Samuel Delaney, in his book *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) argues that “life is at its most rewarding, productive, and pleasant when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will” (Delaney 111). This claim comes in the second half of the book after Delaney ethnographically discusses pre-Times Square sexual contact and the relationships that were birthed because of it. But it would be important to note that even if life is at its most pleasurable and rewarding through contact, it does not necessitate that the lack of contact isn’t rewarding or meaningful. Because if the character of Arnold in the novel exists through his work, then writing 6 collections of poetry indicates some level of meaning for him. If anything, I view Delaney’s focus on sexual repression in this book, versus the flourishing of sociality and sex in other novels

like *The Mad Man* (1994) and *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* (2012), as akin to the push to focus on negative feelings associated with the gay experience that Heather Love argues for in *Feeling Backwards*. Arnold's life epitomizes the "painful negotiation of the coming of modern sexuality" alongside the impossibility of same-sex desire (Love 4). Pre-Stonewall and after it, Arnold's negotiation of loneliness and sexual repression occasions a different vantage point to view black queerness and the productivity that lies in seemingly negative feelings.

Part 3 of the novel contains Arnold's earlier years and his orienting moment, the moment he was first made to feel lonely. In elementary school, Arnold recounts how boys secretly engaged in sexual acts, acts which he watched but never engaged in. At this entry point, there is a relative distance that Arnold constructs personally, a distance whose justification is corroborated when one of the boys is reprimanded by a teacher for kneeling in front of another in an act of fellatio. The teacher says, "don't you realize how dangerous what you're doing is?" (Delaney 153). The secrecy of the acts he watches alongside the kid being reprimanded in public works to demonstrate to a young Arnold that same-sex acts are dangerous and should be avoided. The teacher continues by stating to the child, "You could grow up to be a homosexual" to which Arnold realizes "though he hadn't—really—*done* anything, [he] knew that he would have—eagerly" (Delaney 153). Arnold knows that he sexually desires other men, but it is the social stigma surrounding same-sex desire that keeps him from acting upon it.

The social stigma is extended when we also account for the role the media industry plays in pathologizing homosexuality. After the aforementioned act of sexual voyeurism, Arnold studies homosexuality. In the library, he learned to view his burgeoning identity negatively. The books confirmed to him that "he suffered from homosexuality and that it was a dangerous perversion" (Delaney 153). The use of the word suffering associates homosexuality with an

incorrect way of being, an affliction like loneliness, a seemingly incorrect inhabitation or orientation within the social. It also demonstrates that in 1948, the year in which Arnold is 12 and has this knowledgeable awakening, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DMS), something that he probably would have come across given his voracious reading habits, would have still considered homosexuality a mental illness, not overturning that evaluation until 1987²¹.

With this view of self in mind, Arnold asks his doctor if there are a lot of homosexuals. The doctor, after getting over his initial shock that Arnold has asked him this question responds that it's not very common, afflicting about 1 in 5-6,000. Not only does the doctor assuage Arnold's concerns that he could not possibly be that 1, he supports it by emphasizing Arnold's blackness. He states, "as far as I know, there's never been a case of Negro homosexuality—at least that I know of—in the annals of medical history. It has to do with your race's extraordinary high constitutional levels of. . . ahem, libido. Inversion, onanism, things like that, on the other hand, are sexually degenerative conditions" (Delaney 154). The doctor likens homosexuality with whiteness, philosophically positioning blackness, which he has already constructed as multiply aberrant, as incapable of demonstrating homosexuality. For him, the black race is so sexually degenerative that it could not possibly also contain homosexuality.

In this moment we can locate the beginning of Arnold's loneliness: his orienting moment. In *Black Queer Freedom* (2020), GerShun Avilez discusses how medical institutions, the individuals within them and the documents they create, have the ability to define who a person is. In focusing on desire, Avilez analyzes how writers construct autopoietic narratives, accounts that center self-identification and desire in opposition to institutional forces like the medical

²¹ Robert Spitzer and Janet B. W. Williams, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: III- R* (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1987).

institution. Arnold in *Dark Reflections* signifies the opposite of that. As the later parts of Arnold's life attests, he leans into loneliness as a byproduct of the medical diagnosis and the social stigma and choosing to lean into that position instead of finding life or self-identification outside of it. Arnold carries this orienting moment with him. Arnold is rendered lonely socially, not only because of the fact that the doctor says that homosexuals account for 1 in 5-6000 people, but also because his blackness is an anomaly that cannot be accounted for.

If Arnold has already concluded that he is a homosexual, then what does it feel like to know that he is of a small percentage of people, so small that finding community, in his small town of Pittsfield or anywhere else, is all but an impossibility? And not only is he alone, but he is also reduced to a scientific anomaly since, in the mind of the doctor, blackness and homosexuality are mutually exclusive, having no common connection or history. The doctors' statements speak to the critiques Marlon Ross levies against the concept of the closet in western white queer theory in "Beyond the Closet As Raceless Paradigm" from *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (2005). Ross begins by reading Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976) and discussing how Foucault's argument constructs the notion of the homosexual "body" where the notion of the "body" rests on certain assumptions about what exactly it refers to. Essentially, a totalizing construction of "the body" rests on the assumption of whiteness for its coherence. Foucault "needed to erase the question of racialized bodies in order to theorize the invention of the homosexual body as a unified—this is unmarked and implicitly ubiquitous—Anglo-Saxon subject. Foucault's scientists can script their human subjects as total homosexual compositions only because those bodies are not already marked as Negroid or Oriental; that is, in other words, because they are silently, invisibly already marked as unspecified Anglo-Saxons" (Ross 167).

Arnold's blackness already marks him as deviant as the doctor's reference to black libido illustrates. That leaves him outside of already available discourses on homosexuality.

Siobhan B. Somerville in *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (2000), demonstrates how even though Arnold occupies a scientific gap in the mind of the doctor, matters of race implicitly and sometimes explicitly helped to construct ideas about homosexuality in the late 19th and early 20th century within the field of sexology. Somerville notes how racial differences were sexualized and located on the body through the method of comparative analysis and focusing primarily on African female anatomy. Her perceived excesses worked to secure the boundaries around white womanhood. The field of sexology does the same, relying on physical examinations to study the invert. This methodical similarity, alongside the emergent field of eugenics and racial panics of color-line crossing demonstrates how racial models and concerns help to construct what we now term homosexuality.

Although Ross and Somerville deconstruct the logic of the doctor, his response to Arnold deeply warps the protagonist's perception of homosexuality, and himself, by theoretically and semantically aligning homosexuality with loneliness, thus making Arnold feel that he is alone and that the communities around him are fallacious. The depth to this logic comes into play later in Part 3 when Arnold is out at a gay bar with Bobby and Lamar. The text makes the impact of the doctor's statement central to his understanding of the world around him when Arnold, at Stonewall in the West Village, muses, "when you consider that only one in five thousand men is queer, then you come to a place like this, the only thing you can assume is that every single one of them have come to New York City and every single one of them must show up here on Wednesday night" (Delaney 183). His friends laugh at the absurdity of his statement and his

reasoning, the fact that he learned this information from a doctor. Not only are the doctor's statistics wrong, but the scientific anomaly of a black homosexual is undermined not only by Arnold, Bobby, and Lamar, but also because every other person in the bar outside of an Italian man named Dago Joe, are black. Despite these facts, when Bobby offers his own corrective to Arnold's statistic, 1 in 5, Arnold refuses to believe it, holding on to the formative ideas linking homosexuality and loneliness.

Arnold is deeply impacted by these ideas, to the point where despite enjoying the sociality around him, Arnold imagines it as impossible to sustain. "Arnold listened, feeling that all this, from the verbal exaggerations to the assumption of sisterly affection, was a vast pretense, which he was sure he would probably pull away from soon. It was fun, yes—but it lacked. . . something" (Delaney 185). Arnold is predisposed to being alone, based on his sexual voyeurism, his understanding himself to have a "dangerous perversion," and the doctor-based association between loneliness and homosexuality. The constellation of external renderings turned internalized crutches inhibits sociality's sway. Later in life, in 1988, years after Gay Liberation, Arnold reflects on the new gay world where the "closet had just. . . dissolved around him" (Delaney 203). He does not understand the proud, open claiming of a gay identity, especially when he has cultivated and inhabited loneliness, a feeling that he associates with the "debilitating conditions" of homosexuality. The social is at odds with Arnolds own internal world and perception of his gay identity.

Why does Arnold, in these early years, continue to refuse sociality in favor of a feeling that is described as debilitating and cruel, especially considering he seems to enjoy those moments like the one out with his then friends Bobby and Lamar? If it is so bad, then why not alleviate it? Isn't that how feelings operate, moving towards things that bring pleasure and away

from those that cause pain and the many feelings attached to it?²² What should be said of Arnold choosing to not get rid of it? Arnold's life indicates the way that loneliness does not have to move an individual away from it. That is what I mean by loneliness as (non)movement. He still feels and lives in the world yet his relationship to it constitutes a deep intertwining where one is inseparable from the other.

In Part 3, between the doctor's decree and the bar scene, lies a moment that demonstrates how Arnold views the world around him and how the orienting moment inhabits the consummation of desire. While in college at Boston University, Arnold, and all the other black students, enjoy the soul food from Miss Merelda's place. Arnold orders his food as usual but instead of the regular deliveryman Old Chinese Sam, a "huge, muscular man" named Bo'muh delivers his food. The text details extensively the man's physical attributes from his face to his arms before noting that he was "the most extraordinary-looking man Arnold had ever seen" (Delaney 157). Arnold's desire and attraction is evident from the moment he sees Bo'muh. When the man speaks, Arnold notices a "sympathetic buzz in the bass of [his own] throat, even as Arnold was oblivious to all meanings in it." Arnold's desire is emanating from his insides, in this case through a buzz. He has never felt this kind of desire or attraction before and thus cannot discern what he is exactly feeling. Under the gaze of Bo'muh, Arnold has forgotten that he has ordered food. He does not know why the man is there but he invites him into his room regardless. The act of allowing the man to enter is a kind of threshold moment for Arnold. What waits on the other side of the door? Will his desire be consummated or will it be rejected?

Through the interaction between Arnold and Bo'muh, we see how much Arnold wants to act on his desire. Arnold imagines an "ecstatic image of himself sprawled on his back over the

²² Ahmed considers how emotions work to align certain bodies and things and push away others. See *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004).

floor while this amazing fellow stepped over him” (Arnold 158). If that act had come to fruition, it would incite in Arnold immense pleasure and happiness. But that does not happen. Instead, Bo’muh sits on Arnold’s bed. Arnold sits next to him and accidentally sits on Bo’muh’s hand which causes Bo’muh to rub Arnold’s knee. The act halts Arnold’s breath. Arnold is enamored by Bo’muh’s arms, which he holds and leans closer and closer to. “It took bodily will for Arnold not to press his face against the arm—thick as a thigh!—that he clutched, that he pulled closer, while the pressure moving along his own thigh grew greater” (Delaney 159).

It isn’t until Bo’muh continues to touch Arnold, letting his hands slide from Arnold’s knee, to his hip, and finally grazing his penis, that Arnold refuses the possibility of consummating his desire:

Arnold’s hands tore from the arm. Arnold’s thigh pulled from the fingers. Like flesh seared to steel, Arnold’s leg ripped free of Bo’muh’s, as if it burned and bled. Things Arnold had occasionally imagined Junior Johns or Doogie Mallone doing with him did *not* return. But the maelstrom of shame and pleasure that always followed those imaginings swirled through Arnold’s body. (Delaney 159)

The text moves deliberately from the urgency of the act to the development of anxieties about it. The first two sentences are short, highlighting the actions, his hand moving from the arm, the thigh from the fingers. The next sentence adds feeling to the action of ripping away, where the language, metaphorical in nature, comparing the flesh and steel and being burned or bled, indicates the danger in their flesh continuing to remain together. This feeling is different than previously imagined although Arnold remains both enticed and repulsed, feeling both pleasure and shame, by even allowing himself to think about and touch another man. Keeping the doctor in mind, he still believes he is the only man to have ever thought about and desired another man,

as the following page attests. Later, when he realizes that he forgot to pay Bo'muh, Arnold tracks him down, only to incorrectly assume that Bo'muh and his white man roommate are engaged in a sex ring. The apartment is filled with photographs of Bo'muh engaged in sex with different men, one of which being the usual delivery man Sam. Adding to his fear and shame in engaging in sex and his predisposition to loneliness, the scene works to continue to ward off the potential of desire or sociality, instead remaining, in his mind, and in practice, the one and only black gay man. The orienting moment and the feelings that are a byproduct of it deeply warps Arnold's sense of reality, causing him to cling to fear. Ultimately Arnold demonstrates the full weight of a secondhand lonely, a lonely he did not choose yet feels fully.

Part 3 of the novel informs Part 1, demonstrating the way that Arnold's secondhand lonely in his younger years impacts his present-day self. Part 1 began with Arnold winning the Alfred Proctor Prize. However, it ends with him re-applying to the prize and losing to a young admirer of his. I end here to consider the weight of the lonely life Arnold leads and the significance it holds. As referenced earlier, Arnold's existence is tied to his work, that which he places his sexual desire into instead of acting upon it. He has firmly situated himself outside of the social world, not rejecting it but instead chooses to focus on something else. When his previous editor invites him out to dinner under the pretense of asking him to be on the committee for the Alfred Proctor Prize, Arnold immediately uses his age as an excuse as to why he cannot go. Unlike the rest of the city, he was unaware that 9/11 had taken place, which indicates the level of his detachment not only from other people, but from the happenings of the world. It bears repeating: Arnold is lonely, made to feel that way (secondhand loneliness) yet choosing to reside it in (primary loneliness). The orienting moments of Part 3 demonstrate why he is the

person he is. He has taken the link between his blackness, homosexuality, and loneliness to its extremity. But where does that leave him?

I find it fitting that we are left with Arnold's emotional state at the end of Part 1. Arnold did not win the Alfred Proctor Prize. He cannot get his metro card to work, yearning for the time before when coins were used. He misses the train in the same way that the success he has desired his entire life continuously eludes him. He begins to cry. "He *wasn't* sad. Just a little angry, a little uncomfortable, a little disgusted—with himself and the world" (Delaney 81). Arnold has a lot of feelings in this moment, all byproducts of the immediate situation, losing the prize, as well as the lonely life he has lived. But Arnold's contention is "with himself and the world." The world's governing structure is the cause of his loneliness, reinforced by the medical industries negative naming of homosexuality and his internalization of that fact. The world is the issue here and loneliness is the place where Arnold has chosen to grapple with that issue.

By noting that his contention is with himself and the world, Arnold emphasizes himself amongst a relational dynamic. What I find important here is that he does not reject the nor the many feelings he feels because of his social positioning and its resulting loneliness. He does not occupy the position that Leo Bersani advocates for in *Homos* (1995), most commonly referred to as the antisocial thesis, even as he primarily lives a life of solitude. After increase in the presence of gays as a result of the protests of the 1970s and AIDS, Bersani notes that this presence is also an absence that manifests through gay individuals' desire to be like the majority, to prove that there is nothing different about being gay. Bersani critiques this desire and instead crafts an argument arguing for the significance of homo-sameness (a rejection of the social through its ordering terms). Through his reading of Jean Genet's *Funeral Rites* (1948), Bersani demonstrates that Genet leans into the position of evil, not in opposition to good but instead uses the former as

a way of dwelling in the social construction of homosexuality as evil. Bersani recognizes this as the move to decline to participate in any sociality at all toward the empty value of solitude (ultimately there is no value in evil as a negative if one is not concerned with good) (Bersani 168). Solitude is evil because it betrays the condition of sociality and becomes a break with humanity. But even in Bersani's reading of Genet and subsequent theorization of the anti-relational, one's social positing is made absurd, taken to the extreme in an attempt to find some usefulness in it. That is not Arnold.

What remains clear, even in Bersani's attempt to break from humanity, is that the social structure still informs one's being. That structure remains intact. Arnold offers a different understanding of sociality, primarily because he speaks to sociality in the real or lived sense. The antisocial thesis, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with reproductive futurity, thus making it a limited understanding of sociality. Arnold's solitude or distance from sociality is not concerned with that fact and instead serves the purpose of centering and valorizing himself, not in opposition to the social but with it and because of it. In elucidating the many feelings he experiences as a result of his loneliness and disappointment at the end of Part 1, Arnold essentially draws closer to himself and the many feelings that are a byproduct of his social positioning as black and queer. Arnold's turn to himself and his feelings is similar to what Ernesto Martinez terms "inwardness," an active form of subjectivity that is a practice of recognizing oneself within social contexts that are bent on causing one harm. It is an excavation or sorting out of oneself and a counterintuitive form of radical meaning making.

The productive aspect of Arnold's situation is that his loneliness helps to facilitate his desire, not one that is sexual in nature, but his work. As referenced earlier, Arnold ties his existence to his work. In accepting that he has been made to feel lonely (a secondhand lonely),

and leaning into it for his own purposes, however detrimental one may find it to be because he is seemingly repressing a part of himself, Arnold turns the secondary lonely into a primary one, a lonely claimed as one's own, a lonely that is firmly about the self (a primary lonely). In that acceptance, Arnold eschews a binaristic understanding between the self and the social. He turns inward, to himself and his desires, toward loneliness as an affective space that is about the self within the social.

Delaney's approach to the novel's form makes space for a rethinking of loneliness. By beginning with Arnold later years and ending with his early life, the novel betrays the notion of movement or catharsis. We do not move towards an Arnold who does not court loneliness. Instead, we begin and end in the same place, thus emphasizing a loneliness that resists sociality or desire. In addition, by opposing catharsis, Delaney's text argues that loneliness is not solely a negative, debilitating feeling. Instead loneliness is an alternative inhabitation within the social world, one that makes space for different desires, like Arnold's poetry. Arnold claims loneliness for himself even though he was made to feel lonely through his orienting moment. After 295 pages, we have traversed the moments of Arnold's life only to end in the same place we began. In the end, we moved somewhere yet nowhere at all.

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Next, I want to turn to thinking about the metaphorical claiming of loneliness. How does loneliness manifest structurally? What does its structure make space for? What is unearthed by remaining in loneliness' (non)movement, theorized, and elaborated through the poetry of Cameron Awkward-Rich? What resides in the middle, between the orienting moment and loneliness' potential alleviation?

Returning to movement or the lack thereof in *Sympathetic Little Monster* helps to elaborate what can be found in loneliness. “Theory of Motion (3): Another Middle-Class Black Kid Tries to Name It” centers notions of family and history and the extent to which they bear on the speakers present. Essentially, the poem is one about deep reflection. It speaks to residue, what is ultimately left behind yet continues to bear on the present. In the case of the poem, it is the speaker’s grandmother. The speaker does not know her. Instead, “all [they] know about [their] father’s mother are these holes in her, the holes she left” (Awkward-Rich 46). The line speaks to a history of pain or trauma signified by the holes which connote being left empty, unfulfilled, or broken. For the grandmother, the gift to her descendants is grief, which moved from her to the father, from the father to his daughters, leading the speaker to say “im sure someone’s tried to tell you the blues is only music, *but the radio the radio*” (Awkward-Rich 46). To think about weight of history, the pain and imparting it solely as music misses that it is the vehicle itself, not just a way of speaking about the vehicle. Blues, like loneliness, is an inhabitation, a resource, and a way of dealing with the way that pain and suffering manifests in the present moment. The speaker recounts some of those manifestations, the racism inherent in a teacher’s language, the intracommunal strife that comes about in attempting to make plain what black is and what it aint.²³ The title of the poem demonstrates that there is no escape from this residue. Upward mobility cannot save you from the past and its inheritances. Education is not an escape, as demonstrated through the books, “little hallways full of words that weren’t our own”.

²³ I am signifying on Marlon Riggs film of the same name, *Black Is...Black Aint* (1994).

Medication can't save you. Instead, one must reckon with the weight of the past, its residue, or better yet, its (non)movement.

It's clear that the speaker of the poem is hurting, seemingly crippled by this weight, hence the "please—" that begins the final stanza. They are searching for language, a way to put this experience of inheritance into words. "what's the word for being born of sorrow that isn't yours? For having a family? For belonging nowhere? Not even your body. Especially not there" (Awkward-Rich 47). Isn't loneliness a sorrow that isn't made of one's own doing but external to the self, yet still carried as if it was? Othered, and positioned outside of the social, hence belonging nowhere? What is clear in this poem is that the speaker is attempting to reckon with the holes, the grief, the inheritance, and how it impacts their own life. It is a poetic act of deep introspection and reflection, moving through time and space in search for an answer. Michael R. Jackson's *A Strange Loop* plays with the notion of a lonely structure, a deep inhabitation of the self.

[A Strange Loop](#)

The 2020 Pulitzer Prize and 2022 Tony Award winning musical, *A Strange Loop* by Michael R. Jackson follows a character named Usher, a black queer writer, who works as an usher for The Lion King and is attempting to write a "big black and queer ass American Broadway show." Throughout the musical, Usher navigates his black queerness, desirability politics, critiques the theatre and entertainment industries through allusions to The Lion King and Tyler Perry, and faith-based queer antagonism. What is key about this musical and what makes it perfect for a consideration of loneliness is the only has one character, Usher. Every other character in the musical is a perception played by one of his thoughts (Thoughts 1-6), "Usher's perceptions of reality inside and out." The musical occurs within the confines of Usher's mind. In other words, the musical moves nowhere. In moving nowhere, the loneliness of the structure

facilitates a space of deep introspection and self-reflexivity. Through the loop, Usher moves closer to a better understanding of himself.

The play is a strange loop, as the title makes clear. The loop itself is the setting of the musical, “a loop within a loop within a loop inside the perception of one man’s reality” (Jackson 5). The device makes the play extremely self-referential, and like Usher’s character description, allows for “deep feelings” to manifest. I argue that it is the self-referential nature of the structure of the play that positions it as a kind of lonely structure: a structure that allows Usher to parse through deep complex feelings. In sitting in and with himself, something that loneliness as an affective space provides, Usher opens and excavates his personal histories and trauma. The loop clarifies the (non)movement, a refusal of the need to move beyond bad feelings like loneliness. This is done through a claiming of loneliness in the primary sense, in this case manifesting through Usher and the interplay between himself and his many thoughts.

Usher defines the play’s structure in a scene on a train, a setting, like the many scenes the play moves through, that helps to give the play the feeling of movement. In this scene, he is on the train after recognizing that he is an “exile in gayville” due to his small dick size, his fatness, and his femininity. An attractive white man, the object of Usher’s desire, enters the train and engages in a dialogue with Usher before proceeding to put him down due to his lack of currency in gay desirability politics. A strange loop is a cognitive term coined by Douglas Hofstadter. Usher summarizes the term as follows: “It’s basically about how your sense of self is just a set of meaningless symbols in your brain pushing up or down through one level of abstraction to another but always winding up right back where you started. It’s the idea that your ability to conceive of yourself as an “I” is kind of an illusion. But the fact that you recognize the illusion kind of proves it exists” (Jackson 39). The extended summary highlights the difficulty of

grasping one's own identity. Like Hofstadter states in the epilogue of his book *I Am A Strange Loop* (2007), "Human beings, more like rainbows and mirages than raindrops and boulders are unpredictable self-writing poems—vague, metaphorical, ambiguous, and some- times exceedingly beautiful" (Hofstadter 363). If human beings are complex, vague, or metaphorical in nature, then using a structure of deep feeling to parse through Usher's identity, and landing on no solid conclusion emphasizes the significance of sitting in the complexity for its own sake. A musical with only one character, thinking deeply about himself, then orients us towards a lonely disposition. What becomes significant is what the structure, a strange loop, facilitates.

A repeated line of the opening song "Intermission Song" is "how many minutes to the end of intermission." This moment functions on two registers. On the one hand it centers Usher in the "real world," orienting the reader to the level of abstraction on which the play is operating, where he is an usher for *The Lion King* and is often asked by patrons of the theatre how long they have until the show begins again. On another register, the question places Usher firmly in an interstice, a kind of intermission of himself, one that parses through his own identity. If the loop manifests as multiple levels of abstraction that get to the heart of the fact of the inability of conceiving oneself as an "I," then the intermission emphasizes itself as a space of reflection that will conclude when the intermission does. That is the key difference between a character like Usher and Arnold. Although over the course of the novel, the reader gets to see how Arnold becomes the person that he is, a person that is impacted by loneliness' orienting moment, we do not see him reflect a lot on who he is and why he is the way he is. Usher on the other hand, assisted by structural aspects of the play itself, the loop, and taking place inside of his head, has no choice but to reflect on who he is and why.

A Strange Loop firmly centers the weight of what I have previously referred to as loneliness' orienting moment: the moment that makes a black gay individual feel othered, that which transforms into a secondhand lonely. The musical builds towards that moment. Usher discusses the weight of this moment with one of his thoughts earlier in the play before the play actually arrives at it. Essentially, Usher wants to share his artistic self with his parents, which for him is much harder to show than his sexual self, a self that has been a cause of antagonism in scenes between Usher and the thoughts that represent his parents. He feels the need to confront his parents with the truth of the trauma of his sexuality and his art. This difficulty is essential to the drama of the play which opens up in a song that simultaneously highlights who Usher is and his desire to write a Broadway show.

If we think about the play as moving towards an internal confrontation between Usher and his parents, then the opening of the play sets the stage for what he wants to say. He states" he wants to show what it's like to live up here and travel the world in a fat, black queer body". For Usher, his corporeal reality is significant, being fat, black and queer because it determines how he is viewed and the levels to which he is accepted, particularly in a "world that chews up and spits out black queers on the daily." By presenting this through Usher as playwright, the constellation of things he desires to convey regarding his lived reality is refracted through the theatre world, a world where his work must confront and not slide into dramatic conventions, and be critically likeable, when the underlying assumption is that his blackness, that which the play itself is birthed through in terms of the setting, shores up certain expectations for what the "big black and queer ass American Broadway show" will be.

For Jackson, Tyler Perry's work functions as a foil to what Usher desires to write. Usher is invited to ghostwrite a gospel play for Tyler Perry, which boils down to a story with "a sassy

matriarch, a lonely spinster who loves God” with a few *Color Purple* quotes thrown in (Jackson 45). In “On the Cusp of Deviance: Respectability Politics and the Cultural Marketplace of Sameness” (2016), Kaila Aida Story analyzes the ways that the work of Tyler Perry disseminates and relies on heteronormative discourses of sexuality and the politics of respectability in order to reinforce the idea that the only acceptable approach to dating and relationships, and black sexuality in general, lie in the patriarchal and racist institutions that erase the black queer. Usher’s mother’s desire for him to write her a gospel play like Tyler Perry demonstrates where her investments lie, investments that are in tension with Usher’s black queerness. It is an investment that seeks to erase a large portion of who Usher.

That tension is made explicit when one of the thoughts, as Usher’s mother, wishes him a happy 26th birthday. She begins by telling Usher how much she loves him before sermonizing. Her scene is a way of centering the religious queer trauma that Usher has suffered, that which moves us closer to Usher’s self-referential center. This is highlighted when his mother dovetails into commenting on acceptable object choices. She says, “man is for wo-man. . . and wo-man for man. . .the rest is confusion. . . and not in God’s plan!. . . It aint right, it aint right, it aint right wit Gawd. . . It aint right, it aint right, it aint right with me” (Jackson 72). This statement epitomizes how Usher views his mother and by extension his father. As it relates to his art, which is an extension of his identity, meaning that it centers around his black queerness, his parents do not see or understand his art, which includes depictions of him, because it is from a black queer perspective. That perspective is in tension with the religious conditioning that they have tried to impose upon Usher. This leads Usher to give his mother a play, but only one that he can write, which means that it does not hinge on the same tenants that Tyler Perry centers. The scene focuses on the church, with Usher embodying a pastor and preaching the fire and brimstone

sermon that often accompanies the death of black queer individuals, especially those that die from AIDS related complications. The focus of the sermon is a man named Darnell, Usher's cousin, who is mentioned throughout the play as a cautionary tale for Usher. The tale is, make sure he does not end up like Darnell.

This central moment in the play is about the haunting of the past and mourning, but also how Darnell's death from AIDS related complications works to stage a tension between black queerness, death, and heteronormative rites of passage which is encapsulated through the use of the church and Usher's role as the pastor. In *The Calendar of Loss* (2015), Dagmawi Woubshet considers the space of the funeral or rites of passage generally as a way to further discuss how they are deployed by queer activists and writers. In the book more generally, Woubshet reworks melancholia and mourning in his focus on HIV/AIDS poetics. In terms of the poetics, loss is not singular. Instead, it is plural, resulting in Woubshet's theorization of "the poetics of compounding loss" a loss that grapples with the death of lovers and friends in quick succession while also coming to terms with one's impending death. These disprized mourners turned their sorrow into a vehicle for survival, centering the grief in their politics. In chapter 2, Woubshet focuses on the obituary, its ethical and political significance for queer activists to resist the ways that their loved ones were described by their family members, without any reference to their queerness nor to their HIV status. Woubshet turns to Thomas Glave's short story "The Final Inning" and how the text considers, like the obituary genre, "how shall the dead be remembered? What parts of their lives do we remember and reify? Who has the rights of survival? What's the ethical link between the rites of the living and the rites of the dead? And how about that battered word 'truth'" (Woubshet 72). What becomes clear in the version of a funeral that Usher performs is that Darnell is reduced to his queerness, his HIV status, and how they signify his, and subsequently

Usher's, distance from respectability. This specific distance from acceptance only compounds the distances highlighted at the beginning of the play, specifically Usher's weight, femininity, and lack of desirable currency. Ushers' gospel play becomes a critique of the gospel, primarily for the way that it is used to justify homophobia and a way of circumventing rites of passage that are loving. Usher exposes the way that the rites of passage for the black queer deceased functions as a kind of quotidian violence, not only on the deceased but also those who hear it and are forced to not see the deceased as who they were but as a cautionary tale.

The cautionary tale works for Usher and turns into a foundational part of who he is as a person. It is his orienting moment. He states, "and I can't help but reflect on the ways that I have lived a life without passion in fear of you and your husband's words to me that if I ever acted on my lust for another man, that I would meet the same fate as Darnell lying in that box" and knowing that "the only thing worse than dying from AIDS would be living with it and hearing the people you loved say, "I told you so, I told you so, I told you so"" (Jackson 83). Darnell's death, his loved one's response to it, and Usher's own internalization of it demonstrate the residue of trauma and pain. The play makes it plain that this is what sits at Usher's center because after this moment, his thoughts literally ask, "so what are the implications of that for Usher" (Jackson 92).

To ask for implications, or better yet, a what now, seemingly prompts a move to catharsis, yet the progression of the play eschews that, turning instead towards a recounting of memories, "sweet sour memories" (Jackson 93). The memories Usher recounts range from his experiences in the high school locker room measuring himself to the other boys to those about his home life, but even in the center of those memories, actually recounted between the previous to are those about the church, and him recognizing his own guilt and shame. But the lyrics continuously

return to “one lone black gay boy I know who chose to turn his back on the lord.” Again, the “lone” as with the “intermission” play on two registers. The lone black gay boy centered in his moment is the young Usher reflected upon through the memories alongside the play Usher, the Usher that is literally alone with his thoughts reflecting.

Even as this is a play about Usher and his history, or the mystery of himself, it also extends beyond him, entangling itself within the social. The one lone black gay boy moves into “all those black gay boys I knew who chose to go on back to the Lord” (Jackson 94). Usher is not part of this collective. Lines preceding this shift metamorphizes Usher flying, a flying that stands in opposition to death, a death that comes if he stops flapping both of his wings. In this moment, it’s hard not to think of the collective of boys as those that are dead, a life ending on earth and beginning anew with the Lord, especially considering the impact that Darnel, the cautionary tale, has on Usher’s psyche. The line in general speaks to the AIDS epidemic, a moment in time as Leo Bersani states, is the simultaneous site of gay presence and absence. The line can also speak to a return to religiosity, one that Usher cannot and has not chosen to pursue, instead repeating over and over again, that he chose to turn his back on the lord.

Usher chimes the intermission bell and just like the beginning of the play, it seems like we have come out of the loop, but little has changed. If, as I have been positing, the play serves as a loop, a lonely space of self-reflexivity, then what does Usher learn about himself and who he is at the end of the play? What was productive about claiming loneliness in the primary sense? Usher’s thoughts are puzzled: “so that’s it? . . .that’s really how the show ends? . . .he just turns his back? . . .But is he okay? Does he make it? Does he get the change he wants so badly? And if he does get the change he wants, what is he facing now?” (Jackson 95-96). The questions asked seek a kind of catharsis, something tangible for an audience and even Usher to walk away from

this experience with. Usher finally reckons with who he is, but that reckoning continues to function as a kind of absence.

Usher realizes a lot about himself. Usher is an angsty black gay man. He hates his job yet has no idea or plan of how to navigate his life. Sometimes he hates himself and at other times he doesn't. He has doubts he let define him, unexpressed lust, full of pain that he avoids and repressed rage. But ultimately, he realizes that he is stuck with who he is and realizes a few very important things. He comes to terms with that fact that his thoughts, himself, and ultimately change, are illusions. Usher rejects the move to become someone else, to improve and enter a state of positivity that would negate the various bad feelings he numerates in the final moments of the play. He embraces the self-reflexive state of his position yet chooses to remain there, to not move beyond it.

By considering the (non)movement of loneliness, not only are we able to see what this secondhand feeling facilitates if it is leaned into and made into a primary one, whether to facilitate a different kind of desire or to self-reflect, but it pushes us to move beyond momentary good feeling of catharsis, represented through things like desire and sociality. By engaging this negative feeling for what it offers, we cultivate the negativity of loneliness' imposition. By cultivating loneliness. we do not move us towards despair. Instead, it offers knowledge about the self within the social, and outside of it. To return to Usher, will he be okay? What's next for him? Will he embrace himself in a symbolic preparation to enter into the social world a changed man? While those question are important, it is imperative that we resist the impulse to seek what's next, to move beyond this particular moment and what happens after it.

Both Delaney's *Dark Reflections* and Jackson's *A Strange Loop* utilize the formal elements of their genres—an inverted narrative and staging a character's mental space—to offer alternate approaches to loneliness. Instead of positioning loneliness as a feeling that needs to be overcome in order to embrace other affects like desire, these texts present situations where the narratives protagonists remain in the feeling, following the theoretical impulse in the poetics of Cameron Awkward-Rich's *Sympathetic Little Monster*. By residing in the feeling, loneliness becomes a space of introspection and reflection in the case of Usher and a way to facilitate different desires like ones work with respect to Arnold. And since both texts resist catharsis, they reinvigorate loneliness as a feeling that can be claimed in the same way that Morrison's titular character Sula does in this chapter's epigraph.

Unlike the anthological texts which position loneliness as something to be castigated in favor of sociality and desire, these writers consider loneliness differently. In doing so, their addition to the overall project insists on a complex “Black Gay Sensibility,” one that includes black trans writing, thus moving towards a reparation of the communal abhesion of “black gay”, as well as varied approaches to the project's central affective foci. In this chapter, loneliness resists change. For as Usher states at the conclusion of the play, “change is just an illusion” and if “thoughts are just an illusion...then what a strange loop” (Jackson 99). So, let's begin again...

“Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me.”
 “Lonely, ain't it?”
 “Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondhand lonely.”
 - Toni Morrison, *Sula* (143)

Chapter 3: How Does it Feel?: Enslavement and the Mappings of Black Queer Relational Desire

“There was no other way for me to know the beauty of Earth except through the sexual love of
men...”

Essex Hemphill “Loyalty”

In “Loyalty, a short, yet theoretically and politically dense essay from *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (1992), Essex Hemphill seeks to reorient dominant understandings of black queer desire. In doing that work, Hemphill likens this desire to the sacred, “rival[ing] rituals of sacrifice and worship, and conjures the same glassy-eyed results—with less bloodshed. A knowledge disquieting and liberating inhabits my soul” (Hemphill 63). This comparison that Hemphill sets up is not intended to be blasphemous. It does not seek to ridicule or undermine what is often placed in the realm of the sacred (i.e. religiosity), yet he does make space to critique it through the reference of bloodshed, an allusion to the way Christianity has often been an imperialist tool, a justification for the division of Man. However black queer desire isn’t simply about fucking, although the fucking happens, causing one to moan, curse, and tremble. This desire is a form of liberating knowledge, a way of knowing the beauty of life through the sexual love of men, paralleling the way that Audre Lorde positions the erotic.²⁴

What I find most thought-provoking about this representation of black queer desire is that it prompts “glassy-eyed results”: this desire can move one to tears, highlighting its affective disposition. Yet the relationship constructed between desire and emotionality is positioned against the backdrop of stigma, imposed loneliness, flimsy constructions of manhood, and the black middle class push for respectability. That is why at the end of the essay, Hemphill declares that he needs “the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal” (Hemphill 64). Hemphill is seeking to call black queer desire forward as a truth-

²⁴ Lorde, Audre. “Uses of the Erotic”. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.

telling apparatus. Yet while its utility is primarily about the black queer subject, it also moves beyond him to consider the ways that black queer desire has the potential to affects others, as well as ideologies, or discourses.

This chapter, like the previous one, builds on the way that desire is theorized in the black gay male anthologies of the 1980s and 90s. There, desire functions as the flourishing of sociality after the rejection of loneliness' debilitating imposition. It is expansive, over and underthought, and likened to a "theory in the flesh." This chapter elaborates this idea while investigating it through contemporary texts that look back to consider desire not in the period of the anthology's publications but to the period of enslavement through the genre of the neo-slave narrative. These texts ultimately build upon Toni Morrisons lament that there is "no suitable memorial" to slavery in American, a lamentation that spurred her to write her Pulitzer Prize Award winning novel *Beloved* (1987). But as Charles L Nero notes in the essay "Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic," even in Morrison's novel, same-sex desire remains unspeakable and unthought, leaving no suitable memorial to the black queer enslaved. That unthought position has spurred black queer artists of the 20th and 21st century to reimagine the past with the inclusion of same-sex desire, not as a marginal afterthought to right fictional wrongs or to simply see oneself in the past, although that can be a valid and inspirational move, but as a central method that imagines the affective dimensions of black queer desire and its effects. Ultimately contemporary black queer writers capitalize on black queer archival opacity, intervening in a way that exposes different ways to see and feel the past and our relationship to it.

With respect to the neo-slave genre and its blending of slave narrative conventions and sentimentality, the texts this chapter considers center black queer desire to critique two trends within critical theory: structural critiques of affect theory and the melancholic turn within

histography in black studies. I turn to two texts to think through and move beyond these two trends: Robert Jones Jr.'s novel *The Prophets* (2021) and Robert O'Hara's play *Insurrection: Holding History* (1999). *The Prophets* by Robert Jones Jr. is concerned with the notion of being moved to feel, on the level of character relations (Isaiah and Samuel, and then "the two of them" in relation to the other characters). It speaks to the moveability of black queer desire, its capacity to affect, ultimately challenging humanist discourses that would render black affect as incapable of affecting. By staging this intervention at the level of the enslaved, the novel forces us to reckon with our ideas about the past, particularly as it relates to black feeling or pleasure, social death, and the centrality of the black queer to that reconsideration.

While *The Prophets* leans into sentimental conventions through its reliance on enslaved interiority, Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection: Holding History* (1999) problematizes the reader's identification through sympathy or empathy. The play achieves this through its genre attachments, specifically its use of humor, temporal adjustments where the past and the present are seemingly inseparable, refusing the renders view of enslaved interiority. But in the process, *Insurrection* considers the black queer desire that floats throughout the play as the starting point for something else to take place, a beginning, with respect to our approach to history, and more succinctly, the enslaved past. Taken together, these texts work towards this dissertation's larger aim of pushing black queer studies to its limits by using the specificity of the black queer position to intervene, critique, and reorient understandings of larger trends within adjacent fields. Black queer affect is the site where those challenges are waged.

I begin by first situating these texts within the historical genealogies of the slave narrative and sentimental writing. Ultimately what becomes apparent are the ways that the neo-slave narratives approaches to enslavement plays with and augments sentimental conventions. In

staging that dialogue, it becomes clear that both *The Prophets* and *Insurrection: Holding History* are texts that take black queer desire as its central concern. After considering theories of desire in relation to enslavement, I then engage both texts, *The Prophets* which constructs black queer desire through theories of movement and choice, and *Insurrection: Holding History*, which positions it as a historiographic method for the black queer present in relation to the archive.

Since the literature explored in this chapter refers to the period of enslavement, it is important to consider the slave narrative, one of the founding genres of the African American literary tradition. The act of writing oneself into being, to literarily document the journey from enslavement in the US South to freedom in the North, simultaneously worked to dismantle notions of black inferiority as well as to push for the abolition of the institution. As Henry Louis Gates notes in *The Signifying Monkey* (2014), the slave occupied a liminal status and the act of reading and writing served as the transgression of that position. By writing their own stories, the formerly enslaved like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, to name exemplary examples, “establish[ed] and redefin[ed] their status within the human community” (Gates 141). In addition, by writing their stories, the formerly enslaved contended with conceptualization of “reason” as being beyond the purview of the enslaved. Gates charts this contention as a theory by which the trope of the talking book emerges.

After Descartes, reason was privileged over other human characteristics. Black individuals could only be viewed as human and reasonable if they demonstrated mastery over writing. Reason then becomes a demarcating lens, using the absence of it “to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures of people of color which Europeans had been ‘discovering’ since the Renaissance” (Gates 142). By harnessing the written word, black people could contest their inscribed position at the bottom of the chain of being. For Gates, the talking

book, making a white text speak with a black voice, a move that highlights the tension between the vernacular and the written, serves as the first trope of the African American literary tradition and begins primarily within the genre of the slave narrative, a genre that dominated the literary landscape from 1830 until the end of enslavement.

The slave narrative, an aide in the push for the abolition of slavery, maintained a few literary and thematic conditions. Due to the suspicion of the white general public, the narratives “carried a black message inside a white envelope”, including prefatory and authenticating documentation that asserted the reliability of the narrative (Gates 158). Frederick Douglass would later break with this tradition in 1845 with the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* by insisting on his title as author, a choice that would become the standard in slave narratives in his wake. Additionally, the narratives tended to follow the person’s journey from enslavement to freedom, the south to the north, a journey spurred by extreme conditions of the peculiar institution, conditions ranging from the physical and emotional to the intellectual and spiritual. But even as their stories were told, they were told in a limited manner, relegating explicit details of the violence and abuse to the margins of the narrative. The inclusion of explicit details, instead of garnering empathy from their audiences, would instead be relegated to the realm of the absurd, as acts incapable of being true, or result in action on the part of the predominantly white northern literary audience.

To lean on the reader’s empathy as the primary lens of apprehending the success of the narratives themselves speaks to the centrality of sentimentalism in western literature, a category most often associated with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Toms’ Cabin* (1852), a text that was influenced by the slave narrative and the push to “feel right”. Stowe states in the novel, “there is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that they feel right. An atmosphere of

sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who feels strongly, healthily, and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race” (Stowe 358). As Xine Yao explores in *Diasaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (2021), Stowe’s call to humanity collapses individual feeling in favor of an impersonal, collective one, a move that privileges the normative white, middle class, Christian subject. Even if the normative subject can choose to be unsympathetic to the call to “feel right,” their moral failure is viewed simply as a personal aberration that does not compromise their status as subject, thus leading Yao to the conclusion that the “marginalized do not have the luxury of being unsympathetic without forfeiting the provisional acceptance of their capacity for affective expressions and, therefore, the conditional acceptance of their humanity” (Yao 4). Yao’s centers the way that affect, as exemplified in Stowe’s declaration to “feel right,” is a central component of western literature and especially the literature of peoples of African descent who seek recognition and inclusion within the nation.

Firmly centered in 19th century western thought, sentimentalism was key to the development of the nation. These texts relied on the inherent goodness of people and the importance of emotional connection as a guide for social and political change. Even with the focus on relational connection and sympathy through the suffering of the depicted characters, sentimental novels also defined the social structure of the family. They emphasized the making of family, a challenge to the biological, patriarchal family structure. In the process, sentimental novels exemplified how “identification across difference shapes belonging, ideas of citizenship, and the construction of the body politic” (Yao 12). Sympathy enables a recognition of feelings, a central mode of “apprehending affects, feelings, and emotions—and deeming them legitimate” (Yao 13). Sympathy functions as a way of feeling the other, placing oneself in their situation,

and in the process decenters the subject trying to be apprehended. Sympathy is thus also a colonial tool, separating the civilized white nations from the uncivilized nations, as well as delineating and reinforcing the nationalized boundaries of social exclusion (Williamson 5).

Ultimately, sentimental novels partake in what Lauren Berlant calls the “sentimental bargain,” replacing action with feeling: “substituting for representations of pain and violence representations of its sublime self-overcoming, which end up, often perversely, producing pleasure both as a distraction from suffering and also a figure for the better life that suffers under the regime of nation, patriarchy, capital, and racism ought to be able to imagine themselves having” (Berlant 65). Sentimental fiction then follows a linear trajectory from suffering to its lack, causing the political and social contours of the fiction to be rendered mute. James Baldwin even attacks sentimentality in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” where he states, in reference to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, that “sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonest, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betrays his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty” (Baldwin 12). For Baldwin, then, sentimentality is a façade and is less about an individual’s capacity to feel and more about the brevity of the feeling and thus a lack of action.

Even despite these pitfalls, what becomes apparent are the ways that sentimentalism is a tool for othered groups, those that have been regulated outside of national belonging, and who through the use of sentimental tropes can simultaneously critique sentimentalism for its boundary constructions while appealing to sympathy for inclusion into the “family” of America. Jennifer Williams notes this in *Twentieth-Century Sentimentalism: Narrative Approaches in American Literature* (2014) in relation to 1930s proletarian texts as well as African American literature in

the wake of the Moynihan Report. Regarding the later, Williams places the report in relation to its emphasis on “the sentimental ideology of the white, middle class nuclear family, headed by a benevolent male provider and a female moral guide that produced good children (citizens) for the national family” (Williams 12). In focusing on the African American family’s distance from these ideals, Moynihan unlimitedly demonstrates the way that African Americans are held to sentimental ideals while being prevented from meeting them. But in the same manner that writing oneself into being becomes a way to challenge racist conceptions of reason, deploying sentimentalism in literature, specifically the slave narrative, becomes a way to play on the genre’s public appeal in the 19th century towards political ends. The result had the effect of convincing the general public about the ills of slavery through rhetorical appeals of basic goodness and human nature that readers of sentimental fiction would be swayed by. Conventions of the slave narrative and sentimental fiction find their way into the neo-slave narrative. There, the tropes of the two are grappled with to consider the atrocities of slavery as well as critique ideologies, like sentimentalism, that foreclose the acceptance of the marginalized on the national scale.

The term, neo-slave narrative, was originated by Bernard W Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Traditions* (1987) where he defines it as a “residually oral, modern narrative of escape from bondage to freedom” (Bell 289). Although Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) is considered to be the first of the genre, it is Arna Bontemps’ *Black Thunder* (1936) that “anticipates much of the cultural work that later texts in the genre perform” (Smith). The fact that there has been a proliferation of modern texts that center enslavement demonstrates the centrality of history and memory to the present and the inescapability of the institution of slavery, or in other words its continuous hold on the present.

As Valerie Smith discusses in “Neo-Slave Narratives” from *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (2007), the neo-slave genre provides a lens through which to discuss various issues that are still resonant in the present moment while providing space to fully interrogate the nuances of the institution. For example, she emphasizes “the challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories; the legacy of slavery (and other atrocities) for subsequent generations; the interconnectedness of constructions of race and gender; the relationship of the body to memory; the agency of the enslaved; the power of orality and of literacy; the ambiguous role of religion; the commodification of black bodies and experiences; and the elusive nature of freedom”, many of which work their way into the approaches to enslavement taken up by black queer writers (Smith). The considerable distance between modern writers and the institution of slavery grants them the ability to work through the very elusive aspects of the slave narrative, primarily the horror and violence that the enslaved could not write about due to the sentimental frame of slave narratives. As Yogita Goyal notes in *Runaway Genres* (2019), these authors “choose to linger in horror and negation, refusing readers identification, edification, or healing,” even as some sentimental conventions remain intact (Goyal 55).

Scholar Gabriella Friedman explicitly considers the relationship between the neo-slave narrative and sentimentalism in her essay “Unsentimental Historicizing: The Neo-Slave Narrative Tradition and the Refusal of Feeling.” There, she notes that various neo-slave narratives like Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and M. NoutbeSe Phillip’s *Zong!* (2007), to name a few, use certain sentimental conventions that a text like *The Underground Railroad* (2019) by Colson Whitehead rejects. In relation to previous neo-slave narratives, Friedman argues that they

perform “sentimental historicizing: interpreting and relating to the past through affective, vicarious experience. This mode of historicizing rests on the assumption that feeling the weight of history and entering shared states of feeling with historical actors necessarily inspires ethical action in the service of social justice” (Friedman 117). The result of sentimental historicizing is domestication, fitting the othered subjects into the infrastructure of the nation-state. Friedman notes that this is accomplished through the use of lyrical language and the interiority of the enslaved subject which evoking the reader’s sympathy or empathy. *The Prophets* and *Insurrection: Holding History*, both neo-slave narratives, work through and reject the sentimental conventions of the genre, primarily through their use of black queer desire.

[The Prophets](#)

The Prophets as a novel follows the conventions of the neo-slave narrative and its relationship to sentimentality. The text is about the interiority of the enslaved. Each chapter is told from a different characters’ perspective, not only following their actions, but how they feel about the violence and trauma they are experiencing. As Friedman notes in her definition of “sentimental historicizing,” the weight of history is felt. The novel uses lyrical, metaphorical language and thus makes it easy to sympathize or empathize with the enslaved characters. But the novel’s use of sentimental conventions works with the overarching focus on affectivity, the way that feeling, specifically black queer desire, moves and animates the novel. With respect to the history of enslavement, desire simultaneously centers feeling while showing how feeling desire in relation to another and desiring to have a fuller understanding of a historical period work in tandem.

Ultimately, the novel is explicit in its particular approach to the history of enslavement: a queer one. After two chapters, the first a mysterious collective speaking from a place seemingly outside of normative notions of space and time and the second rendering the forced separation of

families personal through a mother who is reckoning with the loss of her child, the third chapter titled “Psalms” centers black queerness through the intimate relationship between Samuel and Isaiah and their “fucking on purpose” (Jones 14). Simply by focusing on the desire that exists between “the two of them” (what Samuel and Isaiah are commonly referred to throughout the narrative), the novel ruptures historical opacity as it relates to black queer subjects. As Matt Richardson notes in his book, there is a queer limit to black memory, a limit that a novel like *The Prophets* intervenes in. But Jones Jr. also takes it a step further. Through “the two of them,” the novel theorizes the movement of desire, the way that black queer desire can affect those who happen to look upon it. The possibilities of desire are made visible through the polyvocal nature of the novel, focusing on interior lives of various characters and the way they look at “the two of them” and are affectively moved somewhere, or reject that movement in favor of something else entirely. In doing so, the novel focuses on the notion of choice, a highly contested idea, along with desire, with respect to this peculiar institution.

“Psalms,” the first chapter where Samuel and Isaiah are introduced, has a sacred undertone to it, as do all the chapters, not only through the chapter title itself but also the central contention being religion as a tool to exert power over others. In the Christian Bible, Psalms is composed of songs or poems that are meant to be sung. The 150 psalms range in mood, some joyous others more solemn. They are often categorized according to their types: the hymn, the lament, the song of confidence, and the song of thanksgiving. Within the Christian context, they are viewed as offering guidance for the reader or the singer of the psalm. The notion of guidance orients towards one way of approaching the novel through the centrality of Isaiah and Samuel: if “the two of them” are the focus of this chapter Psalms with its sacred connotations, then the

novel firmly centers Isaiah and Samuel as characters with the capacity to impact others, to move them, to be a source of guidance, a path they can follow or imitate.

The Psalms chapter functions on multiple registers: to center Isaiah and Samuel through the present moment as well as their history in order to spotlight their desire. The novel begins with Isaiah and Samuel noticing a change in how others respond to them, a contempt. This contempt further cements the “kind of safe zone” of the barn where they live and work, the place where their desire can be expressed fully. At the end of the workday, under the cover of night where the only light is the moon that shines through the hole in the roof of the barn, “Isaiah slid his tongue, slowly, and gently, over Samuel’s nipple, which came to life in his mouth. Both of them moaned” (Jones Jr. 10). Even within this moment which proceeds them “thrusting into each other in a haystack”, their desire is rife with small complications: after 16 or more years, Samuel remains uncertain about this desire, which has found cover through repetition, while Isaiah is more expressive and seems to initiate their sexual and personal contact, the latter of which through something simple as placing his hand on Samuels’ back. In addition, even as others fold them in on each other, making their twoness one, they each are distinct in their approaches to life and dealing with the ordinary violence of enslavement. By having two characters, each with their own inner struggles and ways of inhabiting their bodies, one more gentle, the other more aggressive, one “choosing woman or free” and the other “choosing man”, the novel speaks to how desire functions as an affect that bridges Isaiah and Samuel, allowing them to experience something different than the others on the plantation and in the process showing how what exists between them is the bridge that connects them to others.²⁵

²⁵ In the chapter titled “O, Sarah!”, the title character Sarah presents a different approach to identity. In it she notes how “girl is the alpha”, where everyone begins. It isn’t until the ceremony where that changes and one can choose either woman, man, free or all. With respect to Isaiah and Samuel she states the following: “...the mean one, Samuel—who seemed to be choosing man because he didn’t understand how that made the other possibilities

The approach to desire that I take differs from how desire is defined within affect studies. In *Desire/Love* (2012), Lauren Berlant uses psychoanalysis as the dominant approach to theorize both desire and love since they are investigated separately. For them, desire is about a state of attachment to something or someone and the possibilities that that attachment provides. Essentially, the attachment is more about oneself than what one desires, as well as the social and political context that centers certain desires over others. Within the opening pages, Berlant focuses on the film *The Imitation of Life*. Her focus on the Black American characters in the film emphasizes the difficulty of desire for multiply marginalized individuals. In relation to racial, economic, and sexual hardships that they stand in for, “the question of desire can only be answered by the transformations in the politically saturated conditions of sustenance that material world does not offer them, changes that cannot be effected by individual will” (Berlant 11). Berlant explicates the way that interlocking oppressions render “standard desires” impossible for certain groups of people because they cannot be obtained without an overall transformation of society.²⁶

Berlant explores these standard desires more fully in the book *Cruel Optimism* (2011). The book considers the ways that certain desires like “the good life,” “enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work,” as well as fantasies like “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy” are maintained even in history and the enduring present point to the ways they will never be fulfilled (Berlant 2-3). In other words, they are attachments to compromised conditions of

remote—was fighting against himself because his desire didn’t look like anything he had ever seen before. The other one, Isaiah, had a better imagination. She wasn’t sure if he had chosen woman or free, but it was clear he had chosen one of the other because violence wasn’t his primary motion” (116). This demonstrates Isaiah and Samuel’s different nature, while also decentering western ideas that are based on the two gender system and biological determinism.

²⁶ For more on “interlocking oppressions” see The Combahee River Collective Statement

possibility. That is what makes optimism cruel, maintaining an attachment to some desiring object in advance of its inevitable loss.

These are not the types of desires that animate *The Prophets*. Berlant is concerned with attachments to institutions and ideas that cannot be applied to the enslaved given the focus on the 20th century and the present. The formation of various institutions as well as ideas about “the good life” come into being post enslavement and with the rise of the middle class. In addition, their conception of desire and attachment is the proximity that one gets to an idea or a thing that the object of one’s desire serves as a placeholder for. Within the context of enslavement, even as desire moves throughout the narrative, it does not function as an attachment to some idea outside of the confines of the immediate moment. It would be intellectually irresponsible to impose the way that desire functions in the contemporary context onto the period of enslavement, especially considering the way that the institution constricts an individual to a point where a “something else” outside of it is difficult to manifest.

Can desire be fully centered within the context of enslavement? What are the texts explored in this chapter attempting to investigate through the focus on desire especially if desire or pleasure cannot be contended with? In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers queries the impossibility of conceiving pleasure or desire within enslavement because under the arrangements of the institution they are thrown into crisis. In making this claim, Spillers focuses primarily on master/slave relations, relations based in violence, power, and the inability of claiming oneself with regard to the enslaved. I would contend that Jones Jr. in his imaginative approach to enslavement with a focus on black queerness holds onto the crisis that Spillers highlights with respect to female and sexual oppressor couplings, since later in the novel there are instances of sexual violence for both Isaiah

and Samuel as well as violence inflicted on the enslaved women in the novel, while also allowing space to consider desire and pleasure between the enslaved and not in the midst of unequal power dynamics like that of the master and the enslaved. For Isaiah and Samuel there is an intentional choosing, leaning into their desire for one another for their own sake, made evident at the start of the novel through the phrase “fucking on purpose,” the orgasmic breaths and spasms after its conclusion, and the level of intimacy they display that is commented on by onlookers throughout the narrative.

My conception of desire is informed by choice and movement. Desire functions as the possibilities afforded through or by intentionally choosing another as well as leaning into or away from the desire one witnesses. This does not mean that the desire is without contention, but that desire still manifests even in contexts where it seems impossible. In thinking of desire this way, I am building on GerShun Avilez’s *Black Queer Freedom* (2020) as well as Robert Reid-Pharr’s *Once You Go Black* (2007). Avilez investigates the double bind of queer desire. On the one hand, it endangers those who express it, while on the other, in the works of artists throughout the Black diaspora, queer desire functions as a navigational tool within spaces of injury. The space of injury isn’t necessarily about a particular space but about the “perception and engagement of the [Black queer] body” (Avilez 3). In the focus on injury, Avilez augments Abdul JanMohamed’s death-bound-subject to an injury-bound subject, the later highlighting the “nuance and complexity of the multiple kinds of vulnerability minorities face” (Avilez 3). I think the distinction Avilez makes is important in the contemporary context, although given my focus on enslavement, I want to hold on to a sociality of the death bound subject, the person who must navigate the three constituent elements of slavery: violent domination, natal alienation, and

generalized dishonor, and yet still lives within this context.²⁷ Desire becomes one way that the life in social death is lived.

By centering desire in the context of enslavement, I am also considering the aspect of choice. As reference earlier, Isaiah and Samuel choose each other. Their choosing is described as “stumbl[ing] into something [they] had never exactly seen before” yet it is something they still choose to lean into and draw sustenance from (Jones Jr. 300). Samuel highlights this earlier in the novel after the contempt has set in on the plantation: “I could do it, you know. Make it with all those womens. But I just don’t wanna” (Jones Jr. 11). Ultimately, Samuel emphasizes that while he may be conscribed to death and rendered socially dead, he is still a choosing subject. By centering choice in the period of enslavement, Jones Jr. builds on ideas that Robert Reid-Pharr theorizes in *Once You Go Black*. Although Reid-Pharr’s focuses on Black male intellectuals of the 20th century, he centers agency and choice as a critique of passivity to argue how the Black American plays a dynamic role in the creation of themselves. Ultimately for him, the history of the Black American centers around the struggle to choose and that struggle is often waged around ideas of sex and sexuality over violent confrontation (Reid-Pharr 8). With regard to the novel, Samuel and Isaiah choosing each other, exemplified through the phrase “fucking on purpose” and their respective internalized ideas about sexuality, intimacy, and their expressions demonstrate the difficulty of desire over its impossibility within the context of enslavement. It renders them as agents, regardless of the degree to which slavery as an institution constricts and makes agency almost an impossibility.

²⁷ See Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982). In addition, by reinforcing “still lives” I am interested in the ways the life is lived within the context of enslavement that are not just about social death or violence. Alongside theories that view the enslaved as death-bound, socially dead, or solely as flesh, I am interested in the way that the so called “human” pursuits of love, desire, pleasure, etc and the way that those things may or may not have served a purpose in their day to day lives. Am not overwriting that for many choice or “human” pursuits were a fact. Instead the literary apparatus provides space to consider its possibilities.

Not only is choice important with respect to desire, nonnormative or nonreproductive black queer desire speaks to the significance of the black queer subject. Reid-Pharr intends to challenge the sense of inevitability within discourses of race which leads him to center choice, but in getting to that point, he points to the significance of marginality, and thus the queer subject who points out the performance and ignorance of racial difference as well as its plasticity. This leads Reid-Pharr to the conclusion that “if black identity and, in particular, black sexuality has the ability to reshape human subjectivity, then perhaps the answer for his nation is for all of its citizens to recognize the possibility—and indeed inevitability—of becoming black, of claiming one’s proper place among the descendants of slaves, the architects of a great, if half finished, nation” (Reid-Pharr 10). Reid-Pharr speaks to the malleability of identity and the way that the agency and choices taken up by Black Americans have a profound impact on the nation state as well as the world. Within the context of the novel, black queer desire has the same function for the enslaved who witness it. It presents the possibility of choice, to choose to experience what it has to offer or to reject it for one’s own personal gain. It is the possibility of becoming queer, an idea that is less about queer sex, and more about other ways to inhabit oneself in the midst of a world and a system that constricts one’s being.

What becomes clear through the novel are the ways that Isaiah and Samuel, by leaning into black queer desire, disrupt the reproductive requirements of the slave through the framework of deviance. One of the central contentions in the novel is the fact that “the two of them” have not reproduced, leaving Paul, the master over the plantation, to believe that they both are broken, an idea he despises because he views them as hardworking bucks whose traits would make for great offspring. What remains key is how Isaiah and Samuel intentionally choose each other, a choice that results in no offspring. In “Deviance as Resistance” Cathy Cohen notes how in

dominant frameworks of resistance, the focus is often on male leaders and well-established organizations which ignore the everyday and ordinary actions of the majority and those rendered to the margins. To focus on the latter, Cohen argues for the framework of deviance, one that highlights the power of those at the bottom “the power of those at the bottom whose everyday life decisions challenge, or at least counter, the basic normative assumptions of a society intent on protecting structural and social inequalities under the guise of some normal and natural order. However, not only do these individuals daily act in opposition to dominant norms, but they also contradict members of Black communities who are committed to mirroring perceived respectable behaviors and hierarchical structures” (Cohen 33). To speak of this deviance as everyday decision further emphasizes the significance of choice, one that is a foil to the institutions themselves and the people that support them. Samuel and Isaiah are not intentionally trying to undermine the institution of enslavement, but it becomes a possibility though what they have decided to feel for each other.

This notion of deviance serves as the reason behind the shift in attitudes toward Isaiah and Samuel, one that parallels the way that deviance can be a site of intercommunal stratification. We can attribute the shift to the character of Amos. Due to his enslaved status, he has no rights to himself nor to the patriarchal protection and safety a husband should be able to provide for his wife. It is the fact that he cannot keep Essie, his wife, safe from Paul, who rapes and impregnates her, that causes Amos to figure out some way of “securing Essie’s refuge” (Jones Jr. 57). Amos intends to secure her refuge through Christianity, where he would make sure that the enslaved remained docile, didn’t revolt, or be disobedient. He sees Samuel and Isaiah as doing the latter: “And wasn’t that, after all, exactly what Isaiah and Samuel’s obstinance amounted to?...it had to be willful, some intentional measure to thwart Paul’s plan to multiply

them as he saw fit. It was as if they believed that the line should stop with them and they could thus be able to spare the blood of their blood whatever it was they believed they, themselves, suffered” (Jones Jr. 62). Amos sees their disobedience, their willful choosing of each other as unholy, an unholiness that if Paul finds out about it, will result in the suffering of all. He then uses his sermons as a tool to stop the deviance that is expressed through Isaiah and Samuel choosing each other and refusing to reproduce.

Essentially, Robert Jones Jr., through Isaiah and Samuel, presents black queer desire as having the capability to disrupt the economy of the plantation, not only with respect to reproduction but also to the individuals of the enslaved community on the plantation. As stated previous, Amos sees “the two of them” as a deviation from the norm, a foreseeable problem to the harmony of the plantation. That coupled with his own desires for security and significance result in him responding to Isaiah and Samuel in a negative way. But what I want to emphasize here is that Amos not only sees them but also feels them. Before he decides to make an example out of them, Amos comments on their affectivity, the way that they literarily affect his being.

Throughout the novel, various characters comment on the glowing they see between Isaiah and Samuel. Amos mentions it through his refusal: “he refused to be seduced by their glowing” (Jones Jr. 71). By using the word “seduced,” Amos emphasizes the capability that the glowing emitting from Isaiah and Samuel is infectious, making one feel something. Later he contends, “Yes, even now he noticed that reality flickering between them. It was like the finest of spiderwebs with a tenuous amount of dew trembling on the strands of it, suddenly snatched away and then reconstructed within the blink of an eye, delicate tendrils that were somehow stronger than they appeared, holding the weight of a rainstorm before finally giving way and allowing an unobstructed view” (Jones Jr. 72). What Amos sees cannot be stated plainly, causing him to

resort to metaphor as a way of describing what he witnesses. But even in resisting the seduction of the metaphorical manifestation of black queer desire in the novel, Amos still feels it. The moment occurs after he goes to the barn at night and witnesses them “fucking on purpose”. Even as he finds their actions foolish, as too intimate, too hazardous when he only embraces Essie with one arm, he centers “the two of them” as having a significant relational impact, “inspiring everything around them to dance”. Seeing them together Amos “nearly glorified their names. He covered his eyes because Isaiah and Samuel were so bright and coated in a shining the likes of which he has never seen before” (Jones Jr. 76). What lies between Isaiah and Samuel has the capacity to affect others, to move them to the point of exaltation, if they choose to. Unfortunately, Amos chooses to smash what exists between “the two of them” instead of allowing himself to lean into whatever they emit.

Current trends in affect theory would have us believe that the black lacks the capacity to have or have access to affect. Tyrone Palmer in “What Feels More Than Feeling: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect” explores how blackness constitutes the un/underthought position within affect studies and their universal conceptualizations of affect. Palmer challenges theorizations of affect as presented by the two strains of thought, seeing affect and emotion as distinct versus their interchangeability, for the lack of substantially accounting for blackness and how affect functions as a tool for racial domination and anti-blackness. Building on humanist discourses that view the black as the constitutive outside of the human as well as that which enables the world to function, Palmer argues that Black feeling is unthinkable in the world and “Black affective responses are only legible as signs of pathology, further reifying blackness-as-subhumanity; as a sign of both excess and lack” (Palmer 32). Palmer constructs his argument

through readings of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2016), a collection of prose poems that focus on what it feels like to be subjected to racial violence in the "post-racial era."

The Prophets as an affective text, shifting perspectives and having each character comment on looking at and feeling "the two of them," would support Palmer's contention with respect to the unthinkability of black feeling and the impossibility of intersubjective relationality only if we focused exclusively on the white characters in the novel, the placeholder for the theoretical position of "the world." Only four chapters in the novel are from the white perspectives of the Halifax family, the owners of the plantation: Ruth, Paul, their son Timothy, and the overseer/ Paul's cousin James. In each of their sections, "the two of them" are still viewed and commented on yet they are not felt, partly because of the characters own sense of superiority. One night, Ruth is enraptured by a warm light emanating from the barn. Once she arrives, she discovers that the light is not "some otherworldly splendor waiting to bestow its grace upon her. No. The light emanated from a simple lamp. Which was set between the two barn niggers" (Jones Jr. 133). She views "the two of them" as glistening, an anomaly that she only desires to consume, which she does by sexually assaulting Samuel while Isaiah is forced to stand there with downcast eyes. So deep in her own inner world of whimsy and fancy, Ruth is unable to see them. Instead, they are only conduits for her own pleasure.

Paul does the same thing later in the novel. After Amos tells him that he believes the sins of Sodom are being sowed on his plantation, Paul goes to visit Isaiah and Samuel.²⁸ He appreciates their proximity to each other because it results in effective labor for him. But as he sits in front of them, bible in his hand, "at that moment, the sun revealed itself and, inch by inch, began to shine down on the standing Isaiah and Samuel, touched their crowns as though they

²⁸ Amos refers to the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah referenced in Genesis 13:12 and Genesis 19:29.

were actually so consecrated, bright in a way that didn't hinder sight but did make the face pinch a little" (Jones Jr. 265). Paul does not allow himself to be swayed by the glowing of "the two of them", instead, a few sentences later, yet still within the same paragraph, he reorients what he is sees in order to center himself. He believes that God is sending him a message, a message confirming his authority: "this wasn't Isaiah and Samuel being bestowed with some sort of majesty; impossible. Rather, this was merely the dawn. God had finally touched his forehead too" (Jones Jr. 265). Paul places himself in the same consecrated position he originally believed to come from Isaiah and Samuel, devaluing what comes from them to bolster himself. Even though he reframes what he sees, Paul, after waking up from fainting a few pages later returns to "the two of them", having to assuage himself of the believe that it is not the proximity to Isaiah and Samuel that cause him to faint, it had to simply be the heat.

What is demonstrated by way of Ruth and Paul are the affective gaps that Palmer highlights in his essay, gaps that are about a one-way relationality: concerned with how black feeling or affect is not viewed by the world or whiteness, particularly in moments that are the effect of racialized violence or under antiblackness. It is an argument concerned with structural positioning and with respect to antiblackness, the inability of moving outside of it. Building on the work of Sylvia Wynter, Calvin Warren and Frantz Fanon to name a few, Palmer helps to elucidate a structural contention with respect to affect theory. But what I find the most compelling about the sections of the novel that focus on white characters is that Isaiah and Samuel, while being subjected to the violence of their enslavers, do not lose their affective capacity regardless of whether it is truly acknowledged or not. They have no desire to affect although they seem to be impacting those that encounter them. If those that are white do not and can not be affected by black (queer) affect, then should we continue to be concerned with their

structural, historical, and interpersonal refusal? Why should they be centered in the first place? Paul and Ruth demonstrate a fundamental ability to witness black affect but an inability to be moved by it. That's clear, but that is not my approach to black affect.

Even if black affect is unthinkable in the world, refused and only viewed as pathology or excess, I am intervening by emphasizing the way that black grammatically augments affect, that black affect does not have to solely be concerned with the world or whiteness, that is the structural, and instead prioritizes the movement of feeling with and between other black individuals, whether those feeling are related to systemic oppression and racial violence or desire. In a similar manner that Bettina Judd details in *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought* (2023), it is important to attune to the bodies of Black people, especially the way black bodies are explored within Black cultural production and art, the emotions and affects that flow from them, instead of solely a focus on the structural. When discussing the affective turn, Judd questions the uniqueness of the affective turn specifically with respect to the way that Black women artists were already exploring emotions and feelings as an approach to their work as well as a form of knowledge. Even as the turn coincided with the rise of seemingly new challenges like terrorism, war, and violence, the texts explored those ideas through white European thinkers as well as through theory that devalued the significance of the feeling body. The terribleness of the world that makes black feeling unthinkable is “endemic to the very circulations of discourse in which [traditional] theory traffics” (Judd 7). It is my intention then, following Judd, to shift my focus to black feelings and emotions, the bodies of those that inhabit them, and how those bodies communicate and relate to others with a similar relationship to the world. This does not mean that some of the world's ideas do not still affect black feelings and the relational exchange, ideas like sexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, making it so that

individuals that are multiply marginalized are not fully heard or felt. This can still be, and often is, the case. However, if a character like Amos points us in any direction, it is one that still sees, feels, and acknowledges black (queer) affect even as one refuses to be swayed by it.

The Maggie chapter in the novel is the perfect example of the full potential of black (queer) affective exchange through desire, especially since she chooses to allow herself to feel something. Maggie is described as an older woman who still has access to forms of ancestral knowledge that many on the plantation have forgotten. After detailing her morning routine: making biscuits for the Halifax's, letting the dogs roam, as well as internally recounting moments of trauma and violence, Maggie turns her attention to "the two of them." What becomes apparent is that in Maggie's mind, Isaiah and Samuel actively and boldly defy the logics of the plantation. Whereas every blade of grass bent to the sorrow of the plantation, "these little ones behaved as if it could be openly defied" (Jones Jr. 35). Isaiah and Samuel simply be themselves, and for Maggie, this act of theft is enchanting.

Maggie is further enchanted when she stumbles upon Isaiah and Samuel fucking, an act of looking that is followed by a metaphor of deep feeling. Maggie simply intended to bring "the two of them" food that she had hidden earlier in the day, but the door was latched, and she was unable to enter. She then, "heard noise and pressed her ear up against the wall. A moan, perhaps; a gasp; the longest sigh ever. Then she peered through a crack between the boards of the wall. She could only see them because of the moonlight that shot through the parts of the roof where the planks needed repair. Shadowy figures. From a distance they seemed to be tussling" (Jones Jr. 36). Here, Maggie sees something she was never meant to, given that the door to the barn was locked from the inside. Not only does she continue to look until 'the two of them' release in ecstasy, but she returns nightly. She describes her actions as "gladly offering her soul for just a

sliver of moonlight”, meaning that she will give anything to witness them, even if what she is receiving seems miniscule in comparison. An erratic urgency is presented, where she always manages to find a spot to see them, whether it is from “underneath ladders, behind stacks of hay, or through the back walls of horse pens” (Jones Jr. 36). Witnessing them, for her, is a precious treasure and this precious treasure, even if momentarily, transports her outside of herself.

Maggie describes what she sees: “for they were as frisky and playful as crows and her proximity made her feel as if she were in the dark sky, suspended upon the surface of their wings. Oh so black. Oh so high. Up here, where there was safety and glow” (Jones Jr. 36). Essentially, by witnessing the two of them, Maggie, if only momentarily, is presented with a sliver of reprieve. They transport her to a mental, imaginative place that conjures notions of escape, through reference to wings. However, the wings she is on are those of ‘the two of them’, which further shows how it is through them that she is lifted up, ‘oh so high,’ away from the ground. Simply thinking about them causes her to have a vision, one of the ways of knowing that was handed down to her by her ancestors. She desperately tries to live in the moment, regulating the past and the future in a metaphorical cage inside of her. But when she thinks about Isaiah and Samuel, the cage unlocks. Through Maggie, we see that Isaiah and Samuel, the objects of her looking, affect her and make her feel something that transports her outside of the current place and time. Maggie demonstrates the full capacity of black affect through queer desire.

Maggie serves as the individual impact that black queer desire has on those that witness it and choose to be impacted by it. The climax of the novel exhibits black queer desires’ collective capacity. In the novel’s final few chapters, Isaiah and Samuel are faced with a problem: Timothy, Paul and Ruth’s son, rapes Isaiah and then requests Samuel a little while later. Samuel decides that this is his final strike. He plans to kill Timothy and escape along with Isaiah. He goes to

Timothy's room where Timothy engages him in verbal foreplay, offering Isaiah and Samuel's freedom once he acquires the plantation years into the future upon Paul's death, a ploy to continue to get them to sleep with him. But it is when Timothy suggests that they come see him together that Samuel snaps, hits him, and then takes the ax he has hidden and lodges it in Timothy's temple. But Samuel could not have foreseen that Paul would return home sooner than expected. Paul witnesses' shadows tussling in his son's bedroom window, rushes inside, and drags Samuel out to prepare to lynch him.

As the lynching commences, the plantation is rife with tension. The other enslaved, forced to watch, keep their eyes downcast until they are commanded to look at Samuel. As he is strung up, vision turning black except for seeing a few flashes of animals (a sign that Isaiah's part of the plan to release the animals succeeds) causes Samuel to offer up one last smile. Desire then enters the frame. As he is choking, a name begins to shape in his mouth. "Who would be able to understand that his last breath would be marked by the joy that had been given to him strictly by chance and taken from him with grave intention? A name. Just a tiny, simple name" (Jones Jr. 339). Samuel's last moments, his last breath, is not about himself. It is not a cry about the pain that he is currently experiencing. He screams out "Zay!" his nickname for Isaiah, and as the flames begin to cover his body, Samuel remains silent. Samuel's desire for Isaiah is still centered in this violent moment immediately preceding his death. Their black queer desire, something that was stumbled upon, constantly chosen and claimed, is significant enough for Samuel that it is Isaiah that he thinks about before he dies. And just as Samuel is literally lit ablaze, the desire he vocalizes metaphorically impacts everyone around him.

Just as Isaiah and Samuel's were introduced in the chapter Psalms, conditioning our reading of them as facilitators of guidance through lyrical elucidations of feelings and their

transcendence, the chapter of Samuel's lynching and death is titled Exodus, imbuing the chapter with the focus of exit or departure. Exodus is the story of the Israelites departure from slavery. The parallels between the bible and this novel are clear. Samuel's evocation of desire serves as the impetus for the enslaved to revolt and leave the plantation. I want to return to the significance that it is black queer desire, desire that is labeled as deviant, a resistance to the logics of the institution of enslavement, a desire chosen and claimed, that leads the other characters that witness it to revolt. *The Prophets* takes black queer fictional approach to the argument that Robert Reid-Pharr makes in "Tearing the Goat's Flesh" from *Black Gay Man Essays* (2001).

In the essay "Tearing the Goat's Flesh" from the collection, Reid-Pharr argues that there is no normal blackness or masculinity to which Black subjects might refer and that in modern American literature, the reality of this lack of normalcy is represented through black gay men, making the figure of the black gay male the sign of chaos and crisis. The act of striking the homosexual, the sign of chaos and crisis through homophobic violence then functions as an attempt "to return the [black] community to normality, to create boundaries around blackness, rights that white men are obligated to recognize" (Reid-Pharr 104). Reid-Pharr comes to this conclusion through a reading of texts like Eldredge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968) and Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) where the homosexual enters the narrative at the moment when masculinity and blackness could become undone. In highlighting this, Reid-Pharr shows that black gay male characters are imbued with a certain potentiality to move those that they encounter if only the one that encountered them were courageous enough to lean into the crisis and instability of blackness, selfhood, and identity instead of seeking to return to a semblance of normalcy. *The Prophets* takes the identity of the homosexual as sign of crisis and

expands it to be more about queerness. The key difference between Reid-Pharr's analysis and mine is that his centers texts not by or primarily about black homosexuality.

The Prophets centers black queer desire and demonstrates its capacity to affect those that witness it. And in witnessing it others undermine the logics of the plantation and reproduction, thus leaning into the transformative capabilities of the black queer position. It is the black queerness that exists between Isaiah and Samuel that is depicted as having the ability to impact those who encounter them, if they want to be impacted, but this final moment enraptures all the main characters. Maggie stabs Paul in the neck with a knife. Puah and Sarah run away from the plantation. And Essie, Amos's wife, walks with her baby to the river and snaps his body and throws him into the river. The final voicing of black queer desire from the mouth of Samuel serves as the impetus for the plantation to be overturned, for characters to do what they have desired to do from the moment they were introduced.

Existing between Isaiah and Samuel, black queer desire is about a choosing: choosing to find comfort and intimacy between each other despite the plantation and the social death it engenders. Their desire defies rigid understanding of sexuality, as well as troubles the understandings of the limits of black affect. Each time they are witnessed, wither by "fucking on purpose" or simply being, the individual that sees them, feels something, and either leans into it or rejects it for their own purposed. It is the black queer desire that animates the novel as a whole, serving as the driver of the plot, the individual musings of each character on the plantation, as well as the insurrection of the plantation. Ultimately, *The Prophets* does tremendous work to rethink approaches to enslavement, not only through the centering of queerness to say that black queer individuals existed in the past, but also to theoretically position queer desire as an affective disposition with transformative capabilities.

Insurrection: Holding History

Whereas *The Prophets* ends with a literal insurrection, Robert O'Hara's 1999 play *Insurrection: Holding History* stages insurrections on multiple registers and in the process queries the significance of telling black queer stories within the context of enslavement. Faedra Carpenter does an excellent job of detailing the various insurrections that the play performs in her essay "Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection*: "Que(e)rying" history." The play "uses the fantastical to emancipate African American history and identity from the bondage of compulsive white heteronormativity [and] dramatizes an insurrection against the limiting perspectives of conventional archives, [presenting] history-and identity—as fluid experiences that cannot be fully confined or categorized within the metaphorically "dusty" pages of an authoritative text" (Carpenter 187). In other words, *Insurrection* challenges what counts as history, in what form that history is presented, as well as its seemingly static nature.

With respect to the neo-slave narrative, *Insurrection* breaks from the sentimental conventions of the genre. By moving across temporalities, the present moment that follows a black gay character named Ron who is writing a thesis about Nat Turner's rebellion, and the enslaved past where Ron and his grandfather T.J. are literally transported to, *Insurrection* relies on fantasy and camp, to restrict reader sympathy and in the process construct a different understanding of historiography through its focus on black queer desire.

In the movement across time, characters in one reality morph into characters other characters depending on the scene. For example, at various points in the narrative, Ron's aunt and cousin, Gertha and Octavia, morph into enslaved people on the plantation that Ron and T.J. are transported to, as well as the enslavers and other white characters. According to the play directions, "8 Negroes n' 1 Cracker Play All of the Following Characters" (O'Hara 5). The

moment between characters suspends empathetic identification on the part of the reader with respect to the enslaved.²⁹

Carpenter discusses that slippage more specifically with respect to the character of Nat Turner. Within the play, he is described as many things: “NAT TURNER who is the INSURRECTIONIST, who is the SLAVE, who is the PROPHET, who is the HATCHET MURDERER” (O’Hara 8). The actor that plays Nat Turner also plays Ova Seea Jones, the enslaver who he rebels against. For her, “these titles illuminate the slippage of identity itself, not only revealing how the character’s identity is shaped by each and all of these descriptive, but also suggesting how various scenarios, relationships, and communities can create contrasting notions of identity for a single historical subject” (Carpenter 188). Not only is multiplicity highlighted over singularity, but for that multiplicity to exist within characters as well as the performers, the play leans into opacity, not only in the sense that it disrupts easy identification with the enslaved characters, but also an opacity that points to a different understanding of doing and seeing history.

The fantastical element of the play is enlivened even more through the use of camp, “creating incongruous scenes marked by their self-conscious theatricality and humor” (Carpenter 194). At one point, Ron and T.J. are transported to the past on a bed that drops on MASSA MO’TEL and kills him. Instead of allowing a moment for the reader to process what has taken place, O’Hara further leans into its implausibility. The stage directions are as follows: “*The Slaves begin a FULL-THROTTLE, NO-HOLDS-BARRED, 11:00, BROADWAY, SHOWSTOPPING, BRING DOWN THE HOUSE, PRODUCTION NUMBER, Chains and all. SONG: “HE’S DEAD”*” (O’Hara 33). The enslaved celebrate the death of their master with a

²⁹ In *The Illustrated Slave*, the author makes a distinction between hierarchical empathy and parallel empathy.

song. The moment, in its theatricality, disavows feeling. The use of camp, theatrical and humorous, alongside a historical moment that centers tragedy, leans into multiplicity that refuses easy affective attachments that exemplary novels of the neo-slave genre perform.

Yet what I intend to focus on, outside of *Insurrection*'s identificatory refusals through fantasy and camp, is the different approach it takes toward feeling, not in a way that invites sympathy or empathy on the part of the reader. With respect to the play, the only character that openly expresses and acts on what he feels is Ron, the only non-enslaved character. After he and T.J. first land on the plantation in a bed, he speaks up for an enslaved woman named Izzie-Mae who did not pick her required weight in cotton. Ova Seea Jones is about to whip her when Ron speaks up for her, but by doing so he only places himself in harm's way. When T.J. tries to protect him, he is forced to whip Ron. After two lashes, T.J. aims the whip at Ova Seea Jones's throat and proceeds to strangle him until he dies. Ron does not understand that he is in a different time and place; a place where Izzie-Mae is used to being whipped every day, a place of forced starvation, rape, and violence. Those that are of that time and place comments on its regularity, but like T.J. states with respect to Izzie-Mae, "none of these crackers know what Izzie-Mae gat inside of her none of 'em don't know what that woman liable ta com' back wit" (O'Hara 58). T.J. elucidates the way that openly feeling within the context of enslavement is a dangerous thing because it can result in one's death. That is why in *The Prophets*, even as characters like Amos and Maggie look on what Isaiah and Samuel display differently, they both think their closeness, their expression of desire and openly being themselves in a way that others can witness it is foolish.

T.J. is not saying that a character like Izzie-Mae lacks interiority. Instead, he suggests the levels of opacity at play through Izzie-Mae. By focusing on Izzie-Mae to elucidate his point, T.J.

points us towards what Darlene Clark Hine terms dissemblance. In “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West” Hines begins her argument with the focus on the threat and reality of rape within 19th century female slave narratives, making it the perfect focus in relation to this play. From there she defines the culture of dissemblance as the desire “to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of [Black women’s] lives, [by] creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings while actually remaining an enigma” (Hine 915). The culture of dissemblance function as a survival method and affective mood. The aspect of dissemblance, not only addressed to the dominant social world who ignore those labeled marginal, but also with respect to the hierarchical relationship between Black women and men, comes into play toward the end of the play.

The enslaved have decided to follow Nat Turner in his rebellion. After Mistress Mo’tel is murdered, another character, Katie Lynn holds, Wretched Jr, a seemingly white baby. A struggle commences between Katie Lynn and Nat over the baby until Hammett, another character, takes the child and kills it. Katie Lynn screams, “NOOOOOOOO!!! THIS ONE WAS MINE!!! HE TOOK IT!!!! HE GAVE IT TA HER!!! THIS ONE WAS MINE HAMMET!!! THIS WAS MINE!!!!” (O’Hara 101). The scene demonstrates the way that the sexual abuse of black women is overlooked, even as Katie Lynn discloses it moments before, not only within historical archives, but also in the interpersonal relationships on the plantation. Katie Lynn keeps the effects of her abuse, Wretched Jr, a secret. It remains in her interior space and is only exposed by product of a violent, traumatizing moment.

Within the affective apparatus of oppressive systems, it is key for black people to keep their feelings at bay. Unfeeling is a main component of Xine Yao’s book. There she explores the racial and sexual politics of unfeeling as a tactic from below within 19th century literature.

Culminating in the term “unfeeling”, this tactic encompasses “a range of affective modes, performances, moments, patterns, and practices that fall outside of or are not legible using dominant regimes of expression” (Yao 11). It often functions as a calculated choice not to care or be affectively moved by the regimes of power that use feeling as a mode of recognition. I see the culture of dissemblance and unfeeling as bedfellows, both functioning as a method of survival within oppressive systems and situations. But if they are useful modes, particularly when thought of alongside the play’s refusal of affective identification, then why does the play focus on black queer desire? What does the movement of this feeling across temporal dimensions serve outside of simply placing queerness within the past to demonstrate the fluid nature of identity and history?

I argue that the significance of black queer desire in the play lies in the structural breaks of the play and the way it brings intimacy to bear on the drama to focus on the relationship between the past and the present through Hammett and Ron. While the play moves toward and queries the act of holding history, validating the significance of the body as a form of knowledge that written history cannot fully contain, it insists on what the black queer body does, says, and feels with respect to the past. In other words, the play asserts that this black queer orientation towards the past provides a different approach to historiography. By attuning to the moments between Ron and Hammett, I demonstrate the way that the play functions as a structural critique of the passive, uninterrupted relationship between the past and the present.

Ron and Hammett meet briefly in the opening of the play. The play begins with the celebration of T.J.’s 189th year of life. While the party is happening, Ron attempts to focus on reading a version of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, but he is drawn away from the book when “he feels something. different. a presence.” (O’Hara 8). That presence is the play’s way of

announcing a reality shift. In that moment, the past and the present converge and Ron sees Nat Turner. He begins to follow him when Hammet, described as “a walking beauty” appears and visually confounds Ron’s attention. When Ron stops and sees Hammet “his Breath is taken away” (O’Hara 9).

Although at this moment not much is known about Ron (especially with respect to his sexuality) nor Hammet, the play makes this initial moment one of forced loss. The text does not say that Ron loses his breath, grammatically positioning the loss of breath as a happenstance occurrence, misplaced yet recoverable. Instead, it is described as taken, either by someone or something. In the description, the breath is given importance with the capital B, making the word stand out from what proceeds and follows it. As will be later conveyed in the play, the breath repeatedly appears. Breath serves as an indication that one is alive, inhaling and exhaling. If Ron’s breath is taken, then it is almost as if he is dead, lacking a vital part of his being. Given the fact that this detail is provided after Ron and Hammet lock eyes and are confounded by each other, it is not far-fetched to assumed that Ron’s breath is taken by Hammet, concretizing an important relationship between the two of them.

Ron and Hammet meet again in the scene titled “Motel” after Ron and his grandfather T.J. leave the elders birthday celebration but not before Ron’s main concern is verbalized: he has decided to focus his thesis on slavery and the Nat Turner rebellion. Ron does not know why he was called to this period, stating “I mean who the hell needs another paper on slavery” and “iii don’t know where it came from but I can’t git it outta my head and I have nothing new to say about [Nat Turner] or slavery” (O’Hara 18). In this moment, it seems as if Ron is metaphorically held by slavery. He does not know where he got the idea from for this project, nor does he know

why he focuses on it given that the academic market is saturated with projects that focus on slavery. I take this moment as Ron gesturing to current trends within black critical theory.

Many texts explore the relative hold that the slave past has on the present, where slavery becomes a central approach to thinking about black collectivity and community through the sharing of historical dispossession. Stephen Best in *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (2018) cites 1988 as the turn to slavery as object and metaphor within Black studies. He views texts, ranging from Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984) and Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) to Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), Valerie Smith's *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (1991) and Hortense Spillers' 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book", as serving as concertizing the slavery narrative as a foundational approach to literary traditions and the present moment's injustices. I would extend Best's list to also include more recent texts like Saidiyah Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), which theorizes the afterlives of slavery, Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) and her theory of being in the wake of slavery as a methodological approach, and even the work that is organized under the header Afro-Pessimism. Essentially, these texts and those like them, center the way that the past literally holds the present, molds and makes it. Hammet and Ron fictionally render that relationship when they meet again and queer it through their desire for each other.

The hold that the slave past has on the present manifests when Ron and Hammet meet again in the motel scene. While Ron secures rooms for him and his grandfather, by conversing with the clerk, his wife and son, Nat Turner and his insurrectionists appear and surround the clerks. They are not seen by the clerks and who they drag out of the scene leaving a lingering

focus on Ron and Hammet. They stare at each other until Hammet motions for Ron. He motions again, and then on the third motion, Ron begins to move towards him involuntarily.

If we view Hammet in this dynamic as the physical manifestation of the past and Ron as the present, then together they demonstrate the extent to which the past has a hold on the present. In the scene it is Hammet who can physically control Ron, rendering Ron helpless as “Slowly, Silently, Gently HAMMET blows Sweet Air into RON’s open mouth. He motions to RON’s mouth again and it closes” (O’Hara 50). The moment is tender, moving gingerly as Hammet blows sweet air into Ron’s mouth. The act of blowing, playing on fellatio, gives the act an erotic undertone. This moment in the play sets up a relationship that will be explored across its entirety between Ron and Hammet, but also demonstrates an unequal power dynamic, one wherein the present is at the mercy of the past, literally rendered helpless by it.

But whereas in their previous meeting, viewing Hammet results in Ron’s breath being taken away, in this scene Hammet restores his loss by blowing “Sweet Air” into Ron’s mouth, cementing the queerness of their interaction. The word sweet, a production of one of the four basic taste sensations, connotes something delightful or pleasing. When thought about alongside the African American southern lexicon, the word sweet builds on the place of sweetened iced tea as the beverage of choice of states like South Carolina alongside the correlation between tea time and women’s culture.³⁰ As E. Patrick Johnson explores with respect to the title of his book *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (2012), ““sweet tea” signifies in gay and straight cultures—whether in its most derisive manifestations in phrases like “sugar in his blood,” “sugar in his

³⁰ In *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (2012), E. Patrick Johnson takes the phrase “spill the tea” and explores the historical presidents that led it to be used by black gay men. In the exploration, Johnson places 18th century British women’s tea culture as a precedent, the way in which women indulged in their desires for sweet treats and tea as a leisurely activity as well as a way to exchange information or gossip. Ultimately the use of the term by gay men functions within the history of camp performance.

tank,” and “he’s a little sweet” to indicate someone’s homosexuality or in its most positive connotations related to desire, as in “he’s sweet on you” (Johnson 19). In each of its iterations, the use of sweet, and sugar, become ways of noting someone’s queerness without the use of words like gay, queer, homosexual, etc. Given that the sweet air comes from Hammet’s mouth, it would be safe to assume that he serves as the manifestation of the black queer past and by blowing sweet air into Ron’s mouth, Hammet further solidifies the connection between the two of them and gives something to Ron that he was missing.

That connection is clarified as one that is centered on desire. Hammet and Ron do not physically interact again until after the meeting about the insurrection. Once everyone leaves, they remain, and Hammet says “i shook. when i first saw you i shook” (O’Hara 87). Hammet communicates the way that even as he exerts control over Ron, making him move, blowing sweet air into his mouth, he is also mutually impacted. I take the word “shook” as a physical and verbal proclamation of deep feeling prompted by another, yet physically manifesting uncontrollably. That feeling is confirmed as desire after Ron asks Hammet if he likes boys to which Hammet replies “i lak you” (O’Hara 87). The kiss causes Ron to faint. This scene confirms the desire that exists between Ron and Hammet, from noticing that the latter is “a walking beauty” to the former being overcome with the mutual desire that he faints consequently. Not only does the use of desire work to disrupt what we know to possibly have taken place with regard to the desires and pleasures of the enslaved, since we see Hammet as a subject who desires despite his death boundness, it also works to centers Ron’s desire for a recognizable past.

Ron’s present yearning to be held by the past, comforted and validated by it, but also to save the past as previously discussed through Izzie-Mae, is vocalized in the extended moment

that he and Hammet share. Ron wakes up after fainting, and they discuss the insurrection. Ron yearns to save Hammet, asking him if he is scared and telling him that he does not have to go through with the insurrection. Hammet rejects this logic insisting that he has to because he is willing to fight and kill for his freedom. In this moment, I view Ron as the embodiment of the present researcher. As stated earlier in the play, Ron is an academic working on a thesis about the slave past. He does not know why he has decided to work on this period, yet I argue that his interest in the period lies in Hammet and the importance of having a legible black queer past.

In their dialogue, Hammet asks Ron what is it like to be free. Ron responds as follows: “i feel lost sometimes without a connection without linkage without a past” (O’Hara 97). Ron demonstrates what it is like to be black and queer with respect to history and the archive. On one hand, Saidiyah Hartman discusses this feeling in relation to the middle passage. In “Venus in Two Acts”, Hartman depicts a desire to give the captive a voice when in the confines of the archive, they are rendered mute, displayed only as a ‘violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history” (Hartman 2). She desires to tell a story that moves beyond simply recounting or committing further violence. Like Ron, Hartman details feeling lost and longing for a connection to the past, realizing that in her attempt to reckon with the archival opacity of Venus, she “wanted to console [herself]” (Hartman 9). She demonstrates a present desire to reckon with the past for the sake of the present and the self, yet even with this desire, because her focus is the archive, she is still confined by how much liberty she can take with her method of close narration.

On the other hand, Matt Richardson isn’t as confined with respect to present desire because his focus is on literary renderings of the past. In *The Queer Limit of Black Memory* (2013), Richardson discusses the ways that the present approach to the past, made evident

through museums like the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) in San Francisco and now the African American Museum in DC, is fundamentally about undoing the negative stereotypes and harm that have pathologized black people. With that in mind, the black family is rendered normatively, suppressing queerness and gender variance in the process. Richardson states that, “queers threaten mainstream Black political and cultural narratives of racial uplift and achievement, respectability and civility” (Richardson 4). So as archives and museums gesture toward the past from the present moment in an attempt to erect an enduring monument for the future, the queer is rendered outside of what should be understood or celebrated about blackness. This leads Richardson to turn to what he terms “expansive historiographic literature”, texts that comment on and re-imagine the past without concern for historic truth, with which I would place *Insurrection* under, although Richardson primarily focuses on black lesbian literature as the argumentative throughline of his book.

Charles L. Nero tracks present desire in the literature of black gay men in his essay “Towards a black gay aesthetic: Signifying in contemporary black gay literature.” After listing the theoretical positions of thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Eldridge Cleaver, Amiri Baraka, and Molefi Asante who view homosexuality as alien to African and thus Black communities, Nero turns to the work of Toni Morrison’s, chronicling the ways that stereotypes of homosexuality are used throughout her oeuvre that replicate the theoretical arguments of the time. It is in Morrison’s 1988 novel *Beloved*, which focuses on enslavement, where Nero views Morrison as surpassing her earlier homophobic efforts reach their peak, limiting the complexity of men’s lives through the Sweet Home Men. As he states, “Morrison’s description is homophobic because it reveals her inability to imagine homosexual relationships among heroic characters” (Nero 294). This gap in literature, alongside the archival gap that rendered accounts of black

homosexuality before abolition a scarcity, becomes the backdrop through which black gay men signify and rewrite negative representations of their being.

With the work of Hartman, Richardson, and Nero in mind, Ron verbalizes what it feels like to be black and queer and to desire a black queer past that archivally does not exist. He is unable to find himself in traditional archives like the versions of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, resulting in his inability to see himself and thus a feeling of lack with respect to a linkage to the past. But like the work of the theorists aforementioned, the play rejects black queer historical opacity through the relationship between Ron and Hammet, the manifestation of the black queer past Ron yearns for.

Immediately preceding Ron's confession of his complicated feelings of freedom, the following exchange takes place:

Hammet: you ain't gat no special somebody?
 One you say anything to do anything wit
 makes ya glow
 when you heah the name?

Ron: ...no

Hammet: i be yo' somebody...if ya want. (O'Hara 97).

In this moment, the past, as represented through Hammet, once found, heals the lack of connection that previously existed within Ron. Ron finds desire in this moment, a black queer desire that works to reorient his view of the period of enslavement as lacking queer subjects, as well as the view of himself and his sense of freedom. The moment is consummated with Ron finally returning to Hammet what Hammet has given him: Sweet Air. Hammet tells Ron to blow him. Ron pauses before he responds, mistaking Hammet to mean fellatio. Hammet opens his mouth and Ron blows sweet air into it. The act serves as evidence of the connection that Ron and Hammet share, "a life-giving force that impregnates each man with the soul of the other, thus filling up their emotional gaps and voids", Ron given back to Hammet in the same way Hammet

has given to him (Carpenter 197). Continuing to view their relationship as one that is about the hold the past has on the present, Hammet taking Ron's breath, moving him involuntarily, blowing sweet air into his mouth, and now asking Ron to blow him, the play moves towards a kind of catharsis, making way for a new approach to the past to take place. Hammet becomes the object, making Ron the subject, making it significant that in this moment, Ron gives Hammet breath.

In the final moments of the play, the insurrection begins, ending the moment between Hammet and Ron. But before they depart, they exchange one final piece of dialogue. As Ron shouts for Hammet to run as the attack dogs edge closer, Hammet punctuates his declarations with "first...last...last...first" (O'Hara 102). Although in this moment Hammet is partially calling back to Nat Turner's dialogue earlier in the play and the biblical refrain of the last shall be first and vice versa that it signifies on, I see this exchange as rupturing a simple understanding between the past as past and the present as present, the first and the last, especially considering that in this moment Ron is moving back to the present and Hammet remains in the past.

Hammet metaphorizes the relationship between himself and Ron and then undermines it. If we focus on the first half of Hammet's statement, Hammet is the first and Ron is the last. In this fictional reality, Hammet existed first, occupying the past that Ron yearns to connect to. Ron is the last, occupying the place in the present. And then Hammet reverses it. Hammet is the last, the former, occupying the past position, leaving room for Ron to exist in the present.

Throughout, I have centered their dynamic as one that considers the hold the past has on the present. With this reversal following Ron blowing sweet air into Hammet mouth, Hammet seemingly releases his hold on Ron, confining himself to the past, allowing the space for Ron to

do with him as he pleases. Instead of continuously considering the hold the past has on the present, why not think about the way that we can use the past to service us in the present?

Stephen Best does a lot of work to critique the present preoccupation with the past in *None Like Us*. He poses questions like “why must we predicate having an ethical relation to the past on an assumed continuity between the past and our present and on the implicit consequence that to study the past is somehow to intervene in it? Through what process has it become possible to claim the lives and efforts of history’s defeated as ours either to redeem or redress?” (Best 64). With the notion of continuity in mind, Best extends the work of queer theory to speak to race, specifically its theories of negativity and anti-relationality. He desires to think about the relationship between the past and the present as one of non-relationality, rethinking racial belonging as kinds of negativity, nonbelonging, or disruptions that resist historical recovery. He suggests these other ways of relation, ones that critique what he defines to be the melancholic turn with respect to history, as a kind of letting go.

Black queer desire plays a central role in this reversal of history, although I do not fully endorse the notion of letting go as the lingering connections between Ron and the past attest. There is archival opacity with respect to black queerness, leaving it the work of fictions to intervene. These works are often concerned with “the production of a past calibrated to meet the current demands for cogent, viable, and recognizable Black queer existence in the present” (Keeling 91). Even though we may inherently know that black queerness existed despite the lack archival documentation or the false idea that queerness was an act of white imposition onto black subjects, fictional works validate that existence and demonstrates our present desire, our collectively longing for a connection, a linkage, as Ron states. That desire is valid. But without that work, without intervening in the archive, creating stories out of desire and lack, the black

queer past seemingly does not exist. Essentially, if the archive lacks black queerness, then we in the present, Ron, are held in relation to it solely by our desire for it. We desire a loss. However, that desire does not function as a throughline, from one thing to another, indicated by the way that Hammet reverses the past and present positions, because the archive and memory severed the black queer present from the black queer past. Our desire is severed, and I view that severance as an opening. The relationship remains severed, but holding onto that severance through fiction becomes another way to view our relationship to the past. This is how I read the ending of the play.

The play ends with Hammet's death, Ron and T.J being transported back to the present and T.J's death upon their return. Ron takes T.J in his arms and says "holding history I'm holding history in my arms" (O'Hara 103). Holding connotes intimacy, a desire for the thing that is being held. In this moment it would be easy to assume that Ron is simply talking about T.J. the dead ex-slave who he now holds in his arms, a figure who embodies history as a whole, but to do so would miss what the play is attempting to say about history with respect to black queer desire.

While Ron is physically holding T.J., he is also holding within himself the black queer past that he has just witnessed. As opposed to earlier in the play when he was physically controlled by Hammet, now Ron, in the present is fully in control of the past. He holds it. O'Hara uses the word "holding." The word is active, suggesting an enduring relation to the past. We can view Ron as holding the past in his arms, an act of intimacy, or as holding it at bay. Regardless of either one, Ron is in control in this moment.

The play ends with the phrase "the BEGINNING" (O'Hara 103). Usually, plays conclude with a sentiment that indicates an ending. Here, after Ron proclaims that he is holding history, something begins. This beginning has the potential to constitute a new orientation towards the

past. Ron has lost both T.J. and Hammet, but his loss isn't melancholic. The scene lacks emotionality, leading it to be read as contentment. The past previously had a hold on Ron, moving him, breathing into him, and at some points he desired to save the past, to engage in the act of redress and recovery that is central in certain trends of black studies and historiography. But in this final moment, Ron holds history, constituting a new way to think about the present in relation to the past. That relationship doesn't need to be melancholic. The play does not fully state what that new relationship will look like. Regardless, it constitutes the start of something else, an opening. The black queer desire between Ron and Hammet epitomizes the act of choosing a new relationship to the place, one that leaves open new possibilities and critical orientations to the work of history.

Together, Robert Jones Jr. and Robert O'Hara do more than simply write stories centering black queer desire into the historical context of enslavement. Instead, they recognize the power and potential of archival opacity; creatively intervening in it to pursue other ways of seeing and thinking. By placing the black queer subject into the past through the genre of the neo-slave narrative and focusing on desire, these writers use the genre to call back to the founding genre of the slave narrative: a genre that holds onto a tension between enslaved status and the claiming of personhood. The journey from enslavement to freedom highlights the extent to which enslaved women and men undermined and resisted their enslaved status in mundane and extraordinary ways. I have tracked the ways that Jones Jr.'s "the two of them" and O'Hara's Ron and Hammet highlight the interpersonal reorientation and critical insights of black queer desire. They offer alternative approaches to black affect studies, ones that center black desiring subjects. In doing so, we see that black queer desire not only has communal ramifications, pushing others to resist

and ultimately overturn the imposition of their status as commodities, but an investment in black queer desire also has the capacity to reorient how we take up the past.

Chapter 4: Hope Against Hope: Aesthetic Returns and the Black Queer Figure

“...and cried tears of hope against hope.”

-Craig G. Harris

In “Hope Against Hope” from *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991), Craig G. Harris puts forth a mediation on hope that I intend to sit with for the duration of this chapter. Like many of the texts from the third section of the anthology titled “Hold Tight, Gently,” Harris’s poem “Hope Against Hope” can be categorized as an elegy, a work chronicling the grief and collective mourning of the AIDS epidemic and the many lost to its effects. The deaths that Harris renders compound. The poem is split into five sections, each one focusing on the life and eventual death of the subjects. From Marc-Steven to Jameel to Calu to Eddie to Frederick, the poem aestheticizes what Dagmawi Woubshet terms a “poetics of compounding loss”: “a narrative of mourning that does not focus on singular events of mourning” but underscore “the serial and repetitive nature of the losses they confront” (Woubshet 3). This compounding loss operates as a kind of perpetual aesthetic return, recounting another loss but insisting on its difference. The serial nature of the losses index the inability of reductionism, the inability for example for Marc-Steven to easily elide into Frederick, insisting on the particularity of each experience. Yet it is not the feelings of grief or despair on which the poem ends, even if it is animated by it. Instead, it ends on a “hope against hope.”

It would seem absurd that after highlighting a litany of losses, that the speaker of the poem would turn to hope. How can the speaker of the poem, being so centered in the losses chronicled, still see something beyond or outside of it? Or in other words, how does the speaker not let grief and despair, the reality of their situation, or even pessimism become the determining lens of their vision? The poem ends on a togetherness. The “we” came together to mourn Frederick in a place where they “held hands, /sang his favorite Joan Armatrading tune / and cried

tears / of hope against hope” (189). The scene is soaked with emotionality through the handholding and the tears that fall from their eyes. I read this emotionality as a physical manifestation of presentist, as in happening in the moment, reckoning with the individual loss of Frederick as well as the four others that preceded his, those which were recounted. The collective repetitive reckoning through mourning makes space for the “hope against hope” that closes the poem. I read “hope against hope” as a poetic doubling down, an insistence on hope in the context of hopelessness, insisting on its necessity while contending with the (im)possibility of its fulfillment. It speaks to the necessity of the affect despite the terribleness of the world’s antiblack and queer violence. It is a move to contend with hope in the moment in which it is invoked, which I read through the emotionality of the tears, decoupling the critical theorizing around hope from futurity. Hope against hope serves as a theoretical reinvestment in the now. Hope becomes clear if it is positioned alongside and through grief.

I begin this chapter with a consideration of hope and the way it manifests within affect studies, queer studies, as well as black studies. That consideration makes space for the primary contention of the chapter: hope as an analytic is in tension with and animates the anti-relational thesis in queer studies and afro-pessimism within black studies. Reading afro-pessimism as being animated by grief, a grief that I find paralleled in Harris’s poetic, I argue that hope, when considered in the realm of the aesthetic, functions as a perpetual returning and recounting of the realities of antiblackness. In this case, hope is not necessarily hopeful, but the repetition of recounting potentially moves towards hope as Harris’ poem demonstrates. It centers hope as a present tense affect instead of as a future oriented one. I read Danez Smith’s 2017 collection of poetry *Don’t Call Us Dead* as an example of this particular way of thinking about hope, particularly through Smith’s HIV/AIDS topical matter. Each return to seroconversion after an

articulation of antiblack violence, demonstrates what I mean by hope's aesthetic. I end this chapter, like the previous ones, by returning to theatre. By reading Jordan E. Cooper's *Ain't No Mo'* (2023), I contend with black queer hopelessness. While the play is animated by a hope for the black community, it reaches its hopeful limit in relation to the figure of the black queer.

While both considerations at face value seem not to be about the feeling of hope, I contend that that specific feeling can only be accounted for in the present tense through a perpetual recounting of or returning to scenes of antiblackness as well as if hopes possibility is positioned against the black queer.

Hope is a desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment. Often, it is someone or something upon which hope is centered. To do hope, one cherishes a desire with anticipation, to want something to happen or be true. This expectation is steeped in confidence, a trust that this desire with which one has invested in will be obtained. Hope then is always tied to the future, given that what is hoped for is often not in grasp of the hopeful. The coupling between hope and the future underpins Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism," José Esteban Muñoz's "queerness," as well as Marquise Bey's "fugitive hope."

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant argues that optimism is cruel when something desired is an obstacle to one's flourishing. For Berlant, optimism is explored through an understanding of objects of desire, or "a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us" (Berlant 20). The closer one is to the desired object, the closer one gets to the things that object promises, regardless of if one is aware of all the promises that will potentially be made possible. What is key here is the notion that optimism is about attachment and all attachment is optimistic because of the way that optimism functions. But people stay attached to "the good life" despite its inability to be obtained leading Berlant to ask,

“why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear costs abounds” (Berlant 2)?

A response to this question, using Berlant’s conceptualization of optimism which I read as simultaneously presentist and future oriented, lies in Berlant’s notion of the impasse and its significance to the subject. The impasse, explored through stories by John Ashbery, Charles Johnson, and Geoff Ryman, is “a name for the transitional moment between a habituated life and all of its others” (Berlant 23). The impasse is a moment rife with possibility where the disappointment of that possibility is put off, where the notion of the different future in and through the good life and its byproducts are believed to be obtainable. I think this is most clearly presented in Charles Johnson’s “Exchange Value,” particularly through its exploration of black life in 1970s Chicago.

The story is told retrospectively from the perspective of Cooter, centering the fact that for him at least, the outcome of this narrative is already known. He and his brother Loftis are black and poor but of different dispositions. Cooter refuses the pull of the good life, choosing instead to not make anything of himself, while his brother Loftis is optimistic and ambitious about life. It is in the midst of the scene of their robbery of an older deceased woman that, according to Berlant, they enter an impasse, cataloging hundreds of thousands of dollars. The moment is rife with possibility. What will they do with the money? Can they now have a different life? It would seem so, but only momentarily, because after they have the money, they are then acquainted with the reality of their situation. They have too much money to spend, leaving Cooter lost and turning Loftis into a hoarder. I recount this moment because I think that the significance of the impasse lies in the fact that it feels good, potentially in an illogical sense. It feels so good that the

reality of the outside world does not come into play. It functions as a kind of high, thus making it something that one desires to continually return to and invest in, in the same way that the notion of “the good life” is clung to. If the impass functions as a kind of hopeful suspension, then it is one that feels good, shoring up possibilities without the finality of a outcome³¹.

Berlant highlights a trend within queer studies to focus on negative affects and attachments, ignoring or infantilizing seemingly positive ones. In *Queer Optimism* (2009), Michael D. Snediker places the work of Judith Butler, Leo Bersani, Eve Sedgwick, and Lee Edelman under the header queer pessimism. I would add Lauren Berlant as well due to the negative and unfulfillment aspect of optimism that they theorize. Together this cohort’s theorizations of “melancholy”, “self-shattering”, “shame”, and “the death drive” have preoccupied queer theory, privileging suffering and dereliction. However, in prioritizing this mode of thinking, the affective curiosities of queer optimism for example and its attachments like hope and happiness, are not taken seriously, and like Edelman’s formation of the future, is cast aside as merely kid stuff. Instead, devaluing the future tense of optimism and hope for a presentism, Snediker uses the proliferation of shame in queer and affect theory as an example to which he wants to apply to optimism: “what if the field of queer optimism were situated as firmly in the present tense as shame? Even as scholarship on shame may arise out of generosity and hopefulness, this work, within queer theory and affect theory, provides shame all the more eloquent and vibrant a vocabulary, while leaving positive affect (itself lexically impoverished) to

³¹ Berlant gestures toward but does not critically engage structural antagonisms of antiblackness. Within the story, Cooter and Loftis both end up worse off than they begin. Financial gain turns into personal ruin, even when logically, at least from the purview of an outsider, it shouldn’t. What remains on the periphery is the way that before coming into wealth, the brothers, already impoverished, were entangled within, and in the case of Cooter demystified from the notion of progress, due to them being placed within afterlife of slavery, the “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (Hartman 6). Yet this does not negate the significance of the impasse, rife with possibilities, and the possible good feelings it engenders, even if the outcome renders those possibilities and the feeling null in void.

fend for itself. That positive affect seems innately less available for thinking—or that hope definitionally exists futurally, and shame immanently—is the sort of temporal *donnee* against which Queer Optimism speaks” (Snediker 16). Snediker helps to highlight some of the stakes of this chapter, which sits at the intersection of black, queer, and affect studies. While the negative is theoretically insightful, there is a tendency to not think of the positive, or the seemingly positive, as offering similar insights. I think that thinking hope alongside the aforementioned thinkers, particularly Berlant’s notion of the *impasse* as well as situated in the present tense, instead of as future oriented like José Muñoz notion of “queerness,” will contribute toward that aim.

Marquise Bey in *Black Trans Feminism* (2022) insists on the significance of hope in relation to the field of afro-pessimism and uses a genealogy of black feminist and trans thought to do so. His archive is significant given that “blackness, transness, and feminism assert life and livability despite, over and against, in excess of, or irrespective of discourses and materiality’s of death and deathliness” (Bey 205). Bey’s notion of “fugitive hope” which functions as the conclusion to the book, insists on avenues for living that are not beholden to white supremacy, heteronormativity, nor cisnormative modes of being. Hope then is not an uncritical happiness or blind faith, nor a denying of dismal realities but “a necessary condition under which possible future might have the chance to emerge. Fugitive hope aspires for life in and through blackness; fugitive hope is an escape from fixed rootedness, which is thus a radical opening of possible futurity.” Ultimately, hope for Bey is the power to imagine beyond current fact (Bey 203). Bey rejects the totality of the systems and structures that render blackness and transness as impossible modes of being to think and feel towards something after the abolition of these signs blackness, trans, and feminism. Methodically, Bey uses coalitions, the “promiscuous, polyamorous love

affair with a kind of relation that ever shifts and must remain open to undoing itself, disedimenting itself” or “a radical togetherness” to assert fugitive hope. Ultimately this cacophony of voices insists on multitudes as being foundational to this analytic of hope, a multitude that Bey argues often goes unacknowledged and uncited when theorizing nihilism or nonbeing. It is in the space of multitudes that possibility is found.

While my theorization is not negatively inflected or anticipatory like Berlant’s, nor is it or oriented abolitionally like Bey’s, I am nonetheless insisting on the necessity of sitting with hope, particularly within the realm of the aesthetic. Both theorists are foundational to how this chapter will think about hope, specifically “hope against hope” or hope without the attachment to its possible fulfillment. In positing a hope without fulfillment, I am moving toward a more presentist orientation of hope, one that brushes up alongside Berlant’s impasse to think about the seamless oscillation between black queerness, antiblack violence, and the daily realities of life. In holding off on a future realization of hope I ask, what does thinking with or feeling hope, and its aesthetic renderings make space for? What does it say about the relationship between lived experience and the structural, or to state it in academic terms, how does leaning into hope for hopes sake intervene in the trends within black and queer studies particularly afro-pessimism and the queer anti-relational thesis? The aforementioned trends are either challenged or reoriented when thought about alongside black queerness as well as the AIDS epidemic, both of which are central concerns for the writers this chapter sits with.

One of my central concerns is the way that the anti-relational seems out of step with the relationality and contact of queer community that Samuel Delaney chronicles in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) as well as the Black gay cultural renaissance that Bost highlights in his book. Delaney speaks to the importance and necessity of relationality, primarily through

his conceptualization of contact. Comprised of peep shows, porn theaters, and spaces that allowed for the exchange of sex, Time Square used to be a place that facilitated interclass contact. For Delaney, this homosocial contact resulted in rewarding and productive exchanges that were primarily conducted in good will. The replacement of these spaces with Disney stores, children theaters, and tourism, like arguments made by Edelman in his book *No Future*, speak to the centrality of middle-class values and their relationship to the figure of the child and overzealous concerns about safety. Ultimately Delaney emphasizes the importance of exchanges, whether or not they are grounded in sex, amid differences, particularly differences of race, gender, class, even if the majority of the examples he provides focus almost exclusively between men.

One central element of Darius Bost's book *Evidence of Being* is the significance of community, a togetherness that often-found expression in the form of writing groups (Bost 155). Recounting the history of the Blackheart Collective, an artist collective for black gay men founded in 1980, as well as the Other Countries Collective, Bost demonstrates that while these groups were created in the midst of mourning, a melancholic mourning that is distinct from Freud's theorization, there remained a "desire for collectivity, community, and empowerment" (Bost 69). Ultimately melancholic mourning can be viewed as a kind of hopeful orientation towards the social, to turn a mood into an action that is not solely concerned with the debilitating effects of moment, particularly the moment of the AIDS epidemic.

Both Bost and Delaney demonstrate the ways that for black gender and sexual minorities, relationality is central and often serves as a resource during hard times, particularly with respect to AIDS, which to some extent the antisocial turn responded to. It ultimately makes sense that most minority theorists like Bost and Muñoz critique the antirelational turn and instead insist on

the significance of community as well as hope and futurity regardless of the present moment. What then is the anti-relational/antisocial actually concerned? It seems to me that the anti-relational is more of a response to the solidification of neoliberalism and the feeling of minoritarian-ism imposed onto white gay men due to their sexuality. In *Homos*, Leo Bersani begins with highlighting the shift in queer politics towards inclusion and the push for gay marriage. From a white gay male perspective, the only thing restricting them from having all the rights and benefits of whiteness is their sexuality. In other words, there lies therein the desire to not be hailed as different. If neoliberalism, defined by Kemi Adeyemi functions as “a system of economic policies and political imperatives that solidified in the 1970s as governments and corporations colluded to produce an allegedly free market, which they did primarily through asset stripping, where publicly held goods and services are turned over to private corporations to own and operate,” resulted in the reshaping of cities, and invested in and reflected white middle class pleasure and ease, then I see white gay men’s frustration on being placed outside of this ease as instrumental to their reflection of the world itself. It is easy to hail and argue for no future or the death drive at the onset of one’s first feeling of setback. For even while theorists of and around social death chronicle the structural impediments to change and progress by recounting centuries of lived realities of antiblack violence, most of them still end with a notion of futurity, even if that future is the end of the world itself.

Let’s return briefly to Harris’ poem. As previously stated, as an elegy, the poem firmly centers loss. But in the serial nature of the loss, the speaker does not move outside of the embrace of this feeling. Even as each stanza ends with a moment of emotionality and collectivity, honoring and grieving the now deceased, another death occurs and must be contended with. What is significant here is the fact that there is a constant return. It is not until

the final one that the speaker slightly moves out of the purview of the pain, death, and grief, to access the hope against hope that the poem ends on. This is the affective relationship I want to construct between perpetual death and dying on one hand and a hope that is not fully hopeful on the other. To access that, we have to lean into a pessimistic position, one that I view as solely animated by grief.

In *Red, White, and Black* (2010) Frank Wilderson defines afro-pessimism as a lens of interpretation exploring “the meaning of Blackness...as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions” and afro-pessimists as “theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon’s insistence that, though Black are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world’s semantic field—regardless of cultural and national discrepancies—“leaving” as Fanon would say, “existence by the wayside”—is sutured by anti-black solidarity” (58). I think that by elaborating a structural dependence on antiblack violence and the inability of overcoming said violence without a complete reordering of society, implies an orientation towards adverse conditions and an expectation of the worst possible outcome

However, grief is imbedded in pessimism; a grief towards the pervasiveness of the object or institution one previously placed their hope in and a hope that that particular grief be replaced by something else, even if one does not want to believe in it given one’s own history towards said object. I want to think about afro-pessimism as offering us a grieving paradigm, that when thought about alongside the particularity of black queer life, the AIDS epidemic, and the metaphorically complex “hope against hope”, necessities dealing with the facts of black (gay) life in relation to any consideration of hope.

Thinking about the lived realities under antiblackness, afro-pessimism helps to come to terms with a history of defeat. In *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the*

African American Imagination (2010), Darieck Scott considers the relationship between power and pleasure on one hand and pain and abjection on the other in order to offer insights into literarily rendered moments of abjection and defeat with respect to the black male body. Abjection serves as a kind of affect, highlighted by the in-betweenness that Scott identifies in the development of subject-object relations, and examined within the context of black male rape. In sitting with black abjection or “a term that speaks to various states of apparent and real disempowerment”, Scott theorizes it as a kind of counterintuitive power (Scott 15). This power is centered in resistance. Scott examines the effects of abjection, constituted by a history of defeat as the legacies of antiblackness demonstrate, to consider how “the injuries themselves, may themselves be tools that can be used either to model or to serve as a means of political transformation” (Scott 9).

Pain and death, and the grief they engender, have the potential to serve as a resource, in the same way that Harris’ recounting of serial losses turns into something else by the end of the poem. While Harris’ poem is about the AIDS epidemic and the feelings it engendered singularly with respect to the deceased as well as plurally in terms of the collective grieving, the following texts sit in the wake of the moment of AIDS, or the HIV positive moment, but are still tied to its effects. Danez Smith explores the relationship between antiblackness and death on one hand and life and hope on the other.

Don’t Call Us Dead

Danez Smith is an award-winning writer and poet. Their work, three poetry collections of which *Don’t Call Us Dead* (2016) and *Homie/My Nig* (2020) are included, has been reviewed and celebrated in public-facing presses like the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, as well as *The Poetry Foundation*. “Don’t Call Us Dead,” the title of Danez Smith’s 2017 collection of poetry functions as a daring provocation and move to think between. The statement serves as a

response: Black people are hailed by death, socially and politically placed within its grasps as the collection's references to police brutality and the slow death of HIV attest. But on the other hand, the push not to continue to frame blackness alongside death functions as a challenge to discourses within the academy, primarily the debate between the anti-relational thesis, Afro-Pessimism and social death and its rejoinder, optimism. I argue that the collection *Don't Call Us Dead* provides an aesthetics of hope, a hope that is not about futurity but is securely grounded in the present tense, reflective and repetitive. Ultimately hope is not pessimistic nor optimistic. It is conscious reckoning or oscillation between the historical, present-tense, as well as potential future catastrophe. It is a yes/and feeling of reckoning, one that uses the past as well as the presents trauma as an opening for something else to take place. Smith, after situating antiblack violence, continuously returns to HIV, seroconversion, and its aftermaths, as well as the way that it mingles with and informs antiblack violence, and slowly moves somewhere else, demonstrating hopes aesthetic capabilities.

In the first chapter, I analyzed the affective resonances of *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother*, framing them with respect to the genealogy of multi-genre anthologies. Traditionally these anthologies served the function of asserting a group identity and politic as well as presented themselves as burgeoning canons of literature of marginated identities. The anthology as genre contains a multiplicity of perspectives and forms, where no one identity or perspective is prioritized over another. They honor intracommunal diversity while acknowledging their incompleteness. As Claudio Gullien states in *The Challenge of Comparative Lit* (1993), they often begin with experiences of oppression, moving to the assertion and celebration of individual identities, and concluding by exploring how the created community can lead to social change or revolution.

To examine the collection of poetry, I will use the anthology as a loose frame of reference. The poems create an irreducible identity through the malleability of the “speaker” and assert a message or idea(s), in this case providing an aesthetic lens, through the speaker’s refraction. While I will not highlight every poem in the collection, I closely focus exemplary examples that speak to antiblackness, as an opening frame, HIV, and the constant return to the two. And finally, I gesture towards what this constant returning makes room for.

I want to think of the opening of Smith’s collection (the first poem) as a kind of introduction, a frame of reference through which to read the subsequent poems that make up the rest of the collection. In *Don’t Call Us Dead*, Smith opens with “summer, somewhere”, a 19-page poem where the speaker fully takes on the realities of antiblack and queer violence, a reckoning with a history of defeat, alongside an Edenic elsewhere that is closely related to that reality but not fully conditioned by it. In this elsewhere, life is firmly centered as indicated by the boys playing underneath a sun. The use of “a” as opposed to “the” demonstrates that this is not the sun that the earth circles. This is a different place. It is “not earth not heaven” (3). It is a place that defies the world’s logics, where there is no language of restrictions as evidence by the lack of words for officer or laws. There is “no color to call white,” which also means there is no social categorization for the boys who are described as “brown as rye” and “gum dark on all sides”. But it is in the final two stanzas of the first page that the speaker asserts a bold provocation about the deployment of language in relation to this collective while also highlighting an in-between space: “please, don’t call us dead, call us alive someplace better” (3).

This poetic investment in somewhere else can be read throughout texts that attend to social death and slavery’s afterlives. Wilderson in *Red, White, and Black* (2010) notes the necessity of moving outside of antiblackness and its structural positioning while acknowledging

the difficulty of doing so. He states, “to say we must be free of air, while admitting to knowing no other source of breath, is what I have tried to do here” (Wilderson 388). Calvin Warren in *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (2018) suggests the need for an “ontological revolution”, “one that will destroy the world and its institutions” towards an investment elsewhere (Warren 171). While Wilderson and Warren argue for an end of the world, other thinkers that attend to the legacy of antiblackness like Christina Sharpe and Saidiyah Hartman through “wake work” and “critical fabulation” developed critical methods for attending to this reality. To varying degrees, they all gesture towards an investment in something beyond the present moment (the end of the world instead of no future at all) or critical methods for attending to the present realities and legacies of antiblack violence.

In saying “please, don’t call us dead,” the speaker acknowledges that black people are often discussed and positioned as the socially dead, positioned outside of the category of the human, the thing through which the world functions as theorists of social death convey, while also attending to the need to be free of air as Wilderson states. For example, the “please” seems to suggest that language has implications. It is a label that is hard to remove. As the rest of the poem notes, this “somewhere” is a place young black boys go to once they have literally died. The past is conjured by way of lynching, signaled by collective ‘we’ “pluck[ing] brothers from branches peeled their napes from bark”, indicating the ahistorical nature of this elsewhere, while others “walk out into his new world still clutching wicked metals” an allusion to gun violence. But ultimately the how of their death is not important. In this somewhere, they are alive, leaving out the need for the use of death as the primary analytic or frame of reference to think about them. “Call us alive someplace better” is a move to prioritize the effect not the cause, the effect of literal death as well as the theoretical categorization as such. As the speaker states, “does it

matter how he got here if we're all here to dance? grab a boy! spin him around! if he asks for a kiss, kiss him. if he asks where he is, say gone.” (5) So even while the speaker briefly considers how the boys came to this elsewhere, most often as victims of white supremacy or internalized queerphobia, what matters most is that they are alive in this place, where life and intimacy are centered. The poem orients us in the present moment of the elsewhere instead of pushing it into the future.

This poem epitomizes the poetry collection as anthological incarnate through the shifts in speaker. The poem is punctuated with sections in italics where the speaker is not always the collective “we” of the elsewhere but from the perspective of those the boys left behind. Even in these sections, the boys are not bound by their death; instead, they are hailed by the space they left behind, or in other words, their absence. Some examples include “dear air where you used to be/dear empty Chucks by front door/ dear whatever you are now/ dear son” as well as “dear sprinkler dancer,” “dear brother from another time,” and “dear dear,” In each of these iterations, personhood is centered, where the boy is conditioned by their relational capacity to the life they had before and most significantly the people they lived alongside. In addition, they are still alive in their absence. While moving between the elsewhere and the world as we know it, the poem emphasizes a constant movement between the two, and at the same time centers the specificity of the body through the language of absence, a specificity that the other poems in the collection will speak to with respect to sex and HIV.

But even in this capacious collective “we” queerness is also attended to. It asserts the fact that some black boys are queer alongside the queer potential of this black space. A few moments stand out. The first one is the previous reference to “if he asks for a kiss, kiss him” (5). In a place full of boys, there is a lack of social restrictions through which boys are often forced to prioritize.

In this somewhere, they are free to kiss whether platonically or romantically without judgment. The other two moments center the romantic. The first is from the perspective of the now alive boy and focuses on domestic violence. In this instance, the boy was murdered by his lover as described through “I loved a boy once and once he made me a red dirge, skin casket, no burial” (9). While the section parses through their relationship, it ends with “he would love it here. He could love me here” (9). Like the previous section, this one notes the ways that the space of the elsewhere dissolves social mores and constraints that made this death possible as the line “no burial” attests, unremarkable and without public grief. Another section, on the other hand, fully centers a mutual love where the distant speaker, after greeting the alive as “dear dear” proceeds to ask “whose arms hold you now after my paradise grew from chaos? whose name do you make thunder the room? is he a good man? does he know my face? Does he look like me? Do I keep him up at night? (15) This section can be read from two perspectives: either from the departed or the left behind. But again, there is an attachment that is highlighted through queer romance.

While every other section that centers the elsewhere or the shift in speaker of those left behind or the boys themselves contain 8 stanzas, 16 lines total, two are brief, an exchange conditioned by police brutality and death, a reminder of the primary way that black boys are often led to this elsewhere in this present moment. The brevity of these sections renders them marginal to the main focus on the elsewhere that the rest of poem is concerned with. On page 26, the speaker is not remorseful about the death they caused. Instead, the death is conditioned as flowing casually from how they were raised, “with a healthy fear of the dark.” Here the speaker does not see those they killed as people, instead they are referred to as a ghost, and after chronicling their fear of the dark, justify their actions by noting that they were just doing their job. But in a stunning reply, the following speaker refuses to acknowledge the previous speaker’s

personhood, instead consigning them to their occupation through their greeting of “dear badge number.” While the previous speaker justified their actions with reference to their conditioning of the fear of the dark which is another way of saying fear of black people alongside their job, the current one refuses to accept the justification. Instead, they pose the following: “what did I do wrong? Be born? Be black? Meet you?” (19) Although the speaker does not get a reply, the following sections of the poem speak to the world of antiblackness that the boys have departed only to return to the elsewhere. But their brevity is significant. For instead of ending with violence, death, and despair, the poem ends on wholeness and peace, or better yet, life.

“summer, somewhere” refuses the language and prioritization of death as the primary lens through which to think and discuss the effects of living in an antiblack world. Instead, it oscillates between allusions to death and life in an elsewhere, feelings of grief on one hand, joy and life on the other. While imaginatively capacious in its rendering, I argue that it is the significance of hope in the aesthetic form that really orients this opening poem as well as the collection. As Snediker notes in *Queer Optimism*, my aim is not to align hope with the hopeful or the optimistic. Instead, hope is a perpetual present-ist reckoning with the reality of antiblackness and its various manifestations and the primacy of a queer frame to its affect. Hope as an aesthetic rendering opposed to an affective or felt one.

While “summer, somewhere” provides a frame through which to think antiblack violence, the poem “it wont be a bullet” centers the particularity of the black gay subject position through the focus on HIV. After chronicling the many ways black people die in the previous poems, by bullets, whiteness, relational violence, as well as cinematically in “dinosaurs in the hood,” this poem places an asterisk next to the usual ways death is thought about to consider the kind that lives in the body. This death lacks iconicity, for the speaker “is not the kind of black man who

dies on the news.” Instead, they are the kind “who grows thinner & thinner & thinner until light outweighs us, & we become it, family gathered around my barely body telling me to go toward myself” (Smith 28).

The speaker conjures a body to explore death, not in the social sense but in a way that centers the lived realities of death in the same manner that Harris’ speaker attuned the reader to the individuals who died from AIDS as well as the embodied emotionality of those grieving their losses. While the previous poems touched on the physical body, they relied more on abstraction as a way of signaling the multiple ways black people die. In “it won’t be a bullet” and other poems that center HIV, there is a focus on singular embodiment. The speakers’ body literally signifies difference through the distance constructed between a newsworthy death and their own.

Smith fills the gap that Darius Bost asserts with respect to the legacies of antiblack violence that render black gender and sexual minorities as absence. Bost centers the AIDS epidemic within the legacy of antiblackness. Tracing the genealogy provided by Orlando Patterson’s 1982 study *Slavery and Social Death* and Saidiyah Hartman’s theorizations of the afterlife of slavery, Bost acknowledges the way that “AIDS-infected bodies often signify as absence and negation in dominant scholarly and popular chronologies of antiblack violence—slavery, lynching, mass incarceration, and police brutality. As such, a framework is necessary for thinking about how black gay men’s marginalization within black communities intensifies their precarity” (Bost 14). In addition, with respect to theories of social death, Bost’s makes an explicit intervention. Theorists like Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, and Calvin Warren to various degrees theorize the black’s incapacity for relationality, arguing that “human’ categories like queerness, “cannot enfold the structural position of blackness as outside the realm of human being” (Bost 155). By including the work of Cathy Cohen and Robert Reid-Pharr, Bost demonstrates the

levels of secondary marginalization at play within blackness writ large where black queer life signifies as absence and negation, subsumed under antiblackness even when the black gender and sexual minorities are positioned “closer to illness, death, and social exclusion under regimes of antiblackness” (Bost 47).

The speaker of this poem aestheticizes this fact with the way that this body’s death is not newsworthy, which is another way of saying that it is not a body to be rallied behind or to be the foundation for movement building in the same way that the bodies of cisgender assumably heterosexual males are. But even as this death is different, meaning that also the lived reality before the death is different, it is its pending nature, the way that it is put off that is significant. The use of an oxymoron, where the body *grows* thinner and thinner, makes us pause and consider the way that this death is slow and exaggerated. In other words, the poem signals the way that this body literally signifies difference, a difference that must be attended to. And by attending to it, we sit in an intermediary state, toward death but not fully confined to it, harkening back to “summer, somewhere.”

As a way of leaning into the levels of secondary marginalization at play, Smith turns the reader’s attention to gay sex, seemingly responding to the unasked yet haunting question: why is this speaker slowly dying? The next few poems, “bare,” “recklessly,” and “litany with blood all over,” chart the speaker(s) relationships to unprotected sex and HIV. In focusing on sex, HIV, as well as the aftermath, specifically the return to it through or in difference, meaning that it is presented or discussed in an altered manner, the collection aestheticizes the presentist reckoning of hope.

The centering of HIV and pleasure, rendered through barebacking in the poem “bare” highlights the inherent contradictions within sexual pleasure, a parallel to the contradictions

between the realities of antiblack violence and the insistence on hope within the context of hopelessness. The speaker of the poem accepts the risk of what could possibly take place by engaging in unprotected sex. For the object of their desire, they will allow their body to battle itself, tear itself apart, “hollow cords of white knights’ intravenous joust.” When viruses appear in the body, white blood cells serve as the primary defense. HIV infects the body by attaching itself to CD4 white blood cells, specific cells that help the virus replicate itself. In other words, the battle that the speaker metamorphizes is a battle at the cellular level where one of the speaker’s own cells is facilitating the replication and further infection of HIV. But the speaker is not fazed by this: “love let me burn if it means you & i have one night with no barrier but skin.” This risk, for the speaker, has the possibility to result in death, or as the previous poem “it won’t be a bullet” metaphorizes, a slow death, yet the speaker gladly accepts it: “love, stay in me until our bodies forget what divides us, until your hands are my hands & your blood is my blood & your name is my name & his & his” (Smith 37).

The poem ends on a notion of plurality as a byproduct of bare sex. The speaker and the other become one, their hands, blood, and names intermingling. But in the final moment, the speaker exponentially compounds what existed between the two to exist between many through the use of “& his & his.” The compounding, on the one hand, refers to multiple partners, but it is also an extension of the object of the speaker’s desire. In the contemporary moment, especially given that HIV is no longer a death sentence, as further poems will highlight, Smith is able to render marginal the death that is so often associated with HIV because of the legacy of the AIDS epidemic, to center pleasure despite the negative social connotations that are still attached to the virus. Or in other words, center the body and its desire and pleasure over legacies of violence, death, and stigmatization. Smith poetically prioritizes the former over the latter.

This specific orientation to HIV and “high-risk sexual behaviors” is not new. Marlon Bailey discusses the contradictions of “Black Gay (Raw) Sex” in relation to discourses of HIV prevention. In the public domain, Black gay men are more often linked to high-risk sex, but this categorization often leaves out an understanding of why they engage in raw sex and semen exchange. Bailey thus offers an analysis, a black queer framework, one that looks beyond risk and disease to make space for desire and pleasure. Bailey comes to his framework through Lyndon Gill’s “erotic subjectivity” and M. Jacqui Alexander’s “erotic autonomy.” The former helps Bailey contend with how black gay men navigate the relationship between regimes of normativity and their own sexual pleasure, while the latter, gleaned from the impact of sexual normativity on black women in the Caribbean, demonstrates how gender and sexual minorities can and do engage in erotic and sexual pleasure despite the varying levels of resistance. Both center what gay men want and desire even within the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis. In a similar vein, Smith’s speaker centers desire and pleasure over stigma and risk.

But after centering desire and pleasure over stigma and risk, we return to the scene of seroconversion through a different lens. The poem “recklessly,” similar to “summer, somewhere” (another return), is broken up by page and stanza with double backward slashes (/), each one representing their own meditation, detailing the speaker coming to terms with the new state they find themselves in: a carceral one as opposed to a pleasurable one. The first line states that “the bloodprison leads to prison.” The speaker invokes the idea that a diagnosis of HIV is a kind of lived prison where simply the diagnosis functions as judgement to echo the over-stigmatization of black gay sex and HIV but also HIV stigma writ large. But even as the previous speaker from “bare” willingly welcomes destruction if love is involved, this particular speaker is not. After noting the links between HIV stigma and prison and the judgement therein, the speaker states “it

was summer & everyone wanted to be in love.” The speaker depicts their HIV seroconversion as occurring from ordinary circumstances like love, pleasure, and sex, not as extraordinary, as in outside of the realm of the ordinary.

Smith juxtaposes the categorization of black gay sex as reckless with the ordinary nature of the sexual acts taking place, as well as the ordinary way in which the speaker of the poem contracts HIV. If we refer back to Bailey, these acts are only seen as reckless because of the speaker’s assumed embodiment, their proximity to death through their blackness as well as the stigmatization of certain kinds of sex, specifically ones engaged in by gender and sexual minorities. For example, the speaker recounts their relationship to the sexual act as a kind of “bottom position,” being used by the other.

In *Extravagant Abjection*, Scott thinks about the bottom position in two ways: the first signifies “the nadir of a hierarchy (a political position possibly abject) and as a sexual position: the one involving coercion and historical and present realities of conquest, enslavement, domination, cruelty, torture, and so on, the other involving sexualized or erotic consent/play which references the elements of the former” (Scott 28). Scott often views those different manifestations together, highlighting the connections between blackness and homosexuality and moves toward his larger argument of investigating the kinds of black power and even pleasure that lie in occupying this position. Kathryn Bond also looks at the bottom position but through an embrace of shame, in relationship to blackness, abjection, and queer sexuality.³² Both of these works, to varying degrees, originate in a negative space in order to find usefulness or in the case of Scott power through this position. For the subject in Smith’s poem, the pleasure and power is already inherent. The speaker states, “still I was/ recklessly a boy’s throat/ until he was done &

³² Stockton, Kathryn Bond, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” Meets “Queer”*. Duke University Press, 2006.

everywhere on my body was a boy's throat... I was everything/ required of me & I was anything/ but tame." Ultimately the speaker finds pleasure in this act, being sexually used by the other for both of their benefits.

The story goes as follows: the speaker has a boy over. The boy came, connoting ejaculation, although the destination of his cum remains ambiguous. The lines conjure the image of a throat, yet the cum could have ended in the mouth of the speaker or in their body since their body becomes a throat for the boy, an opening to be used. But even though the boy left, he remains. This "high-risk" sex, particularly engaged in in a non-reproductive way, defines it as reckless as well as a death-sentence. But from the vantage point of the speaker, occupying a moment in which successful antiviral medication for HIV exists, a death sentences simply becomes a sentence. The poet renders this visually on the page through the opening line "it's not a death sentence anymore" followed by the lack of the word sentence. It then moves to the following, still rendered spatially through the absence of death: "it's more/ it's a sentence/ a sentence". In positing a positive HIV status as more than death as well as simply a sentence, Smith renders it as an ordinary occurrence. Queer sex is then positioned as a regular instead of a spectacular sexual act, and HIV simply a happenstance effect.

Even though we often paint the AIDS epidemic differently, solely centering death, writing from that period, while talking about death, is not over determined by it. For example, in the poem "Blood Positive" from *Love's Instrument's* (1995), Melvin Dixon stages a dialogue between those fallen and those left behind. Those left behind wonder what the dead did, how they loved, how did they borrow time, allusion to antiviral medications. In each of these instances, the present inquiries are conditioned by the loss, and the fact that as Dixon says "history will not be kind" to those who died in this manner. In the first half of the poem, the dead

are frozen in time to be gawked at and over analyzed for their life. But in having the dead speak in the second half of the poem, Dixon rejects that gaze to center and honor life in the same way that Smith describes: “When you love as we did you will know/ there is no life but this” (Dixon 58). Dixon rejects the way black gay life and AIDS are often rendered and thought about spectacularly to instead center is as a kind of happenstance resulting from living the only life possible for them.

But having positioned their HIV status as a sentence, an ordinary occurrence, but still containing the weight of stigma, where does “recklessly” end? It ends with loss, a very different ending than “bare” which considered a pleasurable intimacy between the speaker, their object of desire, as well as multiple others. “recklessly” ends with “men hold[ing] each other/ like they’ll never let go/ & then they let go”. Ultimately, it ends oriented towards a negative mood, one positing seroconversion as being about intimacy as well as loss, whereas “litany with blood all over,” the final poem from the first section, grapples with the effect visually on the page where “his blood” and “my blood” morph together, making them indistinguishable from each other, a call back to the intimacy of “bare” inflected with the mood of “recklessly.” What becomes clear is that in each of these aesthetic returns, the kind of reckoning changes. We shift from pleasurable intimacy to the carceral and then to acceptance and loss. In each return to the topic of HIV seroconversion, the speaker approaches it differently. They are all about the same thing, like Harris’ poem eulogizing his friends, yet each return insists on their singularity.

After taking on antiblackness and HIV separately, in the final saga of poems from the collection, Smith more explicitly mingles the two. The beginning of “everyday is a funeral & a miracle” calls us back to “summer, somewhere” (another return) through the references to death and life by way of funerals and miracles. But as opposed to “summer, somewhere” where

queerness haunts the poem through the lack of specificity, this poem makes it explicit in a similar way that the poems about HIV seroconversion does. The speaker does not want their grandmother to know about their sexuality, nor the fact that they are HIV positive, conveyed through the line “how your blood/ smells like a hospital, graveyard/ or a morgue left in the sun.”

But the speaker moves to make the link explicit between anti-Black violence and HIV through the allusion to police, oscillating between their worldly manifestation and a metaphorical one. At the end of page 64, the speaker rides by the police and lives, while at the top of the following page, they refer to their HIV infected cells as “cops running inside/ my veins, hunting /white blood cells &/ bang bang/ I’m dead.” This oscillation continues between references of black people murdered by police (Tamir Rice, Rekia Boyd, and John Crawford) and the speaker’s organs (their liver, kidneys, and lungs). In doing this, Smith firmly centers HIV as part of the afterlives of slavery, for the speaker is “black & faggoty/ they sent a boy/ when the bullet missed.” Like the play on the poem “recklessly” Smith presents HIV as an extension of antirblackness through the constant return to it and poetically mingling it with examples of police violence. This is not hopeful, as in full of positive feel-good emotion. Instead, the intermingling of the two poems, alongside the allusions to the previous returns and the way in which they compound with and through this present example in “everyday is a funeral & a miracle” demonstrate the nature of perpetual reckoning to a founding scene yet ending in a different place. Together these poems show is a constant return to antiblack violence and HIV, the way they feel, as well as the inability of escaping it. Ultimately they insist that we remain in the present

To solidify the movement away from hope as a feeling and towards a repeated aesthetic of reckoning, the collection ends with “dream where every black person is standing by the ocean,” a poem that conjures the transatlantic slave trade as well as the centrality of oceans and

water to black (diaspora) studies, a foundational return or reckoning. As Tiffany King notes in *The Black Shoals* (2019), “scholars in Black diaspora studies, giving specific attention to late twentieth century scholars, have mobilized oceanic and water metaphors to theorize Black life, aesthetics, and decolonial politics as breaks with continental European discourse” (King 4). Particularly when theorizing the social death and the afterlives of slavery, theories begin with the centrality of the middle passage, turning a person into a thing, and its legacies in policies and the larger social world. Smith does the same, retuning to a founding reality and metaphor in relation to the black experience: the ocean.

Here, the ocean speaks, responding to the question regarding the location of the people it swallowed. It says “that was ages ago, you’ve drunk them by now” (Scott 82). The ocean physically suggests a kind of infusion, the way that history is literally inside of the person that asks that question. To demonstrate this, the person asking the question spits into the water and out walks a boy. While the poem begins with the legacy of antiblack violence by returning to this scene, it remains open ended. What will happen to the boy now that he has arisen from the water? The woman who spits into the water and initiating the transformation? We are left to wonder.

Even as the collection through its poems of antiblack violence and HIV constantly return, reckon again and again, the “so what” is put off. The future when it comes to an aesthetics of reckoning, an aesthetics of hope, doesn’t matter. What matters is the need to continue to return, to see and feel differently or sometimes in the same way in subsequent returns. This is a present oriented hope or a hope against hope. If the ending of the poem suggests anything, it suggests that only after a perpetual reckoning, recounting and retuning, can the possibility of something that looks or even feels like hope be realized. We end someplace else after recounting

antiblackness, HIV seroconversion, and the mingling of the two. But one thing for sure: isn't the future.

Ain't No Mo'

Don't Call Us Dead extended the aesthetics of hope from Harris's "Hope against Hope."

Within the realm of the aesthetic, hope functions as a perpetual reckoning, a return again and again, to the realities of antiblack violence thus governing hope through loss and grief. It is only through this kind of inhabiting that the suggestion of a feeling of hope can be realized.

Positioning hope this way provides space to think about it in the present tense instead of future oriented as a lot of scholars consider it.

Jordan E. Cooper's *Ain't No Mo'* is governed by a hopeful orientation, yet it undermines the possibility of hope with respect to a black queer subject position, demonstrating the inability to truly consider hope in relation to black queerness. The play answers the question: what if the U.S. government offered Black Americans one-way plane tickets to Africa? Told over the course of 8 scenes, the play investigates the realities of antiblack violence and its effects on Black women, the performance of reality tv, black respectability politics, as well as incarceration. These individual scenes are punctuated by the character of Peaches, a "beautiful larger than life Drag queen flight attendant" checking in and preparing soon to be passengers for their flight to Dakar, Senegal, and the only queer character of the entire play. I focus on the fact that it is Peaches who orients the play and allows space to answer the aforementioned question.

Since the play is new, published in 2023, not much criticism currently exists. Isaiah Matthew Wooden published a piece on the play in relation to George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (1987) and Robert O'Hara's *Bootycandy* (2011). In "Teaching *The Colored Museum* and Its Doubles: Black Queer Theatrical Aesthetics in *Bootycandy* and *Ain't No Mo.*" Wooden is primarily concerned with positioning O'Hara and Cooper as modern day theatrical

experimentations of Wolfe's play and how together they are pedagogical tools to explore Black queer theatrical aesthetics as well as ideas animating queer studies and the importance of African American drama. He emphasizes the importance of defining the terrain, guiding students through exercises the parse through the intellectual history of 'queer' as well as 'aesthetic' before thinking about them together. The analysis of Cooper, operating as a kind of conclusion to the piece, notes how *The Colored Museum* served as an inspiration for the playwright, paralleling the original while deviating from it. For example, *Aren't No Mo'* has a prologue and 8 scenes compared to the 12 of the other two plays, emphasizing time and a sense of urgency with respect to the Peaches' scenes, particularly Exit Strategy 2 and 3.

My analysis of the play is less concerned with its position within a black queer theatrical genealogy. Instead, I attend to the scenes where Peaches is the focus, the only black queer representation within the play. Whereas I see the play oriented by hopeful orientation in relation to the possible future black Americans will have in Africa as opposed to the history of defeat and current manifestations of antiblack violence within the US context, Peaches forces us to sit with and consider the lack of that future oriented hope for the black queer. Serving as a kind of aesthetic impasse, Peaches' scenes, the only ones we return to again and again, tarries with the hope and its impossibility. My analysis of the play, and Cooper's approach overall, note the impossibility of conceiving hope, emphasizing the tensions around hope.

The voice of Peaches orients the play in the Prologue. She is our usher in the church and theatrical sense. Her short monologue serves as the beginning of the play as well as the plays own message to the audience to turn their phones off. "Now that your world is OFF, you can come be apart of this one" (Cooper 1). The world that she invites us into necessities audience participation, suggesting the importance of affective exchanges. She implores the audience to

laugh or shout if they feel moved to. In other words, by insisting on leaving the real world behind and fully inhabiting this one to the point where we become part of it, affectively moved to the point of laughter or tears if we feel moved to, sets up the eventual investment we will have in the character of Peaches, our introduction to this world, and what befalls her. Paralleled to the present oriented focus of hope, the move to center Peaches forces us to focus on the present moment of the play itself. But on the other side, Peaches uses the word “apart” instead of “a part”, still constructing and maintaining a relative distance between the audience and the world of the play. The play seems to suggest that even in welcoming the audience into the world, like the plot of the play, severance is imminent. It is as if we, like her, will remain separate.

As Wooden notes in his comparative pedagogical analysis of the play, time is significant. The first scene is a funeral set the night of November 4th, 2008 at 11pm coinciding with the election of Barack Obama, the first black president of the United States of America and the death of Brother ‘Righttocomplain.” From the start, we are oriented by death but not in the same way that Danez Smith explored it by way of present-day manifestations of antiblack violence. Instead, this is a death by way of a link to the assumed uselessness or insignificance of pain and suffering with respect to black life because as the preacher refrains throughout his sermon “because the president is WHAT? YO. Nigga.” (Cooper 4). Brother “Righttocomplain,” a pillar of the black community and the embodiment of suffering and pain with respect to the black experience in the US, is “beaten, sodomized and murdered by the election of the First Negro President of these United States” (Cooper 3).

In eulogizing Brother “Righttocomplain,” the preacher infuses the presidency of Obama with hope for a different future for black Americans. Across the scene, Pastor Freeman, whose name is a play on being a free man in the Obama moment and alludes to the history of

enslavement and the freemen with papers authenticating their freedom and right to movement, notes the various things that will change now that the president is “yo nigga.” There will be an end to police harassment and racial profiling, as well as space for black people to comfortable exists as whoever they want to be, as suggested to the ability to be named “Tyquamotrin” or “MonaLisaLaKeishawanda.”

But this hopeful mood invested in through the death of Brother ‘Righttocomplain’ is undermined by occurrences outside of the scene. At the onset, Pastor Freeman hears what could be a gunshot or a car backfiring but chooses to ignore it since he seems to be the only person that heard it. But as his sermon reaches a climax, full of call and response exchanges between him and his congregation, the atmosphere shifts and “he begins to hear the sounds of gunshots and sirens that he is no longer able to ignore, as they attempt to overtake the sound of celebration” (Cooper 7). What once was a hopeful, optimistic mood (remember Berlant’s argument that optimism is cruel) is now overcome by despair as it is undermined by the future that overtakes the moment. Even as the scene is situated in the past, the future intercedes, demonstrating the necessity of Brother “Righttocomplain” the pillar that was preemptively laid to rest and who the community needs again as “the sounds of news reports build on top of each other, stating events like The Flint Water Crisis and the deaths of those like Oscar Grant, Aiyana Jones, Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Jordan Davis, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Philando Castille, The Charleston Nine, and countless others” leaving Pastor Freeman “frozen and consumed...full but somehow completely empty” (Cooper 7). This is the present reality, a reality that many believed would never come to fruition under the tenure of a black president. Without Brother “Righttocomplain,” hope and futurity in American is rendered null-

The rest of the play exists in a future, “somewhere beyond now” but after the Obama presidency. It is in this moment that Black Americans find themselves with a choice that isn’t really a choice: either take the one-way flight to Africa or remain in the US where they will either be murdered or put into a cell as Peaches tells us, or turned into a White man if they decide to embody the wife of Lot and look back during boarding. Each of the scenes of the play, outside of Peaches’s, focus on characters engaged in their routines, filming a reality show reunion or in line for an abortion, before realizing that the last flight to Africa is leaving soon, while Peaches’s scenes detail the moment of eventual flight from America towards other possibilities, thus oriented towards the future.

In Exit Strategy 2, Peaches provides information about the flight that she is about to begin boarding and speaks to the particularity of the black queer experience. She welcomes passengers to “Gate 1619” an allusion to the year of the arrival of the first recorded Africans to North America, and the final “Reparations Flight.” Not only is she tasked with facilitating the boarding and check in process, she is also the carrier of “Miss Bag,” “the carrier of our entire story as a people in this country as we make this glorious transition” (Cooper 41). What I find interesting here is the fact that it is not someone who is traditionally aligned with black respectability that is in charge of this process, nor the bad, but a black drag queen. It is this gender and sexual minority that is given the most important task, making sure everyone gets on board as well as everything that Black people created while they were in America. She must work to ensure everyone’s passage from America before she can turn to her own.

As I previously recounted with respect to Smith’s poetry collection and Bost’s intervention in theories of social death, there are levels of secondary marginalization, particularly for gender and sexual minorities. The same can be said for Peaches. As she is facilitating

boarding, she is tasked with making sure one of the passengers doesn't look back. The passenger complains about this not being easy, this being boarding the flight and leaving America behind to which Peaches responds, "What? This ain't easy? "Easy? What the hell is that?", and delves into an autobiographical recounting of her personal experience. She begins with the difficulty of having to check everyone in, followed by the pain of being in drag, from the heels "rapping and stabbing my damn feet" to "how much sweat this wig is keeping from gushing down the front of my damn face right now." She then rounds it out by talking about her embodied experience as a black queer person within the black community:

"Do you know how hard it was for me to get out that bed this morning when the sun started yellin' out my name? "Easy." From the moment they plucked me off my mama's peach tree, I was ripe, round, and full of juice, and if "Easy" knew me, I wouldn't be wasting away in a world full of folks who hate peaches. I got my ass whooped last night by a group of jealous niggas who was pissed that I looked better in drag than the bitches they fucked the night before. That wasn't even white folks that did that. . . they look like me, and every one of them standing somewhere in this line, waiting for me to scan they ticket to a better life. Seems like niggas will never accept any other nigga that don't fit into their tiny idea of what a nigga can be. Any kind of sparkle that sparkles too sweet, they gotta spit on"..."So yeah, this shit ain't easy but I shahayed my sexy ass on to work so I could get these coins, and make this flight, you hear me?" (Cooper 44).

In this extended moment, Peaches calls out not only that black life is not easy, but the way in which that hardship exponentially increases for a black queer person like her. But she doesn't just allude to that fact. Instead, she speaks to the immediacy of that difficulty by recounting her experience the night before where she was beaten by a group of black men for sparkling too sweet, a group she will, during the course of her day, will have to check into Flight 1619. She accepts the fact of her life but also orients herself toward the future they all will step into by flying away to Africa. But even in this recounting, Peaches emphasizes the fact that she is afraid. She states, "sometimes black hate black more than any white ever could, and knowing that I'm going to a place where all I see is black, scares the fuck outta me" (Cooper 44). Peaches future still has the potential to be as tumultuous as her present. And given this fact, the play leans into

the impossibility of that future for her, since as the end of the play demonstrates, she won't make it.

Various scholars discuss the black queerness, or the black sissy, in relation to the larger black community and how the figure reorients understandings of blackness, masculinity, and sexuality. Robert Reid-Pharr notes the way that the black gay man when literarily erected by black heterosexual men, function as the sign of crisis and chaos, demonstrating the lack of normalcy with respect to blackness. By striking this figure, normalcy is returned to the community. In another vein, Marlon B. Ross in *Sissy Insurgencies: A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness* (2022) explores how the figure of the sissy is instrumental in how Americans have thought about and constructed black masculinity from the 1800s to the present. In both instances, black queer sexualities and gender performances are positioned as oppositional to a normative blackness, but still demonstrates the expansiveness of blackness as a whole, even when desired otherwise.

Roderick Ferguson begins *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004) by interrogating the figure of the black drag queen from Marlon Riggs 1989 film *Tongues Untied*, more explicitly in line with the character of Peaches, although the figure he interrogates serves as an introduction, not the primary analysis. The black drag queen, walking the waterfront with cigarette in hand, shores us the multiplicity of differences, primarily as it relates to sexual difference, that canonical sociology defines itself against and in the process works to further pathologize blackness. The moves Ferguson toward his larger argument, his "queer of color analysis" which positions itself against Marxism, revolutionary nationalism, as well as liberal pluralism. He makes plain the way that heteronormativity structures social policy.

With these varying intellectually insightful ways of attending to black queerness, how do we figure in *Peaches*? The way that *Peaches* is presented, alone, as well as what befalls her, depicts an impossibility of conceiving hope and futurity for the black queer. Instead, the play seems to suggest that any consideration of hope, or a future away from antiblackness and toward something else, necessitates the black queer and all that they represent, the “any kind of sparkle that sparkles too sweet” to be left behind. Her sparkle and sweetness, while she claims it and relishes in it despite the fact that it isn’t easy, alongside how it positions her closer to violence as the aforementioned monologue demonstrates, represents the tension around queerness and that is best explained through GerShun Avilez’s term queer contingency: “a constant state of uncertainty that derives from the transgression of the protocols of gender expression” (Avilez 50). The play takes that uncertainty and enlarges it, making it the central component of its conclusion.

The play presents a tension between black collective futurity and black queerness in *Exit Strategy 3*. *Peaches* finally gets everyone aboard the plane and is about to leave as well until she remembers Miss Bag, the carrier of black history and culture in America. But unfortunately, Miss Bag won’t budge. *Peaches* recognizes the necessity of the bag, the way that Black experience in America has conditioned and made space for the kinds of cultural creations and innovations. She stays to Miss Bag, “all these niggas blood gone be drained from they souls if they can’t find a yesterday to live in, Miss Bag” (Cooper 70). But not only is her work in vain, attempting to wrest the bag from where it sits, her labor as the flight attendant is also in vain because after all the work she did, she is the one who is left behind.

At first recognizing that she and Miss Bag have been left behind, *Peaches* states, “they left me... they left you...*Now* what they got? *Now* what they got?”. Miss Bag responds to *Peaches*’ question: “Easy” (Cooper 72). Miss Bag constructs a black experience that is only easy

without the weight of black history and the inventions that are a byproduct of it but also one without black queerness. But in having both the bag and Peaches left behind, the play construts a relationship between black history and black queerness. If it ain't no mo' past, it ain't no mo' queer. Black history is intimately tied to its proximality the defeat and that Darieck Scott theorizes, but also the way in which black culture is tied to and birthed from that defeat.

We can think that hope is still obtainable for those that left on the flight. But what does that hope look like if it is disentangled from the black past and the black queer? Is it a future worth investing in? The play refuses to answers these questions. Instead, Miss Bag is taken by the powers that be, and as Peaches tries to fight for black history and culture, she loses the larger than life-ness of her drag persona. "Her voice deepens and her clothes are snatched from her body until he is bare. The Man behind her is revealed". Not only does Peaches not receive anything for her efforts, checking people in all day, even those who violated her, she is reduced to her maleness, the pronouns shifting, the clothes taken away. She is left bare, defeated, as "lightening strikes us into darkness" (Cooper 73).

I'll end by restating the question orienting the play overall, "what if the US government offered Black Americans one-way plane tickets to Africa?" If we follow Coppers play, most of black America will make it. Maybe their lives will be better, easier. However, the black queer will be scapegoated for their absence makes space for black futures hopeful coherence. If this is the case, then the future is not a compelling enough solution to the problems of the present, specifically antiblack and antiqueer violence. Or in other words, if that is how black futures are configured, then we may need to leave the future alone, even when conceived of from the mind of a black queer person. However, if Craig G. Harris points us in any direction it would be to hope for a future yet problematize its actualization. Together, Smith and Cooper apply this notion

within their work, simultaneously building on the past, as they lean into the aesthetic possibilities of a “hope against hope.” Those possibilities reckon with the personal, as with Smith’s seroconversion, or as a way of tarrying with hopes black queer impossibility. Both texts decouple hope from futurity, a key component of black and queer studies, reconsidering the feeling that figured so centrally in the context of the AIDS epidemic and the writers of the anthological generation who lost the future tense from their vocabularies. “A Black Gay Sensibility” holds tightly to the past, allowing it to inform the present, even while different approaches are pursued.

By Way of a Conclusion

This project was birthed through absence. Perhaps it was the midwestern university I attended where African American studies was considered to be an “easy major;” courses with different titles that recycled the same subject matter. In these courses and others like them, I noticed the lack of attention to matters of gender and sexuality: *Ethnic Notions* but no acknowledgement of Riggs’ queerness nor his HIV status, no Beam nor Hemphill, and even when Baldwin made his way onto the syllabus he was engaged solely as the race man. It was with absence in mind that over the course of the last five years I focused entirely on black queerness, a journey initiated when GerShun Avilez handed me *In the Life* for the first time.

Even though I began with absence, I don’t end there. At the beginning of this study, I asked the following question: what it might mean to tell the story of affect theory centering texts like *In the Life*, *Brother to Brother*, and the constellation of black queer cultural production that exists in its wake? Following Hemphill’s 1992 call, I have pursued an answer by attuning to the aesthetics and topical matter of a black gay sensibility: a literary tradition of black gay men’s writing from 1986 to the present, utilizing an anthological praxis to do so. “A Black Gay Sensibility” focused on affect or feelings and how the feelings that animated the anthologies *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother*—loneliness, desire, and hope—can be read in contemporary texts. I attuned to the felt component of those texts, the affects that animated each story, as well as the way that one text can “affect and be affected”³³ by those that preceded and followed it, demonstrated how the anthology embodies a tenant of affect studies. In addition, the focus on

³³ In the Affect Theory reader, editors Melissa Greg and Gregory J. Seigworth state that affect is about potential, “a body’s capacity to affect and be affected” (2).

black queer texts centered the way that race, gender, and sexuality reorient the white assumptive feeling body.

In addition, the anthologies and affective focus of the study builds on the centrality of feeling to the African American literary tradition as eloquently stated by W.E.B. DuBois in 1903. Yet while “how does it feel to be a problem” still animates the way that feeling is read in these texts—the social imposition of loneliness through an “orienting moment”, the lack of HIV and AIDS funding and its relationship to premature death, as well as contending with the problem of black queer archival opacity—they do not overwhelm the analysis. Instead, they function as a beginning, a launching off point to the black queer feeling subjects that each chapter engages, from Arnold and Usher to Isaiah and Samuel, Ron and Hammet to Danez Smith’s speaker and Peaches. And as each chapter moves between genres, from novels, poetry collections, and dramas, I demonstrate the way that generic diversity adds depth and complexity to the study, allowing the engagement of feeling to morph and change as well as reach different conclusions.

However, it must be repeated: this is one approach to a black gay literary tradition. I hope that this project makes room for others that critically engage the anthologies of past as their own genre instead of as simply a compilation of texts. How can we read those texts differently though the lens of the anthologies framing as well as the relationship between texts, an attention to detailed editorial practices? And how do those anthologies speak to the contemporary moment, particularly texts that have not been attended to? Together, some lonesome texts of the past and those of the present, speak to the necessity of widening the types of texts we turn to in and count as worthy of study within the African American literary tradition. It is with that in mind that I offer this study as a beginning.

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