Apart and a Part: Dissonance, Double Consciousness, and the Politics of Black Identity in African American Literature, 1946-1964

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David C. Jones

School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
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84,199 Words
Abstract

This thesis examines the politics of black identity in African American literature during what has come to be known as the ‘age of three worlds’. Across four chapters, I analyse texts by Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Lorraine Hansberry, exploring the way in which their writing plays out within and against the geopolitical exigencies of the Cold War and contemporaneous discourses of Civil Rights and black (inter)nationalism. In doing so, I explore the contrasting ways in which each of them displaces the binary logic that is typically seen as defining the 1950s, as a means of reconstituting both American and African American identity. Rejecting either/or identities, they all decentre prevailing notions of national and cultural identity by juxtaposing them with alternative spaces and temporalities, the result of which is a dual perspective that is simultaneously local and transnational.

By extricating themselves, whether physically or intellectually, from a monolithic discursive framework, Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry recast the idea of double consciousness famously articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Instead of being a self-negating non-identity that serves as the psychological corollary to African Americans’ marginalised status, ‘two-ness’ is transmuted into a privileged vantage point that allows them to both intervene on the world historical stage as empowered modern subjects and renegotiate their relationship with the United States.

What this two-ness amounts to, I argue, is a kind of dissonance. ‘Dissonance’, Duke Ellington claimed in 1941, names black people’s ‘way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part’. The principle of introducing a ‘wrong’ note into a piece of music in order to generate new modalities of expression found in jazz is transposed into a social and literary context by the writers examined in this thesis. Each of them embodies and mobilises the socially grounded sense of being apart and a part alluded to by Ellington as a means of defamiliarising normative notions of race, gender, and sexuality as they pertain to American-ness. In their place, they posit alternative forms of knowledge and politicised identity that reconstitute what it means to be both black and American in the middle of the twentieth century.
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Introduction

African American Literature in the Age of Three Worlds

There was always a border beyond which the Negro could not go, whether musically or socially. There was always a possible limitation to any dilution or excess of cultural or spiritual reference. The Negro could not ever become white and that was his strength; at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of the white man’s culture, yet he came to understand that culture as well as the white man. It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, sub-cultural, or hermetic. And it was this boundary, this no-man’s land, that provided the logic and beauty of his music. And this is the only way for the Negro artist to provide his version of America – from that no-man’s-land outside the mainstream. A no-man’s-land, a black country, completely invisible to white America, but so essentially part of it to stain its whole being an ominous gray.


Dissonance is the truth about harmony.

Interviewed in Los Angeles in 1941 to promote his new musical, Jump For Joy, the legendary jazz musician, Duke Ellington, was asked to expound on the preoccupation with dissonance that characterises his music. Ellington’s response was to transfigure this aesthetic trait into a metonym for African American identity. As a phonograph played a recording his music, he instructed the interviewer to listen, before declaring: ‘That’s the Negro’s life. Hear that chord! That’s us [….] Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part’. What Ellington describes here is a variation of the ‘two-ness' identified by W. E. B. Du Bois forty years earlier as the psychological counterpart to African Americans’ marginalised status in the United States. However, where the latter’s theory of ‘double consciousness’ names the alienation that stems from viewing oneself through the prism of white hegemony, Ellington’s conception of dissonance, as Ajay Heble observes, reconstitutes the notion of being out of tune with the assumptions of a racially delineated status quo as ‘something profoundly empowering’ that opens up new realms of knowledge. Outside of ‘the

dominant tenor’ of the nation’s culture, it names the liminal space – the ‘no man’s land’ described by LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka – from which African Americans recast the representational terrain of American culture.

The duality described by Ellington is one of the central organising themes of this thesis. His ‘socially grounded interpretation’ of dissonance as something ‘politically and culturally salient’ corresponds to the way in which four of postwar America’s most prominent black writers negotiate the vexed relationship between their race and their nationality. The principle of introducing a ‘wrong’ note into a piece of music to generate new modalities of expression, I propose, is transposed into literary and social contexts in the works of Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Lorraine Hansberry. Set against the political and cultural backdrop of the Cold War, Civil Rights, and contemporaneous discourses of black (inter)nationalism, I explore how each of them makes manifest the sense of being at once a part of and apart from the United States that Ellington alludes to.

To this end, what follows is articulated within the historical context of what Leerom Medovoi and Michael Denning have each defined as ‘the age of three worlds’. A triangular relationship between the United States, the Soviet Union, and the rapidly decolonising nations of Africa and Asia provided ‘the globe’s dominant topological imaginary’ during the 1950s, Medovoi argues, with the former two power blocs engaged in an ideological battle to secure the allegiance of the latter, in order to tilt the balance of power in the Cold War in their favour. In a similar vein, Denning claims that “[t]he rhetoric of the three worlds – the capitalist First, the Communist Second, and the decolonizing Third – emerged in the early 1950s, and, though it was challenged on all sides, it dominated the period.” As this thesis will demonstrate, the context described by Medovoi played a pivotal role in shaping the terms in which African Americans articulated their demands for freedom and equality during the 1950s and early 1960s. The four writers I examine are each, in their own way, illustrative of this point. While differences in age, ideological perspective, artistic sensibilities, gender, and sexuality mean that there are inevitable divergences in how they respond to it, Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry are all attuned to the shifting power dynamics of the postwar world.

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6 Ibid, 21, 20.
Their respective attempts to advance the historical claims of African Americans are all, whether implicitly or explicitly, oriented by contemporaneous geopolitics.

However, with the partial exception of Wright, their aims are not straightforwardly political. Despite the fact that all of them were, early in their careers affiliated with the Marxist left, by the time they published the texts I examine in this thesis, their analysis of race no longer adhered to existing ideological patterns. Instead, repudiating either/or identities that distribute knowledge within discrete, self-contained frameworks, each of the writers – albeit in contrasting ways – foregrounds the cultural and political salience of dialogic perspectives that defamiliarise existing cultural formations. In particular, each of them adopts an intercultural subject position that simultaneously straddles national and transnational imaginaries, blurring the ontological distinction between them. As a result, the binary logic underpinning the American Cold War and the ideology of ‘containment’ that supplemented it is destabilised.

Key to this process is the way in which they all juxtapose knowledge attendant to ‘the dominant tenor’ of American culture with that found in alternative spaces and temporalities. Mirroring Baraka’s argument with regards to the way that black artists have been compelled ‘to make use of other resources’ to affirm their identity, all of the writers examined in this thesis extricate themselves, either physically or intellectually, from a monolithic representational framework predicated on their marginalisation. The co-presence of conflicting epistemologies and overlapping genealogies in the work of Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry I argue, creates spatial and temporal disjunctures that fracture the mythic wholeness that characterised postwar America’s prevailing hegemony. The resulting discursive fissures provide a rhetorical space from which they are able to interrogate normative of notions of race, gender, and sexuality as they pertain to American-ness. In doing so, they follow Ellington’s lead by recasting the two-ness of the African American experience as a potent instrumentality for interpreting the interaction of race and national identity in the American cultural imaginary. From this unique vantage point, they articulate alternative forms of knowledge and politicised identity that reconstitute what it means to be both black and American in the middle of the twentieth century.

*
The impetus for this thesis is twofold. Firstly, I wish to foreground the way that the dissonant interventions of African American writers respond to and reconstitute the representational politics of Cold War America. In part, this interest stems from the fact that the relationship between African American literature and the entwined contexts of the Cold War and decolonisation remains something of an underexplored area in scholarly discourse. To this end, using the three worlds topography and mediating between its intersecting axes provides fertile terrain on which to explore the nexus of culture and politics at a pivotal juncture in both black and American history. My second preoccupation evolves out of this historical specificity. By locating the work of Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry within the context of contemporaneous historical discourses, I want to stress the imperative of not treating African American literature and the conceptual apparatuses we approach it through as something monolithic or fixed. Instead, without losing site of the deeper currents of the African American experience as rendered in literature, I emphasise how these broader themes play out in specific locales during specific periods. In short, what is at stake in this thesis is how to negotiate the historical specificity of African American literary and cultural interventions within and against the wider contexts from which they emerge. This process is both spatial in its navigating of the local and transnational, and temporal in its traversing of the contemporary and the historical.

With regards to the specific historical backdrop to what follows, I look to extend the parameters of Cold War scholarship by reiterating the pivotal role played by African American writers in rearticulating the terms of American-ness during this period. Notable exceptions notwithstanding – some of which I return to below – literary studies of what might be termed the long 1950s (here understood as 1946-1964) have tended to treat black literature as either peripheral or an addendum to the Cold War imaginary, rather than a central component of it. For instance, while such staples of Cold War literary studies as Thomas Schaub’s *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991), Alan Nadel’s *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (1995), and Leerom Medovoi’s *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (2005) devote chapters to African American literature and culture, they tend to gloss over the specific implications of black Americans’ relation to Cold War concerns, by synchronising them with broader – which is to say whiter – historical patterns.
Schaub’s analysis of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) underlines this idea. Placing his work on the same continuum as the rightward drift of American culture in the early years of the Cold War, he pays little heed to the racial specificity of Ellison’s cultural politics, a theme I return to in more detail in Chapter 1.⁹ Nadel, for his part, cautions against a ‘1950s revival mentality’ that reads Cold War culture as being ‘for all significant purposes, white’ (emphasis in original).¹⁰ Nonetheless, his analysis of how the narrative of ‘containment’ was transmuted from a foreign policy imperative into an all-encompassing ideological framework that set the parameters of acceptable discourse in fifties America ultimately recapitulates this idea by framing the African American experience in the 1950s as something ‘discrete’ from, as opposed to co-extensive with, the centre of Cold War discourse.¹¹ Indeed, his discussion of black literature and culture is itself contained by the fact that it is set against a binary conception of the postwar world that does not consider the ways in which African decolonisation shaped both the politics of the Cold War and African American responses to their marginalised status in the United States.¹² Medovoi’s emphasis on a ‘three worlds’ topography is, in part, an attempt to address this point.¹³ However, though he stresses the importance of the third world to America’s geopolitical aims in the 1950s and notes the African American influence on tropes of teenage rebellion during this period, he pays scant attention – save for a brief (and perceptive) discussion of Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) in the text’s conclusion – to the role of African American literature in relation to the representational framework he describes.¹⁴

In a sense, racially coding the Cold War as white is both understandable and inevitable. Domestic life in fifties America was ‘for all significant purposes’ white, insofar as the nation’s political and cultural apparatuses were concerned. That the colour line started to fray during

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¹¹ Underpinning Nadel’s study is the principle of ‘containment’ articulated by the American diplomat George Kennan in 1946. In a telegram sent from the Moscow embassy later published in *Foreign Affairs*, Kennan argues that America’s policy towards the Soviet Union must be predicated on a ‘long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies’. Nadel argues that this idea ‘also describes American life in numerous venues and under sundry rubrics’ during the 1950s. The result, he claims, was that containment of communism was equated with ‘containment of atomic secrets, of sexual license, of gender roles, of nuclear energy, and of artistic expression’. Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 2. ⁴. George Kennan, ‘The Sources of Soviet Conduct’, *Foreign Affairs*, No. 25 (1947), 566-82 (573).

¹² Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 221-71.

¹³ In response to Nadel, Medovoi writes that ‘U.S. – Soviet rivalry […] did not play out on a dichotomous globe in a simple scenario of “us against them.” as a “containment” approach to Cold War culture implicitly presumes. Rather, it took the form of a triangulated rivalry over another universe that only now became known as the “third world”’. Medovoi, *Rebels*, 10.

¹⁴ Ibid., 318-21.
this period should not disguise the fact that it continued to set the parameters of what Baraka calls ‘the dominant tenor’ of American society. The right of African Americans to vote was still curtailed in much of the South, resulting in an inevitable lack of political representation.\textsuperscript{15} Equally, though legal segregation was dealt a mortal blow by the \textit{Brown versus Board of Education} decision of the Supreme Court in 1954, it persisted – and, indeed, persists – in various \textit{de facto} forms.

Moreover, blacks were all but invisible in key representational spaces of American culture during the 1950s. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, the postwar emergence of the suburb as a metonym for American national identity proceeded on a racially segregated basis. African Americans were, as Medovoi notes, ‘pointedly excluded from the new suburbs through an ensemble of policies that included “redlining” by banks and the FHA [Federal Housing Association], as well as “restrictive covenants” enforced by developers and homeowner associations’.\textsuperscript{16} \textit{A Raisin in the Sun} taps into this issue, with Hansberry depicting an African American family facing opposition from a homeowner’s group when they purchase a house in a hitherto all-white neighbourhood. Similarly, American television, which emerged in the 1950s as the key cultural apparatus by which the nation’s ideology was disseminated, was overwhelmingly white.\textsuperscript{17} Reflecting on his own fifties childhood, Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes: ‘seeing somebody colored on TV was an event’.\textsuperscript{18} The whiteness of the representational domain in which American-ness was articulated ensured a dominant national self image that was, in James Baldwin’s words, ‘a cross between the Teuton and the Celt’.\textsuperscript{19}

Nonetheless, for all that the dominant tenor of early Cold War discourse may have been overwhelmingly white, in that it was a symptom of a racially demarcated social order, to read the Cold War imaginary as concomitant with whiteness has problematic implications with regards to how we perceive African American literature and culture from this period. The danger here is not just of tokenism, but of perpetuating an either/or narrative, whereby African

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 18.
American texts from the fifties are either draped in the American flag and made to correspond with a broader Cold War agenda or closed off as something entirely separate. In doing so, one is, in effect, compelled to choose which side of the hyphen African American identity falls on.

Shifting the emphasis of Cold War discourse so that the conflict’s transnational, triangulated dimensions are foregrounded, however, sees the duality of African American identity taking on a new historical resonance, one that places it at the heart of postwar geopolitics. Part of the broader thrust of this thesis, therefore, is to demonstrate the fallacy of the dichotomy between blackness and American-ness in the context of the Cold War. The four writers I examine are each constitutive of this idea. Rather than being black or American, in the work of Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry race and nationally function symbiotically. Their racial identity is contingent on their nationality and vice versa. They are black and American: ‘something apart, yet an integral part’. In its blurring of the distinction between the particular and the general, this dissonance enlarges the range of interpretive possibilities for interpreting the postwar world, making African American writers uniquely placed to navigate the shifting discursive terrain of the three worlds topography.

By using a triangulated world-historical stage as the backdrop to my analysis, I build on a growing body of scholarship that has emerged in the past fifteen years exploring the reciprocal relationship between the black freedom struggle in the United States and the geopolitical exigencies of the Cold War. Leading the way was Mary Dudziak, whose *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (2000) placed the African American experience at the centre of Cold War discourse, as opposed to treating it as a discrete or marginal issue. An attempt to redress what she describes as a tendency among historians of twentieth century America ‘to treat Civil Rights and foreign relations as two separate categories’, Dudziak instead foregrounds how American racial practices and contemporary geopolitics were inextricably bound up with one another in the Cold War imaginary.20

The foundations laid by Dudziak have been ably built upon by, among others, Thomas Borstelmann, Penny von Eschen, and Damion Thomas. Underpinning the work of all of these scholars is the principle that the Cold War recast the terms in which the issue of race was articulated. Critically, however, this discourse had multiple and often contradictory strands. On the one hand, the Manichean climate of the early Cold War circumscribed the parameters of black protest. In an era marked by what Brenda Gayle Plummer defines as the ‘obsessive focus on personal association and belief’ of McCarthyism and the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee, those pursuing racial justice were often left vulnerable to charges of Communist subversion. In particular, the overlap between left-wing politics and the struggle for African American civil rights prevalent during the 1930s was rendered suspect in the ideologically straitened fifties, with African Americans expected to disavow any leftist affiliations and capitulate to the demands of anticommunism. Indeed, segregationists were quick to make political capital out of this connection, frequently deploying the epithet ‘un-American’ to attack advocates of racial equality, as well as declaring integration to be a ‘communistic disease’. Reflecting these attitudes, state legislatures in Florida and Alabama moved to ban the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on the grounds of it being a ‘subversive’ organisation.

This perceived equivalence between Civil Rights and Communism was also evident at the level of federal government, particularly among key figures in the FBI. As Jeff Woods notes, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover – ‘history’s most highly paid (and utterly useless) voyeur, in the words of Baldwin – was ‘an obsessive investigator of Communist influence among African Americans and regarded Civil Rights activism as ‘revolutionary in nature’ and a threat

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[24] Reynold Humphries, Hollywood’s Blacklists: A Political and Cultural History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12. Dudziak describes how Robert Patterson, one of the founders of the White Citizen’s Council (a pro-segregationist organisation founded in 1954 in the wake of Brown versus Board of Education), framed the Brown decision as ‘communist inspired’. Dudziak writes: “He protested “the Communist theme of all races and mongrelization” and promised that, if southerners worked together, “we will defeat this communistic disease that is being thrust upon us”” (111).

to the American way of life’. In this context, both Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement more broadly faced frequent charges of harbouring Communist sympathies, finding themselves subject to FBI surveillance. Each of the writers examined in this thesis shared this fate. As William J. Maxwell has demonstrated, Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry were among many writers to attract the attention of American security services, with their respective works scrutinised for evidence of political deviancy. Within the circumscribed political climate of the early Cold War, Maxwell argues, black literary expression and ‘jeopardizing national security’ became synonymous with one another.

On the other hand, however, the geopolitical imperatives of the Cold War precipitated a historical breach in the American cultural imaginary that gave the black freedom struggle a political foothold it had hitherto lacked. As Borstelmann notes, America’s pretensions of ideological and moral supremacy over the Soviet Union hinged on ‘the central belief that the liberal, democratic, capitalist order of the United States represented a more open and humane society than that of Communist states’. Every reported instance of racial injustice was, in this context, a propaganda coup for the Russians. Indeed, Dudziak describes how international revulsion towards lynching and segregation was increasingly seized upon by the Soviet Union from the late forties onwards to advance its own Cold War agenda. Officials at the American embassy in Moscow, Dudziak writes, frequently complained of how the Soviet press appropriated what they characterised as ‘anything showing the position of the US Negro in a derogatory light’.

It was concerns regarding ‘the impact of race discrimination on U.S. prestige abroad’ that underpinned the various pieces of Civil Rights legislation passed in the two decades following the end of the World War II. For example, the Brown versus Board of Education decision was the product of Cold War pragmatism as much as a commitment to racial equality, with
the Justice Department’s brief for the case emphasising how ‘it is in the context of the present
world struggle between freedom and tyranny that the problem of racial discrimination must be
viewed’. When President Eisenhower belatedly enforced the Brown decision in 1957, Cold
War concerns were, once again, paramount. After Arkansas governor, Orval Faubus,
mobilised the state national guard to prevent nine black children from enrolling in Little Rock
Central High School, Eisenhower’s responded by dispatching federal troops to the city to
enforce desegregation. Addressing the nation to explain his decision, he asserted: ‘[O]ur
enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent the whole
nation’. Similar concerns informed the decisions of President Truman to desegregate the
military in 1948 and President Kennedy to send troops to Birmingham, Alabama, to protect
Civil Rights protestors in 1963. In each case it was recognition of the ideological succour
that American racism gave to the Soviet Union that provided at least part of the impetus for
intervention.

As alluded to above, it was the three worlds topography on which this battle for global
prestige played out. With the ideological balance of the postwar world delicately poised, the
imperative that the American way of life appeal to the emergent power bloc of newly
independent African and Asian nations was particularly pronounced. However, the claims of
American democracy and free market capitalism were inevitably undermined by the
persistence of domestic racism. African ambassadors visiting the United States, for example,
frequently came up against Jim Crow laws. The overriding effect was to create a perception
among many in the third world that American racial practices at home were, in Borstelmann’s
words, ‘the likeliest indicator of how they would deal with dark-skinned people abroad’. The
American journalist and political scientist, Harold Isaacs, underlined this point. Citing his own
extensive travels in the third world, he noted how ‘American racial discrimination is one of the

32 Ibid in Borstelmann, 93.
33 Dwight D. Eisenhower, ‘Eisenhower Address on Little Rock Integration Problem’ [YouTube video], Washington D.
34 Dudziak, 85-9; Borstelmann, 160-4. President Kennedy’s television address on the Birmingham crisis underlines
this point. Kennedy states: ‘Today we are committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and protect the rights of all
who wish to be free’. This struggle, he adds, is irrevocably undermined by the nation’s treatment of African
35 Medovoi, Rebels, 10-14; Dudziak, 6.
36 Dudziak, 16.
37 Borstelmann, 41.
facts that identifies us with colonialism in the Asian and African mind. They recognize it for what it is and relate it to their own experience.\textsuperscript{38}

It was against this backdrop that the U.S. State Department sought to enlist to support of prominent African Americans in the Cold War battle for the hearts and minds of the third world. As documented by von Eschen and Thomas respectively, jazz musicians, such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, and African American sportsmen, like the basketball players of the Harlem Globetrotters, were asked to become \textit{de facto} American ambassadors by taking part in government sponsored tours of Africa, Asia, and the Soviet Union. Mobilising prominent African Americans in this way was regarded as a means of minimising the damage caused to America’s standing in the third world by its domestic racial practices. The likes of Armstrong were, as von Eschen notes, cast in the role of ‘moral authority of the nation’.\textsuperscript{39}

Crucially, however, many of those involved in the State Department tours proved to be far more than political pawns advancing the ideological agenda of the American Cold War. In particular, the jazz tours of Africa became an archetypal instance of the kind of intercultural exchange that Paul Gilroy identifies as the basis of black Atlantic discourse. Gilroy’s conception of ‘transnational structures of circulation and intercultural exchange’ underpinning the expressive cultures of the black diaspora is mirrored by what von Eschen describes as the way participants in the tours developed new modalities of knowledge and identity in concert with the those they encountered in Africa.\textsuperscript{40}

Armstrong, in particular, was profoundly affected by the welcome he received in Ghana in 1956. After lunching with the Ghanaian Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah, and drawing a crowd of over 100,000 people to one of his concerts, Armstrong reflected: ‘I know it now. I came from here, way back. At least my people did. Now I know this is my country too […] After all, my ancestors came from here and I still have African blood in me’.\textsuperscript{41} Following his veneration in Africa, Armstrong was imbued with a new racial consciousness that fortified his commitment to the Civil Rights struggle in the United States. When asked by the State Department to tour the Soviet Union in 1957, he refused citing contemporary events in Little


\textsuperscript{39} von Eschen, \textit{Satchmo Blows up the World}, 181.

\textsuperscript{40} Paul Gilroy, \textit{The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 87.

Rock. ‘The way they are treating my people in the South’, he declared, ‘the government can go to hell’. 42 This kind of explicit condemnation of the American government would, von Eschen argues, have been ‘unthinkable’ prior to his tour of Africa. 43

Armstrong’s response to what he experienced in his ancestral homeland is symptomatic of a broader shift initiated by the three worlds topography, whereby African Americans, in contrast to the early years on the Cold War, looked towards the third world, as a means of expediting their own struggle for freedom. 44 Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, would frequently couch the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in global terms. 45 In ‘Letter From Birmingham Jail’ (1963), for instance, he declares: ‘We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter’. 46 Given America’s professed support for decolonisation, such comparisons offered a particularly potent weapon in the struggle for racial equality in the United States. By aligning themselves with events in the third world, American Civil Rights activists called attention to the contradiction between America’s domestic and foreign policies, using the discordance between them to displace America’s racial politics. The resulting discursive breach, allowed African Americans to carve out a rhetorical space within and against the representational domain of American national identity.

Each of the writers examined in this thesis tap into the historical themes identified above. Straddling local and transnational imaginaries, they all displace the co-extensive relationship between American-ness and whiteness by defamiliarising the representational framework in which national identity is articulated. Moreover, in the journey from Ellison to Hansberry

43 von Eschen, Satchmo Blows Up the World, 63.
44 As both von Eschen and Plummer note, the repressive, nationalistic atmosphere of the early years of the Cold War largely curtailed the kind of transnational identification evident among African Americans in the 1930s and early 1940s. von Eschen writes that while ‘activists in the 1940s’ saw ‘no contradiction between their struggles as Americans for political, civil and economic rights and their support of the struggles of Africans and other colonized peoples’, this transnational perspective was transformed by ‘the atmosphere of McCarthyism and the Cold War’, which saw ‘claims about citizenship’ take ‘an exclusivist form’. Similarly, Plummer asserts that ‘[t]he Cold War, among other effects on Afro-American political perspectives […] helped weaken attachment to an internationalist ideal and reasserted the primacy of the individual nation-state as the only genuine champion and guarantor of civil rights’. von Eschen, Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957 (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014 [1997]), 151-2; Plummer, 210.
45 Borstelmann, 110.
charted in this thesis, it is possible to trace the trajectory of what might be termed the black Cold War identified above. Ellison’s rejection of Black Nationalism and locating of resistance to white hegemony in both the black vernacular tradition and the pluralist principles enshrined in the sacred texts of American democracy evolves into an active embrace of transnational identification and international solidarity among the black diaspora in Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. Moreover, Wright’s work may be viewed as helping lay the foundations for this discursive shift. Frozen out in America in the chill of the Cold War, Wright increasingly turned to Africa and the third world in his quest for identification. Baldwin’s work, meanwhile, mediates between the discourses of the American Cold War, Civil Rights, and black internationalism, while refusing to be contained within any of them.

Yet despite their imbrication in contemporary discourse and being arguably the four most prominent African American writers of their generation in terms of stature and influence, relatively little critical attention has been paid to their relationship both to one another and the three worlds topography more broadly. Notable recent exceptions by Stephanie Brown, Lawrence Jackson, and Mary Washington notwithstanding, this critical shortfall is, in some ways, symptomatic of a more general scarcity in both Cold War scholarship and African American studies with regards to viewing black literature from the postwar period in relation to the triangulated historical backdrop from which it emerged.47

In part, the fact that existing three worlds scholarship has been weighted towards more straightforwardly political aspects is perhaps unsurprising, given the tangible political legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and the central place it now occupies in the American collective consciousness. Equally, however, it is vital not to lose sight of literature’s role both in this struggle and that of the African American quest for freedom more generally. From the earliest slave narratives, black writing in the United States has always been co-extensive with the possibility of freedom, arising as it does out of a historical experience in which literacy was deliberately suppressed. As Robert Stepto puts it in *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-

American Literature (1979), the genealogy of African American identity is underpinned by the principle that ‘freedom occasions literacy and [...] literacy initiates freedom’.48

Such is the case with the four writers examined here. All of them were, in some way, at the vanguard of their historical epoch both embodying and shaping the historical transformations occurring among black people in both the United States and beyond in the 1950s. A short précis of their respective achievements underlines their historical significance. In 1953 Ellison became the first African American winner of the National Book Award for his novel Invisible Man (1952); as alluded to above, Wright’s travels in Africa and subsequent documentation of them in Black Power (1953) prefigured an upsurge in interest in their ancestral homeland among black Americans; Baldwin was both a best-selling novelist and one of the era’s most recognisable Civil Rights spokespeople, appearing on the cover of Time magazine in 1963 under the banner ‘the Negro’s push for equality’. Hansberry, meanwhile, was the first African American woman to have a play performed on Broadway. Her 1959 drama A Raisin in the Sun – which was also the first Broadway play to be directed by an African American (Lloyd Richards) – was the first by a black writer to win the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for best play and wowed both black and white audiences alike, running for two years.

Nonetheless, despite their shared status as cultural trailblazers and prominent position within both the American and African American literary canons, Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry are largely peripheral figures in Washington’s and Brown’s texts. They do, however, feature prominently in The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers, 1934–1960 (2011), Jackson’s ground breaking study of African American writing in the middle of the twentieth century. The text sees him excavating a hitherto overlooked literary milieu, by charting the overarching ideological trajectory of black writing from the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights era. This trajectory, which might broadly be defined as a move from Communism to black internationalism, by way of liberalism, is, in some ways, mirrored in this thesis. However, the historical scope of Jackson’s project, coupled with the breadth of literary figures covered in it, inevitably means that some of the finer points of the four writers examined here are subsumed under its broader

historiographical aims. Accordingly, this thesis narrows the parameters of the critical terrain opened up by Jackson, in order to demonstrate the pivotal role played by Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry in both expanding the interpretive possibilities available to African Americans for understanding their experience and reconstituting the terms in which American identity was articulated.

The historically grounded readings I advance of Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry in this thesis are underpinned by the imperative of recognising how African American literature and culture are mediated by the specific epoch from which they emerge. While canonical Black Studies texts like From Behind the Veil by Stepto, Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature (1984) by Houston Baker, The Signifying Monkey (1989) by Henry Louis Gates, and The Black Atlantic (1993) by Gilroy have been pivotal in mapping the terrain and laying the theoretical foundations for the study of black culture, the broad temporal sweep that characterises each of them risks reifying a metanarrative of blackness, in which black literary expression is effectively closed off and treated as discrete from specific historical developments. The danger here is of the local and contemporary being subsumed under the aegis of an overarching historical experience or rendered subordinate to conceptual apparatuses that are presented as fixed rather than contingent.

Accordingly, one of my aims in this thesis is to marry an awareness of the deeper currents and discursive tropes of black culture identified by the likes of Stepto, Baker, Gates, and Gilroy, with analysis of how these tropes are mediated in specific locales at a specific historical juncture. In doing so, I do not wish to minimise the significance of the conceptual apparatuses they outline. Rather, I aim to reiterate their contingent, dialogic nature. In a manner redolent of the jazz musicians beloved of Ellison, the present extemporises on the beat of the past, using the tension and disjunctures between them to formulate new modalities of knowledge and identity. As such, I place particular emphasis on Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness, which serves as one of the key leitmotifs of this thesis.

In the study of African American culture, few ideas have proved to be as influential or as durable or as flexible as Du Bois’s conception of the ‘two-ness’ born of ‘always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that
looks on in amused contempt and pity’.\textsuperscript{49} It has served as one of the organising principles for a vast array of scholarship, not least the four key texts referred to above. As William Lynne points out, the Stepto, Baker, and Gates texts ‘are all grounded in the creative possibilities in the double consciousness that Du Bois defined in The Souls of Black Folk’.\textsuperscript{50} Likewise, it is a central pillar of Gilroy’s study, as its subtitle of Modernity and Double Consciousness attests. However, applying it so readily and so broadly risks treating double consciousness as what Shamoon Zamir describes as ‘a universally and transhistorically true analysis of a tragic aspect of African-American self-consciousness’.\textsuperscript{51}

This tendency is particularly pronounced in The Black Atlantic. Masterful though Gilroy’s analysis undoubtedly is, the two-ness he locates in the work of a panoply of black diaspora artists and intellectuals is conceived in terms that are primarily spatial, rather than temporal. Though Gilroy charts a history of ‘dissonant contributions […] to enlightenment and post-enlightenment concerns’, when he talks of resistance to ‘discrete national dynamics’ (emphasis added) he conceives of it primarily in spatial terms: contemporary black scholars who explore ‘contested “contact zones” between cultures and histories’ are following in the footsteps of ‘successive generations of black intellectuals’ who recognised the ‘special significance’ of their ‘intercultural positionality’ (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{52} As such, the significance of local conditions and historical specificity are occasionally obscured by being absorbed into the overarching temporal trope of modernity. As a result, double consciousness is left somewhat loosely defined. It constitutes what Gilroy himself defines as ‘only the best-known resolution of a familiar problem which points towards the core dynamic of racial oppression as well as the fundamental antinomy of diaspora blacks’ and, as such, ‘illuminate[s] the experience of post-slave populations in general’.\textsuperscript{53} By conceiving of it in this way, however, Gilroy minimises what Zamir identifies as the way that ‘Du Bois’s dramatization of “double-consciousness” is a historically specific and class-specific psychology’ that reflects a contemporaneous ‘black middle-class elite facing the failure of its own progressive ideal in the

\textsuperscript{49} Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, 2.
\textsuperscript{52} Gilroy, The Black Atlantic, x, 6.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 30, 126.
late nineteenth century, in the aftermath of Reconstruction and under the gaze of a white America.\textsuperscript{54}

For my part, I posit that a mid-point can be found between these two interpretations. Given the enormous influence Du Bois exerts over black discourse in the twentieth century – Hansberry, for example, characterised him as ‘an institution in our lives, a bulwark of our culture’ whose ‘ideas have influenced a multitude who do not even know his name’ – it would clearly be counterintuitive to confine his most famous idea to a specific time and place.\textsuperscript{55} Nonetheless, while acknowledging that Du Bois’s influence cuts across space and time, in this thesis I consider the ways in which two-ness is recast in accordance with specific historical developments.

Accordingly, I propose that an evolving, historically contingent mode of double consciousness is discernible in African American literature in the middle of the twentieth century. Though, with the exception of Hansberry, the writers I examine do not openly acknowledge Du Bois’s influence, ideas of two-ness and the insider/outsider duality attendant to it reverberate through their work. Wright, for instance, talks in \textit{White Man, Listen!} (1957) of the ‘double vision’ that stems from being black and ‘a man of the West’ and how this creates ‘a psychological distance’ between him and his environment.\textsuperscript{56} Similarly, in ‘Autobiographical Notes’ (1951), Baldwin describes himself as being ‘a kind of bastard of the West’.\textsuperscript{57} Ellison, meanwhile, makes reference to ‘the uneasy burden and occasional joy of a complex double vision’ underpinning African American life.\textsuperscript{58}

Crucially, however, the two-ness that marks their writing is modified in accordance with both the geopolitical exigencies of the historical moment in which they were writing and the simultaneously local and transnational contexts in which they conceived of their identities. In this regard they do not merely recapitulate Du Bois’s ideas. Indeed, it is important to note that Du Bois himself remained an active figure during the period studied in this thesis and embodies many of its themes. Having had his passport revoked during the ‘red scare’ of the early 1950s, he left the United States for Ghana in 1960, where he remained until his death.

\textsuperscript{54} Zamir, 116.
three years later. In a sense, however, his embrace of the ideological certainties of Afrocentrism and Communism in the 1950s marks a break with his previous conception of split subjectivity.\(^{59}\) For Du Bois, African decolonisation represented the vanguard of the struggle against white oppression, with African Americans, in his view, possessing ‘neither the education nor the aptitude’ to lead the quest for black freedom.\(^{60}\) The writers examined in this thesis, by contrast, repudiate ideological certainties and the illusory wholeness that underpins them. Unlike Du Bois, Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry all retained and even affirmed the American portion of their hyphenated identities. However, their American-ness is placed in dialogic relation to contemporaneous knowledge formations drawn from outside of the nation’s physical and intellectual boundaries. It is the co-presence of conflicting epistemologies that provides their work with much of its impetus and potency. The threshold between them acts as the rhetorical space from which they interrogate and reframe received notions of race and nationality. In doing so, they all give form to the notion of being at once a part of and apart from the representational domains they intervene in. It is for this reason that double consciousness is transmuted into dissonance in this thesis.

Dissonance itself has its own distinctive genealogy in relation to both music and philosophical discourse more broadly. At its most fundamental, it names the tension between constituent elements of a piece of music that cannot be resolved into what Daniel Melnick terms ‘the familiar cadences of harmonic closure’.\(^{61}\) However, the principle of irresolution that dissonance embodies has been transposed into the basis of aesthetic and philosophical strategies geared towards decentring what might be termed the ‘harmonious’ assumptions of prevailing orthodoxies.

Attempts to harness the cultural and philosophical implications of dissonance can be traced back as least as far as the late nineteenth century. For instance, in *The Birth of*

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59 As John Cullen Gruesser notes in *Black on Black: Twentieth Century African American Writing About Africa* (2000), ‘DuBois ultimately came to change his opinion about who was most qualified to lead Africans and people of the diaspora to a brighter future’, moving from the belief that black Americans constituted ‘the advance guard of the Negro people’ in his 1897 essay ‘The Conservation of Races’ to an Afrocentric viewpoint that culminates in him asserting in ‘American Negroes and Africa’s Rise to Freedom’ (1961) that, contrary to his previous belief, ‘it now seems that Africans may have to show American Negroes the way to freedom’. John Cullen Gruesser, *Black on Black: Twentieth Century African American Writing About Africa* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 13-4.


Tragedy (1872), Friedrich Nietzsche identifies ‘the joyous sensation of dissonance’ as the primordial basis for all existence, insofar as its rejection of the unity of harmony is exemplary of unstable, centred knowledge that gives form to ‘radical doubt’ over epistemological certainty. The implications of this idea are taken up in the first half of the twentieth century, providing one of the foundational principles of modernist aesthetics, manifesting itself in the music of composers like, Arnold Schoenberg, as well as being transposed into representational form by painters, such as Egon Schiele and writers, like James Joyce and Thomas Mann.

Underpinning this drive towards a dissonant aesthetic is the desire to destabilise received forms of knowledge and the power relations they inscribe. As Theodor Adorno – the philosopher, who more than any other, has pursued the political implications of dissonance – puts it, dissonance strives to overcome ‘the deceptive moment’ that conventional, harmonious art seeks to elicit which leaves its audience with the illusory sense of feeling ‘in accord with all, accepted and reconciled by all’. Dissonant art, by contrast, advances a perspective that ‘displace[s] and estrange[s] the world’, calling attention to ‘its rifts and crevices’. To this end, dissonance occasions what Melnick, glossing Claude Lévesque, calls a ‘double step’, whereby it ‘repudiates present time and identity even as it continually proposes new, unfolding possibilities of time and identity’. In short, dissonance is not simply negation, but the possibility of transforming existing conditions.

A similar ‘double step’ characterises the two-ness discernible in the work of the writers I examine in this thesis. Each of them exposes the breach – the ‘rifts and crevices’ – between American principles and practices in the hope of expediting a better reality. All use dissonance, in other words, as a means of prefiguring a future harmony. However, where the dissonance found in the modernist literature described by Melnick takes places at the level of form and aesthetic practice, that which I locate in the work of Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and

63 Melnick, 8-15, Harrison, 1-18.
66 Melnick, 11.
67 Karin Bauer elucidates this point: ‘Dissonance is modernity’s most prevalent expression of the disparity between existing conditions and the possibility of a better reality’. Karin Bauer, Adorno’s Nietzschean Narratives: Critiques of Ideology, Readings of Wagner (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 142.
Hansberry is primarily extra-diegetic, insofar as it refers to an experience attendant to social conditions. With the partial exception of Ellison, the work of the writers examined in this thesis is not characterised by a dissonant aesthetic. Rather they write from a position of dissonance, the space of being ‘something apart, yet an integral part’ identified by Ellington or the ‘no man’s land’ described by Jones.

Using this sense of being ‘out of tune’ with their surroundings to defamiliarise existing knowledge formations and power relations, what emerges is a series of perspectives where the two-ness of being apart and a part takes on the kind of cultural and political salience identified by Heble as opening up ‘alternative models of knowledge production and identity formation’. Accordingly, Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry may be understood as mobilising a historically specific mode of double consciousness, one that recasts it from the psychological counterpart of African Americans’ marginalisation into a timely critique of the United States in the age of three worlds.

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The themes described above are articulated across four chapters, which explore the work of Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry in turn. My first chapter, “Never Quite on the Beat”: Towards a Transnational America in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, explores Ellison’s novel in the context of the early Cold War and the intellectual discourses that were its ideological counterpart. In doing so, I argue against the critical orthodoxy that posits that the novel is concomitant with the rightward drift of American culture during this period, as embodied by the intellectuals associated with what came to be known as new liberalism. Instead, I suggest that the novel sees Ellison transposing the sensibility he locates in the black vernacular tradition of jazz and the blues into the social realm as the basis of a cultural politics at once apart from and a part of the prevailing ethos of postwar America. Implicitly rejecting the principle of ‘consensus’ enshrined in Cold War discourse, Ellison uses the ‘antagonistic cooperation’ he locates in jazz as the basis of what I term a transnational American, in which racial and ethic differences, instead of being ameliorated, are continually registered and figured as constitutive of the nation’s identity.

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68 Heble, 20.
If my first chapter describes a transnational America, then, my second, ‘Richard Wright: Yearning For Identification in Paris and the Third World’, describes a transnational American. Charting Wright’s career following his decision to leave the United States for France in 1948, the first part of the chapter analyses rare and unpublished essays produced by Wright during his early years in Paris to examine how he mobilises a comparative perspective that defamiliarises and hollows out American racial practices. The second part of the chapter, responding to Wright’s disillusionment with the Manichean geopolitical climate of the Cold War, follows his growing interest in anti-colonial politics and subsequent travels in the third world. Through analysis of texts such as *Black Power* (1953), as well as his involvement with African and Caribbean intellectuals in what has come to be known as ‘Black Paris’, I explore the ways in which he sets about reterritorialising Africa in his own self-image as ‘a Western man of color’ by attempting to foster a diasporic sensibility among divergent black populations rooted in a shared experience of modernity.

My third chapter, “Something Unspeakable”: James Baldwin and the Closets of American Power’ expands the focus of the thesis to encompass themes of sexuality and gender as mediated by race. Undertaking close readings of several texts, I build on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to argue that Baldwin’s invocation of a white, heteronormative imperative as co-extensive with the American cultural imaginary frames American ‘containment culture’ as being predicated on a series of overlapping closets that coalesce to render the historical experiences of non-white, non-heteronormative people like himself ‘unspeakable’. His response, I argue, is to ‘queer’ the normative American subject by blurring the ontological distinctions that underpin it. In doing so, I place particular emphasis on his status as a self-styled ‘transatlantic commuter’, whose peripatetic lifestyle encompassed time in France, the American South, Israel, Turkey, and Africa. Positioning himself as at once apart from and a part of the various contexts he encounters, he uses the knowledge attendant to the liminal space of the commuter to refashion the representational terrain of American-ness, carving out a rhetorical space in which the hitherto ‘unspeakable’ fact of being black in a ‘white, antisesexual country’ is rendered articulate.

The final, comparatively brief, chapter of this thesis, “It Makes Me Think of Africa”: Subverting Suburbanisation in Lorraine Hasberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, explores the collision
of national and transnational imaginaries in Hansberry’s landmark drama. The play’s depiction of an African American family preparing to move from a Southside Chicago ghetto to a hitherto all-white suburban neighbourhood was celebrated as an affirmation ‘of the general culture of the United States’ by contemporary critics. Yet, such readings obscure the way in which the play articulates powerful discursive links between African Americans and African decolonisation. Far from being a paean to assimilation or celebration of the suburban ethos of the Cold War, I argue that the play is underpinned by the notion that African independence has transnational reverberations that resonate with the contemporaneous struggles faced by black Americans. By placing the move from the ghetto on the same continuum as events in Africa, the family’s move is figured as a defiant assertion of black self-determination. To this end, Hansberry compels her audience to read American-ness through the prism of blackness. In doing so, she demonstrates how for African Americans to become a part ‘of the general culture of the United States’, they must remain far enough apart from it to be able to deconstruct the racialised assumptions on which its culture is predicated.

I conclude with a brief discussion of the legacy of the historical themes I explore in this thesis. Considering their implications with regards to the Obama era and the discourse of ‘colorblindness’ that he is seen to embody, I propose that the recent upsurge in racial tensions in the United States gives renewed impetus to the insights of Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry. By heeding the lessons found in their work, I suggest, America might be able to find a way out of its current racial impasse.
Chapter 1

‘Never Quite on the Beat’: Towards a Transnational America in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

Introduction: Dissensus Culture

I use the term ‘jazz’ here not so much as a term for a musical art form, as for a mode of being in the world, an improvisational mode of protean, fluid, and flexible disposition towards reality suspicious of ‘either/or’ viewpoints, dogmatic pronouncements, or supremacist ideologies. To be a jazz freedom fighter is to attempt to galvanize and energize world-weary people into forms of organization with accountable leadership that promote critical exchange and broad reflection. The interplay of individuality and unity is not one of uniformity and unanimity imposed from above but rather of conflict among diverse groupings that reach a dynamic consensus subject to questioning and criticism. As with a soloist in a jazz quartet, quintet or band, individuality is promoted in order to sustain and increase the *creative* tension with the group – a tension that yields higher levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective project.
– Cornel West, *Race Matters* (1993)\(^1\)

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.
– Ralph Ellison, ‘Richard Wright’s Blues’ (1945)\(^2\)

And here’s the cream of the joke: Weren’t we *part of them* as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?
– Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)\(^3\)

In March 2014, the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, New York, held an exhibition dedicated to the record collection of one of America’s most celebrated authors.\(^4\) To the uninitiated, ‘Ralph Ellison: A Man and His Records’ might appear to constitute a particularly acute case of ‘archive fever’.\(^5\) What is there to be learned from the listening habits of somebody who was rightly celebrated for his gifts as a novelist and essayist? Why records and not ‘Ralph Ellison: A Man and His Books?’ The answer lies in the pivotal role played by music in shaping both Ellison’s art and politics. As promotional materials for the exhibition were quick to emphasise,

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Ellison’s writing and attitude towards the United States existed in a symbiotic relationship with his love of music, particularly jazz. ‘In Ralph Ellison’s mind’, Loren Schoenberg, the artistic director of the National Jazz Museum, writes, ‘there was no better example of what America had to offer the world than jazz’, before adding that ‘many of his most eloquent thoughts emerged when writing about the music and the musicians he loved’.6

It is this co-mingling of music, writing, and American politics that provides the backdrop to this chapter.7 Through close analysis of Ellison’s most famous work, his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, I explore the relationship between his poetics and his politics, arguing that both are steeped in a dissonance that evolves out of his conception of black vernacular music. Combining the ‘aching consciousness’ of the blues with the aesthetic principles of jazz, Ellison fingers their ‘jagged grain’ to advance a critical sensibility that recasts the representational terrain of American-ness in the 1950s.

Ellison’s love of music was forged during his youth in Oklahoma City, where he was acquainted with such luminaries of jazz music as Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing.8 An accomplished trumpet player himself, it was as a musician that his artistic ambitions initially lay. Winning a scholarship at the renowned Tuskegee Institute, Alabama (the black college founded by Booker T. Washington in 1881) on account of his musical talent, the young Ellison harboured dreams of being a composer and would later speak of having sought to emulate Richard Wagner by producing a symphony by the age of 26.9 Ellison’s symphony, however, would seek to bridge the ‘two traditions’ he had immersed himself in: the western classical music that provided the basis of his training at Tuskegee with the jazz he had grown up with in Oklahoma.10

Though disillusionment with life at Tuskegee eventually put paid to this dream and prompted him to leave the South for New York in 1936, his musical grounding continued to exert a profound influence over his work when, on the recommendation of Richard Wright, he

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shifted his artistic energies towards writing.\textsuperscript{11} As well as producing a number of cogent and penetrating essays on the subject of jazz (collected in 2001 as \textit{Living With Music}), Ellison’s sole completed novel effectively transposes his dream of being a composer into literary form. \textit{Invisible Man} is, as Thomas Heise points out, ‘a symphonic novel’.\textsuperscript{12} John Callahan concurs, characterising it as a text ‘whose orchestration shows symphonic traces as well as tragicomic blues tones and the beat and breaks of jazz’.\textsuperscript{13} In other words, \textit{Invisible Man} renders through representational means the epic scope of African American life that Ellison had previously planned to convey through music.

More broadly, Ellison frequently spoke of his literary craft in musical terms. His introduction to the thirtieth anniversary edition of \textit{Invisible Man}, for instance, describes the process of writing the text as ‘improvis[ing] upon my materials in the manner of a jazz musician putting a musical theme through a wild star-burst of metamorphosis’.\textsuperscript{14} In a similar vein, when criticising what he perceived as the lack of ‘respect for craftsmanship’ among some younger African American writers in conversation with Ishmael Reed and Quincy Troupe in 1977, Ellison stated: ‘If they were posing as jazz musicians, dedicated jazz men would chase them off the bandstand – and keep them off until they’d come up to standard’ (emphasis in original).\textsuperscript{15} Such comments are symptomatic of how it was from jazz musicians that Ellison discovered what it meant to be an artist and the expressive possibilities contained within the black vernacular tradition.\textsuperscript{16} In short, if art was Ellison’s religion, then jazz was his denomination, shaping both his aesthetic practice and philosophy to life more broadly.

In this context, ‘Ralph Ellison: A Man and His Records’ provides a valuable insight into his \textit{oeuvre}. Among the 546 records on display at the exhibition were 94 by a single artist: Duke Ellington.\textsuperscript{17} The fact that Ellington figured so prominently in the collection is testament to the esteem in which Ellison held him. Indeed, Ellington was, in many ways, the embodiment of his artistic ideal. In an essay composed in honour of a state dinner at the White House to

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  \item \textsuperscript{15} Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, Quincy Troupe, and Steve Cannon, ‘The Essential Ellison’, \textit{Conversations With Ralph Ellison}, 341-77 (344).
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Early, 22.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} <http://www.ellisonjazzmuseum.org/ellison-record-collection.html> [accessed 14th April 2015]
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celebrate Ellington’s seventieth birthday in 1969, Ellison writes of how ‘it was not until the
discovery of Ellington that we [African Americans] had any hint that jazz possessed
possibilities of a range of expressiveness comparable to that of classical European music’.18
The syncretism that Ellison here locates in Ellington’s music is the model that he himself
aspires to in his own work. His early desire to use his art as a means of bridging the ‘two
traditions’ that underpinned his identity, as well as his later conception of the United States as
a nation ‘woven of many strands’, are each manifest in his characterisation of Ellington’s
music.19 In a similar vein, Ellison’s concluding remarks hailing Ellington’s ability to reduce ‘the
violence and chaos of American life to artistic order’ correspond to comments made by the
narrator at the end of Invisible Man. Vowing to emerge from the underground basement from
which he has told his narrative, he states: ‘having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives
within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge’.20

That Ellington should loom so large over Ellison’s artistry is fitting with regards to the
wider context of this thesis. Of all the writers examined in this project, it is Ellison who bears
the closest relation to the musical domain in which Ellington's description of African
Americans as ‘something apart, yet an integral part’ is couched. Where Wright, Baldwin (his
conception of himself as a ‘blues singer’ notwithstanding), and Hansberry depict the socially
grounded sense of dissonance evoked by Ellington primarily as a state of being concomitant
with the insider/outsider duality of African American identity, the dissonant aesthetic that
marks Ellison’s writing evolves directly out of a musical sensibility, specifically his love of
jazz.21 In effect, his writing constitutes an attempt to render some of the ineffable
characteristics of jazz – dissonance, syncopation, atonality – in representational form, as a
means of expediting social change. Repudiating the closed ontology of either/or perspectives,
dissonance functions for Ellison as a portal to emancipatory knowledge. In Invisible Man, it is
the co-presence of contradictory, inharmonious elements – what Ellison terms ‘the joy of a
complex double vision’ – that opens up new possibilities for interpreting the American

19 Ellison, Invisible Man, 577.
experience and affirming African Americans’ presence within it. Placing different cultural frameworks in a dialogic relationship with one another is shown by Ellison to defamiliarise each of them. Just as the introduction of a ‘wrong’ note may modify each of the constituent elements of a piece of music by emphasising their discordant relationship with one another, thus refusing what Daniel Melnick describes as ‘the familiar cadences of harmonic closure’, the unresolved tension between different fields of knowledge reconstitutes their parameters and ideological scope.

In this regard, the text rehearses what Ajay Heble characterises as the way that dissonance (which he defines as cultural practices that are ‘out of tune with orthodox habits of coherence and judgement’) may occasion ‘a disturbance to naturalized orders of knowledge production’. All existing forms of knowledge are shown in *Invisible Man* to be suspect. The various institutions that the narrator finds himself in – the Southern college, the paint factory, the Brotherhood – all constitute ostensibly closed systems of reality that are eventually thrown into disorder by that which they try to conceal. Indeed, the narrative of *Invisible Man* may be understood as a journey from illusory harmony to emancipatory dissonance. In this regard, the text recapitulates Theodor Adorno’s aphoristic claim that ‘[d]issonance is the truth about harmony’. The dissonant aesthetic of *Invisible Man*, despite evolving out of a form of music that Adorno notoriously despised, makes manifest his claim regarding the ‘unreachablleness’ of harmony, insofar as it gives form to the contradictory impulses that the institutionalised knowledge depicted in the text ‘want to soften and eliminate’. Giving form to that which destabilises these ideological certainties, allows Ellison to reveal their contingency. In doing so, he demonstrates that knowledge is not fixed or harmonious, but in a perpetual state of tension and transition.

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Accordingly, in this chapter, I pursue *Invisible Man* through the lens of Ellington’s conception of dissonance. While it is another jazz great, Louis Armstrong, whose presence casts a long
shadow over the text, I argue that Ellington exerts a similar, if unspoken, influence over its closely entwined politics and poetics. The novel’s famous prologue registers this connection. The text opens with Ellison’s narrator surreptitiously occupying the basement of ‘a building rented strictly to whites’, which he illuminates with electricity stolen from ‘Monopolated Light & Power’. Here, Ellison renders in spatial terms the insider/outsider duality of the African American experience alluded to by Ellington. The fact that the basement has been ‘shut off’ from the rest of the building and ‘forgotten’ about since the nineteenth century underlines this point. It is symbolic of a post-Reconstruction United States in which African Americans were literally and metaphorically closed off from the rest of the body politic of the nation, while simultaneously inhabiting it. Yet, at the same time, the fact his ‘hole is warm and full of light’ neatly encapsulates the creative ends to which many African Americans turned this state of being at once a part of and apart from the larger structure of the United States.

This latter point is underscored later in the prologue in the narrator’s recollection of the ‘strange evening’ he spent in his basement smoking marijuana while listening to Louis Armstrong’s version of the Fats Waller composition ‘(What Did I Do) to Be so Black and Blue?’ (1929). ‘I like Louis Armstrong’, the narrator asserts, because he’s made poetry out of being invisible […] Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That’s what you hear vaguely in Louis’ music. This passage distils the way in which Ellison extrapolates from the aesthetic sensibilities of jazz an instrumentality for interpreting lived experience. The music of Louis Armstrong here provides the rhetorical framework for conceptualising black identity in the United States. Ellison transposes the ineffable quality of invisibility into the non-representational medium of music, which is, in turn, transmuted into a strategy that displaces existing forms of knowledge. The sense of syncopation invoked in his reference to being ‘never quite on the beat’ functions as a rhythmic corollary to Heble’s reference to the potential salience of being ‘out of tune’ with what he defines as ‘institutionalized models of knowledge production’.

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28 Ibid, 8.
29 Heble, 20, 4.
To be out of sync with the historical tempo of your material surroundings, Ellison suggests, is to have a unique perspective on their workings. Indeed, it is telling that Ellison does not frame his narrator’s existence beyond the threshold of legibility as negating his subjectivity or severing his ties with the world beyond his basement. Having a ‘slightly different sense of time’ from the context in which one is immersed presupposes the notion that one’s sense of reality is still, in some way, oriented by the knowledge that underwrites this context. It is the ‘beat’ of this knowledge that is constitutive of the difference that Ellison alludes to. Once again, therefore, he foregrounds the duality of being apart and a part. Critically, however, by emphasising the fact that invisibility furnishes you with an awareness of time’s nodes and allows you to ‘slip into the breaks and look around’, he recasts two-ness from the lack of ‘true self-consciousness’ identified by Du Bois into something empowering. As Penny von Eschen points out in relation to this passage, it positions invisibility and being out of sync with the dominant not as something disempowering, but a privileged perspective from which ‘one sees better, or more, because of the way one is positioned’. Knowledge ceases, in other words, to be a given. What would otherwise be ‘imperceptible’ no longer goes without saying. Accordingly, the ostensibly marginalised perspective that Ellison describes emerges as the basis of a valuable counternarrative, one which defamiliarises received knowledge and the power relations it inscribes.

In this chapter, I argue that Ellison brings this dissonant perspective to bear on the historical context from which Invisible Man emerged. The novel renders the syncopated temporality, the sense of being at once apart and a part elicited by the ‘beam of lyrical sound’ emanating from Armstrong’s trumpet, as an instrumentality for social change. By giving form to this principle, Ellison opens up new identity formations that simultaneously recast the historical meaning of blackness and provide a timely critique of the cultural politics of postwar America. In doing so, I seek to build on existing scholarship on Invisible Man. However, where the likes of Henry Louis Gates and Houston Baker have, justifiably, read the text as symptomatic of deeper currents in African American culture, my aim is, in some ways, more modest. For Gates, Invisible Man constitutes an archetypal example of the African American tradition of ‘signifyin(g)’, a tradition he defines as a ‘black double-voicedness’, in which signs

31 Ellison, Invisible Man, 8.
and symbols from the white world are appropriated and revised by African Americans, before being imbued with new meanings, producing cultural forms that reflect ‘the system of rhetorical strategies peculiar to their own vernacular tradition’.\textsuperscript{32} Ellison, Gates argues, is ‘our great signifier’, someone who riffs on both black and white cultural traditions to create a distinctly African American art.\textsuperscript{33} In a similar vein, Baker posits Ellison within what he defines as the proper figuration of black culture: the ‘blues matrix’ that functions as the ‘always already’ of black culture and provides the ‘enabling script in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed’.\textsuperscript{34}

Though these insights form part of the larger cultural framework of this chapter, the historical scope of my analysis is much smaller. Offering what is, ultimately, a materialist reading of \textit{Invisible Man}, I situate the text firmly within the ‘age of three worlds’ context that underpins this thesis, reading it in relation to contemporaneous discourses surrounding the Cold War and decolonisation. In doing so, I challenge some of the critical orthodoxies prevalent in Cold War readings of the text. In particular, I reject the notion that Ellison’s assertion of individuality and rejection of communism and Black Nationalism in \textit{Invisible Man} reifies the conservatism of early Cold War America. Such readings, I argue, tend to view Ellison through the lens of his later cultural conservatism and, thus, minimise the extent to which his analysis in \textit{Invisible Man} is filtered through a perspective that is avowedly African American.\textsuperscript{35} The epilogue’s emphasis on the imperative of ‘affirm[ing] the principle’ on which the United States was built takes on a decidedly different aspect when stripped of its racial context. As it stands in the text, however, this affirmation contains the caveat of the recognition of having been ‘brutalized and sacrificed’ in its name.\textsuperscript{36}

Far from an endorsement of ‘homogeneity of outlook’ that characterised the American ‘Cold War consensus’, then, I argue that the text’s repudiation of ideology and corresponding emphasis on two-ness, ambiguity, and paradox is redolent less of the discourses of ‘new


\textsuperscript{35} Jackson echoes this point, noting that though Ellison ultimately became ‘something of a neo-conservative’ in his outlook in his later years, ‘his most significant work […] never rejected the importance of politics’. Jackson, ‘Ralph Ellison, Sharpies, Rineheart, and Politics in \textit{Invisible Man\textquoteright}’, \textit{The Massachusetts Review}, Vol. 40 No. 1 (Spring 1999), 71-95 (92).

\textsuperscript{36} Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, 574.
liberalism’ than of the transformative potential Ellison recognised in jazz.37 Accordingly, my conceptualisation of dissonance is one that is grounded within and against contemporaneous material conditions, as opposed to simply a hermeneutical tool for mapping Ellison’s aesthetic strategies. This latter tendency is an established trope in Ellison scholarship.38 As Sara Blair points out – in a manner that, fittingly, given what she is describing, signifies on Jane Austen – ‘among readers of Ellison, it is a truth universally acknowledged that the benchmark for his aesthetics and novelistic style is jazz’.39 My interest, however, lies in the political ends to which these aesthetics are put in Invisible Man, how the text transposes the ineffable, indeterminate quality he locates in jazz to the cultural politics of the United States, as a means of reconstituting the racialised power structure of fifties America.

What emerges as a result of this process, I argue, is a transnational America. Here, I draw on ideas articulated by Randolph Bourne in response to escalating hostility towards immigrants in the United States during World War I. His essay ‘Trans-National America’ (1916) repudiates the metaphor of the ‘melting pot’ as a model for American society, arguing that its nullification of difference produces a culture that is ‘washed out into a tasteless colorless fluid of uniformity’. Insisting that ‘there is no distinctively American culture’, what Bourne advocates in place of the sterility of the melting pot is a society in which ‘hyphenated’ Americans ‘retain that distinctiveness of their native cultures’, facilitating a creative tension that will transform America from a ‘nationality’ into a ‘trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors’.40 Ellison mobilises a similar principle in response to the intolerance of early Cold War America in Invisible Man. The narrator’s rhetorical question of ‘[m]ust I strive towards colorlessness?’ in the novel’s epilogue rehearse Bourne’s reference to the ‘colorless fluid of uniformity’.41 Moreover, Ellison likewise foregrounds creative difference as a locus for transformation, using what he later defined as

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41 Ellison, Invisible Man, 577.
the ‘antagonistic co-operation’ found among jazz musicians as his paradigm for what America could be.\textsuperscript{42} The overriding effect, as John F. Callahan cogently observes, is an \textit{oeuvre} that constantly ‘riffs […] on the bass line of American identity’.\textsuperscript{43} The ‘beat’, therefore, may be understood as what Ellison refers to as ‘the omnipresent American ideal’.\textsuperscript{44} It is figured as something both immutable and ineffable, a kind of mythic wholeness akin to the Real.

Accordingly, in place of the fixed, monolithic paradigm of American-ness enshrined in Cold War discourse, Ellison’s writing posits a fluid vision of the United States in which the disparate ethnicities that comprise the nation constitute a kind of \textit{bricolage} that signifies on the ‘beat’ laid down in its founding principles. ‘In relationship to the cultural whole’, Ellison wrote in 1977, ‘we are, all of us – white or black, native-born or immigrant – members of minority groups’.\textsuperscript{45} This being the case, no American is ‘quite on the beat’. Yet, for all its intangibility, this central beat – like the ‘cosmopolitan note’ that Bourne insists must orient his trans-national America – is imperative.\textsuperscript{46} It anchors and co-ordinates the constituent elements that make up America’s cultural \textit{bricolage}. Without it, the polyrhythms of American society would descend into chaos. In short, the ‘beat’ ensures that they are a part of, as well as apart from one another.

In the context of a transnational America, then, difference, instead of being subsumed under the banner of homogenous national identity, is celebrated as constitutive of American-ness. The result is a paradigm of national identity that subtly subverts the notion of \textit{e pluribus unum}. Out of many, one becomes out of one, many. As Ellison puts it in the closing pages of \textit{Invisible Man}, ‘only in division is there true health [….] America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain […] Our fate is to become one, and yet many.’\textsuperscript{47} Here, Ellison effectively transposes the antagonistic co-operation found in jazz’s dissonant aesthetic to the social realm, recasting jazz from a symptom of the black experience into a locus of transformation. The result is a politics rooted not in consensus, but dissensus. Difference and dissonance are not something to be ameliorated in pursuit of an elusive unity

\textsuperscript{42} Ellison, ‘Going to the Territory’ (1980), \textit{The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison}, 595-616 (602).
\textsuperscript{44} Ellison, ‘Society, Morality and the Novel’ (1957), \textit{The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison}, 698-729 (706).
\textsuperscript{45} Ellison, ‘The Little Man at Chehaw Station, \textit{The Collected essays of Ralph Ellison}, 493-523 (504). His comments in ‘The Little Man at Chehaw Station’ rehearse a theme he outlined in a college address in Dedham, Massachusetts in 1963: ‘the great mystery of identity in this country […] is that everybody here is an American and yet is a member of some unique minority’. ‘What These Children Are Like’ (1963), \textit{The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison}, 546-55 (550).
\textsuperscript{46} Bourne, 2061.
\textsuperscript{47} Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, 576-7.
or harmony, but continually registered as the possibility of transformation and subversion in the existing social realm.\textsuperscript{48} ‘Whence all this passion towards conformity anyway?’ he asks at the end of \textit{Invisible Man}. ‘Let man keep his many parts and you’ll have no tyrant states’.\textsuperscript{49} How he sets about giving form to this principle provides the backdrop to what follows below.

\textbf{Part 1: Ellison among the New Liberals}

Fuck Trilling and his gang.

– Ellison, Letter to Albert Murray (1956)\textsuperscript{50}

If Ellison’s jazz-infused aesthetics constitute a ‘truth universally acknowledged’ among critics, his politics are much less clear-cut. Like many writers who came of age in the 1930s, Ellison cut his literary teeth in left-wing political circles, contributing to left-leaning magazines and journals such as \textit{New Masses}, as well as being a part of the Federal Writer’s Project during the New Deal.\textsuperscript{51} As alluded to above, it was his friendship with Richard Wright – himself an active member of the Communist Party – that set Ellison on the path to being a writer. Wright asked Ellison to contribute a short story to \textit{New Challenge}, a radical journal he helped establish in 1937 (however, Wright ultimately decided not to include the resulting story, ‘Hymie’s Bull’ [1937], in what turned out to be \textit{New Challenge}’s first and final issue).\textsuperscript{52} In later years Ellison downplayed his involvement in left-wing politics, insisting that he ‘never accepted the ideology that \textit{New Masses} tried to impose on writers’ and that he was a ‘true outsider’ when it came to his relationship with ‘the Communist rank and file’.\textsuperscript{53} But as Barbara Foley, Jackson, and Rampersad have all demonstrated, Ellison was, if not a card carrying member of the Communist Party like Wright, then certainly – to use the ideologically loaded language of the 1950s – a dedicated fellow traveller.\textsuperscript{54}

Many of his letters from the 1930s underscore this point. Not only do they demonstrate that he was personally acquainted with a number of Communist Party members, they are also

\begin{itemize}
  \item [48] My ideas with regards to dissensus are indebted to Jean François Lyotard, particularly his suggestion that ‘the only consensus we should be worrying about is one that would encourage […] heterogeneity or “dissensus”’. Jean François Lyotard, \textit{Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 44.
  \item [49] Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, 577.
  \item [52] Rampersad, 96-100.
  \item [54] Rampersad, drawing on the testimony of Herbert Aptheker, a Communist who was acquainted with Ellison, suggests that Ellison was ‘probably […] at least for a while, a dues-paying Party member’ (93). For more on Ellison’s involvement in Communist circles, see: Rampersad, 89-142; Foley, \textit{Wrestling With the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) 1-67 and ‘Ralph Ellison as a Proletarian Journalist’, 540-5; Jackson, \textit{Emergence of Genius}, 161-252.
\end{itemize}
punctuated with allusions to Marxist theory. A letter to Wright written in 1937, for instance, signs off with Ellison riffing on the rallying cry with which Marx and Engels conclude *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), declaring: ‘Workers of the world must write!!!’.\(^{55}\) Another, from 1940, notes how ‘[f]or the Marxist, freedom is the recognition of necessity.’\(^{56}\) More broadly, Rampersad notes how Ellison’s harboured Stalinist sympathies as late as 1940. He defended the Moscow show trials as a justifiable response to what he termed ‘widespread sabotage and wrecking’ and remained steadfast in his support of the Soviet Union even in the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.\(^{57}\) Indeed, following the outbreak of World War II, he told Wright of his hope that Hitler would ‘invade England and break up the Empire’ before ‘dig[ing] his own grave’.\(^{58}\)

Ellison’s toeing of the Communist Party line extended to his attitude towards racial politics in the United States, which saw him echo the Comintern by endorsing the principle of an autonomous black state for the African Americans in the Deep South.\(^{59}\) Like Wright, however, Ellison would, by the mid-1940s, distance himself from Communism. But unlike Wright, who, as will become apparent in the next chapter, continued to embrace Marxism as an instrumentality for interpreting the plight of the black diaspora and expediting their incorporation into modernity, Ellison would repudiate Marxist analyses as inadequate to the task of accounting for the plurality of the black experience in the United States.

For many critics, this apparent rejection of left-wing politics marks Ellison’s move ‘toward the political center’.\(^{60}\) More specifically, there is tendency in Ellison scholarship, particularly that which attempts to situate his work in the specific period from which it emerged, to characterise his writing, including *Invisible Man*, as concomitant with the discourses of new liberalism that functioned as what Roderick Ferguson describes as ‘the ideological complement of cold war politics’.\(^{61}\)

\(^{55}\) Ellison, Letter to Richard Wright, 8 November 1937, Richard Wright Papers, JWJ-MSS 3, Box 97 Folder 1314, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library.
\(^{56}\) Ellison, Letter to Richard Wright, 22 April 1940, Richard Wright Papers.
\(^{57}\) Ralph Ellison, Letter to Joe Lazenberry, 25 April 1939, Box I: 56, Ralph Waldo Ellison Papers, MSS83111, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Rampersad, 123, 127.
\(^{58}\) Ellison, Letter to Richard Wright, 26 May 1940, Richard Wright Papers; Rampersad, 135.
\(^{59}\) Ellison, Letter to Joe Lazenberry; Rampersad, 124.
\(^{60}\) Rampersad, 162.
New liberalism (or Cold War liberalism as it is sometimes referred to) emerged as the dominant ideological response to the Cold War among American intellectuals, helping inaugurate what has come to be known as the ‘Cold War consensus’. Though deriving its impetus from the geopolitical exigencies attendant to the Cold War, new liberalism’s roots stretch back to the leftist intellectual milieu of 1930s New York. In particular, its origins can be traced to writers and critics who, during the thirties, congregated around the literary magazine *Partisan Review*. It was in its pages that such architects of new liberal discourse as Lionel Trilling, Phillip Rahv, and Leslie Fielder forged their reputations as critics.

In contrast to the ideological position that both they and the magazine would take in the 1950s, *Partisan Review* began life in 1934 as an organ of the John Reed Club, an affiliate of the American Communist Party. However, disillusionment with the Soviet Union prompted by the revelation of Stalin’s show trials precipitated a definitive political shift in the magazine’s editorial stance. After briefly flirting with Trotskyism, *Partisan Review* disavowed communism altogether, in favour of a cultural politics that emphasised the liberal tradition of the United States. A symposium organised by the magazine in 1952 encapsulated this transformation. Entitled ‘Our County, Our Culture’, it called on those in attendance to repudiate Russian totalitarianism and embrace ‘the actuality of American life’. Newton Arvin’s contribution to proceedings sums up this changing attitude. The contemporary threat from the Soviet Union, he claims, underlines the necessity of identifying with American culture: ‘The negative relation to one’s culture has great validity in certain periods; at others, it is simply sterile, even psychopathic, and ought to give way, as it has done here, in the last decade, to the positive relation’.

What Thomas Hill Schaub characterises as the ‘chastened liberalism’ evident in *Partisan Review*’s retreat from the left reflects the broader thrust of new liberal discourse. Where
communism had in the 1930s carried an ideological authority that both explicated the contemporary crisis of capitalism and provided a seemingly viable alternative to the fascism that was sweeping Europe, the geopolitical realignment that occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War stripped it of much of its intellectual prestige among American artists and intellectuals. By contrast, having emerged from the war with its political and economic power at an all time high, the United States and its ethos of liberal democratic capitalism were recast as something to be affirmed and protected from the threat of totalitarianism. Within this context, the ideological shift of the denizens of *Partisan Review* took on an allegorical resonance in which their own transformations from naïve idealism to wary realism served as the model for the nation to adopt in relation to the Soviet Union. The result of this narrative was a politics rooted in what the historian and key architect of new liberalism, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., termed ‘the vital center’, an ostensibly non-ideological middle ground between the twin totalitarianisms of communism and fascism that affirmed, above all else, democratic co-operation and ‘the ultimate integrity of the individual’.66

This retreat from ideology and emphasis on individualism would underpin the politics of what has come to be known as the ‘Cold War consensus’. Perhaps best encapsulated by Daniel Bell’s 1960 study *The End of Ideology*, what Bell terms a ‘normative consensus’, in which ‘individual conscience’ displaced ‘social and political commitments’ as the index of ‘Americanism’, evolved out of the new liberal discourse as a bulwark against the ‘ideological politics’ that marred the first half of the twentieth century.67

The politics of new liberalism were supplemented by its analysis of the arts. As Schaub notes, its ‘reassessments of history, politics, human nature, and destiny’ found some of ‘its most profound expressions’ in literary discourse.68 The trenchant anticommunism of the new liberals found an aesthetic counterpart in their repudiation of the politically orientated naturalism that had sounded the dominant note in American literature during the 1930s. It was Trilling who emerged as the figurehead of this aesthetic agenda. His 1949 collection of essays *The Liberal Imagination* constituted a ‘threshold moment’ in literary and cultural

68 Schaub, 20.
discourse in the United States, laying the foundations for what would become the fifties’ prevailing interpretive paradigm.  


Having become similarly disenchanted with communism during the early 1940s, Ellison’s work is often read as part of the rightward drift of Cold War liberalism. Jesse Wolfe, for example, argues that *Invisible Man* ‘stands as the quintessential expression of “New Liberalism” – the anti-Stalinism of the post-World War II American left’.  

75 Michael Nowlin and Schaub make similar claims. The former talks of Ellison’s (and Baldwin’s) ‘affiliation’ with ‘liberal anti-Communism’, while the latter, though noting that it emerges from a different set of interests and experiences to other Cold War liberals, argues that his writing is in accord ideologically ‘with the anti-Stalinist discourse of the new liberalism’.  

Barbara Foley, meanwhile, goes even further, designating Ellison a ‘Cold Warrior’.  

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At first glance, there appears to be plenty of evidence to support these claims. In addition to his contemporaneous break with what he dubbed ‘the facile answers of Marxism’, Ellison’s most famous work shares new liberalism’s rejection of naturalism in favour of an aesthetic that is, at least in part, indebted to the formal innovations of modernism. Invisible Man’s non-linear structure, allusiveness, self-consciousness, and frequent shifts in style and tone may all be seen in the context of broader currents in modernist literature – a point born out by Ellison identifying such exemplars of literary modernism as T. S. Eliot, André Malraux, Dostoyevsky, and William Faulkner as his literary ‘ancestors’. Moreover, his work is shot through with the kind of paradox, ambiguity, and complexity that Bell identifies as the dominant terms of new liberal discourse. Indeed, as Schaub perceptively notes, the epilogue to Invisible Man offers a neat, mid-twentieth century update to what Trilling celebrates as the ability of American writers in the nineteenth century to contain ‘both the yes and the no of their culture within themselves’. I condemn and affirm’, Ellison’s narrator writes, ‘say no and say yes, say yes and say no’. Given these parallels, it is perhaps unsurprising that the first place in which sections of what would become Invisible Man appeared was in the pages of Partisan Review.

The apparent overlap between Ellison’s writing and new liberal discourse is not as pronounced as it initially seems, however. Often implicit within analyses of Ellison’s work in the context of new liberalism is the suggestion that his retreat from the Stalinist left constitutes a kind of ideological betrayal. The description of him as a ‘Cold Warrior’ seems particularly loaded, conjuring as it does the spectre of some of the more reactionary elements of American political discourse in the postwar period. Yet, while the cultural politics of new liberalism and the ideas articulated by Ellison clearly, on occasion, intersect, to simply map Ellison’s break with Marxism onto the ideological terrain of the Cold War risks diluting the ‘complexity’ of his insights and necessarily involves overlooking some of the profound philosophical differences between them. Indeed, for all that Invisible Man finds similar virtue

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77 Ibid, 185.
78 Bell, 300. Rampersad, citing comments made by the poet and contemporary of Ellison, Richard Wilbur, stresses the importance of the word ‘complexity’ in the Ellison lexicon. Wilbur states: ‘Ralph was ever so fond of the word “complexity,” I think that his favorite expression was the “complexity of the American experience.” This is what Ralph wanted to expose, especially in the essays devoted to racial matters, where there is complexity upon complexity’ (416).
80 Ellison, Invisible Man, 579.
in tropes such as complexity, ambiguity, and paradox, the text is far from a ringing endorsement of the principles underpinning the cultural politics of Cold War liberalism. Ellison’s depiction of a narrator self-consciously retreating – both physically and intellectually – from society can hardly be perceived as enacting a positive relationship with his surroundings or a wish to be integrated into the ‘actuality’ of American culture.

There is also a danger of overstating the equivalence between Ellison’s aestheticism and that advocated by the likes of Trilling. His profane dismissal of ‘Trilling and his gang’ cited above is the product of the conflicting attitudes the pair held as to the social function of the novel and the aesthetic criteria capable of serving this function. For Trilling, what he perceived as the deterioration of western civilisation had placed the novel in grave danger.\(^81\) His response was to advocate the revival of what he termed ‘the novel of manners’, as embodied by nineteenth century European writers, such as Balzac and Flaubert, whose work addresses ‘competitive pressures’ and ‘intense passions’, but is articulated ‘within the limitations set by a strong and complicated tradition of manners’.\(^82\) ‘Manners’, for Trilling, name ‘a culture’s hum and buzz of implication’, the traits which ‘draws the people of a culture together and separate them from the people of another culture’.\(^83\) In short, manners constitute what might now be termed the cultural imaginary or the ‘knowledge’ identified by Michel Foucault as allowing ‘the sovereignty of collective consciousness to emerge as the principle of unity and explanation’.\(^84\) Since there is always a ‘conflicting variety of manners’ within a particular culture, Trilling emphasised what he termed ‘the manners of the literate, reading, responsible middle class of people who are ourselves’.\(^85\) It was the American novelist’s duty, he argued, to excavate and interrogate these manners as they pertained to life in the United States and harness them as the basis of a kind of ‘moral realism’ – a quality he located in the work of Henry James.\(^86\)

Trilling’s pronouncements on the imminent demise of the novel in *The Liberal Imagination* and his insistence that a revival of the Jamesian ‘novel of manners’ offered its best hope of resuscitation were both rejected by Ellison. Both his acceptance speech for the 1953 National

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\(^{83}\) Ibid, 206.


\(^{85}\) Trilling, ‘Manners, Morals and the Novel’, 207.

\(^{86}\) Ibid, 219.
Book Award and his 1957 essay, ‘Society, Morality, and the Novel’ (the title of which riffs on Trilling’s ‘Manners, Morals, and the Novel’ [1948]) deliver a more rarefied – but no less pointed – critique of Trilling to that found in the letter to Albert Murray cited above. Reflecting on the aesthetic principles underpinning *Invisible Man*, the former sees Ellison dismissing both the power of naturalism ‘to protect us from despair’ and, in a clear nod to ‘Trilling and his gang’, the ‘prestige of the theorists of the so-called novel of manners’. ‘The diversity of American life, with its extreme fluidity and openness’, he asserts, seems ‘too vital and alive to be caught for more than the briefest instant in the tight, well-made Jamesian novel, which was, for all its artistic perfection, too concerned with “good taste” and stable areas.’

He expands on this point in ‘Society, Morality, and the Novel’. Addressing Trilling directly, Ellison condemns critics who ‘pronounce the novel dead’ and writes of being thankful ‘that the nineteenth century novel of manners is dead, for it has little value in dealing with our world of chaos and catastrophe’. He subsequently adds: ‘Though we love the classics, some of us have little interest in what Mr Trilling calls the “novel of manners,” and I don’t believe that society hot in the process of defining itself can for long find its image in so limited a form.’ Accordingly, *Invisible Man* may be understood as Ellison’s attempt to deliver a more expansive literary form, one that captures the fluidity he locates in American life, a theme I pursue in more detail below.

**Part 2: Ellison’s Textual Politics**

What did they ever think of us transitory ones? Ones such as I had been before I found Brotherhood – birds of passage who were too obscure for learned classification, too silent for the most sensitive recorders of sound; of natures too ambiguous for the most ambiguous words, and too distant from the centers of historical decision to sign or even to applaud the signers of historical documents? We who write no novels, histories or other books.

— Ellison, *Invisible Man*[^89]

Despite his own concerns that he had ‘failed of eloquence’ in *Invisible Man*, the novel sees Ellison delivering on his desire to capture the ‘chaos’ of his age.[^90] The ‘good taste’ and ‘stable areas’ of Trilling’s ‘responsible middle class’ are displaced by a volatile, polyphonic vortex of ‘implication’ in which it is the syncopated rhythms and dissonant notes struck by incestuous

sharecroppers (Jim Trueblood), unacknowledged engineering geniuses (Lucius Brockway), nameless zoot-suited hipsters, disillusioned would-be revolutionaries who have been reduced to hawking ‘Sambo’ dolls on the streets of Harlem (Tod Clifton), and shape-shifting conmen (Rineheart) that stake out the representational terrain on American-ness in the text. In this regard, the text is, as John Wright points out, a ‘novel of manners in reverse’, in that it un masks the ‘manners’ of ‘social superiors’ and charts American culture’s “hum and buzz of implication” [...] from the bottom up’, thus divesting it of ‘its rationalizing constructs and cosmetic allurements’. Mirroring Ellison’s characterisation of jazz as ‘endless improvisation on traditional materials’, the novel depicts a social order that is, in Wright’s words, ‘dynamic and provisional rather than static and secure’.

In this social order, Ellison suggests, it is the ‘transitory ones’ who are ‘too obscure for learned classification’, who are ‘outside the groove of history’ that provide its shifting locus of transformation. The overriding effect of accentuating experiences that function contrapuntally in relation to the dominant ‘beat’ of American culture is to open up a rhetorical space in which the ‘manners’ of the ‘responsible middle class’ are defamiliarised, revealing the distance between their principles and their practices. Indeed, as Morris Dickstein cogently observes, one of the overarching themes of Invisible Man is its ‘lively mockery of every kind of respectability, black or white, corporate or communist, middle class or working class’.

Nowhere is this point more apparent than in the famous ‘Battle Royal’ episode in the novel’s first chapter, in which the narrator recounts his youth in an unnamed Southern town. Having delivered a celebrated valedictory address at his high school graduation, the narrator is ‘invited to give the speech at a gathering of the town’s leading citizens’. However, once at the event – a ‘smoker’ that sees ‘the town’s big shots [...] in their tuxedos [...] drinking beer and whiskey and smoking black cigars’ – he is compelled to participate in a ‘battle royal’ with some of his black schoolmates. After being forced to watch the striptease act of a blonde, white woman, while wearing nothing but boxing shorts and enduring racist taunts from the event’s attendees, the narrator and his schoolmates are subsequently blindfolded and made

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91 John S. Wright, Shadowing Ralph Ellison (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 173.
93 Ellison, Invisible Man, 439, 441.
95 Ellison, Invisible Man, 17.
96 Ibid.
to fight with one another in a boxing ring, while the taunts continue. Their ordeal for all bar the narrator ends with them being told to collect their earnings for participating in the battle royal from a rug that turns out to be electrified, resulting in a number of them receiving serious electric shocks.\textsuperscript{97} When, bloodied and humiliated, the narrator is finally allowed to deliver his speech (a version of Booker T. Washington’s 1895 ‘Cast Down Your Bucket’ address to the Cotton States and International Exposition), the audience are more interested in mocking his polysyllabic vocabulary than listening to what he actually has to say concerning ‘social responsibility’.\textsuperscript{98}

In this episode, then, those whom Trilling might designate to be the ‘responsible middle class’ are, as Dickstein points out, ‘lechers and sadists’.\textsuperscript{99} The ‘bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants’ whom comprise those in attendance openly leer at and grope the nameless blonde woman as she removes her clothes, before enthusiastically cheering at the sight of the blindfolded participants in the battle royal fighting ‘hysterically’ with one another.\textsuperscript{100} The whole event, Ellison suggests, is freighted with hegemonic power relations. It is the white ‘big shots’ who dictate the discursive terrain on which the event plays out and set the terms in which the narrator can articulate his identity. Indeed, Ellison would later characterise the battle royal as ‘a ritual in preservation of caste lines’.\textsuperscript{101} What this ritual amounts to is a kind of initiation rite that interpellates the participants into white hegemony through the projection of ‘certain racial divisions’, which, in turn, reifies ‘the idea of white racial superiority’.\textsuperscript{102} Ellison underlined this idea in a lecture delivered at West Point in 1969. The battle royal, he claimed, functioned in the novel as ‘a ritual through which important social values were projected and reinforced’.\textsuperscript{103}

By emphasising the ritualistic nature of the power relations that the battle royal articulates, Ellison offers an implicit, but sharp, rejoinder to Trilling’s suggestion that American culture’s ‘manners’ could be harnessed as a moral bulwark against its exhaustion and decline. It is, of course, through ritual and repetition that the kind of ‘infiltration’ alluded to by Trilling is codified and transmuted into the ‘manners’ of a particular culture. Ellison’s depiction

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid, 18-29.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid, 29-31.
\textsuperscript{99} Dickstein, 136.
\textsuperscript{100} Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, 18, 23.
\textsuperscript{101} Ellison, ‘The Art of Fiction’, 216.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
of the humiliation endured by the narrator and his schoolmates, however, underlines the way in which manners may be concerned less with morality than foreclosing knowledge and maintaining existing asymmetries of power. In this instance, the event is expressly conceived by those in attendance at the ‘smoker’ as a performative enactment of African Americans’ impotence in the face of their authority. The narrator and his schoolmates are, in effect, goaded with their own sense of disempowerment.

For instance, their being present around a naked white woman functions as a kind of symbolic castration. Where the white men feel free to leer, the narrator and his schoolmates feel a burning sense of shame at their arousal. The narrator states: ‘Some of the boys stood with lowered heads, trembling. I felt a wave of irrational guilt and fear’. One boy faints, while another tries to conceal the erection that is visible though his ‘much too small’ trunks with his boxing gloves. By contrast, the narrator notices ‘a certain merchant […] lips loose and drooling’, responding to the woman’s dancing by winding ‘his belly in a slow and obscene grind’. These contrasting responses are overdetermined by the psychosexual pathology of the South. The fear of the narrator and the other black boys is haunted by the spectre of interracial sexuality and the attendant threat of lynching.

In a similar vein, the narrator’s ability to deliver his speech and – so he believes – gain access to the respectability he desires are entirely contingent on him successfully playing the role demanded of him by the white ‘big shots’. This sees him not only having to humiliate himself, but also literally and metaphorically blinding himself to their behaviour, ‘because only these men could judge truly my ability’. Here, the narrator prefigures what Frantz Fanon later characterised as the ‘massive psychoexistential complex’ that evolves out of the institutionalisation of white supremacy and the corresponding internalisation of inferiority among black people. The result, Fanon argues, is that ‘[b]lack men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect’. The narrator’s longing, in the words of Julia Eichelberger, for the ‘approval of white men, no matter how often they denigrate his worth as a human being’ offers a potent example of Fanon’s

105 Ibid, 25.
argument regarding the lengths black people feel compelled to go to, in order to feel valued in a white supremacist society.\textsuperscript{107}

However, by juxtaposing the sincerity of the narrator’s wish to be allowed to give his address (‘I wanted to deliver my speech more than anything else in the world’) with the indifference and mockery of the audience when he is finally allowed to do so (‘I’m told he knows more big words than a pocket-sized dictionary’), Ellison underscores the futility of African Americans trying to assert their identity within the discursive parameters – or ‘manners’ – of white hegemony.\textsuperscript{108} Instead of empowering him, it merely underscores his invisibility. It is only when the narrator accidentally departs from his script and replaces the words ‘social responsibility’ with ‘social equality’ that he makes his presence felt. Though the hostile response his Freudian slip elicits among the attendees at the smoker results in him quickly backtracking, the dissonant note it strikes is vital in relation to the novel’s wider cultural and political implications. As Danielle Allen suggests in relation to the narrator’s slip, if the United States was true to its democratic principles, then social responsibility would presuppose social equality.\textsuperscript{109} The fact it does not underlines the breach between America’s manners and its morals. As a result, it demonstrates the fallacy of the narrator’s accommodationism.

In this regard, the incident at the ‘smoker’ sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Throughout the text, the narrator is guilty of what Valerie Smith defines as an ‘overdependence on others’ values’.\textsuperscript{110} Whether in relation to the ‘big shots’ at the battle royal, his dealings with Dr. Bledsoe (the president of the Tuskegee-like college he attends), or when a member of the Brotherhood, the narrator repeatedly defers to the knowledge of others rather than trusting himself to improvise in accordance to the beat of his own experiences.

Yet, as in the battle royal episode, Ellison constantly undercuts the discursive legitimacy of the institutions his narrator encounters by revealing the contingency of the knowledge they embody. In each case, their ‘manners’ are shown to be the means by which their power is

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\textsuperscript{108} Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, 25, 29.
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maintained. They function as a bulwark against forms of knowledge that threaten the ‘stable areas’ they wish to preserve, resulting in a disconnect between appearances and reality.

Ellison underscores this point through his frequent allusions to veils and blindness, in the context of the institutions the narrator is involved with. Bledsoe, for instance, is described as turning his face into ‘a bland mask’ and speaking from behind a ‘veil’ when dealing with the white trustees of the college. The Reverend Barbee, who delivers a sermon at the college on the virtues of its founder (himself a thinly veiled Booker T. Washington), is blind. Brother Jack, the head of the Brotherhood, meanwhile, has a glass eye that falls out during a confrontation with the narrator.111 The cumulative effect of this imagery is of a series of closed ontologies that broach no difference. As such, they reify existing power relations and the inequalities that underpin them.

Critically, however, Ellison demonstrates that it is only when the narrator strays from the ‘beat’ laid down for him by others in the way that he does at the smoker that he is able to access the self-knowledge necessary to transform his condition. It is for this reason that the ‘transitory ones’ alluded to above carry such a resonance in Invisible Man and function as ‘the bearers of something precious’.112 Their presence outside ‘the grooves of history’ opens up a rhetorical space in which received wisdom – the ‘manners’ that provide the basis of institutionalised knowledge – may be defamiliarised and reconstituted to serve new purposes. It is this space that the narrator eventually takes residence in, in order to give form to his invisibility.

'[A]fter years of trying to adopt the opinions of others’, the narrator ultimately rebels by retreating to the basement, where he joins the ranks of the ‘transitory ones’ and reorients his relationship with ‘reality’.113 In his syncopated relation to the ‘beat’ of American culture – and, indeed, that of modernity, more broadly – he displaces the various forms of received knowledge that have shaped his existence. What emerges in their place is a world of ‘infinite possibilities’, a shifting, heterogeneous culture that continually registers the prospect of its own transformation.114 To this end, Ellison locates the meaning of American-ness in

111 Ellison, Invisible Man, 102-3, 123-8, 474-6.
113 Ellison, Invisible Man, 573.
114 Ibid, 576.
difference, as opposed to the ‘stable areas’ of the culture’s manners. It is for precisely this reason, however, that the narrator’s ‘hibernation’ must function as what he terms ‘a covert preparation for a more overt action’.\textsuperscript{115} As he prepares at the end of the novel to emerge from his basement and take on ‘a socially responsible role’ again, the narrator justifies his narrative thus: ‘So why do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself I’ve learned some things. Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labelled “file and forget,” and I can neither file nor forget.’\textsuperscript{116} In other words, he has not abandoned ‘the beat’. To remain within the ‘chaos’ of invisibility would be to negate the pattern of possibilities he has conceived of while living beyond the threshold of legibility. The fate of Tod Clifton, whose departure from the certainties of Brotherhood precipitates a ‘plunge into nothingness’ that intersects with the trajectory of a policeman’s bullet, underscores this point.\textsuperscript{117} Possibility can only be transmuted into reality through form. As such, the narrator must provide a record of his narrative and thus break with the other ‘transitory ones’, by becoming one of those who writes ‘novels, histories, or other books’. In doing so, he simultaneously affirms the ‘beat’ of American culture and refashions it. In this transition from what Ellison later termed ‘ranter to writer’, the narrator finally finds his ‘socially responsible role’ as the embodiment of Ellingtonian dissonance: ‘something apart, yet an integral part’.\textsuperscript{118}

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The displacement of American ‘manners’ in \textit{Invisible Man} described above is symptomatic of what John Wright identifies as the battle waged by Ellison throughout the 1950s against ‘New Liberal pieties’.\textsuperscript{119} However, for all the rarefied rhetoric that characterised this battle, it had profound political implications with regards to the construction of American national identity. In particular, Ellison’s comments speak to the emphasis on conformity beneath new liberalism’s ‘non-ideological’ veneer. To this end, Ellison’s invocation of ‘fluidity and openness’ over the ‘good taste’ and ‘stable areas’ advocated by Trilling and his cohorts foregrounds the gap between consensus and dissensus, and the respective political ends they serve.

Ellison’s allusion to ‘stable areas’ in his criticism of Trilling is especially evocative, calling to mind Schlesinger’s ‘vital center’ and the consensus culture it helped inaugurate. By

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{115}Ibid, 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{116}Ibid, 579.
  \item \textsuperscript{117}Ibid, 435-9.
  \item \textsuperscript{118}Ellison, ‘Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke’, \textit{The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison}, 100-12 (111).
  \item \textsuperscript{119}John S. Wright, 184.
\end{itemize}
contrasting it with ‘fluidity and openness’, however, Ellison demonstrates the way in which Cold War liberalism, for all that it advocated a pluralist ideal, was ultimately geared towards fortifying existing parameters of American-ness and was, thus, a discourse that was predicated on conformity as opposed to individualism. Accordingly, far from being a dupe of new liberalism as is sometimes suggested, Ellison offers a potent critique of its latent conservatism. He calls attention to what subsequent critics have identified as the way Cold Warriors like Trilling and Schlesinger, by barricading themselves ‘behind a wall of fierce anti-communism’, narrowed the interpretive possibilities available to Americans and, as such, betrayed the ‘liberal democratic pluralism’ they claimed to defend. For Ellison, by contrast, giving form to the ‘cacophonic motion’ of the American experience in his writing serves to decentre American-ness. His repudiation of conformity and celebration of an America ‘woven of many strands’ creates a historical breach that fractures the principle of consensus and reconstitutes the representational framework in which American identity is articulated.

It is in this emphasis on the transformative potential of difference where the division between Ellison and the new liberals becomes most pronounced. To advocate the preservation of already existing American culture in the 1940s and 1950s was to endorse, if only tacitly, a social order articulated along the faultline of race. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of new liberal discourse is its virtual silence on the issue of race. Neither The Liberal Imagination nor The Vital Center – arguably the two defining texts of Cold War liberalism – broach the question of race in any great detail. Schlesinger, though acknowledging that the treatment of African Americans constitutes ‘the most appalling social injustice in this country’, glosses over the issue by making a perfunctory reference to how it is exploited by Communists. For Ellison to take residence in the ‘stable areas’ beloved of new liberalism, therefore, would render him complicit in his own marginalisation.

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120 Redding traces this paradox between individualism and conformity. He writes: ‘[T]he Cold War consensus made manifest a seemingly hegemonic American, and nationally unified culture devoted to fostering the global spread of what Frances Stonor Saunders has termed “freedomism,” a culture marked by a remarkable, if spurious, sense of consensus, and a culture that rewarded conformity’ (4).

121 Guilbaut, 166, 184. Similarly, Robert J. Corber observes: ‘Cold War liberals were able to determine the way in which Americans thought and lived their relations to the world by limiting the fund of interpretive possibilities available to them for understanding their lived experience [...] [I]n so doing, they gained control over the production of the postwar subject’. Robert J. Corber, In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 4.

122 John S. Wright echoes this point, referring to Trilling and Schlesinger as illustrative of a ‘racially evasive brand of Cold War liberalism’ (184).

123 Schlesinger, 120-1.
To this end, placing Ellison’s political trajectory within the orbit of ‘vital center patriotism’ in the way that Foley does is problematic. It minimises the extent to which Ellison’s utilisation of ostensibly similar aesthetic and intellectual themes in *Invisible Man* is inflected with the ‘aching consciousness’ and ‘jagged grain’ of his racial identity. With its depiction of a narrator lurching from one misfortune to another, *Invisible Man* renders in representational terms his designation of the blues as ‘an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically’ and squeezes from these misfortunes a ‘near-comic lyricism’.

Moreover, as his letters to Wright illustrate, it was not the horrors of Stalinism that were the primary factor in Ellison’s retreat from the Communist left. Rather, his disenchantment is symptomatic of a broader split between the American Communist Party and African American artists and intellectuals that was rooted in the racial politics of the United States, as opposed to the horrors of the Soviet Union. The decision of the CPUSA to shift its focus away from what Richard Purcell describes as ‘direct confrontation with black racism in the USA’ in favour of ‘coalition building against the rise of fascism in Europe’ caused widespread disillusionment among African Americans who had aligned themselves with the Party on account of its professed commitment to racial equality. Ellison himself later recalled how ‘[t]he Communists recognized no plurality of interests and were really responsible to the necessities of Soviet foreign policy and when the war came, Negroes got caught and were made expedient in the shifting of policy’. This sense of expediency is a theme he rehearses in fictional terms through his depiction of the Brotherhood in *Invisible Man*, as will be demonstrated below.

One sees in this statement how the emphasis on plurality that underpins the epilogue to *Invisible Man* is not merely the expression of an abstract principle to buttress a fixed ideological agenda, whether that agenda be Soviet Communism or American ‘vital center’ liberalism. It is instead fundamental to the process of securing an equal footing for minorities within the context in which they find themselves. Difference is not subordinate to ideology, Ellison suggests, but the tape by which ideology is measured. As *Invisible Man*’s narrator

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124 Foley, *Wrestling With the Left*, 1.
realises – in a neat revision of the Marxist sentiments Ellison once championed – ‘freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility’.  

Accordingly, though they may bear superficial relation to the likes of Trilling, Ellison’s cultural politics are shot through with a ‘double voicedness’ that is the product of his racial identity. In short, *Invisible Man* is to New Liberalism what John Coltrane’s version of ‘My Favorite Things’ is to Julie Andrews’s version. Though each riffs on the same principles – the possibilities of democracy, complexity, individualism – Ellison’s version signifies on them, so that they become synonymous with the creative strategies of the black freedom struggle. To fully grasp what Ellison’s work signifies, therefore, it is imperative to see that it signifies. And this means viewing his cultural politics through the prism of his racial politics. As will be demonstrated below, his depiction of the Brotherhood in *Invisible Man* is illustrative of this point.

**Part 3: ‘Whence All This Passion Toward Conformity?’**

In the years following the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison would repeatedly claim that the Brotherhood – a political organisation the narrator joins following his move from the South to New York – was not intended as the thinly veiled surrogate for the Communist Party it is typically read as. He instead insisted that they were a ‘fabrication’ conceived for ‘certain literary reasons’, pointing out that nowhere in the text does he ‘identify’ them as Communist. At first glance, such claims seem to be more than a little disingenuous. The Brotherhood’s mission to help the ‘dispossessed’ and restore ‘the joy of labor’ clearly speaks to socialist tropes, while their use of the word ‘Brother’ when addressing one another is a clear nod to the corresponding use of ‘comrade’ among Communists. Moreover, their ‘scientific approach to society’, which is conceived as explicating the entirety of existence (‘[w]e recognized no loose ends, everything could be controlled by our science’), leans heavily on Marxist instrumentalities, with its emphasis on dialectical materialism, class struggle, and a teleological understanding of history.

The parallels between the Brotherhood were clear enough for contemporary African American Marxists to angrily denounce *Invisible Man* in the wake of its publication. Abner

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Berry’s review of the novel in the *Daily Worker*, for instance, accused Ellison of slandering Communism, as well as ‘middle class snobbishness’ and writing ‘in an affected, pretentious manner to suit the kingpins of white superiority’. Other left-wing publications followed suit. Writing in *Masses and Mainstream* (newly rebranded from *New Masses*), Lloyd Brown accused Ellison of cynically exploiting the era’s anticommunism for commercial gain, a charge echoed by John O. Killens in *Freedom*, a magazine co-founded by Paul Robeson and which counted Lorraine Hansberry among its staff.129

Yet, for all its apparent disingenuousness, it is worth pausing to consider Ellison’s point about having fabricated the Brotherhood for literary purposes in more depth. Given that *Invisible Man* emerges from a virulently anti-Communist historical epoch marked by McCarthyism and the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee, the question naturally arises as to why, if his aim was simply to denounce the Communist Party, Ellison felt compelled to fabricate a proxy organisation. The historical conditions could not have been more ripe – the embittered denunciations of the likes of the *Daily Worker*, notwithstanding – to do so. Why, then, the Brotherhood and not the Communist Party? Ellison’s follow up remarks to his claim that the Brotherhood were a literary fabrication offers some clue as to the answer to this question. ‘I did not want to describe an existing Socialist or Communist or Marxist political group’, he states, ‘primarily because it would have allowed the reader to escape confronting certain political patterns, patterns which still exist and of which our two major political parties are guilty in their relationships to Negro Americans’.130

By claiming the Brotherhood is not representative of an *existing* Marxist group, Ellison implies that it simultaneously is and is not a Communist surrogate. It is insofar as it corresponds ideologically to the doctrinaire tenets of Marxism, but it is not insofar as the cultural and political purposes that Ellison intends it to serve in the novel. As such, recasting the Communist Party as the Brotherhood may be read as a rhetorical device designed to extricate the novel from a discursive framework beholden to the ideological agenda of the American Cold War. It is an example of what Ellison identifies elsewhere as how every

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130 Ellison, ‘On Initiation Rites and Power’, 542.
American war has been a war within a war for the nation’s black citizens. By implicating American politics in the patterns of behaviour that characterise the Brotherhood’s relation to African Americans in *Invisible Man*, Ellison displaces the representational framework in which the narrator’s involvement with the group is articulated. In doing so, *Invisible Man* becomes less about the politics of left and right than those of black and white. He demonstrates that, while they may, on occasion, intersect with one another, they are not reducible to one another, whatever side of the iron curtain they happen to be approached from.

The fact that *Invisible Man* continues to be read as concomitant with the era’s prevailing intellectual hegemony suggests that Ellison was not entirely successful in calling attention to the war within the Cold War. Nonetheless, the notion that his rejection of Marxism was predicated largely on racial grounds is borne out in the text. Indeed, the narrator’s eventual repudiation of the ideology of the Brotherhood as an ‘obscene swindle’ rehearses Ellison’s criticism of the Communist Party for failing to recognise a ‘plurality of interests’. What the Brotherhood presents as sober rationalism and ‘scientific objectivity’ is shown by Ellison to be an unyielding myopia with regards to the complexity of lived experience. This point is rendered symbolically through his depiction of the glass eye of Brother Jack, the organisation’s leader, falling into a glass of water during a confrontation with the narrator over the latter’s lack of ‘discipline’.

Broaching no contradiction or ‘loose ends’, the monolithic focus of the Brotherhood – once again in a manner than recalls the alleged activities of the American Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s – first subsumes the issue of race under its banner, before subordinating it to its teleological aims. Racial grievances, one of the movement’s members insists, ‘can’t be allowed to upset the tempo of the master plan’. One must, in other words, synchronise oneself to the ‘beat’ of its fixed system of reality. In doing so, however, the historical identity of African Americans is effectively erased.

Ellison illustrates this point early in the narrator’s involvement with the Brotherhood. During an informal gathering that marks his first meeting with the organisation, one of the movement’s white members drunkenly asks the narrator to sing ‘a spiritual [...] Or one of

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131 Ellison, ‘Author’s Introduction’, xxx.
133 Ibid, 474.
134 Ibid, 490.
those real good ole Negro work songs’. It prompts a furious response from Brother Jack who insists that the narrator ‘does not sing’, which, in turn, prompts the man who asked the question to respond: ‘Nonsense, all colored people sing’ (emphasis in original).\footnote{Ibid, 312, 313.} While Brother Jack is undoubtedly correct when he notes the ‘racial chauvinism’ implicit in the request that the narrator sing, it is his response that Ellison suggests is, ultimately, the more dangerous. Throughout the exchange, the narrator is rendered silent by Brother Jack speaking on his behalf. By denying him a voice in a matter that clearly concerns him, Brother Jack is guilty of his own brand of racial stereotyping, one that is arguably more pernicious than the clumsy stereotyping of the drunk man. It precludes the possibility of dialogue and cultural exchange, effectively closing off the issue of race from the Brotherhood’s representational domain. At first glance, this kind of amelioration of racial difference is seductive. However, it betrays a homogenising impulse that invariably results in the knowledge attendant to minority identity being erased.

Ellison offers a potent illustration of this erasure of minority identity earlier in the text, during the narrator’s short stint working in a New York paint factory following his expulsion from college. Tasked with mixing Liberty Paints’ signature product, ‘Optic White’ – ‘the purest white that can be found’ – the narrator discovers that its purity is contingent on ten drops of a ‘dead black’ liquid.\footnote{Ibid, 202.} On the one hand, the obvious symbolism here is of an America that is always already part black. It prefigures LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s claim, cited in my introduction, about the ‘invisible’ blackness that is an essential part of the United States (particularly given that a chemical mix-up results in the narrator producing a batch of paint that Baraka might deem to be an ‘ominous gray’).\footnote{LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], ‘The Myth of a Negro Literature’ (1962), \textit{Home: Social Essays} (New York: Akashic Books, 2009 [1966]), 133.} Equally, however, the very fact that the ten drops of black are subsumed and disappear into a homogenous sea of whiteness points to the way in which the eradication of difference may prove to be concomitant with negation.

Accordingly, by simply absorbing the issue of race into the representational framework of the Brotherhood, Brother Jack effaces the cultural heritage of African Americans in much the same ways as the paint (if mixed correctly, at least) effaces all traces of blackness. As such, what initially seems like testimony to his open-mindedness is actually the opposite. It closes
off a field of knowledge and the consciousness attendant to it, thus disempowering the person he is ostensibly defending. In this regard, Ellison speaks to ideas later advanced by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* (1992). ‘The habit of ignoring race’, she writes, ‘is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference’. Crucially, however, Morrison adds: ‘To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body’.\(^\text{138}\)

It is just this kind of ‘shadowless participation’ that characterises the narrator’s involvement with the Brotherhood. The attempt to ameliorate racial difference merely underscores his invisibility. As a result, his only function is as a vessel for ideology.

What Ellison appears to advocate in place of the kind of closed system of reality propagated by the Brotherhood is participation in the dominant cultural body, where the ‘shadow’ of the black presence is made manifest. Any power that the narrator is shown to possess in *Invisible Man* stems from him harnessing the specificity of his experiences as an African American in contrapuntal relation to the dominant rhythm of the various discursive contexts he is compelled to articulate himself within. The speeches he delivers on behalf of the Brotherhood are illustrative of this idea. He is at his most effective as an orator, Ellison demonstrates, when he strays from the ‘beat’ laid down for him by the Brotherhood and instead extemporises like a jazz musician, fingering the ‘jagged grain’ of his blackness. Perhaps the most potent example of this tendency comes in the oration he delivers on behalf of the Brotherhood at the funeral of Tod Clifton, a disillusioned former member of the organisation who had taken to selling ‘Sambo’ dolls in the streets of Harlem, before being shot and killed by a police officer. The speech is worth quoting at length:

> His name was Clifton and they shot him down. His name was Clifton and he was tall and some folks thought him handsome. And though he didn’t believe it, I think he was. His name was Clifton and his face was black and his hair was thick with tight-rolled curls – or call them naps or kinks [...] His lips were thick with an upward curve at the corners. He often smiled. He had good eyes and a pair of fast hands, and he had a heart. He thought about things and he felt deeply. I won’t call him noble because what’s such a word to do with one of us? His name was Clifton, Tod Clifton, and, like any man, he was born of a woman to live awhile and fall and die. So that’s his tale to the minute. His name was Clifton and for a while he lived among us and aroused a few hopes in the young manhood of man, and we who knew him loved him and he died.\(^\text{139}\)


Marrying the personal and the political, the individual and the social, the specific and the universal, what could have been a staid recitation of ideological platitudes is transformed into something akin to a jazz elegy. The repetition of ‘His name was Clifton’ functions as a kind of musical refrain that anchors the oration, allowing the narrator to affirm his identity as an individual within and against the homogenising forces responsible for his death. In doing so, Ellison demonstrates the narrator’s ability to signify on the rhetorical framework of the dominant cultural body, revising its meaning in a manner that reflects the specificity of his own cultural heritage.

It is precisely this kind of assertion of individuality within and against the ‘beat’ of history that the Brotherhood rejects. Individual or local concerns only matter inasmuch as they can be synchronised to the tempo of their ideological agenda. Within this context, blackness is rendered disposable, becoming what the narrator glibly refers to as a ‘natural resource’ to be expended in the service of historical progress, a means of expediting history’s inexorable spiral towards its ultimate telos. ‘What did they know of us’, he states, ‘except that we numbered so many, worked on certain jobs, offered so many votes, and provided so many marchers for some protest parade of theirs?’ The implication of this statement is clear: African Americans are an instrument that facilitates the Brotherhood’s interests, as opposed to vice versa. Ellison reinforces this idea with brutal clarity in the text’s penultimate chapter when the Brotherhood instigate a race riot in Harlem, because it is politically expedient to them for there to be divisions within the community.

The narrator’s realisation that he is a pawn in the Brotherhood’s game rehearses his previous experiences with institutionalised knowledge in the text. In particular, his time at a Tuskegee-like Southern college follows a similar pattern of exploitation. Just as in the Brotherhood, the narrator becomes expendable as soon as he strays from the beat that is laid down for him by others and threatens their illusory sense of harmony. In the case of his expulsion from college, ‘never quite on the beat’ finds a spatial corollary in the form of straying from the beaten track. The text’s renowned Trueblood episode, in which one of the college’s white trustees, Mr. Norton, learns of the incestuous relationship and resultant offspring of a black sharecropper and his daughter, occurs when the narrator, having been tasked with

140 Ibid, 507.
transporting him around the college, inadvertently drives Norton to a remote area far removed from the rarefied surroundings of the college campus. This ‘new territory’, as Norton calls it, proves to be as much psychic as physical. Being confronted with Trueblood’s horrifying (yet darkly comic) story of how he came to impregnate his daughter shatters Norton’s romanticised image of black life and the liberal pieties that underpin it. To this end, *Invisible Man* renders in fictional terms the critique of self-congratulatory, white liberal paternalism found in James Baldwin’s ‘Everybody’s Protest Novel’ (1949). Any ‘thrill of virtue’ or sentimentality that Norton feels as a patron of the black community is rudely interrupted by his encounter with Trueblood. Moreover, the Trueblood episode offers an early example of how Ellison harnesses the sensibility of black vernacular music to displace the ideological certainties of the white world. As a number of critics have pointed out, Trueblood’s surreal, improvised narrative of ‘accidentally’ raping his daughter while in a somnambulant, dreamlike state is indebted to Ellison’s conception of the blues.¹⁴¹ Trueblood’s recollection of singing the blues amid the fallout from the incident (‘I sings me some blues that ain’t never been sang before’), coupled with his ability as what Robert Stepto terms ‘a master storyteller’, sees him imbuing the ‘painful details […] or brutal experience’ with a ‘near-tragic, near-comic lyricism’.¹⁴² In short, the tale stands as archetypal instance of ‘personal catastrophe expressed lyrically’. The overriding effect is to interject a sense of dissonance into Norton’s hitherto harmonious and pure conception of the world, with Trueblood defamiliarising the assumptions on which Norton’s identity is predicated.

Ultimately, it is for shattering Norton’s illusions that the narrator is expelled by the college’s African American principal, Dr. Bledsoe. What is most telling about the expulsion, however, is the terms in which Bledsoe’s condemnation of the narrator’s behaviour is articulated. Chastising him for his naivety in obeying Norton’s instructions to show him some of the more remote areas of the college campus, Bledsoe asserts: ‘We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see’.¹⁴³ The full implications of these remarks only become apparent much later in the novel. During the argument with the narrator alluded to above regarding the historical consciousness of African Americans,

¹⁴¹ See, for example, Houston Baker, ‘To Move Without Moving: Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison’s Trueblood Episode’, *PMLA*, No. 98 (October 1983), 828-45.
Brother Jack recapitulates Bledsoe’s words when he states: ‘We do not shape out policies to the mistaken and infantile notions of the man in the street. Our job is not to ask them what they think but to tell them!’¹⁴⁴ (emphasis in original). On the surface there appears to be little to connect the accommodationist Bledsoe with the revolutionary Brother Jack ideologically. Yet, Ellison suggests that, in terms of the ends to which their respective ideologies are put, they are in complete accord with one another. Each strives for a closed ontology, seeking to foreclose the possibility of difference by exerting complete control over the representational terrain where meaning is constructed. In both instances, this process results in the lived experience and historical consciousness of African Americans being subordinated to the practice of hegemonic power. As a result, blackness is placed beyond the threshold of representation, occasioning the invisibility that provides Ellison with his central metaphorical trope.

The fact that Ellison draws such clear parallels between the Brotherhood and the various other institutions depicted in *Invisible Man* is crucial to the overall import of the novel. The shared behaviours he attributes to institutionalised forms of power suggests that there may be more truth than is typically assumed in his suggestion that the Brotherhood were not simply a proxy for the Communist Party. In particular, it undermines readings of the text that cast Ellison in the role of Cold Warrior. By implicating such bastions of respectability as Tuskegee (albeit in surrogated form) and Liberty Paints in the pattern of behaviour exhibited by the Brotherhood, he defamiliarises the ‘stable areas’ and ‘manners’ of American-ness, demonstrating the extent to which they constitute a closed system of reality that precludes difference and, in doing so, effaces blackness. If Ellison was waging battle in *Invisible Man*, therefore, his target was not so much Communism or Socialism as the combined forces of white hegemony.

Accordingly, while Ellison’s vision does undoubtedly intersect with that of the American Cold War on occasion, he is far from a pawn in what he himself might refer to as its ‘futile game of “making history”’.¹⁴⁵ Rather, he exists in syncopated relation to its representational domain, shifting the accent of Cold War discourse to the politics of race. In doing so, he reveals the distance between the ‘beat’ of America’s principles and the tempo of the nation’s

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 473.
¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 575.
praxis. In this space, he revises the meaning of American identity as it pertained in the middle of the twentieth century, rendering it coextensive with a hitherto disavowed blackness. Apart from the United States, Ellison suggests, the dissonant presence exerted by African Americans emerges as its most vital part, affirming ‘the principle on which the country was built’ by acting as a bulwark against the ‘increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern’. ¹⁴⁶ This passion, *Invisible Man*, demonstrates is not merely the province of America’s enemies. The text’s invocation of the importance of difference, therefore, carries a resonance that reverberates beyond the specificity of the narrator’s experiences as an African American and into the broader currents of American culture. As the closing words of the novel aptly put it: ‘Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?’¹⁴⁷

**Conclusion: Ellison’s Transnational America**

It is not culture which binds the people who are of partially African origin now scattered throughout the world, but an identity of passions. We share a hatred for the alienation forced upon us by Europeans during the process of colonization and empire, and we are bound by our common suffering more than by our pigmentation. But even this identification is shared by most non-white peoples, and while it has political value of great potency, its cultural value is almost nil.

– Ellison, ‘Some Questions and Some Answers’ (1958)¹⁴⁸

[Y]ou have to give up the idea that culture exists in neat pockets. Culture is exchange.

– Ellison, Interview with Hollie West, 1973¹⁴⁹

To conclude, I would like to consider the wider implications and the legacy of the cultural politics Ellison articulates in *Invisible Man*. While the novel is today a staple of both black studies and the American literary canon more broadly, its reputation has not always been so secure, particularly with regards to the former. In his 1994 memoir *New York Days*, the former *Harper’s* magazine editor, Willie Morris, recalls an incident in the late 1960s, which saw Ellison being accosted by two young black militants at an event at Grinnell College, Iowa. As described by Morris, what followed was a ‘vehement argument’ over *Invisible Man*, which culminated with one of Ellison’s interlocutors shouting: ‘You’re an uncle Tom, man. You’re a sell out. You’re a disgrace to your race’. When a concerned black student leader, Henry

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 562.
¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 581.
Wingate, came to his aid by breaking up the confrontation, Ellison broke down in tears, sobbing into Wingate's shoulder, while refuting the accusations.\footnote{Willie Morris, *New York Days* (New York: Little Brown and Co., 1993), 277-80.}

The haunting image of the usually taciturn Ellison responding in this way speaks to his frustration in the face of a new generation's attempts to render him invisible. Indeed, the incident recounted by Morris was far from an isolated one. By the mid-1960s, Ellison was an increasingly marginal figure in relation to prevailing currents in African American cultural discourse, with his emphasis on the fluidity and possibility inherent to American democracy holding little sway in the era of Black Power. Just as the Communist left had done a decade earlier, black radicals lined up to denounce his work and question his racial allegiance. For instance, in his review of Ellison's essay collection, *Shadow and Act* (1964), Hoyt Fuller accuses him of Olympian detachment from the reality of contemporary black life, castigating him for 'his above-it-all pose relative to the racial conflict'. To Baraka, he was 'a snob, an elitist'. Ernest Kaiser, meanwhile, would repeat the indictment of the young militants at Grinnell College, calling Ellison 'an Establishment writer, an Uncle Tom, an attacker of the sociological formations of the Black freedom movement [...] a denigrator of the great tradition of Black protest writing and, worst of all for himself as a creative artist, a writer of weak and ineffectual fiction and essays'.\footnote{Hoyt Fuller, 'Books Noted', *Negro Digest*, August 1965, 51-2; Amiri Baraka, qtd in Rampersad, 380; Ernest Kaiser, "Negro Images in American Writing", *Freedom Way*, No. 7 (Spring 1967), 152-63 (152).}

The cumulative effect of this kind of invective was to create a climate in which Ellison and, by extension, *Invisible Man* were perceived as somehow less than black.\footnote{This point is neatly summed up by an anecdote from fellow African American novelist and National Book Award winner, Charles Johnson. Recalling his time as a student at Southern Illinois University in the late 1960s, Johnson describes seeking a copy of *Invisible Man*, only to be told by the librarian of the recently introduced Black Studies programme that 'we don't carry it [...] because Ralph Ellison is not a black writer'. Charles Johnson qtd in Rampersad, 462.} But while Ellison was certainly sceptical of sociological formations and had from the moment *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award been a part of the American literary establishment, the charges of Uncle Tom-ism are patently unfair and reveal more about the ideological machinations of the Black Power era than they do about Ellison or his writing. Though it would be overstating the case to suggest he was a radical – at least in his post-Marxist years – he was, undoubtedly, to use the parlance of the 1950s, a 'race man', as the preceding sections of this chapter attest. Moreover, the idea of Ellison as a disengaged aesthete content to fiddle while the ghettos burned is a fallacy. His conception of literature was always bound to wider
social imperatives. This point is underscored in his eloquent riposte to Irving Howe’s claim in ‘Black Boys and native Sons’ (1963) that _Invisible Man_ is marred by an ‘aesthetic distance’ that foregoes the ‘plight and protest’ attendant to the black experience. ‘[P]rotest’, Ellison writes, ‘is an element of all art, though it does not necessarily take the form of speaking for a political or social program. It might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before, or as a protest against the human condition.’ In other words, it is through form as much as content that prevailing orthodoxies may be challenged. Accordingly, in its attempt to expedite the freedom of African Americans through an aesthetic rooted in black vernacular traditions, _Invisible Man_ is a novel that has radical implications in terms of what it suggests about American-ness.

What Ellison was not, however, was an essentialist. His conception of racial identity was culturally grounded rather than ontological, with black identity constituting an evolving, historically contingent set of rituals, traditions, and cultural formations forged within and against specific local conditions, as opposed to an innate, metaphysical essence. It is for this reason that his rejection of Marxism was mirrored by his rejection of Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist ideologies. Given that, in one way or another, Black Power was indebted to all three of these philosophies, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that its adherents frequently disparaged Ellison and his work.

In many ways, Ellison’s understanding of race was in keeping with the broader thrust of the ideas he exhibits in _Invisible Man_ regarding the relationship between knowledge and power. His repudiation of closed systems of reality in the novel extends to notions of racial essentialism, as evident in his depiction of Ras the Exhorter (later Ras the Destroyer). A West Indian, Black Nationalist, Ras (whose name refers to an Ethiopian nobleman and who, in the novel’s final chapter, rides through Harlem on horseback ‘dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain’) attacks the narrator for his involvement with the integrated Brotherhood, calling on him to join his rival organisation, ‘a glorious movement of black people’. Invoking the Pan-Africanist principles articulated by his fellow West Indian Harlemite, Marcus Garvey, in the 1930s, Ras asserts:

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You my brother, mahn. Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men brother? Shit, mahn. That's shit! Brothers the same color. We sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! You African. AFRICAN! Why you with them? Leave that shit, mahn. They sell you out. That shit is old-fashioned. They enslave us – you forget that? How can they mean a black mahn any good? How they going to be your brother?  

This statement is illustrative of what Paul Gilroy terms ‘cultural insiderism’. Its locating of black identity in an ontology of African-ness reifies what Gilroy characterises as ‘an absolute sense of ethnic difference’ that ‘acquires an incontestable priority over all other dimensions of their social and historical experience, cultures, and identities.’

By foreclosing difference in this way, however, Ras recapitulates the rhetorical patterns of those he denounces. The ideological purity of his utopian Pan-Africanism mirrors that of the Brotherhood in its attempt to synchronise the complexity of lived experience in accordance to a set of fixed a priori assumptions. The corrosive potential of this kind of absolutism is brought home in the race riot depicted in the final chapter of Invisible Man. Blaming the Brotherhood for Tod Clifton’s death, Ras calls on the narrator to be hanged, proclaiming: ‘Hang him up to teach the black people a lesson, and theer be no more traitors. No more Uncle Toms’.

With its unnerving echoes of white supremacist rhetoric and corresponding invocation of the spectre of lynching, Ellison here underlines the implications of ‘cultural insiderism’, regardless of who perpetuates it.

Ellison’s critique of ethnocentric identity paradigms in Invisible Man distils the broader thrust of his attitude towards Black Nationalism, whether in its local or international manifestations. The animus displayed towards him by nationalists in the United States during the 1960s was mutual, with Ellison condemning black militancy as ‘an easy con-game for ambitious publicity hungry Negroes’. He was similarly disdainful of the flowering of Pan-Africanist sentiments in African American literature in the 1960s. Comparing black writers in the 1960s to those in the 1930s, he suggests that Africa merely supplants Communism as the chosen mode of false consciousness among more militant African Americans. ‘In fact’, Ellison

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155 Ellison, Invisible Man, 370-1.
157 Ellison, Invisible Man, 557.
adds, ‘quite a number who were concerned with Communism are now fervent black nationalists. Oddly enough, however, their way of writing hasn’t changed significantly’.\textsuperscript{159}

Such remarks are symptomatic not just of his distrust of ideological purity, but his sense of alienation from African culture. Indeed, of all the writers examined in this thesis, it is Ellison who is the least inclined to look to his ancestral roots for political or intellectual sustenance. Neither African culture nor the continent’s burgeoning drive towards independence from colonial rule aroused much interest in him. Invited to visit Ghana in 1959, for instance, Ellison politely refused, on the grounds that he had ‘no special emotional attachment to the place’ and that ‘it was just part of the bigger world to me’.\textsuperscript{160} In light of this sense of detachment, it is perhaps unsurprising that he was profoundly sceptical as to the efficacy of the philosophy of Négritude, viewing it as merely an inverted form of the illusory racial purity propagated by white supremacists. Drawing on his own mixed racial heritage, Ellison insists that ‘we are bound less by blood than by our cultural and political circumstances’.\textsuperscript{161}

Accordingly, one sees how, for all that he eschewed the deterministic impulses attendant to what might be termed vulgar Marxism, Ellison was, ultimately, a materialist. However, it would be a mistake to confuse his locating of identity within specific ‘cultural and political circumstances’ with parochialism. For instance, his invocation of an ‘identity of passions’ among people of African origin rooted in their shared experience of white oppression attests to the way in which he was attuned to the transnational forces underpinning local conditions. What Ellison objected to was that the idea that the routes of culture are co-extensive with its roots.\textsuperscript{162} In other words, he rejected the assumption that blackness constitutes a discrete realm of knowledge that retains its primordial unity regardless of the context in which it is articulated.

‘Culture’, Ellison insisted instead, ‘is exchange’. He elucidates this point in his review of Baraka’s \textit{Blues People} (1964). Criticising what he perceives as Baraka’s failure to account for ‘the intricate networks of connections which binds Negroes to the larger society’, Ellison emphasises the way in which the interaction between black and white culture has been

\textsuperscript{159} Ellison, ‘A Very Stern Discipline’, 747.
\textsuperscript{161} Ellison, ‘A Very Stern Discipline’, 753.
\textsuperscript{162} The roots/routes homonym is elucidated by James Clifford in \textit{Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century} (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 36.
generative of new knowledge formations and modalities of expression. ‘[W]hite Americans’, he points out, ‘have been walking Negro walks, talking Negro-flavored talk (and prizing it when spoken by Southern belles), dancing Negro dances and singing Negro melodies for far too long to talk of a “mainstream” of American culture to which [African Americans are] alien’. It is in African American music, Ellison suggests, where this dialogic process is revealed most forcibly. Insisting that ‘Negro musicians have never, as a group, felt alienated from any music sounded within their hearing’, he argues that African Americans ‘have taken, with the ruthlessness of those without articulate investments in cultural styles, whatever they could of European music, making of it that which would, when blended with the cultural tendencies inherited from Africa, express their own sense of life, while rejecting the rest’.\(^{163}\)

Ellison’s own blending of European literary modernism with the ‘jagged grain’ of his experiences as an African American transposes this principle to the terrain of literature. As such, Ellison’s cultural politics appear to belong within the Black Atlantic tradition outlined by Gilroy. They are symptomatic of what Gilroy describes as the way that successive generations of black artists have fashioned explicitly intercultural perspectives that play out within and against the contours of western modernity and, in doing so, reveal its antinomies. In particular, Ellison’s suggestion that black vernacular music provides a locus of identification for those ‘without articulate investments’ in dominant cultural modes is concomitant with Gilroy’s argument that the music of the black diaspora has functioned, historically, as a site of resistance that responded to the ‘enforced separation of slaves from literacy’ by displacing ‘language and writing as the preeminent expression of human consciousness’.\(^{164}\)

In a sense, *Invisible Man*, with its musically inflected aesthetic and critical sensibility derived from jazz and the blues, reads as an attempt to render his principle – somewhat paradoxically – in literary form. The image of the narrator setting fire to all the papers in his brief case (including his high school diploma and a slip of paper containing the name he is to use in the Brotherhood) in the novel’s final chapter neatly symbolises this idea of displacing textuality as the locus of identity. In its place, Ellison turns to the transitory ‘ones […] who write no novels, histories or other books’, such as Trueblood, Lucius Brockway, Tod Clifton, and the Zoot Suiters. It is they, he suggests, who provide the most potent articulation of

\(^{164}\) Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 76.
modernity as it pertains to life in the United States precisely because they call attention to its antinomies.

Ellison fundamentally differs from Gilroy, however, in the emphasis he places on the nation-state as the framework in which the transformative potential immanent to modernity’s antinomies is best harnessed. ‘Geography’, Ellison was wont to point out, ‘is fate’. In other words, though identity is the product of multiple roots and divergent routes, it is articulated in accordance to the beat of the local circumstances that one finds oneself in. Culture is exchange, but an exchange that occurs in a specific locale and freighted with knowledge and power relations particular to that locale. In Ellison’s case, it is the beat laid down in America’s founding principles that orients the contrapuntal flows of knowledge that play out within its borders. Critically, these principles register difference as constitutive of what it means to be an American. They function in a manner reminiscent of Baraka’s characterisation of jazz as a ‘changing same’. Just as jazz, in Ellison’s words, ‘finds its life in endless improvisation upon traditional materials’, so the lifeblood of American-ness is its fluidity, the fact that the various cultures contained within it can extemporise on the bass line of the nation’s history.

In this context, the ‘passion towards conformity’ that Ellison condemns in Invisible Man may be understood as being – to use the contemporary parlance – un-American. As Ellison himself put it in 1961, ‘the real death of the United States will come when everybody is just alike’. It is this idea that has, in many ways, provided the backdrop to this chapter. Ellison, in effect, signifies on the principles of American democracy and, in doing so, reveals the way in which the tempo of American life in the middle of the twentieth century is out of sync with the beat of its principles. Both in Invisible Man and the rest of his oeuvre, Ellison’s response is to lay the foundations for a new, transnational America, in which trans emerges as the operative principle. This America is a transitory, perpetually transforming ‘culture of cultures’ where ‘the whole is always In cacophonic motion’; a ‘nation of nations’ articulated across, beyond, and through the boundaries of existing forms of knowledge.

Today, amid an upsurge in ideological partisanship both in the United States and beyond, this affirmation of difference and ‘antagonistic cooperation’ in the face of facile certainties

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165 Ellison, ‘Going to the Territory’ (1979), The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison, 595-616 (604).
resonates with a renewed urgency. Now might be a good time to synchronise ourselves with
the beat laid down by Ellison in *Invisible Man*. For *who knows but that, on the lower
frequencies, he also speaks for us?*
Chapter 2

Richard Wright: Yearning For Identification in Paris and the Third World

Introduction

I’m a rootless man, but I’m neither psychologically distraught nor in any wise particularly perturbed because of it. Personally, I do not hanker after, and seem not to need, as many emotional attachments, sustaining roots, or idealistic allegiances as most people […] I must confess that this is no personal achievement of mine; this attitude was never striven for … I’ve been shaped to this mental stance by the kind of experiences that I have fallen heir to. I say this neither in a tone of apology nor to persuade the reader of my ideological direction, but to give him a hinting clue as to why certain ideas and values appeal to me more than others.

– Richard Wright, White Man, Listen! (1957)¹

In Black Boy (1945), his autobiographical account of his childhood in Mississippi, Richard Wright recalls a ‘yearning for identification loosed in me by the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon a mysterious journey’.² In many ways, this yearning is the thread that connects Wright’s entire œuvre. Reflecting what Alan Nadel characterises as a recurring trope in African American literature of writers ‘looking […] for a site where their humanity is not a metaphoric or contingent or private assertion in the dubious margins of public knowledge’, Wright, throughout his career, attempts to anchor his or his characters’ perception of themselves and their environment to various instrumentalities that will validate their experiences.³ For example, reflecting on his decision to join the Communist Party in 1933, he claims that ‘[i]t was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics’ that attracted him to the Party, but the sense that ‘in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role’.⁴

Yet, by the time of the publication of *White Man, Listen!* in 1957, Wright claimed to ‘unabashedly [...] like and even cherish the state of abandonment, of aloneness’. At first glance, it is difficult to reconcile this affirmation of rootlessness with his earlier attempts to ‘find a home’ for African Americans like himself. Indeed, it is his rootlessness, his sense of being ‘in but not of’ the culture into which he was born, that precipitates his ‘yearning for identification’ in the first place. I propose, however, that Wright's subsequent claim that he does not need ‘as many emotional attachments, sustaining roots, or idealistic allegiances as most people’ is indicative of a historically contingent shift in his later work towards deterritorialised forms of identification – forms of identification that, paradoxically, hinge on and find a ‘functioning value and role’ for his rootlessness.

In this chapter, I argue that there are three interconnected reasons underpinning this shift: firstly, his decision to leave the United States for Paris in 1946; secondly, the transnational reverberations of the American Cold War; and thirdly, the growing momentum of anticolonial movements in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean in the 1950s. Accordingly, this chapter follows Wright from the United States to Africa, by way of France, examining his ‘yearning for identification’ as viewed through the prism of exile, Cold War geopolitics, and third world independence. To this end, I begin by examining Wright's engagement with Paris. Although he wrote sparingly about the city, the little he did write points to Paris playing a pivotal role in Wright's intellectual development. Through close analysis of Wright's unpublished essay ‘I Choose Exile’ (c. 1952), I propose that Wright endows Paris with a specular quality that throws the racially demarcated boundaries of American life into sharper focus. While this process sees him making some highly dubious claims about the scope of racial freedom in France, reframing the United States from a comparative perspective serves to defamiliarise the social relations that produced Wright's dual identity as an African American and, thus, disrupts the representational politics of the United States. What emerges is a perspective that derives its leverage from being simultaneously a part of and apart from the contexts, both local and transnational, that Wright's work subsequently intervenes in.

Echoing Michel Fabre's claim that Wright's ‘exile’ both ‘gave him perspective on his country and opened up the realities of Africa to him’, I subsequently examine how Wright's

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5 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 647.
6 Ibid.
attempts to bring his dissonant subjectivity to bear on the fight for independence in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean and how his perspective mediates and is mediated by the Cold War.\(^7\)

After noting the ways in which the transnational reverberations of the Cold War imperils Wright’s Parisian exile, I go on to analyse Wright’s engagement with African decolonisation in *Black Power* (1954), arguing that the text prefigures a diasporic sensibility, in which his ‘yearning for identification’ is recast in temporal and deterritorialised terms. In doing so, I suggest that Wright finds a ‘functioning value and role’ for his dual identity in the geopolitical flux instigated by decolonisation and the Cold War. Wright suggests that there is a premium placed on the insights of quasi-colonial subjects like himself in a geopolitical climate where a decolonised third world may hold the balance of power in the Cold War.\(^8\) Two-ness, in this context, functions as an instrumentality that allows Wright to mediate between the first and third worlds. To this end, I argue that he recognises in the deterritorialised status of the third world a historical counterpoint to his own rootless identity.

Noting his assertion that the actions of Europe’s imperial powers in Asia and Africa has created a psychological ‘void that must be filled’, I argue that Wright seeks to reterritorialise the third world in his own self-image as a ‘twentieth century […] Western man of color’.\(^9\) In doing so, I aim to build on and develop ideas advanced by John M. Reilly in his essay, ‘Richard Wright and the Art of Nonfiction’ (1986). Reilly argues that Wright’s post-exile nonfiction is driven by the ‘deeply held conviction that […] consciousness is the terrain of history’.\(^10\) I modify this argument to suggest that Wright sees double consciousness as the ‘terrain of history’. With the old imperial order seemingly in terminal decline and the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War nurturing a state of perpetual uncertainty, Wright recognises an opportunity to project his ‘double vision’ as what Reilly terms ‘the template for contemporary history’.\(^11\)

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\(^8\) In a 1947 interview with *PM’s Sunday Picture News*, Wright explicitly equates segregation in the United States with colonialism: ‘The Negro is intrinsically a colonial subject, but one who lives not in China, India, or Africa but next door to his conquerors, attending their schools, fighting their wars, and labouring in their factories. The American Negro, therefore, is but a facet of the global problem that splits the world in two’. ‘Why Richard Wright Came Back From France’, *Conversations With Richard Wright*, eds. Keith Kinnamon and Michael Fabre (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993), 122-125 (125).

\(^9\) Wright, *White Man, Listen!* 690, 702.


Accordingly, I propose that the exigencies of the historical moment see Wright rearticulating double consciousness. Where Du Bois’s desire is for the African American ‘to merge his double self into a better and truer self’ that does not forsake either strand of their dual identity, Wright embraces the dissonance of multiple subject positions as an affective force capable of articulating modalities of power outside of the prevailing hegemonies of the postwar period in both local and transnational contexts.\(^\text{12}\) Indeed, rather than being a self-negating non-identity, ‘two-ness’ empowers him to speak as a modern subject. Presenting himself as a privileged interpreter of his deterritorialised historical epoch, Wright offers his own ‘third point of view’. one that ‘see[s] and understand[s] the West; but […] also see[s] and understand[s] the non – or anti – Western point of view’. as concomitant with the fractured social order of the post World War II global imaginary.\(^\text{13}\) In doing so, I argue, he positions himself and those like him ‘who exist precariously / on the clifflike margins of many cultures’ as representing the vanguard of historical progress and finally finds a ‘functioning value and role’ for his experiences.\(^\text{14}\)

**Part 1: ‘For Paris is the Crossroads of the Earth’**

[Exile though I am, I remain unalterably and simply but an American.  
– Richard Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’ (1952).\(^\text{15}\)]

[For it is here that you can loll with your fine or café crème and watch the world go by. And I mean literally the world. For Paris is the crossroads of the earth and sooner or later all folks with enough gumption to travel will pass through.  
– Richard Wright, ‘There’s Always Another Café’ (1953).\(^\text{16}\)]

Wright, disillusioned with what he referred to as the ‘racial pressure of America’ left the country of his birth for France in the summer of 1946.\(^\text{17}\) Although he briefly returned to New York in early 1947, and went so far as to declare in an interview with *PM’s Sunday Picture News* in February of that year that he ‘belong[ed]’ in the United States, he returned to Paris on a permanent basis in August of that year, with the city remaining his home up until his untimely death in 1960. In this section, I consider the impact of the place Wright referred to as

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\(^\text{13}\) Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 706, 705.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid, 633.

\(^\text{15}\) Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’ (1952), Richard Wright Papers, JWJ-MSS 3, Box 6 Folder 10, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library, 17.


\(^\text{17}\) Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’, 3.
African Americans’ ‘land of refuge’ on both his intellectual development and his writing.\(^{18}\) Drawing on minor essays produced by Wright following his departure from the United States, notably the unpublished ‘I Choose Exile’, I wish to challenge two ostensibly opposed readings of the impact of exile on Wright’s work. The first, which for a long time constituted the critical consensus, suggests that, by moving to Paris, Wright ‘cut himself off from his roots’ and severed ‘the emotional umbilical cord through which his art was fed’.\(^{19}\) The second, advanced by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*, posits the notion that in Paris ‘the anti-colonial political struggle displaced an earlier exclusive interest in the liberation of African-Americans from their particular economic exploitation and political oppression’.\(^{20}\)

While the value judgements these readings place on the merits of Wright’s move to France are diametrically opposed, both are predicated on the assumption that he abandons the local in favour of the transnational in his post-exile work. Such interpretations, I argue, risk misrepresenting Wright’s work both before and after his departure from the United States. In the first instance, Wright’s work and the racial politics he depicted in it, as pre-exile texts such as *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) and ‘I Tried To Be a Communist’ (1944) attest, were always already transnational.\(^{21}\) More pertinently in the present context, however, while Gilroy is certainly correct in noting a shift towards anti-colonial politics in Wright’s later work, to suggest that it displaces an ‘exclusive interest in the liberation of African-Americans’ from their historically specific, localised forms of oppression risks diluting the complexity of Wright’s intellectual project during this period. Likewise, it is a misreading of Wright’s work to suggest that he severs his emotional attachment to the United States. As Tyler Stovall notes, ‘[i]f anything during his years in France, Wright spoke out even more forcefully than before against the social injustices that had caused him to flee the United States. Articles such as ‘American Negroes in France’, ‘The Shame of Chicago’, and ‘The American Problem’ testify

\(^{18}\) Wright, ‘American Negroes in France’, *The Crisis*, June–July 1951, 381-3 (381), Richard Wright Papers, JWJ-MSS 3, Box 5 Folder 70, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library.


\(^{21}\) In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright’s analysis of the genealogy of African American identity traces the transnational matrix of capitalism and imperialism that gave rise to the slave trade. ‘[T]he New England Puritans and the imperialists of Europe erected the traffic in our bodies into the “big business” of the eighteenth century’, Wright asserts. ‘Nation waged war against nation for the right to buy and sell us, just as today they fight for “markets and raw materials”’. Similarly, in ‘I Tried To Be a Communist’, Wright outlines an explicitly transnational perspective, claiming he was drawn to the CPUSA in the belief that their ideological emphasis on ‘the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands’ offered the possibility of ‘uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole’ (45). Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, Richard Wright Reader, 141-241 (148-9, 240).
to his continuing concern, even obsession with the plight of black Americans. Indeed, as I will demonstrate below, the difficulties Wright faced in trying to publish articles of this type reveals more about the cultural and political climate of early Cold War America (a climate where the kinds of overt expressions of dissent that he specialised in were – to use the parlance of the time – contained) than any sense of quietism or lack of commitment on his part.

Instead, I propose that Wright’s perspective in the texts I examine is at once transnational and local. Put simply, Wright views his ‘local’ status as an African American in an increasingly transnational context, but simultaneously interprets this transnational context through a (double) consciousness forged in specific, local conditions. For Wright, the collision between national and transnational imaginaries mobilises a dissonance which allows him to intervene in both contexts from a position that is at once a part of and apart from what he is describing. In so doing, he is able to utilise what Vilashini Cooppan calls ‘the peculiar ontological strength’ of double consciousness, which allows ‘nation and globe […] to coexist in a mutually sustaining fluctuation between seemingly opposed yet secretly conjoined states of being.’

Indeed, the ‘two-ness’ implicit in this formulation of dissonance recapitulates what Gilroy describes as ‘the insider-outsider duality […] traced down the years from slavery’ inherent to double consciousness.

Crucially, however, although Cooppan identifies this ‘doubled simultaneity’ as being a feature of *The Souls of Black Folk*, I propose that Wright expands the concept by reversing the power relations that structure Du Bois’s conception of ‘two-ness’. When Du Bois refers in *The Souls of Black Folk* to the ‘peculiar sensation’ of ‘looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’ and the ‘lack of true self-consciousness’ this yields, he is, in effect, describing a kind of alienating cognitive dissonance that is the product of having internalised racially demarcated discourses that structure African Americans as ‘other’. By contrast, reconstituting his ‘two-ness’ in a new locale (and, indeed, during a different historical epoch) allows Wright to exteriorise his dissonance, projecting it outwards as a mode of authorisation.

25 Cooppan, 305.
This dialectical movement between the local and transnational allows Wright to reclaim and reframe the double consciousness that is, in Reilly’s words, ‘the birthright of all sensitive Afro-Americans’ as the basis of a dissonant subjectivity that serves as an authoritative and timely critique of early Cold War America.27

The unpublished essay ‘I Choose Exile’ develops many of the themes discussed above. Originally written by Wright in 1951 and intended for publication in the African American journal *Ebony*, the article was rejected by the magazine’s publisher, John H. Johnson, who was fearful of publishing a piece that was so openly critical of the United States at the height of McCarthyism. Although the article was subsequently revised in 1952 and was considered for publication in *The Atlantic Monthly* and the *Paris Review*, it remains – as of 2015 – unpublished.28 However, the troubled history of ‘I Choose Exile’ should not detract from its importance in Wright’s *oeuvre*. It captures a vital moment in his career and provides the clearest evidence of the way that he endows Paris with a specular quality that works to defamiliarise American race relations. The comparisons he draws between French and American life mobilise a dissonance that undermines the legitimacy of racial practices in the United States. Perhaps most importantly, however, ‘I Choose Exile’ provides compelling evidence that Wright did not simply ‘cut himself off’ from the United States when he moved to Paris. It instead demonstrates that it was the boundaries placed on free expression in the geopolitical climate of the Cold War that served to marginalise him with regards to the plight of African Americans in the postwar period.

Ironically, in the essay itself, Wright attempts to address the accusation that exile will have a detrimental impact on his ability to engage with events in the United States. The question of whether he can ‘write in Paris’ when ‘so far from [his] subject matter’, Wright claims, is one that ‘is flung at me with frequent unctiousness [sic]’.29 His response is telling. He states:

> Anyone who has not, by the age of twenty, stored away the fundamental basis of his so-called subject matter will never do so. I took my subject matter with me in the

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Wright’s insistence that the ‘baggage of [his] memory’ will ensure that ‘the fundamental basis’ of his ‘subject matter’ will remain the same in Paris gestures towards the ‘doubled simultaneity’ of coexisting spaces and temporalities referred to above. Moreover, his evocation of an unchanging ‘fundamental basis’ structuring his work and predating his exile implies that Paris’s role was less transformative than translatory for Wright. Indeed, it would be a mistake to assume that Wright’s travels constitute some kind of metaphysical bildungsroman, whereby travel underpins a concomitant journey of self-discovery. As Michel Fabre points out, Wright was not ‘seeking his identity’ or trying to learn ‘more about himself’ in Paris. Rather, he was looking for ‘a unique vantage point’ from which to view and intervene in the racial politics of the United States.  

Of course, if Paris did not have a transformative effect on Wright’s identity and if his linking of the local and the transnational predates his exile, it is pertinent to ask what the significance is of Wright’s change of locale. It is my contention that, while the ‘baggage of [his] memory’ that constitutes the ontological basis of his identity remains the same, embedding it in a different cultural context defamiliarises the social relations that produced this baggage. As Wright states in ‘I Choose Exile’, having decided that he could no longer stand the ‘racial pressure’ of the United States, he resolved to ‘go to France’ and ‘defeat the culture that shaped me’. Once there, he found that, although his ‘racial conditioning went deep’, he ‘shed it all without a moment’s trouble or regret’.  

While Wright may, perhaps, be guilty of hyperbole when he states that he ‘shed […] all’ of his ‘racial conditioning’ in Paris, what is clear here is that he views the city as having provided a contradistinction that divests America’s racial practices of their authority over him. Herein lies the significance of Wright’s exile. While he cannot (and, indeed, has no desire to) efface ‘the fundamental basis’ of his identity, exposing it to new constituencies translates the value of his ‘baggage’, furnishing it with fresh meaning and a new role.

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30 Ibid.  
31 Fabre, The World of Richard Wright, 151.  
32 Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’, 5.  
33 Ibid, 8.
For Wright, defamiliarising the social relations that underpinned his ‘racial conditioning’ serves to translate and provide a new role for the double consciousness that is the by-product of this conditioning. Though Wright never openly acknowledges his debt to Du Bois, his references to being ‘in […] but not of’ Western civilisation in both *Black Boy* and *White Man, Listen!* and his description of Bigger Thomas being unable to find ‘a wholeness, a oneness’ between himself and the world in *Native Son* (1940) point to him being conversant with the older writer’s thinking. Indeed, the tension between what Vilashini Cooppan describes as ‘the curse and the gift’, ‘the philosophical condition and the expressive modality’ of double consciousness provides one of the overarching themes of Wright’s work. However, while the examples cited above emphasise the ‘curse’ of double consciousness (in *Black Boy*, for instance, Wright links African Americans’ duality to what he perceives to be ‘the essential bleakness’ and ‘cultural barrenness of black life’), there is a shift in emphasis towards its ‘expressive modality’ in Wright’s post-exile work.

Another of Wright’s Parisian essays neatly illustrates this point. In ‘There’s Always Another Café’, Wright describes being asked by a ‘baffled’ café owner as to why his (white) American patrons talk ‘about race all the time’ and ‘laugh a lot’, yet ‘don’t seem to be really happy’. The unspoken implication here is that Wright as someone who is both a part of and apart from the world being described will be able to decipher this scene. Wright’s double consciousness becomes, in this context, a kind of instrumentality that allows him to mediate between the local and the transnational. Moreover, Wright’s response to the café owner that the apparent uneasiness of his white American patrons stems from them having ‘encountered new ideas and notions in France’, which ensure that ‘[t]hey don’t really feel at home here’, underscores what Sujata Moorti describes as the way in which the collision between different ‘axes of production’ serves to defamiliarise the ‘national imaginary’, producing a ‘transnational optic’ that ‘foregrounds the politics of dislocation, disruption, and ambivalence’ as means of reconstituting the ‘representational politics’ that underwrite the nation. While for white Americans this process of defamiliarisation may shake the assumptions on which their identity

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35 Cooppan, 300, 305.
37 Wright, ‘There’s Always Another Café’, 83.
38 Sujata Moorti, ‘Imaginary Homes, Transplanted Traditions: The Transnational Optic and the Production of Tradition in Indian Television’, *Journal of Creative Communications*, 2. 1-2 (2007), 1-21 (3, 4).
is predicated, for Wright, providing a new spatial and temporal staging ground for his ‘twoness’ enables him to recast it as a privileged, authoritative vantage point from which he can interpret and intervene in contemporaneous events both locally and transnationally.

The defamiliarising effect that encountering ‘new ideas and notions’ has on white Americans in Paris is also evident in Wright’s responses to the city. Although, ultimately, Wright frames his own sense of deterritorialisation as a privileged mode of authorisation, his exile also forces him to confront his assumptions about his homeland and, perhaps most significantly, to re-evaluate his life and work prior to his departure. ‘I Choose Exile’ is illustrative of these points. When Wright declares that ‘[w]hile living in America I had had the illusion that in time my country would evolve a code of humane values […] but my sojourn in France taught me that I had deceived myself’, there is a definite sense of his assumptions being reconstituted by ‘new ideas and notions’. Similarly, later in the essay, Wright calls attention to the fact that ‘the distance of a freer culture’ had transformed his anger towards ‘America’s barbaric treatment’ of African Americans into ‘a sort of amazed pity’. Here, self-reflection and analysis underpin a critical re-reading and assessment of the assumptions about American life, which had provided the impetus for his earlier work.

In the context of these observations, Paris becomes, in a sense, an index of the failure of Wright the ‘protest’ writer. Wright, inspired by the example of H. L. Mencken, had begun his writing career with the aim of using ‘words as a weapon’ in the fight for racial justice. As ‘I Choose Exile’ demonstrates, however, despite being the pre-eminent African American writer of his generation, Wright found that he was unable to purchase a ‘dream house’ in New England on account of his race (an event I discuss in more depth below). Indeed, contrary to Irving Howe’s famous assertion that ‘[t]he day Native Son appeared, American culture was changed forever’, the limits the colour line placed on where Wright could live provides an all

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39 Wright also discusses what he perceives to be the difference between the responses of white and African Americans to French life is in ‘American Negroes in France’. Reflecting on the growing influence the United States exerted over France in the wake of the Marshall Plan and the Atlantic Pact, Wright observes: ‘To an extent that white Americans do not feel the capacity or the need, U.S. Negroes have sought a solidarity with French attitudes as though for protective coloration’. He goes on to state that whereas African Americans feel ‘a deep kinship with French ideals of liberty’, many of their white counterparts ‘have continuously attacked the culture and national qualities of the French character’ (383).
40 Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’, 10
41 Ibid, 13-4.
42 In Black Boy, Wright recalls reading H. L. Mencken’s A Book of Prefaces (1917) and being shocked to discover that ‘this man was fighting, fighting with words’ and deciding that he too would attempt to use ‘words as a weapon’ (282).
43 Ibid, 4.
too potent symbol of the limited immediate impact, in material terms at least, of his artistic endeavours.44

This lack of accord between Wright’s authorial and personal identities is evoked more explicitly in an interview with Sunday Picture News conducted during his brief return to the United States in 1947. Recalling questions put to him by French reporters as to whether the success of African American writers, artists, and musicians had improved American race relations, Wright observes: ‘Don’t let anyone tell you that any Negro in America, no matter what success he attains, has gotten over the difficulties and disabilities of being a Negro. The lives of all of them flow through banks and channels built for them by white Americans […] Artists are accepted as artists, but not as human beings. They are accepted on the stage and in the concert halls, but not in the same apartment house’.45 Implicit in this observation is that African American artists like himself are caught in a double bind, whereby they are required to express themselves within the terms of the very framework they seek to deconstruct. African American artistic expression becomes, in this context, a symbolic corollary of Du Boisian double consciousness. Just as African Americans’ ‘soul’ is measured ‘by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’, so must their artistic endeavours be measured by the structuring gaze of white America.46 In both cases, African Americans are inscribed within their ‘otherness’, by a sense that their subjectivity is somehow not their own.

There is a Foucauldian logic to Wright’s argument here. A parallel can be drawn between his point about the ‘acceptance’ of African Americans as artists and performers and Michel Foucault’s description of a ‘panoptic’ disciplinary regime where one ‘is seen, but […] does not see’, rendering visibility as ‘a trap’.47 The ‘visibility’ of African American artists on ‘the stage and in the concert halls’ (or, indeed, in works of literature), Wright suggests, fixes them within the gaze of deterministic ‘channels’ of power that structure blacks as ‘other’. The compromised subjectivity that this relationship precipitates has the effect of positioning African Americans as what Foucault characterises as ‘object[s] of information’ rather than

subject[s] in communication’. In turn, this induces ‘a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power’.48

The social protest fiction with which Wright came to literary prominence can be seen to have inadvertently contributed to ‘the automatic functioning of power’. The notion that ‘protest fiction’ actually props up existing power structures constitutes the overarching theme of James Baldwin’s famous criticism of Wright (and the ‘protest’ genre in general) in ‘Everybody’s Protest Novel’ (1949). ‘The “protest” novel’, Baldwin writes, ‘far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying the framework we believe to be so necessary’ and provides the (implicitly white) audience ‘a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all’.49 Wright’s work in this reading, far from challenging the authority of existing power structures, actually internalises and reinforces them. Texts that explore the consequences of American race-relations like Uncle Tom’s Children (1938) and Native Son (1940) come to reflect what Foucault defines as the way that power is not simply ‘the “privilege” […] of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated’ (emphasis added).50

Wright’s resentment of Baldwin’s critique is, of course, well-documented: it precipitated a split in what had hitherto been a cordial relationship between the two men that was never resolved.51 Yet some of Wright’s own reflections on his early fiction appear to endorse Baldwin’s argument. His assertion in ‘How “Bigger” Was Born’ (1940) that reviews of his short-story collection, Uncle Tom’s Children (1938), made him realise that he had offered his readership ‘the consolation of tears’ by writing ‘a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about’ characterises the text as a salve to white consciences in much the same way outlined by Baldwin.52 Native Son was conceived as a retort to such sentimental readings of his work (‘I swore to myself that if I wrote another book, no one would weep over it’). However, upon publication Wright found that his intention of

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48 Ibid, 200, 201.
50 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 26.
showing how ‘the contempt’ in which whites hold African Americans underwrites black violence was misread by many white readers as evidence of how ‘all blacks are criminals’.53

In both examples, Wright’s literary endeavours are appropriated as objects of consumption that serve to buttress the white self, while continuing to render African Americans as ‘other’. The dissonance he has sought to interject into the American psyche through his ‘protest’ fiction becomes, when embedded solely within a national framework, self.negating and alienating. Its dissonant potential is inextricably caught up within a network of (white) hegemonic power. Accordingly, having seen his work appropriated in this way, Wright sought new ‘channels’ and networks through which to filter his work. The contradistinction provided by Paris and, later, the third world fulfilled this role for him. Moreover, the insights that Wright gleans from exposing the ‘baggage’ of his identity to these different contexts are, in turn, enlisted in the service of a renewed, simultaneously local and transnational perspective that displaces existing knowledge formations. Indeed, as I demonstrate below, framing the racial practices of the United States comparatively and transnationally provides a new impetus and role for Wright’s work, one which, ultimately, sees him taking on the mantle of what Harilaos Stecopoulos terms ‘postcolonial critic avant la lettre’.54

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The sense of France and the United States constituting two very different axes of production hinted at in ‘There’s Always Another Café’ is foregrounded in ‘I Choose Exile’. Indeed, the ‘insider-outsider duality’ that frames Wright’s engagement with the café owner in the former is the key organising principle of the latter. When, in the second paragraph of ‘I Choose Exile’, he boldly asserts that ‘I live in exile because I love freedom, and I’ve found more freedom in one square block of Paris than there is in the entire United States’, Wright creates a dialogue between the two locations that structures the remainder of the text.55

Reflecting the way that a dissonant relationship between opposing forces may modify each axis, Wright’s view of both Paris and the United States is contingent on and haunted by the spectre of the other. The sense of ‘freedom’ that Wright imbues Paris with is framed

relationally by his formative experiences of ‘the racial pressure’ that defined his existence in the Deep South and, later, Chicago, New York, and, New England. By the same token, these ‘local’ experiences are given new value from the transnational vantage point offered by Paris. Memory and personal experience are, in effect, reconstituted in a new locale and placed in a dialogic relationship that simultaneously shapes Wright’s response to his new surroundings and rearticulates his relationship with the environment he has left behind.

However, ‘I Choose Exile’ also illustrates how the collision of national and transnational imaginaries that this dialectical exchange initiates does not have the same discursive impact across each axis of production. On closer inspection, Wright’s analysis of French culture in the essay is circumscribed by the same critical distance that makes the essay such an effective critique of American race relations. As a portrait of life in postwar Paris, ‘I Choose Exile’ offers little in the way of penetrating critical insights. It has next to nothing to say about the quotidian day-to-day reality of Parisian life in the aftermath of the Second World War, a reality that, privately, frustrated Wright.56 A diary entry from September 1947, for example, sees him railing against ‘the French mentality’ when it came to ‘practical matters’: ‘It is so hard to get a fixed routine in Paris these days. [...] Went to the ice house. It was closed until five o’clock! Now, I ask you, is not that the reason France is so damned poor today?’57 Nor does the essay shed much light on the social, cultural, and political practices that underpin French life. Though Wright praises the ‘smooth flow of Parisian public politeness’ and praises contemporary French writers (notably Jean-Paul Sartre) for their ‘humanistic passion to defend the dignity of man, to advocate an equality of respect among peoples’, these reactions are largely limited to his own experiences as what James Campbell calls a ‘man of letters’ feted by the French literary establishment and politicians.58

The resulting insights into French culture in ‘I Choose Exile’ are at best superficial and at worst hopelessly naïve. Wright seems quite content to take the ideological claims of French culture at face value, ignoring the extent to which his status as a privileged outsider mediates his experience of ‘freedom’ in Paris. For instance, in the conversation with André Gidé that he recounts in the draft of ‘I Choose Exile’ submitted to Ebony in 1951, Wright allows Gidé’s dubious claim that ‘in France, the different, the variant is prized; our curiosity to know other

56 See, for instance, Fabre, The World of Richard Wright, 149-50.
57 Wright, qtd in Fabre, The World of Richard Wright, 150.
58 Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’, 8, 10; James Campbell, Exiled in Paris, 9, 4-9.
people is the hallmark of our civilized state’ to pass unchallenged. It is highly unlikely that
North Africans – particularly Algerians – in Paris during this period would have shared Gidé’s
sanguine perspective on the French attitude towards ‘the different’. Indeed, contemporaneous
newspaper articles claiming that ‘[t]he reality of the Arabs swarming Paris is that the city is
today one of the least safe in the world between sundown and sunset’ make a mockery of
both Gidé’s assertion and Wright’s claim that ‘Paris is racially a free city’ and that ‘[t]he French
define their civilization, officially and non-officially, in non-racial terms’.

It would be more accurate, therefore, for Wright to assert that ‘Paris is a racially free city
for African Americans. Being largely outside of the historical purview of French imperialism,
black Americans in the first half of the twentieth century did not belong to France’s cast of
racial ‘others’ in the way that, for instance, Algerians did. Accordingly, as an African American
(and a celebrated African American, at that), French racial practices were not practised on
Wright in the same way that American ones were. As a result, he and other African
Americans did not find their identity marooned in the gap between rhetoric and practice in
Paris the same way they did on the other side of the Atlantic. It is this remoteness from the
local history of their adopted homeland that allowed French’s culture’s invocation of ‘freedom’
and racial tolerance to resonate with their day-to-day existence in France.

Wright’s description of encountering an African American expatriate living freely and
happily with his French wife and her family in a ‘provincial café’ underscores this point.
Extrapolated from their historical context, his references to ‘a smiling French peasant family
doting on their colored boy’ and the African American café owner’s claim that ‘he has settled
down here to do some free living’ appear to endorse the notion of a racially free France.
When placed alongside contemporaneous attitudes towards inter-racial relationships between
French citizens and its colonial subjects, however, it becomes clear that African Americans
occupy a very different place in the French racial imaginary.

As Stovall has shown in essays that have explored the issue of miscegenation in Paris in
the first half of the twentieth century from both African American and colonial vantage points,

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60 The reference to the supposed threat of ‘Arabs’ on the streets of Paris is taken from a 1948 edition of the
conservative newspaper L’Aurore and is quoted in Rosemary Wakeman, ‘The Heroic City: Paris, 1945-1958
61 Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’ (1952), 15-16.
62 Ibid, 16.
attitudes to inter-racial relationships between French women and African American men, although ‘not encouraged’, did not provoke the same cultural anxieties as relationships between French women and colonial subjects. For African Americans used to miscegenation being either illegal or ‘liable to provoke a violent reaction from whites’, the fact that such relationships could be pursued with relative openness in Paris ‘often seemed the ultimate proof of French racial tolerance’. By contrast, Stovall demonstrates how France’s decision to supplement the nation’s workforce with French women and men from the nation’s colonies during World War I nurtured new relations between the two that set ‘forth themes that would come to fruition after 1945’. ‘Such contacts’, Stovall writes, ‘were extremely controversial, attacked by both French men and French public authorities, and the danger of love across the color line was the key reason for France’s decision not to renew its use of non-white labor during the interwar years’.

In this context, Wright’s insistence that he has ‘found more freedom in one square block of Paris than there is in the entire United States’ is true, insofar as it corresponds to the reality he experiences in the city as a celebrated African American author and the extent to which it mirrors ‘the fundamental basis’ of his identity. Accordingly, while Paris offers a resolution to Wright’s ‘yearning for identification’, it is a problematic resolution. The city embodies all of the enchanting qualities of the ‘vast modern cities’ he describes being captivated by as a child in Black Boy, but without the culturally contingent racial ties that limit his experience of such spaces in the United States. In direct contrast to his relationship with the United States, Wright’s historical distance from France increases his proximity to the type of individual freedom enshrined in the national imaginary of both nations. Yet, paradoxically, his affinity with and attachment to France is predicated on his historical detachment from the reality he describes and, indeed, experiences. In other words, his identification with the ‘freedom’ of French life is entirely contingent on his being an ‘outsider’. It is precisely because he is not imbricated in French culture historically in the way that an Algerian is that he is able to speak of France’s love of ‘freedom’. There is, therefore, something solipsistic about his claims that

65 Wright, Black Boy, 148.
France is racially free. It betrays what Brent Hayes Edwards – glossing Stovall – describes as a tendency among African Americans in Paris in the first half of the twentieth century to view the city as “free of racism” precisely at the height of French colonial exploitation. Employing the putative universality of the French “Rights of Man” to decry U.S. racism in this way, Edwards adds, risks privileging local concerns at the expense of ‘transnational black solidarity’.  

Edwards’ argument is inadvertently illustrated by Wright’s attempt to nurture solidarity between African Americans and the French, in response to French concerns about the United States’ growing influence in postwar France. As detailed in ‘American Negroes in France’, Wright was instrumental in the formation of the Franco-American Fellowship. The ‘aim’ of this organisation, Wright claims ‘is to raise again the concept of freedom, generosity, the dignity and sanctity of the individual’ in such a way that benefits both African Americans and ‘their French neighbors’. Yet, Wright readily acknowledges that the group keeps ‘scrupulously clear of French domestic politics’.  

What Wright is, in effect, advocating here is identification without accountability. It revolves around an abstract notion of freedom, which, in turn, hinges on his remoteness from the culture he claims to identify with. In doing so, he reveals both the advantages and perils of cosmopolitan detachment. Wright’s experience of France as a privileged outsider is unencumbered by what Bruce Robbins describes as ‘the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives’. As such, he is able to invest in an idealised vision of French culture that corresponds with the ‘fundamental basis’ of his own identity. On the one hand, the deterritorialised form of identification that empowers Wright to speak as a modern subject and advance the cause of African Americans inadvertently silences the ‘nation-bound’ experiences of those outsiders in France for whom the luxury of cosmopolitan detachment is not an option. When utilised reflexively to critique the racial practices of the United States, however, this kind of detachment is an effective discursive tool that reveals the historically and culturally contingent nature of racial otherness.

67 Ibid.
70 Bruce Robbins, ‘Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism’, Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation, eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1-19 (1).
Ultimately, then, the discursive weight of Wright’s insights in ‘I Choose Exile’ varies depending on the axis of production they are applied to. This difference is the result of his having a very different historical relationship with the United States to that he has with France. As an African American, he is imbricated historically within American culture. He is, to use the terminology deployed by Du Bois in The Souls of Black Folk, ‘woven […] with the very warp and woof’ of the United States.\textsuperscript{71} By contrast, Wright’s relationship with France is almost entirely ontological: it is a connection grounded in his existence and experiences as lived in the present moment; a connection predicated more on who he is, as opposed to how he came to be.

It is this sense of being historically entangled within the racially demarcated ‘channels’ of American power that prevents Wright from being able to sate his ‘yearning for identification’ in the land of his birth and compels his flight into exile. Being an African American writer in the United States is, in Wright’s eyes, to have one’s identity appropriated to buttress a social order that has developed on the back of your marginalisation. It is, therefore, his historical relation to the United States that precludes him from identifying with it. The spatio-temporal gap afforded by the Atlantic Ocean and three centuries, however, creates a kind of historical breach that facilitates a deterritorialised form of identification with French culture that transforms (or, more accurately, translates) the value of Wright’s dual identity. This breach provides a space in which Wright’s historical ‘baggage’ is not anchored by the weight of local hegemonies.

In Paris, then, Wright is able to pursue the ‘sense of freedom’ and ‘vague glimpses of life’s possibilities’ that reading literature had awoken in him as a young man in the American South.\textsuperscript{72} Freeing him from the representational burden of being black in the United States, the city provides an environment in which the promise of a better life is not – for him at least – circumscribed by his racial background. This physical distance from the United States simultaneously creates an intellectual distance that defamiliarises American culture. The concluding paragraph of ‘I Choose Exile’ neatly illustrates this point. Wright asserts: ‘exile though I am, I remain unalterably an American and, as such, I’ve often asked myself if, armed with these gloomy insights from an exiled life, I could somehow aid my country in its own

\textsuperscript{71} Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, 163.
\textsuperscript{72} Wright, Black Boy, 292, 293.
clumsy grappling with alien realities’. For Wright, the ‘plurality of vision’ affected by his Parisian exile transforms the value of his dual identity. Instead of ‘two-ness’ being the basis of a self-negating non-identity, extricating it from a specifically American context repositions it as a dissonant subjectivity that casts Wright in the role of privileged interpreter of his cultural domain. He mobilises this dissonance as the basis of political interventions in both local and transnational contexts. His later writing on the third world, in which he posits the notion that ‘two-ness’ constitutes the historical vanguard in the postwar era, is, in many ways, the culmination of this process. In ‘I Choose Exile’, however, the fact of his being at once a part and apart is harnessed by Wright to penetrate the ideological parameters of American culture. Juxtaposing his experiences in the United States and France, Wright utilises the ‘two-ness’ of his subject position to articulate a timely critique of American racial practices. Dissonance thus emerges as an affective, deterritorialising force that opens up new identificatory possibilities and channels of power both for Wright himself and African Americans in general.

While Wright’s analysis of French culture in ‘I Choose Exile’ is clearly compromised by his failure to address or even acknowledge the issue of racial discrimination in France, the comparative relationship between the United States and France that structures the essay provides an effective tool for undermining the discursive legitimacy of American racial practices. Indeed, in some respects, Paris as described by Wright exists almost entirely as a mirror that throws American racial practices into sharper focus. As the previously cited reference to there being ‘more freedom in one square block of Paris than there is in the entire United States’ suggests, Wright frequently frames American race relations comparatively in ‘I Choose Exile’, with the United States coming off significantly worse in the comparison. The text is, therefore, illustrative of what Paul Giles defines as ‘virtualization’, a process whereby national ‘cultural formations are hollow[ed] out by looking at them from a comparative angle of

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73 Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’, 17.
vision'. Rejecting the notion of a ‘universalist’ discursive model that seeks ‘simply to transcend national boundaries’, Giles instead posits the notion that ‘by reconsidering national formations from a position of estrangement’, it is possible ‘to illuminate the nation’s unconscious assumptions, boundaries, and proscribed areas’.

Foremost among the ‘proscribed areas’ of American life that Wright’s comparative perspective illuminates is the racial demarcation of property relations. Wright notes how, when seeking an apartment, ‘I had an advantage over American Negroes in that […] there is no Black Belt where public opinion or the law compels a Negro to confine his domicile’ (to underscore his point, he describes sharing tea with his prospective landlord, ‘an aristocratic woman of some 80 years’, before moving into his new apartment). The ease with which Wright negotiates finding somewhere to live in Paris is at odds with his experiences in the United States. Indeed, he identifies being prevented from buying a house amid the ‘lovely, snow-clad New England hills’ by a ‘white owner [who] did not want to sell his house to a Negro’ as being the incident that precipitated his decision to leave the United States.

American property relations, in this context, constitute the ‘insider-outsider duality’ of double consciousness made manifest. Being prevented from taking up residence in one of the foremost representative spaces of the America’s national identity – New England, Wright reminds us, was home to ‘the dauntless abolitionists’ and the ‘stubborn but free Yankee soil’ from which Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau’ emerged – provides a literal representation of how Wright’s blackness places him outside of the ambit of the American national imaginary. His experiences in New England underscore the way in which, in the United States, Wright is forever inscribed within his otherness as an African American, the way in which he is, to quote Du Bois, an ‘outcast and a stranger in [his] own house’.

Framing his comparison between the U.S. and France in these materialist terms functions as a particularly effective discursive tool for Wright. As he acknowledges elsewhere in ‘I Choose Exile’, appeals for racial justice that are couched in evocations of ‘freedom’ are liable to be dismissed as overly abstract. couching his critique in material terms, however,
defamiliarises the ‘practical’ as well as the philosophical grounds on which American racial practices operate. By placing Parisian property relations alongside those of the United States, Wright, in effect, ‘others’ the United States. In doing so, he demonstrates that segregation – in both its *de jure* and *de facto* forms – is historically and culturally contingent, rather than natural.

‘I Choose Exile’ thus reflects what Giles describes as the way that texts with an explicitly ‘comparative dimension’ may ‘denaturalize what is supposedly familiar and consequently reveal the strange and sinister components that go to make up formations of a “national psyche”’. For Wright, the specular quality of France deconstructs the ‘strange and sinister components’ of the American cultural imaginary, opening up the possibility of a new paradigm of national identity more amenable to the claims of African Americans and more in keeping with the ‘self-evident truths’ on which the nation was founded.

Through the ‘doubled simultaneity’ of a perspective that is at once transnational and local, then, Wright is able to translate the value of the ‘insider-outsider duality’ that structures his identity. In doing so, his work recapitulates what Edwards, discussing James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) describes as the text’s ‘contention […] that a transnational foray is necessary to undo the “fixed” and “static” nature of the “Negro question in the United States”’. ‘I Choose Exile’ adheres to a similar logic. Wright’s ‘transnational foray’ loosens the ties of local hegemonies, throwing American racial practices into a state of flux. As a result, immersing the ‘baggage’ of his double consciousness in a different set of social relations furnishes him with a ‘functioning role’ for his dissonant subjectivity. The alienated object of history who in *Black Boy* laments the ‘barrenness’ of African American life (‘how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories’) emerges as a self-authorising modern subject whose ‘two-ness’ articulates the discontinuities in American cultural discourse.

* Though well aware that his attempt to defamiliarise American race relations is likely to see him branded – with all the attendant connotations such a designation carried during this period – ‘un-American’, ‘I Choose Exile concludes with Wright outlining his hope that the

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81 Giles, 3.
dissonant subjectivity he has forged away from the United States will allow him to ‘inject into the American consciousness a consciousness of their consciousness’ (emphasis in original). Drawing attention to both the alienating effects of ‘racial conditioning’ on African Americans in the United States and the propaganda value of American racial practices to the Soviet Union, he aims, in effect, to enhance his fellow Americans’ understanding of their racially codified national imaginary by simultaneously foregrounding its local and transnational implications.

Unfortunately for Wright, however, his prediction in the final paragraph of ‘I Choose Exile’ that the type of criticism he advances in the essay ‘might well merit a militant attack on the part of those determined, in their shortsightedness, to defend at any cost their American purity’ turned out to be all too prescient. ‘[T]he gloomy insights’ he had ‘garnered from exiled life’ were too provocative, too radical for American publishers during a period that demanded uncritical patriotism. In an America riven by Cold War paranoia, failure to toe the nationalist line prompted charges of aiding and abetting communism that inevitably curtailed one’s career prospects. It was, thus, an inhospitable political climate in which Wright sought to nurture a new consciousness among his fellow Americans. ‘I Choose Exile’ passed from *Ebony* to *Atlantic* to the *Paris Review*, but in each case any enthusiasm among editors for the piece was outweighed by political expediency. The essay remained – and, indeed, remains – unpublished. Like many other dissenting voices during this period, Wright found himself frozen out in the chill of the Cold War.

**Part 2: Wright and The Parisian Cold War**

The impact of the American Cold War on Wright’s life in Paris extended far beyond his ability to find a publisher for the kind of ‘gloomy insights’ into American culture that he articulates in ‘I Choose Exile’. By the late 1940s, France increasingly found itself positioned as an ideological staging ground for the Cold War, with the advent of the Marshall Plan greatly increasing the cultural and political influence of the United States in France. As David Ryan notes:

> US political authority paved the way for the Marshall Plan, which guaranteed access to European markets for American goods […] But the products rarely travelled across the Atlantic alone. They came with strong and seductive political messages. In

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84 Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’, 17.
various ways and through various adaptations, American goods, from cigarettes to jeans, promoted narratives of freedom, often explicitly in advertisements.\textsuperscript{85}

France was, in many ways, the litmus test for the Marshall Plan. Its perceived vulnerability to a Communist takeover – the nation’s Communist Party had emerged from World War II with its prestige enhanced by its prominent role in the French resistance and subsequently attracted almost 30% of the vote in the national elections of 1946 – meant that it was top of the list for American aid.\textsuperscript{86} According to a State Department policy statement from 1947, France was riven by an ‘internal political battle, the outcome of which is of the greatest importance to the United States’. The statement continues: ‘The world drama of Russian expansion is being played in miniature on the stage of France’.\textsuperscript{87} Fears that the ‘loss’ of France to Communism would result in the rest of Western Europe following suit meant that, when the aid from the Marshall Plan was finally apportioned, France received $2.9 billion, the largest amount of any nation.\textsuperscript{88} Ultimately, the Marshall Plan’s various incursions into Europe amounted to a ‘strategy towards becoming the Western hegemony [that] was multifaceted’.\textsuperscript{89}

Ideologically, such an approach revolved around what Alan Sinfield, in a different context, has described as the project of dominant powers to make the relationship between ‘economic, political, military, and cultural power’ seems ‘harmonious and coherent’.\textsuperscript{90}

Wright’s response to the Cold War was to reveal the truth about this harmony by interjecting a sense of dissonance into America’s Cold War project, undermining its discursive legitimacy. Having seen his own work divested of its radicalism and transformed into a panacea for white liberal guilt, he was all too familiar with the way in which cultural expression could be appropriated to buttress the prevailing hegemony. Moreover, as an African American reared in the Deep South, he had plenty of cause to fear what American hegemony might entail for the rest of the world.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Wright was dismayed by America’s growing global presence. In particular, he was fearful that the social and political conditions that had

\textsuperscript{87} Qtd in McKenzie, 20.
\textsuperscript{88} McKenzie, 21.
\textsuperscript{89} Ryan, 53.
precipitated his departure from the United States had followed him across the Atlantic and were beginning to pollute his ‘city of refuge’. Both Reilly and Campbell note, for example, that Wright’s initial optimism about his adopted home gave way to a ‘disillusionment’ born of the incursion of the ‘international power struggle’ initiated by the Cold War into Parisian life. As a result, he increasingly engaged in projects intent on disturbing the ‘harmonious and coherent’ self-image that the United States sought to present to the world. Ultimately, this strategy saw Wright interjecting race into the Cold War imaginary via anti-colonial politics. In the first instance, however, it saw him harnessing his ‘two-ness’ as a kind of instrumentality capable or revealing the reality buried within the ‘seductive messages’ of U.S. propaganda to his French hosts.

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Wright’s concerns about the impact of the Cold War on Paris are explicitly outlined in ‘American Negroes in France’ (1951). Noting a ‘fear of America and […] dread of Russia’ that is shared by French and African Americans alike, Wright views the intrusion of the Cold War into Parisian life in the form of the Marshall Plan and the Atlantic Pact as threatening the ‘French ideals of liberty’ that he and his fellow African Americans feel ‘a deep kinship with’. For the first time, Wright notes, ‘[…] the U.S. Negro is asking himself: To what extent will some Frenchmen, eager to please Americans, accept racial doctrines alien to French traditions or customs?’

Inevitably, given his first-hand experience of America’s racial practices, Wright’s primary concern was that a ‘deepening of American influence in France’ – both culturally and economically – would result in the ‘arbitrary racial assaults’ and ‘constricting racial influences’ that prompted his departure from the United States being replicated in his adopted home. In other words, Wright viewed American global hegemony as an extension of American whiteness. Being intimately acquainted with what the practice of American whiteness entailed, he was understandably keen to elucidate the parallels between the ideology of the American

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91 Reilly describes how in a letter to Dorothy Norman from February 1948 published in Twice a Year, Wright makes reference to ‘a feeling among the French that they were helpless objects in the struggle between the US and the USSR’. Campbell, meanwhile, notes how Cold War politics followed Wright across the Atlantic creating ‘a new inventory of problems concerning his role as a political activist, and even his continuing residency in France’, which saw ‘[t]he romance of life in the City of Light turn into a chilly exile’. Reilly, ‘The Art of Non-Fiction’, 509. 508; Campbell, Exiled in Paris, 96-7; Richard Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’, 6.
93 Ibid., 382.
94 Ibid., 382, 381.
Cold War and the nation’s domestic racial practices. As a result, in ‘American Negroes in France’ (and, indeed, in the nonfiction he subsequently produced on the subject of third world independence), Wright tries to offset the ‘seductive messages’ of American propaganda by articulating counter-narratives that mobilise the dissonance inherent to his dual identity. The essay sees him drawing on his experiences as someone simultaneously inside and outside of American culture to reveal the continuities between the United States’ hegemonic aspirations and its racial practices.

The fears that Wright articulates in ‘American Negroes in Paris’ reveal the transnational reach of what Nadel characterises as ‘containment culture’. Though he does not use the word in the essay, Wright’s reference to ‘constricting racial pressures’ in the United States borrows from the same vocabulary of culturally mandated restriction and demarcation as containment. Indeed, at first glance Wright’s fears of a hegemonic, totalising impulse underpinning the increased involvement of the United States in France merely expands the geographical parameters of Nadel’s claim that ‘the American cold war is a particularly useful example of the power of large cultural narratives to unify, codify, and contain – perhaps intimidate is the best word – the personal narratives of its population’ (emphasis in original). When Wright suggests that in the wake of the Marshall Plan and Atlantic Pact ‘France is no longer just France’ (emphasis in original) but ‘a nation whose attitudes are being modified’ by ‘the spread and deepening of American influence’, he effectively casts ‘the American cold war’ as an offensive, interventionist policy intent on unifying, codifying, and containing the national narratives of other populations as well as its own.

In doing so, Wright reverses prevailing American assumptions about the nature of the containment narrative. ‘The impact of “containment” as a policy and a word’, Ryan writes, ‘immediately suggested that the Soviets took the initiative and that the Americans responded as part of a defensive posture concerned with national security. Within this framework, the United States was identified as the guarantor of Western security’. Wright’s analysis in ‘American Negroes in France’ not only refutes any suggestion that America’s pretensions of being ‘the guarantor of Western security’ during the Cold War was merely altruistic, it also hints at an alternative genealogy for the containment narrative, one which goes some way to

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95 Nadel, Containment Culture, 4.
97 Ryan, 61.
explicating his unease at America's deepening influence in France. Implicit in Wright's fear that the Cold War may result in the 'constricting racial influences' of the United States being revived in France, is the notion that containment – at least in the sense of what Nadel defines as a 'rhetorical strategy that functioned to foreclose dissent, preempt dialogue, and preclude contradiction' – is not simply a historically specific response to the perceived threat of Soviet Communism, but the extension of the logic underpinning the nation's racial attitudes. The political or ideological 'other' becomes, in effect, congruent with the racial 'other' in the American (trans)national imaginary.

More broadly, when refracted through the prism of 'the American cold war', Wright's oeuvre reveals how easily containment may function as a synonym for segregation. His description in 'The Ethics of living Jim Crow' (1937), for instance, of the 'Jim Crow wisdom' that led to him being berated by his mother as a child for fighting with white children and being told that he 'was never, never, under any conditions, to fight white folks again' (emphasis in original) reads as an archetypal example of what Nadel terms the 'power of large cultural narratives to [...] intimidate [...] the personal narratives' of those caught within their orbit. Reflecting on 'The Ethics of Jim Crow', Abdul JanMohamed argues that the culture described by Wright revolves around an 'ever-present threat of overwhelming violence' towards African Americans that makes their survival contingent on their acceptance of 'racist hegemony' and 'marginalization [...] as a pedestrian fact of life'. The result, JanMohamed adds, is an inevitable 'distortion of their psyches'. Nadel's reference to the power of 'the American cold war' to 'intimidate [...] personal narratives' hints at a similar discursive structure underpinning containment. Both containment and segregation may be understood as adhering to the kind of Foucauldian power structure discussed above. Each is predicated on a logic of self-surveillance, whereby the subject is compelled to modify their behaviour to the demands of hegemonic discourse, to ensure what Foucault terms 'the automatic functioning of power'.

96 Nadel, Containment Culture, 14.
Accordingly, when Wright claims in ‘American Negroes in France’ that ‘France is no longer just France’ and that local ‘attitudes are being modified’ by the incursion of ‘the American cold war’ into French life, he is pointing to a nation being ensnared in the kind of power structure he himself has been caught up in. France is, in effect, framed as having been required to adopt a posture of self-surveillance, in order to function amid the geopolitical tensions of the postwar period. In turn, this act of self-surveillance serves to confirm the discursive authority of the United States. What Wright describes as ‘the national humiliation to which France is being subjected’, positions his adopted home in the role of the circumscribed subject compelled to adjust its identity to extend ‘the automatic functioning’ of American power. The French experience thus becomes congruent with that of African Americans. As a result, Wright is able to posit a shared basis of identification between himself and his adopted home that he hopes to mobilise in opposition to the creeping hegemony of the United States.

Put simply, then, Wright frames an extension of American power as an extension of white supremacy. In this context, his concerns about the effects of France’s acceptance of the Marshall Plan on its ‘ideals of liberty’ and status as a ‘humane civilization’ points to a concealed intersection of containment and segregation in the Cold War imaginary. In essence, what Wright’s opposition to the ‘Americanization’ of French life amounts to is the fear that American cultural imperialism will result in a transnational hegemony underpinned by ‘Jim Crow wisdom’. As such, halting the hegemonic aspirations of the United States and its accompanying racial values becomes the overriding imperative of his political interventions.

It is not just incursion of the American Cold War into Parisian life that fell under Wright’s critical gaze, however. The Paris he describes in ‘American Negroes in France’ is a city ideologically besieged by the cultural imperialism of the United States on the one hand and Stalinism on the other. ‘French conditions of life’, he writes, ‘sway and retreat under the impact of one or other of these nationalistic blocs’. Neither bloc appeals to Wright’s intellectual, artistic, or political sensibilities. Both are inimical to the kind of individual freedom

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102 Ibid.
he identifies in ‘I Choose Exile’ as being his lifeblood. As discussed above, though a member of the Communist Party in the 1930s, frustration with what Kevin Gaines describes as the Party’s threat to ‘artistic independence’ and its ‘wartime appeasement of Jim Crow practices’ led to Wright formally severing his ties with the Party and Soviet-sponsored Communism in 1942.

He carried this attitude with him across the Atlantic, with the hegemonic aspirations of the United States doing little to soften his stance towards Soviet Communism. In two letters to Dorothy Norman from February 1948 that were subsequently published in the journal Twice a Year, he explicitly condemns the ‘ruthlessness’ of Stalinism and notes European fears that the withdrawal or failure of the Marshall Plan would allow ‘Stalin to march to the English channel’. Wright thus defines the Cold War dyad as two sides of the same coin that left unchecked prefigures a global, historical drift towards totalitarianism. As such, the power struggle he saw playing out in Paris, had a resonance beyond its immediate historical moment.

Wright’s letters to Norman endorse this point. In the second, he states: ‘The right and the left, in different ways, have decided that man is a kind of animal whose needs can be met by making more and more articles for him to consume […] If man is to be contained in that definition, and if it is not to be challenged, then that is what will prevail.’ Insisting that the ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union was not merely ‘a contest between Left and Right’, Wright tells Norman that what is at stake is nothing less than ‘a total extinction of the very conception of what it has meant to be a human being for the past 2000 years’. In this context it became imperative for Wright to extricate himself from the increasingly constricted conditions of Cold War Paris and find yet another context on which to bring the ‘baggage’ of his dual identity to bear.

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103 He writes: ‘I need freedom […] Unless I’m uninhibited in letting my instinct range, unhampered in my comings and goings, free to question and probe my environment, I languish, I wither’ (emphasis in original). Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’, 2.
105 Wright, ‘Two Letters to Dorothy Norman’, Twice a Year, 16 (1948), 65-73 (66, 72).
106 Ibid, 73.
107 Ibid, 72.
Part 3: Translating Two-ness

While Wright’s frustration with regards to Cold War politics is clear, it is overstating the case somewhat to suggest as Reilly does that his ‘disillusionment’ constituted ‘an intellectual nadir’ that was only resolved by becoming actively involved in anti-colonial politics.\(^\text{108}\) This line of argument obscures a crucial mediating factor in the apparent shift in Wright’s political focus. Far from there being some kind of ideological break whereby the politics of the Cold War were supplanted by those of decolonisation in Wright’s imagination, his increasing emphasis on third world independence in the 1950s in fact reflected and evolved out of the material conditions of postwar Paris.

The Paris Wright found himself in during the 1940s and 1950s was, in many ways, a fractal version of the triangulated world he later maps in *Black Power*, *The Color Curtain*, and *White Man, Listen!*. As well as being a theatre in which the competing hegemonies of the United States and the Soviet Union waged ideological battle, the city was also a locus for what Edwards characterises as ‘black transnational interaction, exchange, and dialogue’.\(^\text{109}\) Given that Wright was a prominent voice in these dialogues, it follows that his journey from Cold War exile to champion of third world independence was undertaken via the diasporic networks of what is often referred to as ‘Black Paris’. Indeed, his involvement in the founding of the Pan-Africanist magazine *Présence Africaine* anticipates in incipient form themes that later characterises his writing on the third world.

Wright had long recognised the ways in which slavery and segregation in the United States belonged to a transnational matrix of racially demarcated power. His introduction to *12 Million Black Voices*, for instance, posits the notion that slavery, colonialism, and capitalism are constituent parts of the same historical continuum.\(^\text{110}\) Similarly, in a 1947 interview undertaken during his brief return to the United Staes, he insists that ‘the Negro is intrinsically a colonial subject’, before adding that ‘[t]he American Negro problem […] is but a facet of a global problem that splits the world in two’.\(^\text{111}\) Thus, the idea that the emphasis on transnational paradigms of black identity in Wright’s nonfiction in the 1950s is born of his

\(^{110}\) In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright asserts: ‘New England Puritans and the imperialists of Europe erected the traffic in our bodies as the “big business” of the eighteenth century […] and the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes fluttered from the masts of men-of-war as the ensign of protection for “free trade” in our bodies’ (148-9).
\(^{111}\) ‘Why Richard Wright Came Back From France’, 125.
disillusionment with the incursion of the Cold War into Parisian life is immediately complicated.

Moreover, Wright’s engagement with Black Paris can be traced back to his first visit to the city in 1946. During this visit, he became acquainted with the likes of the Senegalese writer Léopold Senghor, West Indian poet Aimé Césaire, and Alioune Diop, a Senegalese teacher, all of whom – with Wright’s aid – would subsequently help found Présence Africaine.\(^\text{112}\) This predates by almost two years such pivotal developments in Cold War discourse as the implementation of the Marshall Plan and the emergence of the ‘containment’ narrative, both of which contributed to the disillusionment that Wright articulates in ‘American Negroes in France’ and the letters published in Twice a Year.\(^\text{113}\) It is perhaps more accurate, therefore, to say that Wright’s pessimism with regards to achieving racial justice within the geopolitical framework of the Cold War ran concurrently with a sense of possibility born of his involvement in ‘the cultures of black internationalism’ being articulated in Black Paris.\(^\text{114}\) Indeed, it is the dialogue and interaction between Cold War Paris and Black Paris that shaped the direction of Wright’s nonfiction in the 1950s. Wright’s analysis of decolonisation sees the geopolitical intrigue of the Cold War and diasporic identity politics exist in a state of ‘doubled simultaneity’.

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Wright’s early years in Paris saw him becoming actively involved in the diasporic networks of Black Paris, collaborating with and lending his support to a number of cultural initiatives intent on promoting African culture, whether in native or diasporic forms. Foremost among these was Présence Africaine. Understandably, given Wright’s contemporaneous status as what Cedric Tolliver describes as ‘the most famous literary figure of African descent in the entire world’, Diop was keen to enlist Wright’s support for the fledgling magazine.\(^\text{115}\) As a writer whose identity testified to the transformative possibilities of art and whose raison d’être was to ‘use words as weapons’, the marrying of the political and the cultural that Présence Africaine


\(^{113}\) ‘Why Richard Wright Came Back From France’, 125.

\(^{114}\) Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora, 5.

advocated made it an obvious candidate for his support.\textsuperscript{116} It should be noted, however, that Wright harboured profound ideological differences with many in the Présence Africaine group. The philosophy of Négritude advocated by the likes of Senghor was anathema to an avowed materialist like Wright, as was Senghor’s Catholicism and Césaire’s membership in the French Communist Party.\textsuperscript{117} Nonetheless, Wright’s involvement with the magazine went far beyond mere patronage. Not only did he contribute a novella, ‘Bright and Morning Star’ (1938) to its debut issue, he was also one of the magazine’s sponsors and a member of its editorial board. Moreover, he was instrumental in shaping its early editorial policy, ‘arguing’, in Fabre’s words, ‘for cultural orientation and ideological freedom’, as well as helping to translate Diop’s inaugural editorial into English.\textsuperscript{118}

Whether consciously or otherwise, the resultant editorial, ‘Niam N’Goura, or Présence africaine’s raison d’être’, appears to have been written in Wright’s image. It sees Diop describe Présence Africaine as the product of ‘a new race, mentally mixed [mentalement métissée]’. He proceeds to outline the magazine’s primary aims as being the transformation of ‘overseas men into brains and arms adapted to modern life’ and defining ‘the African’s creativity and to hasten his integration into the modern world’.\textsuperscript{119} These comments are symptomatic of the way that Présence Africaine was, in Edwards’s words, ‘expressly conceived as an African incursion into modernity’.\textsuperscript{120} In this regard, Diop’s editorial rehearses key ideological tropes that are found in Wright’s work both before and after his exile. The desire to use ‘words as weapons’ outlined in Black Boy is intrinsically bound to his belief that modernity offers African Americans ‘something new’ that offers a way out of ‘the cultural barrenness’ that sustains racial oppression.\textsuperscript{121} It is an idea he returns to and extends in his writing on decolonisation, notably in The Color Curtain when he insists that the future of the newly independent nations of the third world is contingent on their ‘willingness […] to take up modern ideas and live out their logic’.\textsuperscript{122} Moreover, Black Boy sees Wright evoking a similar sense of being ‘mentally mixed’ when he talks of being ‘claimed’ by the ‘modern world’ while

\textsuperscript{116} Wright, Black Boy, 282.
\textsuperscript{117} For Wright’s ideological differences with other members of the Présence Africaine group see Fabre, The World of Richard Wright, 192-5.
\textsuperscript{118} Fabre, The World of Richard Wright, 193.
\textsuperscript{119} Alioune Diop, ‘Niam N’Goura, or Présence africaine’s raison d’être’, trans. Richard Wright and Thomas Diop, Présence Africaine 1 (October-November 1947), 190-1.
\textsuperscript{120} Brent Hayes Edwards, ‘The Uses of Diaspora’, Social Text, 66 (Vol 19, No 1), Spring 2001, 45-73 (47).
\textsuperscript{121} Wright, Black Boy, 148, 46.
\textsuperscript{122} Wright, The Color Curtain, Three Books From Exile, 429-630 (591).
simultaneously having ‘never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization’. This feeling is, of course, the essence of double consciousness. What *Présence Africaine* does, however, is to translate double consciousness, furnishing it with new meaning. A such, it is worthwhile considering Wright’s role as translator of Diop’s editorial, as well as the various forms of translation his relationship with Black Paris mobilises, in more depth.

Wright’s role as translator both symbolises the kinds of transnational dialogue nurtured by ‘Black Paris’ and anticipates his response to Africa in *Black Power*. As translator, he becomes pivotal in shaping what Edwards describes as ‘the ways that discourses of internationalism travel, the ways they are translated, disseminated, reformulated, and debated in transnational contexts marked by difference’ (emphasis in original). Translation in this context takes on multiple meanings. To translate is not simply to render something in another language. It also implies a kind of movement: the shift from one set of conditions to another. Moreover, this movement implies a kind of dissonance, whereby the collision of different local contexts reformulates the conditions of both.

In ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1923), Walter Benjamin observes that ‘[t]ranslation [...] ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages’ and that ‘no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original’. However, he adds that the translated text constitutes a ‘transformation and the renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change’. In other words, the translation and the original text are, at once, a part of and apart from one another. Different languages and contexts collide, creating a dissonance that generates new meanings, which may outstrip and transcend the original text. As such, the act of translation may be understood as simultaneously local and transnational. Extricating the subject (by which I mean both the subject matter of the text and the subjectivity of its author) from a single discursive context, it opens up new interpretative possibilities that endow it with a power it had hitherto lacked.

For Wright, his role in translating and adapting *Présence Africaine*’s inaugural editorial amounts to him filtering ‘the discourses of internationalism’ articulated by Diop through his

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126 Ibid, 73.
own carefully cultivated self-image. He, in a sense, appropriates and reterritorialises Diop’s words, making them concomitant with his own experiences as an African American, a process which similarly underpinned his subsequent engagement with the third world. The process of translation is not a one-way, linear process for Wright, however. It also reveals the new modalities of diasporic identification that ‘Black Paris’ opened up to him. He does not simply translate and reformulate the philosophy of Présence Africaine: he is also translated and reformulated by it. Translation becomes, in effect, translatory for him. When Diop describes Présence Africaine as being the product of ‘a new race, mentally mixed’, the sense of double consciousness implicit in this statement is, in effect, extricated from a specifically national context and imbued with new knowledge that transforms its historical value. The dissonance that occurs at the interface of local and transnational imaginaries endows Wright’s local experiences as an African American with new power. The ‘two-ness’ invoked by Diop effectively recasts Wright’s own ‘two-ness’ from the root cause of his alienation to a locus of transnational identification.

Edwards is correct, therefore, when he asserts that Wright’s interpretation of Diop’s editorial is illustrative of how Présence Africaine ‘represents black internationalism in practice’ (emphasis in original). What Edwards alludes to here is not diverse black populations being bound together by some kind of racial essence, but the ways in which the opportunities for transnational dialogue facilitated by Black Paris serves to translate the local experiences of diverse black populations, bringing about – as in Benjamin’s translated text – their ‘transformation and renewal’. In short, Présence Africaine and Black Paris function for Wright as what he elsewhere describes as ‘a distant witness, [whose] supporting evidence comes to buttress one’s own testimony’, the result of which is that ‘[o]ne feels not so alone’.

Though Wright’s belief in the power of cultural expression was, in many respects, always already the guiding principle of his writing, by the time Wright left the United States, his optimism with regards to the transformative possibilities of literature had waned somewhat. The events recounted in ‘I Choose Exile’ and public statements acknowledging the way in which the artistic expression of African Americans ‘flow[s] through banks and channels built for them by white Americans’ point to a writer disillusioned with the limited impact of ‘fighting

with words’. By extricating him from the structuring gaze of white America and providing him with a new battleground in which to deploy his linguistic weaponry, therefore, Présence Africaine may be seen as helping revive Wright’s faith in the power of cultural expression, a belief he carries with him in the journeys to Africa and Asia recounted in Black Power and The Color Curtain.

To this end, Wright’s subsequent attempts to articulate a transnational black identity in Black Power, The Color Curtain, and White Man, Listen! may be understood as mobilising a vocabulary of diasporic identification that he was already well-versed in. As hinted at above, many of the defining characteristics of Présence Africaine – its emphasis on expediting the incorporation of African peoples into the modern world, its attempt to foster a diasporic consciousness among diverse black populations, its critique of western imperialism – resonate with key tropes in Wright’s writing on Africa.

Accordingly, Wright’s immersion in Black Paris should be seen as having finessed his understanding of the transnational contours of racial oppression and intensified his interest in how his experiences as an African American could be brought in line with those of other members of the black diaspora. Wright recognised that the African and Caribbean intellectuals he was engaging with in Paris were, in Fabre’s words, similarly ‘torn between two worlds’. The ‘new race’ straddling first and third worlds described by Diop is resurrected in Wright’s analysis of ‘the Westernized elite’ in his writing on the third world. It is, I argue, from a sense of being ‘mentally mixed’ – of, in other words, a sense of ‘two-ness’ that Wright attempts to fashion an antidote to the dehumanising logic of the Cold War from the politics of decolonisation.

Conclusion: Towards a Diasporic Identity in Black Power

‘What is Africa to me?’ So asks Countee Cullen in his 1925 poem ‘Heritage’. In doing so, he articulates a dilemma that has animated black intellectuals in the United States from the eighteenth century onwards: to what extent are African Americans, ‘three centuries removed / From the scenes [their] fathers loved’, African? Can, as Michelle Ann Stephens asks in

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129 Ibid, 282.
130 Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, 319.
“Black Empire” (2005), African Americans 'turn to Africa as an originary homeland? Or should they locate home and nationalism in American citizenship?’

The history of black thought in the United States is littered with attempts to answer these questions. Denied full citizenship and access to the political institutions and discursive manifestations of the nation they inhabit, a panoply of black thinkers, from Frederick Douglass and Martin R. Delany in the nineteenth century to W. E. B DuBois, Marcus Garvey, and Paul Robeson in the twentieth, have sought to address the significance of their ancestral heritage as a means of interpreting their vexed relationship with the United States. Looking beyond the spatial and temporal confines of their immediate environment, they each – albeit in contrasting ways – cast their critical gaze back across the Atlantic towards Africa in their quest for self-realisation, identity, and citizenship.

This traversing of the Black Atlantic has resulted in repeated attempts by African American artists and intellectuals to nurture a diasporic sensibility among dispersed black populations. Transnational conceptions of blackness were particularly prominent during the first half of the twentieth century, with its impact being discernible in organisations such as Du Bois’s Pan-African Congress movement, Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, and the Council of African Affairs, co-founded by Robeson in 1937. Perhaps inevitably, given their contrasting personal and ideological backgrounds, there were crucial philosophical differences between these groups. Du Bois and Garvey, in particular, were notoriously hostile to one another, with the former seeing the latter’s ‘back to Africa’ philosophy as a dangerous recapitulation of the logic of white supremacy. Nonetheless, as Stephens and Brenda Gayle Plummer illustrate, each engaged ‘with transnational frameworks of identity [...] as they attempted to construct an oppositional form of black nationalism and political representation’. In doing so, they ‘helped defeat an American-exceptionalist view of race relations’ and ‘expanded Afro-American consciousness by rescaling questions of racial justice to global dimensions’.

134 Stephens, 135.
135 Stephens, 3; Plummer, 12.
It is to this tradition that Wright speaks in writing on third world independence. In June 1953, he travelled to Liverpool, where he boarded a ship destined for Ghana. In doing so, he formalised a relationship with the third world that would shape his writing and underpin his political commitments for the rest of his life. What emerges, I argue, is an attempt to foster a diasporic sensibility that unites the experiences of African Americans and the Africans he encounters. Though the word diaspora is not deployed in the text, *Black Power*, Wright’s record of his journey to Africa, is shot through with the necessity of ‘rescaling questions of racial justice to global dimensions’ and formulating the basis of a shared political consciousness among African Americans and Africans.

Yet, while Wright is attracted to the revolutionary momentum of Africa, he is, at the same time, haunted by the question: ‘what is Africa to me?’ Cullen’s poem provides one of *Black Power*’s epigraphs and attempting to find an answer to this question provides much of the impetus for what follows in the main body of the text Finding a satisfactory answer to it is the conundrum that Wright must solve if he is to locate a ‘functioning value and role’ for his dual identity in anti-colonial politics.

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The connection between African Americans and their ancestral homeland is not as axiomatic in Wright’s work as it is in that of some of his Pan-Africanist antecedents. Where Marcus Garvey claimed to ‘know no national boundary where the Negro is concerned’ and called on Africa to be the ‘guiding star’ of the black diaspora’s ‘destiny’, the spatio-temporal boundaries of three centuries, the Atlantic ocean, and a (double) consciousness forged in the historically specific context of the United States meant that, for Wright, his instinctive reaction to the prospect of visiting Africa was a feeling of distance and estrangement.\(^{136}\) Outlining his motivations for his journey to Ghana, he states:

> I genuinely wanted to know about the political situation in the Gold Coast [Ghana], yet another and far more important question was trying to shape itself in me. According to popular notions of “race,” there ought to be something of “me” down there in Africa. Some vestige, some heritage, some vague definite ancestral reality that would serve as a key to unlock the hearts and feelings of the Africans who I’d meet…. But I could not feel anything African about myself, and I wondered, “What does being African mean” (ellipsis and emphasis in original).\(^{137}\)

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Wright’s positioning of his own relationship with Africa as ‘far more important’ than the continent’s ‘political situation’ here is telling. It points once more to the ‘yearning for identification’ that runs through his entire oeuvre. At first glance, it may appear that such an assertion displays a staggering degree of solipsism. However, while there may well be a kernel of truth in such a reading, it is important to note that for Wright his personal quest for identification was inextricably bound to a larger political context. His own alienation was always figured as a cipher for the alienation experienced by African Americans more broadly.

As his assertion that he ‘could not feel anything African’ about himself demonstrates, however, the process of identifying with his ancestral homeland was far from straightforward for Wright. Indeed, his comments are illustrative of what Edwards describes as the way attempts to nurture transnational forms of black solidarity are ‘necessarily skewed’ by spatial, temporal, and linguistic disjunctures that create ‘gaps’ and ‘unevenness’ between the experiences of various black populations.138 This feeling was exacerbated by Wright’s own ideological disposition towards materialism rather than essentialism. Wright shunned metaphysical notions of racial identity, insisting that thinking had no “race” in it, but rather was ‘conditioned by the reaction of human beings to a concrete social environment’.139

Wright’s doubts as to the efficacy of his ancestry prior to his journey to Africa did not dissipate on his arrival there. On the contrary, his time in Ghana merely confirmed to him that his scepticism regarding his ability to identify with Africa on the basis of ‘some vague ancestral reality’ was not unfounded. Indeed, is notable just how often Wright makes reference in Black Power to his inability to comprehend and process what he is experiencing. Moreover, despite its title, the text frequently underlines Wright’s own sense of disempowerment in Africa. He talks, for instance, of the ‘absolute otherness and inaccessibility of this new world’, of rituals ‘whose significance I could not understand, of ‘people […] acting upon assumptions unknown to me, unfelt, inconceivable’, and, perhaps most significantly, of how ‘I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me’.140 There is a clear insider/outsider duality at play in these comments. In this instance, however, it is a disempowering duality. Instead of providing him with a privileged vantage point and a comparative angle of vision from which to reframe American racial practices,

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139 Wright, Black Power, 21.
Wright’s physical proximity to African life merely underscores his difference. The cumulative effect is one of alienation. He is left with something akin a feeling of impotent liminality: a neither/nor identity, whereby his African-ness impedes his American-ness and his American-ness extinguishes his African-ness.

What this sense of alienation illustrates is that national boundaries are not merely physical. It underlines the difficulty of mobilising discourses of black internationalism across national borders and the historical ‘gaps’ described by Edwards. Local contexts and historical circumstances result in the development of distinct local epistemologies. This idea of local contexts problematizing transnational paradigms of identification is particularly pertinent in relation to the black diaspora. The fact that the subjectivities of dispersed black populations are forged within specific local contexts creates a gap that race alone cannot bridge. It is thus almost impossible, Edwards argues, to ‘translate a basic grammar of blackness’. Instead, Pan-African identity paradigms are marked by what he calls ‘misapprehensions and misreadings, persistent blindnesses and solipsisms, self-defeating and abortive collaborations’, thus undermining attempts to mobilise a transnational black identity as the basis for geopolitical intervention.141

Wright’s visceral response to African culture offers a particularly potent example of the kinds of ‘misapprehensions and misreadings’ outlined by Edwards. As a number of critics have noted, the feelings of incomprehension and frustration towards Africa detailed above frequently metastasise into ones of disgust towards native Africans and their local customs. Margaret Walker, for instance, makes reference to the expressions of ‘disappointment, distaste, and downright disgust’ that punctuate *Black Power*.142 There is more than a degree of truth in such readings. For instance, Wright describes being ‘moved not to compassion, but to revulsion’ by the site of physically deformed beggars in Accra. Later, reflecting both his discomfort at the prevalence of nudity among women and his disdain for local tribal rituals he describes a funeral procession in which he is passed by ‘about fifty women, young and old, nude to the waist, their elongated breasts flopping loosely and grotesquely in the sun’ and which sees those taking part ‘knocking […] sticks furiously together, setting up an unearthly

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clatter, their eyes fixed upon the *revolting* coffin of brass*.*" Once again, the overriding effect here is one of distance and estrangement.

Yet, despite claiming not to ‘feel anything African about myself’, Africa is clearly *something* to Wright. For all that he disavows African culture and develops what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls a ‘rhetoric of distance’ in his writing about it, the visceral nature of his response hints at a deeper, unconscious connection with it. It is telling that part of Wright’s response to the funeral procession is to ask '[h]ad my ancestors acted like that?’ His insistence that he is apart from African culture is accompanied by an implicit acknowledgement that, on some level, it is also a part of him. When placed alongside his earlier reference to how aspects of the African personality were ‘strange but familiar’, Wright’s revulsion towards African culture evokes Julia Kristeva’s description of the abject.

Abjection, for Kristeva, names the feeling of violent repugnance caused by the trauma of encountering a ‘jettisoned’ part of oneself as other. Disturbing the boundaries of self and other, which in turn drags one ‘toward the place where meaning collapses’, this encounter elicits ‘a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome’. In Wright’s case, it is his historical connection to Africa that makes so much of what he encounters seem ‘radically separate’ and ‘loathsome’. Africa haunts his identity in the present and threatens its boundaries. However, this ghost can neither be resurrected nor exorcised; it is at once a part of and apart from who he is.

To this end, Wright must find a means of negotiating the breach between himself and Africa. His solution, I argue is to try and fashion a diasporic consciousness that recasts Africa in accordance with his own ideological sensibilities. As scholars including Kevin Gaines, John Lowe, and Joyce Ann Joyce have noted, Wright’s work in the 1950s is informed by a diasporic sensibility that sees him striving to articulate a framework of transnational solidarity between various black populations to counter the imposition of white hegemonic power.

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143 Wright, *Black Power* 72, 163-4.
The ‘gaps’ between different black populations described by Edwards have underpinned attempts to advance what Gaines criticises as an ‘essentializing, reductive sense of diaspora as an unbridgeable gulf’ that ‘is routinely invoked in the wake of the destruction of pan-African and global black radical projects’. However, scholars such as Edwards, Gaines himself, and, perhaps most notably, Stuart Hall, have sought to counter this narrative with a model of diaspora that shuns ‘essence or purity’ in favour of what Hall defines as ‘the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference’.

While I echo the imperative of moving away from racial ‘essence’ as a basis of transnational solidarity, there remains a danger that foregrounding the differences between black populations in the United States, Europe, and Africa will undercut the very unity it attempts to nurture. Framing diaspora as difference versus essence/purity risks perpetuating a binary logic that loses sight of the shared historical experiences that provide the impulse for the kind of transnational solidarity that the diaspora concept is meant to foster in the first place. It is, therefore, vital that similarities and continuities between diverse black populations (whether structural or historical) remain just as important components of diaspora as difference. Hall appears to endorse this point when he talks of ‘black Caribbean identities as “framed” by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture’. Caribbean identity, he argues, emerges from ‘the dialogic relationship between these two axes’.

Attempts by Edwards and Gaines to build on Hall’s insights, however, tend to emphasise the latter axis at the expense of the former. Edwards, for instance, insists that diaspora ‘forces us to articulate discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference’ (emphasis added).

As such, though the broad thrust of Edwards’ argument with regards to the imperative of recognising difference is compelling, his suggestion that transnational solidarity can ‘only’ be articulated ‘through and across difference’ needs to be tempered by a greater
acknowledgement of the fact that continuity and similarity are crucial in providing the kind of shared basis of identification necessary to mobilise diaspora as a counterhegemonic source of power. Edwards uses the metaphor of a ‘joint’ to describe how diaspora constitutes ‘both the point of separation […] and the point of linkage’ for dispersed black populations and to insist that ‘in the body it is only difference – the separation between bones or members – that allows movement’ (emphasis in original). To utilise a different bodily metaphor, however, it is perhaps useful to think of diaspora as a host body for transplanted organs. For transplanted organs to function in a foreign body, they must share certain genetic characteristics with both each other and the body that hosts them. Ultimately, it is their similarities that allow the body to live and stimulate the movement that joints engender. In the case of diaspora, it is shared genealogical and historical characteristics between different local black populations that allows them to work together through diaspora to stimulate movement that reverberates both locally and transnationally.

Wright’s engagement with the ‘cultures of black internationalism’ in *Black Power* is illustrative of how a notion of diaspora articulated through difference remains contingent on some sense of continuity. Indeed, while much has – justifiably – been made of the problematic way in which Wright renders the differences between himself and many of the traditional aspects of African culture he encountered in Ghana (see, for instance, essays by Kwame Anthony Appiah, Ngwarsungu Chiwengo, and Henry Louis Gates Jr.), comparatively little attention has been paid to the continuities he maps out in the text. For all that *Black Power* is a text marked by difference and disorientation, it is important to note that he frequently attempts – albeit not always successfully – to offset his incomprehension of African tribal practices by articulating continuities between his own ideological perspective and identity and that of the Africans he encounters while in Ghana.

Accordingly, while his sense of disorientation and disgust in the face of traditional African cultural practices ‘shatters’, in Cornel West’s words, ‘any romantic relation of Black Americans to Africans or sentimental attachments to African ways of life’, Wright acknowledges that the notion of there being ‘some kind of link between the native African and the American Negro

152 Ibid, 15.
was undoubtedly true'. The question for Wright, however, is the form that this link takes. His quest for an answer sees him attempting to reterritorialise Africa in his own image.

A key feature of \textit{Black Power} is the repeated references to supporters of Kwame Nkrumah (Prime Minister of the Gold Coast and subsequently the first President of an independent Ghana) chanting ‘Free–dooom! Free – dooooom!’ that punctuate the text. These calls for freedom function as a kind of Greek Chorus, providing a collective comment on the anti-colonial movement that distils the political demands of the historical moment both locally and transnationally. Framing the politics of decolonisation around the mantra of ‘freedom’ in this way allows Wright to translate the struggle into an ideological language that he understands, expressing, as it does, a continuity with his own politics (‘I need freedom […] unless I’m uninhibited in letting my instinct range, unhampered in my comings and goings, free to question and probe my environment, I languish, I wither’ [emphasis in original]). In doing so, he is partially able to reorient himself in relation to his new surroundings. He imposes a sense of order on difference that revives the possibility of a shared locus of identification with those he encounters.

This shared locus of identification eschews the binary logic of racial essence versus intercultural difference. Rather, it recognises local differences, but insists on the experiential fact of race as a material reality with shared transnational origins. Accordingly, Wright’s attempts to mobilise continuities between his experiences as an African American and those of Africans living under the aegis of colonial rule emphasises a materialist and temporal – as opposed to metaphysical and spatial – basis for diasporic identification. Addressing the crowd at a rally for Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party (CPP) he makes reference to ‘a common heritage of suffering and hunger for freedom’ between African Americans and Native Africans born of the fact that ‘centuries ago we were reduced to nameless, stateless pawns shuffled by the will of Europeans and Americans across the chessboards of history’. In something of a tumbleweed moment, what Wright had conceived as a rallying cry of freedom and solidarity is met with only ‘weak and scattered’ applause. The muted response of the audience

\footnotesize{Cornel West, ‘Introduction’, \textit{Black Power, Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!}, vii-xiii (viii); Wright, \textit{Black Power}, 89.}

\footnotesize{Wright, \textit{Black Power} 75, 101, 118}

\footnotesize{Wright, ‘I Choose Exile’, 1.}

\footnotesize{Wright, \textit{Black Power}, 102.}

\footnotesize{Ibid, 102, 103.}
illustrates once again the tricky task of translating ‘even a basic grammar of blackness’. Nonetheless, these comments are highly significant. They call attention to the way in which a diasporic sensibility can fill the ‘gap’ between diverse black populations by acting as the nexus of ‘a common history of suffering’ and a shared future of freedom. To bridge this gap, however, it is also necessary for someone to both literally and figuratively translate the differences that sustain it into a common language.

The letter from Wright to Nkrumah that closes Black Power underscores this point. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Wright downplays the sense of difference that permeates much of the text, focusing instead on the ‘odd kind of at-homeness’ he felt while wandering ‘the compounds, market places, villages, and cities’ of Ghana. Tellingly, however, he describes this sense of ‘solidarity’ as stemming ‘not from ties of blood or race, or from my being of African descent, but from the quality of deep hope and suffering embedded in the lives of your people, from the hard facts of oppression that cut across time, space, and culture’. As with his address at the CPP rally, this statement gestures towards the contemporaneous reality of difference between various black cultures. Wright’s identification with the anti-colonial struggle on the basis of an ‘oppression that cuts across time, space, and culture’ as opposed to blood or racial ties, however, subsumes these differences under the banner of a shared historical rupture that continues to structure the local experiences of black populations wherever they may be.

What Wright tries to articulate in Black Power, therefore, is not so much a ‘basic grammar of blackness’, but a basic grammar of having been made black. As he neatly puts it in his brief history of the slave trade in the opening chapters of Black Power, ‘[s]lavery was not put into practice because of racial theories; racial theories sprang up in the wake of slavery, to justify it’. In other words, the D.N.A that connects the various strands of the black diaspora is the product of historical rather than biological forces. As such, the diasporic consciousness that Wright articulates is one predicated on what Andrew Warnes terms ‘affinities of political circumstance – based on the similar social and psychological predicaments facing colonized Africans and ghettoized Americans’ (emphasis added). It does not imply that the black experience is the same regardless of local contexts. Rather, it notes the differences that

159 Ibid, 410.
distinguish these local conditions as having a shared genealogy rooted in their relationship with white, hegemonic power.

This interplay between similarity and contradiction amounts to a paradigm of black internationalism that derives its political potency from a sense of dissonance. The oscillation between familiarity and disorientation that characterises Black Power reveals how diverse black populations are at once apart from and a part of one another. Diaspora, in this context, provides a locus where difference and continuity intersect, opening up new forms of power. Through both continuity and difference, it is able to ‘articulate discourses of cultural and political linkage’ that transcend national boundaries. Diaspora of the kind hinted at in Wright’s work, therefore, is marked by its ‘two-ness’. It is, however, a ‘two-ness’ that carries a different historical value to that outlined by Du Bois. Whereas double consciousness for Du Bois names the sense of alienation that arises from living in an America that ‘only lets [the African American] see himself through the revelation of the other world’, the two-ness underpinning the diasporic consciousness that Wright’s work gestures towards is a unifying principle that mirrors the logic of translation. To use the theory Benjamin outlines in ‘The Task of the Translator’ in a cultural rather than literary context, the ‘two-ness’ of diaspora expresses a ‘central reciprocal relationship’ between diverse black cultures, while resisting claims of an essential likeness. In doing so, it is able to renew and transform specific local experiences into new transnational forms that, mirroring Benjamin’s observations concerning the ‘distinctive convergence’ that marks different languages, are ‘interrelated in what they want to express’.  

Ultimately, then, the historically grounded transnational black identity that Wright’s post-exile nonfiction seeks expresses a desire to roll back white hegemonic power and the racially demarcated social order it underwrites in all of its manifestations. More specifically, however, this process sees him attempting to use his writing as a means of expediting the incorporation of the black diaspora into the modern world. When Wright tells his audience at the CPP rally that ‘your heart and my heart beat as one’ he points not to a distinct racial ontology but a transnational black identity generated by the syncopated rhythms of modernity.  What Marshall Berman defines as the ‘maelstrom’ of ‘world-historical processes’ underpinning

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162 Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, 73.
163 Wright, Black Power, 102.
modernity is marked by antinomies that disrupt any sense of these processes responding to a steady historical pulse. Rather, modernity may be understood as a series of interconnected rhythms and counter-rhythms, whose tempo is contingent on which of these various beats happens to be accentuated at a particular moment in history. Wright’s articulation of a diasporic consciousness predicated on ‘affinities of political circumstance’ is, in a sense, both a response to these syncopated rhythms and an attempt to alter their Euro-centric emphasis. While the ‘beat’ of African and African American hearts is synchronised by ‘a common heritage of suffering’, the concomitant ‘hunger for freedom’ that is the legacy of this suffering is harnessed by Wright to shift the historical accent of modernity away from Europe and the United States and towards the hitherto weaker ‘beats’ of those like himself ‘who exist precariously / on the clifflike margins of many cultures’.

Chapter 3

‘Something Unspeakable’: James Baldwin and the Closets of American Power

Introduction

One’s aware in an eerie way, that there are barriers which must not be crossed, and that by these invisible barriers everyone is mesmerized. But it is quite impossible to discover where, in action, these barriers are to be found.

– James Baldwin, ‘Color’ (1962)

‘Yes, it does indeed mean something – something unspeakable – to be born, in a white country, an Anglo-Teutonic, antisexual country, black’. So writes James Baldwin in his seminal 1963 essay The Fire Next Time. As a writer who was both African American and queer, Baldwin was well placed to deliver such a diagnosis. Indeed, this statement rehearses many of the preoccupations that animate his writing. Pitched at the intersection of race, sexuality, and national identity, his indictment of a white, heteronormative ideal marginalising the experiences of African Americans is illustrative of how his work mines the hidden recesses and interrogates the received wisdom of American national identity. From early book reviews condemning the ‘subterranean assumption […] that whiteness is a kind of salvation and that blackness is a kind of death’, to late essays calling on African Americans to ‘excavate […] a reality much older than Europe […] because America is not, and never can be, white’, Baldwin’s writing is shot through with the necessity of unearthing and affirming the presence of that which America’s prevailing hegemony disavows.

The most cursory of glances at Baldwin’s work helps to illustrate this point. For example, a recurring trope in Baldwin’s oeuvre is titles that call attention to absence, loss, and what

Douglas Field terms the ‘elusiveness of place’. The likes of ‘Many Thousands Gone’ (1951), ‘Stranger in the Village’ (1953), Nobody Knows My Name (1959), Another Country (1962), Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone (1968), No Name in the Street (1972), and The Evidence of Things Not Seen (1985) all evoke such feelings, positing a sense of making manifest that which exceeds the representational boundaries of the existing status quo. Each affirms, in other words, the presence of the ‘unspeakable’. All of the titles allude to the existence of something or somewhere ostensibly apart from the spatial and temporal parameters of America’s ‘Anglo-Teutonic, antisexual’ norm becoming entwined with and defamiliarising it. The result is a paradox in which the presence they articulate is expressed as a kind of absence and vice versa. As such, the ontological distinction – that is the binary framework that conceives of being and non-being as coextensive but mutually exclusive – between presence and absence is destabilised. Rather than being two discrete categories that are wholly separate from one another, presence and absence are reframed as contingent terms, in which each only exists as a function of the other.

This blurring of the threshold between presence and absence, I argue, pervades Baldwin’s writing and distils the broader thrust of his politics of identity. What Baldwin perceives as America’s ‘passion for categorization’ sees identity distributed within a binary framework that privileges ‘life neatly fitted into pegs’ over the ‘disquieting complexity’ of lived experience. The idea that categorisation for Baldwin is synonymous with a binary framework is underscored in ‘Here Be Dragons’ (1985). In what is one of his final published works, Baldwin reaffirms the distaste for identity categories and labels he harboured throughout his career, expressing his relief that their power over him had been ‘shattered […] very early in [his] life’. Tellingly, what he regards as ‘the American categories’ are conceived of as a series of binaries, namely ‘male and female, straight or not, black or white’. The result of such categories, he suggests, is a polarised understanding of racial, gender, sexual, and national identity, wherein rigidly demarcated binarisms of black and white, male and female, gay and straight, and American and un-American are framed as self contained entities that are closed off from one another, as opposed to mutually constitutive. ‘Stranger in the Village’, neatly encapsulates this idea. ‘[T]he American vision of the world’, he writes, ‘tends until today to
paint moral issues in glaring black and white’, a vision, he continues, that is discursively entwined with ‘the battle waged by Americans to maintain between themselves and black men a human separation’ that cannot be bridged.\(^8\)

In and of itself, a case can, perhaps, be made that there are no negative consequences inherent to such a separation. However, this kind of polarity is also freighted with hegemonic power. In short, binary logic invariably privileges one dyad over the other, with the relative value of each pole determined by the prevailing hegemony of the context in which they are articulated. The imposition of ‘Jim Crow’ laws in the United States may be read as a particularly potent example of this point. Separate is rarely, if ever, equal, as American history reveals all too forcibly. What emerges instead is a kind of hierarchical dualism, in which the presence (for which, read power and authority) of the privileged dyad is affirmed and consolidated, while the other is absented and thus disempowered.

In the America that Baldwin describes, it is a white, heterosexual, patriarchal presence that is affirmed, creating the conditions that render blackness ‘unspeakable’. Accordingly, his response is to set about deconstructing the binary framework that underwrites these conditions. Eschewing the ontological closure of either/or identities, his work straddles the dividing line of binarisms of identity by developing a variety of strategies that help blur the fault lines along which American culture is articulated. In doing so, he displaces the determinate framework that binary logic inscribes, positing new modalities of identity that go some way to redressing the asymmetries of power that sustain postwar America’s ‘Anglo’Teutonic, antisexual’ norm.

It is Baldwin’s attempts to articulate a paradigm of American-ness that exceeds the existing binary framework that provides the backdrop to this chapter. Through close analysis of work he produced up to and including the publication of *The Fire Next Time*, I examine how Baldwin carves out a space in the American cultural imaginary in which the disavowed presence of non-white, non-heteronormative persons is made legible and articulate. This process, I suggest, is not simply a case of him asserting the cultural value or meaning of blackness in the United States. Indeed, Baldwin’s writing is as much an interrogation of the historical conditions that have naturalised whiteness and heteronormativity as it is an

\(^8\) Baldwin, ‘Stranger in the Village’ (1953), *The Price of the Ticket*, 79-90 (89).
affirmation of black identity. Rather, his work is geared towards illustrating the effects of these conditions on black and white Americans alike, as well as pursuing ways of transforming them.

In this chapter, I explore how Baldwin sets about this task. Given that Baldwin’s literary career spanned some five decades, a full account of his lifelong project to deconstruct the myths of American history is beyond the scope of a single chapter. As such, my focus for the most part shall be on work he produced during the 1950s and early 1960s. In part, this decision is born of the imperative to contextualise his work in relation to both the other writers that are examined in this thesis and the specific historical conditions from which it derives its thrust. More specifically, however, this period marks the highpoint of Baldwin’s career, in terms of the discursive traction his critical interventions garnered. Though much of the diverse body of work he produced from the late 1960s to his death in 1987 is dazzlingly inventive and retains the mixture of linguistic dexterity and penetrating cultural insight on which his reputation rests, it never captures the historical zeitgeist in the way that much of his earlier work does.

There is, as Field rightly suggests, good cause to re-evaluate the scholarly consensus that frames Baldwin’s career as one of early promise giving way to a steady waning of his abilities and cultural influence. Indeed, work by Warren J. Carson and Lynn Orilla Scott, among others, has done much to challenge this critical orthodoxy. Nonetheless, while I shall on occasion draw on some of Baldwin’s later works to illustrate my argument, this chapter pursues Baldwin’s attempts to make the historical meaning of African American identity articulate through the lens of some of his most celebrated works, including ‘Everybody’s Protest Novel’ (1949), Another Country (1962), and The Fire Next Time (1963). In doing so, I chart his journey from the impoverished twenty four year old who fled the United States in 1948 doubting his ‘ability to survive the fury of the color problem’ there, to someone who, by the mid-1960s, was arguably America’s most famous living writer.

This journey that plays out against a historical backdrop that encompasses the Cold War, third world decolonisation, and a burgeoning Civil Rights movement in the United States. To

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9 Field, James Baldwin, 12.
11 Baldwin, ‘The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American’ (1959), The Price of the Ticket, 171-6 (171).
varying degrees, each of these historical developments shapes the contours of Baldwin’s work, as will become apparent in due course. However, though attuned to their significance, his relation to these discourses is often equivocal. Baldwin frequently finds himself out of step with the ideological assumptions underpinning them, whether on account of his race, his sexuality, or simply his refusal to adhere to modes of thinking that ‘paint moral issues in glaring black and white’. Instead, mirroring the famously itinerant lifestyle that he felt compelled to live for much of his adult life, Baldwin’s work mobilises a dissonant perspective that is at once a part of and apart from the contexts with which he engages. In doing so, he dislocates the binary framework in which blackness and/or queerness have typically been compelled to articulate themselves, as well as offering a timely counternarrative to Cold War America’s prevailing orthodoxies.

To help elucidate the themes discussed above, I explore both the discursive process by which blackness is rendered ‘unspeakable’ and how Baldwin sets about dismantling them. In doing so, I propose three critical interventions, which, in keeping with what Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz characterise as Baldwin’s eschewal of ‘straight lines’, unfold thematically as opposed to a strict chronology. Firstly, I argue that his designation of the historical meaning of blackness as ‘something unspeakable’ is symptomatic of what Kevin Birmingham describes as the way Baldwin’s work derived much of its power from ‘the closeted presence of the past’, with his writing geared towards ‘bearing witness’ to this absence. Developing this point, I suggest that Baldwin’s repudiation of the white, heteronormative imperative that renders blackness ‘unspeakable’ bespeaks an America whose prevailing hegemony is derived from what I – glossing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick – term a closeted epistemology. The efficacy of the closet paradigm as a means of understanding Baldwin’s politics of identity – particularly in the era of Cold War ‘containment’ – is a theme I shall explore in more depth below. In short, however, it points to the way in which the America he depicts in his writing (a nation which he claims lives with something in its ‘closet’ that it pretends is not there) clings to an illusory sense of harmony by erecting discursive barriers that circumscribe and disavow the

12 Baldwin, ‘Stranger in the Village’, 89.
14 Kevin Birmingham, “History’s Ass Pocket”: The Sources of Baldwinian Diaspora’, James Baldwin: America and Beyond, 141-58 (143).
experiences of various historical others, chief among whom are non-white, non-heteronormative people like himself. Within this framework, identity is distributed asymmetrically according to a binary logic whereby blackness and homosexuality are excluded from the representational domain in which American-ness is articulated and are left, in effect, to inhabit a realm of non-speech. Both become, in other words, ‘something unspeakable’.

My second intervention evolves out of this point. Baldwin's response to the 'passion for categorization' that closets the historical experiences of African Americans and other non-heteronormative persons, I argue, is to queer American subjectivity. Queer in the context it is used in this chapter does not refer exclusively, or even predominantly, to sexuality (although as shall become clear, queer sexuality is a vital component of the Baldwin imaginary). Rather, I use the term in the broader theoretical sense outlined by Sedgwick in *Tendencies* (1993). For Sedgwick, 'queer' names a kind of 'movement' that calls attention to 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically'. Queerness is here framed as a kind of two-ness: to be queer is to inhabit a liminal space 'across' polarities of gender and sexuality, straddling the threshold of multiple subject positions simultaneously; it is to refuse the closed system of reality that characterises either/or identities. Accordingly, while clearly not reducible to one another, there is an overlap between that which Sedgwick describes and the duality that characterises the African American experience, making it imperative to include a racial axis among the 'mesh of possibilities' opened up by queer analysis.

Baldwin’s *oeuvre* offers a potent example of the kinds of overlap alluded to by Sedgwick. Baldwin similarly refuses to ‘signify monolithically’. He repudiates either/or identities that result in what he himself defined as ‘life neatly fitted into pegs’. Insisting that ‘people refuse, unhappily, to function in so neat and one-dimensional a fashion’, his work instead foregrounds the transformative potential of liminal spaces and states of being that destabilise established polarities of identity. This liminality is, in many ways, the cornerstone of this

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16 Ibid, xii.
chapter and leads into my final intervention. Baldwin’s analysis of existing identity categories, whether national, racial, or sexual, is typically articulated across the gaps and overlaps that binary logic disavows, but inadvertently inscribes. Traversing this space as a means of developing alternative modalities of identity, it is in these gaps and overlaps, I argue, that Baldwin queers the postwar American subject. To this end, I place particular emphasis on his status as a self-styled ‘transatlantic commuter’. More than a neat turn of phrase to describe his peripatetic existence in the late 1950s and 1960s, the notion of being a ‘commuter’ captures something of Baldwin’s politics of identity. The sense of indeterminacy, of existing across binarisms of place, implicit in the notion of being a commuter corresponds to the blurring of identity categories that marks his work from the moment he crossed the Atlantic for the first time in 1948. More specifically, his crisscrossing of the Atlantic creates thresholds between the United States and what Birmingham characterises as ‘everywhere elsewhere’.\textsuperscript{18} At these thresholds, the regulatory power of American’s rigidly delineated, categories of race, gender, and sexuality is simultaneously diminished and refashioned.

The liminal space of the commuter, I suggest, extricates Baldwin and the ‘excesses of meaning’ that constitute his identity as someone who is black and queer from the monolithic representational politics of postwar America. Furnishing a perspective that is at once local and transnational, his liminality opens up new forms of knowledge and identificatory possibilities rooted in two-ness and dissonance, as opposed to an illusory sense of wholeness and harmony. By positioning himself betwixt and between the United States and ‘everywhere elsewhere’ in this way, Baldwin is able to disturb ‘the logics of synchronicity’ that Homi Bhabha identifies as authorising ‘the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force’.\textsuperscript{19} Within this ‘Third Space’, Bhabha continues, ‘the meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity’. As a result, these ‘same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew’.\textsuperscript{20} As a ‘transatlantic commuter’ Baldwin inhabits such a space, with his interventions in the cultural politics of the United States emerging from this indeterminate position.

Crucially, however, despite finding life in the United States to be ‘intolerable’, Baldwin’s work makes no attempt to conceal or disavow his American-ness. Indeed, the centrifugal

\textsuperscript{18} Birmingham, “History’s Ass Pocket”’, 153.

\textsuperscript{19} Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004 [1994]), 53

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 54, 55.
force of national origins is one of the overriding themes of his writing. ‘[H]ome’ as he puts it in his 1956 novel Giovanni’s Room, is ‘not a place but simply an irrevocable condition’. Similarly, in archive footage included in Karen Thorsen’s 1989 documentary, The Price of the Ticket, he insists: ‘You never leave home. You take your home with you. You better. Otherwise you’re homeless’. Such remarks are illustrative of what Magdalena Zaborowska defines as Baldwin’s ‘paradoxical patriotism’.  

For Baldwin, national identity carries an experiential reality that cannot be effaced. While any nation may, ultimately, be a historical construct, it is a construct that is reified through ritual and repetition and thus experienced as true, insofar as it shapes the material circumstances in which one’s consciousness and subjectivity are forged. However, while home may be ‘an irrevocable condition’, the content of this condition is not immutable. One of the overriding imperatives of Baldwin’s artistic project, therefore, was to find a way of reconciling his ‘irrevocable’ national identity with a sense of national belonging.

It is out of this apparent impasse that Baldwin’s transatlantic commuting emerged as a powerful instrumentality. As a ‘transatlantic commuter’, he was able to enact a double movement, whereby the meanings and symbols of American culture were at on once retained and ‘rehistoricized’, thus divesting them of their homogenising force. Accordingly, the final section of this chapter examines how Baldwin’s transatlanticism informs his interventions in the cultural and social politics of the United States. From his liminal vantage point, I suggest, he dislocates postwar America’s ‘Anglo-Teutonic, antisexual’ norm from its territorial moorings and juxtaposes it with other forms of knowledge. No longer anchored in what Stuart Hall defines as the “machineries” and regimes of representation’ that consolidate particular forms of knowledge in particular contexts, Baldwin posits a reimagined paradigm of American-ness, fracturing the mythic wholeness that the nation’s closeted epistemology seeks to preserve. The resulting fissures in the American cultural imaginary open up a rhetorical space in which Baldwin makes blackness and queerness legible, thus rearticulating what – to paraphrase the

title of one of his most famous essays – it means to be an American in the middle of the twentieth century.

Part 1: ‘Something in Your Closet’

No one in this country, as far as I can see, really knows any longer what it means to be an American. He does not know what he means by freedom. He does not know what he means by equality. We live in the most abysmal ignorance of not only the condition of the 20 million Negroes in our midst, but of the whole nature of the life being lived in the rest of the world. And I think the American white man, the republic, is beginning to pay for his treatment of the Negro in terms of what he does not know about the rest of the world. You cannot live […] with something in your closet, which you know is there and pretend it is not there without something terrible happening to you.
– Baldwin, Radio debate with Malcolm X (1963)

To be African American, Baldwin writes in The Fire Next Time, is to inhabit a ‘universe [that] has evolved no terms for your existence, has made no room for you’. As with his designation of the historical meaning of blackness as ‘something unspeakable’, this statement posits the African American experience as something outside of the symbolic order of the nation’s prevailing orthodoxy. In doing so, it captures one of the key themes of his writing, namely that the cultural imaginary of the United States – that is the shared bases of identification through which national identity is forged – is predicated on the separation and disavowal of aspects of itself that threaten its coherence. Indeed, Baldwin’s analysis of race and sexuality is articulated along these lines. In ‘The Male Prison’ (1954), for instance, he suggests that the repudiation of homosexuality as ‘unnatural’ and thus beyond the accepted representational limits of contemporaneous cultural norms serves to preserve the discursive legitimacy of heterosexuality. To imply that homosexuality is anything other than ‘unnatural’, he writes, ‘would be to rob the normal – who are simply the many – of their very necessary sense of security and order’.

Placed alongside the demarcation of race, the overriding effect is to reify a normative American subject that is always already white and heterosexual. As Baldwin himself states in ‘In Search of a Majority’ (1960), ‘the national self-image’ of the United States involves an

26 Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, 344.
28 Roderick Ferguson echoes this point, writing that ‘American identity, as it was framed toward the latter portion of the 1940s was implicitly a heterosexual and masculine identity’. Roderick Ferguson, ‘The Parvenu Baldwin and the Other Side of Redemption: Modernity, Race, Sexuality, and the Cold War’, James Baldwin Now, ed. Dwight A. McBride (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), 233-61 (240-1).
archetype that ‘is kind of a cross between the Teuton and the Celt […] an image which suggests hard work and good clean fun and chastity and piety and success’. The sexual conservatism coded here in ‘good clean fun and chastity’ bespeaks the idea that whiteness and heteronormativity are identical both with one another and the United States. 

Yet, Baldwin’s designation of this Teutonic archetype as America’s national self-image comes with an important caveat. ‘Beneath this bland, this conqueror-image’, he writes, ‘a great many unadmitted despairs and confusions, and anguish and unadmitted crimes and failures hide’.

Baldwin here frames the normative American subject as deriving its authority and power not from what it reveals, but what it conceals. In doing so, he distils the broader thrust of his writing. The implication that normative identity and the hegemonic power relations it inscribes are contingent on the closeting of that which imperils its discursive legitimacy resonates throughout his work. Baldwin frequently gestures towards the realm of non-speech and deploys imagery that evokes a sense of concealment and restriction. Indeed, for all his obvious eloquence, Baldwin repeatedly makes reference to the limitations of language and the compulsion placed on non-white and non-heteronormative persons to occupy a territory beyond the boundaries of representation. To be born black is ‘something unspeakable’; lynching is the manifestation of the ‘unspeakable longings’ that overdetermine interracial desire in a segregated society; the presence of African Americans elicits ‘the tension of a silence filled with things unutterable’; same sex desire is ‘something unspoken […] something unspeakable, undone and hideously desired’.

This sense of being excluded from the representational terrain of the dominant is reinforced by the allusions to finding one’s lived experience circumscribed by the prevailing orthodoxy of American culture that punctuate his oeuvre. ‘Everybody’s Protest Novel’, for example, sees Baldwin refer to being ‘trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream’ and finding oneself ‘bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our

29 Baldwin, ‘In Search of a Majority’ (1960), The Price of the Ticket, 229-35 (232).
30 The roots of the white, heteronormative imperative to which Baldwin alludes can be traced back at least as far as the late nineteenth century. Julian B. Carter, for example, traces the emergence of heteronormativity to the 1880s, when concerns about the growing prevalence of nervous disorders among white Americans struggling to keep pace with the ever increasing tempo of industrial modernity prompted a concerted effort to ‘strengthen and fortify whiteness’. The resultant discourse of ‘normality’, Carter claims, was a way of alleviating these anxieties. Providing whites with ‘a common and deeply sexualized vocabulary’ with which to communicate their shared racial and political values with one another, it allowed white, heterosexual Americans to stake ‘a racial claim to the right to possess in perpetuity both the materiality and the meaning of modern America’. Julian B. Carter, The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880-1940 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 70-2.
31 Baldwin, ‘In Search of a Majority’, 232.
categorization’. In a similar vein, what he characterises as ‘the mindless grunting and swaggering of Hollywood he-men’ is presented as making a ‘prison’ out of hegemonic masculinity, while the nation’s preference for ‘life neatly fitted into pegs’ leaves its inhabitants suffocating in ‘airless, labelled cells, which isolate us from each other’. 

As will become apparent in my discussion of Baldwin’s relation to Cold War discourse below, there is a historical relativism to these invocations of containment. The overriding effect of this emphasis on the boundaries of representation, however, is to position the American cultural imaginary as deriving its impetus from a closeted epistemological framework. In this section, I look to develop this point. Reading Baldwin’s work alongside that of Sedgwick and scholars from the burgeoning field of black queer studies, I propose that the closet paradigm elucidated by Sedgwick, far from being exclusive to the experiences of homosexuals in the twentieth century, provides an expedient theoretical apparatus through which to explore both the distribution of hegemonic power in early Cold War America and broader currents in American history. Baldwin’s work – attuned as it is to the symbiotic relationship between race, sexuality, historical identity, and contemporaneous geopolitics – offers a salient site for the exploration of this idea. As such, I analyse both how the multiple closets that characterise American culture manifest themselves in his writing and what he presents as the ‘terrible’ consequences of the United States living – to paraphrase Baldwin himself – with something in its closet that it pretends is not there.

The ‘defining structure of gay oppression’ in the twentieth century, the homosexual closet as described by Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) names the vehicle through which heterosexuality is naturalised. Functioning as a threshold or point of demarcation, it inscribes a discourse whereby sexuality is distributed asymmetrically within a binary framework that sees an ‘ontologically valorized’ heterosexual dyad derive its meaning from ‘the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion’ of a ‘subordinated’ homosexuality. This ‘subsumption and exclusion’ does not negate the discursive potency of homosexuality, however. While at the most basic level the closet describes the cultural imperative to

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33 Baldwin, ‘Everybody’s Protest Novel’, 31, 32.
36 Ibid, 9, 10.
circumscribe and conceal queer sexuality, it is the existence of a defiled homosexuality at the threshold of normative discourse that orients heterosexuality and underwrites its cultural legitimacy.

The closet functions, in other words, as a site of abjection, acting as a fault line that simultaneously forecloses that which threatens to violate heterosexual privilege and reaffirms it through the same process of exclusion. In doing so, it maps the discursive terrain on which sexual identity may legitimately be constructed, thus setting sets the terms of normative discourse. In this framework, meaning is produced through a dialectic of presence and absence. A key component of the closet's regulatory power, Sedgwick claims, is the way in which it renders 'silence [...] as pointed and performative as speech'. Highlighting how 'ignorance' may 'collude or compete with knowledge' to produce meaning, it instead enforces the discursive power of heterosexuality by positioning homosexuality as beyond the acceptable boundaries of representation. It is the absence of homosexuality from the field of knowledge in which power is articulated that naturalises heterosexuality, rather than any intrinsic quality of heterosexuality itself. This absence elevates heterosexuality to the status of 'goes without saying'. As such, ignorance is not here simply the absence of knowledge; rather the fact that it is central to the practice of power and production of meaning instead makes it constitutive of knowledge.

In effect, what Sedgwick describes is an extension of Michel Foucault’s idea of knowledge/power. For Foucault, knowledge names the discourse through which the historically grounded ideas, values, and narratives of a particular culture or context coalesce,

37 My thinking here is indebted to Henry Urbach’s analysis of abjection, in which he asserts that the abject exists just beyond the subject and simultaneously soils and cleanses it. ‘This partial, incomplete elimination’, he writes, ‘keeps that which is dirty present so it can constitute, by contrast, the cleanliness of the clean’. Henry Urbach, ‘Closets, Clothes, disClosure’, Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction, eds. Iain Borden, Barbara Penner, and Jane Rendell (London: Routledge, 2000), 343-53 (346).
38 Ibid, 4.
39 Peter Hegarty echoes this point, writing: ‘At is simplest, Sedgwick’s argument is illustrated by the fact that the privilege of heterosexuality is best accomplished by silence. To insist on your straightness only raises the question of why you feel the need to insist’, Peter Hegarty, ‘What Comes After Discourse Analysis for LGBTQ Psychology?’, Out in Psychology: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer Perspectives, eds. Victoria Clark and Elizabeth Peel (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 41-58 (44).
41 Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 4, 8. For more on the idea of ignorance as power see: Sedgwick, ‘Privilege of Unknowing: Diderot’s The Nun’, Tendencies, 23-51.
allowing ‘the sovereignty of collective consciousness to emerge as the principle of unity and explanation’. Critically, however, this knowledge is never ideologically neutral. Rather, it exists in a symbiotic relationship with hegemonic power. ‘There is no power relation’, Foucault claims, ‘without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations’. Sedgwick’s foregrounding of the importance of ignorance in the production of meaning is, in a sense, a development of this principle. Her suggestion that the discourse surrounding sexuality in the twentieth century gives rise to a field of knowledge that is, paradoxically, contingent on ignorance redefines the relationship that Foucault articulates. Implicit in the closet paradigm is the notion that knowledge is, in effect, a cipher for omission. The closet presupposes a power relation that hinges on a correlative field of ignorance. In other words, it is that which is absent and concealed from the representational domain that undergirds the sovereignty of heterosexuality that reifies its power.

It is this idea that underpins what follows below. However, challenging Sedgwick’s own insistence that the closet’s ‘historical gay specificity’ be retained, I propose that the collusion between ignorance and knowledge she identifies as the basis of western civilisation’s heteronormative imperative is metonymic of how hegemonic power is distributed more broadly. The postwar period which provides the historical backdrop to this chapter offers a particularly potent example of this tendency, with the collusion between ignorance and knowledge doing much to shape the ideological contours of the American Cold War. Alan Nadel elucidates this point, making a compelling case for postwar America constituting a closeted episteme. The narrative of Cold War containment, he argues, shared a number of structural similarities with the narrative of the homosexual closet developed by Sedgwick. Like the closet, the bifurcation of American and un-American mobilised by Cold War containment foregrounded the imperative of ‘clear, legible boundaries between Other and Same’, inscribing ‘a matrix of binary oppositions’, the relative value of which were determined by ‘a

44 Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 72.
45 See also David Harley Serlin, ‘Christine Jorgensen and the Cold War Closet’, Radical History Review, 62 (Spring 1995), 136-65.
weighted set of social norms’. Moreover, the containment narrative similarly advanced a paradigm of identity that hinged on a coextensive relationship between presence and absence (or knowledge and ignorance). Just as the closet has, historically, constructed heterosexual identity through its simultaneous ‘subsumption and exclusion’ of a defiled homosexual other, so the American Cold War, with its institutionalisation of ‘un-American activities’, constructed a model of national identity that derived its meaning from what it was not, as much as what it was. As David Caute cogently argues in relation to McCarthyism, ‘it offered every American […] the chance of being taken for a good American, simply by demonstrating a gut hatred for Commies’. In other words, it was the ‘un-American’, that which was ostensibly excluded from the field of knowledge that constituted American-ness, which underwrote and gave meaning to national identity in the United States during the 1950s.

What fell under the ambit of ‘communism’ and ‘un-American’ in the Cold War imaginary was not limited to one’s political affiliations or ideological sympathies, however. Rather, both functioned as free-floating signifiers that encompassed a vast array of lived experience. Anxieties over the boundaries of the American ‘self’ frequently resulted in the ‘gut hatred for Commies’ described by Caute becoming inseparable from hostility towards various historical others, notably non-white, non-heteronormative persons. Indeed, transgressing established polarities of identity occupied a similar place in the demonology of Cold War America as political ‘deviancy’. To this end, the containment narrative accentuated existing faultlines in the American imaginary. Staking out the terrain of American-ness through a series of binarisms that made national identity legible only through the disavowed presence of each binarism’s closeted other, it reified a normative American subject that was always already white, as well as heterosexual.

It is within and against this framework, I argue, that Baldwin’s work is pitched. Though never referred to directly, the spectre of containment, or the disciplinary power of the closeted episteme in which his identity was formed, haunts his writing. The allusions to finding oneself trapped within the strictures of American culture that punctuate his writing read as a kind of

46 Nadel, Containment Culture, 29, 34, 29.
48 Nadel, Containment Culture, 34.
textual unconscious that invokes the exigencies of his historical moment.48 What Baldwin demonstrates, however, is that the genealogy of the closeted episteme identified by Nadel is not a historically specific response to the threat posed to American life by any expansion of Soviet Communism, but symptomatic of deeper historical currents in the American cultural imaginary. In doing so, his work expands the temporal parameters of the containment narrative, while simultaneously enlarging the interpretive scope of the closet paradigm. The emphasis he places on the containment of the historical identity of African Americans and what he terms the ‘vast sexual implications of our racial heritage’ demonstrates the imperative of what Marlon B. Ross characterises as the necessity to move beyond the idea of the closet as a ‘raceless paradigm’.50

Instead, Baldwin’s writing reflects a broader collusion between ignorance and knowledge in the American psyche that he locates in the myth of the nation’s primordial ‘innocence’. For Baldwin, innocence is not a condition worthy of extolling the virtues of; nor is its passing to be lamented. Rather, it is an oppressive force that reifies ignorance as the basis of the nation’s prevailing hegemony. As he put it in a 1986 interview with David Leeming, it names ‘the “general failure” – the failure to touch, to see’.51 George Shulman explicates this idea, writing how Baldwinian innocence names a ‘dream of safety, sovereignty, or purity’ that hinges on the ‘denial of history’ and ‘denying the social landscape of power and our differential positioning in it’.52 By ‘denying the social landscape of power’, existing power relations are effectively naturalised and consolidated.

Repudiating ignorance/innocence as destructive, what emerges in Baldwin’s work is a redefinition of knowledge and power from which the collective consciousness of the United States derives its unity and explanation. And the basis of this redefinition is knowledge rooted in the historical experiences of those like Baldwin himself who had hitherto found themselves excluded from the ambit of hegemonic power.

The Closet, the Veil, and the American Cold War

My suggestion that the collusion between ignorance and knowledge in the production of meaning extends beyond the domain of sexuality means challenging Sedgwick’s own interpretation of the closet paradigm. Cautioning against what she perceives as its ‘floating free from its gay origins’, she insists that sex and knowledge are ‘conceptually inseparable from one another’ in twentieth century culture. To evacuate the closet of its ‘historical gay specificity’, therefore, risks reinscribing the very power relations it is a vehicle for.\(^5^3\) Sedgwick is correct insofar as the prejudices experienced by different marginalised groups have their own distinct genealogies that cannot be productively reduced to one another. The genealogy of race, for example, cannot be simply mapped onto that of sexuality. The experiences of non-white and non-heteronormative persons are patently not one and the same. To suggest otherwise risks effacing the existence of black homophobia or queer racism. However, this does not mean that there are no parallels or points where their respective histories intersect.

While the metaphor of the closet obviously has a particular semantic resonance in relation to the history of sexuality, the asymmetrical distribution of identity it mobilises is not exclusive to relations between hetero and non-heteronormative persons. Indeed, if, as Sedgwick contends, power is distributed according to a binary logic that sees one dyad valorised through ‘the subsumption and exclusion’ of the other, it seems curiously schematic for her to privilege the sexual dyad above all others. To downplay the historical role of race is particularly problematic, given the extent to which a racial faultline has been constitutive of both American history and that of western modernity, more broadly. It appears to rehearse what Matt Brim characterises as an occasional tendency in queer theory to ‘recenter whiteness’.\(^5^4\) Minimising the significance of race to the discursive framework inaugurated by modernity is, however inadvertently, to perpetuate the very ‘compulsions’ that the closet inscribes and Sedgwick herself cautions against. In doing so, she effectively elides the historical identity of non-white populations by evacuating their experiences under the aegis of modernity of their racial specificity.

To minimise the significance of race to the distribution of power in the twentieth century is hugely problematic. As Du Bois memorably declared in 1903, ‘[t]he problem of the twentieth

\(^{5^3}\) Ibid, 72, 73.

century is the problem of the color-line’, a prophecy that proved to be remarkably prescient.\textsuperscript{55}

Equally pertinent in the present context, however, is his formulation of ‘the Veil’ that separates African Americans from their white counterparts. Like Sedgwick’s closet, the Veil establishes an asymmetrical binarism; it functions as a dividing line that not only separates two opposing dyads, but also delimits and circumscribes the existence of the subordinated dyad, excluding it from the field of knowledge in which power is distributed. Put simply, Du Bois’s conception of ‘the Veil’ represents a racial corollary of the closet. Though a different metaphor and applied to an ostensibly different realm of experience, the power structure it describes is strikingly similar to that subsequently outlined by Sedgwick. African Americans, Du Bois claims, live ‘within the Veil’ (emphasis added) and, as such, are ‘shut out’ from the white world in which meaning is produced. The result, he famously opines, is African Americans are left in possession of a ‘double consciousness’ he characterises as ‘the peculiar sensation of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’. Tellingly, Du Boisian double consciousness is framed as enforcing white hegemony through the absence of knowledge. Though he refers to African Americans being ‘gifted with second sight in this American world’ (emphasis added), it is a world that ‘yields [them] no true self-consciousness’.\textsuperscript{56} It is a world, in other words, articulated along a rigidly delineated dividing line, in which power is contingent on the identity of its subordinated inhabitants existing outside the prevailing terms of legibility. The overriding effect of the Veil, therefore, is to render the African American experience invisible in much the same way that the closet renders the experiences of homosexuals invisible.

To posit the existence of what is, in effect, a racial closet to go alongside that of sexuality need not detract from the latter’s efficacy as an interpretive paradigm for comprehending the power relations attendant to the hegemonic status of heteronormativity. The closet remains crucial to our understanding of how and why sexuality has been disciplined from the late eighteenth century onwards. However, to recognise, in the words of Maurice O. Wallace, that ‘the singularly gay character of the closet no longer holds’ is to affirm new interpretive possibilities that may provide the basis for an intersectional critique of the dialectic of ignorance and knowledge that sustains hegemonic power.\textsuperscript{57} The imperative of such a critique,

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, vi, 2.
I argue, is particularly pronounced when applied to an American context and is especially pertinent to our understanding of the United States in the years immediately following World War II.

* Baldwin’s analysis of American race relations neatly encapsulates the preceding points. The principle of ignorance being constitutive of power is invoked in a racial context in *The Fire Next Time* when he accuses American culture of having ‘evolved no terms’ for its black citizens. The Anglo-Teutonic archetype he identifies as the embodiment of America’s national self-image can only function as such by closeting the historical identity of African Americans as something apart from, as opposed to a part of, American-ness. The American pretension that it is ‘the greatest country the world has ever seen’, Baldwin claims, hinges on a ‘collection of myths’ that extol an ancestry of ‘freedom loving heroes’, while simultaneously keeping ‘the truth about the black man, as a historical entity and as a human being […] hidden from him deliberately and cruelly’. 58 What he is describing here is, in effect, the imposition of the Veil. The assertion that the truth is kept ‘hidden’ from African Americans recapitulates the absence of ‘true self-consciousness’ alluded to by Du Bois when elucidating its consequences on African Americans.

Circumscribing the historical experiences of African Americans in this way consolidates a discourse whereby the respective genealogies of the nation’s black and white inhabitants are positioned as entirely distinct from one another. In this context, the nation’s racially demarcated history – a history of ‘rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape’ – is effectively closed off from what it means to be an American, making American identity synonymous with whiteness. 59 The United States has ‘evolved no terms’ for the historical presence of African Americans precisely because this presence constitutes a part of the American psyche that threatens to destabilise the meaning from which the (white) American subject derives its identity. Yet, at the same time, whiteness cannot exist without it. A repudiated black otherness is, as Baldwin puts it, ‘the fixed star’ and ‘immovable pillar’ that orientates the white world’s sense of ‘reality’. 60 It is the disavowed presence of African Americans, in other words, from which white America derives its authority. The implication

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59 Ibid, 376.
60 Ibid, 336.
here that there is ‘no room’ for African Americans within the representational domain in which American identity is articulated rehearses the regulatory structure of the closet. Baldwin’s foregrounding of a cultural imaginary that derives its meaning and authority from an absent black other offers a racial corollary to the process of ‘subsumption and exclusion’ that Sedgwick locates in the asymmetrical distribution of heterosexual and homosexual. Binary logic once again stakes out the terrain of normative identity, with whiteness on this occasion functioning as the ‘ontologically valorized’ dyad.

Underlying the attempt to contain race within a clearly defined parameters is an unspoken anxiety as to the boundaries of American identity. In much the same way that the closet helps ward off the potential of what Sedgwick terms a ‘definitional crisis’ in the realm of gender and sexuality, keeping the historical identity of African Americans distinct from the field of knowledge in which the collective consciousness of the United States is forged helps shore up the American national self-image. If, as Baldwin claims, African Americans have been perceived historically as something apart – ‘the fixed star’ that has provided the ideological co-ordinates for white hegemony – then any blurring of the racial faultline precipitates a concomitant crisis of identity. In other words, if American history is one of ‘rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape’ rather than ‘freedom loving heroes’, its raison d’être, the claim of historical exceptionalism on which the nation’s identity is predicated, begins to ring somewhat hollow. Far from being a beacon of light unencumbered by the wreckage of history, it becomes merely another document of civilisation produced through barbarism.61 Blackness and, more specifically, integration, thus, attack the very foundations on which America’s existing social order is premised. And, as Baldwin points out, for white Americans this potentially means the loss of their identity.

Given the imperative of maintaining clear, legible boundaries between other and same precipitated by the exigencies of the Cold War, it is perhaps unsurprising that the issue of race was one of the key faultlines of containment culture. As discussed in my introduction to this thesis, many defenders of racial segregation during the 1950s deployed Cold War rhetoric to justify the preservation of the colour line. The epithet ‘un-American’ was frequently

deployed by segregationists to attack advocates of racial equality.\textsuperscript{62} Integrationists, meanwhile, were often explicitly equated with the threat of Soviet Communism and castigated for spreading a ‘communistic disease’.\textsuperscript{63} Such moves were symptomatic of a broader anxiety about the boundaries of the American self and its vulnerability to contamination. As Field points out, ‘[f]rom politics to culture, seeped an unstoppable rhetoric of contamination’, underpinned by concerns over the legibility of the nation’s enemies.\textsuperscript{64} The ‘rhetoric of contamination’ that Field describes was particularly pronounced in the discourse surrounding the topic of miscegenation, however. That the preservation of a mythical, pristine whiteness could be rendered in these terms foregrounds the coextensive relationship between whiteness and American-ness in the historical imaginary of the United States. To suggest that integration was ‘un-American’ or a ‘communistic disease’ presupposes the un-American-ness of blackness. Mapping whiteness onto the ideological terrain of the Cold War in this way, therefore, be read as an attempt to fortify the parameters of the racial closet, to ensure the veil separating white Americans from their white counterparts remained in place. Doing so offered a veneer of historical justification to white segregationists’ attempts to cling to the power and attendant privileges associated with the existing racial order. Invoking the contemporaneous language of war, in other words, was an attempt to keep the meaning of being born black in the United States as ‘something unspeakable’.

Yet, for all its pervasiveness, the paradox of the closeted episteme that Cold War containment gave rise to was that its rigorous policing of boundaries merely underscored their permeability. The colour line, which had already begun to yield under the strain of two world wars, became increasingly frayed during the early years of the Cold War in the wake of historic developments both within and beyond America’s borders. The Supreme Court decisions to desegregate the military and the education system in 1948 and 1954 respectively, coupled with symbolic victories such as Jackie Robinson breaking Major League Baseball’s \textit{de facto} colour line in 1947 and the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} Mary Dudziak describes how Robert Patterson, one of the founders of the White Citizen’s Council (a pro-segregationist organisation founded in 1954 in the wake of Brown versus Board of Education), framed the Brown decision as ‘communist inspired’. Dudziak writes: ‘He protested “the Communist theme of all races and mongrelization” and promised that, if southerners worked together, ‘we will defeat this communistic disease that is being thrust upon us’. Mary L. Dudziak, \textit{Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy} (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011 [2002]), 111.
\end{itemize}
1956 pointed towards the veil finally being lifted. At the same time, the gathering momentum of third world decolonisation discussed in the previous chapter and its potential implications in relation to the Cold War added historical credence and geopolitical ballast to the black freedom struggle in the United States.

The damage to America’s global prestige caused by the continued existence of racial segregation in the United States, particularly among the decolonising nations of Africa and Asia, was a vital contributory factor in the legislative steps taken to bring about its formal dissolution.\textsuperscript{65} Baldwin speaks to this point when he writes of the \textit{Brown versus the Board of Education} decision: ‘Most of the Negroes I know do not believe that this immense concession would ever have been made if it had not been for the competition of the Cold War, and the fact that Africa was clearly liberating herself and therefore had, for political reasons, to be wooed by the descendants of her former masters’.\textsuperscript{66} Equally, the Civil Rights Movement drew inspiration and sustenance from events in the third world, a point I discuss in more detail in the final part of this chapter. The growing visibility and power of black people both in the United States and beyond symbolised by these events paved the way for the emergence of African Americans from the racial closet and onto the representational terrain where the meaning of American-ness was forged.

**Behind the Veil?: Baldwin’s Politics of Integration**

In many ways, Baldwin’s work is at the vanguard of the historical shift described above. As will be explored in more detail later in this chapter, his writing straddles literal and metaphysical boundaries. In particular, he uses his liminal vantage point as a self-styled ‘transatlantic commuter’ to create a field of knowledge in which the historical meaning of blackness and queerness can be made articulate in relation to American-ness. Indeed, it is not overstating the case to suggest that destabilising the parameters of American identity as they were framed by the prevailing hegemony during the early years of the Cold War provides the \textit{raison d’être} for his writing. His oft-stated disdain for and attempts to blur monolithic identity categories, therefore, may be understood as symptomatic of both their pervasiveness and permeability during the 1950s. Moreover, with regards specifically to race, as his literary


\textsuperscript{66} Baldwin, \textit{The Fire Next Time}, 371.
renown grew, Baldwin increasingly took on the mantel of spokesman for the black freedom struggle, one who, at the height of his fame in the early 1960s, rivalled the national prominence of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

Yet, Baldwin’s politics of identity did not sit comfortably alongside either the broadly integrationist perspective of King or the strident black nationalism of Malcolm. What his work offers instead is a dissonant perspective that foregrounds the state of being ‘something apart, yet a vital part’. On the one hand, for all his condemnation of ‘life neatly fitted into pegs’, Baldwin was attuned to the experiential reality of categorisation. ‘We take our shape’, he writes in ‘Everybody’s Protest Novel’, ‘within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth’, before adding that society is ‘held together […] with legend, myth, [and] coercion’. Implicit here is the notion that, while the meaning attributed to existing notions of racial, sexual, and national identity may be historically and culturally contingent, its arbitrariness does not stop them from shaping the contours of lived experience. Through ritual and repetition it is naturalised and thus experienced as ontologically true. If this were not the case, then the fact that the historical meaning of being black is ‘something unspeakable’ in an ‘Anglo-Teutonic’ country would be something of a moot point. To be African American is to be something apart; it is to possess a distinct, historically contingent identity. At the same time, however, just because categorisation and difference may be understood as real insofar as they determine the conditions in which one’s consciousness is forged, this does not mean that they are immutable and ‘cannot’, in Baldwin’s words, ‘be transcended’. It is this principle that animates Baldwin’s perspective. He resists the temptation to reinscribe a separatist racial paradigm in the way that Malcolm – at least prior to his departure from the Nation of Islam – did. Rather, Baldwin emphasises the extent to which the respective genealogies of black and white Americans are entwined with and thus inseparable from one another. In doing so, he foregrounds how African Americans are a vital part of the historical identity of the United States. ‘Negroes are Americans’, he writes in ‘Many Thousands Gone’, ‘and their destiny is the country’s destiny. They have no other experience besides their experience on this continent and it is an experience which cannot be rejected, which yet

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68 Ibid, 33.
remains to be embraced’. However, this affirmation of the American-ness of the nation’s black citizens should not be read as an unequivocal endorsement of integration. As Scott rightly observes, “integration” is a false issue’ for Baldwin. It is not a goal to be aspired to or something that can be conferred on African Americans by their white counterparts. Instead, Baldwin’s excavation of the hidden recesses of historical memory is predicated on the assumption that the United States was always already integrated. As he was wont to point out, the relationship between black and white Americans ‘is not simply the relationship of oppressed to oppressor, of master to slave, nor is it motivated merely by hatred; it is also, literally and morally, a blood relationship.’ To put it another way, the United States was ‘integrated in the womb’ and, as such, ‘can scarcely be considered a white nation’. The sexual implications of this point is a theme I return to below. More broadly, however, it rehearse what Baldwin perceives as the imperative to transform the representational framework in which race is articulated in the United States. And in this regard, his work both speaks to and furthers the breakdown of the existing racial power structure that was evident during the 1950s.

Accordingly, Baldwin’s racial politics are geared towards redeeming the dissonant presence of African Americans in the historical imaginary of the United States and redefining the representational terrain of American identity in the context of this presence. For Lawrie Balfour, noting the ‘multiple doublenesses’ of Baldwin’s work, this process sees him taking his predominantly white readership ‘behind the veil’. Balfour is correct insofar as Baldwin gives form to domains of experience that were typically concealed by the prevailing orthodoxies of his era. At the same time, however, such an interpretation risks diluting the ideological import of Baldwin’s work. Implicit in his writing is the idea that it is not sufficient to simply go ‘behind the veil’. Doing so fails to address the asymmetries of power that the veil symbolises.

Balfour comes closer to capturing Baldwin’s politics of identity when she asserts that his ‘version of double consciousness provides a critical metaphor for the experiences of white

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69 Baldwin, ‘Many Thousands Gone’, 77.
70 Scott, ‘Challenging the American Conscience’, 155.
71 Baldwin, ‘Many Thousands Gone’, 77.
Americans as well as those of blacks'. Here, an important distinction emerges. The allusion to double consciousness structuring the perspective of white Americans as well as African Americans raises the possibility of the veil being something that yields the former ‘no true self-consciousness’. Once more, a parallel can be drawn with the closet paradigm as articulated by Sedgwick. Just as ‘the gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people’, but a means of buttressing the discursive legitimacy and authority of heterosexuality, so the veil facilitates the elevation of whiteness to the status of goes without saying. Baldwin sets about deconstructing this process, effectively redefining the colour line as something that yields white Americans ‘no true self-consciousness’. This means shifting the emphasis of America’s race problem onto its white citizens.

One need only consider Baldwin’s objection to so-called ‘protest’ fiction to recognise why it is insufficient for him to merely take his (white) readers ‘behind the veil’. His criticism of the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Richard Wright in ‘Everybody’s Protest Novel’ and ‘Many Thousands Gone’ is not the attack on social determinism it is sometimes assumed to be. Indeed, Baldwin explicitly acknowledges the fact that '[w]e take our shape […] within and against the cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth’. Rather, his objection stems from his belief that protest fiction does not do enough to try and transform this ‘reality’. ‘[F]ar from being disturbing’, Baldwin writes, such texts are actually ‘an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying the framework we believe to be so necessary’. To put it another way, while they may take the reader ‘behind the veil’, protest novels do little to challenge the ideological framework that produced the veil in the first place. Leaving ‘any unsettling questions safely ensconced in the social arena’ and providing the implicitly white reader with ‘a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact [they] are reaing such a book at all’, they inadvertently reify the conditions they are ostensibly intended to critique.

Implicit here is the notion of a white liberal readership being afforded a kind of voyeuristic pleasure in the suffering of African Americans, which, in turn, buttresses their own sense of superiority. As Baldwin writes of Stowe: ‘God and salvation become her personal property,'
purchased with the coin of her virtue. Here, black equates with evil and white with grace.\footnote{Ibid, 30.}

Put simply, a text like Stowe’s \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} (1852) is predicated on the assumption of \textit{white is right}. In this regard, protest fiction consolidates hegemonic assumptions, abrogating its readership of any personal or collective responsibility for what is depicted in the texts. As a result, African Americans continue to find themselves disciplined by the very knowledge that had subordinated them in the first place. They continue to be positioned as passive receptacles of white knowledge/power, perpetuating the idea that equality for black people in the United States means merely attaining the privileges of whiteness.

\textit{The Fire Next Time}, perhaps reflecting the growing confidence of African Americans in the wake of the historical gains of the 1950s, sees Baldwin revive this idea in more explicit terms. ‘White Americans’, he writes, are unable to ‘divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want’. As a result, African Americans are expected to ‘accept and adopt white standards’, which, thus, ‘corroborates the white man’s sense of his own value’.\footnote{Baldwin, \textit{The Fire Next Time}, 374.} Baldwin’s argument here calls attention to the double bind faced by African Americans when trying to carve out a place for themselves within American culture. On the one hand the desire for equality appears to be axiomatic. At the same time, however, this desire begs the question: equal to what and equal to whom? It is this tension that problematises the notions of assimilation and integration advanced by a text like \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}. Always already within such claims is an asymmetrical power relation, whereby it is the dominant dyad of the black/white binarism that sets the terms for the other’s integration, determining whether the other may be integrated into its regime of knowledge.

In this regard, integration follows a similar pattern to the idea of ‘coming out of the closet’ for non-heterosexuals. The confessional logic that underpins the act of coming out places the speaker in a subordinate position, wherein their acceptance into the symbolic order is contingent on the approval and legitimacy conferred on them by the listener.\footnote{For more on the power relations underpinning the notion of ‘coming out’, see Sedgwick, \textit{Epistemology of the Closet}, 4-8, 71-3.} This kind of disciplinary structure upholds the existing asymmetrical distribution of power structuring the hetero/homosexual dyad, thus foreclosing the possibility of genuine equality.\footnote{Davin Allen Grindstaff helps elucidate this point. In response to Sedgwick’s deconstruction of the liberatory potential of ‘coming out’ narratives, he argues that the assumption ‘that the revelatory act of coming out will secure...’} Indeed, by
recuperating the other into its own regime of knowledge as opposed to vice versa, it preserves the constitutive power of ignorance discussed above. By claiming not to have been aware of the speaker’s sexuality, the listener is able to demarcate the discursive terrain on which the exchange occurs, thus maintaining the closet’s power to discipline the context in which sexuality may be articulated.83

It is the coercive logic of integration that Baldwin sets about deconstructing in his writing. This process involves a renegotiation of the power relations surrounding the veil/racial closet. White Americans in Baldwin’s formulation are compelled to view themselves through the lens of the black world, as opposed to vice versa. ‘My Dungeon Shook’, the letter from Baldwin to his nephew that opens The Fire Next Time neatly encapsulates this point. Feigning a conspiratorial tone, the reader is positioned, as George Shulman points out, in such a way that it is as though they are overhearing an unmediated conversation from outside of their field of knowledge.84 Baldwin writes: ‘I am writing this letter to you, to try to tell you something about how to handle them’ (emphasis in original). He subsequently adds: ‘There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them’.85 The implicitly white reader is here disempowered, placed in the subordinate position in the us/them binary wherein they are forced to view themselves through what Du Bois defined as ‘the revelation of the other world’.86 Similarly, when later in The Fire Next Time Baldwin insists that, for the most part, African Americans do not hate white people, but view them as ‘slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing’, he recasts the kind of ‘amused contempt and pity’ with which the white world is described as viewing the African American in The Souls of Black Folk.87 Accordingly, not only is the reader taken behind the veil, they are also made to experience, if only briefly, what it is to be shut out from the representational domain in which knowledge is produced.

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83 the rights of citizenship’ is circumscribed by the fact that within a closeted discursive regime ‘we remain unable to question the relations of power that are at work in the production of knowledge’. Davin Allen Grindstaff, Rhetorical Secrets: Mapping Gay Identity and Queer Resistance in Contemporary America (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006), 25.
84 Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 5.
86 Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, 334, 335.
87 Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, 2.
These reversals shift the locus of American history. Offering a historical counternarrative to the nation’s self-mythologizing discourse, Baldwin gives voices to what may be termed the ‘excesses of meaning’ that this mythology veils and keeps in its closet. In doing so, he interjects a sense of dissonance into the American imaginary. Instead of being a discrete, self-contained, closed system of reality, the history of the United States is recast as a contested terrain. Repudiating the suggestion that American democracy in the middle of the twentieth century constitutes the telos of history – ‘I cannot accept the proposition that the four-hundred year travail of the American Negro should result merely in his attainment of the present level of the American civilization’ – Baldwin sets an ancestry of ‘freedom loving heroes’ against one of ‘rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape’ as a means of developing a new interpretive paradigm for the American experience. To this end, he lays the groundwork for a renegotiation of the discursive framework in which both blackness and integration are discussed. As will be demonstrated below, this means unpacking the coextensive relationship between race and sexuality in the American imaginary, a relationship that is shot through with connotations of queerness. Foregrounding the extent to which the historical relationship between blacks and whites in the United States is a ‘blood relationship’, what emerges is the basis of an intersectional critique of how power is distributed in a ‘white, antosexual country’.

Part 2: Blackness as Queerness/Queerness as Blackness

The sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you know. If Americans can mature on the level of racism, then they have to mature on the level of sexuality.

Speaking about the history of sexuality in the United States necessarily involves speaking about race, and vice versa. Though each possesses its own distinctive characteristics, race and sexuality constitute intersecting axes in the American imaginary. As such, it is not the case that the closeting of race simply exists in parallel with that of sexuality. Rather, each is imbricated both with one another and within a larger matrix of power where whiteness, heterosexuality, and American-ness are positioned as co-extensive.

88 Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, 375.
It is this reciprocal relationship between whiteness and heterosexuality that has prompted a number of scholars, particularly those working in the burgeoning field of black queer studies, to foreground the imperative of introducing a racial axis into the discursive structure mapped by Sedgwick. The likes of Roderick A. Ferguson, Marlon B. Ross, Siobhan B. Somerville, and Maurice O. Wallace – to name just four examples – have all explored the intersection of race and sexuality, demonstrating the way in which they coalesce to produce American identity.\footnote{Roderick A. Ferguson, \textit{Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique} (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Ross, ‘Beyond the Closet as a Raceless Paradigm’, 161-89; Siobhan B. Somerville, \textit{Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Wallace, \textit{Constructing the Black Masculine}.}

In \textit{Queering the Color Line} (2000), for instance, Somerville makes a compelling case for there being a symbiotic relationship between the 1896 \textit{Plessy versus Ferguson} court ruling that provided the legal basis for racial segregation and anxieties about sexual definition that precipitated what Michel Foucault famously characterises as the contemporaneous invention of the homosexual as ‘a species’.\footnote{Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction}, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990 [1976]), 43.} Far from being a mere historical coincidence, Somerville argues, ‘the simultaneous efforts to shore up and bifurcate categories of race and sexuality in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were deeply entwined’ in the American imaginary, with ‘the formation of notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality in the United States [...] saturated with assumptions about the racialization of bodies’.\footnote{Somerville, 3, 4.} In short, sexuality is overdetermined by race, while race is always already freighted with connotations of queer sexuality.\footnote{As Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien point out, there is a strong argument to be made for ‘Western’ notions of sexuality being always already racialised: ‘Historically, the European construction of sexuality coincides with the epoch of imperialism and the two inter-connect [...] The person of the savage was developed as the Other of civilisation and one of the first “proofs” of this otherness was the nakedness of the savage, the visibility of its sex’. Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, ‘Race, Sexual Politics, and Black Masculinity: A Dossier’, \textit{Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity}, eds. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 97-164 (106).} The concomitant emphasis on African Americans being ‘separate’ entities enshrined in \textit{Plessy versus Ferguson} and the designation of the homosexual as a distinct, un-American ‘species’ institutionalised a paradigm of American-ness that placed blackness and queerness outside the purview of what it meant to be an American. What this amounted to was a cultural hegemony structured not just by the ‘modern homo/heterosexual definition’ identified by Sedgwick, but by a broader self/other binary in which an emergent American ‘self’ was defined in opposition to a disavowed otherness that was black and/or queer.
Once again, Baldwin’s *oeuvre* provides fertile terrain on which to pursue this idea. As someone who was both black and queer, as well as being from a materially disadvantaged social background, his life provides an object lesson in how various forms of oppression intersect. Moreover, his work foregrounds the way in which oppression may be fought from this point of intersection. Dwight A. McBride echoes this point, writing that Baldwin ‘reminds us that whenever we are speaking of race, we are always already speaking about gender, sexuality, and class’.  

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the nexus of race and sexuality is particularly marked in Baldwin’s writing. Throughout his career, he was closely attuned to what he termed ‘the vast sexual implications of our racial heritage’, insisting that ‘the sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined’ in the American psyche.  

This refusal to disentangle race and sexuality is consistent with Baldwin’s broader disdain for categorisation and his concomitant refusal to wed himself to a one-dimensional, monolithic identity. Indeed, a striking feature of his writing is the way that it, in effect, queers the colour line and racialises queer sexuality. In doing so, he not only foregrounds the extent to which America’s closeted epistemological framework is articulated along multiple, intersecting axes, but also creates a breach in this framework, in which the disavowed experiences of non-white, non-heteronormative persons are made legible.

‘A Blood Relationship’: The Psychosexual Politics of Lynching  

By the mid-1950s, the United States was in the midst of a profound and frequently violent state of upheaval, particularly in the South. The faultlines of this conflict were African Americans’ stake – or lack thereof – in the institutions, traditions, and cultural heritage that undergird national identity. The 1954 *Brown* decision and the gathering momentum of the Southern Civil Rights Movements following the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, prompted a backlash among segregationists. Over the next few years, groups such as the White Citizen’s Council and a resurgent Ku Klux Klan engaged in campaigns of violent intimidation against those who sought to implement desegregation. Such campaigns were supplemented by a strain of Southern politics embodied by the likes of Orval Faubus and

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95 Goldstein, 178.
George Wallace (state governors of Arkansas and Alabama, respectively). Both men tried to block attempts to desegregate education, with the latter going so far as to stand in the entrance of an auditorium at the University of Alabama to prevent two black students from enrolling there in 1963. In a similar vein, six years earlier, Faubus had mobilised the Arkansas National Guard to prevent nine black children from enrolling in Little Rock Central High School. In each case, the crisis that ensued prompted the intervention of the federal government, with Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy – mindful of the damage the incidents were causing to America's global prestige amid the geopolitical exigencies of the Cold War – sending in troops to help enforce the Brown decision.96

It is against this backdrop that much of Baldwin’s work in the late 1950s and early 1960s plays out. Having returned to the United States from Paris in 1957, essays such as such as ‘A Fly in the Buttermilk’ (1958), ‘Nobody Knows My Name’ (1959), They Can’t Turn Back (1960), and ‘The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King’ (1961) see him address the Civil Rights struggle directly.97 Baldwin’s analysis of Southern race relations sees him expanding on themes advanced in his earlier work. In particular, he continues to repudiate monolithic paradigms of identity, resulting in the intersection of race and sexuality that is implicit in much of the work he produced in Paris, becoming increasingly pronounced in the work he produced from the late 1950s onwards.

‘Nobody Knows My Name’ offers a particularly potent example of this tendency, charting how the disavowal of one kind of ‘blood relationship’ between black and white Americans results in it being displaced by another. The essay, which recounts Baldwin’s first visit to the Deep South in 1958, is ostensibly a report on the progress of desegregation in the wake of Brown. But as Baldwin makes clear, the lingering resentment towards the Supreme Court’s ruling among southern whites ‘has […] nothing to do with education’. Rather, ‘it has to do with political power and it has to do with sex’.98 It is this relationship that Baldwin sets about unpacking in the essay, a process which, once again, sees him turning his attention to the ‘unspeakable’ aspects of the American cultural imaginary.

This co-mingling of race, sexuality, and power is distilled most clearly in the essay’s invocations of racial lynching. Baldwin’s two direct references to lynching in the text emphasise the image of a castrated black, male body: ‘My mind was filled with the image of a black man […] hanging from a tree, while white men watched him and cut his sex from him with a knife […] How many times has the southern day come up to find that black man, sexless, hanging from a tree’.\textsuperscript{99} Lynching is here framed as sublimated sexual desire. It is the social sanctions that overdetermine sexual relations between whites and blacks in the South made manifest and rendered – in the Kristevan sense of the word – abject. Racial violence, Baldwin suggests, is displaced ‘guilt’, stemming from the ‘unspeakable longings’ and ‘dreadful taboos’ that accompany interracial desire among white, southern men. It is their own nocturnal transgressions of the racial dividing line – Baldwin makes reference to the bleakly ironic observation of a light-skinned African American in Alabama to integration having ‘always worked very well in the South, after the sun goes down’ – that undergirds their brutal policing of this fault line in the form of lynching.\textsuperscript{100}

The spectre of miscegenation that haunts these relations imperils the meaning on which hegemonic identity in the South is premised, resulting in the expulsion and the projection of this guilt onto the imaginary figure of the black, male rapist possessed with an insatiable lust for white women. Accordingly, when in the aftermath of his sexual encounters with black women, the white southerner is confronted with a black man who possesses what Baldwin characterises as ‘a body like his, and passions like his, and a ruder more erotic beauty’, it elicits a reaction akin to the ‘massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness’ experienced as something ‘radically separate [and] loathsome’ that Kristeva identifies as the essence of abjection.\textsuperscript{101} Hence, lynching, where one blood relationship is displaced by another. In this context, the horrifying spectacle of the castrated black body functions as a way of reaffirming the South’s racial dividing line and the asymmetrical power relations that are attendant to it. Robyn Wiegman elucidates this point:

Operating according to a logic of borders – racial, sexual, national, psychological, biological, as well as gendered – lynching figures its victims as the culturally abject, monstrosities of excess whose limp and lifeless bodies function as the specular

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid, 188.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, 192.
assurance that the threat [to white hegemony] has not simply been averted, but thoroughly negated, dehumanized, and rendered incapable of return.\textsuperscript{102}

In other words, by transmuting the ‘threat’ of miscegenation into something abject, it keeps blackness just beyond the representational domain in which meaning is articulated. Legible borders of identity are maintained, thus preserving the harmony of the existing social order. It is these borders that Baldwin sets about deconstructing.

The link between repressed sexual desire and racial violence Baldwin that traces in ‘Nobody Knows My Name’ demonstrates that the closet is not simply a vehicle for disciplining same-sex relations. Rather, the closeted sexuality of the Deep South is shown to be integral to the region’s racialised social order. Once again, Weigman is instructive here. Translating the threat to white supremacy into sexual terms, she argues, provided ‘a very powerful means through which not only black men, but the entire black community could be psychologically and physically contained’.\textsuperscript{103} In this framework, interracial sexuality is forced to exist beyond the representational terrain of the dominant social order.

Baldwin neatly encapsulates this idea in ‘Nobody Knows My Name’. While his presence as a Northern African American elicits the uncanny recognition that his ‘ancestors are both white and black’, the evidence of interracial sexuality that is, quite literally, written on the faces of many of the region’s inhabitants remains largely unspoken, functioning as a kind of open secret on account of the brutal violence that often occurs when it approaches the threshold of meaning. Baldwin underscores this point by detailing how the ‘dreadful taboos’ he identifies as giving rise to lynching reflect ‘unspeakable longings’ (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{104} Moreover, these longings are shown as typically playing out under the cover of darkness and thus at the threshold of legibility. ‘What passions cannot be unleashed on a dark road in a southern night!’, Baldwin writes. ‘Desire can be acted here; over this fence, behind that tree, in the darkness, there; and no one will see, no one will ever know’.\textsuperscript{105} Interracial desire, he suggests, can only exist in the realm of non-speech in the Deep South. The overriding effect is that blackness is laden with connotations of queer sexuality. In the dark of the southern night, there exists another kind of love that ‘dare not speak its name’.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, 456.
\textsuperscript{104} Baldwin, ‘Nobody Knows My Name’, 188.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
If ‘Nobody Knows My Name’ demonstrates the extent to which blackness is overdetermined with connotations of queer sexuality, then Baldwin’s third novel, *Another Country*, illustrates that the reverse also holds. Eric, a white actor from a wealthy Alabama family who, when we first encounter him, is in the south of France preparing to return to the United States after a long absence, is described by Baldwin reminiscing about his first sexual encounter as a teenager with an African American named LeRoy. As in ‘Nobody Knows My Name’, the relationship is set against a backdrop of illegibility, where the only terms available to describe it render it abject. Setting the scene for their encounter, Baldwin describes how ‘the silence of the South hung heavy’ (emphasis added), before detailing the interpretive difficulties posed by a rich white boy associating with a poor black boy in such a climate. The only intelligible context for their relationship, Baldwin suggests, is an economic one freighted with asymmetrical power relations. He writes:

[T]heir friendship, their effort to continue an impossible connection, was beginning to be a burden on them both. It would have been simpler – perhaps – if LeRoy had worked for Eric’s family. Then all would have been permitted, would have been covered by the assumption of Eric’s responsibility for his coloured boy. But, as things were, it was suspect, it was indecent.106

The absence of a field of knowledge capable of legitimising Eric and LeRoy’s relationship within the prevailing power structure of the South results in it having to play out in the realm of non-speech. Their mutual desire for one another is referred to as having been ‘something unspoken between them, something unspeakable’, while Eric recalls ‘aching and yearning for the act’, yet unable to articulate his desire linguistically: ‘It had yet to reach the threshold of his imagination; and it had no name, no name for him anyway, though for other people, so he had heard it, it had dreadful names’.107

The underlying sense of abjection discernible in Baldwin’s description here reveals the homogenising force of a closeted epistemological framework that is formulated along intersecting axes of race, gender, and sexuality. Tellingly, it in never made clear as to whether the ‘dreadful names’ that could be used to describe Eric and LeRoy’s relationship allude to interracial or same-sex desire. By blurring the ontological distinction between race and sexuality in this way, Baldwin once again reveals them to be contingent terms and, in doing

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107 Ibid.
so, ‘debunk[s]’ what Ferguson characterises as a counterproductive tendency in American cultural discourse to suggest that ‘race, class, gender, and sexuality are discrete formations, apparently insulated from one another’.  

To this end, Baldwin’s work may be understood as offering ‘queer of color’ interpretive paradigm *avant la lettre*. It illustrates the extent to which whiteness and heterosexuality are mutually constitutive, with each deriving their discursive leverage from a defiled, disavowed otherness. Within such a framework, to be queer is to be less than white. Once again, the encounter between Eric and LeRoy underscores this point. LeRoy’s assertion that their relationship will result in Eric having to flee his hometown, because ‘they going to lynch you before they get around to me’ foregrounds the way that the regulatory power of racial discourse is enforced through legible boundaries of sexuality and gender, as well as race. In LeRoy’s formulation, Eric’s queerness divests him of his whiteness. As a result, he becomes susceptible to the same obscene, supplementary violence that is used to preserve white hegemony. Accordingly, just as the black body in a segregated society is always already queer, so the queer body is always already racialised as non-white and is thus compelled to forfeit the cultural privileges that accompany whiteness. The overriding effect is to underscore the relationship between whiteness and heterosexuality in the American imaginary, making them identical both with one another and the practice of hegemonic power more broadly. Moreover, by demonstrating how this process is contingent on a logic of disavowal where that which is unsaid is as potent as what is, Baldwin illustrates once more how ignorance may underwrite power as much as knowledge.

**Part 3: ‘Transatlantic Commuter’**

I really *do* find American life intolerable and, more than that, personally menacing. I know that I will never be able to expatriate myself again – but I also somehow know that the incessant strain and terror – for me – of continued living there will prove, finally, to be more than I can stand [...] I think that I must reconcile myself to being a transatlantic commuter – and turn to my advantage, and not impossibly the advantage of others, the fact that I am a stranger everywhere.


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In 1957, following nine years in Europe, Baldwin returned to the United States. The Baldwin who arrived in New York that July had seemingly come a long way from the impoverished twenty four year old who had fled the city in 1948 doubting his ‘ability to survive the fury of the color problem’ there. In the intervening years he had published Go Tell It on the Mountain and Giovanni’s Room, as well as a critically acclaimed collection of essays, Notes of a Native Son (1955). As a result, he was now hailed in some quarters as ‘the most gifted’ African American writer of his generation, a viewpoint that would become increasingly prevalent over the next few years. Yet, despite his career being firmly in the ascendancy, Baldwin’s homecoming was far from a happy one.

Having answered the call of history by returning to participate in the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin – as his comments to Robert P. Mills attest – found the prevailing atmosphere of the United States to be ‘intolerable’ and ‘personally menacing’. Indeed, as James Campbell notes, while Baldwin recognised that the United States had changed in the nine years he had been away, he harboured doubts as to whether it was for the better. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, his return would prove to be short lived.

Instead, the next five years or so saw Baldwin become a self-styled ‘transatlantic commuter’. Between 1957 and 1963, he crisscrossed the Atlantic on multiple occasions, taking in visits to France, the American South, the United Kingdom, Israel, Turkey, and Africa. These journeys I argue, have a profound impact on his writing. Accordingly, in this section, I explore the symbiotic relationship between Baldwin’s transatlanticism and his work. Paying particular attention to Another Country and The Fire Next Time, I suggest that they advance a textual and theoretical counterpart to Baldwin’s transitory existence, mobilising an explicitly transnational perspective that hollows out the closets of the American cultural imaginary.

The term ‘transatlantic commuter’ appears to have entered Baldwin’s lexicon around 1961. In an interview with Studs Terkel recorded in July and broadcast in December of that year, he describes himself as resigned to ‘spend[ing] the rest of my life as a kind of trans-Atlantic

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111 Baldwin, ‘Notes of a Native Son’ (1955), The Price of the Ticket, 127-46 (134); Baldwin, ‘The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American’, 171.
113 Campbell, Talking at the Gates, 118.
commuter’, in order to be able to cope with the ‘exhausting’ reality of life in the United States and so that he will be able to maintain a clear perspective on life there.\textsuperscript{114} Baldwin uses the term in print for the first time in the December 1961 letter – subsequently published as part of ‘Letters From a Journey’ in the May 1963 issue of Harper’s magazine – to his agent, Robert P. Mills, cited above. Though the phrase is otherwise absent from Baldwin’s writing, it is a description he would periodically return to when pressed to account for his living situation over the next 25 years. For instance, when asked in a 1969 interview whether he is tempted to return to Europe, Baldwin once more uses the term, describing his commuting as crucial to his ability to juggle his twin roles as artist and racial spokesperson.\textsuperscript{115} He uses the term again during a question and answer session following his speech to the National Press Club in Washington D.C. in 1986. Rejecting (as he would throughout his career) the terms exile and expatriate, Baldwin settles instead on ‘commuter’.\textsuperscript{116}

Given Baldwin’s oft-stated distaste for categorisation, the fact he would assign himself this label is significant. Tellingly, as with the other designations he would attach to himself during his career, such as ‘witness’ and ‘disturber of the peace’, ‘transatlantic commuter’ speaks to an insider/outsider duality, what Kaplan and Schwarz characterise as Baldwin’s ‘standing both inside and outside of the American house’.\textsuperscript{117} Just as ‘witness’ bridges intimacy and distance and ‘disturber of the peace’ evokes the external disrupting the internal, so the mobility inherent to ‘transatlantic commuter’ conjures a sense of being at once a part and apart.

The phrase is much more than a neat sound-bite, however. Rather, it distils the blurring of boundaries that characterises his politics of identity. Indeed, the liminal space of the commuter may be understood as the vantage point from which Baldwin surveys American culture. It refuses the closed ontology of place, in favour of the indeterminacy of the threshold. In effect, the Atlantic functions as a rhetorical space in which national and transnational


\textsuperscript{117} Kaplan and Schwarz, 18. ‘Disturber of the peace’ enters Baldwin’s vocabulary around the same time as ‘transatlantic commuter’. It is used in the interview with Terkel cited above, with Baldwin asserting: ‘Artists are here to disturb the peace’ (21). Thereafter, the phrase is one that Baldwin often returns to when articulating what he sees to be the role of the artist. See, for example, Yvonne Neverson, ‘The Artist Has Always Been a Disturber of the Peace’ (1978), \textit{Conversations With James Baldwin}, 168-71 (171).
imaginaries collide, resulting in new discursive alignments. Being a commuter allows Baldwin to retain and even affirm the bonds of home – something which he felt being an expatriate’ foreclosed – while simultaneously insulating the excesses of meaning that constituted his black, queer subjectivity from the regulatory force of America’s white heteronormative imperative. At the same time, being apart from the United States enables him to bring knowledge from different locales to bear on the ‘irrevocable condition’ of home. As Kaplan and Schwarz note, Baldwin’s ‘impressive mobility’ is a kind of double movement in which he simultaneously ‘disengage[s] from the systems of falsehood’ that characterise life in the United States and turns these same falsehoods back on themselves, thus exposing and undermining them.

What emerges is a dissonant subject position in which the ‘primordial unity’ identified by Bhabha as underpinning the ‘historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force’ is both literally and figuratively displaced. This dislocation of the meaning of American-ness results in it being translated, rehistoricsed and reconstituted. In the ‘third space’ of the commuter, in other words, Baldwin is able to disturb the synchronicity and harmony of American culture. The dissonant relationship between national and transnational imaginaries gives rise to new modalities of identity, opening up a rhetorical interstice in which ‘the dangerous and reverberating silence’ around America’s entwined racial and sexual neuroses can be excavated and made articulate. Below, I develop this point by analysing how Baldwin harnesses the transformative potential of liminal spaces and states of being in Another Country.

Another Country and the Transformative Power of the Commuter

Liminal spaces and states of being are a pervasive feature in Another Country. In a novel concerned with the difficulty of communicating across binarisms of race, gender, and sexuality, literal and metaphorical thresholds act as a means of escape from the homogenising force of historically contingent categories of identity. Yet, the text’s relationship

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118 Baldwin’s rejection of the status of expatriate on account of its severing of national ties is articulated in a 1967 interview in which he asserts: ‘I am not now, and never will become – at least by my own desire – an expatriate. For better or worse, my ties with my country are too deep, and my concern is too great […] The danger of being an expatriate is that you are very likely to find yourself living, in effect, nowhere’. ‘James Baldwin Breaks His Silence’ (1967), Conversations with James Baldwin, 59-63 (59-60).

119 Kaplan and Schwarz, 19.
to these spaces is ambivalent. For Baldwin, liminality is not, in and of itself, a panacea for the ills of ‘life neatly fitted into pegs’. Nor is it the case, as some critics have suggested, that Baldwin seeks a world free from identity categories.\(^{120}\) As discussed above, the historical contingency of categorisation does not prevent the conditions they underwrite from being experienced as ontologically true. To simply efface categories of race, gender, and sexuality, therefore, risks a corresponding negation of the basis of one’s own lived experience. If identity, as Baldwin claims, has ‘something to do with knowing whence you came’, disavowing the categories that have mediated from ‘whence you came’ risks severing the cultural ties that underwrite your subjectivity.\(^{121}\) In this context, the transcendence of ‘identity’ may result, not in liberation, but alienation.

It is this tension that Baldwin wrestles with in *Another Country*. For all that the threshold between established polarities of identity or place may be liberating, it can just as easily become a void, a site of negation where the breakdown of meaning that occurs there acts as a prelude to the obliteration of the self. Mary Douglas elucidates this point, observing: ‘Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others.’\(^{122}\)

The fate of Rufus Scott in *Another Country* offers a poignant example of this danger. His suicide in the first part of the novel, an event which casts a long shadow over everything that follows, underscores how liminal spaces may become voids that facilitate self-negation, as opposed to self-creation. Rufus kills himself by deliberately jumping from the middle of the George Washington Bridge in New York and into the Hudson River below. As Field points out, the site of Rufus’s suicide is significant. The bridge, he writes, is ‘crucial symbol in the novel, a metaphor that offers the possibility of connection’. He subsequently adds: ‘Symbolically, it may represent mediation between black and white, straight and gay, or male and female. But although the bridge connects two sites, the structure itself is stranded, occupying neither one

\(^{120}\) See, for example, James A. Dievler, ‘Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and *Another Country*, *James Baldwin Now*, 161-83.

\(^{121}\) ‘James Baldwin Breaks His Silence’, 74.

site nor the other. In particular, the centre of the bridge is a no-man’s land, neither leaning
towards one site nor the other’.  

There is a danger, perhaps, of overstating the extent to which the bridge constitutes a
‘third space’ free from the homogenising force of the nation. It is, after all, George Washington
Bridge and thus freighted with the knowledge and power relations associated with hegemonic
notions of American-ness (Baldwin’s ironic reference to the bridge being ‘built to honour the
father of his [Rufus’s] country’ underscores this point). Nonetheless, the bridge as framed
by Baldwin does constitute a ‘no-man’s land’, a ‘non-place’ for Rufus where meaning and
subjectivity collapse. As Rufus stands on the bridge preparing to jump to his death, Baldwin
describes how ‘the cars on the highway seemed to be writing an endless message, writing
with awful speed in a fine, unreadable script’ (emphasis added), before adding: ‘from this
height, the city which had been so dark as he [Rufus] walked through it seemed to be on
fire’. What Baldwin describes is a blurring in Rufus’s perception of the world around him,
his field of knowledge ceasing to be intelligible in the way it has hitherto been. Rufus’s
tragedy, however, lies not in the fact that his representational domain is defamiliarised, but
that he has no means of interpreting and reconstituting this knowledge. The ‘no man’s land’ of
the bridge merely displaces the alienation attendant to the ‘No Man’s Land’ that Wright
identifies as ‘the ground that separated the white world from the black’ in Native Son.

To this end, Rufus may be understood as a cipher for Baldwin he not made it to France;
if, in other words, Baldwin had found himself ‘stranded’ in the middle of the Atlantic. Where
Baldwin was able to reinterpret his historical identity against the backdrop of what was,
literally, another country, Rufus has no alternative frame of reference that may translate his
experiences and thus make them intelligible to him. Accordingly, while the ‘no place’ of the
bridge may provide momentary respite from the dehumanising racial categorisation that
overdetermines his existence in the city, he has no other forms of knowledge with which to
replace it. What Rufus is left with, therefore, is a choice between two voids, two types of ‘no

doctoral thesis, the University of York), 269, 271.
124 Baldwin, Another Country, 92.
125 Ibid, 93.
man’s land’, two forms of negation. As Baldwin neatly puts it, ‘[h]e was black and the water was black’.127

Baldwin’s challenge in Another Country, then, is to destabilise the homogenising force of categorisation, while avoiding the kind of negation that befalls Rufus. Reflecting what James Darsey characterises as the way Baldwin ‘simultaneously desires and resists placement’, his solution is to mobilise a kind of two-ness that is congruent with his own duality as someone who considered himself simultaneously a part of and apart from the United States.128 Indeed, the text foregrounds the efficacy of the transatlantic commuter – embodied in Another Country by the character of Eric – as a figure capable of harnessing the generative, creative aspects of liminality and queering existing norms. While a bridge may represent a site of connection between two places, it is a fixed, static entity. The figure of the commuter, by contrast, traverses the space between two sites, assuming the possibilities and knowledge attendant to both. They do not constitute a ‘third space’; they are constituted by it. Stasis is antithetical to the notion of commuting. To commute is to move between a point of departure and a point of arrival. It presupposes not only a state of transition, but the temporariness of this state. Commuting may be understood, therefore, as a temporal phenomenon, as much as a spatial one.

Baldwin mobilises this notion of a temporally circumscribed liminality in Another County. The potential of liminal spaces and states of being as a means of cultural transformation is shown to be contingent not just on their ability to divest existing cultural frameworks of their homogenising force, but also on whether they reconstitute and renew the representational terrain of the sites they connect. In doing so, Baldwin demonstrates that liminality is a means, not an end. He himself did not aspire to be a ‘transatlantic commuter’, but he learned how to turn it to the advantage of both himself and others.

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It is with a transatlantic voyage that Baldwin concludes Another Country. The text’s final chapter describes Yves, Eric’s French lover, journeying from Paris to New York, where the couple will be reunited. As Jenny M. James notes, the fact that Another Country concludes with Eric and Yves – arguably, the only happy couple we see in the text – being reunited,

127 Baldwin, Another Country, 93.
suggests a salvation-like conclusion to the novel’, a feeling underscored by Baldwin’s reference to Yves ‘stepping into a new and healing light’. But, as James readily acknowledges, it is ‘an uncertain reunion’. This uncertainty is underscored by Baldwin’s description of the transformation that occurs in Yves and his fellow passengers when they land in the United States. Beginning with the other passengers, Baldwin writes:

[T]he plane came slowly to a halt. As the plane halted, the people in the cabin seemed, collectively, to sigh [...] The faces they had worn when hanging, at the mercy of mysteries they could not begin to fathom, in the middle of the air, were now discarded for the faces which they wore on earth. The housewife, travelling alone, who had been, during the passage, a rather flirtatious girl, became a housewife once again: her face responded to her proddings as abjectly as her hat. The businessman who had spoken to Yves about the waters of Lake Michigan, and the days when he had hiked and fished there, relentlessly put all that behind him, and solemnly and cruelly tightened the knot in his tie.

This passage leads into a description of Yves’s growing sense of unease and displacement. ‘[A]ll seemed perfectly all right while they were in the air’, Baldwin continues. ‘But now, on the ground, and in the light, hard and American, of sober second thought, it all seemed rather suspect. He felt helplessly French: and he had never felt French before.’

The contrast between the unfathomable ‘mysteries’ of being ‘in the middle of the air’ and being earthbound is stark. The liminal space of the aeroplane and, by extension, the Atlantic is here framed as liberating people from the homogenising force that anchors their nation-bound lives. Baldwin’s description of the housewife as ‘a rather flirtatious girl’ turned abject, along with the noose-like tie of the businessmen suggest the suffocating regulatory power of life in the United States. Darsey echoes this point. He notes how Baldwin’s depiction of Yves’s flight to New York – and his use of the theme of ‘flight’ throughout his oeuvre – signifies freedom ‘from pedestrian limitations, from the law of gravity, from the boundaries imposed by the weight of color or sexual orientation or homeliness or physical frailty’.

What is perhaps most interesting here, however, is the way in which Baldwin engages with and deconstructs prevailing American archetypes. Within the space of a single line he conjures a housewife who could easily have been lifted from the pages of Betty Friedan’s 1963 study The Feminine Mystique. The sense of desolation implicit in Baldwin’s description

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130 James, 57.
131 Baldwin, Another Country, 423, 424.
132 Darsey, 195.
of the housewife evokes the participants in Friedan’s study who speak of the domesticated ideal of white, suburban womanhood that pervaded Cold War discourse leaving them ‘empty somehow’, not ‘feel[ing] alive’ and asking ‘[i]s this all?’ In a similar vein, the businessmen energised by talk of youthful outdoor pursuits calls to mind what Stephen P. Knadler has identified as ‘a nostalgia for a lost innocence and for the self-reliant man’ running through William H. Whyte’s landmark critique of corporate conformity, The Organization Man (1956).

There is a sense, therefore, of the flight making legible the unspoken desires and frustrations that Baldwin identifies elsewhere as haunting the normative American subject. While Baldwin has been justly criticised for the occasional patriarchal blind spot in his writing (for instance, some of his pronouncements on race, particularly in the 1960s and 1970, display a disconcertingly masculinist bias), his fleeting description of the ‘flirtatious housewife’ displays a sensitivity towards how the regulation of gender circumscribes the freedom of even ostensibly privileged women. Moreover, the alienation implicit in his description of the businessman conveys a similar sympathy towards the stifling conformity experienced by men under the aegis of the era’s normative paradigm of masculinity. In doing so, Baldwin demonstrates that his concerns extend beyond securing a stake for non-white, non-heteronormative persons in the American polity. Rather, his aim is to transform the conditions in which normative identity is articulated. In short, he seeks to transform the United States into another country.

Acutely aware that one’s whole life cannot be lived in flight, Baldwin’s challenge is to harness the displaced knowledge contingent to transitory states as a means of reconstituting the categories that are inherent to placement. In this regard, Eric and Yves represent Another Country’s key figures. When we first encounter them, they are in France, living in a house that looks out on ‘the thunderous blue of the Mediterranean sea’. We join them the night before Eric is due to travel to Paris, from where he is set to return to the United States, in order to star in a Broadway play. Baldwin’s description of the house foregrounds a sense of

135 See, for example, Trudier Harris, Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985).
136 Baldwin, Another Country, 183.
indeterminacy. Eric is described as ‘sat naked in his rented garden’ in ‘the brilliant heat’, overlooking the sea.137 While his references to the housekeeper, Madame Belet, and the ‘Mediterranean salt’ on Yves’ lips situate it somewhere in the south of France, the house is never definitively located.138 As a result, it becomes everywhere and nowhere, taking on qualities from throughout the world. The garden, for instance, is compared by Baldwin to Africa, while Yves is described as being overcome with a feeling of ‘Oriental opulence’ whenever he bathes.139 Zaborowska, reflecting on the latter description, notes the way in which the ‘stereotyped homoerotic orient’ conjured by this image positions the house as ‘a space of fantasy escape for queer desire, the space away from the closet of the home country’ in which homosexuality becomes ‘attainable’.140 Critically, however, Baldwin frames it not just as a ‘space away from the closet’, but a space where the closet loses its homogenising force. The house, as articulated by Baldwin becomes a kind of liminal space in which historical memory is reconstituted and cultural knowledge is stripped of its disciplinary power.

This apparently idyllic, utopian backdrop to Eric and Yves’ relationship has led critics such as Carolyn Wedin Sylvander to argue that the setting constitutes ‘a kind of Eden’.141 Baldwin’s description of Eric being ‘sat naked in his rented garden’, along with the obvious Eve/Yves homonym would appear to lend themselves to such a reading.142 However, while such interpretations are seductive, they obscure the fact that the apparently Edenic setting is framed not as a site of primordial innocence, but hard won self-knowledge. Moreover, and just as importantly, such readings minimise the fact that the idealised setting is circumscribed temporally. The fact that the garden is a ‘rented garden’ and that the action occurs as Eric is poised to leave underscores the temporary nature of this idyll. Instead, its proximity to the sea, coupled with the fact that it houses Eric as he prepares to return to the United States positions it as a transitory space, a spatial and temporal threshold betwixt and between his exile and homecoming.

137 Ibid.
138 Ibid, 191.
139 Ibid, 183, 201.
142 Baldwin, Another Country, 183.
The sense of impermanence that Baldwin assigns to the utopian setting in which the reader first encounters Eric and Yves is crucial. Without the possibility of crossing the threshold it represents, the setting risks ceasing to be utopian in the sense of an ideal and becoming utopian in the etymological sense of ‘no-place’, a kind of void in which knowledge and subjectivity are negated. As it stands, however, Eric is able to use its status as a liminal space between Paris and New York as a site to reflect on and re-evaluate the American culture he grew up in. The chapter in which we are introduced to him and Yves is interspersed with recollections of both his life in the United States and his first meeting with Yves. For instance, the site of Yves in the bathtub precipitates a kind of Proustian reverie, in which Eric is transported back to ‘that moment fifteen years ago, when the blow had inexorably fallen and his shame and his battle and his exile had begun’.143 The moment Baldwin refers to is Eric’s encounter with LeRoy described above. As well as underscoring the co-mingling of race and sexuality in the American imaginary, by setting this memory against the liminal setting of Eric and Yves’ utopian idyll, Baldwin reconstitutes the meaning attached to it, divesting the hegemonic power relations that overdetermined the encounter of their homogenising force.

The distance of fifteen years and the Atlantic Ocean throws the world Eric left behind into new and sharper focus. What he is left with is a kind of paradoxical freedom, in which self-realisation battles with an overwhelming sense of alienation. Baldwin writes:

He knew that he had no honour which the world could recognise. His life, passions, trials, loves, were, at worst, filth, and, at best, disease in the eyes of the world, and crimes in the eyes of his countrymen. There were no standards for him except those he could make for himself. There were no standards for him because he could not accept the definitions, the hideously mechanical jargon of the age.144

The ‘third space’ in which this memory occurs becomes a portal to knowledge. It reconciles Eric to his difference. At the same time, however, the sense of negation and being rendered abject that Baldwin describes here are evocative of the feelings experienced by his former lover, Rufus, prior to his suicide. Just as the world described by Eric associates his sexual preferences with ‘filth’ and ‘disease’, so Rufus inhabits a universe whose racialised psychosexual pathology results in him viewing himself as abject. Baldwin’s description of him on the night he dies urinating in a toilet that smells of ‘oceans of piss, tons of bile and vomit

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143 Ibid, 200.
144 Ibid, 211.
and shit’, while holding ‘that most despised part of himself’ underscores this point. Rufus internalises the sense of abjection that Eric alludes to. The filth of his surroundings corresponds to his view of himself and the world.

However, Eric is able to escape the fate that befalls Rufus because he is able to fill the void in himself with new meaning. In part, this difference stems from the contrasting types of liminality that each embodies. Where Rufus is left marooned in ‘no man’s land’, Eric’s liminality is marked by movement, as opposed to stasis; his identity is fluid, rather than fixed within the confines of categorisation. Moreover, unlike Rufus, Eric is able to traverse the void by fleeing to Paris. The contradistinction provided by France and, more specifically, his relationship with Yves transforms the representational framework in which his identity is articulated. Indeed, his relationship with Yves functions as the counterpoint to the ‘definitions [and] hideously mechanical jargon’ of the world he repudiates. In place of ‘the sordid beds and squalid grappling’ that marked his earlier homosexual relations (his encounter with LeRoy notwithstanding), Yves is ‘the lover who would not betray him […] his first lover’.¹⁴⁶

What Yves embodies for Eric, therefore, is the possibility of communion, a relationship that is not stymied by ‘definitions’. Baldwin’s description of them viewing each other as ‘the dwelling place that each had despaired of finding’ and ‘almost like conspirators’ underscores this point.¹⁴⁷ Implicit here is a sense of their bond being untarnished by the ‘hideously mechanical jargon’ that would render it abject. In particular, the notion of them being ‘conspirators’ invokes a sense of communion that exists outside (and is compelled to exist outside) the regulatory framework of normative discourse. To this end, the fact that their relationship is forged in ‘another country’ and that Yves is French is crucial. Being apart from the disciplinary gaze of a world that would deem their live to be ‘filth’ ensures that the relationship is not freighted with the same ideological barriers and categories that Baldwin identifies as isolating people from one another in the United States. As the reference to him as Eric’s ‘first lover’ attests, Yves is, in effect, LeRoy without the overdetermining factor of America’s entwined racial and sexual neuroses. As such, Yves is able to initiate a kind of spiritual rebirth in Eric that transforms his perception of same-sex desire. Instead of being a defiling otherness that alienates him from both himself and others, it is rehistoricised as a

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 89.
¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 220.
¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 184, 220
locus of ‘revelation’ and self-knowledge. Accordingly, being apart from the United States is not simply a case of Eric severing his ties with the United States. Rather, it allows him to reconstitute the meaning he attaches to the place ‘from whence he came’ and find a way of being able to bear the burden of this knowledge.

Ultimately, then, the relationship between Eric and Yves can be enjoyed precisely because it exists apart from the representational framework that labels homosexuality ‘a disease’. As James Dievler cogently observes, ‘[t]he nature of the love that Eric has with Yves is redemptive […] because Eric and Yves are free of race, gender, and sexual orientation constraints’. In this regard, their love is not so much a love that dare not speak its name, as need not speak its name. But this freedom from these constraints can only ever be temporary. Indeed, even the idyllic setting in which Eric and Yves’s love is framed is haunted by the attitudes of the world beyond its threshold. For instance, when discussing their imminent departure for New York, Yves speaks of how ‘[p]eople do not take the relations between boys seriously’, while Eric is described as feeling ‘a strange fear [that] closed his throat’.

Accordingly, Eric and Yves must find a way of transposing the sense of freedom and renewal attendant to their displaced sexual identities onto the social, cultural, and moral topography of postwar New York.

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The transformative role played by France and Yves with regards to Eric’s relation to his own queerness is a role that Eric takes on himself upon his return to New York. In his sexual relations with Cass and Rufus’s best friend, Vivaldo, Eric acts as a kind of conduit that facilitates their movement beyond the threshold of normative identity categories. He is, as Field rightly observes, ‘a crossroads of racial and sexual traffic’; his presence in New York serves to extricate other characters from what Baldwin identifies in ‘Preservation of Innocence’ as ‘those airless, labelled cells, which isolate us from each other and separate us from ourselves’. What Eric offers instead is a destabilised conception of identity, one in which the parameters of race, gender, and sexuality are shown to be fluid and permeable, rather than stable and fixed. In this regard, he embodies the queer potentiality of the commuter. His physical movement between different locales produces a corresponding

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148 Dievler, 179-80.
149 Baldwin, Another Country, 222.
movement across established polarities of identity. The series of asymmetrical binarisims that characterise the monolithic, closeted episteme from which the text emerges are displaced by a new field of knowledge, one that cannot be contained within the representational framework of white, heteronormative patriarchy.

Personifying this excess of meaning, Eric becomes a locus for self-knowledge among those he enters into relationships with, giving form to something they lack and allowing them to reorient their identities in accordance with it. For example, Baldwin writes how ‘Eric’s entrance into [Cass] [...] had left her prey to ambiguities whose power she had never glimpsed before’.\textsuperscript{151} Extricating her from the domestic containment that characterises her life as a wife and mother, Cass later confesses that her attraction to Eric stems from his possessing ‘something I needed very badly [...] A sense of himself’.\textsuperscript{152} Such remarks are symptomatic of what Kevin Ohi describes as Eric’s status in the text as a ‘prop that establishes others’ secure self-knowledge and self-sufficiency’.\textsuperscript{153} Though Ohi is correct to note that the text is ambivalent regarding whether Eric himself possesses this knowledge – Eric responds to the Cass’s suggestion that he seems self-assured by insisting ‘I don’t feel very sure of myself’ – Baldwin characterises him in such a way that he is able to fulfil this role regardless of how secure his own self-knowledge is. Put simply, the other characters do not want to be Eric; it is what he can make them be that attracts them to him. In this regard, it is his status as an object, a site outside of the self invested with the knowledge of different locales that allows him to transmute self-knowledge to others.

Baldwin’s characterisation of Eric following his return from France makes plain his liminal status, emphasising the way in which he straddles multiple subject positions simultaneously and defamiliarises the perceptions of the people he encounters. To this end, it is not who Eric is, as much as what he embodies that allows him to function as a locus of identification. It is precisely the fact that his self-knowledge is not fixed and secure that allows him to displace the binary logic that prevails in the New York. Among the patrons of a Greenwich Village bar, for instance, he ‘attract[s] a certain covert attention’ on account of the fact that he does ‘not look American, exactly’, the result of which is that they are left ‘wondering how to place

\textsuperscript{151} Baldwin, \textit{Another Country}, 355.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid, 366.
\textsuperscript{153} Kevin Ohi, “‘I’m Not the Boy You Want’; ‘Race,’ and Thwarted Revelation in Baldwin’s \textit{Another Country}, \textit{African American Review}, Vol. 33 No. 2 (1999), 261-81.
him’. Implicit here is a sense of movement. As someone who appears to be ‘not American, exactly’, he blurs the ontological distinctions that orient the patrons’ sense of reality. In a similar vein, when Vivaldo sees Eric acting in a film he is struck by the ineffable nature of Eric’s identity. Though the performance provides Vivaldo with ‘a glimpse of who Eric really was’, this knowledge is framed as something intangible that exceeds the threshold of intelligibility. Baldwin writes:

in precisely the way that great music depends, ultimately, on great silence, this [Eric’s] masculinity was defined, and made powerful, by something which was not masculine. But it was not feminine, either, and something in Vivaldo resisted the word androgynous […] There was a great force in the face, and great gentleness. But, as most women are not gentle, nor most men strong, it was a face which suggested, resonantly, in the depths, the truth about our natures.  

The co-presence of seemingly contradictory subject positions in this passage figures Eric as a vessel of transformation. He prefigures the ‘universal duality’ that Baldwin identifies in ‘Here Be Dragons’ (an essay that hinges on the notion that ‘we are all androgynous’) as the key to ‘communion and completion’. Bridging the distance between familiarity and difference, self and other, and male and female, his objectified image stages a dialogue between realms of knowledge and experience that Vivaldo had hitherto considered discrete. In doing so, he represents the possibility of renewal. His resistance to placement, the sense of him exceeding the parameters of categorisation, results in a kind of interpretive breach that fractures the closed ontology that had hitherto provided the co-ordinates for Vivaldo’s identity.

When Vivaldo sleeps with Eric later in the text, the latter’s status as a vessel for transformation is underlined. The encounter carries distinct echoes of that between Eric and LeRoy earlier in the text. Describing the ‘healing transformation’ and ‘revelation’ LeRoy brought about in Eric, Baldwin writes: ‘that day was the beginning of his life as a man. What had been hidden to him was, that day, revealed’. Vivaldo similarly feels a ‘great revelation’ after having sex with Eric. In the same way that LeRoy forces Eric to re-evaluate his relation with difference, so Eric forces Vivaldo to confront the disavowed, defiled otherness that had set the parameters of his masculine identity. Having previously associated sex between men ‘with the humiliation and the debasement of one male by another’ (something vividly brought home earlier in the text by his recollection of having participated in the brutal gang rape of a

154 Baldwin, Another Country, 245.
155 Ibid, 324.
156 Baldwin, ‘Here Be Dragons’, 677, 678.
157 Baldwin, Another Country, 205.
‘queer’ when he was younger), Vivaldo’s encounter with Eric is ‘insistently double-edged’ and sees him ‘surrendering to the luxury, the flaming torpor of passivity’. The overriding effect, Baldwin writes, is of ‘an unprecedented steadiness and freedom’. By assuming the role of the ‘other’, therefore, Vivaldo is able to find the sense of ‘communion and completion’ he had hitherto lacked.

It is not the case, however, that sleeping with Eric results in Vivaldo transcending what Dievler defines as ‘a categorical approach to identity’. Indeed, Baldwin is, at best, ambivalent about the prospect of a world entirely free of identity categories. For instance, at one point in Another Country, Vivaldo is described as ‘briefly and horribly, in a region where there were no definitions of any kind, neither of colour, nor of male and female. There was only the leap and the rending and the terror and the surrender’. In its invocation of a leap and the feeling of terror, this passage calls to mind Rufus’s suicide and, thus, demonstrates the fine line between freedom from categorisation and the negation of subjectivity. In contrast, the ‘surrender’ that Vivaldo feels with Eric is circumscribed temporally. Even during the sexual act, Vivaldo recognises that he is ‘condemned to women’. In other words, a sense of categorisation is preserved. But what Eric does is reveal the contingency and fluidity of these categories. Vivaldo is, therefore, able to reconstitute his relation with difference, rather than negating it all together. He recognises that identity is inherently symbiotic and forged through what Robert Corber characterises as ‘a dialogic encounter with otherness’. As in the androgynous figure that Baldwin would outline in ‘Here Be Dragons’, Vivaldo, like Eric, comes to illustrate the fact that ‘each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other – male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white.

Yet, for all Eric’s transformative power in Another Country, Baldwin’s positioning of him as a ‘prop’ that buttresses the self-knowledge others risks relegating queer subjectivity to a supporting role in the construction of the American imaginary. Matt Brim makes a cogent case for this line of thinking, arguing that Another Country offers ‘an essentially bad deal for the homosexual man, who, circulated as the instrument of racial and sexual exploration, gives

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159 Ibid.
160 Dievler, 181.
161 Baldwin, Another Country, 297.
162 Ibid, 377.
164 Baldwin, ‘Here Be Dragons’, 678, 681, 690.
much more than he receives, both physically and emotionally’. Here, the homosexual man is figured as the sacrificial victim at the altar of heteronormativity. Compelling though this argument is, it underplays the extent to which queer subjectivity displaces normative identity in the text. There is no sense at the close of the novel of a return to the status quo. The United States at the end of Another Country is another country. The lives of Cass and Vivaldo have been irrevocably altered – queered, you could say – by their encounter with Eric. Moreover, the fact that the text concludes with the arrival of Yves in New York suggests that the process of renewal inaugurated by Eric must and will continue.

Another Country concludes with Baldwin describing Yves perceiving New York for the first time. To Yves, it is the ‘city which the people from heaven had made their home’. This description stands in sharp contrast to how it is viewed by those native to the city. To Rufus, ‘the weight of this city was murderous’; Cass is described as hating its ‘proud towers, the grasping antennae’; Eric perceives ‘danger and horror barely sleeping beneath the rough gregarious surface’.

Tempting though it may be to dismiss Yves’ impression of New York as a kind of false consciousness, his perception brings with it a sense of renewal. The collision between old and new, insider and outsider, local and transnational, ignorance and knowledge that Yves’s arrival precipitates becomes generative of a representational domain in which the United States may be rehistoricized. To this end, the paradigm of identity that emerges in Another Country comes to mirror Baldwin’s depiction of the centrifugal pull of home: while it may be ‘irrevocable’ it is not immutable.

‘The past […] can now be put to the uses of power’: Baldwin and the Politics of Black Liberation

The Fire Next Time is, in a sense, a companion piece to Another Country. As is the case with the latter, the former sees Baldwin harnessing the ‘third space’ of the commuter as a means of divesting American culture of its ‘primordial unity’ and homogenising force. In The Fire Next Time, however, Baldwin focuses predominantly on the issue of reconstituting American race relations. While there are invocations of queer sexuality in the text – for instance, it memorably concludes with a call for ‘the relatively conscious whites and the relatively

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165 Brim, 97.
166 Baldwin, Another Country, 426.
conscious blacks’ to come together ‘like lovers’ to create ‘the consciousness of others’ – the essay is less overtly intersectional than Another Country, subsuming sexuality into the broader framework of racial politics. Moreover, unlike Another Country, the text’s transtlanticism is mainly extra-diegetic. It functions as a kind of rhetorical interstice from which he writes the text and reconstitutes his two-ness as an African American. Nonetheless, while largely unspoken, Baldwin’s transatlantic commuting haunts The Fire Next Time, playing a vital role in shaping the politics of identity that he advances in the text.

At first glance, The Fire Next Time is, as Kevin Birmingham notes ‘the most American of [Baldwin’s] essays’. Its overriding imperative is to reconstitute the American state, to ‘achieve’, as Baldwin puts it, ‘our country’. Yet, as Birmingham readily acknowledges, closer inspection of the text’s gestation places it firmly within the third space of Baldwin’s travels. ‘Down at the Cross’ (1962), the article for The New Yorker that eventually comprised the bulk of the text in The Fire Next Time, was originally commissioned as a report on West African independence and evolved out of the itinerant period of Baldwin’s life referred to above that cemented his status as a ‘transatlantic commuter’. Though the original article never materialised, Baldwin’s stay was, according to his biographer David Leeming, pivotal in shaping the content of what would eventually become The Fire Next Time. His time there, Leeming claims, led Baldwin to the conclusion that ‘[i]t was time for a “redefinition” of our myths in the context of our deeds’ and convinced him that ‘America’s – and the West’s – only hope of survival lay in a liberation from the hypocrisy that made oppression and subjugation [...] possible’.

Baldwin’s circumnavigating of the Atlantic find a diegetic corollary in The Fire Next Time in the way that the text traverses space and time. Part autobiography, part reportage, part historical treatise, the essay moves seamlessly between Baldwin’s experiences in the black church as a youth, the history of European imperialism, a meeting with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam in Chicago, World War II and the Holocaust, and the historical significance of African decolonisation. Together, these events provide the historical backdrop to his

166 Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, 379.
167 Birmingham, ‘History’s Ass Pocket’, 144.
172 See Campbell, Talking at the Gates, 152.
dissection of American race relations. The vast historical panorama and transnational sweep of the essay is crucial to Baldwin’s argument. By mapping the representational politics of the United States onto the wider spatial and temporal terrain of a beleaguered western modernity, he displaces its claims of historical exceptionalism and decentres its power. In the wake of two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the decline of imperial power, the moral authority of what Baldwin would describe in a 1968 speech to West Indian students in London as ‘that great Western house’ had been greatly diminished. Accordingly, synchronising the historical identity of the United States to the tempo of modernity allows him to reformulate the assumptions underpinning this identity and reconstitute the knowledge from which it derives its power.

In particular, this process sees Baldwin harnessing the gathering momentum of Black Nationalism both in the United States and Africa as a means of fracturing the mythic wholeness of America’s national self-image. Though deeply equivocal with regards to some of the ideological tenets that characterise the various forms of Black Nationalism that were gaining political traction during this period, he recognises their potential to expedite the struggle for racial equality in the United States. The emergence of these historical counternarratives, Baldwin suggests, provides a new locus of knowledge that displaces America’s prevailing hegemony. Juxtaposed with alternative cultural frameworks, American racial practices are at once defamiliarised and, when viewed through the lens of decolonisation, rendered as a historical anachronism. The overriding effect is to hollow out the closets of American power. As a result, the hitherto ‘unspeakable’ fact of being born black in an ‘Anglo-Teutonic’ country is excavated and imbued with new meaning. No longer merely receptacles of white hegemonic power compelled to measure themselves by the tape of a world predicated on their marginalisation, African Americans are reconstituted as part of a historical vanguard transforming the representational terrain and attendant power relations, not just of the United States, but that of the postwar world more broadly.

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174 Pressure/Baldwin’s Nigger, Dir. Horace Ové (BFI Video, 1969) [Reissued on DVD, 2005].
As Vaughn Rasberry notes, Baldwin’s writing during the 1950s and 1960s may be understood as concomitant with the era’s ‘anti-colonial zeitgeist’.\(^{175}\) This is particularly true of *The Fire Next Time*, a text that is pitched squarely within the shifting power dynamics of the postwar world. Yet, Baldwin’s attitude to Africa itself was deeply ambivalent. Though attuned to the historical significance of decolonisation – for example, ‘Stranger in the Village’ memorably concludes with him declaring that ‘[t]his world is white no longer, and will never be white again’ – he was, in the 1950s at least, profoundly sceptical as to the efficacy of forms of transnational identification predicated solely on race. Whether implicitly or explicitly, nègritude, Pan-Africanism, and diasporic kinship models are all framed by Baldwin as inadequate to the task of accounting for the historical specificity of the African American experience. To identify solely on the grounds on race, Baldwin suggests, is to efface the significance of the often traumatic local conditions in which identity is forged. And to deny the contingency of identity in this way is to disavow the experiential reality that is the product of these local conditions.

‘Princes and Powers’ (1956), Baldwin’s account of the 1956 conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists organised by *Presence Africaine* in Paris, underscores this point. Critiquing the notion of racial essentialism, Baldwin questions whether a common ‘history of oppression’, which has seen ‘millions of people […] divided from each other […] and which had produced so many different subhistories, problems, traditions, possibilities, aspirations, assumptions, languages, hybrids […] can legitimately be described as a culture’.\(^{176}\) To illustrate his point, he deconstructs Leopold Senghor’s contribution to proceedings, an analysis of Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945). Senghor’s claim that close analysis of the text ‘would undoubtedly reveal the African heritage to which it owed its existence’ is positioned by Baldwin as ‘taking away [Wright’s] identity’ by ignoring the specific historical conditions of the American Deep South out of which the text emerged. The text’s ‘form, psychology, moral attitude, preoccupations, in short, its cultural validity’, Baldwin insists, ‘were all due to forces which had nothing to do with Africa’.\(^{177}\)

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\(^{175}\) Vaughn Rasberry, “‘Now Describing You’: James Baldwin and Cold War Liberalism,” *James Baldwin: America and Beyond*, 84-105 (85).


\(^{177}\) Ibid, 51.
In part, Baldwin’s scepticism with regards to his kinship with African culture stemmed from his early encounters with Africans in Paris, encounters which, according to Campbell, left him with the belief that they were ‘total strangers’ to one another. Recounting one such meeting in ‘Encounter on the Seine’, Baldwin writes of how there is between ‘the Negro and the African […] a gulf of three hundred years – an alienation too vast to be conquered […] too heavy and too double-edged ever to be trapped in speech’. The historical rupture alluded to here is a theme that Baldwin returns to in a 1960 interview with Harold Isaacs. Describing the mutual unease that characterised his relations with the denizens of ‘Black Paris’, Baldwin claims their incompatibility with one another stemmed from the fact that they ‘held their attitudes largely on racial grounds’ and, thus, viewed him as ‘insufficiently intransigent against America’. Making specific reference to the way in which Senghor, ‘frightened him’, Baldwin adds: ‘The terms of our life were so different, we almost needed a dictionary to talk’. As with his reference to the impossibility of bridging the ‘gulf’ between Africans and African Americans through speech in ‘Encounter on the Seine’, Baldwin’s allusion to needing a dictionary to communicate with Senghor rehearses the difficulties outlined by Brent Hayes Edwards with regards to formulating a ‘basic grammar of blackness’ discussed in the previous chapter. This lack of a common language – both literal and cultural – renders any discourse of black internationalism unintelligible, depriving it of a coherent form through which to approach a shared basis of identification that transcends national borders. Local differences, Baldwin appears to suggest, short-circuit diasporic identity.

By the early 1960s, however, there appears to have been a softening in Baldwin’s stance towards Africa. As Lynn Scott points out, Baldwin’s contributions to the Civil Rights Movement during this period frequently foregrounded an international perspective that interpreted the black freedom struggle in the United States ‘in the context of the third world liberation movements that were exploding myths of white supremacy’. For instance, ‘They Can’t Turn Back’ (1960), a report on the activities of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in the American South, sees Baldwin emphasising the fact that the students involved with CORE

178 Campbell, Talking at the Gates, 109.
182 Scott, ‘Challenging the American Conscience’, 142.
'were born at the very moment at which Europe’s domination of Africa was ending'. The implication here is that the American struggle for Civil Rights will derive ideological sustenance and inspiration from events across the Atlantic.

Such an assertion seems to be at odds with Baldwin’s previous position. It appears to invest, if not in a ‘basic grammar of blackness’, then, at the very least, a shared genealogy than transcends national boundaries. It would be a mistake, however, to interpret Baldwin’s remarks as a sudden flowering of Pan-Africanist sentiment. Even after visiting Africa in 1962, he continued to feel a sense of psychological detachment from his ancestral homeland. As Fern Eckman notes, ‘Baldwin had no sense of homecoming in Africa’. Nor was it the case that he sought to reterritorialise Africa in his own image in the way that Wright did. His interest in Africa was more reflexive, focusing on how the anticolonial insurgency could influence events in the United States, as opposed to how African Americans could expedite Africa’s incorporation into the modern world. During a talk delivered at a forum organised by the Liberation Committee for Africa in New York in 1961, for instance, Baldwin states: ‘I don’t know what we can do to aid Africa or Latin America or Asia. But I do know what this source can do for us. They will survive with our help or without it. They are really our opportunity’. Implicit here is the notion of third world liberation as a kind of instrumentality that can bring about a historical transformation in the United States.

Viewed against the context of the sense of estrangement from Africa that Baldwin had previously articulated, what this affirmation of third world liberation illustrates is not so much a case of identification, as of disidentification. The concept of ‘disidentification’, as developed by José Esteban Muñoz, names a process by which minority subjects recycle aspects of a culture they are otherwise estranged from as a way of renegotiating their position within it. Repudiating an either/or paradigm that insists on a subject being either for or against their culture, it offers a way of engaging with the existing power structures that acknowledges their flaws, while harnessing their transformative potential for one’s own ideological ends. In this regard, it is concomitant with the idea of dissonance. Disidentification similarly hinges on a

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183 Baldwin, ‘They Can’t Turn Back’, 228.
186 José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4, 9.
logic of being at once apart and a part. Its relevance in relation to Baldwin’s work is thus obvious. The attitude he cultivates towards the United States in his writing, the way in which he, in the words of Hortense Spillers, simultaneously sings and criticises American democracy in one ‘amazing dialectical movement that opens fully onto the stage of national culture’, may be understood as him disidentifying with his homeland.\textsuperscript{187} He, in effect, appropriates the signs, symbols, and historical identity of the United States as a way of transforming the meaning attendant to them. Moreover, his decision to become a ‘transatlantic commuter’ becomes, in this context, an extension of the logic of disidentification, in that it allows him to retain the bonds of home while simultaneously distancing himself from their regulatory power.

Baldwin’s disidentification with Africa, however, follows a slightly different pattern. Muñoz describes disidentification as typically operating within and against the framework it seeks to transform: ‘[it] is a strategy that works on and against the dominant ideology.’\textsuperscript{188} Third world liberation does not appear to meet this criteria. Within the context of Baldwin’s politics of identity, it does not constitute the ‘majoritarian public sphere’ punishing him on account of his blackness and which he is thus seeking to transform.\textsuperscript{189} But Africa and the third world do represent a locus of power that has currency within this sphere, given the perceived importance of the third world to the outcome of the Cold War. Accordingly, making a strategic bargain with the discursive power of third world independence becomes a way for African Americans to access the representational terrain of America’s prevailing hegemony. Baldwin’s suggestion that the Brown decision was prompted by the fact that ‘Africa was clearly liberating herself and therefore had […] to be wooed by the descendants of her former masters’ offers a potent example of the transnational resonance of decolonisation, demonstrating its power to affect change in national cultural formations in the United States and, in doing so, carve out a space for African Americans within them.\textsuperscript{190} It is this power that Baldwin disidentifies with when he places the black freedom struggle in the United States on the same continuum as that of the struggle against colonial rule.

\textsuperscript{187} Hortense Spillers, ‘Afterword’, James Baldwin: America and Beyond, 241-5 (242).
\textsuperscript{188} Muñoz, 12.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid, 4.
\textsuperscript{190} Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, 371.
The Fire Next Time represents, perhaps, the most lucid example of how Baldwin harnesses the power of African decolonisation in his writing. While the essay underlines the extent to which African Americans are culturally, economically, and biologically imbricated within the history of the United States (‘the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or worse, and does not belong to any other’), he simultaneously foregrounds the way in which Africa’s emergence as a world force provides a new historical framework in which African Americans can couch their demands for equality. Baldwin writes:

African kings and heroes have come into the world, out of the past, the past that can now be put to the uses of power. And black has become a beautiful color – not because it is loved but because it is feared […] As they watch black men elsewhere rise, the promise held out, at last, that they may walk the earth with which white men walk, protected by the power that white men shall have no longer, is enough […] to empty prisons and pull God down from heaven (emphasis in original).\textsuperscript{191}

What Baldwin is describing in this passage is the excavation of a usable past, a field of knowledge that has rendered blackness articulate and will allow African Americans to renegotiate their relationship with their local surroundings. For all that they may ‘need a dictionary’ to communicate with one another, he here points to a shared genealogy between Africans and African Americans that legitimates the contemporary, local claims of the latter. As Baldwin would state during a speech at Cambridge University in 1965, he had been brought up to believe that ‘Africa had no history and that neither had I. I was a savage about whom the least said the better’. Africa’s emergence on the world stage, however, meant that ‘Africans had to be dealt with in a way they had never been dealt with before’, which ‘gave the American Negro, for the first time, a sense of himself not as a savage’.\textsuperscript{192} Dislocating American racial practices in this way allows Baldwin to amplify the historical claims of African Americans and begin the kind of redefinition of American-ness that Leeming alludes to.

Within the shifting power dynamics of the postwar world, then, the historical identity of African Americans is imbued with new meaning. Recycling the discursive power of the anticolonial insurgency opens up a rhetorical space for African Americans in an otherwise hostile local public sphere. The excavation and legitimisation of the hidden recesses of black history precipitated by African independence, coupled with the corresponding crisis that afflicted western modernity, is harnessed by Baldwin to produce a breach in the American

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid, 366.
\textsuperscript{192} Baldwin, ‘The American Dream and the American Negro’ (1965), The Price of the Ticket, 403-7 (406).
cultural imaginary. In this space, he redefines what it means to be an American, making the African American experience the central organising principle of the nation's identity. In doing so, Baldwin effectively hollows out the closets of American power. ‘The American Negro’, he writes in *The Fire Next Time*, ‘has the great advantage of never having believed the collection of myths to which white Americans cling’.\(^{193}\) African Americans’ proximity to their historical identity, he adds, ‘contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful’. It furnishes them with a knowledge ‘that that no school on earth […] can teach’ and an authority […] that is unshakeable’. By contrast, ‘innocent’ white Americans ‘do not know and do not want to know’ about their history.\(^{194}\)

In a culture given to what Du Bois characterised in his 1890 commencement address at Harvard University as a ‘strange forgetfulness’ with regards to its own principles, Baldwin’s comments are illustrative of the way in which African Americans have functioned, in the words of Cornel West, as the Americans who ‘could not not know’.\(^{195}\) This juxtaposition of white innocence with black knowledge displaces the notion of ignorance as constitutive of American identity. Playing out within and against the self-mythologising discourse of the nation’s ‘official’ history, the cultural memory of African Americans, bolstered by the historical capital of third world liberation, bridges the distance between rhetoric and reality to reconstitute the representational terrain of American-ness. Leeming’s reference to a speech made by Baldwin at a college in Tallahassee, Florida in 1960 elucidates this point. Describing the speech, the theme of which was the notion of African Americans constituting the ‘savior[s] of the nation’, Leeming writes: ‘Only black Americans contain the true history of America, he said. And only that history can “redeem” the false history and release America from the “tyranny” of their myths. And only after such a release, can the nation survive in the context of its stated ideals.’\(^{196}\) No longer ‘something unspeakable’, the black experience here emerges as the locus of American history, tasked with forging the collective consciousness of the nation.


\(^{194}\) Ibid, 376, 334, 377.


\(^{196}\) Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 176.
Conclusion: Saying Yes to Baldwin

This is why one must say Yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found […] For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have […] The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.
– Baldwin, ‘Nothing Personal’ (1965)

To conclude this chapter, I will consider Baldwin’s legacy in relation to the themes discussed above. To the extent that he succeeded in making the ‘unspeakable’ articulate, *The Fire Next Time* constitutes the apotheosis of Baldwin’s achievements. As Campbell observes, ‘it is the essay which comes closest to representing his ideas in toto […] All the disquisitions he had written on the subject of black-white relations might have been practice for the writing of this one’. Indeed, while he had over the previous decade or so built a reputation as a formidable literary talent, with *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin reached a new level of success and influence. Its rousing call on black and white Americans to come together ‘like lovers’, in order to ‘achieve our country, and change the history of the world’, captures the zeitgeist of a period, in which the demand for racial justice became an inexorable historical force. When the bulk of what became *The Fire Next Time* was published in *The New Yorker* as ‘Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind’ in November 1962, it ‘became, literally’, as Leeming puts it, ‘the “talk of the town,” causing the magazine’s sales to soar’. Upon its publication in book form the following January (in which ‘Down at the Cross’ was preceded by ‘My Dungeon Shook: A Letter to My Nephew’, a short essay that had appeared in *The Progressive* the previous December), the text topped bestseller lists throughout the United States.

In the wake of *The Fire Next Time*’s success, Baldwin was for a time the most famous and feted writer in the United States, celebrated both nationally and internationally. In May 1963, he was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine under the banner of ‘the Negro’s push for equality’. The accompanying article casts him as the voice of a generation: ‘In the United States today there is not another writer, black or white, who expresses with such poignancy and abrasiveness the dark realities of the racial ferment in the North and South’. Other publications soon followed suit. A week after appearing on the cover of *Time*, its sister

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199 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 211.
200 Ibid, 214.
publication, *Life*, ran a nine-page profile of Baldwin, juxtaposing his growing celebrity (the cachet of being well acquainted enough with Baldwin to call him ‘Jimmy’ is, the article claims, ‘a sign of considerable chic’ in literary circles) with his role as Civil Rights activist, carrying out speaking engagements across the United States. In the process, the magazine anoints him ‘the monarch of the current literary jungle’. The following year, *Esquire* ran a similarly lengthy (if less flattering) feature on him. Its title, ‘Everybody Knows His Name’ (a play on the title of one of Baldwin’s best known essays), testifies to his visibility as ‘the hottest property in publishing’ in the first half of 1960s.

Baldwin’s cultural capital extended far beyond the literary world, however. As Scott notes, he was increasingly cast in the role of ‘public intellectual’ and spokesperson for the Civil Rights Movement whose opinions were widely sought out and publicized. A measure of his stature in this area can be found in the decision of the then Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, to invite Baldwin to lead a delegation of prominent Civil Rights supporters to a meeting in New York to discuss American race-relations. The legacy of what proved to be a fraught and, ultimately, disappointing meeting is a theme I will return to in the afterword of this thesis. Among Baldwin’s delegation, however, was the noted African American psychologist, Kenneth B. Clark. When Clark was tasked in the summer of 1963 by National Educational Television to produce a film on contemporary race relations in the United States, he further underlined Baldwin’s status within the black freedom struggle. The resulting film, *The Negro and the American Promise*, revolves around Clark interviewing three of the era’s most prominent figures: Martin Luther King Jr.; Malcolm X; and, Baldwin.

A literary superstar, courted by the White House, and whose image peered out from newsstands across the country, Baldwin, to all intents and purposes, appeared to have succeeded in his task of making the black experience in the United States legible and articulate. But giving voice to the plight of African Americans proved to be very different from

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203 Carol Polsgrove notes that Baldwin was deeply offended by the *Esquire* profile. Its depiction of ‘a needy, exhibitionist Baldwin’ (Polsgrove’s words) greatly distressed him, prompting him to threaten to sue *Esquire* and refuse to publish anything in the magazine – hitherto a regular outlet for his work – for several years. Carol Polsgrove, *It Wasn’t Pretty Folks, But Didn’t We Have Fun?: Surviving the Sixties with Esquire’s Harold Hayes* (Oakland, CA: RDR Books, 2001 [1995]), 116-7.

204 Marvin Elkoft, ‘Everybody Knows His Name’, *Esquire*, August 1964, 59-64.

205 Scott, ‘Challenging the American Conscience’, 141.


being listened to. His increased visibility coupled with his political involvement made him a target for the FBI surveillance, eventually resulting in a file that ran to almost 2000 pages.\textsuperscript{208} Moreover, his warning in \textit{The Fire Next Time} that ‘[w]hatever goes up must come down’, ultimately proved to be true of his own career.\textsuperscript{209} His proximity to the historical vanguard in the 1960s stands in sharp contrast to his latter years, during which he was often relegated to the margins of American culture. As with Richard Wright in the 1950s, Baldwin’s decision to live outside of the United States led to accusations that he ‘had lost touch with reality’ – a somewhat ironic assessment, given that his most successful works had been produced while living in Paris and, later, as a self-styled ‘transatlantic commuter’.\textsuperscript{210} His last three novels, \textit{Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone} (1968), \textit{If Beale Street Could Talk} (1974), and \textit{Just Above My Head} (1979) were, by and large, poorly received. By the mid-1980s, he was struggling to find a publisher for his work. His final book, the \textit{The Evidence of Things Not Seen} (1985) – a journalistic account of a series of child murders in Atlanta between 1979 and 1981 – was rejected by his long-term publishers, Dial Press, as well as several others, before finally being released in 1985 to lukewarm reviews.\textsuperscript{211}

During the late 1960s and 1970s, Baldwin found himself similarly marginalised ideologically. In part, this marginalisation can be traced to the refusal to signify monolithically from which his early writing derives much of its power. The hostility towards categorisation that pervades his work is at odds with the ‘identity politics’ that would increasingly shape cultural and political discourse from the late 1960s onwards. Baldwin’s project was always a politics of identity, a project that framed identity as a fluid, shifting process, in contrast to the fixity and occasional essentialisms that characterised what followed. Indeed, as early as 1964, he talks of feeling ‘terribly menaced’ by his role as racial spokesperson, believing it to be ‘antithetical’ his job as an artist, which is ‘to smash all the existing definitions’.\textsuperscript{212} This sense of being ‘terribly menaced’ rehearses the overdetermination he experienced as a black, queer writer compelled to articulate himself within and against an ideological framework that conceived of the world in the monolithic, binary framework his writing eschews.

\textsuperscript{209} Baldwin, \textit{The Fire Next Time}, 379.
\textsuperscript{210} Leeming, \textit{James Baldwin}, 361.
\textsuperscript{211} For more on the critical response to Baldwin’s later work see Francis, 97-121.
Baldwin’s anxieties proved to be well-founded. In particular, his refusal to closet his sexuality became a means of silencing his contributions to black politics. Baldwin was acutely aware that his sexuality made people ‘wary’ of him in the Civil Rights movement (a feeling born out in comments by Martin Luther King Jr. Captured by FBI surveillance in which Baldwin’s sexuality is deemed a potential source of embarassment to the movement). Cruelly dubbed ‘Martin Luther Queen’, by John F. Kennedy and black militants alike, Baldwin was, throughout his career, dogged by suggestions that his sexuality compromised his authority on issues of race. This trend would reach its apotheosis in Eldridge Cleaver’s virulently homophobic attack on Baldwin in Soul on Ice (1968), in which he accused Baldwin of having a ‘racial death-wish’.

As Lee Edelman cogently observes, the foregrounding of Baldwin’s sexuality to discredit his racial politics mobilises a relationship between racism and homophobia that helps enforce a ‘normalizing sexual taxonomy’ that furnishes those ‘positioned to exploit it [with] a surplus value of cultural authority’. Indeed, what we see in the attitudes of King, Kennedy, and Cleaver is the disciplinary logic of the closet operating at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. While each is geared towards contrasting ideological ends, implicit in all of their responses toward Baldwin is the notion that the asymmetrical power structure sustaining white hegemony is, at least in part, leveraged on a fulcrum of heteronormativity. There is a shared recognition between them that Baldwin’s queerness effaces both his and other African Americans’ claims to equality. The note scrawled on Baldwin’s FBI file by J. Edgar Hoover underlines this point. Hoover’s question, ‘[i]sn’t Baldwin a well-known pervert?’, coupled with the (incorrect) designation of Baldwin as a communist elsewhere in the file, speaks to the way in which discourses of blackness, queer sexuality, and political deviancy were entwined in the political imaginary of Cold War America well into the 1960s.

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213 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 228. For more on King’s belief that Baldwin was ‘better qualified to lead a homosexual movement than a civil rights movement’, see Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, 175.


It was in the context of these attacks that Baldwin would glibly refer to himself in his autobiographical essay No Name in the Street (1972) as an ‘aging, lonely, sexually dubious, politically outrageous, unspeakable erratic freak’. However, the hostility towards him in the late 1960s gradually gave way to reverence. By the end of his life, he had become a touchstone for black and white writers alike, a point poignantly illustrated by the eulogies delivered at his funeral by luminaries as diverse as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Amiri Baraka, and William Styron. Morrison, in particular, provides eloquent testimony to Baldwin’s achievements:

You gave me a language to dwell in, a gift so perfect it seems my own invention [...] You made American English honest – genuinely international. You exposed its secrets and reshaped it until it was truly modern dialogic, representative, humane [...] You went into that forbidden territory and decolonized it, “robbed it of the jewel of its naïveté,” and un-gated it for black people so that in your wake we could enter it, occupy it, restructure it on order to accommodate our complicated passion.

Morrison here distils the broader thrust of this chapter. By providing African Americans with ‘a language to dwell in’, he opened up the representational terrain of American-ness to blackness. Once there they could transform it and rearticulate what it means to be an American.

Yet for all African American literature and culture’s indebtedness to Baldwin, for a long time his work occupied an uneasy place in its literary canon. In 1985, for example, Trudier Harris, lamented the fact that, despite being ‘one of America’s best-known writers’, Baldwin had ‘not attained a more substantial place in the scholarship on Afro-American writers’. Indeed, even Henry Louis Gates, who claims that ‘James Baldwin was literature for me’, can find no place for him in his ground-breaking work The Signifying Monkey (1988). Moreover, despite his status as a ‘transatlantic commuter’ and his interest the transnational contours of blackness, Baldwin is, as Field points out, also ‘conspicuously absent from Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic’. These absences are in some way symptomatic of the resistance to placement discussed in this chapter. While Baldwin makes the black experience legible he does so in

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218 Baldwin, No Name in the Street (1972), The Price of the Ticket, 452-552 (458).
such a way that is often not easily intelligible. His scepticism with regards to categorisation inevitably makes him an uneasy bedfellow within the often discrete, self-contained world of academic discourse.

Nonetheless, there has, since the turn of the millennium, been something of a renaissance in Baldwin studies. Essay collections such as *James Baldwin Now* (1999), *Reviewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (2000), *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin* (2009), and *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* (2011) have renewed academic interest in his work and gone a long way to filling the gap that Harris called attention to. Moreover, the emergence of black queer studies and the consolidation of intersectional modes of analysis have provided conceptual apparatuses that come closer to capturing something of Baldwin’s fluidity. Accordingly, while for a long time Baldwin’s legacy seemed uncertain, his critical standing – for the time being, at least – seems secure. Indeed, in the past two years, there have been several new publications devoted to Baldwin’s life and work. The breadth of approaches to his *oeuvre* displayed in these texts – ranging from his ‘queer imagination’ to his ‘protestant imagination’, from his ‘meditations on fame’ to his sense of humour – are testament to the scope of his achievement.

The Baldwin renaissance has not been confined to the academy, however. Fittingly for an autodidact like Baldwin who spoke of the imperative of appealing to ‘the “publicans and tax-collectors” as well as the righteous’, recent years have seen an upsurge in interest in Baldwin among the wider public. In 2014, in celebration of what would have been his ninetieth birthday, a group of arts organisations came together in New York to hold a series of events under the banner ‘The Year of James Baldwin’. Among the celebrations was the unveiling of ‘James Baldwin Place’ in Harlem. The writer who once wrote of having ‘no name in the street’ now gives the street on which he was raised its name.

Even more poignantly, Baldwin’s analysis of the persistence and intractability of American racial practices have taken on new resonance in the wake of recent protests in response to the deaths of African Americans at the hands of law enforcement officers and

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224 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 211.

subsequent failures to prosecute the perpetrators. While this is a theme I will return to in more depth in the afterword to this thesis, it is worth noting in passing the frequency with which Baldwin’s insights have been invoked in the context of events in Ferguson, Missouri, following the death of the unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, after being shot by a white police officer in 2014. Depressing though it undoubtedly is that, some fifty years after the publication of *The Fire Next Time* and the passage of the Civil Rights Act, there is a need for articles drawing attention to passages from Baldwin’s work that seem to foreshadow the unrest in Ferguson, it is testament to his enduring significance as a voice of change. Responding to the urgency and rhetorical power contained within this voice, a new generation has felt compelled to say Yes to Baldwin. One can only hope that through his example what would otherwise be unspeakable does not remain unspoken.

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Chapter 4

‘It Makes Me Think of Africa’: Subverting Suburbanisation in Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun

Introduction

One of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific. Universality, I think, emerges from truthful identity of what is [...] In other words, I think people, to the extent we accept them and believe them as who they’re supposed to be, to that extent they can become everybody.
– Lorraine Hansberry, Interview (1959)

[S]urvival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

‘What happens to a dream deferred?’ asks Langston Hughes in his 1951 poem, ‘Harlem’. It is this question that provides the impetus for Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play A Raisin in the Sun, the title of which is drawn from one of Hughes’s own responses to the question (‘Does it dry up / Like a raisin in the sun?’). The play, the first by an African American woman to be performed on Broadway, depicts three generations of an African American family living in a tiny Southside Chicago apartment some time between World War II and the late 1950s. Its narrative thrust comes from a $10 000 insurance windfall received by Lena Younger – the matriarch of the family – from a policy taken out by her late husband. To the dismay of her son, Walter (who wants to use the money to invest in a liquor store), she decides to use the bulk of the money to buy a house in, Clybourne Park, a hitherto all-white neighbourhood, with the remainder going towards the college tuition of her daughter, the fiercely anti-assimilationist, Beneatha. Although Lena partially relents, and gives Walter a share of the money, one of his would-be business partners disappears with it. As a result, Walter is left

4 Ibid.
seriously considering an offer from Lindner, a representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association to buy back the home purchased by the Youngers, to ensure that the neighbourhood remains all-white. Walter ultimately rejects the offer, however, and the play concludes with the family leaving their Southside apartment for the final time and heading to their new home.

This depiction of a family taking its first tentative steps on the property ladder resonated in an era when suburbia functioned as one of the foremost representational spaces of American democracy and a key ideological weapon in the Cold War. After opening on Broadway in March 1959, following successful productions in Philadelphia and New Haven, A Raisin in the Sun ran for two years, leading to a successful film adaptation starring the original cast in 1961. This commercial success was matched with critical acclaim. The New York Times, for instance, hailed Hansberry’s ‘wisdom and integrity’. Others celebrated A Raisin in the Sun as ‘a triumph or racial pride’. The play’s critical standing was underscored later in 1959 when Hansberry became the youngest and first African American winner of the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for Best Play.

A recurring feature of these early critical responses – particularly among white liberal critics – was praise for A Raisin in the Sun’s universalism, its affirmation of what George Murray in Chicago American termed ‘the general culture of the United States’. Robin Bernstein’s essay on the play’s early reception, for instance, notes just how frequently the phrase ‘happens to be’ occurs in these reviews: ‘the play was “about human beings, who happen to be Negroes” (or “a family that happens to be colored”); Sidney Poitier played “the angry young man who happens to be a Negro”’. Murray’s review is symptomatic of this tendency. ‘A Negro wrote this show’, he writes, '[but] it isn’t written for Negroes […] It’s a show about people, white or colored’.

‘Universalism’ in these responses is, of course, a synonym for white-ness. Just ‘happen to be Negroes’ implies the characters are, to all intents and purposes, white. This view was

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8 Sinnott, x.
11 Murray, 19.
shared by some prominent African American critics – particularly after the Civil Rights Movement evolved into Black Power – who perceived the play’s apparent affirmation of assimilation as a betrayal. Jordan Miller, labelled Hansberry an ‘Uncle (Aunt) Tom’ and accused *A Raisin in the Sun* of being ‘a sellout to the white power structure’. Likewise, Harold Cruse attacked the play in 1968 as a ‘cleverly written piece of glorified soap opera’, reserving particular scorn for its depiction of supposedly working class African Americans ‘mouth[ing] middle class ideology’.

Yet, to sustain this argument that the play is a hymn to assimilation, one must choose to ignore some of the explicitly anti-assimilationist rhetoric that punctuates it. Beneatha, for instance, expresses her hatred of what she calls ‘assimilationist Negroes’ who forsake their ‘own’ culture and ‘submerge [themselves] completely in the dominant and, in this case, oppressive culture’ (emphasis in original). Moreover, such readings obscure the way in which the play articulates powerful discursive links between African Americans and their ancestral homeland. The revolutionary momentum of African decolonisation is shown by Hansberry to have transnational reverberations that reconstitute African American demands for freedom and equality in the United States. When the character of Asagai, a Nigerian student actively engaged in anti-colonial politics and romantically involved with Beneatha, tells the family that their move ‘makes [him] think of Africa’, he – and, by extension, Hansberry – hints at something far more radical than an affirmation of ‘the general culture of the U.S.’ or assimilation into Cold War America’s prevailing suburban ethos.

Accordingly, in this chapter, I interrogate *A Raisin in the Sun*’s early critical reception by analysing the play’s historical relation to both domestic and international contexts. Beginning by reading the play through the racially coded lens of postwar suburbanisation, I go on to assess how the play’s engagement with Africa transforms the power dynamic underpinning the Youngers’ move, before concluding by considering some of the critical implications of the dual historical perspective that *A Raisin in the Sun* advances. In doing so, I argue that the play frames the politics of race as co-extensive with the politics of space. Setting events in the play against the ‘three worlds’ topography of the 1950s, I suggest, allows Hansberry to

15 Ibid, 131.
displace the hegemonic assumptions underpinning what Leerom Medovoi defines as postwar America’s ‘white suburban imaginary’. The co-presence of national and transnational imaginaries in the play, I argue, reconstitutes the power dynamic attendant to the family’s move to suburbia. Placing it on the same continuum as events in Africa frames it as an assertion of self-determination concomitant with the struggles against colonial rule playing out on the other side of the Atlantic. Far from being a ‘sellout to the white power structure’, therefore, the move is figured as a local corollary of a global historical shift in the politics of black identity, one intent on eroding white hegemony in all its manifestations.

Part 1: ‘Acute Ghetto-itis’

To be imprisoned in the ghetto is to be forgotten – or deliberately cheated of one’s birthright – at best.

– Hansberry, To Be Young Gifted and Black (1969)

It’s just a plain little old house – but it’s made good and solid – and it will be ours. Walter Lee – it makes a difference in a man when he can walk on floors that belong to him.

– Lena Younger, Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun (1959)

At first glance, Lena Younger’s desire to move her family to a comfortable suburban home in A Raisin in the Sun does, indeed, reflect ‘the general culture of the U.S.’ in the 1950s. The rise of suburbia was key to the national self-image of the United States in the first two decades of the Cold War. Between 1950 and 1970, the population of the suburbs doubled from 36 million to 72 million, transforming the American economy and serving the nation’s ideological interests. As Medovoi notes, the ‘suburbs interpellated Americans as consumers’ by offering ‘an environment that reorganized life around the pleasures of private consumption’. The suburbs did more than just prop up economic demand, however. Cold War discourse heralded the ‘suburb as the apotheosis of American freedom, a utopian space of national abundance in which people could at last fully realize their individuality by making consumer choices that expressed and satisfied their inner wants’. The overriding effect of this process was a ‘prevailing ethos of domesticity’.

17 Hansberry, To Be Young, Gifted and Black, 63.
18 Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun, 95.
20 Medovoi, Rebels, 17.
21 Ibid, 15, 16.
Perhaps the clearest and most famous manifestation of this co-extensive relationship between suburbanisation and the ideological agenda of American Cold War was the so-called ‘kitchen debate’ between American Vice-President, Richard Nixon, and Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959, which saw Nixon use the model of a typical American kitchen complete with various labour saving devices as emblematic of what he termed an American’s ‘right to choose’. In this context, to move to the suburbs was, as Medovoi states, ‘tantamount to doing one’s national duty by building the affluence and strength of the United States’.

Accordingly, the postwar suburb became a space freighted with geopolitical significance, functioning as the representational terrain on which America articulated its sense of itself. It was symptomatic of what Henri Lefebvre characterises as the way societies and their attendant power relations are contingent on the production of spaces in which and on which their ideology can be inscribed. In the co-mingling of consumerism and patriotism underpinning suburbanisation, therefore, we see the ‘spatial practice’ of the American Cold War. By providing a representational terrain onto which the nation’s ideological principles can be projected, the suburb bolsters this ideology, helping ensure its ‘continuity and some degree of cohesion’. Medovoi reinforces this idea, writing that ‘the postwar suburb must be understood, not simply as a geographical phenomenon, nor even as a new mode of mass consumption, but as a primary Cold War ideological apparatus’ designed to protect ‘the “American dream” […] against its communist enemies’.

This suburban ideal of an identity articulated through consumer choices is invoked in A Raisin in the Sun. As Margaret Wilkinson notes, the play dramatises ‘the seductiveness of American materialistic values’. This idea is revealed most forcibly through Hansberry’s characterisation of Walter. His dreams of prosperity, of owning ‘a plain black Chrysler […] and a Cadillac convertible’, of living in a house uptown where his wife will greet him at the door with a kiss, clearly corresponds to the domestic, consumer-oriented ethos celebrated in

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23 Medovoi, Rebels, 18.
26 Medovoi, Rebels, 19.
postwar America’s suburban model of normative identity. Yet, it is an ideal that Hansberry constantly undercuts, demonstrating the fallacy of what Audre Lorde identifies as the oppressed trying to ‘use the master’s tools’ to expedite their freedom. Walter’s rhetoric of entrepreneurial uplift, Hansberry demonstrates, goes hand-in-hand with the internalisation of racist discourse. He blames the fact that his dreams have failed to materialise on his being ‘tied up in a race of people that don’t know how to do nothing but moan, pray and have babies’.

By blaming his fellow African Americans for the failure of his dreams to materialise, Walter is viewing his situation through the eyes of the white world. This, of course, is the essence of ‘double consciousness’ as outlined by Du Bois. In this scenario, the racially delineated structure of white hegemony is left unexamined. One of the great strengths of *A Raisin in the Sun*, however, is the way in which it implicitly juxtaposes the claustrophobic, poverty-stricken world depicted on stage and the ‘general culture of the U.S. To this end, Hansberry foregrounds the co-extensive relationship between racism and capitalism in the American imaginary. Walter’s dreams of Chryslers and Cadillacs are figured as a kind of false consciousness that blinds him to the material basis of his oppression. Placed alongside his repudiation of his racial identity, it becomes symptomatic of what Paul Gilroy identifies as the power of ‘consumer capitalism’ to ‘depoliticise, disorient, and mystify’.

The racially delineated nature of the ideals that Walter invests in is underscored by the family’s run-in with Linder and the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. Claiming that ‘Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities’, he proceeds to offer the Younger family money not to move to Clybourne Park, telling them that ‘[o]ur association is prepared, through the collective effort of our people to buy the house from you at financial gain to your family’. In doing so, he calls attention to which the suburban ideal that provided the ‘prevailing ethos’ of postwar America was racially coded. Indeed, if any character in the play represents what Murray calls the ‘general culture of the U.S.’ at this time it is Lindner. Suburbanisation was often underpinned by de facto segregation. African Americans and other ethnic minorities were frequently excluded from taking up residence in suburban housing

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29 Ibid, 87.
31 Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 118.
developments due to ‘redlining’ from banks and the Federal Housing Association, and the enforcement of “restrictive covenants” by property developers or, as in the case of *A Raisin in the Sun*, homeowner associations. Confining African Americans to their ‘own communities’ helped to maintain the harmony of the dominant social order, placing the plight of African Americans beyond the threshold of legibility. To this end, the dichotomy between ghetto and suburb found in *A Raisin in the Sun* enacts the kind of racial closet identified by Baldwin and discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, if the suburbs were ‘the apotheosis of American freedom’, where people could ‘fully realize their individuality’ by ‘participating in a national ideal’, then black ghettos like Chicago’s Southside, were their abject counterpart. The threshold between the ghetto and the suburb marks the faultline that separates the white American self from that which imperils its cultural authority. To this end, the racial coding of the suburb is an attempt to contain the dissonance that abjection evokes. It is a way of keeping that which is an *abjected* part of the American self – that is to say the horrors of its racial practices – apart from it. In this context, the reaction of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association to the prospect of the Youngers crossing into their representational domain is the abject horror elicited by the breakdown in meaning occasioned by a blurring of the entwined racial and spatial distinctions from which they derive their sense of self.

This sense of the ghetto as a space of abjection that, in the words of Kenneth Clark, institutionalised ‘powerlessness’ is underscored in Hansberry depiction of the Southside apartment inhabited by the Youngers during the play, which underscores the sense of the ghetto as something closed off from the rest of America. Diegetically *A Raisin in the Sun* plays out exclusively within the living room of the Younger family’s tiny apartment ‘sometime between World War II and the present [1959]’ and covers approximately one month in their lives. The narrow spatial and temporal parameters of the play’s staging serve as both a formal structuring device and a spatial representation of African Americans’ status in American society. As Anne Cheney notes, *A Raisin in the Sun* ‘strictly abides by the unity of

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place’ and though ‘[s]tretching the unity of time from one day to one month […] still maintains unity of impression with the emotional concerns of the Younger family’.  

The spatial and temporal unity of the play’s staging allow the room to function as a repository of African Americans’ abjection. While the suburban homes that supposedly testified to the triumph of the American dream were heralded as ‘a utopian space of national abundance’, the Youngers’ apartment is, according to Hansberry’s stage directions, a space of ‘depressing uniformity’ characterised by a ‘weariness’ borne of having ‘to accommodate the living of too many people for too many years’. As a result, ‘all pretences but living itself have long since vanished’. The apartment, thus, stands as testament to the lack of material progress made by African Americans, emphasising not only their spatial separation, but the temporal disjuncture between them and the white world.

Spatially, a parallel can be drawn here with Frantz Fanon’s description of the contrast between the ‘settler’s town’ and the spaces inhabited by colonial subjects in The Wretched of the Earth (1961). The former is ‘well fed […] easy-going’ and ‘full of good things’, while the latter ‘is a world without spaciousness’ that ‘is starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light’ and is thus ‘a town wallowing in the mire’. While the suburbs are full of the ‘good things’ promised by the American dream, the ghetto is, like the colonial subjects’ town, ‘a world without spaciousness’, something which the play’s claustrophobic staging renders literally.

This spatial segregation is accompanied in A Raisin in the Sun by the imposition of what Michael Hanchard calls ‘racial time’. Hanchard defines racial time ‘as the inequalities of temporality that result from power relations between racially dominant and subordinate groups. Unequal relationships between dominant and subordinate groups produce unequal temporal access to institutions, goods, services, resources, power and knowledge […] Its effects can be seen in the daily interactions – grand and quotidian – in multiracial societies’. In A Raisin in the Sun, the imposition of racial time is evident in Mama lacking the resources to turn her modest dream of a comfortable home into a reality until after her husband’s death.

36 Medovoi, Rebels, 19.
37 Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun, 22, 23.
This point is underscored when Mama tells Walter’s wife, Ruth, that she and her late husband had planned on living in the apartment inhabited by the Younger family during the play for ‘no more than a year’, before buying ‘a little place out in Morgan Park’.\textsuperscript{40} The subtext here is that while time has moved on, she and the millions of African Americans like her have not, since they lack the access to resources and power by virtue of their race.

The human consequences of what may be characterised as this racial space-time continuum are evident, to some degree, in each member of the Younger family. For all of them, the apartment comes to be associated with the negation of subjectivity. Indeed, the thwarted identity that characterises all of the characters for the majority of the play can be traced to their inability to reconcile their respective quests for self-realisation with their material surroundings. For Beneatha and Walter, in particular, their vitality as individuals is perpetually undercut by the poverty of their environment. To this end, their ‘world without spaciousness’ becomes what Fanon terms ‘a zone of nonbeing’.\textsuperscript{41} Inverting the symbiotic relationship between identity and place mobilised by the Cold War suburb, the (non)identities of Beneatha and Walter are framed as coextensive with the negation attendant to their abject surroundings. This point is underscored when Beneatha, responding to Asagai’s enquiry as to how Walter’s loss of much of the insurance money has affected her, declares forlornly ‘Me? … Me? … Me, I’m nothing’.\textsuperscript{42} Similarly, Walter’s perceives his future as ‘a big, looming blank space – full of nothing’\textsuperscript{43}

Accordingly, Hansberry demonstrates that America’s compartmentalisation of space was not just a means of segregating people physically along racial lines, but also a kind of psychic segregation that circumscribed ambition and negated subjectivity. In this context, \textit{A Raisin in the Sun} ceases to be the affirmation of the ‘general culture of the United States that some critics have perceived it to be. Hansberry’s illustration of how supposedly ‘universal’ American values are not applied universally, immediately complicates what her husband, Robert Nemiroff later described as attempts to by certain critics (both white and black) to interpret the play as upholding ‘the social order and proof that if one only perseveres with faith, everything

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{40} Hansberry, \textit{A Raisin in the Sun}, 44-5.
\footnotetext{42} Hansberry, \textit{A Raisin in the Sun}, 132.
\footnotetext{43} Ibid, 73-4.
\end{footnotes}
will come out right in the end and the system ain’t so-bad-after-all’. Indeed, Lena’s motivations for buying the house reveal quite the opposite. While her attempt to assuage Walter’s anger at not being given the insurance money to pursue his entrepreneurial dreams may point to her having interpellated what Cruse dismisses as ‘middle class ideology’ – ‘it makes a difference in a man’, she asserts, ‘when he can walk on floors that belong to him’ – her decision to move is ultimately driven by a desire to find a cure for what Beneatha earlier characterises as ‘the acute ghetto-itis’ afflicting the family.

Lena’s announcement that she has put a deposit down on a house follows on from a scene that sees Walter’s pregnant wife, Ruth, confessing that she is considering having an abortion, due to her fears that the family will be unable to support her unborn child financially. Lena’s justification for buying the house may be read as a darker, alternative take on Cold War America’s ‘prevailing ethos of domesticity’. ‘I just seen my family falling apart today ... just falling to pieces in front of my eyes’, Lena tells Walter. ‘We couldn’t go on like we was today. We was going backwards ‘stead of forwards – talking about killing babies and wishing each other was dead ... When it gets like that in life – you just got to do something different, push on out and do something bigger’. This statement is hardly a ringing endorsement of integration. It is the claustrophobic conditions of ghetto living as opposed to any wish to buttress the ideological prestige of the United States that compels Lena to proceed with the move. Framing it in this way enables Hansberry to interrogate the structural inequalities in American society that make African Americans’ relationship with ‘the general culture of the U.S.’ so much more precarious than their white counterparts.

Neither Hansberry nor her characters are under any illusions that Clybourne Park is the kind of utopian suburban space celebrated in Cold War discourse. Mama is at pains to point out that their new home is ‘just a plain little old house’, while the family’s run in with Lindner provides a worrying preview of the hostility they will face following their move. Indeed, Hansberry responded to suggestions that A Raisin in the Sun has a ‘happy ending’ by glibly remarking that reviewers who thought this should ‘come and live in one of the communities where the Youngers are going’. This comment was born of personal experience. Hansberry’s family moved into a hitherto all-white neighbourhood when she was a child.

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44 Nemiroff, 10.
45 Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun, 74.
46 Hansberry, Qtd in Nemiroff, 12.
where they were confronted with angry mobs of white residents. On one occasion Hansberry was almost killed by a brick thrown through the window of her parents’ home.47

In this context, Mama’s ‘universal’ desire for a better life for her family amounts to little more than wishing to break the cycle of poverty, stagnation, and decay that arises from the imposition of a racial space-time continuum and the ‘acute ghetto-it is’ that is its by-product. ‘To be imprisoned in the ghetto’, Hansberry writes in her posthumously published ‘informal autobiography’ To Be Young, Gifted, and Black, ’is to be forgotten – or deliberately cheated of one’s birthright – at best’, before adding: ‘We must come out of the ghettos of America, because the ghettos are killing us; not only our dreams, as Mama says, but our very bodies’.48

Part 2: ‘In Preparation for a Journey’

Do you remember the first time you met me at school? […] You came up to me and you said […] “Mr. Asagai – I want very much to talk with you. About Africa. You see, Mr. Asagai, I am looking for my identity!”
– Asagai, A Raisin in the Sun, 1959

In A Raisin in the Sun the incipient diasporic consciousness articulated in Richard Wright’s writing on the third world is brought to bear on the domestic politics of the United States. When Beneatha asks Asagai to tell her about Africa, because she is looking for her ‘identity’, she distils the broader historical shift that Wright helped precipitate, whereby African Americans increasingly turned towards their ancestral homeland in their quest for identity. In the wake of the Bandung Conference documented by Wright in The Color Curtain (1956), there was a revival of transnational sentiments among African Americans that had been curtailed by the nationalistic atmosphere of the early Cold War. As Brenda Gayle Plummer writes, Bandung ‘was a break in the Cold War ice’ that ‘marked a turning point in the psychological awareness of formerly colonized peoples’ and ‘helped inaugurate a new period of cultural interest in Africa and the diaspora’ among African Americans.50

47 Cheney, 4.
48 Hansberry, To Be Young, Gifted and Black, 131-2.
49 Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun, 62.
In particular there was a growing recognition among black people in the United States that events in the third world could expedite their own freedom struggle.\footnote{Thomas, Borstelmann, The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 121.} For example, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, Martin Luther King was keenly aware of decolonisation’s transnational resonance. Contrasting what he described as the ‘jet-like speed’ nations in Asia and Africa were moving towards independence with the ‘horse-and-buggy pace’ African Americans were moving towards ‘gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter’, he called on black Americans to recognise that their ‘struggle for freedom’ as part of a ‘worldwide struggle’ against the doctrine of white supremacy.\footnote{Martin Luther King Jr., Letter From Birmingham Jail (1963), The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr. (New York: Abacus, 2004 [1998]), 187-204 (192).}

King’s comments recapitulate the overarching theme of \textit{A Raisin in the Sun}. The transnational pull of Africa reverberates throughout the play, transforming the historical framework in which the domestic concerns of the Younger family are articulated.

\textit{A Raisin in the Sun}’s affirmation of African culture is consistent with Hansberry’s own lifelong interest in African history. Indeed, of all the writers examined in this thesis, it is Hansberry who shows the strongest commitment to her ancestral roots. This interest is, in many ways, unsurprising. Her uncle, Leo Hansberry, was a highly respected professor of African studies who had a college named after him at the University of Nigeria.\footnote{Cheney, 16.} Moreover, as Cheney notes, during her time working for \textit{Freedom}, a left-wing magazine co-founded by Paul Robeson, in the early fifties, she was encouraged by the likes of Robeson, Louis Burnham, and W. E. B. Du Bois (a family friend) to pursue her interest in African history.\footnote{Ibid, 58.}

Reflecting on her childhood in an autobiographical story included in \textit{To Be Young Gifted and Black}, Hansberry recounts (in the third person) spending ‘hours of her younger years poring over maps of the African continent’ and feeling

\begin{quote}
certain [that] she was at one, texture, blood, follicles of hair, nerve ends, all with the sound of a mighty Congo drum. She had never heard African music that had not set her mad with the romance of her people, never. At the first rich basso boom, her heart rose in her bosom, her teeth set, her eyes widened, and Africa claimed her.\footnote{Hansberry, \textit{To Be Young Gifted and Black}, 75.}
\end{quote}

The suggestion that residual traces of African roots underpin and animate the lives of African Americans evident here is recapitulated in \textit{A Raisin in the Sun}. For instance, when Mama
enters the stage for the first time, Hansberry’s directions describe her thus: ‘She is, in a word, a beautiful woman. Her bearing is perhaps most like the noble bearing of the women of the Heroes of Southwest Africa – rather as if she imagines that as she walks she still bears a basket or a vessel upon her head’. Similarly – and perhaps more pertinently, given Hansberry’s reference to being ‘at one […] with the sound of a mighty Congo drum’ – in Act II Scene One she depicts Beneatha and Walter both becoming ‘enraptured’ with ‘eyes far away – “back to the past” by the sound of a Nigerian record given to Beneatha by Asagai.

Though the scene is initially light-hearted, with Beneatha imitating a Nigerian tribal dance and Walter shouting ‘FLAMING SPEAR! HOT DAMN!’ and ‘OCOMOGOSIAY’, Hansberry’s stage directions subsequently point to a shift in mood ‘from pure comedy’, a move signalled by a subtle change in the stage’s lighting to suggest Walter’s imagination. In his imagination, Hansberry writes, ‘[Walter] sees what we cannot, that he is a leader, a great chief, a descendent of Chaka, and that the hour to march has come […] It is the inner Walter speaking: the Southside chauffeur has assumed an unexpected majesty’. The shift in lighting that Hansberry describes in her stage directions is pivotal, altering the whole tenor of the scene. Walter, in effect, ceases to ‘perform’ African-ness; rather Africa ‘performs’ him. In other words, the performance becomes constitutive of his identity. In doing so, it serves to empower him, displacing the alienation that characterises his life as a Southside chauffeur.

However, although, as Steven R. Carter points out, Hansberry had a ‘profound respect for her racial background and for African culture’, the affirmation of her ancestry evident in A Raisin in the Sun does not cross over into what Paul Gilroy has described as a tendency among ‘Afrocentric’ artists and intellectuals to posit ‘a ruthlessly positive notion of Africa that is indifferent to intrarracial variation and is frozen at the point where blacks boarded the ships that would carry them into the woes and horrors of the middle passage’. She was not, as Fanon Che Wilkins puts it, ‘uncritically romantic about all things African’, nor was she blind to the spatial and temporal rupture wrought by the middle passage. Indeed, A Raisin in the

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56 Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun, 35.
57 Ibid, 77.
58 Ibid, 77, 79.
59 Ibid, 78-9
Sun carefully demonstrates that the specificities of African American experience are such that attempting to transpose the symbols and rituals enshrined in pre-modern African culture to the apex of modernity that was mid-twentieth century America creates an inevitable sense of dissonance.

Hansberry’s characterisation of Beneatha underscores this point. For much of the play, Beneatha appears to harbour the type of ‘ruthlessly positive notion of Africa’ criticised by Gilroy. Railing against what she calls ‘assimilationist Negroes’ who abandon their ‘own culture’ and ‘submerge’ themselves ‘in the dominant, and [...] oppressive culture’, Beneatha valorises a pre-modern Africa whose people ‘were the first to smelt iron on the face of the earth’ and who ‘were performing surgical operations when the English [...] were still tattooing themselves with blue dragons’. However, Hansberry suggests that there is a disconnect between what Beneatha considers to be her ‘own culture’ and the spatial and temporal reality of her existence. For instance, when Beneatha wears African robes Asagai has bought her, Hansberry’s stage directions hint that any sense of coherent identity she derives from an outward adoption of African culture is misplaced. Hansberry writes: ‘She picks up the Nigerian dress and holds it up to her in front of the mirror [...] ‘She sets the headdress on haphazardly [...] Then she starts to wriggle in front of the mirror as she thinks a Nigerian woman might’. Hansberry proceeds to describe Beneatha, ‘[e]merging grandly from the doorway so that we can see her thoroughly robed in the costume Asagai bought [...] she is coquettishly fanning herself with an ornate oriental fan, mistakenly more like butterfly than any Nigerian that ever lived’ (emphasis added).

These descriptions imply that there is a disjuncture between Beneatha’s perception of herself and how she actually appears. While Beneatha’s belief that Africa holds the key to her identity is bound up with these performative gestures, Hansberry’s suggestion that this performance of African-ness is haphazard and mistaken serves to emphasise the spatial and temporal distance between Beneatha, the mid-twentieth century African American woman, and her African roots. While Beneatha’s Afrocentrism may be an attempt to affirm an essential African identity untouched by the incursion of Western modernity and the attendant horrors of slavery and colonialism, the dissonance that occurs when she seeks to transfer this

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63 Ibid, 66, 76.
pre-modern Africa to postwar America merely underlines the historical rupture wrought by ‘the woes and horrors of the middle passage’. Thus, any sense of Africa as a metaphysical essence underpinning the existence of African Americans is counterbalanced by the acknowledgement that the distance of three centuries and the Atlantic ocean has created a sense of estrangement from their African roots that cannot be bridged simply by embracing or appropriating symbols pertaining to this heritage.

Nonetheless, A Raisin in the Sun’s depiction of the spatial and temporal distance between Africa and African Americans is not simply a critique of the limits of Pan-Africanism or the difficulty of translating a ‘basic grammar of blackness’. Indeed, while A Raisin in the Sun may demonstrate the historical rupture between African Americans and their ancestral roots, the dissonance that occurs as a result of Beneatha’s appropriation of the semiotics of African culture in a specifically American context is generative of a modality of identity that displaces the knowledge attendant to her immediate environment. Medovoi echoes this point, writing that ‘Beneatha looks to Asagai and to Africa for her identity’ because it allows her ‘to resist capitulation to the suburban regime of American whiteness’. The effect of Beneatha’s Afrocentrism, then, is not so much to reveal how, like the young Hansberry, she is ‘at one, texture, blood, follicles of hair, nerve ends’ with Africa and its culture. Rather, it serves to reframe her relationship with the United States and is, therefore, illustrative of how the co-presence of national and transnational imaginaries serves to defamiliarise existing forms of knowledge, opening up a rhetorical space in which to redefine the meaning of American-ness.

The sense of empowerment that both Beneatha and Walter derive from their African heritage is coextensive with the emergence of Africa as a major geopolitical force. Contemporaneous events in Africa are mapped onto American domestic politics in A Raisin in the Sun, as a means of displacing the existing social order. In a conversation between Asagai and Beneatha in Act III Scene One, Asagai explicitly links the Youngers’ move to the era’s geopolitics. Unaware that the move is now in jeopardy due to Walter having lost much of the insurance money in his doomed investment in the liquor store, Asagai, seeing the Younger’s packed belongings, declares: ‘Ah, I like the look of packing crates! A household in preparation for a journey! It depresses some people … but for me … it is another feeling. Something full

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64 Medovoi, Rebels, 320.
of the flow of life, do you understand? *Movement, progress ... It makes me think of Africa*’ (emphasis added). ⁶⁵ In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said writes that the ‘objective space’ of a house ‘is far less important than what it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value.’ ⁶⁶ Here, the Youngers’ new home ‘is endowed with […] a figurative value’ that transforms the family’s move from a ‘sell-out to the white power structure’. Asagai’s invocation of African independence instead imbues it with the revolutionary ferment of decolonisation. As such, rather than affirming the ‘general culture of the United States’ the Youngers are illustrative of what Hansberry later characterised as ‘an affirmative moment in history’. ⁶⁷ It is an attempt to finally turn the ‘dream deferred’ into a reality.

Accordingly, the transnational pull of Africa prevents the Youngers from becoming mere assimilationist tokens or proof that, in Nemiroff’s words, ‘the-system-ain’t-so-bad-after-all’. It allows them to move to Clybourne Park without forsaking what is uniquely African American about them. To this end, Asagai serves as a catalyst for transformation. As Medovoi writes, it is Asagai’s presence in the play that ‘rejuvenate[s] the Younger family’ and inspires them to pursue ‘self-sufficiency and defy those who would keep them in a state of subjection […]’ Asagai inspires the Youngers to believe in what black people might achieve by resisting white acts of racial oppression, whether in the form of red-lining in Chicago or colonialism in Africa. ⁶⁸

Nowhere is this transformation more apparent than in the narrative arc of Walter Younger. By the end of the play, the man who had earlier described himself as being a part of ‘[t]he world’s most backward race of people’, turns down Lindner’s bribe with the words ‘we come from people who had a lot of *pride*. I mean – we are very proud people […] And we have decided to move into our house because my father – my father – he earned it for us brick by brick’ (emphasis in original). ⁶⁹ These are not the words of someone who ‘just happens to be a Negro’; nor do they constitute a selling out ‘to the white power structure’. Rather they are simultaneously an affirmation of racial pride and an assertion of American-

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⁶⁹ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 147.
ness. African Americans helped build the United States, Walter suggests, and now they are going to live in it.

Conclusion

‘The question, I’m sure, is asked you many times – you must be tired of it – someone comes up to you and says: “This is not really a Negro play; why, this could be a play about anybody! It’s a play about people!” What is your reaction? What do you say?’

‘Well I hadn’t noticed the contradiction because I’d always been under the impression that Negroes are people’. – Hansberry, Interview (1959)\(^70\)

To conclude, I would like to return to the early critical reception of *A Raisin in the Sun*, before briefly considering some of the implications of the issues raised in this chapter. It is tempting to assume that the insistence that the play ‘just happened to be about’ African Americans and was part of ‘the general culture of the U.S.’ created a discourse around *A Raisin in the Sun* that – to use the contemporaneous Cold War parlance – *contained* it within a non-threatening, integrationist framework that buttressed the ideological interests of the United States during this period. Nonetheless, it is far too easy to dismiss Hansberry and *A Raisin in the Sun* as dupes of the ‘white power structure’ merely on account of attempts to appropriate the play’s message. Power, as Foucault points out, is always coextensive with its own resistance.\(^71\) It might be better, therefore, to ask why critics were so keen to assimilate the text into the mainstream of American culture.

The ideological interests of the United States at this time were haunted by the spectre of decolonisation, the imperative of being viewed favourably by the Asagai’s of the world. Hailing *A Raisin in the Sun* as representative of the ‘general culture of the U.S’, therefore, may be read as a concession to the rising tide of black power sweeping Africa in the 1950s. Given what occurs during the play, the very attempt to recuperate *A Raisin in the Sun* into the existing power structure of the United States involves a profound re-evaluation and reconsideration of the assumptions governing what being American entails.

A parallel can be drawn here with Timothy Parrish’s reading of Mary Antin’s 1912 autobiography *The Promised Land*, another text that is frequently dismissed as a naïve paean to assimilation. Parrish argues that Antin’s story of her childhood as a Jewish immigrant in

\(^70\) Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 128.

Boston complicates notions of assimilation by forcing the reader to see her Americaness through her Jewishness. ‘Antin’, Parrish claims, ‘assimilates her audience to her own Jewish heritage. To participate in Mary Antin’s alleged triumph of assimilation, her audience must also identify with the ethnic customs of that “curly headed Jew”’. He adds: ‘[she] forces her audience to accept her “Americanization” only insofar as it is mediated through her Jewishness’. A similar logic can be applied to A Raisin in the Sun. The Younger family’s ‘Americanization’ (by which I mean their moving to suburbia) can be said to be refracted through their blackness. For critics to read the play as ‘American’, they must identify with the racially mediated heritage – as evident in Beneatha’s African dress, Walter’s invocation of his ancestry when rejecting Lindner’s bribe, or Lena’s ‘noble bearing’ that is redolent of the Heroes of Southwest Africa – that Hansberry explicitly preserves.

To this end, Hansberry should be seen as using the transnational pull of Africa to interject a sense of dissonance into ‘the white suburban imaginary’, with the discordant relationship between national and transnational imaginaries generating new knowledge formations. Retaining that which sets them apart is what allows the Youngers to carve out a place for themselves in the heart of American society, while simultaneously allowing them to resist the hegemonic demands of the power structure that underpins it. As such, the dissonance that occurs when suburbanisation and decolonisation interact prompts realignments in discourse that facilitate new modalities of politicised identity. In doing so, the play suggests that assimilation and integration can only proceed on a deterritorialised basis. For African Americans to become a part ‘of the general culture of the United States’, the assumptions on which that culture is predicated must be deconstructed. As Hansberry put it in a 1964 letter to the Village Voice, ‘integration’ is not about ‘being absorbed into this house […] the Negro people would like to see this house rebuilt’. A Raisin in the Sun, may be seen as laying the foundations for this process.

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Afterword

Dissonance in a Post-Racial America

There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America; there’s the United States of America. There’s not a black America and a white America and a Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.
– Barrack Obama, Keynote Address at the Democratic National Convention (2004)¹

[What really exercises my mind is not this hypothetical day on which some other Negro ‘first’ will become the first Negro President. What I am really curious about is just what kind of country he’ll be President of.
– James Baldwin, ‘Nationalism, Colonialism, and the United States: One Minute to Twelve – A Forum’(1961)²

In May 1963 the American Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, invited James Baldwin to breakfast at his home in Virginia. After a short meeting in which they discussed the racial crisis gripping the nation, Kennedy recommended that Baldwin assemble a group of prominent African Americans to discuss the issue further the following day in New York. Taking Kennedy up on his offer, Baldwin set about rounding up around a dozen of his allies to take part in the summit. Among those he called upon was another of the leading players in this thesis, Lorraine Hansberry. Once the meeting began, however, the atmosphere quickly soured, with the Baldwin delegation castigating Kennedy for what they perceived as his lack of commitment to the struggle for racial equality.³

The Baldwin-Kennedy summit has gone down in history as little short of a disaster. Yet it distils something of the broader thrust of this thesis. Invited to the very heart of American power, Baldwin and Hansberry (who Baldwin later recalled ‘towered over the meeting as a moral force’) refused to be cowed and insisted on exposing Kennedy to the truth about American harmony.⁴ ‘Out of tune’ with Kennedy’s expectations of a cordial gathering, they displaced the naturalised assumptions of power, revealing what Adorno might term the ‘rifts and crevices’ within it.

⁴ Leeming, James Baldwin, 224.
Reflecting on the meeting two years later during his address to the Union Society of Cambridge University, Baldwin would pour particular scorn on the claim made by Kennedy during it that an African American could be president in forty years: ‘We were here for four hundred years and now he tells us that maybe in forty years, if you are good, we may let you become President’.\(^5\) Baldwin is, of course, right to detect the note of condescension in Kennedy’s prediction. Yet, on a strictly factual basis, it proved to be remarkably prescient.

When Barrack Obama was elected to the American presidency in 2008, it was tempting to view the ‘dream deferred’ that so animated Hansberry as having finally been realised. On a symbolic level, it is difficult to gainsay the significance of Obama’s victory. In a country where at the time of his birth he would have struggled, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., to get ‘a cup of coffee at a lunch counter’, his ascension to the highest office in the land is testament to the trail blazed by those, including the writers examined in this thesis, who fought to reconstitute what it means to be an American.

Obama, in many ways, crystallises some of the overarching themes of this thesis. Not only is he a child of the Civil Rights era chronologically, but his origins reflect the shifting geopolitical dynamics characteristic of the period. As the child of a white, American mother and black, Kenyan father who met each other at a Russian language class, he embodies both the three worlds topography and destabilisation of racial boundaries that I have charted.\(^6\) In this regard, one might be inclined to view the story explored in the previous four chapters as, ultimately, a triumphant one: a narrative that leads from the basement of a whites only building all the way to the White House.

But as Baldwin was wont to point out, it is not the colour of the president that matters, but the kind of country that they are the president of. And it is this question that resounds as we enter the last days of the Obama administration. With the dying embers of the Obama era playing out against heightening racial tensions, police brutality, and the vestiges of segregation, one cannot help but wonder if his has been something of a pyrrhic victory for African Americans.

Accordingly, now seems like the ideal time to reassess the conceptual frameworks through which race is perceived in the United States. Obama’s invocation of a raceless,


depoliticised America in the 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention which brought him to national prominence is symptomatic of a broader shift in American culture in the past three decades towards the principle of ‘colorblindness’. The post-racial narrative elucidated by Obama is undoubtedly seductive, appearing, as it does, to represent the telos of the American ethos enshrined in the nation’s foundational documents. But as Toni Morrison warns us, though ‘the habit of ignoring race’ may appear to be ‘generous’, to remove it from the representational domain is to ‘enforce its invisibility through silence’.7 Here, important lessons can be learned from *Invisible Man*. In the rush to embrace ‘colorblindness’, there is a risk of creating an ‘optic white’ America, where like the signature product of ‘Liberty Paints’ described by Ellison, ten drops of black are subsumed into a homogenous whiteness.

Responding to this dilemma, a wave of scholarship has emerged in recent years that has sought to address the issue of race in a supposedly post-racial society.8 Of these studies, it is perhaps Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) that provides the most compelling example of the political stakes involved in foreclosing race from the field of social discourse. Charting the serried workings of the so-called War on Drugs, mass incarceration of African American males, and disenfranchisement, Alexander argues that a covert, but no less insidious racial caste system has taken hold in the United States.9 In her emphasis on the pivotal role played in this process by the silencing of racial discourse in the guise of ‘colorblindness’, what Alexander describes is, in effect, the emergence of a new racial closet, where blackness is once more ‘something unspeakable’. To paraphrase Ellison, in this era of official ‘colorblindness’, African Americans have once again become invisible simply because people refuse to see them.10

In its own small way, this thesis seeks to contribute to this debate. The principle of African Americans as ‘something apart, yet an integral part’ that has provided its central *leitmotif* is intended to register both the experiential reality of racial difference and how, in dialogic relationship with the central ‘beat’ of American culture, difference can be generative of a better reality. The imperative of recognising this two-ness seems particularly urgent in

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light of recent events. As I write, Baltimore, Maryland, is ablaze amid protests following the
death of an African American man, Freddie Gray, in police custody. Gray’s death is but the
latest in a depressingly long line of such incidents, which have once more brought race to the
forefront of the American political agenda.

Hearing of the deaths of the likes of Gray, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and Eric Garner
(to use just four of the most famous examples) during the process of researching and writing
this thesis, I could not help but be struck with a disquieting sense of *déjà vu*. When the
unarmed Martin was shot and killed by a neighbourhood watch volunteer in a gated
community in Florida, one saw brutal echoes of the co-extensive relationship between the
politics of race and the politics of space mapped by Hansberry in *A Raisin in the Sun*: for the
suburbs of the 1950s read the gated communities of the new millennium.11 Similarly, in the
shooting of Brown by a police officer on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, one was haunted
by the ghost of Tod Clifton, felled by a police officer’s bullet on the streets of Harlem in
*Invisible Man*.

Sadly, then, when it comes to race in the United States the axiom *Plus ça change, plus
c'est la même chose* remains depressingly apt. But tempting as it is to be pessimistic, the
model provided by the writers examined in this thesis offers cause for hope. From the ‘no-
man’s land’ of their dissonance, they used the resources available to them to fashion their
own visions and versions of what it means to be both black and American. In doing so, they
not only revealed the truth about American harmony, but also helped reconstitute the terms in
which both American-ness and blackness could be articulated. In these increasingly
dangerous times, the lessons provided by Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Hansberry have much
to teach us. Reviving their example, we can, perhaps, set about revealing the truth about the
harmony of our own age.

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like-minded residents who seek shelter from outsiders and whose physical seclusion then worsens paranoid
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