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*What Moves at the Margins* is a critical rhetorical analysis that explores the literary work of three African American writers, while examining Black queer thematics, sensibilities, rhetorics, and pedagogies. The writers examined in this study include Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Natasha Trethewey. Although these writers work in multiple genres, their writings include thematics about the meaning and experiences of Black people in America (blackness) and the sociopolitical responsibilities of Black writers to their community and nation. Their projects are critically pedagogical, in scope and praxis, and intersect critical pedagogical discourses. Additionally, this study utilizes a framework called *Black queer poetics*, which functions much like the word rhetorics, both the object of study and a set of analytics to study said object. Furthermore, the adoption of the phrase *Black queer poetics* illustrates a certain type of methodological flexibility that gestures towards the simultaneous study of a certain set of texts held in regard in the humanities and other disciplines while also highlighting queer(ing) rhetorical, analytical, ideological lenses.

WHAT MOVES AT THE MARGINS: BLACK QUEER POETICS AND  
THE CRITICAL PEDAGOGICAL IMAGINATION

by

Robert Earl Randolph, Jr.

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

for Robert E. Randolph, III, my son and golden Goose...

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Robert Earl Randolph, Jr., has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

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In “Our Grandmothers,” Maya Angelou writes about the strong women among us who “go forth, along, and stand as ten thousand.” I feel these words keenly now as I’ve come to the end of a long, arduous educational journey. “I come as one, but I stand as 10,000” became my mantra as I initiated, wrote, and theorized my way through this work. The throng of ten thousand is here with me now, and I owe them an incalculable debt.

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## CHAPTER I

### IN SEARCH OF A CRITICAL PEDAGOGICAL IMAGINATION: INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND BLACK QUEER ROOTEDNESS

Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created . . . Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation . . . Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin? What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company. (Morrison & Denard, 2008, pp. 205–206)

I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make hurt go away. I saw in theory then as location for healing. (hooks, 1994, p. 59)

#### Introduction

##### On Critical Marginality

Through my many years of schooling and education, Black queer theory/studies and African American literary production became the main foci of my intellectual and creative work. I view them both as lodestones that point me in particular directions that seem paradoxically familiar and unexpected. While the two entities are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they are a great influence on my intellectual and artistic work. Additionally, these epistemological entities linger at the margins of more traditionally positioned disciplines—feminist/queer theory and studies and English studies respectively. As such, *What Moves at the Margins* is a critical rhetorical analysis that



explores the literary work of three African American writers, while examining Black queer thematics, sensibilities, rhetorics, and pedagogies. The writers examined in this study include Toni Morrison, novelist and 1993 Nobel Laureate in Literature; James Baldwin, critically acclaimed essayist and public intellectual; and Natasha Trethewey, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and former Poet Laureate of the United States. Although these writers work in multiple genres, their writings include thematics of the meaning and experiences of Black people in America (blackness) and the socio-political responsibilities of Black writers to their community and nation. Their projects are critically pedagogical in scope and praxis. And, I read the works of these writers with three assumptions: 1) they are writing for particular audiences and with specific aims that often intersect critical pedagogical discourses, 2) these writers balance pedagogical and political commitments, and 3) through queer and rhetorical reading strategies, one might see ways in which their texts theorize, articulate, and ruminate about perceptions and articulations of what is termed “critical pedagogy.” With these assumptions in mind, a few questions frame this inquiry: 1) In what ways do African American writers and their texts contribute to the continued importance of critical pedagogical projects, such as liberatory and social justice education, decolonization, and critical literacy? 2) What distinguishing rhetorical characteristics of African American literary productions lend themselves to critical pedagogical projects? and 3) How might queer reading strategies yield new and expansive ways of interpreting and teaching African American literary texts as forms of critical pedagogy? This study examines what it means to “be on” or

“hang out” at the margins and how that marginality alters, shapes, and orients how Black writers view and discuss educational moments, experiences, and boundaries.

I hold several meanings of the margins together as I proceed with this study. The basest definition of margin refers to a border or edge, a space that often marks the furthest limit of an entity. As a spatial concept, it demarcates the space beyond what is deemed necessary or a limit where something ceases to be utilized or desired. Then too, the margin also marks the limit of possibility—of existence, examination, or exploration. These definitions connote a symbiotic relationship: the margin does not exist without a center, and this powerful binary reifies power relations and social hierarchies. Though my understanding of the margin/center paradigm is informed by those hierarchical considerations, I do not rely on them. The margin/center paradigm is a social construct with arbitrary meanings and real-life consequences, meaning marginalization is an abstract idea with concrete realization that means something to those who are often marginalized by the greater society. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks (1984) asserts that marginality provides a “special vantage point” from which to critique and dismantle social ills such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism, etc. (p. 15). The counter-hegemonic praxis of critiquing from the margins remains a time-honored tradition with African American communities and experiences. Additionally, Edward Soja (2010) reflects on the possibility of transdisciplinarity of the “spatial turn,” an affective praxis that examines how our social dimensions transform our environmental and geographical realities. This perspective utilizes a “socio-spatial dialectic” that moves beyond traditional spatial considerations and emphasizes the processes of class formation

and social stratification. He notes that this “socio-spatial dialectic” and the spatial turn have both been taken up by other disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology, law, and economics; and he argues, “whatever your interests may be, they can be significantly advanced by adopting a critical spatial perspective” (p. 2). And so, in my pedagogical and educational inquiry, I take up both hooks’ and Soja’s theorizing about (and around) the margins. I situate spatial thinking to critically approach how and why the margin (and by extension, the center, perhaps) is important to my study.

What discourses reveal themselves when we assume the material conditions of the margins as educative, instructive, and pragmatic praxis? How do the margins and marginal conditions activate and constitute new, inventive knowledges and methods of inquiry? I have had to develop new reading strategies because “normative modes inquiry and containment often are incapable of assessing . . . value” (Manning, 2016, p. 27). Discussions about the margins are about ecology, relatedness, and acknowledgment of a difference without privileging distinction. To write about and for “the margin” and marginalized people, both within and outside the academy, is to write about an intense predicament. The burden (or reward) of doing so is inextricably linked with seemingly intractable machinations of visibility. To see oneself both as the disenfranchised from a vantage point that produces a type of (radical) agency and knowledge, which is to say, inclusion/exclusion has material effects.

The margins represent a place where “cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities and eccentric traces” (Gordon, 2008, p. 25) are allowed to illuminate a sensuous knowledge. This knowledge makes one

radically available to oneself, operating at the level of impulse, ability, and intimacy. As I have written, I have vacillated between belief and mania, self-doubt and confidence, between the personal and the social. To make peace with myself as a scholar, researcher, student, teacher, I had to truly take up the margins as a serious inquiry and unequivocal concern. I had to acknowledge and get comfortable with uncertainty, the penultimate condition of the margin.

Briefly, I utilize the spatial turn as I look at pedagogical investments of the margin. Again, centering spaces/places has social capital, theoretical or otherwise. The classroom, the archive, and fields of study inculcate its occupants with dimensions of both restriction and promise. The center/margin paradigm is also such a place. Like the authors I examine, this project ruminates about how language either confines or regulates one to the margins of our society and how language developed at the margin imbues those inhabitants with certain potentialities. These potentialities are pedagogical and bound to a certain futurity that re-theorizes what the purposes of education may become more specifically a pedagogical interest in marginality motivates individual views of gender, sexuality, race, etc. as marginal sites of experience and inquiry.

Ideologically and ontologically, the margin and the center can never be separated and enter discourses together. And while scholars traditionally understand the center as the demarcation of privilege and the margin as a demarcation of disadvantage, the social statuses of these spaces often give way to material realities that cannot be subsumed or understood by the other. That is, to be at the center is not only privilege and the margin is not only disadvantage. Depending on positionalities, circumstances, and contexts, these

spaces represent more, in excess to normative narratives. Thus, these spaces become and represent queer spaces, sometimes neither here nor there. Because the margin is a sociopolitical space of exclusion (of the excluded), it is often read as spaces of undesirability, illegibility, disposability, and neglect. But this is the center's perspective on the margin: what is the margin's perspective of itself? Here in lies the importance of this study: the insistence to look rigorously at the tendencies, autonomy, and the operational pulse contained within a marginal status.

My argument, perhaps, is not so much about the intervention of language to describe these marginal discourses within educational and literary studies, but to activate a continuity of difference, to celebrate survival (as only the marginalized truly can endure and celebrate), to catalog the interstices of linguistic and literary gesture in the works of three African-American writers, to circumstantiate the insistence on radical presence in institutions disciplines and discourses. In other words, what life and learning moves at the margins, at the border, at the limit of what is recognized as imperative, generative, or even fungible?

Then too, the aim of this inquiry is to consider how textual gaps, absences, and silences at the margins operate pedagogically and rhetorically and to approach the texts and writers with a particular analytical flexibility that lends me temporary directional lines on which to start my intellectual inquiry. This study utilizes a framework called *Black queer poetics*, which functions much like the word rhetorics, both the object of study and a set of analytics to study said object. Furthermore, the adoption of the phrase *Black queer poetics* illustrates a certain type of methodological flexibility that gestures

towards the simultaneous study of a certain set of texts held in regard in the humanities and other disciplines while also highlighting queer(ing) rhetorical, analytical, ideological lenses. While this study coins the term *Black queer poetics*, the description of it here is only preliminary. Possibilities of definitional language are changing and evolving during the course of this study (Creswell, 2007, p. 19). Black queer poetics allowed me multiple ways to engage and remain attentive to queering that may not disorder, but actually reorder a particular researcher's biases and positionalities.

A wide range of theoretical analytics and scholars are utilized, for example, Jacqueline Jones Royster's (2000) concept of the critical imagination, Jasbir Puar's (2007) use of the assemblage, Frances Smith Foster's (2010) and Mulana Karenga's (2006) interpretation of Sankofa, and Barbara Christian's (1988) concept of transgressive reading strategies. Accordingly, literature that examines the fields of African American letters and critical pedagogy provided context for this analysis. Because these fields do not function necessarily as discreet disciplines, they do not produce discrete genres of writing or scholarship. Thus, following Barbara Christian's (1988) call for intentionality of reading across disciplines to develop my own methods of reading is particularly relevant here. Additionally, social and cultural critics like bell hooks (1999; 2012) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1926/1997) further situate this study within a discourse of socio-cultural responsibility of African American writers. W. E. B. Du Bois (1926/1997) writes in "The Criteria for Negro Art" that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be . . . I stand in utter shamelessness and say whatever I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of Black folk to love and enjoy" (p. 757). Over the

centuries, African Americans have clung closely to the didactic nature and liberatory immediacy of literacies. Just as some of them did not believe in art for art's sake, neither did Black educators and critical pedagogues believe in education for education's sake and sought to utilize literacy and education to bring about more furtive means to survive the racist society they inhabited.

For Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) critical pedagogues use social and critical educational theory in conjunction with cultural studies to examine, critique, and proffer solutions to prolific social, historical, political, and economic conditions of dominant culture and society (p. 23). Unlike Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, I do not believe these critical pedagogies are necessarily or even primarily restricted to the classroom or the school. I acknowledge that this is the traditional purview of critical pedagogues, but I believe this site of critical examination belies many other possibilities of criticism. In this study, I necessarily expand the critical vistas of my critical pedagogies, necessarily moving from the school as a unique institution to examining oppressive and restrictive institutions in general. With this ideological shift, I am able to claim the socially engaged and participatory nature of African American literary work as thoroughly pedagogical in scope and imperative. Writing to assert one's agency and to tell one's story has been part and parcel of African American letters in the United States since Phyllis Wheatley, the first published African American writer, in 1773. African American writers use their literary works to witness the particular—and often peculiar—experiences of their racialized subjectivities. In other words, the Black writer is constantly writing with an obligation—at times moral and ethical—to expose hegemonic

machinations with our culture and society and to affect social justice and political equity. As such, my study seeks to comprehend the often-paradoxical responsibilities of the Black writers to reflect the social-political currents driving our society and to, simultaneously, resist “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 1994). This study addresses the role of African American writers who subscribe to a grand and storied African American literary tradition, which views literary production as personal, political, and *pedagogical*. Simply, African American writers, often, see their literary productions as artistic endeavors and social justice projects.

Joe Kincheloe (2008) notes, “critical pedagogy—like knowledge in general—is shaped by those who devise them and the values they hold” (pp. 5–6). And though there is not unifying definition of critical pedagogy, most critical educators realize 1) that education and educational institutions are inherently political, social, and historical; 2) schools and education can be spaces that theorize but also act to alleviate human suffering; 3) critical pedagogues attempt to prevent violence against students; and 4) engage knowledge as a social construct (Kincheloe, 2008; McLaren, 2009). As Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2003) notes Giroux was among a coterie of scholars who pushed the ideological and theoretical boundaries critical theory and education to form a more cohesive set of concerns that would now be called critical pedagogy. Michael Apple, Maxine Green, bell hooks, Jean Anyon, among others, used their critical positionalities to present a diverse array of ideas that have continued to shape critical pedagogy. Many of these theorists and writers of the 1980s and 1990s were influenced by the work of Paulo Freire who would be credited with laying the foundations for critical pedagogy in his



seminal work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Paulo Freire (1970/2005) articulated some of the central tenets of critical pedagogy that focus on liberatory/emancipatory pedagogy, literacy, and praxis in an effort to bring about substantive change in the society in which he worked. He writes, “The pedagogy of the oppressed, animated by authentic, humanist (not humanitarian) generosity, presents itself as a pedagogy of humankind” (p. 54). Freire takes up a host of questions: How does one educate others for liberation? Indeed, what does it mean to be educated and/or liberated? How does hegemony and power influence our understanding of knowledge and knowledge production? Similarly, Barry Kanpol (1994) sees critical pedagogy as “a cultural-political tool that takes seriously the notion of human differences (race, class, and gender),” and as “a shared language of critique, struggle, and hope to end various forms of human suffering” (p. 27). Rooted in a dialectical view of knowledge, critical pedagogy seeks to support the dynamic interactive elements of the classroom and society, rather than participate in the formation of dichotomous or hegemonic thinking. To this end, critical pedagogues help students recognize the reality of a socially constructed world and society and the implications of (not) challenging this world and attempting to equip them with the tools (i.e. critical thinking, epistemological frameworks, knowledges, agency, etc.) to change these worldviews. Under these definitions and parameters, Morrison, Baldwin and Trethewey are critical pedagogues whose literary works function as “cultural-political tools” to aid marginalized people in ending their suffering and degradation.

### **Selection of Authors and Texts**

This study examines interviews, essays, and literary works of three writers and cultural critics of the 20th Century: Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Natasha Trethewey. There are three main reasons to focus on these specific writers: First, with a resurgence of racist and anti-Black violence in America, the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement, and more recent events in Charlottesville, Virginia, critical attention should be paid to writers who have discussed and predicted such violence. Morrison and Baldwin's work centralizes African American life and experience and the presence of racial violence that often shapes it. Second, while the scholarship on Morrison and Baldwin is quite voluminous, this study uniquely substantiates further examination as few studies examine or theorize about their pedagogical engagements and queer sensibilities. Though a nationally and internationally renowned poet, Trethewey inclusion in this project represents my attempt to leverage more clearly my own associations with poetics as both praxis and pedagogy. There are very few literary examinations of her poetry and no pedagogical studies. Thus, her inclusion also allows me to "break new ground." Finally, these authors work and worked as actual educators: Morrison at Princeton, Baldwin at University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Trethewey at Northwestern. The feasibility of this study rests in the choice of writers and in the genres of writing analyzed. For practical reasons, Toni Morrison is examined as novelist, James Baldwin as essayist, and Natasha Trethewey as poet. These specific genres are also three of the most commonly read genres in English studies classrooms. As such, critical pedagogues may

have a familiarity with the conventions and characteristics of each genre discussed in this project.

### **Significance of the Study**

Much like bell hooks' (1994) search for a *healing theory*, this project organically developed from a necessity to survive the educational apparatus, to challenge hegemonic political and social forces of that apparatus, and to locate myself in the curriculum utilized in English and critical pedagogy classrooms. I perceive these fields as potential locations of healing and reconciliation. Accordingly, the study is grounded by my educational passions and experiences and includes three specific orientations. First, my pedagogical imperative to become a professor is rooted in the idea of being the mentor and educator that I needed as an undergraduate student, essentially to become the type of teacher who attends to my students' spiritual, mental, physical, and intellectual well-being. Second, my own emotionality, including anger, also precipitated this project. I have yearned to see myself represented in the literature of my fields and disciplines. My educational experience has been one of erasure and invisibility, one in which my identities—Black and queer—were usually neglected pedagogically, in both curriculum and the professorate. Third, I have been a “witness and participant” in promoting hegemonic, traditionalist, morose English curriculum. Now, I wish to offer a portrait of the teacher as reader and to engage deeply with theories and praxes I have been, at times, both fascinated by and critical of for the past decade of my teaching career. Thus, this project engages what Rodriguez (2007) calls the “pedagogical search for theory” (p. 293).

### **Approaching Queer(ness): Critical and Theoretical Orientations**

For me, queer means radiant darkness, radical love, and a million and one ways to resist and decolonize. Queer is imbued with deep spirituality and sweetness. (Edward Ndopu, as cited in Hanno, 2013)

As Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth St. Pierre (2005) remind us, “Language is not the result of one’s individuality; rather, language constructs one’s subjectivity in ways that are historically and locally specific. What something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them” (p. 961). As I began this project, it was necessary to attend to the language of queer (ness), to imagine the possibilities that might yield the best results for this research endeavor, and to situate myself among a coterie of scholars who have utilized queer methodologies for both literary and critical pedagogical purposes. As Giffney and O’Rourke (2009) argue, “The minute you say ‘queer’ . . . you are necessarily calling into question exactly what you mean when you say it.” Even for the researcher, the definition of queer is not always known. Of course, this ability to slip the bonds of definition is due to queer’s strategic uncertainty and instability. It must necessarily remain so, to be fluid enough for any particular scholar’s uses. Queer(ness) refuses to be appropriate in ways that yield predispositions, and it refuses commodifiable coherence. Queer(ness) entreats us to consider new inventions, new ideas, new imaginations (Brim, 2014). Similarly, for researchers, as Harper, White and Cerullo note, “queer includes within it a necessarily expansive impulse that allows us to think about potential differences within that rubric” (as cited in Giffney & O’Rourke, 2009, p. 1). The following section discusses some theoretical underpinnings of my project, namely queer

theory and how it helps develop critical analytic reading strategies, followed by a discussion of how these queer ways of reading are additionally informed by rhetorical analysis and criticism.

Broadly, this study thinks about queerness as labor, oriented in three distinct ways: archive, assemblage, analytic. By using queer theory to read texts, the definitional possibilities of invoking queer ideologies and contemplations might be understood and conceptualized more clearly: namely, *queer circularities* (how queer theories move and circulate from project to project, from experience to experience) and *queer silences* which invite further investigation of subjugated experiences. Because queer theory extends from several locations (Browne & Nash, 2010, p.7) all at once, from various disciplines, theorist, and scholars, for often similar and yet disparate purposes, several initial definitions help approach queer(ness) as an analytic.

While the word queer often invokes notions of sexuality, to confine it to identity politics is reductive. “Queer has become the chosen term,” William Pinar (2009) believes, “for many who have come to be dissatisfied with what they perceive to be the assimilationist politics associated with the terms gay and lesbian” (p. 3). Ideologically, queer calls into question binary or rigid sexual identification. Marla Morris (1998) pragmatically describes queerness as having “three ingredients”: queer as subject position, queer as politic, and queer as aesthetic (p. 228). These ingredients seem to mirror Brandon Wint’s (2013) longing to be queer, “[n]ot queer like gay. Queer like escaping definition. Queer like some sort of fluidity and limitlessness at once. Queer like a freedom too strong to be conquered. Queer like the fearlessness to imagine what love

can look like . . . and pursue it” (para. 2). For him, queer theory and praxis possesses a liberatory turn, one that permits him to prioritize his own well-being in intimate and imaginative ways. For him, queerness gestures toward radical self-making in a capitalistic society bent on homogenizing its populace.

“Locating the elusive phantom of queerness” is difficult (Whitlock, 2010, p. 82), but the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) offers a very advantageous definition of queer, meaning “to pull out of order,” or essentially, to disorder. Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2006) attends to the directional aspect of queerness, noting that it is “what is ‘oblique’ or ‘off line’ [...] odd, bent, [and] twisted” (p. 161). This definition emphasizes the counter-hegemonic, anti-normative logics. Or, in other words, this delineation highlights queer’s tendency toward “social disorientation” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 162). We are left to ponder: “pulling what out of order?” and “pulling out of order to what end(s)?” These questions attempt to approach critical pedagogical theorizing and practices with an ethic of uncertainty, thus creating imaginative, spontaneous rupture. However, destabilizing normalcy is not enough. A criticality needs to attend to these possibilities as well. When the OED notes that ‘queer’ means to pull out of order, it is signaling queer as a disruptive, disorganizing agent, subject, or performance of hegemonic and normative structure symbols and institutions. For Judith Halberstam (2005), queer references “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (p. 6). The selection of definitions depends on the task or project of the scholar or communicator; and increasingly, queer is being called upon to do

some heavy theorizing, taking on an almost mythological status. These negative connotations have left queer theory with some malcontents.

For instance, within the field of African American Studies, Black queer theorists and scholars have been viewed as interlopers and agitators, shifting critical inquiry away from the field's "proper" and primary site of critique—race. For these traditionalists, queer theory is an additive property, something wholly unnecessary, and to a certain extent, a negation of "established" scholarship. The subversive nature of the queer project inspires a certain apprehension by some African Americanists and ire for those who claim its utility (Collins, 2016; Patton, 2012). Furthermore, a host of African American and other scholars of colors who have taken up the queer project *and* critiqued queer theory's lack of inclusivity and its central focus on white gay men (Cohen, 2005; Eng & Hom, 1999; Ferguson, 2004; Hammonds, 1994; Johnson & Henderson, 2005; Muñoz, 1999). Nevertheless, "queer" is not simply relegated to sexual identities; such a myopic view obscures ways in which queer theories destabilize categories of historical and social identities and transgress the lines between normal and abnormal.

Destabilizing normativity, queer theory's central project, cannot be achieved without an archive of materials and texts to be read and reread. The archive, in whatever forms it may exist for the researcher, represents hierarchies of power and knowledge and highlights materialist notions of experience and this is a prescient dilemma for the queer researcher. As Shane Vogel (2006) suggests, establishing queer narratives and sociality may prove too difficult for scholar-archival work. Simply, individuals and institutions control and surveil archives. Vogel warns, "The point is to take note of the limits of the

archive, narrowly conceived, for queer knowledge production and to recognize the many forms and unlikely places where residues of queer history and memory might settle” (p. 418). For the Black queer theorist and researcher, challenging normative notions of archive or disciplinarity (i.e., reading it) while arguing for more inclusivity in the archive is a given. They must necessarily be done simultaneously. To achieve this feat, I must challenge the language of inclusivity and disciplines.

Grappling with all these research complexities may require not just the examination of language, but a new vocabulary. As Christian (1988) believes, the archive is the language itself. As such, African American literary criticism and critical pedagogy are archives—texts, discourses, knowledges, and materials—that have failed to imagine epistemological and ontological *queernesses*, what Muñoz (1996) terms “an archive of queerness” (p. 6). Thus, reading archives queerly requires queer reading strategies. The need and desire to assemble a unique theory of reading is important because some of the circumstances in which African Americans write and theorize are not valorized by mainstream, dominant culture, including the academy. The implicit knowledge espoused in their work is often read as merely sociological or, worse still, as merely political. African American literary texts are sociological and political, surely. However, to relegate African American literature to these tracts alone marginalizes questions of human(istic) determination, spirit, and play. “For people of color have always theorized,” Christian (1988) writes,

—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs,



in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, and our very humanity? And women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pity language that unmasked the power relations of their world. It is the language, and the grace and pleasure with which they played with it, that I find celebrated, refined, critiqued in the works of writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory—through more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure that is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative. (p. 78)

This “race for theory” seems to be, in and of itself, an under-theorized aspect of African American literary and critical pedagogical discourses; and this project seeks to begin a dialogue about ways to address what can be seen as a major contradiction of both discourses.

For me, as well as Christian, special attention must be paid to the language’s dynamic features such as sensuality, form, and power relations. This agenda cannot be completed using traditional (read: hegemonic and patriarchal) epistemologies or methodologies. To discuss race without the pedagogical intricacies of sexuality, affection, and intimacy, all under the gaze of capitalistic constructs, seems trite. These aspects of “human experience” cannot be shuttled off into discrete disciplines or written about in discrete ways. To do so would diminish both the researcher and the subjectivities she wishes to highlight. Consequently, my project must also consider thematics of (il)legibility, perception, and normativity. The tendency to disjoint subjectivities into discrete parts, to objectify as it were, is a function of and serviceable tools for liberal multicultural and capitalistic agendas. To challenge these ubiquitous agendas, I turn to the conceptualization of queerness and queer reading strategies as an assemblage.

Until recently, intersectionality has been one of the main critical frameworks by which some feminist and queer scholars interpreted queer subjectivities and aesthetics. But I echo Jasbir Puar's (2007) warning about intersectionality and its attending frameworks, that it paradoxically requires the same type of reductive identity politics it tries to eschew. She writes,

Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification . . . (p. 212)

In other words, intersectionality as a concept has the potential to reproduce the oppression it seeks to escape. Rather, Puar (2007) believes that “an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency” (p. 212). Rather than focusing on the intersectional nature of race and sexuality, I explore how reading queerness might unsettle long-held (or withheld, in some cases) theorizations of Black people as pedagogical subjectivities.

### **Rhetorical Criticism as Educational Research Method**

Much has been written about the role of the dialectic in educational theory and philosophy (Greene, 1988; Gadotti, 1996; Glassman & Burbidge, 2014; Nelson & Stuart Palonsky, 2017). Aristotle famously asserted, “Rhetoric is the counterpart to the Dialectic” (*Rhetoric* I.1, 1354a1), insofar as neither is the purview a “special science” or discipline. To this end, a few educational studies have utilized rhetoric as an analytic, most offering rhetorical critiques of educational policy (Grumet, 1990; Levin & Young,

2000). And while the dialectic is concerned with many audience, rhetoric is concerned with communicating and disseminating knowledge to specific audiences. Thus, rhetoric seems particularly useful methodologically for examining the works of these African American writers, marginalized in distinct discourses, and specifically educational research. And rhetorical analyses of educational studies can move beyond policy critiques.

Critical rhetorical scholars examine a range of issues, such as authorial/audience engagement, public address, and culturally informed texts; and these concerns influence how and why I approach educational studies from this point of view. Moreover, I use a rhetorical analysis (informed by Black feminist/queer theories, pedagogies, methodologies) to understand not only key critical pedagogical concepts present in the literature, including the authors' main purposes, intents, and critical functions. Because rhetoric is nuanced, complex and understood on different ways (Kuypers & King, 2009, p. 10), my decision to use its attending methods is influenced by Cultural Foundations emphasis on interdisciplinary work. Defining rhetoric(s) can be as elusive as defining queer(ness). As Edwards et al. (2004) assert, "Writing about rhetoric is inevitably an impossible task. How is it possible to pin down what rhetoric is and do this without resorting to rhetoric?" (p. 1) Generally, rhetoric is defined as the art or strategy of persuasion. Communication scholar Sonja Foss (2009) defines rhetoric simply as "the human use of symbols to communicate" (p. 3). Likewise, rhetorical theorist Krista Ratcliffe (2003) defines rhetoric as "the study of how we use language and how language uses us."

Famously, Plato defined rhetoric as “the art of ruling the minds of men.” During different historical periods, rhetoric engaged both praxis and pedagogical implications of language and often required teachers to instruct students in various techniques and forms (Kennedy, 1999; Richards, 2008). Gesturing towards rhetoric’s pedagogical impulse, Lloyd Bitzer (1968) also sees rhetoric as “a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action” (p. 4). For Donald Cross Bryant, rhetoric also involves one of praxis. He writes, “[Rhetoric] does rather than is” (as cited in Kuypers & King, 2009, p. 8). Thus, rhetoric moves beyond the realm of mere epistemological concern and into one of praxis, a means of applying various knowledges. Rhetoric as artifact and analytic has the power to shape social discourses and realities. Articulating what he calls a “social-epistemic rhetoric,” James Berlin (1996), rhetorician and writing theorist, defines it as “the study and critique of signifying practices in their relation to subject formation within the framework of economic, social, and political conditions” (Berlin, 1996, p. 77). Surveying my chosen texts, Berlin’s social-epistemic rhetoric seems well-suited to describe and examine the ways African Americans use language to shape and produce their own subjectivity under socially, economically, and politically objectifying structures. “Without language to name our experience, we inevitably become instruments of the language of others” (Berlin, 1996, p. 101). Berlin (1996) refers to Stuart Hall’s argument that language belongs to no specific identity designation, social class, gender, sexuality, or race. Thus, the cultural meanings of any text are freely accommodated or contested from numerous ideological and identification

positions. As Berlin (1996) notes, rhetoric was not invented to better understand, rather its invention lies in its almost pathological need to persuade and “make their positions prevail in the conflicts of politics” (p. 83). In addition to more traditional Eurocentric ways of delineating and examining rhetoric, I turn toward rhetorical theory articulated by African American scholars.

As African American cultures originated as oral cultures, it is important to utilize theories that account for both oral and written communication and persuasion. English scholar Keith Gilyard (2007) notes that African American rhetorical scholars have a long tradition. Gilyard (2007) provides a historical sketch of African American rhetoric that moves beyond a discussion of linguistics and focuses on “scholars working taxonomically and employing rhetorical perspectives ranging from Aristotelian principles to Afrocentric conceptions . . . by those of African descent in the United States” (p. 2). Furthermore, Watts (2006) offers a brief overview of African American rhetorics and situates those in a tradition of resistance and resilience. He writes, “When one thinks about Black public speech, one must consider a cultural history wherein the very act of Black speaking (and writing) was subject to severe censure [...] to conceive of African-American rhetoric is to think first of all the ways that an American public tried to squash it.” He also argues that a history of racial violence precipitated this type of African-American rhetoric.

In a way, African American rhetorics employ certain aspects of traditional rhetorical gestures, such as argumentation, exigency, and rhetorical situation, but also incorporate and develop unique rhetorical gestures. Gilyard (2007) also notes the

importance of *Nommo*, which he defines as “the African belief in the persuasive, mystical, transformative, even life-giving power of the Word” (p. 12). Thus, he locates the origins of the African American rhetorical tradition in the nineteenth century, focusing on the oratorical practice of abolitionist and religious figures. Gilyard also references several authors and creative writers who engaged in oral and written forms of protest and resistance. Furthermore, Eric Watts (2006) links the African American rhetorical tradition to the essential aspects of “conjuring voice.” Although he does not term this conjuring as *Nommo*, he does invoke “a kind of black magic, hoodoo, or ‘conjure.’” Also, he explicitly moves the rhetorical tradition from its oratorical beginnings to literary production, noting the prominence of the Harlem Renaissance development of “race capital” as “a resource for African American rhetorical invention.” Because African Americans dared to speak of America’s moral failing and bankruptcy, Watts also notes how the implements of African American rhetors were developed under vicious censorship under local and federal governmental agencies, such as the FBI. Thus, speaking and writing became a matter of putting one’s “life on the line.” Many of these rhetors were prominent educators (i.e. Alexander Cromwell, Frances Jackson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Anna Julia Cooper, and others) and became some of the most vocal critics of American democracy, challenging nationalistic notions of liberty and equality.

Another aspect of African American rhetoric praxis involves the griot. In “The Griot: The Rhetorical Impetus of African American Fiction,” Atkinson (2011) discusses the West African concept of the griot, as a repository of tribal and communal culture. Like Gilyard, Atkinson focuses on the idea of *Nommo*, which he defines as a “Bantu term

that denotes the magical power of words to cause change.” While the griot is a performer, entertainer, and historian, she or he also serves as a counter-educational agent who works against the colonizing effects of traditional educational practices. The griot utilizes “nommo” as a uniquely African/American rhetorical trope, one that serves as the impetus for African/American literary productions. As Atkinson argues, the novelist, “engages the reader in the teller/listener dynamic that fashions unity and harmony from chaos and creates balance” from a troubled, violent past.” Indeed, as I read my authors for this study, I believe they are also engaging a Nommodic force to help their readers acknowledge, theorize about, and survive the social, political, and ideological traumas of life in the United States and the African diaspora.

Again, as I have stated, *What Moves at the Margins* draws on multiple theories including African American literary analysis, reader-response theory, and rhetoric to illustrate how my selected authors and their texts engage pedagogical thematics and sensibilities, as well as the ideology that guides their work, as creative writers and public intellectuals. Several genres of rhetorical analysis--cluster criticism, neo-Aristotelian criticisms, and metaphoric criticism—can be used to examine my chosen texts. I have selected ideological rhetoricians who build on the works of Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, such as Bartholomae (2004), Bizzell (1992), and Berlin (1996) and who specifically engage in social epistemic rhetorics. These critics look “beyond the surface structure of an artifact to discover the beliefs, values, and assumptions it suggests” (Foss, 2009, p. 209). “[I]deology is a pattern of beliefs” Foss (2009) argues, “that determines a group’s interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world. [...] The primary components of an

ideology are evaluative beliefs—beliefs about which there are possible alternative judgments” (Foss, 2009). Thus, an ideological critic seeks to discern not just the “grammars of a culture,” but also the ways and reasons these grammars go unacknowledged and/or unchallenged. “Because it structures our thoughts and controls our interpretations of reality, it is often beneath our awareness. It seems ‘natural,’ and it makes what we think and do seem ‘right.’ . . . ideology does not reside in things but ‘in a network of relationships which are systematically connected [and] exists in the practices of everyday life” (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2003, p. 152). Thus, art via storytelling, literature, and language become some of the chief transmitters of our everyday lived experiences and practices, and “seduces persons to see and to feel, to imagine, to lend their lives to another’s perspective” (Greene, 2000, p. 69). And writers and artists relay our quotidian lives in ways that provide profound insight into our spiritual strivings, our prevailing anxieties, and the interior of the mind, to name a few.

Sonja Foss (2009), feminist rhetorician, offers a four-step model for completing an ideological critique: “1) selecting an artifact; 2) analyzing the artifact; 3) formulating a research question; and 4) writing the essay” (p. 214). During step two, arguably the most crucial step, Foss asserts that the ideological critique coalesces into four distinct analytics for the chosen artifact (the text): “1) identifying the presented elements of the artifact; 2) identifying the suggested elements linked to the presented elements; 3) formulating an ideology; and 4) identifying the functions served by the ideology” (2009, p. 214). While Foss offers neat parameters for ideological rhetorical analysis, I anticipated my own variations and deviations and left room for my own critical articulations, frameworks, and



departures. Because I privilege queer orientations, I utilized Foss’s model of critique without being unnecessarily bound to its specific processes and methods. I appropriated and relied on all of these aforementioned rhetorical definitions, distinctions, and analytical methods as I moved forward with this project, attentive to the ways in which rhetoric—like queerness—“alters when alteration it finds.”

### **Notes Toward a Black Queer Poetics**

Purpel and Shapiro (1995) argue, that educators must nurture a “language of possibility” in order to prevent disillusionment and nihilism, and that the “sense of possibility—and hope—rests, in part, on the development of our capacity to dream, to image [sic] other kinds of lives and worlds” (p. 109). I took this call for nurturing the language of possibility seriously, as I sought to broaden my existing intellectual and theoretical vistas by developing queer reading strategies which I termed *Black queer poetics (BQP)*. As I have conceptualized and theorized *BQP*, it represents which simultaneously describes a set of literatures and a theoretical construct to read them. While I discuss the possibilities of designating and describing a set of literatures as BQP in the concluding chapter of this study; this inquiry is specifically concerned with BQP as an analytic, as a means of describing the ways it can be leveraged for interpretive and pedagogical purposes. To illustrate how Black queer poetics might make this pedagogical turn, this project turned a selection of literary texts, interviews, and essays by Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Natasha Trethewey. The literary works served as the primary site of inquiry. The interviews and essays provided insights about the writers’ methods, intentions, and purposes for their literary works. In each chapter, I performed

relatively the same method for approaching the text. Although each chapter's examination produced slight variations of an overarching pedagogical ideology, the basic structure of my method is as follows.

First, I performed a close reading of my selected texts, looking for and describing the writers' "major arguments, types of evidence, images, particular terms, or metaphors" (Foss, 2009, p. 214). Second, I followed this description with my thoughts about possible suggested elements such as "ideas, references, themes, allusions, or concepts" that are implied by the presented elements (Foss, 2009, p. 216). Third, to discover the ideology at work in these texts, I organized "major ideational clusters and themes" (Foss, 2009, p. 217) that spoke to a particular pedagogical ideology I termed *the critical pedagogical imagination*, the ways these texts and authors sustain teaching and learning, which I believe is implicit in the literary works of African American writers. Last, I examined how the critical pedagogical imagination functions for the readers (teachers and students) who encounter it and delineate the consequences it has for their social worlds (Foss, 2009, p. 220).

As the reader proceeds through my inquiry, please understand that though I have described my methods above, ultimately, my "method is everything and nothing much really" (A. Gordon, 2008, p. 24). As I have suggested thus far, my rhetorical methodology, critical orientations, and overarching theme of the margins and marginality coheres around what might be called a critical bricolage, employing a commitment to "multidisciplinary insight and theoretical dexterity" to help "gain a more rigorous (not in the positivistic sense) view of the world but also a new mode of researcher self-

awareness” (Kincheloe, 2008, pp. 4–5). Because of these texts and authors, this study *had* to remain open to an intuitive process, trying to see what was not-quite-there or not-yet-there. As such Black queer poetics emerged “a method attentive to what is elusive, fantastic, contingent, and often barely there” (A. Gordon, 2008, p. 26).

As marginal methodology, my deployment of Black queer poetics ultimately sought to disrupt normative pedagogies (critical, literary or otherwise), which “shadow[ed] and threaten[ed] to subvert the very authority that establishes disciplinary order” (A. Gordon, 2008, p. 26). As researcher and critical reader, I moved carefully to facilitate agency, intimacy, circulation, and even the erotic as I read against the disciplinary boundaries present and prescribed ways of seeing. Here I am following Erin Manning’s (2016) suggestion that “study is an act that delights in the activation of the as yet unthought . . . of *imminent* critique” (p. 12, emphasis hers). Thus, BQP, as both marginal discourse and work, is activist in nature. It is easy for those doing what they consider radical work to become in the ways in which that work gets taken up is also oppressive in other ways. In short, the seductive, altruistic work of activism can produce a type of inscrutability.

Even as I claimed Black queer poetics as a reading strategy, I tried to remain open to my own critical imaginings, open to liminal spaces that link imagination and critique (A. Gordon, 2008, p. 26). And while I wish to develop BQP, my own “rhetorical” reading of these texts, I do not want the reader to mistake this offering as a strict rubric, but rather as a cursory invitation to explore the bountiful lessons of all literature. My reading strategies offer my unique perceptions, interpretations, and intuitions of these texts from

Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Natasha Trethewey. And no analytic lenses are suitable for every reader. But, as I have encouraged my students to do, I expect readers to develop their own ways of reading that incorporates their own aims, experiences, and positionalities, even if my framework serves as a point of departure. My own positionalities, reading strategies, and selection of texts (and subsequent contexts) provide me with my own unique vista from which to explore new terrain and landscapes. Embracing the lenses of marginality, deep reflexivity, and uncertainty, I proceeded with the study; and some defining characteristics and features of Black queer poetics were presented:

1. *Ethic of Refusal*. BQP refuses discrete categorization, either as pedagogy or analytic or curriculum. Necessarily, I think BQP does the work of all three simultaneously. Additionally, while I draw upon Morris' (1998) categorizations of queer(ness) as sexual subjectivity, politic, and aesthetic, I intend to articulate what might be called a "queer ethic or ethos" as a part of my consideration of rhetoric. The refusal to be categorized or to settle on binary ways of knowing or reading is at the core of my entire inquiry. My use of the ethic of refusal moves beyond mundane notions of resistance and highlights my meaningful acknowledgement of margins, to refuse encapsulation, both literal and metaphorical. My unconventional and unruly reading of Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, for example, exemplifies this queer ethic of refusal.

2. *Participatory Readership*. Toni Morrison expresses her desire, “My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do...My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it” (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 164). The positionality of the reader matters greatly and colors how and why the text is consumed or consulted. Additionally, a participatory readership requires an attention to relational interpretation, that the interpretation cannot be achieved without the unique experiences and epistemologies of a particular reader. Participatory readership offers the reader an opportunity to co-create with the author, to think carefully about the truths that are revealed when we meld the consciousness and contexts of the author with our own. “[The] pedagogical challenge,” Dennis Carlson (2012) tells us, “is to help students become more aware of their own interpretive frames in interaction with the interpretive frames of the author” (p. 264). In other words, educators seek to reveal how and why our reading practices are socially performative, often betraying the normative and hegemonic literacies we have been given by our societies and communities.
3. *Critical literacy*. Critical literacy is one of the most important aspects of critical pedagogy and involves reading of alterity (Britzman, 1998), reading for critical consciousness (Kincheloe, 2008), and reading for the recognition of power relations and struggles (Freire, 1970/2005). Ira Shor (1999) argues that critical literacy is serviceable insofar as it helps both students and teachers redefine themselves and society “through *alternative rhetoric* [emphasis

added] and dissident projects” (p. 1). Thus, for Shor, critical literacy is about “questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane” (p. 1) and prepares educators and students alike for social justice, social action, and social knowledges. Thus, literacy should be more than a function of industry and citizenry; students need to be able to read texts, but also read their world as a text as well, one with author’s who have purposes, etc. (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Critical literacy also prepares students to engage in critical question posing about absences, including questions about not only who is doing the teaching, but just what is being taught (Morrell, 2008). This modality of reading is figured as preferable than a neoliberal utilitarian literacy that is “geared to make adults more productive workers and citizens within a given society” (Giroux as quote by Macedo, 2006, p. 18). For my understanding of James Baldwin’s pedagogy, the notion of critical literacy became a crucial component as I struggled with his considerations of the utilities of language—both hegemonic and queer.

4. *Ephemera as Evidence*. In “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” Muñoz (1996) questions the notion of evidence and the challenges of establishing a queer archive. He writes, “Queerness is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that

are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.’ (Muñoz, 1996, 6). While Muñoz’s queer and queerness primarily refers to subjectivity, his framework affords me ways to search for “queer evidence” in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977). Furthermore, Muñoz’s ideas about ephemera also rely on Raymond Williams’ “structures of feeling” that “explains the ways in which art conveys, translates, and engenders structures of feelings” (p. 10). In other words, ephemera as evidence moves beyond what has been forgotten, lost, or allowed to lapse into obsolescence. Ephemera as evidence emerges as an intuitive and counter-hegemonic method.

5. *Critical Imagination*. Because of my critical orientations, Black queer poetics possesses rhetorical characteristics. I want to utilize Jacqueline Jones Royster’s (2000) theory of critical imagination that she articulates in *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change*. As a Black feminist rhetorical scholar, Royster uses critical imagination not only as a theory but also as a mode of analysis to speculate about her rhetorical subjects. I am interested in Royster’s reconceptualization of her notion of critical imagination, which she utilizes to remake interpretive frameworks based on critical questioning and knowledge-making. In other words, literature often becomes “a critical space where scholarship and imagination meet” (Royster, 2000, p. 83). The notion of critical imagination provides a use analytic to imagine the inner lives and

creative aims of my writers, especially James Baldwin. In this way, critical imagination is similar to “ephemera as evidence” in that it becomes crucial for readers and researchers to cultivate “the ability to see the possibility of certain experiences even if we cannot know the specificity of them” (p. 83) and becomes paramount in questioning ones’ own viewpoints and positionalities. These critical skill is useful to any examination of literature, of course, but even more important to my inquiry of all three authors. My ability as reader to see and imagine the lives of Morrison’s fictional characters, the historical narratives in the essays of Baldwin, or the poetic history-telling in Trethewey’s work is more than reading strategy. It also comprises a vital communal happening at play in the work of marginalized and non-canonical literary artists.

6. *Chrono-epistemology*. My particular reading strategies also engage spatiotemporal rubrics and a chrono-epistemology called Sankofa, a concept from the Akan tribe in Ghana. Both Frances Smith Foster (2010) and Mulana Karenga (2006) emphasize the pedagogical imperative of the ancient Akan concept “We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we can understand why and how we came to be who we are today” (p. xvii). Like many other African American scholars, I read Sankofa as a moment of critical return, a reading and knowing across space and time, that make current predicaments and particularities legible while also (de)stabilizing and casting temporal reckoning upon the present. While I note the chrono-epistemological



nature of poetry in my examination of Natasha Trethewey's work, the criticality of time and temporality also implicitly figures in my look at Morrison and Baldwin.

Again, I wish to emphasize that these are my reading strategies—my theoretical and ideological lenses to see if the pedagogical sensibilities and impulses I have preliminarily perceived, in these writers' works, are indeed evidential. These reading strategies are my attempt to use my language and knowledge to construct my own world, to contour it in ways I understand (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Ultimately BQP, like Toni Morrison's *American Africanism*, makes "it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom" (Morrison, 1993, p. 7). I believe this framework can be used to analyze numerous African American literary works. Not only does Black queer poetics locate me within a theoretical tradition of African American literary criticism and rhetorical analysis, but it also allows me an opportunity to more inclusively shape the critical pedagogical tradition.

### **Organization of Inquiry**

*What Moves at the Margins* is organized into five chapters. The introduction, "In Search of a Critical Pedagogical Imagination: Interdisciplinarity and Black Queer Rootedness," focused on framing the study and why I believe this topic is important and significant to critical pedagogy. While the notion of queerness and rootedness presented a paradox, queer methodologies and strategies start somewhere. I am obliged to contend

with “resources of the old language, the language we already possess and which possess us” (Spivak, as quoted in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961). To this end, I outlined preliminarily what I found as I queerly read the works of Morrison, Baldwin, and Trethewey. Using traditional rhetorical and literary methods of interpretation, I developed a critical reading strategy called *Black queer poetics*. This queer reading framework entailed a pedagogical imperative that seeks to educate the reader (and the writer) in the ways to disrupt normative-hegemonic forces within our cultures, including our educational institutions. Specifically, my intention was to illustrate the value and potentiality of literature, specifically African American literature, to articulate certain critical pedagogical imperatives—namely, critical literacy, inter/transdisciplinarity, critical imagination, and decolonization. Following these concerns, I attend to questions about the necessity for new reading strategies and why these approaches might provide an intervention in critical pedagogical and English studies.

In Chapter II, “Shifting Intimacies: Queering Love and Friendships in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*,” I discuss Morrison’s critically acclaimed novel *Song of Solomon* and the pedagogical importance of love and male friendships in the African American community. This chapter looked closely at how Morrison developed the characters Milkman and his best friend, Guitar Baines. This discussion included considerations of queer subjectivities beyond sexual identity and takes up critical imagination and intuition as reading strategies. Central to my analysis was the notion of love as connective theme, disorientation, and queer(ly) directional(ity) and desire lines (Ahmed, 2006, p. 19). Additionally, my examination of this novel culminates in a queer

reading of the pinnacle of the novel, Milkman's flight at Solomon's Leap, a unique pedagogical moment in African American literature.

Chapter III, "Evidence of Things Not Seen": The Queer Rhetorics and Public Pedagogies of James Baldwin," seeks to study the tradition of the African American public intellectualism as it relates to "epistemic colonization" (L. R. Gordon, 2006, p. 31) and as well as educational aspects of decolonization (Tuck & Yang, 2012, 2014). Baldwin (2011) asserts that for Black people to get an education in America is to risk schizophrenia. While provocative and seemingly hyperbolic, his statement represents certain lived-experiences, realities, and material conditions some African American students often struggle to articulate about our educational institutions. The dis-ease and mentally disabling apparatus of schools (often state-sponsored) can perhaps be contended or mitigated with art, including creative writing, both its production and consumption. Additionally, I analyze James Baldwin's literary contributions to my thinking about critical pedagogy and my own educational process.

In Chapter IV, "How the Past Comes Back": Black Pedagogical Temporalities and Chronotoping in the Poetics of Natasha Trethewey," I examined Trethewey's poem "Theories of Time and Space" as a treatise on the pedagogical potential of time and poetry itself. Additionally, this chapter seeks to discuss how Trethewey, who identifies as "biracial," employs concepts of queer time to establish new spacio-temporal iterations of race and gender in the American hemisphere. Here, I posit that discourses about gender, sexuality, able-bodiness, and race, particularly mixed raced Americans are closely tethered to Trethewey's own poetic-pedagogical impulse. To afford the reader a moment

to reflect and evaluate her insights about her own spatiotemporal embodiment and substantive critical ruptures as a mixed race American, Trethewey engages a type of historical poetics that articulates critical imagination and memory to move temporal experiences and events from the periphery to center.

In Chapter V, “Queer Circularities: Black Writers, History and the Critical Pedagogical Imagination” I summarize my approaches to my examined writers while putting them in conversation with one another. I also fleshed out Black queer poetics and teased out nuances that had not been readily presented at the outset of this project. Notably, I discussed how Morrison, Baldwin, and Trethewey perform historiography, as they write through the racialized realities of Black people in the United States. This examination speaks more hopefully to my yearning for new ways to think about teaching African American literature in our current times.

In the concluding chapter, “Undetermined Discourses: (Re)Locating Pedagogical Frameworks for Black Queer Poetics,” I discuss Black queer poetics as an assemblage able to expand and supplement the critical pedagogical archive. Thus, this chapter also focused on how Black queer poetics might illuminate the futurity of education. Moreover, I ruminate about the extent to which critical pedagogues might imagine and achieve critical pedagogical aims and how the curriculums of (Black) queerness can help achieve this goal. Finally, while acknowledging the chrono-epistemologies of the past and the present, I gesture toward new queer pedagogical horizons that conjure contextualized futurities for African American writers, their texts, and their societies and communities for which they write.

### **Sensuous Scholarship as Critical Marginalia**

*What Moves at the Margins* enacts a “sensuous scholarship,” which is “ultimately a mixing of head and heart . . . an opening of one’s being to the world—a welcoming. Such embodied hospitality is the secret of the great scholars, painters, poets, and filmmakers whose images and words resensualize us” (Stoller, 1997, p. xx). While embracing the sensuality of my research, I must also be attentive to the ways my positionality influences my project. In short, I must engage in a “strong reflexivity” (Spencer, as cited in Mason, 2017, p. 242), recognizing that my own voice, language, “epistemological privileges” (p. 193), and life events help shape what I see/read and how I interpret what I see/read. A few questions arise: Did I choose African American texts because I am African American? If I did, is there anything wrong or “invalidating” about that selection? What agendas, if any, can be clarified—and not apologized for—in my selection of these texts? While I certainly believe in the influence of my subjectivity on my research, I must remain careful not to foreclose discussions about exactly that means and how it has shaped my epistemological viewpoints as an interdisciplinary researcher and educator.

Additionally, because marginality, at its core, is a potential discourse of spatiality this project is indebted to and closely aligned with literatures in the humanities and educational discourses, across philosophical and theoretical orientations and identifications, some of which inhabit or exemplify the margins of their respective disciplines. As Roland Barthes suggests, interdisciplinarity is less about confronting established, deeply entrenched disciplines or coalescing those disciplines around the

theme or subject. Interdisciplinarity, he insists, creates “a new object that belongs to no one” (as quoted in A. Gordon, 2008, p. 7). This principle is at work in *What Moves at the Margins*. Drawing from several disciplines and their attending methods allows me to assemble a new way of looking at what remains elusive in those disparate disciplines, provides with an entrance to an unconventional mode of inquiry, and allows me to establish a new reading strategy. But what of the old ways of reading, one may ask? While useful, they are inadequate, meaning they failed to open the literature I examined fully to my own imagination. As A. Gordon (2008) puts it, “the available critical vocabularies [failed] to communicate the depth, density, and intricacies” (p. 8) of the margins or marginal experiences and discourses. In other words, my interdisciplinarity, methods, analytics, assumptions, approaches were a pragmatic choice, if albeit undisciplined (thus risking in legibility). Or as Manning (2016) suggests, what I employ in this inquiry is a “speculative pragmatism” (p. 41). What follows is my attempt to understanding the interstices of knowing, experience, and learning at the margins.

That my research interests and pedagogies engage the notion of critical marginalia, working at (and around) the margins of my academy, society, and culture, can certainly be attributed to my embodied position as a Black queer man who has spent a great portion of my life wishing to be at the center of my society and culture rather than being relegated to the periphery. Because of my positionality, I have spent equal amounts of time thinking about why I feel (or indeed, felt) I was at the margins, thinking about who socialized me to perceive that was my place (in life and society), and thinking about why I desperately wanted to escape the doldrums of the margins. So much of my

formative years were spent lamenting my so-called *marginal condition* that I have not spent nearly enough appreciating exactly what this meant to me and those around me. But early in my academic life, through language and literature, I slowly began to realize that the margins were a blessed place that could (and often did) provide the benefit of learning to survive despite my circumstances.

As an educational specialist in writing studies and composition, I have deeply thought about the aims and purposes of the writing act and how writing aids my pedagogical ends, and how story-telling speaks to the one of the most unique human impulses. I have firsthand experience of the potential of literature to change lives. The educational promise of engaging and studying literature cannot be underestimated or reduce simply to an academic endeavor—there are personal ramifications. Roberts (2014) argues that much can be learned from novelists, including the “[the] reflective consciousness that lies at the heart of suffering,” more complex and humanizing characters at the margins of society, and an abiding appreciating of hope and life-long learning (Roberts, pp. 372–373). Without the hyperbolizing, I can attest to students’ statements about how a particular article, essay, short story, poem, or novel changed their lives. Additionally, the theories and philosophies imbedded in these texts have an equally transformative effect on students. These transformative moments, whether fleeting or more enduring, have never occurred without deep thinking and critical imagination that allows a reader to see beyond the present moment. Subsequently, this transformation carries a temporal ideology that may be overlooked by critical pedagogues.

My engagement with literature has always been a primarily a pedagogical one. Like my students, I can also attest to the life-altering have been able to attest, I do not exaggerate when I assert that literature saved my life. I chose a professional life in letters because I felt that if these texts had the ability to help me figure out “life,” to help solve the major conflicts and issues of my life. Literature offers the possibility to do this. As Morrell and Scherff (2015) intimate,

The world needs independent, free-thinking, open-minded intellectuals who can come together across multiple lines of difference to collect, process, and produce information that will help solve some help solve the most challenging problems of our time, and no discipline is more important in shaping this kind of citizen than English. (p. xii)

Indeed, to help students hone those critical thinking and critical solution skills and to analyze novels in a more personal way, I have developed a question that simultaneously inspires students to struggle with interpretation but also critical-consciousness-raising possibilities of a novel: “What is the writer trying to teach you about your world that you *don't* already know?” This question’s self-reflexive nature is a queer one. This question invites students to become active participants in their own education. It also seeks to provide a paradigm that situates literature as running commentary and dialogue not only on society and communities as a whole but also on individual lives. Simply, the question invites students to individually contextualize texts, and then again in more expansive ways.

From this more expansive vantage point, this study serves as conceptual interpretations of the marginalia of critical pedagogies and arises from observations and



ruminating begun during my Ph.D. studies. Implicitly, this study challenged critical pedagogy's inclusiveness, especially around issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Historically, African American experiences have included ways we have struggled to educate ourselves despite systemic structures, ranging from enacted "laws of the land" to outright violence, designed to prevent that endeavor. Whether informal or formal, education and literacy appeared as a means of liberation, both communally and individually. Whereas Critical Race Theory/Pedagogy remains, perhaps, of one the most popular racialized critiques and analyses of educational institutions and enterprises (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006), my articulation, *Black queer poetics*, as a critical framework, functions to make the margins of the critical pedagogical archive more legible. And while my writing incorporates my own ideological quandaries about education and schooling, I am not this study's singular audience. There are no requirements of racial or queer identity categories to understand the idiosyncrasies of my analytic or to understand the possible interpretations and ways of re-imagining literature as a means of developing emancipatory thinking and education. So much scholarship has amassed around queer theory and its benefits to educational philosophy, theory, and pedagogy. I benefit from this scholarship and it affords me an opportunity to extend this scholarship by applying the lenses of the racialized subject. Thus, a rhetorical analysis, then, of the theoretical relevance and pedagogical possibilities of the interstices of Black queer critique, critical pedagogy, and African American literature is what I offer in the study that follows.

## CHAPTER II

### SHIFTING INTIMACIES: QUEERING LOVE AND FRIENDSHIPS IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book—leaving the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, a little ambiguity. I detest and loathe [those categories]. I think it's a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things. (Jaffery, 2008, p. 140)

As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components--race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion--are separable analytic and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency. (Puar, 2007, p. 212)

#### Black Queer Studies and Public Discourse

Some years ago, I found myself—quite bizarrely and absurdly—in a very public skirmish with a fellow academic about the very existence of Black queer folks in the larger African American community. It was the Second Annual “Dialogue on Progressive Enlightenment” Conference held at North Carolina A&T State University, and I had been invited to speak at the conference in order “to expand beyond the Afrocentric scholarship normally presented.” The tone of the invitation seemed curiously worded, but I did not inquire further about what exactly that meant. Simply, I believed I was invited because my research interests in Black queer studies was indeed “progressive,” especially for African American research. During that time, I taught a class titled “Black Masculinity.”

It was one of the most popular course offerings of the African American Studies program. In that course, I challenged hegemonic and patriarchal views of gender identity and troubled traditional notions Black masculinity.

For example, we began by situating Black masculine performance as iterations or responses to a host of social practices and mores encountered during the institution of American chattel slavery. Given the time constraints of the semester we initiated our analysis with foundational African American literary texts, specifically the slave narrative. Frederick Douglass (1845) and other formerly enslaved narrators provided the necessary context for our contemporary understanding of who Black men were and the genesis and impact of ideological “traps” such as racism, sexism, and homophobia (Bryd, 2001, p. 2) within Black masculine cultures. Specifically, Douglass explicitly articulated his understanding of manhood as a possession and implicitly gestured toward manhood as performative. For Douglass and many other male slave narrators, their manhood was contingent upon their freedom, a dangerous iteration of one’s racialized gender. While his social leadership and political acumen became the model for the quintessential Race Man (Carby, 1998, p. 40), we cannot risk universalizing his experience as an enslaved person in general or as a Black man in particular. Even more specifically, I used Douglass’s narrative as well as Harriet Jacobs’s (1837) to note the precarious sexual abuses of enslaved Black men, a topic that is still unmentionable and unthinkable for many scholars and students alike.

Admittedly, I expected some push back from some of the participants because Black queer studies and culture remains a taboo subject, well into the 21st century. For

my presentation, I talked about how the reclamation of Black queer culture could inform an over-arching liberatory praxis for all Black folk. I argued, like Essex Hemphill (1992/2000) over 30 years before, that it was important to know who people loved because it informed his or her work as much as their geography or race. I explained that Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, was correct in his assessment that “maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary” in our society (as quoted in Byrd & Guy-Sheftall, 2001, p. 282). I wanted the audience to understand how Manning Marable’s (2011) revelatory, yet ephemeral, evidence that Malcolm X was a bisexual sex worker during his latter teenage years in Boston further contextualized Malcolm X’s activist positionality, that this fact further humanized, instead of detracted, from his legacy (p. 78). My efforts were for naught, as I was met with sneers, ugly looks, and open hostility.

In many ways, this study is indebted to this very painful, public discourse on Black queer studies. Since then, my intellectual pursuits have turned primarily to Black queer literature. Thus, this chapter continues building on my specific critical theory and method of Black queer poetics. This critical project seeks to fill ideological and critical gaps, utilizing several methodologies and reading strategies that draw from several disciplines such as literary, queer, and feminist theories to perform a unique reading of Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977). I do not rely only a queer subjective critique but expand it to include aesthetic and politics thereby opening Morrison’s work and the works by other African American writers who are rarely thought of as directly engaging in queer subjects.

The characters in Morrison's text are queer and despite Morrison's reputation for writing stilted queer characters, her works and characters, both in aesthetic and subjectivity, challenge the stereotypically drawn Black queer people. For instance, in her most famous novel, *Beloved*, Morrison (2004) draws a portrait of a mother who goes to extraordinary lengths to protect her children, she would rather kill them rather than have them bear the licentious nature of her old slave master, Schoolteacher. If the decision is unthinkable, then the act of infanticide is unforgivable. And here, Morrison further challenges our notions of the Black community as one of harmony and care. After this heinous act, the men and women of Sethe's community shun her.

Most scholars who examine at sexuality and queerness in African American literature have grossly overlooked Morrison's literary style and performance as a Black queer discursive intervention. Morrison's work provides an excellent vista from which to think about the critical pedagogical interventions at play in African American texts because her works provide "an insurgent act of cultural translation" for both her community and the wider American society (Bhabha, 1994, p. 7). Susan Searls (1996) offers a reading of three Morrison novels as proposals for counter-pedagogy and critique against white supremacist ideology inculcated not only in popular culture but also in schools. She notes that Morrison's novels address "how identities get shaped in relation to a variety of public spheres—in schools, in higher education, in the mass media, in church—in all those places where knowledge is produced and deployed pedagogically" (pp. 193–194). After establishing reading strategy that accounts for W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness, Searls examines *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved*

(2004) as particular sites of epistemological inquiry, including elementary and post-secondary schools. Roberts (2014) offers a similar critique of the Fyodor Dostoevsky. Whereas Roberts believes Dostoevsky promotes education through suffering, Morrison is concerned with the elevation of suffering and thus liberation as an educative moment. Her characters suffer, for sure. But, I do not think their education is borne from this specific type of adversity.

First, a brief framing of Black queer poetics, as a method and reading strategy is needed. Second, Morrison's notions of queerness by reading her non-fiction such as speeches, interviews, and essays are examined. And, though her nonfiction centers on race, queer theory opens her words up to "concrete possibility for another world" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). Finally, queer reading of Morrison third novel, *Song of Solomon* is provided with the main two characters, Milkman and his best friend, Guitar Baines. Morris' rubric of queer as subject position/subjectivity is also considered not only *Song of Solomon's* main character, Milkman queer, but his queerness can be used as a means to engage queer temporality and space. Milkman's queerness necessitates a "reverse migration" in the narrative, a Sankofa moment. This reverse migration illustrates his experiential education, informed by his queer self-making.

### **Invisible Ink: Toni Morrison and Black Queer Poetics**

Morrison's novels offer models and strategies for Black liberation and resist what bell hooks names, "the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" and its gaze (hooks, 2003, p. xi). For African American writers, a part of that liberating project includes obliterating normative notions of race, gender, and class. For Morrison

this work is both a privilege and politically charged. In her Nobel Acceptance Lecture, she defines her use of language, “Word-work is sublime, she thinks, because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference—the way in which we are like no other life” (Morrison, 2008, p. 203). These differences are gendered, embodied, and sexualized, raced and are rich with ancestry and cultural memory. But she also argues that the State uses language, as well, to exploit those differences and to abuse its citizens and to marginalize them through scientific and social articulations. Thus, her work addresses concepts of (in)visibility, a major trope of queer studies. And though some work of the writer is visible and evident, some work is not. That is, while Morrison’s texts are vigorously critiqued as treatises of race, she also making statements about queerness and its radical politics and personal potentialities.

Juda Bennett (2014) asserts that Morrison has always questioned sexual and gender orthodoxies in her work, including three specifically sexually queer characters from her novels *Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008). Additionally, his readings of Morrison and her work make room for an arc of progressive thinking over time. Toni Morrison is often criticized among some African American literary scholars for a lack of fully complex queer characters, most notably by Charles Nero’s (1991) essay “Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature” “For instance, in her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, Soaphead Church, appears as a sadistic homosexual who recognizes and understands Pecola Breedlove’s abuse and chooses to further traumatize her. Specifically, Pecola comes to him in search of her blue eyes. He is known in the community as conjurer and mystic. He promises to magically secure those eyes if she can

give an annoying dog poisoned meat. Pecola unwittingly gives the dog the meat but has no idea of the consequences for the dog. She witnesses the dog's horrific death and looks on helplessly as it writhes in pain, thrashing, and foaming at the mouth. Pecola Breedlove's trauma is exacerbated by Soaphead Church's failed promise. What is even more problematic about Soaphead Church's treachery is associated with latent homosexual desire. In her most famous and critically acclaimed novel, *Beloved*, Morrison writes of another incendiary scenario. When Sethe arrives at Sweet Home, a plantation in Kentucky, she is granted the "privilege" of choosing her mate and husband. The men of Sweet Home want to be chosen and see her choice as a particular grace given the forced coupling that was commonplace during the American slavery regime.

Notably, Nero (1991) takes umbrage with Morrison's choice to play up their intense sexual urges, which culminates with bestiality. The implications of this construct are clear, as Morrison notes they succumbed to one of two options: masturbation or bestiality. In other words, same-sex relations are not even an option, which struck some Black queer people and scholars as unimaginable. And for this reason, Bennett (2014) reads the earlier novels against her later ones to highlight Morrison's textual evolution on sexual queerness (Bennett, 2014, p. 12). Curiously, Bennett's offering is the first full-length queering of Morrison's work. Because Morrison's work resonates on multiple levels, and in various ways, she and her work get taken up by competing groups that can be often "be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable" despite "shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).



### Queering Morrison: The Language of Possibility

As Bennett (2010) suggests, Morrison's work has been "exhaustively considered" from almost every conceivable theme and scholarly position, including Africanist, feminist, new historicist, and other approaches. He writes,

It is, therefore, surprising that there has been no monograph that queers Morrison despite the early promise of Barbara Smith's queer reading of *Sula* in 1977 and the exciting recent work done by Kathryn Bond Stockton on *Sula* and *Beloved*. In more than three decades of active scholarly criticism on *Beloved*, there have been many provocative readings of gender and sexuality, but they frequently stop painfully short of queering the text. Why? (p. 10)

Taking up Black queer poetics here as an ethic of refusal, I, too, am curious about the lack of critical work that queers Morrison's work, especially given her own aims to consciously transgress hegemonic literary distinctions, tropes, and gazes. Toni Morrison's work is too deliberately transformative and subversive to refuse queer readings. "A queer reading of a text," Morris (1998) suggests, "uncovers the possibility of the texts radical political potential" and engages a discursive politic and aesthetic that challenges and resists normative spaces, knowledges, and discourses (p. 228). Morrison's queer sensibilities may be illuminated with foundation queer theories, but they can also be aligned with her philosophy of language and her texts, themselves, which often lead "the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, a little ambiguity . . . and opening doors to all sorts of things" (Morrison & Denard, 2008, p. 141). Thus, Morrison's readings open themselves rhizomatically, leading to various and ever-expanding connections to numerous themes and approaches including queerness.

For several decades, starting in 1993, with the publication of *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison has tried to show how the absence of Black people in mainstream, white literature constitutes anathema to the “national” identity, that it was impossible to write about and shore up white identity without the serviceability of Black subjectivities. She also notes this absence in the academy as well. As she explains,

We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily “not-there”; that a void may be empty but not be a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose . . . (Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” 1988, p. 136)

This “opening door” to “all sorts of things” then is Morrison’s rendering of the elusive Black presence as an elusive queer presence. Here, I modulate Morrison’s own analysis to argue for queerness in her work. Using Black queer poetics as process, an ethics of refusal asks me to move beyond a “resistant” reading, and rather substantiate why Morrison’s work has been taken up in particular ways. As I read for power dynamics and power struggle, it occurs to me that the glaring, overt absence of queer characters in her early work (particularly) may be intentional if not complicit with Black nationalist and patriarchal constructs of the Black community. If “literary whiteness” buttresses the oppressive social order of the United States, then perhaps a “literary heteronormativity” buttress the social order of Black community. And just as Morrison urges literary scholars to examine the coded and scripted racial discourses, I want to examine coded queer discourse in African American literature. Additionally, my choice to rhetorically read Morrison’s perceived lack of unproblematic and controversial queer characters and

themes relies on Morrison's own stated aims for the African American writing tradition, the suggestive and generative performances of African American language, and her authorial demands for a participatory readership. Morrison assumes that the reader will work collaboratively with her to convey local and global meanings.

Just because certain meanings are not presented on the surface does not mean as Morrison says it is "not there." Several theories are needed to assemble a critical/conceptual framework that Black queer poetics. While these theories inform my over-arching framework, I am indebted to Barbara Smith's (1977/1994) reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula* for my reading of queerness in *Song of Solomon*. Her seminal essay, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," represents the first queer reading of Morrison's work, one that attends to subjectivity as well as aesthetic. Smith reads *Sula* as "an exceedingly lesbian novel in the emotions expressed, in the definition of female character, and in the way that the politics of heterosexuality are portrayed" (p. 422). Her analysis draws from (at that time) fledgling Black feminist research as a means to develop a Black feminist criticism.

### **The Language Must Not Sweat: Queering *Song of Solomon***

Published in 1977, *Song of Solomon* catalogs the life of an awkward young boy who discovers through lore and love what it means to be a man. Born to a demure mother and tyrannical father, Macon Dead III (later nicknamed Milkman) spends his life wandering aimlessly around an unnamed Michigan town. His father, who has had a difficult childhood, provides his family with a thoroughly comfortable upper-middle class life. Their family higher socio-economic serves to only highlight the rabid poverty in the

Blood Bank, the black section of the town. The Deads are a proud family, whose money dulls their sense of self. But this changes when Milkman meets two people Guitar Baines and Pilate Dead, Milkman's aunt. Between the two, Milkman begins to learn about personal responsibility. Milkman eventually outgrows the limits of his town and goes on a journey to learn about his heritage and to right the wrongs of his family's past and generational wounding. Pedagogically, in the roman a' clef, or coming of age story, characters are meant to learn more about him/herself by the end of the novel, to arrive at some understanding about the world they did not possess at the beginning. *Song of Solomon* is no exception. Though the themes of fragmentation and reclamation are replete in the novel, they are seemingly always tied to notions of love and affection, which Morrison deeply embeds in the dialogue and narration throughout the text. As such, allow for a queering of *Song* are in action here: (1) the various roles and definitions of love, (2) the workings of directionality and disorientation, and (3) the relationship between Milkman and Guitar and its possible meanings. Using my analytic to examine these concepts, I extend Morrison's notions of erasure and the power of Africanisms to concept and reality of queerness.

**Song of Solomon as An Assemblage of Love Letters: The Rhetoric of Love as  
Central Connective Theme**

Bennett (2014) notes that Morrison has devoted herself to "considering the limits of love," using tropes such as queerness "to express those limits or, rather, the erasure of those limits" (p. 12). While queer subjectivities are less prominent in Morrison's novels, what is evident are her almost obsessive constructs of (queer) love. For Morrison,

authentic, heart-felt love is usually associated with blood sacrifice, sometimes a life, sometimes a limb, and sometimes a child. In *Jazz* (1992), the lovelorn Joe tracks Dorcas, his girlfriend, to a loud and lively Harlem rent party and shoots her. She has carelessly insulted his virility and age. So when her friends discover her bleeding to death in another room, they ask her who has shot her. She will not answer, which helps her former lover to escape persecution and prosecution. In *Sula* (1973), struggling to feed and clothe her children, Eva, a demoralized and dejected mother, decides that their poverty is too much for her children to bare. She leaves home and comes back with only one leg. It is speculated by the community that she put her leg on the railroad tracks and allows it to be severed in order to collect insurance money. Later in the novel, after witnessing the psychic damage of war of her son Plum, she decides to “put him out of his misery.” She douses him with gasoline, strikes a match, and watches him burn. Morrison (2004) takes up the theme of infanticide again in *Beloved* when the newly escaped slave, Sethe, decides to kill her children rather than see them experience slavery. Also in *Beloved*, the reader is presented with the romantic sacrifice of Sixo, one of the Sweet Home men, who decides to walk 30 miles each way to visit and court the aptly named, “Thirty-Mile Woman.” And when their plan to escape is found out, Sixo sacrifices himself rather than see the Thirty-Mile woman captured. When the slave posse catches him, they tie him to a tree and burn him. Instead of crying out in pain, he laughs and screams “Seven-O, Seven-O.” The befuddled captors do not understand that his sacrifice secures his bloodline, as the Thirty-Mile Woman is pregnant with his son, Seven-O. While some readers may read this “blood sacrifice” as grotesque (and it is), Morrison’s depiction of Sixo’s death and

demise is increasingly layered and fraught with both despondency and celebration. The death/sacrifice does not function as a consequence of white supremacy. Indeed, this is what is so queer about Morrison's work: it becomes a radical investment in human possibility, ultimately negating the captive body (as articulated by Hortense Spillers) and exemplifies agency and choice. Sixo's sacrifice secures life. And perhaps Morrison is commenting on the racial anxieties and narratives of marginalities so many Black folk sought to suppress, to comport with standards of emotive express. Engaging the chrono-epistemology or "critical return" of my analytic, I am reminded of a 1905 letter W. E. B. Du Bois received from a white "scientist": "We are pursuing an investigation here on the subject of crying as an expression of the emotions and should like very much to learn about its peculiarities among the colored people. We have been referred to you as a person competent to give us information on the subject. We desire especially to know about the following salient aspects: 1. Whether the Negro sheds tears . . ." (as quoted in Morrison & Denard, 2008, p. 48). Sixo's laughter may be read as reifying the white supremacist notions of the Other and the (black) monstrosity. But Sixo's laughter instructs in other ways and represents a rupture of white expectation of begging. He does not beg for his life but performs in ways that subvert attention from his escaping wife and soon-to-be-born child. In short, Sixo's laughter functions as aural slight of hand, and he becomes the embodiment of love. These examples of sacrifice challenge traditional and normative notions of what it means to love and be loved.

In a 1994 interview, Morrison stated, "The search for love and identity runs through most everything I write" (Micucci, 1994, p. 278). She goes on to say that in

mainstream American literature and culture, “Black People, as a group, are used to signifying the polar opposites of love and repulsion . . .” (Micucci, 1994, p. 282).

Morrison’s work seeks to escape the yoke of burdensome and negative representations of love, to broaden her community’s ideas of love, and position love as both social and political, personal and public. Her characters see love in many ways: as some cloyingly sweet emotion with romantic attachments, as an aspect of life that enables community building and solidifies families and friends, and as practices of survival in racist and oppressive spaces. Morrison’s love is discursive, generative, unending—indeed, it is ethereal and divine. Furthermore, Morrison views her fiction as a place where the reader can “react violently or sublimely, where it is all right to feel melancholy or frightened, or even to fail, or to be wrong, or to love somebody, or to wish something deeply, and not call it by some other name, not to be embarrassed by it” (Ruas, 1994, p. 109). We might consider that Morrison calls for multiple readings that stresses the significance of naming exactly what menaces you and what love means to you.

*Song* can be read as an assemblage of (difficult) love letters. Toni Morrison takes her title from a book in the Bible with the same name. Imbrie (1993) notes that the biblical Song of Solomon is “a love poem, written in dialogue, which describes the experience of sexual pleasure” (p. 474). As indicated earlier, one of Morrison’s central themes is love and *Song* is similarly a love poem. When Melvin Dixon (1978) writes about the “obsessive terrorism of Guitar,” he is writing about Guitar’s “thick love” for Milkman (p. 178). Readers are made to feel ambivalent about that love, as Dixon asserts, “*Song* challenges every emotion, making love or hatred vague and inappropriate feeling

until we endure their steady cutting edges. Like Pilate, Macon, Ruth, Hagar, Milkman, we are no longer safe. Nor should we, after reading this novel, want to be” (Dixon, 1978, p. 173). What we recognize as love may be hate and what we read as hate may be love, as Dixon suggests.

Among the love letters in *Song* are the lessons Pilate bequeaths to her nephew, Milkman. Pilate becomes a teacher to Milkman, a guide who exemplifies “the healing power of no longer defining themselves by the borders and binaries of the hegemonic culture” (Carlson, 2012, p. 263). The character Pilate is queered physically (she has no belly button!) and this unsettles the readers and signifies Morrison’s aversion to social and embodied notions of normalcy. Throughout the novel, Pilate takes Milkman under her wings and instills in him a sense of heritage and purpose, one he never inherited from his father. In the final scene of the novel, as she is dying in Milkman’s arms, she leaves him with a final message, and it is of love: “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would a loved ‘em all. If I’d knowed more, I would a loved more.” (p. 336). As her final lesson, Pilate entreats Milkman to become a more critical reader, to develop a critical literacy that would dislodge him from his father’s patriarchal grips, and to encourage him to find his own interpretive frames for his world.

With her dying declaration, Morrison teaches Milkman to understand people more, to except them as they are, to forgo notions of changing them or dominating them in ways that produce conflict and fear. Pilate does not elucidate, the meanings of love explicitly. She simply makes an assertion: that there is a tacit connection between knowing/knowledge and love, that it connects individuals in ways that are often hard to



describe but can be intensely felt. In this moment, Milkman begins to understand kindredness as essential to love and community. In other words, love becomes a conduit to know differently, to see the idiosyncrasies of the world through the eyes of another. He begins to trust the perceptions of others about his world (Pilate, his sisters, his mothers, the people of Shalimar). And perhaps Morrison's text produces the sense that love is primarily an epistemological practice. Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2008) similarly note that

Knowledge is not some sort of object that is locked inside a head or that is lying in pools out in the world; rather, knowledge is a potential to action—meaning that knowledge is *embodied* (there must be an actor) and *situated* (there must be a context for the action). Bodies know, and that's what makes them part of grander knowing bodies. Knowledge, then, is about relationship. (p. 66)

Thus, love relies on another. Therefore, it cannot remain situated with the individual, principally or otherwise. In essence, Pilate's final lesson for Milkman becomes a rumination about the liberatory affects effects of love and its attachment to knowledge—an epistemological love—a love that Milkman in turn passes on to Guitar.

As Milkman and Hagar's love begins to disintegrate, a kind of love-sick madness grips Hagar and she refuses to let go. All the residents of Not Doctor Street take notice of Hagar: "The lengths to which lost love drove men and women never surprised them. They had seen women pull their dresses over their heads and howl like dogs for lost love. And men who sat in doorways with pennies in their mouths for lost love. 'Thank God,' they whispered to themselves, 'thank God I ain't never had one of them graveyard loves'" (Morrison, 1977, p. 128). Here, Morrison positions men as victims of this love-

sick hysteria. Men, too, are subjects and participants in these deathly loves, even if their expressions are more measured and reserved. It means that men, too, are swept into the doldrums, a fathomless passion that seems to strip the mourner of any agency. “Deathly loves.” The phrase itself sounds oxymoronic, but there is something about the pairing of these ancient words that also seems familiar (the wedding vows, perhaps, “till death do us part”). These are the types of loves Morrison chooses to privilege for the reader. She centralizes these complex and complicated notions of love to situated African Americans’ relationship to knowledge, knowing, desires, erotics, etc. The dance between the body, mind and spirit enumerates through various times and spaces. The embodied and deeply spiritual aspects of love and friendship cannot afford to be dismissed by critical pedagogies—and perhaps Morrison is gesturing towards these marginal loves to highlight the potential for them to learn things we have forgotten or overlooked. And while she privileges these queer loves, it is our positionalities that shape what these loves mean and even if we accept, understand, or engage them. Again, the writers may centralize themes and concepts she wishes to bring attention to, but the reader plays the most crucial role in her own literacy and reading strategies.

One day, Guitar sees a disheveled and befuddled Hagar, approaches her with compassion (perhaps empathy), and tries to impart to her his understanding of love. He compassionately and softly speaks to Hagar: “You’re turning over your whole life to him. Your whole life, girl. And if it means so little to you that you can just give it away, hand it to him, then why should it mean any more to him? He can’t value you more than you value yourself.” (Song, p. 306). Since Milkman’s departure, Hagar has descended into a

deep depression. She is disheveled, her hair unkempt, her makeup blurred. She hunts Milkman's old home. Here "love" for Milkman is obsessive or what Morrison calls "an anaconda love." The metaphor is clear. This type of love is deadly.

Unlike the other residents of Not Doctor Street, Guitar sympathizes with Hagar, he knows the deep loss of love ones, but ultimately understands the result of this type of obsessiveness. Guitar continues:

Love shouldn't be like that. Did you ever see the way the clouds love a mountain? They circle all around it; sometimes you can't even see the mountain for the clouds. But you know what? You go up top and what do you see? His head. The clouds never cover the head. His head pokes through, because the clouds let him; they don't wrap him up. They let him keep his head up high, free, with nothing to hide him or bind him. (p. 306)

Notably, I assert that Guitar assigns a gender to the mountain in his analogy, and then denies the same gendering to the clouds. Because he is speaking to Hagar, one may be tempted to simply assume that he believes the clouds are Hagar and that the mountain is Milkman. Here, I activate my Black queer poetics aspect of participatory readership and critical literacy. While I cannot say for certain that Morrison plays with gender pronouns is deliberate, this instance does open space for me to read this critical slippage of language queerly. Thus, I choose to read and imagine Guitar's failure to gender the clouds in similar ways to some male R&B singers (i.e. Luther Vandross and Frank Ocean) strategically used "gender-neutral" pronouns in songs. This rhetorical strategy was often done to preserve the illusion of compulsory heterosexuality and to circumvent listeners possibly reading lyrics as explicating disclosing queer yearnings. So perhaps the clouds that allow the mountains to be free can be read as Guitar himself. Despite Guitar's

warning, Hagar eventually succumbs to her overwhelming love for Milkman. Simply, but not cliché, she dies of a broken heart. She allows herself to wither away. Morrison offers this cautionary love letter about what happens when one falls victim to this “anaconda love, a metaphor deployed to describe how love is occasionally experienced as one that seizes you and squeezes the life/spirit from you. As I think through the ephemera of clouds and off-hand conversations, I believe that Hagar and Guitar share a similar obsession with Milkman but vastly have different fates. Their names even share the same ending rhyme, and this cannot be mere coincidence.

### **On Queer(ly) Directional(ity) and Desire Lines**

To make an argument about Milkman’s queerness is to make an argument about how and why queer characters are oriented in texts. To what objects, times, spaces, does the writer orient characters, and what are their importance to our understanding of the critical enterprises of knowledge production and queering. As Sara Ahmed (2006) painstakingly explains, orientation--queer or otherwise--involves directionality. By this, Ahmed means that the language of sexual orientation involves directions, and that language rarely goes criticized or under-theorized. Ahmed tells us that what is queer is “what is ‘oblique’ or ‘off line’ [...] odd, bent, [and] twisted” (p. 161). This definition emphasizes the counter-hegemonic, anti-normative logics. Or, in other words, this delineation highlights queer’s tendency toward “social disorientation” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 162). We are left to ponder: “pulling what out of order?” and “pulling out of order to what end(s)?” Milkman’s queerness aligns with Ahmed’s use queerness as “oblique” or “off-line.” Milkman’s backwardness and disorientation might also gesture towards

Milkman's queerness; Milkman engages in sex frequently and in queer circumstances.

Most notably, he has an ongoing romantic relationship with his cousin, Hagar.

In the forward of the 2004 edition of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison herself notes the queer directionality of the novel. Doing a close reading of her first sentence of the novel, links queerness, directionality, and race: "The sentence starts with 'North Carolina' and closes with 'Lake Superior'—geographical locations that suggest a journey from south to north—a direction common for black immigration and in the literature about it, but this direction is reversed here since the protagonist has to go south to mature" (para. 8).

Though he does not use the language of queerness, Herman Beavers (1998) also notes the directionality and spatiality of the novel and its importance to Milkman, claiming that "[f]or so many of Toni Morrison's male characters, the South is a duality, oscillating between a place of origin and a curse. As such, the South takes up permanent residence in the memories of the men who people her fictions" (Beavers, 1998, p. 61). He believes the permissive relationship between space/place and self represents the potentiality of subjecthood. But how and why we orient ourselves to certain spaces/places also involves possible disorientations. Sara Ahmed argues that disorientation involves a certain pedagogical imperative. What does disorientation teach us? If teaching and learning require an object of orientation, then what does it mean to disorient the learner? To pull their directional gaze to invite learners to see what was in the background, to re-inhabit or co-inhabit spaces we were never fully aware of (Ahmed, 2006 p. 101). In many ways, several events and characters disorient Milkman. A result of this rupturing is that Milkman can no longer rely on the knowledges he has acquired along the way. To follow

Ahmed's logic, Milkman loses his bearings, but gains new knowledge because of his wandering. When I think of wandering, images of aimless, unintentional roaming are immediately presented. Importantly, this is not the type of wandering I wish to invoke. In this way, we tend to wander to lose a sense of self (to forget something traumatic, perhaps) or to gain a sense of self, and perhaps a mix of both. Specifically, Milkman's journey to find his family's legacy and learn his family's narrative attends to modalities of meandering, drifting, straying, and deviating with purpose, often activating a spatial (and ideological) traversing and transgressing. His wandering involves a certain somatic validation and pleasure, that had been denied while living in the city in the North Midwest. Thus, wandering, in this novel and other Black texts, represents a way to affirm self-actualization.

### **Milkman's Queer Childhood**

Then too, there are other markers of queerness, places where invisible ink is legible to queer scholars and researchers. For Ahmed, people "acquire orientation through the repetition of some actions over others" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 58). This notion is seen in Milkman's childhood. Morrison tells us that Milkman repeatedly looked behind himself. Milkman's backwardness and backward facing ways signify a type of contrarian nature and personality. Morrison is also signifying on the Akan notion of the Sankofa bird that also faces backwards. Morrison notes that "each member of his family awkward with fear" (Song, 10). The use of the word awkward signals a lack of conviction and confidence. Their awkwardness is juxtaposed against Macon's forthright certitude about life and the world. Macon is a hardened man, but finds joy in his material possessions, all

of which is accentuated by this gait. Macon struts around the Blood Bank. As Rolland Murray notes, Macon's strut can be read as a hyper masculine performance (Murray, 1999, p. 128). In many ways, Milkman is denied the performative identity of the hyper-masculine. He lives with his family, under the benevolence and manipulation of his father. He has no job, no prospects for a profession, unlike his sister. He shows no prowess of intellect. He is even denied the swagger of his father—the strut—because of his limp and dis/ability. One of Milkman's legs is shorter than the other, resulting in a limp, and he chooses to disguise it with “an affected walk, the strut of a very young man trying to appear more sophisticated” (Morrison, 1977, p. 62). He loses the limp when he begins to more fully understand his heritage and where he is from. He loses it among the men of Shalimar, after he survives a vicious attack by Guitar. By confronting Guitar, uncertainty, and his own fears, he is no longer bound to affect anything about himself.

Though the narrator tells us that Milkman's “deformity was mostly in his mind” nevertheless he views it as the one thing that prevents him from every fully emulating his father. But Morrison does not leave it there, she painstakingly describes the ways they are dissimilar. She ultimately paints a portrait of a father-son dynamic rife with willful agency, Milkman's insistence on refusing his father in every way:

[s]o he differed from him as much as he dared. Macon was clean-shaven; Milkman was desperate for a mustache. Macon wore bow ties; Milkman wore four-in-hands. Macon didn't part his hair; Milkman had a part shaved into his. Macon hated tobacco; Milkman tried to put a cigarette in his mouth every fifteen minutes. Macon hoarded his money; Milkman gave his away. (p. 63)

Rhetorically, Morrison juxtaposes the father and son. In every way, they are different: Their masculine performances, their physical appearances, and even their gait. To this end, Macon Dead also represents a normative life that ascribes/inscribes whiteness and capitalism. He is materialistic and is only concerned about his land and money; and he is a ruthless landlord who is both hated and feared by his tenants. Macon warns his son that materialistic concerns are the only ones in life. This sentiment is countered throughout the novel by Milkman's aunt, Pilate, who teaches him that life is more than a set of keys that symbolizes Macon's real estate empire. She teaches Milkman that life is about altruism, loving-kindness, discovery, and about remaining true to one's true purpose when you find it. For Pilate, crass materialism gets in the way of these life-sustaining elements. Still yet, what does it signify when Morrison tells us that "the deformity [of his leg] was mostly in his mind"? Milkman's disability—real or imagined—signifies a type of queerness. Referencing the work of Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomas, and others who theorize about the body and performance, Robert McRuer (2006) ruminates and theorizes about "compulsory able-bodiness," in which bodies are normalized and asked to shore up certain social notions such as capitalism (p. 6). Thus, he asserts that our society privileges certain (abled) bodies that are serviceable to particular ideologies such as patriotism and nationalism. And while Milkman's body—his embodied queerness—marks the continuation of my analysis of *Song of Solomon* as a queer text, Milkman's relationship with his best friend Guitar serves as my most salient "evidence" for my reading.



### **Milkman and Guitar: A Literary Pas De Deux**

Deborah Ayer Sitter (1992) briefly notes a Morrisonian trope in the final scene of *Beloved*, and calls attention to the typography of Sethe and Paul D's words, how they are placed beside one another (p. 26). Sitter calls this moment and coupling of words and characters a "pas de deux," drawing from a traditional ballet vocabulary which usually features a male and female dancer and signifies equal partnership. Morrison tends to end her novels with such pairings, either materially in each other's presence (as in *Beloved*) or metaphysically (as in *Sula*), especially her novels with explicit themes about love. Similarly, Milkman and Guitar are the last two characters presented in *Song of Solomon*, and their relationship forms the major tension, conflict, and surrender of the novel.

Imbrie (1993) notes that "the relationship between Milkman and Guitar [is] rooted in both deep *affection* and argument" (p. 474, emphasis added. Melvin Dixon (1987) notes that one of the three "principal organizing structures that enlarge the orbit of cultural performances" of *Song of Solomon* is the "relationship between Milkman and Guitar as the problematic moral center" (p. 157). At the outset of their meeting, Morrison signals the importance of Milkman's relationship with Guitar, ". . . at twelve met the boy who not only could liberate him but could take him to the woman who had as much to do with his future as she had his past" (Morrison, SOS, p. 36). Throughout the novel, Milkman only cares about Guitar's opinion (Morrison, SOS, p. 293). Guitar is one of the few people whose opinion Milkman trusts and values because Guitar does not judge him for his shortcomings, does not blame him for his inherited privilege, and genuinely enjoys his company. For example, Morrison notes that Milkman "had always hated [his]

name, all of it, and until he and Guitar became friends, he had hated his nickname too. But in Guitar's mouth it sounded clever, grown up" (Morrison, *SOS*, p. 293). They are both outsiders, marginalized in multiple ways, and this allows a special kinship and affection to form between them. Guitar provides a freedom from shame and guilt about the origin of his nickname (which involves breastfeeding beyond a socially accepted age).

This notion of a literary *pas de deux*, the erotic and (dis)embodied coupling of two characters, is perhaps the "trace" or "ephemera," Barbara Smith (1977/1994) senses in *Sula*, as she turns her gaze beyond what can be seen, but towards what is acutely felt. She writes,

Despite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters, I discovered in re-reading *Sula* that it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family. Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives. (pp. 417–418)

In essence, my reading attends to the silences and ephemera present to appropriate a similar argument about *Song* and its male characters. While I do not argue that Milkman and Guitar are gay or bisexual, I do wish to assert the queerness of their relationship as traceable and evident in the ways Muñoz implores. Even in this permissive reading of their relationship, I want to engage an ethics of refusal. Refusing the easy theorizing around queer subjectivities, I instead, purpose that they have a "same-affection loving" relationship. C. P. Gause (2007), cultural critic and education scholar, writes:

I use the term ‘same-affection loving’ to speak of the spiritual attraction I have for individuals devoid of the performance of a sex act. [...] It is through the affection of soul connection that speaks of my desire for another human being and because this is soul-practice: the body inhabited has little meaning in establishing a relationship. (p. 166)

When examining the relationship between Milkman and Guitar, one must look at their relationship beyond sex. In many ways, if we choose to relegate queerness to sex, we may overlook the other subtleties of the text and characters. Smith’s reading of *Sula* examines the main characters’ close friendship and how that friendship informs them about their individual relationships in their worlds. Notably, she uses a descriptive rubric to define a lesbian as a “woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society—perhaps then, but certainly later—cares to allow her” (p. 420). This permissive definition does not privilege sexual contact or fantasy, though it is not excluded. It does privilege intentionality, imagination, and epistemological agency. Despite the patriarchal interference, “the deepest communion and communication in the novel occurs between two women who love each other” (p. 422).

My queering of Milkman and Guitar’s relationship has little to do with sex and sexuality and has more to do with the nonnormative nature of their relationship, which extends beyond sexuality and into other social, political, and ethical aspects of their lives. Toni Morrison writes against (or rather in excess to) frameworks of normative male friendships, and specifically Black male friendships. In other words, their relationship operates excessively beyond what is expected or required for traditional Black male

friendships. And I see this aspect of their friendship specifically at the end of the novel, as Morrison reintroduces the motifs of flight and song and love.

### **Fight as Queer Motif: Learning at Solomon's Leap**

In *Song of Solomon*, voices are not just heard: they soar, they fly, they dance. In some instances, like Pilate's lament at her daughter's funeral, they take up space within the mind and spirit. For me, as a participatory reader, the tight language between Milkman and Guitar animated me most. The dance between Milkman and Guitar that opens this novel culminates in their reunion and confrontation at a gulch called "Solomon's Leap" by locals of Shalimar, Virginia. The gulch is named after Milkman's great-great-great grandfather who "flew" back home to Africa, leaving his wife and children. For some in this novel, this place signifies escape and for others abandonment. It also connotes suicide; and we, as readers, are immediately drawn back to the opening of novel with the Robert Smith's suicidal leap from the copula of the "No" Mercy Hospital. Morrison offers flight as the central motif of *Song*. Although some scholars have focused on the classical and mythological parallels to the Icarus story, Morrison actually based her treatment on African American folklore. Specifically, like other Black writers and artists like Faith Ringgold and Julius Lester, Morrison uses the flying Ibo myth to provide the cultural context for *Song of Solomon*. Discussing the flying myth in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison, establishes her source material:

If it means Icarus to some readers, fine: I want to take credit for that. But my meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem . . . Perhaps it was wishful thinking—escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn't. What might I mean? (LeClair, 1994, p. 109)

Flight is about escape, transcendence, but it also signifies reconciliation, liberation, and resistance, which Milkman and Guitar do by the final words of the novels.

It was everywhere—people used to talk about it, it's in the spirituals and gospels” (LeClair, 1994, p. 122). While Morrison takes up the literal meaning of flight and its importance to Black life, she also makes a tacit connection between flight, music, and knowledge. Morrison makes these connections clear to the reader by juxtaposing several characters to convey multiple meanings and interpretations and to capture the complexity and unlimited traces of knowledge produced by various conditions and experiences. As I have noted earlier, her juxtaposition of Macon with his son Milkman situates notions of disability as perhaps to the novel, but she also juxtaposes the flights of Robert Smith and Milkman to discuss the meaning for flight and its attending epistemologies.

Morrison bookends her novel with two flights. By juxtaposing the flight (suicidal leap) of Robert Smith at the beginning of the novel with Milkman's flight at the conclusion of the novel, Morrison comments on the dichotomy of ignorance/knowledge (knowing). Smith's flight fails because he is depressed about his life—a downtrodden, overworked insurance salesman, who is not respected by his community. As a member of *Seven Days*, Smith has murdered in the name of the countless Black victims of racial violence. He receives no validation or “thanks” from his community. His secret, bloody labors go unacknowledged or accounted for. In many ways, Smith lacks a sense of self. And though he goes unnoticed by his community, he is nevertheless constituted by its existence, made legible by it. In short, his community and its racial strife operate to unify/cohere his narrative of self. Ultimately, this falls apart and Smith commits suicide.

Conversely, Milkman's flight succeeds for several reasons. One, he is not beholden to his community for a sense of self, in the ways Robert Smith is. Macon, a tyrannical landlord, has thoroughly alienated his family from the community, unlike his sister Pilate. Two, Milkman rejects the violent rhetoric of the Seven Days, viewing its mission of violence as counterproductive and wasteful. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Milkman's flight succeeds precisely because he has embraced knowledge of self. His genealogical inquiry into his family's narrative serves as the impetus for his flight. The quest to learn where he came from and who his people are include lessons of love, including his moment with Sweet, Pilate's dying declaration ("if I'd known more, I would have loved more"), and his final embrace of Guitar at Solomon's Leap. At the end of the novel, Guitar becomes the object of desire and Milkman creates a desire-line as he leaps towards him.

Additionally, for this novel, the flight motif is also linked to history and heritage. After traveling to Shalimar, Virginia, Milkman learns that his heritage is linked to the flying motif. He shares this revelation with his best friend:

He flew, baby. Lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew home. Can you dig it? Jesus God, that must have been something to see. And you know what else? He tried to take his baby boy with him. My grandfather. Wow! Woohoo! Guitar! You hear that? Guitar, my great-granddaddy could flyyyyyy and the whole damn town is named after him. (Song, p. 328)

Milkman learns the secret of his great-grandfathers' flight which has lived on in song-lore in Shalimar. "Milkman's leap at the novel's close is a redeeming flight. His journey is not an easy one; nor is the novel's moral center in the magnetic friendship between

Milkman and Guitar without a healthy dose of ambiguity and role reversal” (Dixon, 1987, p. 158). Here, Dixon hints at the traces of queerness between Milkman and Guitar. Why he, and other scholars, never take the intellectual leap is not only interesting but also baffling. Oddly, it appears, at least for me, that the queer pieces were there, ready to be connected, the same way Milkman has to render his heritage legible once more.

### **The Homoeroticism of Milkman’s Final Words**

Milkman’s final words are both beautiful and homoerotic, both a question and declaration. Guitar has just shot Pilate with lethal accuracy. Milkman cradles her. In the culminating last scene of the novel, Milkman confronts the one man who always put him at ease with himself and the world, the one man whose mouth could bare his nickname:

“You want my life?” Milkman was not shouting now. “You need it? Here. Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees- he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it. (p. 337)

He decides to give his life and his love to the last man standing, the man who needs the most. This time, unlike his love affair with Hagar, he takes responsibility for he makes peace with his uncertainties, and affectionately jumps into the arms of his “main man.” In light of this scene, I employ Black queer poetics to ponder the truths Morrison might be offering to the reader. Specifically, I juxtapose Sulu’s complicated words to Jude about the nature of envy, obsession, and love in the lives of Black men:

I mean, I don’t know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis

they forget their own . . . And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children—white and black, boys and girls—spend all their childhood eating their hearts out `cause they think you don't love them. And if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in the world loves a black man more than another black man. It looks to me like you the envy of the world. (Morrison, 1973, pp. 103–104)

For me, Sulu's words have direct bearing on the relationship between Milkman and Guitar. Again, these words should be cast again Sula's words about Black men being alone. Here, Milkman and Guitar cannot bare to be alone, or without one another. Then too, let us consider the ambiguity of the book's final flight.

Morrison chooses to bookend flights in the novel, and unlike Robert Smith's fatal flight (read: suicide leap) from the cupola of No Mercy Hospital, I posit that Milkman's flight is successful. Black queer poetics as an analytic, encourages me to fully acknowledge and appropriate the margins as productive, accommodating spaces. Thus, I choose to read Milkman's leap into the arms (killing or otherwise) as a moment of *agential intimacy*, which theoretically and ideologically allows us to extinguish fear and anxiety associated with social constructs and normativity to approach objects of desire (Brooks, 2016). Particularly, Morrison describes Milkman's leap as an embrace, connoting choice, warmth, she says "embrace." Here I emphasize the connotative reading of "embrace." Many readers have read Milkman's flight as a leap to his death and that he is hell-bent on taking Guitar with him as revenge for killing Pilate. I choose to read his flight differently, queerly, and in a more permissive, affirmative way, and powerful way. To seek revenge seems to undercut the learning Milkman's experience throughout the novel. Indeed, I believe all the learning that he has fought hard to imagine taught him a



fundamental inheritance. Simply, he learns to fly. Perhaps to gain full access of this knowledge and ability, Pilate's blood sacrifice is required. Unlike Solomon, Milkman does not leave his loved one behind. He leaps at Guitar and surrenders to the air. He takes flight. Thus, some readers read Milkman's flight as a fulfillment of his great-grandfather's flight, as Milkman has been retracing Solomon's legacy. I do not, however, read his flight as a denial or refusal of his family—his mother, sisters, and father. Such a refusal would represent, for me, a misunderstanding of the consequences of Solomon's legacy and the traumas that ensue because he left his loved ones behind.

Fight, in *Song*, functions as a queer act that permits “performative acts of experimental self-perception and affiliation” (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 9). After all, he does choose Guitar, orients himself toward him, his flight constitutes a “desire line” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 19) and “a model of how bodies become oriented by how they take up time and space” (Ahmed, p. 5). He gives himself to Guitar, an ultimate gesture of love, a “true sacrifice,” a fulfillment of Pilate's dying pronouncement. Morrison understands this gesture as a “mercy,” and “grace note” of the novel that “constitute[s] the heartbeat of the narrative” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” p. 392). Biblically, mercy is understood as an ontological component of love, which she believes “touches, turns, and returns to Guitar at the end of the book—he who is least deserving of it—and moves him to make it his own final gift” (Unspeakable, p. 155). Again, my analysis here does not mean to suggest that Milkman and Guitar are romantic lovers. But their friendship exceeds the limits of what we readily recognize as the typical Black male friendship. Smith (1977/1994) tells us,

Obviously Morrison did not intend the reader to perceive Sula and Nel's relationship as inherently lesbian. However, this lack of intention only shows the way in which heterosexist assumptions can veil what may logically be expected to occur in a work. What I have tried to do here is not to prove that Morrison wrote something that she did not, but to point out how a Black feminist critical perspective at least allows consideration of this level of the novel's meaning. (p. 142)

Compulsory heteronormativity or compulsory heterosexuality informs most readings of *Song*; such rubrics diminish the permissive and participatory interpretations Toni Morrison holds dear and implies the "evidence of queer lives, powers, and possibilities" (Muñoz, 1996, p. 6). In the past when I have named these queer aesthetics and ethics among Black men in *Song of Solomon* and other African American literature, my ideas have often been discarded or, worse yet, discredited. The intensity of Milkman and Guitar's relationship is only read through heterosexist lenses. Considering reader-response theories as espoused by Louise Rosenblatt (1994) and Wolfgang Iser (1974), it becomes evident that how and why we read certain texts and our investments in certain interpretations have powerful psychological and sociological implications. The transactional and collaborative readings often speak to our own personal linguistic and experiential values. In other words, if one has a particular investment in oppression or hierarchy, because of one's positionality or aspirations, then one's readings often support these values and ethics. These hegemonic ways of reading have always vexed me and cannot be understood as happenstance. This willful ignorance exemplifies the oppressive power structures at work in language and literacy. Never one for willful ignorance, most readings and interpretations of Milkman's leap left me empty and I was always left with a clawing "incompleteness" in the pit of my stomach. In retrospect, my suspicion that there

was something more, something left unsaid or unexplored or unacknowledged always left me with nagging open-ended questions: Does this mean what I think it does? Have I seen what I think I have seen? “Incompleteness—the open question—summons us,” Maxine Greene (1978) tells us, “to the task of knowledge and action... we actively insert our own perception into the lived world. It is a process of meaning making” (p. 74).

Attentive to various characteristics of Black queer poetics, namely focusing on my positionality and critical imagination, *Song of Solomon*, at its most base, functions as a treatise on the meaning of men to each other. And offers a queer space to read, resist, and disrupt heterosexist assumptions and logics at work in the African American literature. To this end, the power of Milkman and Guitar’s final scene rests on the notion that knowledge of self cannot be created outside of another, that it takes another (community, family, friend, lover) to contextualize who and what you are. This notion is not unlike the agency of the participatory reader, a praxis of co-creation. No reader is an island unto herself, as it were. In the final analysis, Milkman chooses to share what he has learned about himself as a person, man, friend, lover with Guitar. He offers Guitar another possibility of living or existence—just a Morrison does for the reader. This act of love and loving, spurred by choice and agency, does not so much close the novel as it opens it up to new queer horizons.

### **“What Moves at the Margins”: Assemblages and Queer Readings**

In Toni Morrison’s Nobel Lecture, she asks, “What moves at the margin? What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of a town that cannot bear your company?” (“The Nobel Lecture in

Literature,” p. 206). Here, Morrison engages a poetic pedagogy that only points to an absence of dialogue about liminality but also seeks to invoke a critical juncture at which “home” represents a loss, a negation. She reflects on the fact that artists, especially writers, are in a precarious position, to be truth-tellers even when the truth will put you at odds with your community. After all she asks the critical question, “What moves at the margin?” Grammatically, her question gestures toward a lack of personhood and an absence of agency. And perhaps, it is “truth” and not the truth-teller who moves beyond what is central to social life. Years ago, at the conference, I knew my offering would be taboo, but I never thought it would so controversial. The more Afrocentric members of the conference, indeed the keynote speaker, took me to task about for “doing the white man’s work for him.” For him and many African American men, Black nationhood is built on stringent gender and sexuality foundations. Heteronormativity undergirds much of Afrocentric philosophy and culture. How could I prove that homosexuality existed in Africa before colonization? In my detractors’ estimation, homosexuality was a European export to Africa. Aside from the fact that their arguments lacked “proof” as well, I could not persuade them to understand that my argument hinged on something “more evident than evidence,” which I assume meant sociological or scientific evidence. My presentation hinged on Muñoz’s theorizing trace and ephemera and on Barbara Christian’s observations of Black folk theorizing through the language itself, that African American language itself is a repository, an archive that spans a full range of linguistic performances such as silences, gaps, etc.

This rhetoric of silence performs various gestures depending on the communities to which we belong. Beyond an academic matter, Black Queer Studies is important and is a matter of life and death, a matter of survival. Drawing from the same ideological/personal well as Barbara Christian who wrote, “I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me, literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is” (Christian, 1988, p. 78). For Christian and others, writing and teaching is about self-preservation. Black queer poetics has the potential to illuminate how Black queer subjectivities move not only at the margins but how they sometimes assume the center. Queer poetics and research “is about questioning the presumptions, values and viewpoints from those positions (marginal and central) especially those that normally go unquestioned” (Dilley, 1999, p. 462). Not only does Morrison explore queer cultural landscapes in her fiction, she also explores queer themes in her nonfiction, even if scholars are unable or unwilling to do so.

Further, this project’s critical importance is not necessarily about expanding conventional wisdom about Morrison’s literary prowess but serves to illustrate that she has written in very complex, nuance ways about Black queer subjectivities, ethics, and aesthetics. When critics and scholars advance the notion that Morrison lacks complex gay characters, they are implying a lack of romance, sexuality, and sensuality. If only they could look to the margins to see the full extent of signs of desire and yearning. Simply, queer theory itself is generative and opens up Morrison’s work to more expansive and

useful readings. Jasbir Puar (2007) contends that queerness is a confluence of consciousness:

There is no entity, no identity, no queer subject or subject to queer, rather queerness coming forth at us from all directions, screaming its defiance, suggesting a move from intersectionality to assemblage, an affective conglomeration that recognizes other contingencies of belonging (melding, fusing, viscosity, bouncing) that might not fall so easily into what is sometimes denoted as reactive community formations--identity politics--control theorist. The assemblage, as a series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks, draws together enunciation and dissolution, causality and effect, organic and nonorganic forces. (p. 211)

As Puar's statement suggests, to claim that Milkman and Guitar are lovers would be too tidy. But to call attention to their queerness is "messy," in the parlance of Black gay vernacular. The messiness of the novel, of any literary work, and particularly one by Morrison, is evident through the parabolic language, the ambiguities, the ruptures, and gaps she presents as an intricate dance of the dialectic. And Morrison is also offering the reader a moment to think between, through, and beyond what goes unimaginable and unimagined in Black culture as it pertains to love and friendship. And perhaps Morrison seeks to teach us that the messiness and queerness of life is normal and is all around and may not be as invisible as it may appear.

### CHAPTER III

#### **“EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SEEN”: THE QUEER RHETORICS AND PUBLIC PEDAGOGIES OF JAMES BALDWIN**

In another instance a slave by the name of Scipio was put to death for teaching a slave child to read and spell, and the child was severely beaten to make him “forget what he had learned.” (Anderson, 1988, p. 17)

People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. [...]What joins all languages, and all men, is the necessity to confront life, in order, not inconceivably, to outwit death: The price for this is the acceptance, and achievement, of one’s temporal identity. (Baldwin, 1979)

#### **Public Pedagogy and the Tradition of African American Public Intellectualism**

James Baldwin may be one of the most prolific educators of the 20th century. As one of “America’s teachers,” the United States and its citizenry represent simultaneously the classroom, the curriculum, and the students. Though many scholars from a number of disciplines have looked at Baldwin’s work, his pedagogical influences and impact remain under-theorized and under-explored. Many scholars have examined his influence on African American literature and even more have analyzed his impact on American society. Baldwin lectured at numerous high schools, colleges, and universities, within the United States and globally. Jeff Frank (2014) believes that Baldwin’s writing and work are “educationally significant” (p. 24) and also notes the potential for Baldwin’s writing to contribute to anti-racist pedagogies and his growing significance to political and social thought (Frank, 2015, p. 1). Additionally, A. Scott Henderson (2014) compares Ellison

and Baldwin's public statements about education and situates them in an American tradition of scholars theorizing/ruminating about education. He notes that while "Ellison advocated a pedagogy of uplift . . . Baldwin supported one of upheaval" (Henderson, 2014, p. 137). Similarly, in the inaugural volume of the *James Baldwin Review*, Joyce, McBride, and Field (2015) situate James Baldwin's increasing relevance with the rising dire political and civil unrest. Significantly, they reference the protests and riots in Baltimore, Maryland after the death of Freddie Gray while in Police Department custody in 2016. Noting the similar historical moments, "Prospects lie in the new readers being touched by Baldwin's work, and the technologies of access and distribution in our current moment of 'digital humanities' make this a time of unprecedented possibility" (Joyce, McBride, & Field, 2015, p. 5). Francis (2014) believes that critics, scholars, and readers will always come back to Baldwin because "he asks the questions we can't quite articulate, mines the places we find too dark and scary and painful" (p. 143).

Here, to illuminate Baldwin's role as a public intellectual, I begin with a discussion of the purposes and practices of public pedagogy. While I agree with Carlson (2012) that Baldwin's pedagogical project is still needed to challenge the "very real material and ideological apparatuses that are implicated in the production of inequality and oppression," I believe we need to situate where Baldwin fits into educational discourse (p. 264). Traditionally, even among some critical pedagogues, the classroom remains the physical site of teaching and learning. Though popular thought conceives of it as such, the educative act and moment is not insular to the classroom. Baldwin engaged in a public pedagogy that mapped the political and social landscape of the United States



and offered long-term solutions and strategies to confront oppression. Public pedagogy involves education research and inquiry that focuses on “various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning occurring beyond formal schooling and is distinct from hidden and explicit curricula operating within and through school sites” (Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011, pp. 338–339) and ultimately troubles the notion of the classroom as education’s “primary and historical site of practice” (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 363, emphasis in original). My analysis of Baldwin’s work extends beyond arguments about his inclusion on syllabi in contemporary classrooms. Baldwin’s oeuvre includes his novels, plays, poetry, but also his essays. Many of them were extended commentary that he rehearsed while doing public lectures. As such, my analytical reading of Baldwin’s work as engaging critical question-posing leads me to situate Baldwin as a public pedagogue whose primary focus was influenced by the social and political realms of Black life in America. My inclusion of Baldwin within the field of public pedagogy aligns with Savage, who emphasizes that public pedagogy scholarship “glosses over the myriad grey areas of power struggles, and perhaps more importantly, fails to recognize the powerful role everyday cultural texts and discourses can play as dynamic, dialectic, and political vehicles of resistance” (Savage, as cited in Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 346).

Simultaneously, James Baldwin is one of the most prolific writers in the American literary canon and was extraordinarily gifted and blessed with introspection and comprehension of the machinations of American life. When one canvasses Baldwin’s life, it is assuredly clear that he was exceedingly authentic and transparent in his writing, often using autobiographical elements in his essays as examples of intellectual and

ideological rigor. He was honest with himself and the American people and his fellow countrymen. During the 1950s and 1960s, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin chose to critique and question the origins of American imperialism, gross capitalism, and racism. These mediations and critiques make up the vast majority of his work, regardless of genre. Baldwin deconstructed himself with precision and grace, traversing the American ideal, dream, and myth. With the publication of his first major collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Baldwin began to deftly confront his own inner demons. In the first essay in this collection, “Autobiographical Notes,” he writes, “One writes out of one thing only—one’s own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give” (p. 7). Additionally, he offers a critical portrait of his father, lamenting his defiant yet unsuccessful war against racism and white supremacy, as well as his own struggle to become an “honest man and a writer” (p. 9). Similarly, in his most famous book *The Fire Next Time* (1963/1993), he examined his own struggle for spiritual wholeness, mining the ironies and paradoxes of his religious upbringing and the ways we contrive to deny ourselves deeper meaning of life. “Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble,” he tells us,

is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one’s death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. (p. 86).

Through many of his works, particularly his essays, Baldwin sought to find the collective American soul and identity, to delineate its incongruities, and to foster understanding and dialogues among the citizens of the US and globally. At first glance, Baldwin's work defies definition and label; however, upon closer examination, two abiding themes permeate his corpus--masculinity and race. The brashness of Baldwin's writing is astounding, shocking, and disconsolate.

Through his public intellectualism, James Baldwin fought for a more inclusive society. That fight was not always understood or acknowledged by the very people he advocated for. Perhaps this is why the welcome table was such an important symbol for Baldwin and his work, especially since he was not always welcomed in many circles, Black and white, mainstream and grassroots. Reading his work, it appears that being James Baldwin was a "trick bag," (a reoccurring metaphor in his work). Referred to as "Martin Luther Queen," by prominent leaders of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, he was unceremoniously removed from the speakers at the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (Elam, 2015, p. 3). Born in 1924 in Harlem, New York to Southern migrants, Baldwin was poor, Black, and gay. He did not view these as negatives identifications, but as a type of birthright, once commenting that he had hit the "jackpot." In this respect, Baldwin presented a type of vernacularism "in which the political and the popular conjoin identificatory pleasure with ideological resistance" (Farred, 2003, p. 1). From this vantage point, Baldwin was able to use his circumstances, his positionalities, and his marginality to become one of the greatest Black public intellectuals of the mid-late 20th Century.

As a public intellectual, James Baldwin is important to Frank (2014) because he helps us accept “the difficulty and complexity of the moral problems that are most significant to us” (p. 29). In the case of most African Americans in the mid-20th Century the predominant moral problem were white supremacist ideology and its ravaging effects of the Black community. Baldwin was both a creative writer and activist, and tapped into the culture and thinking of a people whose lives testified to the ravages of white supremacy ideology. Baldwin and other Black public intellectuals, like Anna Julia Copper and W. E. B. Du Bois, challenged the racist grammars of American society—capitalism, imperialism, and colonization. Baldwin and other intellectuals like him used their talents and intellects—be it arts, athletics, or academia—to engage in a form of public pedagogy that sought to move beyond the classroom as the major site of education, and to speak directly to their communities, and to address—problematically at times—their oppressors. As Harold Cruse (2002), tells us in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, “In advanced societies it is not the race politicians or the ‘rights’ leaders who create the new ideas and the new images of life and man. That role belongs to artists and the intellectuals of each generation” (Cruse, as quoted in Henderson, 2014, p. 137). Black public figures like Baldwin used their keen insights and “their highly visible public positions within the academy, arts, and letters to engage in public debate” (Farred, 2003, p. 23). They described brilliant societies where equity and inclusion were serious considerations and urgencies.

Much like the Old Testament prophets, Baldwin wrote and spoke furiously within a tradition that castigated American idealism and myth and warned of the impending

consequences of holding on to the “American dream.” Stylistically, the scholars spoke plainly for their communities they belonged. “Critical pedagogues and theorists,” Purpel & Shapiro (1995) tells us, “are often accused of writing in an unnecessarily opaque, arid, tendentious, and dense manner, which promotes charges of arrogance, elitism, and hypercerebralism” (p. 122). Baldwin was indicted by various scholars and activists as arrogant and elitist, yet his work was too personal, often autobiographical, to sustain or maintain an elitist sense of distancing often found in the work and writing of many philosophers and critical thinkers. Part of Baldwin’s beauty was his unabashed ability to disavow impartiality—everything was personal. He gathered his complexities and contradictions, his fears and hopes, his aspirations and identities and tried to reconcile them in a very public manner. This type of public examination left Baldwin open to criticism and scrutiny from other intellectuals of the time. For example, in *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver (1968) leveled one of the most infamous and vitriolic attacks on Baldwin:

The case of James Baldwin aside for the moment, it seems that many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in his racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves—though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man’s sperm. (p. 102)

Cleaver’s pathologizing of Baldwin and other “Negro homosexuals” typifies language by some Afrocentricists (Johnson, 2003, p. 222). Even in these moments of Baldwin’s

deployment of humanistic and civil rights discourses, his authenticity and agenda as Black American intellectual was being questioned by other Black leaders.

Baldwin was an organic intellectual, or more aptly a Black vernacular intellectual, who used his texts and public lectures to delineate how communal identities were formed in intersectional oppressive regimes and provided thoughts about how to survive. These very existences constituted a resistance to white supremacist ideologies. Educators need to recognize how a politics of resistance extends the debate about knowledge creation and value claims into the public sphere (Giroux, 2003). Indeed, the consequences of what is taught (curriculum) and how (pedagogy) in the classroom had a utility beyond it and “challenge[d] dominant ideologies and regressive social policies that undermine the opportunities for connecting the struggles over education to the broader crisis of radical democracy and social and economic justice.” (Giroux, 2003, p. 14). Indeed, the vernacularism of such scholars and public intellectuals engages “the language of the popular, the particularities, idiosyncrasies, and distinctness of vernacular speech” to challenge these dominant ideologies. Dominant ideologies cannot be challenged with dominant ideological rhetoric (Farred, 2003, p. 12). Thus, Baldwin’s critical public pedagogy constitutes a *queer rhetoric* informed by interpolations of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

### **Subjugating Knowledges and Historicizing Narratives: The Rhetoric of Decolonization as Central Connective Theme**

The deft, agile fierceness with which Baldwin remained an outspoken critic of both his own society and culture not be underestimated to proponents of critical

pedagogy. He understood power relations and explained them in ways that affirmed the experiences of African Americans while also keenly delineating the consequences of white supremacist ideology and behavior. “White people hold the power,” he writes,

which means that they are superior to blacks (intrinsically, that is: God decreed it so), and the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared. Long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it. (Baldwin as quoted in Frank, 2015, p. 8)

A critical examination of Baldwin’s work illustrates how some educators and educational institutions unnecessarily limit students’ agency and accountability for their own education, learning, and literacy. In “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?,” an essay included in many textbooks in the United States, James Baldwin contextualizes the deculturalization process Black children face in schools:

The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child’s language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience. (p. 652)

As Baldwin intimates, imperialism, colonization, and deculturalization represent (often) hidden ideologies at work in classrooms across the United States. In a real sense, as Baldwin sees it, these teachers, mainly white women during the writing of this essay, had little concern about student achievement. Indeed, these curriculums represented contempt for these students’ experiences, their daily lives, their struggles, and their triumphs. This is what their language (such vibrant and dynamic language!) is, what it does. Language marks survival, and it marks necessity. Words and ways of speaking come into being

because they are needed to bear witness to the speaker's experience. When we think this assertion through to a natural conclusion, literacy and language education often supplants Black languages and vernaculars in order to impose a hegemonic language (English) that wishes to annihilate all markers of survival and existence. Indeed, literacy and language education may mark the beginning of a deculturalization process that starts with Black English. The implications of assimilationist curriculums are often lost on students and teachers alike. That is, these processes often happen unconsciously, despite curriculums often being situated as culturally and socially inclusive.

Joel Spring (2004) defines deculturalization as “the educational process of destroying a people's culture and replacing it with a new culture” (p. 5). This process is done through the promotion and acquisition of literacy. And while literacy can be used for well-intentioned aims, it can also be used for more sinister aims as well. Amanda Cobb (2000) argues “Literacy is valued, for perhaps different reasons, by those who teach literacy and those who learn literacy. What value literacy has for either party is dependent upon the community and context in which it is used, for literacy is always tied to purpose; it is something to be used, used for something” (p. 22). As I argue later, the process of deculturalization is often tied to the promotion and acquisition of language and literacy. Again, as I engage my framing of Black queer poetics, and as I continue to study education in America, questions linger: Is deculturalization inherent to the education process in America? Are there any safe spaces from this process? How do I participate in this process, either explicitly or implicitly? Why does deculturalization seem to be the prime educating apparatus?



In Baldwin's opinion, the countermanding of deculturalization and the colonializing project involves both historical and linguistic discourses. He views them as intractably intertwined. Near the end of his life, at the National Press Club, Baldwin (2014a) was asked how he "accessed race relations today?" Baldwin's answer illustrates how historiographical understanding influences identification politics:

I want to establish a modest proposal: white history week. The answer to these questions is not to be found in me but in that history which produces these questions? It is late in the day to be talking about race relations. What are you talking about? In the result to which we have "race relations"—how can they deteriorate or improve? I am not a race and neither are you! No, we are talking about the life and death of this country. I'm not joking when I talk about white history week. One of things which most afflicts this country is that white people don't know who they are or where they come from. That's why you think I'm a problem. But I am not a problem, your history is. And as long as you pretend you don't know your history, you're going to be a prisoner of it. And there's no question of liberating me because you can't liberate yourselves. We are in this together.

Here, though, his comment received laughter from the audience, Baldwin is incredibly serious in his "modest proposal." Simply, the shaky and fragile mythologies of whiteness and nationality threaten the psyches of all-American citizens. And what any white person knows cannot be substantiated without a reckoning of these mythologies. Critical thinking and critical question-posing, it seems that Baldwin asserts, is important to exposing one's social or cultural biases. Thus, studying the links between historical influences of language and the language of history affords educational scholars opportunities to rethink the purposes, processes, and the progress of schools. Additionally, Baldwin bemoans the dearth of a (so-called) lack of formal educational opportunities for both whites and Blacks, but also articulates how the curriculum and

epistemological reflections can “restore the routes that have been torn up by slavery by recalling their experiences and exclusion from American history” (Kharem, 2000, p. 34). This oppressive and paternalistic ideology undergirds the reason why a critical pedagogical epistemologies and education are so important.

As discussed in the previous section, education is a colonizing enterprise and is often utilized imperial, neoliberal, and corporate interests to further their agendas. The result of this enterprise, specifically for the student, is a loveless, sterile, and hollow educational experience. In “The Discourse on Language,” Michel Foucault (1972) argues,

Education may well be, as of right, the instrument where by every individual, in society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse. But we well know that in its distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battle lines of social conflict. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it. (as quoted in Giroux, 1991, p. 51)

Historically, these social conflicts have instigated power-grabs and produced technologies and grammars that consolidate power and solidified hierarchal structures. And as I have stated, deculturalization represents one such grammar of cultural and social control. Thus, Baldwin and his work sought to address the significance of thinking about schools as sites of deculturalization and “epistemic colonization.” For African American philosopher L. Gordon (2006), epistemic colonization is a move to purposefully exclude Black Americans from expressing, discerning, and theorizing about their own experiences (which include knowing and knowledge, pedagogies and praxes); their experiences are often filtered through theoretical lenses of and by dominant and

hegemonic cultures. Similar to Barbara Christian, his argument is one of exclusion and inclusion, one of the margin-center paradigm. And like Christian, he makes a move to reclaim the not just the robust essences of these experiences but also the right to provide a way of reading and theorizing about them.

Thus, creating and theorizing new reading strategies (or counter-reading strategies) are necessary to resist internalized oppressions and biases instilled by the colonizing enterprise of education. In other words, an epistemic decolonization is needed. As schools are sites of power contestation, an epistemic decolonization of education grapples with the materialities of ideology and its function in schools. As I think through my critical framework, with particular attention to an ethic of refusal and critical imagination, I want to complicate how educational scholars have approached notions of decolonization. My discussion foregrounds decolonization as a central connective theme that runs through Baldwin's work on language.

My mention of decolonization at this juncture of the study is two-fold. One, the project of decolonization is essentially and ideologically queer (Ndopu, as cited in Hanno, 2013). Again, to queer an object or discipline is to pull it out of order, to wrest it from the fatal clutches of the norm, to disrupt what is predictable and fixable in ways that shore up nationalism or capitalism. In this way, the queer project opens up possibility and is the impetus for agency. (It might be said that to exercise agency is a queer figuration.) Two, I invoke decolonization as a critical project imbued with the problematics of individuality and communal importance. Importantly, I do not invoke decolonization without attention to its sometimes problematic and often glib iteration as a liberatory

aspiration. Tuck and Yang (2012) rightly decry the problematics of adopting the language and rhetoric of decolonization because it has real implications and meanings for Indigenous peoples, that “decolonization is not a metaphor” (p. 3). They do not wish to lose the “what is incommensurable between decolonizing projects and other social justice projects” (p. 4) and that “an acknowledgement that decolonization will require a change in the order of the world” (p. 31). While I agree with Tuck and Yang that decolonization is not a metaphor, I would necessarily add that it is “not ONLY a metaphor.” And yet, the notion—the metaphor of decolonization—has political and social implications and consequences as well. Because ideology often precedes an act, metaphors are very useful in thinking through complex theoretical conundrums. In other words, before settlers and imperialists could colonize (the act) they first had to theorize the colonial project (the ideology). Thus, the first steps (or one of them) is to engage a counter-ideology to help think through the act of decolonization. Avoiding the metaphor, hardly allows scholars and activists this flexibility. Thus, I wish to complicate their identification of Paulo Friere’s conscientization (critical consciousness) as a “settler move to innocence” and as a “stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 19). While I concur that all too-often it is easy to pontificate about decolonization and glibly use the word with acknowledgement of struggles of Indigenous peoples, I also respectfully disagree with their bold statement that “Until stolen land is relinquished, critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 19). Freeing one’s mind or conscientization is exactly what Baldwin advocates for in his work, both his writings and public pedagogies.

Colonization begins with the colonizing of the mind, that of the setter as well as the colonized. Under a rubric of colonization and imperialism, Baldwin (1985) notes the difficulty of understanding exactly what “Afro-American” might mean as a description of a people or as “potential” (p. 551). For him, any meaningful discussion about Black identity starts with an admission and acknowledgement of the colonizing project. He writes:

[W]hat is called civilization lives first of all in the mind, has the mind above all as its province, and that the civilization, or its rudiments, can continue to live long after its externals have vanished—they can never entirely vanish from the mind. (Baldwin, 1985, p. 551)

The move towards “decolonizing the mind,” at least in critical pedagogical discourses, seems to be an all-too-easy conceptualization without much critical thought or action toward more difficult work and theorizing. Thus, I invoke and nuance epistemic decolonization to do this critical work. Though Baldwin doesn’t name “epistemic decolonization” specifically in his works, he does discuss the multiple ways, colonized peoples must grapple with the “particular and peculiar danger” of history and the sheer fecundity and tenacity of language. In his seminal essay “Princes and Powers,” Baldwin describes and reports the proceedings of the 1956 Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists convened at the Sorbonne University in Paris. Among the participants were writers, intellectuals, and staunch Pan-Africanists from the Diaspora, including Aime Cesaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Richard Wright, George Lamming, Cheikh Anta Diop and others. Cesaire was among the most vocal writers about psychological machinery of colonization, asserting,

In the culture to be born there will no doubt be old and new elements. How these elements will be mixed is not a question to which any individual can respond. The response must be given by the community. But we can say this: that the response will be given, and not verbally, but in tangible facts, and by action. (p. 53)

In other words, Césaire sought to account for a futurity of Black culture, a complex *mélange* of cultures expressed by colonized peoples that would include aspects of the colonized and the colonizer. Baldwin attempts to also account for this cultural and linguistic happening but also articulate dimensions and parameters under which such work would take place.

As Baldwin and the other participants of the Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists understood, to work towards an epistemic decolonization, we must tackle the hegemonic ideologies. The hegemony of schools remains one of the ways hegemonic ideologies are passed on. This fact is not lost on Baldwin, who adeptly notices that this great conference is taking place at “one of the great institutions of Western learning” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 54). Indeed, an examination of the history of schooling in America confirms that this was the impetus for these educational sites. At various times in US history, schools have been used to implement or satisfy various goals—to promote democracy and democratic ideals, procure social equity (“education as the great equalizer”), and to provide character education as a nationalistic endeavor. At times these purposes and goals have had competing agendas and at times they have overlapped. As Gramsci notes, “every relationship of hegemony is an educational one” (Gramsci as quoted in Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 343). In one way, schools are sites of ideological struggle, as they are used to maintain State and corporate power. Foss (2009) discusses

how ideology becomes hegemony (p. 210). She tells us that hegemony is the “privileging of the ideology of one group over that of other groups” (p. 210). Foss acknowledges the inherent ideological function of the educational institutions, which “teaches obedience to orders and the necessity to follow rules” (p. 211). The ideology of schools and the rhetorics that surround schooling are at stake.

In order to deconstruct and critique dominant ideologies and hegemonies, critical educators must begin to acknowledge, study, and disseminate the dynamic values of marginalized peoples. Because of racialized oppressions, Michael Dumas (2004) argues

. . . Black people produce ways of thinking, construct identities/consciousness, and formulate/transmit values with the explicit or implicit aim of preventing self-annihilation, meaninglessness, and individual or collective disembodiment (the separation of the spirit/soul from the body/flesh). (p. 156)

These identities and values culminate in knowledges—decolonizing knowledges—that enable marginalized people to resist the structures of oppression. These decolonizing knowledges also yield an attending set of decolonizing practices, which are constantly presented in marginalized peoples’ cultural productions. Perhaps Black vernaculars and literacies, which bear witness to the experiences of those who use them, are repositories of these decolonizing knowledges. However, when Black people enter schools these knowledges are discredited, and they are asked to disavow these vernaculars, as they are figured as “non-standard” and deficient. The vacillation between languages and knowledges that speak to our existence and the languages and knowledges of dominant cultures often ends with disastrous results. “[A]ny Negro who is born in this country and

undergoes the American educational system” Baldwin (1998) warns, “runs the risk of becoming schizophrenic” (p. 679).

To mitigate this effect, classrooms and curricula should reflect the students and their communities. This type of decolonizing knowledge reveals the truth of both those marginalized and those who wish to maintain ideological dominance. Again, Baldwin’s insights prove useful:

If, for example, one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools so that Negroes learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you would be liberating not only Negroes, you’d be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history. (p. 683)

While the argument can be made that literature has been used to solidify ideological stances of both the State and corporate interests, literature also contains decolonizing knowledges. In this respect, African American writers engage in a “resisting discourse, a set of communicative practices that constitute a text of resistance against White America’s racism and its Eurocentric cultural dominance” (Smitherman, 1997, p.7). In this respect, writers can be viewed as embodying an agency that resists the colonizing project. Counter hegemonic ideologies involving resistance and perhaps art remains one of the best rhetorical strategies to provide not just a rhetorically ideological resistance—but also suggest specific ways to resist. Thus, it is very important to teach students the roles literacies and languages play in liberating them from oppression, and to develop reading strategies to see how the adoption of dominant languages are constructed to maintain certain ideologies. Black queer poetics holds in close proximity this



decolonizing ideological stance and process—resistance is not just a characteristic but a more integral entity of Black queer poetics.

**“That Loveless Education”: Pedagogies of Oppression and Praxes of Vernacularity**

The essay was Baldwin’s primary genre, a highly stylized prose that combines autobiographical connections and philosophical ruminations. Baldwin is commonly thought of as one of America’s greatest essayists. The ideological rhetoric Baldwin espouses in three works (“On Language,” “Black English: A Dishonest Argument,” and “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare”) serve as the basis for his famous essay about race and language, “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” published in 1979 in the *New York Times*. It is important to begin this analysis of similar thematics of an essay and move to two speeches on the same thematic of language and its effects on our relationships to others and us. His essays are more linear in its presentation and argumentation while his speeches often give way to the often frenetic yet profundity of Baldwin’s vocal affectations and style.

Several decades before his often-quoted and anthologized essay “If Black English . . .,” we see Baldwin beginning to grapple with ideas of language acquisition, expression, and literary art. Baldwin chooses to emphasize certain overarching elements in each iteration of his thoughts on this subject: the centrality of schools/schooling in the suppression of language variation and expression, Black language as a repository of Black experience or history, and Black vernacular as pedagogical possibility. By engaging a critical return to Baldwin’s earlier, previously uncollected work, I wish to provide not only context for the evolution of his thinking about the English language but

also how his theorizing functions as both a pedagogical performance of Black public intellectualism and as the critical imaginative impulse for most of his work. The essays contain a connective theme of the illusion of (white) innocence, a useless sentiment that prevents critical consciousness and the acquisition of difficult knowledge (namely, the world is not white) and how “home languages” or vernaculars repudiate this dominant ideology. Thus, Baldwin’s public musings and discussions of language, both as essays and speeches, constitute an iteration of public pedagogy that “occurs both when culture socializes us into dominant ideologies and as critical educators intervene, engaging students in critical discussions about how culture works to instill dominant values.” (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 361).

In “On Language, Race, and the Black Writer,” Baldwin (2010) broaches the difficulty Black Americans have being taught the English language and emphasizes the often-strained relationship with a language that is constantly trying to annihilate our experience as American citizens and, more importantly, as humans. He begins with the assertion that writers must grapple critically with the language they are using: for Black writers, this relationship is tenuous and strained. As I have intimated previously, Baldwin used his own life as a representative, though not exhaustive, model of this phenomenon. He begins with a supposition: “Writers are obliged, at some point, to realize that they are involved in a language which they must change. And for a Black writer in this country to be born into the English language is to realize that the assumptions on which the language operates are his enemy” (p. 140). To escape the cruel realities of his society, Baldwin left the US and eventually settled in Paris, a favorite of United States

expatriates. And while Baldwin made France his home, his writing always spoke for and about the experiences of Black Americans. Baldwin did not appreciate “the beat of the language of the people who had produced [him]” (p. 140) until he found himself in France and unable to communicate with the French. When Baldwin left the US for Europe, he took with him a typewriter and two Bessie Smith albums. Notably, he found his voice in the beat of the rueful melodies of those albums. As Baldwin (2010) would later argue in “The Uses of the Blues,” that the language and vernacularity of the Blues necessarily bore witness to the survival of his people.

In 1980, Baldwin (2010) delivered remarks at a symposium titled “Black English and The Education of Black Children and Youth” at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. “Black English: A Dishonest Argument” begins with another supposition, that talking about language is “a very difficult thing” that invokes the “historical moment” of “the question of black English” (p. 154). The tension between Black English (black and non-standard dialects) and standard American English culminated in the 1979 court case *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District* (Whiteman, 1980; Mayes, 1980; Fiske, 1981; Yellin, 1980). The lawyers for the five Black children argued that the language curriculum of the district was discriminatory and failed to adequately account for the students’ home language for instructional purposes. As Yellin (1980) notes, the case was about two things: whether Black English was language or a dialect and what was its relationship to school achievement of Black children (p. 150). Judge Charles W. Joiner of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan ruled for the plaintiffs and instructed that “the Ann Arbor

School Board must identify Black English speaking students who need special help learning Standard English” and further order the teachers attend training workshops about dialect awareness (Yellin, 1980, p. 151).

With the Black Power movement of the 1970s, conversations were being had about the effects and efficacy of dominant white curricula and pedagogies. Notably, Black scholars and writers saw language as a major site of contestation, as it had always been, challenging not only curriculum but also how teachers related to their students. In 1974, the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication passed resolution titled “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” which stated, “We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style” (Smitherman, 1995, p. 21). In 1977, Geneva Smitherman published her critical acclaimed book *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. She attended to the “nitty-gritty of answering the questions, just what *is* Black English, where did it come from and what are the implications for Black-white interaction and teaching black children?” (p. 2) Smitherman highlighted the socio-political utility of the language, why it arose in the first place and also emphasized both the language and style of Black speech.

Baldwin (1964) begins his essay, “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare,” with a seemingly probable yet modest assumption: “Every writer in the English language, I should imagine, has at some point hated Shakespeare, has turned away from that monstrous achievement with a kind of sick envy” (as cited in Baldwin, 2010, p. 53). He

takes care to reiterate his point with a series of metaphors, comparing the new relationship with Shakespeare and the language to a flower opening in the morning, an atrophied muscle starting to function again, and to the thawing of frozen fingers. Additionally, he asserts “The greatest poet in the English language found his poetry where poetry is found: in the lives of the people. He could have done this only through love—by knowing, which is not the same thing as understanding, that whatever was happening to anyone was happening to him” (p. 68). In these essays, James Baldwin presents several (primary) themes, allusions, and concepts. Most notably, he attends to the definition and meaning of whiteness, Shakespeare as paradoxical representation of (counter) hegemonic English, and the role of language to Black Americans.

### **The Meaning of Whiteness**

At times Baldwin’s meandering style seems whimsical, bombastic, and caustic—and it is—but perhaps it reflects the often, incoherent experience of African-Americans in the United States and the incoherence of the self is not ours alone. As he notes a number of immigrants from Europe gave up their coherence, a sense of meaning and lineage for the promise of America—Whiteness. And he believes and knows language was the linchpin of this new, vacuous identity:

When the Europeans arrived in America, there was a moment in their lives when they had to learn to speak English, when they became guys named Joe. Guys named Joe couldn’t speak to their fathers because their fathers couldn’t speak English. That meant a rupture, a profound rupture, with their own history, so that they could become guys named Joe. And in doing so, Joe never found out anything else about himself. (p. 142)

The cost of American identity, or the construction of white identity, meant a repudiation of whole nations, cultures, and languages. This epistemic rupture, as it were, represents the empty moral authority of whiteness. But as Baldwin decries, “I beg you to bear in mind when I use the word “white” that I am not talking as the other side of the Ku Klux Klan. There is no one, there is not a living soul in this country, who can prove he is white. Not one!” (Baldwin, 2010, p. 156). The denial of this authentic identity has been the root of much suffering and misery, which was justified as a price of racial progress. Then too Baldwin argues,

The American idea of racial progress is measured by how fast I become white. It is a trick bag, because they know perfectly well that I can never become white. I’ve drunk my share of dry martinis. I have proved myself civilized in every way I can. But there is an irreducible difficulty. Something doesn’t work. Well, I decided that I might as well act like a nigger. (p. 143)

Here, Baldwin deconstructs the myth of racial progress, or what might be called integration or accommodation, as a simple “irreducible difficulty,” that no matter a Black person’s comportment, or education, or social class, phenotypically racial identity was something that could never be overcome.

### **The Paradox of Shakespeare**

Another theme that presents itself in these essays is Shakespeare as paradoxical representation of (counter) hegemonic English. The linguistic distance students are routinely asked to assume for themselves and their communities Baldwin calls a “loveless education” (p. 53) and often leads them to detest Shakespeare and other writers like him

who they see as “authors and architects of my oppression” (p. 65). “My quarrel with the English language” Baldwin asserts,

has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter in quite another way. If the language was not my own, it might be the fault of the language; but it might also be my fault. (p. 67)

However, he views a turning point in his thinking about the language he was educated about and socialize into as an appreciation of the vernacularity of his own people. The music of those ancestors—sorrow songs, the blues and jazz—managed to achieve something striking in the face of adversity; they created new art forms to reflect the principles and values that proliferated beyond the morose moments of suffering. In essence, they invented themselves concomitantly with these art forms, “an entirely new idiom in an overwhelmingly hostile place” (p. 67).

Baldwin read Shakespeare’s presentations of Othello and Caliban (two of three Black characters in Shakespeare’s work) as anti-Black representations, distortions that looked nothing like the Black life he knew or grew up around in Harlem. He confesses, “[Shakespeare’s] great vast gallery of people, whose reality was as contradictory as it was unanswerable, unspeakably oppressed me. I was resenting, of course, the assault on my simplicity . . .” (p. 67). These simplistic depictions of Black men, Othello, a former general of the Venetian nation-state brought low by paranoia and scheming, and Caliban, a slave literally bound to the land by a wizard, were seared into the white imagination. For instance, Abigail Adams saw Othello for the first time in 1786 and later wrote to a friend that the “moor” touching “gentle Desdemona” offended her. And she also

wondered if Othello had cast a spell on Desdemona. In other words, she could not fathom why a white woman would be attracted to a Black man (Booker, 2000, p. 12). When we read, for instance, that Othello announces that upon killing Desdemona that he has thrown away “a pearl away richer than all his tribe” (p. 140). Baldwin questions the logic of Shakespeare’s assertion. Not only is it unethical to require students to read texts without unpacking anti-Black and white supremacist ideologies within them, such curricular and pedagogical practices also represent deculturalization.

### **The Role of Language to Black Americans**

Lastly, the most significant theme in the selected essays is the role language plays in the lives and survival of Black Americans. James Baldwin saw Shakespeare as representative of the type of problematics with the English language; however, he saw new possibilities of language by reexamining Shakespeare as “the last bawdy writer in the English language” (p. 67), a paradoxical, yet important, observation. Baldwin defines bawdiness as

one of the elements of jazz and revealed a tremendous, loving, and realistic respect for the body, and that ineffable force which the body contains, which Americans have mostly lost, which I had experienced only among Negroes, and of which I had then been taught to be ashamed. (p. 68)

He continues, “The authority of this language [of Black people] was in its candor, its irony, its density, and its beat: this was the authority of the language which produced me, and it was also the authority of Shakespeare” (Baldwin, “Hating Shakespeare,” p. 68).

Here, Baldwin provides a counter-narrative to the ways most students approach Shakespeare, as exemplar of the English language.



His queer reading of English signifies that Baldwin remained open to the usefulness of even the oppressor's language. Indeed, he turned that language back on the colonizers to point out their tragic sense of self-worth while also highlight the triumphs of his own people. Shakespeare represents a certain fear about the English language, but it is the one of the main languages of power and influence in the United States. Learning how to "master" it to one's advantages is a tenuous skill to acquire. As Baldwin explains, "You describe your environment in order to control it, in order to find out what it is, in order to find out who and where you are ("Dishonest Argument," p. 157). Thus, language acquisition is not a neutral action, or merely about grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary. "Grammar, even a garbled understanding of the term," Thomas (2014) argues, "is not just about correctness in English class. Grammar is about values" (para. 7). Language education and instruction also involves the ideological positions.

Thus, for Baldwin, when a Black student is asked to disavow her language, what they are beginning to be asked to do is disavow their history and to assume an ideological whiteness, which is, in fact, a loss of identity and a willful miseducation. Furthermore, discussions or so-called debates about the role of Black English to Black students demonstrates "presents [themselves] as being concerned with the validity of what is called Black English [is] the most dishonest arguments in the history of a spectacularly dishonest nation" (p. 155). Baldwin also condemned the hypocrisy of allowing the profundity of Black English for entertainment for purposes, noting the iconic American opera *Porgy and Bess* and the film *Showboat*, both of which written by white men who

utilized (at least partly) the rhythm and beat of Black English. “We, the blacks, can be described by others,” he informs, “but we are forbidden to describe ourselves” (p. 158).

As Baldwin assumes, the real problem and controversy about Black English is that it catalogs the catastrophic waste of life and resources in the name of greed and gross capitalism in the US. He says, “They lynched me, they burned me, they castrated me— knowing what they were doing— and they’re doing it until this hour. That is what these arguments are about (“Dishonest Argument,” pp. 156-157). At this point, he returns metaphorically to the auction block to situate the role of slavery in notions of language, that Black folk have been denied the human right to education and literacy; however, this time he notes that the consequence affected not just Black folk but whites as well; the price of willful, necessary illiteracy of enslaved people is the illiteracy of the nation:

the price of that ticket is we’re sitting in the most illiterate nation in the world. THE MOST ILLITERATE NATION IN THE WORLD. A monument to illiteracy. And if you doubt me, all you have to do is spend a day in Washington. I am serious as a heart attack. (p. 158)

Here, he punctuates his point with hyperbolic vernacularism, which connotes the felonious debate while intimating the ultimate consequence of such gross illiteracy. Vernacular(ism) is a queer modality, word, idiom, or expression that “refuses to be modulated, intimidated or silenced by the machinations of the public sphere” and at times both accommodates and undermines hegemonic ideologies and discourses. And this is how Baldwin is able to “disidentify” with the English language and one of its principal architects, Shakespeare.

### **Black Queer Poetics and Decolonizing Knowledges**

My theoretical framework highlights Baldwin's use of vernacular(ism) as a mode of discursive rhetorical strategy, cultural representation, and decolonizing knowledge. In this way, Baldwin's insistence of vernacular(ism) is unruly and undisciplined. His essays and speeches deploy what Vershawn Young (2010) calls "code-meshing" that incorporates many dialects, vernaculars, registers, and dictions to produce more authentic and effect communication. Because of the complexity of Baldwin's language, his essays and speeches often meandered and often turned quickly on a punctuated phrase or vernacular flourish to reveal a destination the reader or listener had not previously anticipated. My queer reading also privileges Baldwin's continuous practice of disidentification, as taken up taken up by Muñoz (1999) and hooks (1994). In this way, Baldwin engages an ethic of refusal that eschews binary thinking while embracing variability, discursive play, and possibility. His work emerges as a meditation on a personal and often prophetic analysis of his social understanding and experience of race (also a queer figuration).

As Ndopu reminds us, the queer project is about "radical love," resistance, decolonization, "deep spirituality and sweetness" (Hanno, 2013). As I think of Baldwin's abiding faith in love and his critique of "loveless education," I am reminded that the word "education" comes from two Latin words: *educere*, which means "to lead out" and *educare*, which means "to nourish or to train" (Winch & Gingell, 2008, p. 63). Baldwin (2010) directly questions the oppressors ability to nourish or lead Black children: "How can we expect people who cannot educate their own children to educate anybody else" (p.

144)? Because he views “the school” as the focal point of our social problems, his solution is simple:

But we could begin with the schools— by taking our children out of those schools, taking them off those buses. Everybody knows, who thinks about it, that you can’t change a school without changing a neighborhood, and you can’t change a neighborhood without changing the city, and there ain’t nobody prepared to change the city, because they want the city to be white. (p. 143)

Baldwin links the racial unrest and strife to the deplorable educational institutions and opportunities to ethical pedagogical relations.

An ideology of resistance emerges in this discussion of James Baldwin’s work. His essays support long-held arguments and positions by African Americans. And as a member of a long tradition of Black public intellectuals and writers, his work provides further evidence of the moral bankruptcy of the US and indicts educational institutions who often inculcate students with hegemonic ideologies vis-à-vis curriculum and pedagogy. Moreover, his essays on language encourage Black readers to value their vernacular/cultural languages, stating that it acknowledges and valorizes an experience needed to make the English language more useful. His ideological stance affirms three primarily epistemological positions: 1) that Black English centers a particular experience or history not found in Standard English (and necessarily so); 2) that Black English establishes its own criteria for judging its useful; that is, it insists on its on “measuring stick” and blatantly disregards the metrics of oppressive regimes (In fact, it participates in active resistance through vernacularism); and 3) that Black English reiterates Black folk

as astute rhetorical agents. These stances inform Baldwin's larger point about the nature and purposes of schooling in America.

Baldwin (1998) presents an ideology that challenges the nefarious schooling used by the State, one that produces a "citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society" (p. 679). "The purpose of education," Baldwin asserts,

is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. (p. 678–679)

For Baldwin, schooling should involve critical question-posing and examination, while also presenting linguistic tools for resisting that schooling. To this end, both Morrison and Baldwin view the linguistic oppression practiced in schools more than problematic and goes so far as to asserts that it seeks to annihilate the psyches of Black children.

Morrison (year) writes, "It's terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging. . . This is a really cruel fallout of racism" (LeClair, p.27). As I have noted, the essays examined in the this dissertation culminate in Baldwin's "If Black English . . .," where he sounds a similar note to Morrison: "A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that

way.” In this “dishonest debate” about language and the education of Black children, Baldwin’s final pronouncement situates himself as a pithy philosopher-advocate.

While Baldwin and other intellectuals of his generation were “spokespersons for the race,” it can be said that quite a bit of their work addresses white audiences and the patriarchal order. They are addressing the white gaze, as Morrison writes. As an international writer, he had many audiences, but for the purposes of this analysis, I have focused on his white and Black American audiences and the attending ideologies he elaborates for both. For his Black audiences, he wants us to understand that this suffering is not happenstance, that we are victims of someone else’s imagination, history and white supremacy. Additionally, he wishes us to feel a sense of pride in our experience and language, to embrace them in order to change the often-dire situations, our perspectives, presences, cultures, and sense of selves. For his white audience, Baldwin wants them to understand that their identity is fabricated, costly, wasteful, and dishonest, that their so-called ignorance and innocence is neither and also cost other marginalized people, including Indigenous Americans. What whites call history is also a fabricated narrative that shores up their identity. For Baldwin, there are points of similarity of experience among all Americans; there is not a complete alienation, and language and writing can foster connections between all Americans.

While the argument can be made that literature has been used to solidify ideological stances of both the State and corporate interests, literature also contains decolonizing knowledges. In this respect, African American writers engage in a “resisting discourse, a set of communicative practices that constitute a text of resistance against

White America's racism and its Eurocentric cultural dominance" (Smitherman, 1997, p. 7). Thus, writers embody an agency that opposes the colonizing project. Counter hegemonic ideologies involving resistance, and art remains one of the best rhetorical and poetic strategies to provide not just a rhetorically ideological resistance--but also suggest specific ways to resist. Thus, it is very important to teach students the role their literacies and languages play in liberating them to see the world in ways that make sense to them and develops a literacy that sees that the world is constructed/functions to maintain certain ideologies. And, as I discuss in more detail in the final chapter of this project, Black queer poetics holds in close proximity this decolonizing ideological stance and process—resistance is not just a characteristic by more integral entity of Black queer poetics.

## CHAPTER IV

### **“HOW THE PAST COMES BACK”: BLACK QUEER TEMPORALITY AND CHRONOTROPING IN THE POETICS OF NATASHA TRETHERWEY**

Time catches up with kingdoms and crushes them, gets its teeth into doctrines and rends them; time reveals the foundations on which any kingdom rests, and eats at those foundations, and it destroys doctrines by proving them to be untrue. (Baldwin, 1963, p. 46)

A poem I write is not just about me; it is about national identity, not just regional but national, the history of people in relation to other people. I reach for these outward stories to make sense of my own life, and how my story intersects with a larger public history. (Trethewey, as quoted in Hall, 2013, p. 110)

#### **Poetry and Poetics: A Labor of Time**

On June 7, 2012, Natasha Trethewey was appointed the 19th Poet Laureate

Consultant in Poetry by James H. Billington, the Librarian of Congress. In a statement Billington noted,

Natasha Trethewey is an outstanding poet/historian in the mold of Robert Penn Warren, our first Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. Her poems dig beneath the surface of history—personal or communal, from childhood or from a century ago—to explore the human struggles that we all face. (Osterberg & Ursche, 2012)

The prestigious appointment is largely ceremonial but in recent years, Laureates have designed and implemented projects to raise awareness of the beauty and utility of poetry for American citizens. Highlighting her role as an academic, Trethewey began to keep “office hours,” making herself available to converse with general visitors in the Poetry



Room of the Library of Congress (Urschel, 2013). Apart of the ceremonial duties also includes delivering a “closing lecture” at the end of the appointment. At the conclusion of her second term as Poet Laureate, Natasha Trethewey (2014) chose to critically return to a poet that continues to inspire her work, the first US Poet Laureate, Robert Penn Warren. Her decision to discuss Warren was no doubt based on his poetics but also his ever-evolving views of race, segregation, and the South. Both Southerners, Trethewey feels a special kinship with Warren and with the ways he attempted to acknowledge changes in racial ideology in the country. Warren’s wish to “examine not only the facts of the past, but to historicize human nature; to consider the actions of human beings not in a vacuum, but as a response to culture and society,” constitutes the critical imbrications that form the nexus of American literature. For Trethewey, Warren serves as a literary ancestor who grappled with history and poetics in ways that tried to illuminate their complexities and consequences for a nation, and not just a region. In many ways, Trethewey has also sought to do the same, taking up the labor of writing as simultaneous excavation and construction, while also acknowledging the ways her identity as a mixed race, biracial, or Black woman has been sublimated in hegemonic notions of time.

A quick description of Trethewey’s poetic work highlights her compulsory relationship with time and history, often transcribing and modulating historical images, both paintings and photography, into ekphrasis poetry, a form that provides expressive and reflective descriptions of other works of art. Trethewey returns to the power of the image of the Black subject in the Americas over and over again, as recurring theme and source material for her work. Trethewey’s tendency toward ekphrastic poetics began with

the publication of her first collection, *Domestic Work* (Trethewey, 2000). In the collection, Trethewey documents the domestic life of 20th century African Americans and sparingly uses language to portray the interior lives of Black folk and to explore communal and intimate relationships. The work engages a type of new historicism in which she interprets and critically imagines the culture and experience of this time period. Early in her career, Trethewey aligns her poetics with a discourse of history that circulates around what it means to be a marginalized person in America. In her next collection, she continues her examination with the same methodology to look at a prostitute in early 20th century New Orleans, Louisiana. *Bellocq's Ophelia* (Trethewey, 2002) presents a series of dramatic monologues to fictionalize the life of a sex worker, a segment of the population often shunned and overlooked. By centering the life of a sex worker, Trethewey re-constructs a record of a woman through the social positioning and literary aesthetic. In 2006, she followed up this intimate depiction with a *Native Guard*, which won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. The privilege and prestige of this prize signaled the arrival of a new, exciting voice among the throngs of American literary masters. *Native Guard* features a slate of confessional poems, mining the grief and loss of her mother. Finally, with the publication of *Thrall* (2012), Trethewey picked up the threads of memory and public history begun in initial work. This time, she turned her critical eye towards the Casta paintings of Juan Rodríguez Juárez (Nance, 2012, p. 56), working against historical amnesia and erasure. While Trethewey reflects on the complexities of race, identity, and loss repeatedly, time and history constitute the main through-lines of Trethewey's oeuvre.

Readers have only to look at Natasha Trethewey's life to understand her disidentification with (the) time(s). Born in 1966 in Gulfport, Mississippi, to an African American mother and a white-Canadian father, and because of the oppressive and racist laws of the times, Trethewey's birth was considered illegitimate. Indeed, her parents had no legal right to marry in Mississippi. Due to these circumstances, perhaps Trethewey insists her poetry "makes connections between past and present so that the historical poems I make (I hope) still speak to—in some ways—our contemporary moment" (Begiebing et al., 2004, p. 585). In her poem "How the Past Comes Back," Trethewey (2012) ruminates about the ways memory affects us:

Like shade across a stone,  
                   gradually —  
                           the name it darkens;  
 as one enters the world  
                   through language — (p. 72)

Specifically, she enters her reality through temporal vernaculars such as *past*, *endless*, *year after year*, *refrain*, *repeating*, and *forgets*. Signifying a sundial, the line "shadow across a stone" emphasizes the passage of time, the forward trajectory of time, though the speaker in the poem is being pulled paradoxically back in time. Trethewey situates the poem toward the end of *Thrall* (2012), itself a reflection of racialized histories, times and spaces. To complicate her critical undertaking in the collection, I ask, "What is the past coming back to?" In this way, her meditation about her own contemplative reflections mirror and commune with a certain set of logics African American writers, in particular, have developed about the notion of time. As Sara Ahmed (2006) surmises, time labors

with us as much as we labor with it. Trethewey, like other African American writers, uses time to grapple with cultural and racial consciousness.

What is time? How do humans experience time and to what end? James Baldwin warns, “People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.” How do we negotiate this condition? And how do we represent it in our literatures? Etymologically, the word *time* has several sociolinguistic sources, but most definitions point to the idea of demarcation, that we can tick it off, that it passes, and that it is irredeemable. Various taxonomies of time/temporality evidence this view: *cyclical time*, *linear time*, *relative time*, *lunar time*, *down time*, *long time*, *the next time*, *lag time*, *difficult times*, etc. Time, as we know it or experience it, is often acknowledged as a personal aspect; but time is also socially constructed and imbued with certain political agendas and deployed as an organizing principle to impose order. In this way, time is both an imperialist, patriarchal object and subject. In Western cultures, time is purported to keep all things, subsume all effects, make all events “legible” (i.e. history). Time can also be experienced differently as it engages racialized and gendered subjectivities. Time is a social construct and a cultural construct shaped by our understandings of sexuality, race, gender, and other aspects. This belief challenges the normative notions of time. Specifically, when one considers how Natasha Trethewey, a Black (biracial) woman, views and utilizes time—it may constitute what some scholars have called *queer time*. I am interested in how time exposes ideologies, how temporal discourses and logics undergirds social processes and institutions such as the school. This chapter offers a discussion of Trethewey’s poems

through the use of the literary notion of poetics and then challenges this reading by introducing and focusing on notions of race, which leads to a queering of poetics.

### **The Disidentification with Time: Queer Time and Black Queer Poetics**

Queer time and temporalities extend beyond the notion of running counter to standard time. Again, “standard time” is a normative idea of linear temporality, which is linked to privileged identities such as White, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc. The concept that time itself is a privilege is often hard for students to comprehend. When exploring the linkages between queerness and temporality, I turn to several scholars.

Gary Needham (2009) writes,

Queerness is something that is literally out-of-time in the sense of being urgent immediate and on the outside. Queer time’s refusal of normative time instead favors extremes of temporal experience: asynchrony, discontinuity, belatedness, arrest, coincidence, time wasting, reversal, time travel, the palimpsest, boredom, and ennui. (p. 152)

Jack Halberstam (2005) defines queer time as “a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 6). Additionally, Halberstam notes “histories of racialization cannot avoid spatial conceptions of time, conflict, or political economy” (p. 8). Furthermore, McCallum and Tuhkanen (2011) explores the vernacularism of the temporal, “Queer time has long been colloquially understood to be about fifteen minutes later than the appointed time” (p. 1). Curiously and playfully, I connect this approach with that of “CP time” or “colored people’s time” (also running fifteen minutes later than an appointed time), another

colloquial witticism about straight time (or white time) used among Black Diaspora. As I have often described it for my students, Black folk are always “on time” but usually “in time.” In this way, being in time participates in an embodied temporality that might be thought of as rhythmic and sensations. As we think through normative notions of time, the idea of time signatures in musical notation and literature attempts to comport all musicians to a common time. Indeed, there is the 4/4 time signature called “common time.” Here, I am reminded of the Jazz idiom of being “in pocket,” meaning playing or singing within the meter of the song, but not necessarily on beat. So, my theorizing for this chapter engages what I refer as the “temporalities of blackness and Black identities.” That is, I examine how constructions of race and the experiences of racialized subjects are represented in African American poetics.

In the previous chapters, I have discussed Black queer poetics and its relation to critical literacy and resistance epistemologies. Here, I turn to its relationship with time. Specifically, I argued that Black queer poetics center, among other aspects, spatiotemporal rubrics that account for African American migration over time, Disaporia modernities, and individual and communal queerness in multiple iterations. The importance of time to the African American literary tradition is stressed. Black queer poetics also engages a chrono-epistemology called Sankofa (Foster, 2010; Karenga, 2006). Mulana Karenga (2006) understands this pedagogical imperative as primarily a historical one:

In its most expansive understanding and definition, sankofa contains three basic elements and processes: (a) an ongoing quest for knowledge that is to say a continuing search for truth and meaning in history and the world; (b) a return to

the source, to one's history and culture for grounding and models in one's unique cultural way of being human in the world; and (c) a critical retrieval and reclaiming the past, especially the hidden, denied, and undiscovered truths of the African initiative and experience in the world. (p. 413)

While Sankofa is often read as a belief in returning to the past to secure a strong future, I read this concept as a moment of *critical return* to (de)stabilize the present, make sense of current predicaments and particularities, and cast temporal reckoning upon present ideologies, etc. "Theorizing back requires us to reprove and reclaim theories," thus, Sankofa has necessary implications for my examination of connections between Black queer poetics and temporalities. For so many marginalized constituents of the United States, the power to look, and indeed, critically examine one's past is not a luxury (Anyon, 2009, p. 189).

In another temporal vein, Karla Holloway (1992), literary studies theorist, examines the function of time in African American women's literary texts. Notably, she argues,

. . . instead just talking (telling) seems to be the way from memory and time to work out some sort of textu[r]al truce. History is reconstructed within such a frame and the writer is able to write out of a matrix of memory that is both sensual and visceral, as well as to reconstruct a logic of repetitive, circular complexity rather than a binary of linear polarity. (p. 108)

Holloway also stipulates that African American women writers have used a myriad of linguistic structures and strategies that are concerned with an aspect rather than tense (future tense), which is to say these texts dissolve the distinction between synchrony and diachrony. "In addition to literary synchronicity," Holloway argues, "a figurative sharing

of metaphysical space between historical recoverable events and events metaphorically retrieved through the insatiable memory and myth occurs” (p. 72). José Esteban Muñoz’s turn toward queer futurity and queer utopias also influences my thinking about Trethewey and her temporal poetics. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz (2009) begins his theorizing by reading a poem “A photography” (1974) by James Schuyler. Muñoz notes that the poem engages in “multiple temporalities and the affective mode known as ecstasy” (p. 25). Moreover, he argues that ecstasy (desire’s awakening/fulfillment) requires that we step out of “straight time.” All of these theories and theorists provide lenses to examine the uses of time in African American women’s writings and are particularly useful for looking at the poetics of Natasha Trethewey.

### **The Desire to Constantly Circle Back: History, Time, and Poetics**

As Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo and Pauline Sameshina (2009) note in *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences*,

[h]istorically, poetic inquiry has been found in discussions and practices of autobiography and autoethnography as research methods and in narrative inquiry [...]The potential power of poetic inquiry is to do as poetry does, that is to synthesize experience in a direct and affective way (p. xxii).

Poetry allows readers to slip away from the drudgery and mendacity of our everyday realities into a phenomenological self-presence. The economy of language allows us to engage in ways that delve into deep contemplative moments without huge, intractable swaths of time. In short, the commitment of a poetic reading is usually short. This is not to say poetry is less complicated than other literary genres, such as the novel, but the poem/poetic form allows us to get “right down to business,” to get directly to the work



queer temporality requires. “The Poet alights,” Maxine Hong Kingston (2002) contemplates, “in the right-now time, and stays in the special ordinary moment. If I were to make an hour for poetry every day, I would change my life” (pp. 30–31). However, the paradox of poetry is that it offers opportunities of deep contemplative moments—but they do not necessitate this contemplation. I agree with McCallum and Tuhkanen (2011) as they suggest textual analysis provides a “more vitalist perspective” to examine queer temporality (p. 13). As an exploration of history, memory and place, the study of temporality can help illuminate intersubjectivity and hegemonic ideologies. As such, the labor of temporal studies seems to be the same labor as poetry; it witnesses and remembers in ways that resist erasure and absence.

Poetic forms such as the elegy and ekphrasis are particularly useful because they uniquely engage discourses of historiographical analysis and themes of return, erasure, nostalgia, and memory: all of which I call *chrono-tropes*, or what Eva Hoffman (2009) names *temporal ego-ideals*. “[R]hythmic forms of expression—in music and dance, as well as in poetry and gesture,” Hoffman tells us,

are great carriers of temporality; it is within these that specific cultural valences of time are often most directly and intelligibly articulated. If time is shaped individually within the subjectivity, then its cultural constructions can be said to provide temporal ego-ideals. (pp. 125–126)

Trethewey insists the type of poetic forms she uses has “everything to do with the idea of historical memory and reinscription [...] the necessity of repeating them, saying it not once, but twice, to make such things become memorable” (as cited in Hall, 2013, p. 157). Specifically, Trethewey seems partial to the elegiac and ekphrasis poetic forms. The word

elegy comes from a Greek word that means ‘lament’ and is a poem that mourns an individual or a tragic event (Bennett & Royle, 2004, p. 290). The elegy is located in the temporal and in a sense of timelessness. The elegy “ritualizes grief into language and thereby makes it more bearable. The great elegy touches the unfathomable and originates in the unspeakable in unacceptable loss” (Hirsh, 2014, p. 197). Mourning requires one to step out/from the forward stream of time. Ekphrasis poetry “involves the attempt to describe a visual work of art in words” and “denotes any attempt to encapsulate a visual image or perception or effect in language” (Bennett & Royle, 2004, p. 290). “Ekphrasis modes” Hirsh (2014) states, “inevitably address, and sometimes challenge the great divide between spatial and temporal experience . . .” (p. 196). Both of these forms resist a certain passivity of language and labor. That is, they are not meant only to be read. Because these forms deal with loss and time, the poet tries to cast the reader into moments of reflection. Trethewey argues that elegiac and ekphrastic poems “create a momentary stay against the inevitability of loss,” which follows poet Robert Hass thinking about the elegiac impulse of language (Hall, 2013, p. 131). Again, I return to Sara Ahmed’s (2006) critical question about time: “What does time do, if not make available the possibility of seeing that which is not in view? Time is also occupied not only in the sense that we do something with it, but also in how it is available to us only through what we do” (p. 186). Additionally, Trethewey finds that ekphrastic poems have a practical utility for poets and arguably for readers as well, that it provides “something that is concrete from which to start . . . rather than starting with abstractions” (Hall, 2013,

p. 114). These concrete monuments and photographs form the basis of her poetic critique of stifled historical imagination.

### **Theories of Time and Space: The Rhetorical Agency of Trethewey's Poetics**

Her 2006 collection, *Native Guard*, is divided into three sections. The first section of the collection is comprised of chonotropic elegies, which center her memories, mediations, and mourning of sudden and violent murder of her mother. Gwendolyn Ann Turnbough remarried after her divorce from Trethewey's father and was violently shot outside her apartment by her estranged second husband. Unfortunately, Trethewey's brother, who was waiting for the bus, witnessed the murder. When Trethewey received the news, she was finishing her freshman year at the University of Georgia. The loss further strained her relationship with her father, the poet, Eric Trethewey. To deal with the loss of her mother, Natasha Trethewey began working on a set of elegies that would comprise the driving force of her collection *Native Guard*. The work of elegies mandates the arresting of time to attend to inconsolable and incomprehensible loss. A corona of sonnets occupies the middle section of *Native Guard*. Through the epistolary poetic form, Mississippi's *Native Guard* wrote home about their experiences, motivations, and fears about the Civil War. Thus, the very title of this collection, *Native Guard*, symbolizes and pays homage to the "forgotten" African Americans who fought for both the Confederate and Union armies. In the last section, Trethewey returns to more personal ruminations about her childhood and revolve around her deeply conflicting and confusing views of her mixed-race heritage. Because Trethewey privileges temporality in her poetry, I wish to discuss at some length the function and her choice of "Theories of Time and Space" as

the epigraphic poem for *Native Guard*. I contend that this poem not only functions to center our thinking about this particular collection, but also serves as Trethewey's philosophies of temporality and critical return. This poem encapsulates and demonstrates Trethewey's associations and connections with poetics and queer temporality.

In "Theories of Time and Space," Natasha Trethewey signals the temporal-textual journey of the American South and her presence there. She warns the reader early in the poem that once the journey begins, "there's no going home" (p. 1). This warning also tries to prepare the reader for the impending imperatives often associated with exile and home, tensions between the margin and the center. As a prefatory poem, she equally indicates *Native Guard's* potentiality as a "tome of memory" (p. 1). Using Black queer poetics as a lens, Trethewey engages the gaps and silences present in history and embarks on task to account for dialectical aspect of memory. Time has no fixed essence, and as such Trethewey utilizes this concept to ease the reader into the temporal discomfort of *Native Guard* via this poem. Recounting a trip to Ship Island, Mississippi, with her husband and brother, "Theories of Time and Space" explains how time resists its own death (the past, perhaps). Literature, it can be thought, disciplines time in essential ways that reveals its nature and power us as readers. Ship Island contains the memorial to the Native Guard Again, *Native Guard* furthers not only her narrative with increased meaning and subtly, but the book also takes up the story of the Native Guard, who were stationed on Fort Massachusetts on Ship Island, off the coast of Mississippi. Because history has forgotten these soldiers, her critical return and subsequent critical retrieval of their story seeks to acknowledge and rectify what she portrays as "yet another way that a

history is forgotten, buried, or overlooked” (Rowell, 2004, p. 1032). This gap in Mississippi’s history (and by extension, the South’s as well) strikes a personal tenor with Trethewey, who views it as “yet another history that I think would’ve been very important to have known when I was growing up and spending the Fourth of July on that island, a little Black girl in Mississippi” (p. 1032). In this way, Trethewey assumes the narrative of the Native Guards as a part of her own.

A photographer takes the photos of visitors as they board a ferry for Ship Island. When they return, he has a photo of them waiting and available for purchase. The photographer attempts to memorialize who they were in that transitory moment; but through his trade, he commodifies time as well. He photographs the travelers in the hope that someone will buy them when they return. Through her meditation on this trip and the photographer’s trade, Trethewey uses this incident as a critical retrieval, a Sankofa moment. In this way, the photograph unwittingly participates in the paradox of history, trying to capture that which cannot be captured. But the attempt is, as I insist, a worthwhile endeavor. Arguably, Trethewey preforms the same work as the photographer. Whereas the photographer uses the camera to “frame” a particular moment, it seems to rather insular to the subject. It possibly lacks the criticality that Trethewey’s poetry seeks to accomplish. In lines 3-4, 18-20 of the poem, she writes, “Everywhere you go will be somewhere/you’ve been./someone will take your picture:/the photograph-who you were-/will be waiting when you return.” In her poem, Trethewey also utilizes various tropes of time: *going home*, *dead end*, *loose stitches* (in time), *waiting*, and *return*. (In fact, if you collapse the entire poem to only its first and last words, it reads: “You return.” And while

I'm not entirely sure, I believe this truncated reading is intentional.) The picture, like poems, captures who the visitors used to be, who we were; it memorializes—materially—an intangible moment. Pictures allow us a moment to ponder the constant loss of time, of self, of memory. However, the physical labor of the photographer and the poet provide possibilities of time-play—temporal return and temporal (dis)comforts. The photographer's product has no way of producing those temporal returns in the way Trethewey and other poets can achieve through certain rhythms and repetitions. She explains the elegiac impulse of her historiographical writing:

I rely on storytelling quite a bit because I see narrative as a significant element of the “invisible scaffolding” for my poems. However, linear narratives in poems can be tricky, and the poem's music and lyricism can be weighed down by the “story.” For this reason, I must employ other techniques such as nonlinear narratives that have overlapping stories, or stories told from different perspectives. I also turn to repetition in which the phrasing, as in a musical composition, changes subtly each time it is repeated, thus furthering the narrative and deepening the meaning of the story at the same time. (Begiebing et al., 2004, p. 590)

Trethewey continues to further the narrative of race with deeper meaning as she extends her gaze. Whereas *Native Guard* begins with ruminations of time and space, moving from personal elegies about her mother to elegies about the South and lost innocence, in *Thrall* (2012) transitions to a new spatiotemporal consideration of the global American South and racial categorization in Mexico and Central America, as well as returning once again to the theme her racial heritage.

Literally, thrall means “a person in bondage” (by time or blood, perhaps) but also for the root of the word enthralled which means “to be enslaved.” Mediations of bondage

and slavery link the two collections. Thus, *Thrall* (2012) concerns itself with “histories of race across time and space” (Hall, 2013, p. 198) and deploys both racialized taxonomies and temporal taxonomies. A vast portion of the collection is inspired by casta paintings from Mexico. As Trethewey explains Thrall’s ideological underpinnings are concerned with

the historical investigation of the language and iconography of eighteenth-century casta paintings in colonial Mexico that showed the mixed blood unions and the offspring of those unions in the colony—the taxonomies of the children inscribed right there on the paintings. I became obsessed with these families—mother, father, and child—and always the white father, the black mother, and the mulatto child. Of course, there was a reason I was fascinated by that. I thought it was just this language or iconography, but indeed it’s about my own family, and so the difficult thing I’ve learned is that these poems are about my father, and the history of colonization, and who the colonialist is, and who the colonial bodies are. (Hall, 2013, p. 124)

These casta paintings reflect Trethewey’s own history and narrative, not just that of Mexico; and they quite literally “enthrall” concepts of race and power. However, Trethewey centers her meditations of race with a prefatory poem titled “Elegy,” which details a memory of a fishing trip with her father. Eric Trethewey remains a curious (and queer) choice for an elegy, particularly because he was still living at the time the poem was written. Perhaps she did not know her time with him would be as short; perhaps she did not understand the prophetic nature of writing an elegy to someone not-yet dead. Or, she chose to write an elegy, as I argue, to highlight the ideological and personal rifts with her father. It is possible that she wanted to display a wanton indifference and disregard she had experienced from him—a little literary revenge. After all, as she writes in another poem “Knowledge” that her father once wrote his “crossbreed child.” And although he

did not or could not understand how painful those words hurt Trethewey at the time and how much his words participated in an established discourse about the animalistic nature of Black people in America. Describing a trip to Thomas Jefferson's Monticello with her father, the poem painstakingly traces her tenuous relationship with her father over time.

The poem "Enlightenment" in *Thrall* does the work of historiography, which "exposes the frames and parameters of historical writing in order to further one's understanding of the circumstances of the past. Historiography offers a method of intervention in the comprehensive comprehension of and living in socio-cultural political events" (Villaverde, Kincheloe, & Helyar, 2006, 311). Historiography also engages the past and contests it as a catalog of intractable or immutable truths. "The key element in historiography is the ability to discern how history is mediated by philosophy, ideology, and politics (Villaverde et al., 2006, p. 311) and actively resists totalizing language that figures "history" as an all-encompassing, objective phenomenon. In "Enlightenment" Trethewey composes a metanarrative about mixed race heritages and the capricious nature of miscegenation itself. Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings' "history" together reveals similar power struggles and relations that can also be attributed to her parents' relationship. As the "product" of this relationship, Trethewey's poetics emphasizes that "history might be as much about the skin, physiology, and blood as they are about styles, words, clothes, and technologies" (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 196–197). Blood becomes a conduit (to use a popular time travel metaphor) to read blood beyond the persistent narrative of trauma so often attributed to African Americans. Since Trethewey stresses the primacy of mixed-race identities in her poetics, discussions of miscegenation gestures toward a



blood-politic. Blood and bloodlines contain multitudes of narratives. And, Trethewey recognizes that these narratives affect her, as well as the Americas, and the American South particularly.

Returning to a crucial aspect of my Black queer poetics, “Enlightenment” deploys a chrono-epistemology and historiography. The poem also activates a poetic pedagogy that also takes up thematics of temporality. Thus, Trethewey’s oeuvre confronts the temporality of racial trauma—both personal and communal—and addresses the notion of time’s sedimentary or accumulative effects, while also performing an archeology to uncover and reengage how Black people experience time. Her mixed-race heritage, as it is conceived in popular and social culture, is not-quite-there-yet. The heterogeneity of her blackness and the queer futurity it produces also mirrors the heterogeneity of the Americas and its queer horizons, which allow us to “see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” and “the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1).

### **Black Queer Poetics, Spatiotemporal Embodiment, and Critical Ruptures**

It is difficult to see beyond the “quagmire of the present” when one is tried and burned out. As Leggo (2005) notes, this is a great concern about teaching, “that the demands are so relentless that even the most dedicated teachers often experience burnout, dissatisfaction, ennui, hopelessness and despair” (Leggo, 2005, p. 441). Burnout and emotional exhaustion stifles not only knowledge consumption but knowledge production and exploration. How can we be expected to read critically given such difficulties? And this is where the profundity and possibility of a pedagogy of poetics enters. Poetry allows

one to read with/against difference. Or as Griffin (1995) tells us, “Poetry does not describe. It is the thing. It is an experience, not the secondhand record of an experience, but the experience itself” (Griffin, as cited in Leggo, 2005, p. 440).

As an educator, I must vigilantly acknowledge and try to understand what students are experiencing when they encounter readings and discussions that might render their “essential selves” unintelligible. Britzman (1998) submits,

Pedagogical thought must begin to acknowledge that receiving knowledge is a problem for the learner and the teacher, particularly when the knowledge one already possesses or is possessed by works as an entitlement to one’s ignorance or when the knowledge encountered cannot be incorporated because it disrupts how the self might imagine itself and others. (p. 225)

The pedagogical imperative of literature, particularly poetry, offers an opportunity to temporally engage in language and how/why the writer needs it, to see the necessity of language to express our realities and our fantasies, and lend themselves to representing those silences in other political/social realms, such as the academy.

In numerous interviews, Trethewey acknowledges the role of teachers on the trajectory of her work and the power of poetics to reinscribe how we think about time. Trethewey’s own pedagogical impulse affords the reader time to reflect and evaluate insights about spatiotemporal embodiment and substantive critical ruptures to what Western philosophical traditions might call *history*. As McCallum and Tuhkanen (2011) argued,

The temporal complexities between life—as a becoming, as a dynamic process of an individual’s vital and embodied engagement with the environment—and language—as reading and writing, narrating, or analysis—have a power to open up innovative forms of intimacy that betoken not only new modes of becoming,

but new ways of affiliation with others and alternative modes of transmission. (p. 13)

Trethewey's work engages a type of historical poetics that articulates critical imagination, memory, and racial consciousness to modulate our understanding about the labor and effect of time and to move racialized experiences and historical events from the peripheral to center. Speaking to her own pedagogy in the classroom, Trethewey posits that the role of the teacher is to save students from an "excruciating silence" by provoking discussion that reinforces responsibility, commitment, and community (Hall, 2013, p. 15).

One cannot escape reading Trethewey's insistence on pedagogical discourses about race, gender and sexuality, and particularly mixed raced Americans, as an attempt to ferret out textual appropriations of these identities. To see the mixed-race figure as a historical artifact that reaches across time and space requires an exploration of the nexus of subjugation and pornotroping. In "Miracle of the Black Leg," another poem from *Thrall*, Trethewey comments on the uses of the Black body *vis-à-vis* necropolitical discourses, as a white recuperative symbol, or as Hortense Spillers (2003) terms it, "the vestubularity of flesh." In accordance with her critical examination of the serviceability of the Black body, Trethewey necessarily takes up (Black) queer temporalities that allows us to examine these classifications as arbitrary and capricious, to step out of the linearity of traditional disciplinary boundaries. With the boundaries of time, its constraints and seemingly necessary violence, Trethewey suggests we cannot be at rest in the present. Under these repressive modalities of time, the future is not promised. In our *current*

moment, a litany of dead Black bodies bares that fact out. By Western logics of time, I am hurdling toward the future, its gravitational pull so complete as to render my identity immutable and incessantly contemporary. By Western logics, time does not afford me occasion or space to reflect on my present, much less my past. Trethewey's poetics teach us that our present (or the future for that matter) is rendered incoherent without my ability to reestablish or reconcile my identities to those of the past, to critical return to history for alternative perspectives and voices.

With the passage of time and the perceived forward flow of temporality, Trethewey utilizes a historical poetics and her positionality as a biracial woman to reflect upon certain knowledges and dominant discourses. Here, I want to capitalize on Black queer poetics to highlight Trethewey's liberatory project. And her self-examination affords the reader the same temporal moment of possible reflexivity, to grapple with "difficult knowledges" in synchronic and diachronic ways. And because knowledge is understood as "reflecting human interests, values, and actions that are socially constructed and directed toward emancipation and human agency" (Slattery, 2013, p. 40), poetry engages the intrinsic nature of words, both in synchronic and diachronic ways. For example, I cannot experience the tragedy of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (the present), without contextualizing his death with that of the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi (the past), and imagining the racial terrors my son *will* inhabit in America (the future). The inconsequential nature of such temporal-wanderings is not experienced separately as Western logics of time might impose. Rather, I experience them simultaneously. "In a sense," Toni Morrison argues, "we all produce time" (1994, p.

159). Thus, we all produce temporal and long-lasting knowledges based upon linkages to other knowledges, institutions, and ideologies.

The hegemonic linearity of time cannot completely account for in/visibility of subjugated knowledge of connected struggles of Black people. The repetition of such brutal violence functions to strategically intervene/interrogate the historicity of Black male identity but also Black communal realities and national discourses of racialized violence. Natasha Trethewey's concern for public histories guides both her progression and direction of her work but also its broader cultural moments that move in particular spaces and times, with attention to historical erasure and memory. And like those erasures—of women/people of color—Trethewey uses silences to great effect. Time in her work has always been a consideration of chronicity (i.e. looking at the temporal framework of ekphrasis poetry). Her deployment of chrono-tropes renders her both subject and object (what Du Bois called double consciousness); in essence Trethewey's real labor—as poet and historian—constitutes an integration of her mixed raced subjectivity and a close examination of that (dis)identity as a national object—one that rigorously performs persistent restoration, an undue (temporal) burden by marginalized people.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CRITICAL PEDAGOGICAL IMAGINATION: NOTES TOWARD A SOCIAL-EPISTEMIC RHETORIC

[M]arginal locations as spaces where we can best become whatever we want to be while remaining committed to liberatory black liberation struggle. (hooks, 1989, p. 54)

#### The Contrapuntal Nature of Critical Marginalia

The notion of temporality, Sankofa, and critical return have preoccupied my thinking about what it means to be educated and what it means for pedagogical locations throughout and beyond the academy and classroom. Throughout this project I have shown why this is so: Morrison uses *Song of Solomon* to re-write what it means for African Americans to discover their individual and communal identities; Baldwin invites African American writers/readers to examine their tenuous relationships with the English language; and Trethewey asks American citizens to revisit how we identify racially and nationally and how these identities enthrall us to particular temporalities that are outmoded and unproductive for living fully in the 21st century. As I conclude this study about critical marginality, I wish to think through critical marginalia and spatial marginality, both metaphorically and realistically.

I am a slow reader, mainly because I am an installable reader and writer. Whether creative writing or critical scholarship, I read for content and style. As such, I try to take in too much, too many details, too many plot-points, too many stylistic flourishes, I am

undone by vocabulary, the endless search for etymology and meaning. With a No. 2 Ticonderoga pencil, I write in the margins of all my books and texts. In fact, I relish this performative and participatory readership. I thought long about when I developed this habit, and I cannot pin it down, but probably during my graduate school years. I annotate everything I read—pencil ticks and check marks besides passages, highlighting topic sentences, circling unfamiliar vocabulary. But most important to me are my annotations written in the margins. My marginalia transform the text itself. What I have come to know and accept about this readerly labor is that sometimes what is written in the margins of my books is just as important as the text itself. Those annotations contextualize the reading, adding meanings, understandings, revelations, and epiphanies. In short, annotations—the critical marginalia of a text—produce knowledge as well. The text and my annotations become a complex composition all its own—the writer and I are co-creators and co-conspirators—what Morrison calls a participatory readership.

Educators constantly take up discussions about the purposes of education, but we rarely engage learners directly about what they want or rarely do we fully invite them to participate in their learning. As I let questions of ethics, epistemologies, ideologies and ontologies of education as an institution guide my reflections, a simple question presented itself: what sort of historical moment contextualizes my conjuring of Black queer poetics, critical pedagogical imagination, and critical marginality? I once met a young Black man, who at the age of 18, sitting in my composition classroom, exclaimed in frustration one day, that he had never had a positive experience with an English teacher. I was thunderstruck by this proclamation. But it also struck me as lamentably

true. Surprisingly, in all of my years of teaching, he is the only one to explicitly write or say so. But, I have seen the utter fear and despair in the eyes of countless other students when I have passed back essays with my comments and critiques. I have heard the frustration in the grunts and groans when I speak of the importance of grammar. I have read or heard somewhere that all emotion and subsequent action stems from fear. These students who have had a tenuous relationship with a language and writing wrestle with anxieties of recognition and invisibility. Language and literacy instruction often means engaging in reflexivity, it “means thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see” (Mason, 2017, p. xi). In splendid fashion, a looming ethical dilemma presents itself to the educator of the 21st century, how do we mitigate the fears and anxieties students experience in the educative moments of our classrooms without traumatizing them further?

For an answer, let us critically return to Morrison’s pedagogical moment in her Nobel lecture. The title of my study is taken from a line in her lecture, “What moves at the margin.” My use is almost verbatim, but with one notable exception. Here, she notes “the margin”—an almost monolithic structure without equivocation or apprehension. And while I believe I understand Morrison’s “margin” (singular), I nonetheless feel compelled to pluralize it. There is not one margin from which we live and write, or even teach. For me, the margins (plural) constitute an assemblage of experiences, yearnings, and knowledges too copious and too rich to totalize in the nominal singular form. And some



may say—as I have already imagined—that this represents a difference without distinction. But we, as Toni Morrison (2008) warns, must be on the lookout or the dismissive totalizing language of our world and ardently resist it. We must recognize that

. . . language can never live up to the life once and for all. Nor should it. Language can never “pin down” slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable. (p. 201)

Also, my slight quibble with Morrison, as it were, is taken up by something she says in the lecture. She writes, “the vitality of language lies in its ability to learn the actual, imagine and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers” (p. 202). To live at the margins is to dwell in the interiority of one’s own life, not inferiority or invisibility. “My work bears witness” Morrison tells us, “and suggests who the outlaws were, who survived and why . . .” (Morrison & Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 26). The margins are nothing new to me. I am an outlaw in many ways, living and teaching beyond a politics of respectability. I lived in the shadows of the projects on a narrow strip of land that served (impossibly) as my back yard. But more poignantly, my family had the poor, unfortunate distinction of having the trailer park’s trash dumpster a mere 20 feet from our front door. The message and meaning of my spatial marginality was clear, at least to my young mind, that I was not even good enough to live in “the projects” but also that my day-to-day existence amounted to trash—my life was disposable. Most days were bearable, but a sudden shift in the wind could relegate my sister and I to the house for the day. Now that I look back on it, those monstrous days, part of me—the little boy—never gave into that narrative of disposability. That politics of refusal serves as my spiritual and

intellectual moorings. Thus, when I read Toni Morrison's Nobel Lecture about the powers and privileges of language to maintain and traverse social and ideological borders, I had a vantage point from which to immediately see her work as not only valuable but as foundational to my own survival in a world shaped by this oppressive language. Then, my reasons for offering Morrison as our initial epigraphic guide to this study are simultaneously pedagogical and personal. I wish the reader to hold in her mind the contrapuntal nature of critical marginalia, that while it is an artifact of its own, it nevertheless functions with another element—the text—to form a unique artifact. Perhaps this new artifact can serve as a guiding metaphor as we close this study.

### **Summary of Previous Chapters**

In the following chapter, I summarize my approaches to the writers Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Natasha Trethewey; discuss my findings and insights of my study; and flesh out my framework, Black queer poetics. In Chapter II, "Shifting Intimacies: Queering Love and Friendships in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," I discussed how Morrison's initiation of a participatory reader—a co-writer—led me to read the text (more) queerly. Among the queer elements of *Song of Solomon*, I chose to illuminate the possible meanings of the queer directionality of Milkman's return to Shalimar, Virginia, his ancestral home; the possible meanings of Milkman's symbolic flight at the culmination of the novel; and most importantly, the desire and love shared between Milkman and Guitar, his best friend. Morrison's use of critical imagination initiates silences and gaps in a text that leave room for a reader to engage fully and

inclusively. Additionally, the pedagogical uses of these queer thematics mark a departure point for further discovery about the radical potentials of literature and literacy.

Chapter III, “Evidence of Things Not Seen”: The Queer Rhetorics and Public Pedagogies of James Baldwin,” discussed Baldwin’s rhetorical performance as a Black public intellectual. I examined three of his speeches/essays, reading closely for thematics related to education and decolonization. While Baldwin argued for educational autonomy of African Americans, he also understood the reality that we were to be schooled in a system that did not privilege the truth, history, or even literacy. Thus, his steadfast commitment to mastering the English language participated in a long tradition of Black writers who used the language to articulate the horrors of living in a racist society and the brutal beauties of that existence. His suppositions engaged a critical imagination to articulate counter-hegemonic ways to use the language of one’s oppressor against your oppressor.

In Chapter IV, ““How the Past Comes Back”: Black Pedagogical Temporalities and Chronotoping in the Poetics of Natasha Trethewey,” I examined Trethewey’s poetry and poetics as an approach to time and temporality in critical pedagogy. Because she identifies as biracial woman, she embodies a special temporal relationship with the United States and its attending hegemonic ideologies of oppression and hierarchy. However, Trethewey uses the difficult labor of poetry to write herself into the history of the country, to reassert herself into a dialogue about the ways race and gender get taken up in the national literacy project, as well as education. By privileging a historical poetics, Trethewey deploys a critical imagination that seeks to move the experience of

Black people in the United States from the periphery to the center, from obscurity to interiority.

In the section that follows, I take an opportunity to read across my three critical chapters, putting my writers in conversation with each other and illuminating two common aspects I realize about all three of my writers—the notion of the Black creative writer as rhetorician and historian. Specifically, I discuss the ways African American writers and their texts contribute to the continued importance of critical pedagogical projects, such as liberatory and social justice education, decolonization, and critical literacy. It is important to discuss why these writers are steeped in an aesthetics and ethics of difference, marginality, and coded vernacular (signifyin’). These Black literary characteristics align with an aesthetics and ethics of queerness; and when read together, they may constitute and/or necessitate a new way of reading them. Moreover, I discuss aspects of my framework, Black queer poetics, as it activates what I have called a *critical pedagogical imagination*. Additionally, I wish to reiterate why this study matters, the very real stakes of reading oneself in the classroom and curriculum. “Education is not training,” Giroux (2003) argues, “and learning at its best is connected with the imperatives of social responsibility and political agency” (p. 9). Likewise, African American writers have always sought to connect an ethics of social responsibility and agency with the necessity to record the Black experience in this country. Thus, as I intimated earlier in this study, Black literature is rarely written out of a pure sense of enjoyment or personal pleasure but from a deep sense of communal struggle and

resilience. As I have argued, these writers and their works can be taken up in a host of critical pedagogical projects. As Henry Giroux (2003) argues,

Educational work, at best, represents a response to questions and issues posed by the tensions and contradictions of public life and such work, when critical, also attempts to understand and intervene in specific problems that emanate from the material contexts of everyday existence. (p. 11)

In this context, the pedagogical and educational possibilities of literature and labor of writers becomes evident, particularly as one thinks about the specific themes and motifs African American writers engage, all of which stem from a need to discuss the problems of Black life and offer pragmatic, profound, and prophetic solutions.

### **Working at the Margins of Language and Time: The Writer as Rhetorician and Historian**

As Joan Leach (2000) argues, “The goal of rhetoric is never to be ‘scientific,’ or to be able to categorize persuasion for all times and all places. The power of rhetorical analysis is its immediacy, its ability to talk about the particular and the possible, not the universal and the probable” (Leach, 2000, p. 211). The African American artistic project—particularly writing—is one that moves beyond the theoretical aspects of merely revealing dominant ideologies and power relations within our society but seeks to provide strategies to live more fully within these oppressive systems (what some might call liberation) and contains a pedagogical impulse to which rhetoric is central. As I will discuss in the final chapter, this pedagogical impulse has profound implications for the teaching of literature, both curriculum and instruction. Because “[r]hetoric is nuanced,

and may be understood on many different levels” (Kuypers & King, 2009, p.10), I focused on the social-epistemic rhetoric in these works.

### **Black Writers as Social-Epistemic Rhetoricians**

One of the main concerns of this study has been to look at how distinguishing rhetorical characteristics of African American literary productions lend themselves to critical pedagogical projects. One of the main implements to help with social justice education is the deployment of social-epistemic rhetoric by my writers. In his seminal book *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, James Berlin (1996) discusses the defines social-epistemic rhetoric as

Social- epistemic rhetoric is self-reflexive, acknowledging its own rhetoricity, its own discursive constitution and limitations. This means that it does not deny its inescapable ideological predispositions, its politically situated condition. It does not claim to be above ideology, a transcendent discourse that objectively adjudicates competing ideological claims. It knows that it is itself ideologically situated, itself an intervention in the political process, as are all rhetorics. Significantly, it contains within it a utopian moment, a conception of the good democratic society and the good life for all of its members. At the same time, it is aware of its historical contingency, of its limitations and incompleteness, remaining open to change and revision. (p. 88)

Throughout this study, I have discussed how ideological rhetoric functioned within the works of my selected authors. However, in this section, I wish to highlight the two key ideological findings at the heart of my own framework of Black queer poetics.

African American artistic production has primarily been analyzed through a sociological tract (Morrison & Denard, 2008), but the works labor beyond the social constructions of race. For example, analyzing the relationship of the African American rhetorical tradition to artistic productions, William W. Cook (2007) asserts that Ellison’s

novel, “when fully understood,” should stand next to the works of sociolinguists such as Roger Abrahams or Geneva Smitherman “as a thoroughly worked-out study not only of African American rhetoric but of the liberating power of that rhetoric and the cultural forces that it embodies” (p. 260). The liberatory power of these texts, their rhetoric and cultural forces, are not relegated to the text itself, they resonate beyond it. For this reason, my understanding of rhetoric circulates queerly in this study. Literary studies narrowly rely too heavily on interpretation of “produced texts” as the primary site of inquiry. “[S]ocial-epistemic rhetoric offers,” James Berlin (1996) asserts, “post-structuralism devices for studying the production as well as the reception of texts, particularly since text production has long been at the center of rhetoric’s project” (p. 81). Thus, I have turned to rhetorical considerations to account for the production of texts, the very act of producing them, to look at them as models of decision-making processes of Black writers. Here, I do not wish to privilege one method over another per se. But I do want to highlight clearly the benefits of incorporating rhetorical theory into a literary analysis, especially one that examines the pedagogical impulses of the authors and the texts themselves. In short, counter-hegemonic ideologies are present in the texts themselves but also in the writing, at the level of production. And what I have tried to illuminate in this study are the pedagogical offerings of these texts. Here, I wish to focus on the African American linguistic trope of *signifyin’* as a site of possibility.

Didactic discourses circulate widely in African American literature and often center on the necessity to witness and testify. *Signifyin’*, then, becomes an operative mode of expression, a queer modality that offers a queer analytic for discussions of

African American pedagogical inquiries. Signifyin' is an African American linguistic and rhetorical apparatus, using a shared and coded language and requires an adept rhetorical understanding—subject matter, audiences, context, aesthetic practices, etc. To borrow a phrase from Sara Ahmed (2006), my rhetorical analysis looks for “through-lines,” spatial and abstract conceptions that exhibit desire and orients the reader. As an African American linguistic trope, Geneva Smitherman (1977) characterizes signifyin' as

indirection, circumlocution; metaphorical-imagistic (but images rooted in the everyday, real world); humorous, ironic; rhythmic fluency and sound; teachy but not preachy; directed at person or persons usually present in the situational context (singers do not talk behind yo back); punnin', play on words; introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected. (p. 121)

This mode of communication may seem contradictory to another Black linguistic trope of “saying it like it is, or saying it plain.” However, I view them as differently capable of communicating various political leanings and desires, various social and cultural dimensions. For example, while Morrison signifies profusely in her novels, she often tries to clarify her work in interviews, to make it plain. In other words, Morrison, Baldwin, and Trethewey rhetorically account for the “the sheer ugliness of the language, its lack of clarity, its unnecessarily complicated sentence constructions, its lack of pleasurable quality, its alienating quality” (Christian, 1988, p. 72). These writers just do not “do” language, they actively play with it, take pleasure in its “sensuous knowledge.” This sensuous knowledge operates on several registers, both personal and collective. As James Baldwin indicates, “language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identify: It reveals the private identity, and connects one



with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity” (Baldwin, “If Black English”). Through signifying, Baldwin activates a “critical intimacy” with the very thing he seeks to critique, which Spivak (Paulson, 2016, para. 11) calls critiquing from the inside.

As I conducted research for this project, I read, listened, and viewed many of Baldwin’s essays and speeches. Although he deploys signifyin’ in most of his work, one example stood out in particular. Notably, this essay is one I analyze in Chapter III, but I critically return to it for another illumination. I supplemented my reading with a viewing of this performance (Baldwin, 1979). One of Baldwin’s more comical moments is not captured adequately in the print version. Here, Baldwin is riffing on the responsibilities of the Black writer, to witness and testify to what she has seen of the consequences of the American project and to adequately portray the beauty of Black life in the face of so much adversity. With much vocal inflection and “invented accent” (Heard, 2015, p. 109), Baldwin states,

The American idea of racial progress is measured by how fast I become white. It is a trick bag, because they know perfectly well that I can never become white. I’ve drunk my share of dry martinis. I have proved myself civilized in every way I can. But there is an irreducible difficulty. Something doesn’t work. Well, I decided that I might as well act like a nigger. (2010, p. 143)

The audience erupted in laughter as he punctuated his remarks with the phrase “irreducible difficulty.” They understood it. And with his vocal performance, gesticulations, and posturing at the podium, the affect is all the more noticeable and pronounced. His allusion of dry Martinis, a signification of high class and moribund

sophistication—a stand-in, perhaps, for the liberal elite—signifies Baldwin’s dilemma as a Black intellectual and the impossibility of what they are really asking “civilized Negros” to do, which is to assimilate.

In a similar way, Natasha Trethewey’s poem “Enlightenment” operates on this same register. In Chapter III, I focused my analysis of this poem for the temporal poetics at play, how and why her relationship with her white father parallels the complicated (yet, racist) ideologies at work in those who do not recognize difference as integral to the American experience. Employing the trope of signifiyin’, Trethewey titles the poem “Enlightenment,” a double entendre which gestures toward both the philosophical age as well as a moment discursive, epiphanic knowledge. Her father, a learned man, has referred to her as a zebra and “cross-breed” in his poetry. These words conjure to mind the similar pseudo-scientific language espoused by Thomas Jefferson and other purveyors of Enlightenment ideology. Specifically, I am thinking of his “observations” about enslaved persons in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787).

Again, as I prepared for the study, I listened and viewed many of Toni Morrison’s interviews, particularly those with Charlie Rose. While Rose and Morrison seem to have a friendly relationship, they often engaged in a *tête-à-tête* that left me thinking about her performance as Black public intellectual. In this mode, Charlie Rose becomes a metaphorical stand-in for the very “master narrative” Morrison claims to be writing against. His frequently sloppy readings of her work and his constant probing for “solutions” to racial problems of the United States lead to a tense exchange. In a 1993 interview, Rose asked, “Do you still have that encounter [racist and discriminatory

encounters]? Do you TONI MORRISON, Pulitzer Prize winner, successful, honored in the halls of academe, et cetera, still have that encounter?” Rose’s questions belie an ignorance not only about race, but also about the lived experiences of those who have been raced in particular ways in America. Morrison quickly “pulls the glove inside out” (to use the vernacular), flipping the question back on the interviewer and admonishing him that he was “asking the wrong question.” Then she offered,

How do you feel? Not you, CHARLIE ROSE, but don’t you understand that the people who do this thing, who practice racism, are bereft. There is something distorted about the psyche. It’s a huge waste and it’s a corruption and a distortion. It’s like it’s a profound neurosis that nobody examines for what it is. It feels crazy. It is crazy and it leaves—it has just as much of a deleterious effect on white people and possibly equal that it does black people. I always knew that I had the moral high-ground. All my life. I always thought those people who said I couldn’t come in the drugstore and I had to sit in these funny places. I couldn’t go in the park. [...] And I thought they knew that I knew that they were inferior to me morally. I always thought that and my parents always thought that.

Here, Morrison use of signifyin’ expresses both impatience of having to explain an ideology she neither created nor subscribed to. Her “Not you, CHARLIE ROSE” may seem to let him off the hook for such naïve thinking about race, but it does not. In many ways, I have often read her “Not you, CHARLIE ROSE” as an implicit indictment, a form of loud-talking, African Americans have had to adopt to speak “truth to power.” I will also note that when I have shown this clip to my Black students, they immediately catch Morrison’s signifyin’ use of indirection to both indict Rose while also eliciting his agreement with her argument. Morrison, Baldwin, and Trethewey engaged, in various ways, the rhetorical trope of signifyin’ to address the necessity of their moral and

political work as a crucial site of inquiry and subsequent intervention, a site at the nexus of self-definition and social agency.

As I have discussed, Baldwin deployed the English language as both weapon and shield, often wading into public debates relevant to the most contemporary issues of the time, such as the “legitimacy of Black English.” As Farred (2003) posits, “Vernacular intellectuals intervene in the public debate about issues relevant for them and their community in a language inscribed with the history of their disenfranchisement and subjugation” (p. 24). Morrison and Trethewey also engage this type of vernacular intellectualism. The impetus for writing *Song of Solomon*, Morrison tells us, was to address the negative images of Black men in American society and to portray a new mode of masculinity not often seen.

This mode of vernacular intellectualism also pivots on the notion of witnessing, being radically open to see and speak the truth about and for marginalized people. Baldwin often spoke about witnessing and once he saw his three friends, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Medgar Evers assassinated, he wrote that he “was to discover that the line which separates a witness from an actor is a very thin line indeed” (Baldwin & Peck, 2017, p. 30). In a country that would rather see them silenced, these writers know that witnessing and truth-telling is not without peril. Putting white supremacy ideology on full display is dangerous work, indeed. And yet they do it. Again, this is what I wrote about in Chapter I, that Black writing is personal, political, and pedagogical. As Morrison often retorts, this display of the consequences of slavery is not written from the white gaze, and that examination is imbued with the “pedagogical impulse” (Morrison &

Denard, 2008, p. 204). We rely on our writers to reflect and report responsibly our realities, to critique the benign and profound ways in which we are oppressed and violated, and to offer the possibilities and deriving some semblance of life, ways to mitigate the silencing that takes place in our heterogeneous cultures and societies. I will note that Baldwin, Morrison, and Trethewey has (or had, in the case of Baldwin) a large white readership, and given this consideration, the pedagogical impulse of witnessing and truth telling becomes even more important and urgent. Frank (2015) believes writers like James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and June Jordan, Gayl Jones, and Edward P. Jones offer important counter narratives that complicate hegemonic “knowingness” for wider (read: white) audiences (p. 15). Writers provide ways to read and interpret our world, ways to construct meaning of a world ordered by violence, hierarchy and complex power relations.

Morrison, Baldwin, and Trethewey are constantly writing against the master-narrative, the hegemonic white patriarchal gaze that objectifies, commodifies, consumes, and denies marginalized people’s agency and voice. Or as Frank (2014) tells us,

The novelist does not need to simplify and distort moral life as a precondition for the reader seeing the importance of moral problems. Instead, when these problems are understood through the lens of the complexly developed character, the reader is given the possibility to confront an actual problem, and not a fantasy. (p. 28)

Again, this is the pedagogical imperative of *Song of Solomon*—for Milkman and the reader. For Milkman, to become the human he is inspired to be by his aunt Pilate, he must confront the mythologies buttress oppressive tendencies of manhood and family. For the reader, Morrison asks us quite simply to confront our mythologies about Black men in

American society. Indeed, the role of the Black writer may be to produce subversive literature, which simultaneously suggests the political or social relevance of the text and seeks to deconstruct one's political and social influences beyond the text. Thus, the political value of this text does not rest wholly on its effectiveness to subvert or transgress upon social norms and performative values but also to change those established norms. The subversive reading of one's own body is, in essence, an act of breaking free from the social acceptable performative bonds is what leads to new social realities.

In "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare," Baldwin offers that the role of the poet is

to defeat all labels and complicate all battles by insisting on the human riddle, to bear witness, as long as breath is in him, to that mighty, unnameable, transfiguring force which lives in the soul of man, and to aspire to do his work so well that when the breath has left him, the people— all people!— who search in the rubble for a sign or a witness will be able to find him there. (p. 69)

By finding the poet, the reader find herself. Also, in this way, the poet conquers death itself, achieves a sense of longevity beyond their unique historical moment. Moreover, Baldwin offers two propositions about the role of the writers: one, that poets (artists) are the only people in our society that know the truth about human nature and motivation; and two, the death of one's society and culture can be traced to the willful ignorance of its' poets. And he concludes that, "Art is here to prove, and to help one bear, the fact that all safety is an illusion. In this sense, all artists are divorced from and even necessarily opposed to any system whatever" (Baldwin, 2010, p. 51).

Finding resonance and challenge in the life and work of James Baldwin,  
Trethewey offers,

When I read James Baldwin's words, "This is the only real concern of the artist: to retreat out of the disorder of life that order which is art," I felt he was speaking directly to me. I began writing, then, because I had some things to make sense of—experiences from my past, as well as a collective past, that I needed to grapple with in order to understand. (Rowell, 2013, p. 405)

As Trethewey asserts that writers primarily show that we are not alone, that we are not facing grief, despair, loss in isolation. In other words, poetry and the poet increase our sense of community. In a realistic way, Trethewey, perhaps more than Baldwin and Morrison, needed this sense of community after the death of her mother. But this intensely emotional work is equally communal as her work against erasure: "[My] role as a poet in some way is to try to recollect the collective and historical memory of a people thought the very individual people . . ." (Hall, 2013, p. 85). This too, is an aspect of the vernacular intellectualism. Farred espoused, this tendency to "explicate links between the popular and the political" (Farred, 2003, p. 1). No wonder then Trethewey turns to vernacularism in her second book *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002), an ekphrastic collection inspired by E. J. Bellocq collection of photographs of prostitutes in the red-light district of New Orleans. Ophelia may be for some Black conservative readers an "improper subject" for Black poetry. But perhaps this prostitute, the interiority of her life has something significant to say about race, gender, and class in our society. And Trethewey utilizes critical imagination to plumb the depths of that life. She also represents a class of Black Americans Langston Hughes (1926/1994) advises Countee Cullen to look to for

inspiration for truly great Black art; “[T]he low-down folks, the so-called common element” [...] “furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations” (p. 56). Hughes’s point illustrates the power of vernacularism as a primary insight of creative inquiry. Or, as Farred states, “[N]ever overlook the vernacular as a means of producing a subaltern or postcolonial voice that resists, subverts, disrupts, reconfigures, or impacts the dominant discourse” (Farred, 2003, p. 1). These are the voices Morrison, Baldwin, and Trethewey raise and utilize throughout much of their work.

### **Black Writers as Historians**

Sandlin et al. (2011) argue that “scholars should work to illuminate the ways in which educational elements within these [public] spaces diverge from, problematize, disrupt, or oppose the practices and performances of formal schooling” (p. 364). By laboring in the public, the role of the Black artist transcends the limitations of formal schooling by constantly insisting on recognizing history as a social construct with social consequences, by constantly memorializing the experiences of African Americans. But memorials are tricky business. As I have written elsewhere, Black novels and other literature are “about remembrance, an act imbued with as much memory as disavowal. That is to say, people are often compelled to paradoxically commemorate trauma even as they are desperately trying to forget it” (Randolph, 2012, p. 105). As such, the labor of the Black artist and pedagogue also methodologically engage historiography to subvert hegemonic ideologies about sex, race, gender, etc. Another theme that arose among all three authors was the importance of knowing one’s history as deep a part of the educative



process, of “fabricating historical memory” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 16) to combat personal trauma and national “social amnesia.” For Baldwin, the role of the artist as historian is not only excavation, but exorcism of a curse, which subjugates us to other people’s narratives of our experiences and positions. In his last major work, Baldwin (1985) writes,

One may see that the history, which is now indivisible from oneself, has been full of errors and excesses; but this is not the same as seeing that, for millions of people, this history—oneself—has been nothing but an intolerable yoke, a stinking prison, a shrieking grave. It is not so easy to see that, for millions of people, life itself depends on the speediest possible demolition of this history, even if this means the leveling, or the destruction of its heirs. (p. 473)

Here, Baldwin views history as integral to the educative enterprise, and his texts as well as those of Morrison and Trethewey provide a moment of reckoning. To refuse an accurate accounting of one’s personal or collective history is done to one’s detriment. Thus, when I discuss and teach Black literature, I cannot do so in insolation. Learning and knowledge production must involve a transactional and transformative historiography.

Historiography exposes the frames and parameters of historical writing in order to further one’s understanding of the circumstances of the past. Historiography offers a method of intervention in the comprehensive comprehension of and living in socio-cultural political events. (Villaverde et al., 2006, p. 311)

As my writers do not refuse this undertaking, I argue that critical educators can no longer afford to view history as a catalog of intractable or immutable truths and that literature may be one way to help students tackle the seemingly impossible task of excavating their

personal and communal histories. To this point, Villaverde et al. (2006) argue that the key element of historiography is the ability to discern how history is mediated by philosophy, ideology, and politics and actively resists totalizing language that figures history as “an all-encompassing, objective phenomena” (p. 311). History is often conceived as objective, stable, and immune from the influences of power struggles and relations. However, history is a dynamic text with culturally specific values and beliefs; thus, history can be what some postmodernists and poststructuralists might call a metanarrative. These metanarratives convey morals and values and thus rely on interpretation. Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2008) remind us, “[p]erception implies interpretation, and ability to interpret hinges on experience—meaning that perception is mainly learned” (p. 31). To this end, one must engage in a critical hermeneutics that “tries to make sense out of history and contemporary context without tying either too rigid theoretical foundations” (Noddings, 1995/2005, p. 71). Again, this understanding is what is at stake in Baldwin’s “disidentification” with the English language. The language bears witness to experiences because it has to, words do not arise in isolation of their speakers.

If we understand history as a narrative, which presupposes a writer with biases, purposes, and flaws, then history is an accounting of social practices and human institutions. Thus, “such clarity makes history intelligible and assessable, denoting its contemporary presence and significance. Having ownership over the past links to self to others and vice versa, grounding the present with critical consciousness and the future with proleptic responsibility” (Villaverde et al., 2006, p. 311). This is the accompanying

investigation Trethewey engages as she walks on the grounds of Monticello with her father. At once, she is interrogating her personal, communal, and national past and history. Jefferson's estate near the banks of the Rivanna River is not merely a tourist attraction—it is a testament, a witness, a memorial to the political conflicts and capitalistic practices still in play in American society and its attending institutions like the academy.

Indeed, Morrison, Baldwin, and Trethewey acknowledge the academy's authority to police, surveil, and maintain both narratives and histories. I wonder often about just how many histories are taught as "fact" when they are, in essence, legitimized fictions. The pedagogical imperative of my writers—Black writers—to challenge my views of history leads us to approach these subjugated knowledges in difficult and previously unimagined ways. In "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberation Education in the 1990s," Chandra Montanty explains,

Uncovering and reclaiming subjugated knowledge is one way to lay claims to alternative histories. But these knowledges need to be understood and defined pedagogically, as questions of strategy and practice as well as of scholarship, in order to transform educational institutions radically (as cited in hooks, 1994, p. 22).

Then too, by challenging histories of knowledge and language, my writers are encouraging dialogic thinking and exchange beyond what is already known and learned. As Morrison (1994) warns, "policing languages of mastery" do not "permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas" (p. 5). These limitations are not just imposed on writers, but students and teachers as well. Too often, our focus on

product obscures our pedagogical conversations on process. In other words, our practice of history and language situate paradigms that seem too risky or impossible to challenge. This unruly and undisciplined approach to literature—through historical lens—is not immediately understood or sanctioned by “the powers that be,” by curriculum specialists and language purists. I still remember my high school English teacher’s attempt to discuss Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) without an accompanying discussion of slavery. As a student, I was baffled. Now, as a teacher, I find this “approach” unfathomable. In his “Talk to Teachers,” James Baldwin (1985) argues, “American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it, so is the world larger, more daring, more beautiful and more terrible, but principally larger . . .” (p. 332). What am I to conclude, except that my teacher and so many others do not wish to face the vast pedagogical potential of history, a history that informs and precipitates the brutal necessity of language itself?

### **A Brutal Necessity: Black Queer Poetics**

In the following section, I discuss more clearly the necessity for my development of a new framework, Black queer poetics, and offer new departures for this research methodology. Because “queer travels in a variety of ways across disciplines, disciplinary fields or places” (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 7) and often at the margins, I have found them useful and seductive. Britzman (1998) intimates this offering when she attests that queer theory “offers methods of imagining difference on its own terms: as eros, as desire, as the grounds of the political. It is a particular articulation that returns us to practices of bodies and to bodies of practices” (p. 214). This erotic nature of reading—of lenses of

reading—produces, at least for me, its own interiority, a place just for me, a place where I get to make the world in my image, where words serve my own purposes.

I returned to my initial thinking about Black queer poetics at the outset of this inquiry. The liberatory pedagogies of Black queer poetics are evident in what I have presented thus far and they rely on the theoretical underpinnings of feminist, queer, and African American literary studies. As Britzman (1998) suggests, queer theory affords the educator an opportunity to paradoxically exceed binary oppositions while providing “an analysis of social difference that can account for how structural dynamics of subordination and subjection work at the level of the historical, the conceptual, the social, and the psychic” (Britzman, 1998, pp. 226–227). Depending on whom you read queer theory is too rigorous (needlessly so) or not rigorous enough, or relentlessly glib in certain claims and pronouncements. Either it is too structured or not structured enough, too prescriptive or not enough. Perhaps this is why Browne & Nash (2010) assert, “[S]ome scholars argue that queer approaches, while interestingly theoretically, are largely detached from the blood, bricks and mortar of everyday life” (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 6). My intention, then, is to engage in a generative use of queer theory, are not detached from the blood, bricks, and mortar of my students. My adoption of this critical approach is no mere academic or intellectual exercise—its survival. My own conclusion is that working with queer theory is like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall (in some strange world, I suppose this is a necessary enterprise). But more importantly, when you add something like race or blackness to its contours, queer theory becomes a little bit more serviceable: its usefulness is no longer fungible.

Trying to define queer theory is paradoxical. I am not so much trying to police queer theory, rather I am attempting to limn its contours. And to the extent that others police queer theory's serviceability or criticality, its use becomes about power and hierarchal control. One of the interesting dimensions of layering blackness onto queer theory is that in many ways race theories tend to be essentialized, despite our talk about race as a social construct or an imagined categorization. Thus, there is often more policing around race than queerness. For this reason, as you have seen, I have resisted settling on one name for the people in this study, at times using African American, but preferring Black (folk). Blackness is less cohesive, less clinical, more inclusive and does not presume Africanness or Americanness origins (perhaps blackness does not have anything to do without ethnicity). *Blackness is queerness is blackness*. I am not the first scholar to assert this but I do believe that blackness colors queer theory (excuse the pun) in a myriad of ways that have yet to be explored. And helps perform certain labors queerness or blackness cannot do alone. This study is one attempt at synthesizing such a critical project.

In this spirit, I have offered Black queer poetics, which affords critical scholars and lay readers alike new reading strategies including a "hermeneutics of suspicion" used to interrogate the dominant/straight narratives that are imbued with hegemonic ideologies. Also, a hermeneutics of indeterminacy (uncertainty) becomes a position of challenge and change. When an object or person defies categorization (as blackness and queerness do), it cannot be coopted for capitalistic consumption; it can, necessarily, if needed move beyond artificiality of public consumption and discourse. Thus, an ethic of

social change proceeds from my readings of these texts as well. Social change and social justice asks those of us charged with the profundity of this labor to suspend our own capacity to negotiate the ego. Those of us who identify as social justice advocates and educators cannot be too concerned with our own personal images and positions of authority if we are to make and inspire change. Our ability to “risk the self” by reading differently has blood, brick, and mortar consequences. For this reason, Britzman (1998) concludes, “Reading might then be one of theorizing reading as always about risking the self, about confronting one’s own theory of reading, and about theorizing difference without gathering the grounds of subjection” (p. 226). Additionally, if we keep “reading straight” (Britzman, 1998), meaning reading normatively, then we will never see the full benefits of what our racial and other marginalized identities have produced. As long as we are reading straight, we never see our critical marginality come into full blossom.

“A language comes into existence” Baldwin (1985) insists, “by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey” (p. 650). Thus, I ask what does this reading strategy allow/enable us pedagogically? Primarily, it affords us an expansion of the critical pedagogical archive, opening us to the full potential of literary texts. While I have offered Morrison, Trethewey, and Baldwin as my examples in this study, there are more examples that I have not explored in this study.

- Lucille Clifton’s writing is as prolific as it is beautiful. Her strength as a poet lay in her almost singular ability to write short, terse poems that leave readers bereft. Her poems do not so much inspire interpretation as much as they invite a deeply evocative connection. She often forwent punctuation and

capitalization, which may seem like a minor detail, but it allowed her an opportunity to cut straight to the exquisiteness of the language. She exemplifies the type of poetic possibility I spoke of in my examination of Natasha Trethewey.

- One of the great tragedies of the 1980s and 1990s was the impact of HIV/AIDS on the Black gay communities of writers and intellectuals such as Assotto Saint, Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill. Inquiries about their work would find queerness registering at multiple levels. And though their works are not voluminous, it nevertheless presents necessary interventions about the politics of intimacy and the beauty of Black cultural identity.
- Walter Mosley's *Killing Johnny Fry* (2007), which tells the story of 40-something-year-old Cordell, suddenly becomes vibrantly alive once he is freed from the conventions of heteronormativity. While we are tempted to read this as midlife crisis, Mosley offers a narrative that explores the redemptive nature of sexual agency and false dichotomy of the mind-body-spirit split most Black men assume in the United States in order to survive.

The examples are not limited to literary texts:

- With his first major exhibition in 2006, Kehinde Wiley became an instant sensation with his modern interpretations of "Old Masters," often retaining the Rococo style while adding African textures and motifs and replacing the white men with Black men dressed in hip hop street wear. For many years, Black men were his main focus, but he has since begun to incorporate Black women



into his paintings and sculptures. His themes have remained consistent: authenticity, social order, and the queer slippages between the two.

- Janelle Monáe's career now includes two notable stints on the silver screen, *Moonlight* (Jenkins et al., 2016) and *Hidden Figures* (Melfi et al., 2016).

However, her catalog includes highly stylized albums such as *The ArchAndroid* (Monáe, 2010) and *The Electric Lady* (Monáe, 2013) which explore themes of Afrofuturism and post-apocalyptic love, through her android persona, Cindy Mayweather.

And then there are other note-worthy examples from the authors I have examined:

- While Toni Morrison remains a popular author to study, there are no major books that focus solely on her public intellectualism. For many years, even when she taught at Princeton, Morrison maintained a schedule that included not only readings for book promotions but more importantly public lectures where she has discussed her positions on everything from the role of the artist to the convergence of goodness and evil.
- James Baldwin wrote across genres, including plays, children's books, and poetry. With the reprinting of his only poetry collection *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems* (2014b), there has been a new interest in how he played with sound and rhythm to portray an aural space for Black lives.
- Natasha Trethewey's *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2010) offers a portrait of the socioeconomic forces at play with the catastrophic loss of life (1,245 and more . . .) during the August 28, 2005

landfall of Hurricane Katrina. This elegiac memoir delves into the type of reminiscences that exemplify the unbreakable bond Black folk have to the land and to their communities.

Of course, there are many other texts—books, music, visual art, and the like—that can be examined using my Black queer poetics framework. And while this framework represents my understanding of critical marginality, I offer it as a beginning, a jumping off point, from which an educator or lay reader can utilize to begin reading their own way in the world.

## CHAPTER VI

### UNDETERMINED DISCOURSES: (RE)LOCATING PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR BLACK QUEER POETICS

Poets move us to give play to our imaginations, to enlarge the scope of lived experience and reach beyond from our own grounds. Poets do not give us answers; they do not solve the problems of critical pedagogy. They can, however, if we will them to do so, awaken us to reflectiveness, to a recovery of lost landscapes and lost spontaneities. Against such a background, educators might now and then be moved to go in search of a critical pedagogy of significance for themselves. (Greene, 1986, pp. 428)

The sort of pedagogy I am proposing would entail thinking about the ways margins produce not only abject outsider-hood but also profoundly unique ways of self-defining, knowing, and acting; and about how, though people usually want to leave the margins, they do want to be able to bring with them the sharp vision that comes from living with friction and contradiction. (Malinowitz, as cited in Alexander, 2008, p. 13)

#### Critical Pedagogy: Dynamics and Directions

In critical pedagogical discourses and theorizing, there exists a huge disconnect or a gap between what is preached and practiced. This is why I wanted to write about writers who, I believe, are valuable because their primary goal/purpose is to “stand in the gap.” Many writers, in addition to the ones I have examined here, practice pedagogical imperatives differently than those traditionally identified as critical pedagogues. The poet and artist do not beat their readers over the head with theory, it is *a priori*, already built into the practice and discipline of one’s art form. Their theorizing through narrative creates a new sensibility. Thus, this study has proposed new ways to read these texts

pedagogically. Purpel and Shapiro (1995) also call for examining “the present boundaries of critical pedagogy and the possibilities of extending them” (Purpel & Shapiro, 1995, p. 124). Essentially, this is the aim of my project and to grapple with “critical pedagogy’s wariness to go beyond social, political, and economic discourses” (p. 124). But what indeed lies beyond those ideological boundaries of the field of education? And what lies at the margins of critical pedagogy’s borders?

During my first few semesters, I discovered that I lay at the margins of critical pedagogy. In an introductory course, I asked my professor earnestly who were the Black folk who wrote and theorized about critical pedagogy. The professor gave my question only a passing consideration as he quickly returned to a discussion of Henry Giroux. As I have explained in the introduction of this study, I was influenced by Barbara Christian’s brazen indictment of critical theory and philosophy. Her indictment of hegemonic readings and disciplines is also a clarion call for new ways of reading. Taking her cue, I began to seriously look for Black educational theorizing “elsewhere,” to move beyond the tokenized way bell hooks was offered to my class—the only woman and racially minoritized writer we formally encountered that semester. When I brought up the pedagogical possibility of Black educational theory in riddles, poems, novels, and songs, my professor began to sidestep my proposal as well. I have often generously read his reticence as glib ignorance. I have often chalked it up to my own nascent foray into educational studies and my own seemingly inarticulate suppositions. I did not want to acknowledge the racist and misogynistic undertones of his dismissal. But what became evident, crystal clear to me right then and there, was that his ignorance could not be my

own. His dismissal became an invitation to truly become a scholar, to find myself and shape the field to my own liberatory aims and purposes, to move beyond abstract musings of writers and theorists who never fully account for my presence in the academy.

My critical project imagines disruption, emancipation, and justice beyond abstract reasoning. At stake here are pragmatic considerations of what literature has to say about how and why we teach what we do. My goal has been to approach critical pedagogy with the “understanding that complex problems require complex solutions that must be revisited, revised, and re-implemented to reach a full solution” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 25). Thus, in this section, I discuss more specifically my own intervention as a critical pedagogue seduced by queer theory. Despite my professed affections and affinity for queer theory, my critique of that critical pedagogy has seemed too deterministic and too rooted in a particularly prescriptive paradigm. I am drawn to critical pedagogy but there are limitations.

Critical pedagogues “do” social justice, name and disrupt oppressive systems and orient toward speculative directions. Kincheloe (2008) writes,

Critical pedagogy is dedicated to resisting the harmful effect of dominant power. Advocates of critical pedagogy work to expose and contest oppressive forms of power as expressed in socio-economic class elitism, Eurocentric ways of viewing the world, patriarchal oppression, and imperialism around the world. (p. 34)

To approach critical pedagogy in ways that eschew “Eurocentric ways of viewing,” this project centered my positionality and disrupted my own thinking about who gets cited as critical pedagogues and whose work gets taken up by critical pedagogues as exemplars of critical examinations of those oppressive systems. And while critical pedagogy, like so

many disciplines, exclaims the importance of inclusivity, it sometimes feels like citational representation masking as inclusivity. For Orelus and Brock (2015), critical pedagogy offers a language for teachers and students to effectively challenge dominant systems and power, employ constant question-posing, and offer critical answers. In essence, critical pedagogy is “the framing tool that provides a language of critique to question the structures of the education system in general and classroom pedagogy in particular” (Orelus & Brock, 2015, p. 288). Then too, because critical pedagogy is “[r]ooted in a dialectical view of knowledge,” it “seeks to support the dynamic interactive elements, rather than participate in the formation of dichotomies and polarizations in thought and practice” (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003, p. 13). While Darder et al. (2003) note that the main concerns and critiques come from feminists and scholars of color who noted the preponderance of men (mainly white men), their now canonical volume on critical pedagogy seems to stumble into racial (read: difference) quagmire, offering few voices of racially minoritized thinkers.

At moments in the history of critical pedagogy, this factor became a major source of contention, as concerns were raised about the failure of critical pedagogy to explicitly treat questions of subordinate cultures from the specific location of racialized populations themselves (Darder et al., 2003, p. 17). The skepticism critical pedagogues direct towards power dynamics and machinations must also be used to critique the discipline itself. We must also redirect our keen criticality to unveiling contradictions that threaten to undo (and perhaps fail to achieve) much of the critiques of hard fought and won anti-oppressive work. It takes a certain stalwartness to critique one’s own disciplinary

boundaries. Villaverde and Carter (2015) point out that critical pedagogy has not affected its stated aims and desired change in America because it suffers from the same “incongruences and inequities” as the institutions, including the academy’s disciplines, schools and colleges, teacher prep programs, curricula, and pedagogy. They assert, “Contrary to many who may believe criticality is lacking, we are fairly convinced it exists albeit to varying degrees. Where we see the biggest chasm is in application, living out exactly what recognizing criticality entails” (p. 17). In many ways, critical pedagogues are never really forced to think about it. When we are educated, a type of indoctrination elides over how and why the discipline has coalesced; there seems to be very little substantial conversation about evolution of the discipline of critical pedagogy itself outside of certain professional symposium and conferences. We need to constantly reclaim the pragmatic possibilities of resistance as essential to the work we do and think beyond critical pedagogy as a discipline governed by abstract thinking and theorizing and vastly competing agendas. Once we agree to make the project concrete with theoretical and pragmatic articulations, agendas begin to be etched in stone and disagreement ensues. But this need not be a bone of contention among those dedicated to the discipline. In some ways, too, critical pedagogy rehearses a modernist language of liberation, as if one can become liberated, transformed, or empowered, as if liberation is a destination. Perhaps, and this is what my project has tried to articulate: liberation and emancipation are ongoing projects without a foreseeable conclusion, without the restraints of causality, but one of circularity, temporality, and futurity. What would it mean to “practice” critical pedagogy instead of teaching critical pedagogy? Or what would it mean to adopt a mode

of criticality (Villaverde & Carter, 2015) instead of viewing critique as a final product of resistance?

### **Queering Critical Pedagogy**

The task and purpose of literature is not only to mirror our human experiences but also provide understanding insights into what we desire, hope, and dream, how to see the communities, and to celebrate the possibility of renewing our world through individual and collective dialogue. As Purpel and Shapiro (1995) suggest,

critical pedagogy needs to ground itself not only in a social theory but also in considerations to speak to what it means to be human. It is clear that humans over the vastness of time and place have sought to define themselves through their capacity not only to reason and develop human relationships but also to understand themselves in relation to the mysteries of the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of the inner self. (p. 124)

The readings I have selected exhibit how we, as African-American writers and teachers, are doing the same work. Thus, this study does the labor of mining the critical marginality of African American literature to supplement the critical pedagogical archive. But for reasons I have previously stated, despite their works and subjects, these Black writers are not considered the “proper” purview of critical pedagogy’s stated aims, which are more influenced by social sciences than the humanities (we need both, and more). Here my concern with disciplinarity confronts the old aphorism of “recognizing difference without distinction,” that perhaps categorization seeks to obscure biases and agendas.

The pursuit for allyship outside the traditional borders of the academy and outside the disciplinary boundaries of critical pedagogy is nothing new, as Purpel and Shapiro



(1995) argue that “reconstructing the nature of schooling requires a strategy that speaks to those whose work and lives exist substantially outside” (p. 97) of the academy. My strategy is to speak “to” those lives, but also “with” them, to go to the primary sources of their experiences—the art and the literature. Perhaps a central argument for this study is that a sustained, evocative queering of critical pedagogy needs to occur. As I have argued in the previous chapter, perhaps one of the primary investments in the critical pedagogical project is one of critical imagination. Critical pedagogy strikes several registers: critical as deeply reflective, as non-essentializing, as interpretations of oppressive systems and (demoralized) marginalized subjects, culminating in recursive and discursive impulses that often characterize the imagination. “A key task of critical pedagogy” Kincheloe (2008) states, “involves helping people understand the ideological and epistemological inscriptions on the ways of seeing promoted by the dominant knowledges that stimulate our ethical, ideological, and *pedagogical imagination* [emphasis added] to change our relationship with the world and other people” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 3). Thus, a concomitant call and implementation of the critical imagination is needed. Here, queer theory may salvage or extend the critical pedagogical project: queer theory is a deconstructive, post-structuralist (postmodern) project; while queer theory is deconstructive, its project is not necessarily emancipatory, although we can look at the emancipatory implications. Throughout this study, I have examined the relationship between queer theory and critical pedagogy, examining the tensions between the two and where they were compatible. However, my praxis of queering critical pedagogy has illuminated its strengths and its limitations.

### Critical Pedagogy and the Archive

Instead of conceptualizing critical pedagogy as a discipline/theoretical framework, perhaps it is best to think of how an American tradition of critical pedagogy extends beyond those initial theorists who we often credit with its formation. To this end, we should view critical pedagogy as a *longue durée* that arches backwards, with an ever-expanding examination and reclamation of the past. Edward Said (1975) tells us,

[A] beginning immediately establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both. But the moment we start to detail the features of a beginning--a moment likely to occur in examining many sorts of writers--we necessarily make certain special distinctions. Is a beginning the same as an origin? [...] Of what value, for critical or methodological or even historical analysis is, "the beginning"? By what sort of approach, with what kind of language, with what sort of instruments does a beginning offer itself up as a subject for study? (p. 3)

Archives as sites of intervention are often overlooked and debates about inclusion seem trite and symbolic (Rand, 2013). As we conceive the critical pedagogical archive, my argument, then, is not one of exclusion (I am not arguing to get rid of anyone); my argument is one of supplement, of expansion, of possibility. I do not wish to supplement in a way that establishes texts and theories as foundational, but as rich material, texts, voices, experiences to be added in ways that do not feel or suggest their inclusion as an afterthought, in a way that provides a richer archive. From this standpoint, one might be tempted to assert, for the sake of this argument, that if critical pedagogy is a "peculiar" discipline, historically rooted in the Frankfurt school and Eurocentric institutions, then why not suggest or establish new beginnings and call this new discipline something different? In short, why continue down the road of critical pedagogy, especially since that

road has been exclusionary and amnesic? For example, why do Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990) and the leaders of the Frankfurt School get to claim that their modality of theorizing as central if educators and scholars have been engaged in similar critiques decades before. Here, I am reminded of the seminal book, *Black Intellectual Thought in Education: The Missing Traditions of Anna Julia Cooper, Carter G. Woodson, and Alain LeRoy Locke* by Grant, Brown, and Brown (2016). Their operative adjective “missing” correlates the same signifyin’ I discussed in the previous chapter. As veteran scholars of critical pedagogy and higher education, Grant et al. discursively highlight an “absence” of three Black educators and philosophers whose work would greatly add to many critical pedagogical projects. Again, to return to Said, my critique is not about demolishing what has come before, but to add for future scholars. And to reiterate this point, I will add that what is missing is also a recalibration of critical pedagogy as process not necessarily as product. Toni Morrison eulogized James Baldwin as one of the finest writers in English language. She and Baldwin did not divest themselves of the language though it was wrought with ideological quagmires. Instead, they attempted to supplement the anemic language with their voices and experiences and those of their communities. They used the language to bear witness to the violence and experience of the marginalized subjects of the United States. And I make the argument that they affected change not by constantly naming and defining that violence and experience, they simply reported it, the role of an artist.

While my troubling of critical pedagogy is not new, I do attempt to take up seriously Maxine Greene’s (1983) call in “In Search of Critical Pedagogy.” She discusses

the potentiality of American experience and cultural heritage to inform a meaningful, transformative critical pedagogy. She argues that while we may look beyond our national borders for inspiration for critical pedagogy (read: Paulo Freire), the United States has sufficient and possibly more informative roots for a local critical pedagogy. While her recommendation appears prescriptive, I wonder if her words have been seriously heeded. Indeed, Greene points to numerous groups who necessarily developed their own critical pedagogies, noting that these words were “imitations of what Paulo Freire was to say years later” (Greene, 1986, p. 433). Although other marginalized scholars have made important, necessary contributions to the way I conceptualize educational purposes and aims, scholars such as Giroux, Apple, Kincheloe have received exorbitant citational authority within critical pedagogy discourses and communities. As a Black Southerner, imbued with the culture of “Down East” North Carolina, we never had the luxury of imitation. Our sensibilities called for making do with the resources we had at hand, what we often call “nigger-rigging” or “Negro engineering” in Black vernacular. And this is what I think we have. Critical pedagogy is not perfect in praxis or theory, but no American institution is, given all the connections to imperialism, colonization, genocide, and slavery.

While there is an identifiable critical pedagogy canon or archive with tangible contours, I want critical pedagogy to align with queer theory to make these contours and boundaries more porous, while also thinking carefully about the implications of how this would change the way we teach about critical pedagogy. Baldwin and Morrison are mentioned little in critical pedagogical literature. And most of my colleagues would

hesitate to call them, including Trethewey, critical pedagogues. But I am making an explicit argument that we should be reading, discussing, and theorizing using the texts of these writers, and many more. The answer is to include more voices, more tools, but not just that we should be reading more literature in critical pedagogy and more literature by minoritized writers and communities. It is not simply a matter of putting Peter McLaren's (1989) *Life in Schools* in conversation with Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Let us read all these works as a part of other origins for critical pedagogy in the United States as Maxine Greene suggests.

### **Critical Pedagogy and the Irreducible Difficulty**

Critical pedagogy remains one of the most effective theoretical and, perhaps, practical tools to mitigate the deleterious effects of systematic oppression but only if critical pedagogues are willing to engage more inclusively in ways of being, truly living up to and rededicating ourselves to the pragmatics of criticality. In this spirit, I offer this study as both call for rededication to the values and possibilities of the critical tradition itself. In short, as Kincheloe (2008) argues, critical pedagogy must remain relevant by diversifying its discourses, practitioners, and methodologies. He notes that this new synergy would come from people of color and their indigenous knowledges. And while I agree, I additionally view queer(ness) as an indigenous knowledge that could greatly influence how we do what we do. Ideologically and philosophically, it occurs to me that what I have been meandering around is what James Baldwin calls the "irreducible difficulty," that the supplementing of the critical pedagogical archive may be more productive than coalescing around the vague and obscure tenets of critical pedagogy.

Much like America for James Baldwin, critical pedagogy was never created for me; and in many ways, trying to maintain that illusion is an exercise in futility. I wish to leverage my difficult knowledge-making to have difficult dialogues and debates to reshape and reestablish the field. Morrison, Baldwin, and Trethewey are grappling with this irreducible difficulty as well, privileging a modality of witnessing instead of easy solutions.

The contributions of Black writers to the field of critical pedagogy are undeniable and the potential for similar work for the future of critical pedagogical discourse and scholarship is both promising and exciting. Given my own positionality, I realize the limitations of Black queer poetics. My greatest challenge was enthusiastically resisting hegemonic discourses without being too intractable about my subjects and objects of study. Simply, I have tried to maintain philosophical and theoretical rigor while also remaining pliant to processes of queer critique. Again, I felt it necessary to strike a position that felt neither dominant nor patriarchal. By engaging in the contributions of Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Natasha Trethewey, I have tried to make space for their agential voices and my own, while honoring their ideological complexities and my own discursive currents.

Anecdotally, I offer an example of supplementarity and the archive. As a Black queer educator, I have often found my positionality and my pedagogy at odds. In a class of mainly Black students that I first shared my queer observations and readings the *Song of Solomon*. The offering was disastrous to say the least. They felt I was “over reading.” And to be fair, perhaps I was too overzealous in my approach about Milkman and

Guitar's queer connections without acknowledging my working definitions of queerness. Later, as I reflected, I had laid very little groundwork about the inclusion of queer subjects and texts. The course was about the Black male subjectivity in culture and literature, and sexuality is inevitably a part of all those discussions. After that semester, I began to incorporate more politically and aesthetically queer texts and authors. And I have not regretted it from that day to this one. On another occasion, I offered an explicit text, in which the author briefly described and discussed the first time he had sex with another man. On more than one occasion, students have expressed their "disgust" of having to read texts like Essex Hemphill's "Ceremonies." But one student confessed to a colleague that reading Hemphill saved his life, that he had been considering suicide at the time. I do not know if that student identified as queer, (and in many ways, it is irrelevant) but there was something about Hemphill's autobiographical essay, about coming to terms with his adolescent queer experience, that touched my student in some profound way. In some small way, I illuminate the brilliance of the margins that felt safe and affirming for both he and I.

### **Facing Queer Horizons for a New Day**

In the introduction of this study, I stated,

I conceptualize queer circularities (how queer theories move and circulate from project to project, from experience to experience), queer silences which invite further investigation of subjugated experiences, and most importantly, the definitional possibilities of invoking queer ideologies and contemplations, and epistemologies.

But what does it mean to queer epistemologies or offer queer epistemologies; is it more than merely contesting the norms of disciplinary methodologies. As I have stated elsewhere, a major impetus for this project stems simply from how often I have caught myself invoking the notions of queer and queerness, always with the realization that what I conceived as queer was a “local knowledge” (Noddings, 1995/2005, p. 78), that my use of the word was never universal or totalizing. The ease at which I talk about queer research and texts without any serious or sustained concerns about queer ontologies and epistemologies never really concerned me—until now. Personally and academically, I can no longer claim to be a queer scholar (or a queer person, for that matter) without taking a moment to undertake significant considerations about just what I mean by “I’m a Black queer scholar.” How might these distinctions work in tandem (momentarily, it would seem) to situate me within a tradition of scholars who have taken up the same work?

As a critical pedagogical scholar, who has spent the past few years in the classroom as both teacher and student, I have come to see these roles are more similar than dissimilar. Both teacher and student must be open-minded and employ a critical imagination to be successful learners. It also requires the deep-dive into knowledge that at times feels uncomfortable and uncertain. My critical marginality has amplified these aspects, resulting in the sensation or experience of joining an institution, a discipline, a career that I have worked hard to gain access into. However, the experience of joining the ranks for the academy has left me bereft and hungry to change certain aspects of it, to make them more pliant and inclusive, to lend them my voice. In short, my training has



not fatigued so much as it has imbued me with the impulse to disrupt. This “moral vacuum,” as Baldwin would call it, represents the current neoliberal moment in educational ideology and institutionalization. I argue perhaps critical pedagogues would find a queer sensibility useful to affect the ways our students and fellow citizens see life and the lives of others.

I sympathize with Lewis (2011) who extols, “I am what I teach: an intersectionality, an interdisciplinarity, a complex epistemology, and pedagogical location” (pp. 49–50). Several years ago, I saw a video of James Baldwin, and it changed my perspective for my personal and academic lives: Baldwin eschews the politics of respectability as a false equivalency when he punctuates that 1979 speech with “I might as well act like a nigger.” Baldwin’s pronouncement registered on multiple levels, but the one that resonated the most was the connotation: “I might as well be queer.” The appropriation of his words, a punctuated vernacularism, freed me to think about all the queer ways I have circulated in and around the academy, hovering at the margins. This study is but one iteration of those initial considerations. As a teacher I have been trained in specific yet unacknowledged ways to see the world as straight, as normative. But Baldwin’s words begged me to think about the many ways my survival as student and teacher were “necessarily anchored in my discontinuous locations” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 45). In other words, I am always teaching on the cusp of epistemological rupture. But I have dedicated my professional life—my intellectual and creative energies—to the cause of highlighting the inequities often bound up in ascribing and describing difference. This has not been an easy task because I often “feel” out of pocket or place. And as a teacher, I

am committed to an emancipatory pedagogy (conceptual pedagogy) that encourages learning that reflects various cultural perspectives and voices. And as I have suggested, the sensation is once again contrapuntal, perhaps even paradoxical, of moving into the center while also retaining my marginal sensibilities.

Working on this project surprised me with many productive moments. I have learned from this process that good scholarship cannot be rushed, the conditions that sent bell hooks and I to theory because we were hurting moves us beyond our current positions—and the peace and healing that theory provides does not arrive whole cloth. I do agree with Roberts (2014) that “Education implies a loss of stillness” (p. 380). At the outset of this project, I tried to think about my place and home in the academy. To be sure, my scholarship speaks to several disciplinary locations: critical pedagogy, cultural studies, Black queer studies, and literary and literacy studies. Naively and ironically, I have sought to situate myself in one *primary* field, to locate myself where I am most legible. But as I have progressed in the writing of this study, I have made peace with my marginality. This project reminded me of the power and possibility of being on the outside. The tendency to seek a home-place is not new, it is rather common. But I have come to understand home in two ways: one as James Baldwin states, “perhaps home is not a place but a condition,” and two, Gloria Anzaldúa explains, “I am a turtle. I take my home with me.” But I have not wandered aimlessly. Unsure of my approach or framework or positionality, I began this project unsure if I could strike a clear argument amidst the disruptiveness of everyday life. But I see now many connections between writers and scholars—Greene, Muñoz, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison; I have learned

more fully that my queerness and marginality allow me to see certain passageways than I previously thought. Which is to say that this project, in many ways, made me more legible to myself.

Finally, this project has pushed me in ways I never expected. I could have easily chosen more conventional theoretical frameworks, but I choose to push my mind, to in effect push myself towards the “decolonization of the mind” that I have argued for in this study. If decolonization of the mind or concretization, is a part of the critical pedagogical agenda, then the teacher must be the first to engage this action, to change how we see our students, the university or educational institution, and how we see that world—to engage in both self-reflection and empathy. For as the poet Derek Walcott (1987) warns us in “Tomorrow, Tomorrow,” “To have loved one horizon is insularity;/it blindfolds vision, it narrows experience” (p. 79). To do so, we must, as critical educators and pedagogues, extend ourselves beyond what we know, and open ourselves up to the unknown, to face the queer horizons of a new day.

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