



FIGURE 1. Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight* (2016). Frame grab.

A Queer Visitation

Black Unbelonging and the Gothic Phenomenology of Flesh

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What to become?" asks Horace Cross, in search of a proper incantation. At the outset of Randall Kenan's black queer, Southern Gothic novel *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), Horace's question is tragically unrheterical. Horace does not seek self-improvement or self-determination.¹ He seeks *carne vale*—a farewell to flesh. To "become" evokes release from the fleshy prison house of the soul. Outside the flesh-in-this-world, Horace might achieve what he "wanted more than anything": to abscond, to fly away, to exist otherwise.² The figure of the bird stands in for this unutterable and unrepresentable alterity. While Horace attempts to exceed the human by summoning a demon that would turn him into a bird of prey, we are faced with the cruel irony that antiblack terror shapes even his horizon of possibility. His spell backfires. As uninvited spirits pantomime a horizon forged by the accumulation of suffering, Kenan's protagonist cannot bear to occupy the flesh-in-this-world—haunted by a lingering malediction unto which only terror can unfold.³

For poor Horace, to ask what to become is akin to asking for "something for which there is no coherent articulation."⁴ That something is no less than a rupture in the ground on which "proper" experiential logics or phenomenological accounts unfold, dramatized by Horace's self-immolation at the conclusion of his tragic bildungsroman. Often an enterprise of self-possession and self-constitution, phenomenology simpliciter brackets away the carceral, quotidian automation of antiblack and heterosexist violence against bodies (and body-objects) marked as histori-

cal manipulanda without access to solipsism.⁵ Phenomenology simpliciter cannot grasp the horror of being grasped, even as it reflexively proceeds from the habitual grasping of objects whose singularity need not be understood nor seen in full as it functions. Phenomenology simpliciter lacks what Frank Wilderson calls a “language of abstraction to explain this horror” of the sensation of being grasped, used, discarded without end.⁶ To reckon with this horror in the face of the impasse reached when attempting to wrest a phenomenological account or mimetic representation of black living in and through perpetual black dying, we issue a ghastly account of *black unbelonging*. Black unbelonging is the calculated dislocation of black life, embodiment, and sensation from hegemonic categories of experience that serves to capture, to surveil, and to leave us in a state of constitutive discomfort. This dislocation arises nowhere—outside and beyond the logical limits of the hegemonically proper—as simultaneously generative and destructive.

Rather than merely signifying non-ontology, alienation, or racialization, black unbelonging further allegorizes how self-possession and originary constitution are intrinsic to the phenomenology in which it cannot properly exist. Black flesh-in-this-world labors in such dreaded intrinsicity as pure, relentless function. What dwells in the absence of a self-possessive and self-interpellating subject, for Calvin Warren’s *Ontological Terror*, is precisely this “function of black(ness) [to] give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing). Being claims function as its property [but] the aim of

black nihilism is to expose the unbridgeable rift between Being and function for blackness.”⁷ As Warren addresses the metaphysics of an antiblack world that nullifies any attempt to suture blackness as such into an ontological sum, we cannot overlook the implications of the function of formlessness—however impossible—in the quotidian drama of black embodiment in this world as “available equipment in human form.”⁸ Unfortunately, the failure of phenomenology simpliciter discloses more about black unbelonging than its botched simulation or grotesque reenactment. The function of blackness in the domain of lived experience is to serve as the object of utter devastation and devilish enjoyment; to simulate a human body without constitution; to incarnate the subject’s perverse double and rational humanism’s phobic object; and to give form to the lack of the proper.

Where Warren cannot assume black existence as “being,” we cannot assume an uninjured, ahistorical, and living body governed by human psychic or proprioceptive formulae. Black flesh-in-this-world, the product and receptor of unbelonging, emerges from the assembly line of Western modernity’s technologization of human form. Perhaps black flesh-in-this-world resembles nothing more than a reanimated cadaver given life only through the projection of antiblack fantasy. What becomes of a reanimated cadaver whose exhibition is at best fearsome and at worst oriented by a singular horror lurking at the horizon of possibility and actuality? How can one visualize or quantify the perpetuity of suffering under this horizon? Why can’t we represent the fullness of black

BLACK FLESH-IN-THIS-WORLD LABORS IN SUCH DREADED INTRINSICALITY AS PURE, RELENTLESS FUNCTION

lifedeath in spite of the choking grasp of the proper subject? What are the consequences of Horace's, or Sethe's, or X's "flesh" reincarnating undifferentiation as a lived rivenness to be grasped and manipulated at the body's outer edge? X marks the spot where even the name of your flesh might be interred. Flesh visits upon the unbelonging; it stands in relation to the constant unfolding of antiblack terror, as a form of living death, and reifies discomfort even in its disappearance. The subject of what Sara Ahmed calls a "phenomenology of whiteness" cannot inhabit this constitutive discomfort—foiled by the luxury of Husserl's desk chair—nor can it form clear syllogisms about the nature of this perpetual terror.⁹

For flesh, this terror without beginning or end germinates a negative mode of sensation unto which appearances cannot unfold with ease. Discomfort here is written in the tapestry of skin, in its tense sinews as what Hortense Spillers describes as the "theft of the body—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive [from] its motive will, its active desire," where any semblance of

originary constitution collapses into flesh.¹⁰ A Gothic phenomenology of flesh would track the captive as a sensorial object forged through discomfort without presuming the salvageability of a proper body-subject. Not unlike Merleau-Ponty's register, this flesh is simultaneously hypervisible and indistinguishable as a result of the continuous mapping of nowhere onto cadavers reanimated by phenotypical blackness. I call this enterprise "nowhere" because its origin cannot be traced in a discrete place or linear space-time, and "nowhere" because it cannot stand in a comfortable thereness of being. I want to suggest that nowhere (1) is haunted by our inability to locate flesh in phenomenology's proper body-subject, (2) cannot itself be represented in the logic of the mimetic image-object, and (3) appears through substitutions alluding to suffering under, and in excess of, the projection of antiblack fantasy.

In the sections that follow, I meditate on the impasse of nowhere when thinking black embodiment, sensation, orientation, or desire through the lens of phenomenology. First, I briefly highlight the role of proper form in Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian phenomenologies before advancing a gothic phenomenology of flesh mediated by critical theories of haunting that require us to forgo certain proper assumptions when elaborating the paradox of black life shaped by cumulative black death. The second and final section considers how black unbelonging manifests for the protagonists of *A Visitation of Spirits* and Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* (2016), who struggle with the question of (black) sexuality as an allegory for

the ineffable experience of being flesh-in-this-world. Returning to Horace's desire for *carne vale* and adding the color blue alongside Chiron's littoral figuration as a phenomenological nowhere, this section demonstrates how Gothic conventions in *Visitation* and *Moonlight* allegorize our inability to represent black eros, autopoiesis, and embodiment within the demarcations of self-possessive proprioception. Undergirding black unbelonging as a theoretical intervention is my conviction that phenomenology's form cannot be wholly redeemed by Black Studies and that we must seek alternative frameworks through which to approach the everydayness of antiblack terror.

Unholy Science: Toward a Gothic Phenomenology of Flesh

Phenomenology has been a privileged mode of recourse to the subject of human experience—even as those who cling to it in name alone often neglect its original procedures and inclinations. Often touted as the “father of phenomenology,” Edmund Husserl developed a simultaneous appreciation for scientific rigor and distaste for scholarly investigations that failed to meet its highest standards of reasoning. Essence, clarity, and rationality would generate the form of what he originally called the new science of transcendental phenomenology: “A discipline whose peculiarity it is to be the science of science, [it] must bring to pure expression, must *describe* in terms of their essential concepts and their governing formulae of essence, the essences which directly make them-

selves known in intuition.”¹¹ From this point, Husserl's phenomenologist can proclaim, “I stand above the world, which has now become for me, in a quite peculiar sense, a phenomenon.”¹² Husserl cleared the path for French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty to take as his primary object the “body-subject” as a “freely moving organ by [which] the subject experiences the external world” in response to the former's underdeveloped notion of an originary constitution.¹³

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is an active form constituted through “originary,” on the one hand, and “motor intentionality,” on the other.¹⁴ The body-subject needs an ingress into the world, as a thinking-moving form among forms, in order to constitute itself originally in a proper *corporeal schema*. Often trisected into habit body, present body, and flesh, the schema suggests that his body-subject is inherently constituted not through biological givens but through the aggregation of meaning in concert with things and spacetime. Originary constitution is therefore crucial for the body-subject to interpellate as such. The present body, given always to the horizon of appearances, is mediated by its own presence-at-hand or everydayness that allocates potentiality to it in the given moment. The habit body, by contrast, offers an alternative relation to time that does not rely upon explicit positioning within the now that is given. This is a body responsible for the sedimentation of movements, processes, and somatic responses that exceed purely intentional action. Routine drivers need little forethought or effort to perform habitual gestures and

manipulate their vehicle's gears, for instance. While present and habit subvert the natural attitude blurring their distinction, both inform Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh as a deindividuated sensorium and peculiar relation to the totality of being.

If perception names the unfolding of the world before a subject, then flesh names perception without constitutional ipseity. It names the outermost edge of incarnation that exceeds first-person subjectivity in its relation to a vague other emerging without individual singularity—nowhere and everywhere in the world: "But my perception of the world feels it has an exterior; I feel at the surface of my visible being that my volubility dies away, that I become flesh, and that at the extremity of this inertia that was me there is something else, or rather another who is not a thing. He then is seated nowhere."¹⁵ This other is nonetheless crucial for the body-subject's singularity, which, in "becoming" flesh, glimpses the absence of self-possession. Neither present nor habitual, flesh constitutes a third space at the edge of reality's unfolding that cannot be entered with the standard protocol of phenomenological sensibility nor with the coordinates of perception. It is, for Merleau-Ponty, indiscernible and unbounded by presence—a haunting in the realm of human experience. Flesh "opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things."¹⁶ The phenomenological attitude cannot entirely "grasp" flesh because inten-

tionality must remain tethered to its subject in order to survive. Flesh keeps this subject at bay by virtue of its general indiscernibility. Collapsed into flesh, into nowhere, the body-subject would vanish from analytic sight. Phenomenology, therefore, needs this distance from flesh at the same time as it needs flesh in order for the subject to appear within the phenomenological attitude's frame.

Frantz Fanon's racial-corporeal schema generates our most direct response to the body-subject in his widely read chapter "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," which begins to describe the constitution of a motor intentionality prior to the intrusion of anti-black terror: "And I make all these moves not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge. A slow construction of my self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema."¹⁷ What Fanon teaches us about this schema is that its coherence is an illusion that withers in contact with the white proprioception that "returns" his body as a negatively charged object capable only of being witnessed on the outer edge of its surface. This returned body-object harbors no call to ethics, no elevation to the level of living being: "Where do I fit in? Or, if you like, where should I stick myself? . . . My body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone."¹⁸ This inability to hide away when interrupted by the projection of black flesh indicates a dual anonymity and singularity—anonymous as the formless "Negro" of revulsion and singular as the "Negro" given at the present moment. In a dreadful navigation of the present body and flesh corrupted by this world's horizon

of possibility, Fanon can only lexify the terror of the human-shaped thing returned.

What are the implications of phenomenology's form for body-objects unmoored from originary constitution and devastated by the perpetuity of racial-colonial violence—for flesh oriented not by self-reflexive meaning but by the everydayness of discomfort and terror? The blackness of black unbelonging renders an uncanny body-object standing nowhere and forcefully stripped of an originary constitution when under siege by appearances of perpetual terror. In our Afro-Gothic reclamation, the flesh-of-this-world dwells in quotidian discomfort and is constituted at every moment by the certain uncertainty of terror. *Unheimlich*—the familiar thing triggering anxiety, so often invoked by literary theorists of the post-Freudian Gothic tradition—is another word for our constitutive discomfort. The constitutive discomfort of such perception embattles our ability to form phenomenological sums with regard to it because one cannot fully separate the incidental appearance of terror (event) from the totality of terror's unfolding (horizon). How do we begin to describe the sensation of this unholy science with the proper coordinates of phenomenology?

The proper object of our gothic phenomenology is not an originary constitution but the originary *unheimlichkeit* that precedes and follows body-objects irrupted by antiblack terror. Without the presumption of thereness, unbelonging leaves in its wake the flesh-in-this-world that interrupts phenomenology's Merleau-Pontian register as immanent, relational plenitude and instead suspends intentionality

COLLAPSED INTO FLESH, INTO NOWHERE, THE BODY-SUBJECT WOULD VANISH FROM ANALYTIC SIGHT

(the proper consciousness behind phenomenological sums) and orientation (the ease of directing consciousness toward specific experiences and appearances) within black lifedeath's "atmosphere of certain uncertainty."¹⁹ The body-object of flesh cannot gather itself in the face of this atmosphere where grotesque reenactments of the proper collapse into pain and exhaustion at the hands of the eternally choking grasp. Limning this horizon and its proper object, a gothic phenomenology of flesh engages the object of this monstrous and gratuitous, meaningless and dogged grasp without isolating its manifestation into discrete temporalizations or embracing the phenomenological attitude in an attempt to force belonging where it is absent. The body-object triangulates the perpetuity of terror, the uncanniness of nowhere, and the paradoxical containment of life within the fleshy prison house of death. In the afterlife of slavery, a dark horizon of possibility arises from our devastating function: the lesson that phenomenology's doomed integration can teach us about hauntings made manifest inside and outside

THE PROPER OBJECT OF OUR GOTHIC PHENOMENOLOGY IS THE ORIGINARY UNHEIMLICHKEIT THAT PRECEDES AND FOLLOWS BODY-OBJECTS IRRUPTED BY ANTIBLACK TERROR

black body-objects. The queerness of this queer visitation, perhaps, lies in the (black) soul's interminable resistance to being encased by the image or body-object alone.²⁰

The antiblack world of phenomenology contends that black body-objects exist in the space of infinite impasse and delay—in the middle of a nowhere that can be named—not the world, not here, not space-time, not the house of Being. We cannot give visual form or spatial presence to the totality of nowhere (blackness), let alone to the flesh standing under its eidetic rubric. For Jacques Derrida, this sense of being “neither here nor there” conditions the appearance of what he famously calls *hauntology*, which is not an ontology of ghosts but the trace of a historical timeline thwarted in the present. “To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction” of a simulacrum of absence wherein even “time is out of joint” in relation to this nowhere.²¹ For the hauntologist, apparitions of the simulacrum often point to future possibilities foreclosed by past (in)actions that

endure in the “experience of the non-present, of the non-living present in the living present, of that which lives on.”²² Haunted not by futurity but by perpetuity, the flow of time for flesh-in-this-world has been torn asunder, even as its constitutive discomfort expects terror on the horizon of future possibility. Hauntology alone is not an apposite model through which to comprehend unbelonging.

Hauntology, like many critical theories of haunting, insists upon the apparition of a specter located outside the onlooker that instructs her to consider the past's encroachment on the present and future. A ghastly image-object, the specter is bound to the horizon of appearances as a peculiar object among objects that manifests to invoke dread in a grasping subject. The subject and specter of hauntology relate to the world and appear in it; however, the latter, like flesh-in-this-world, is situated nowhere. Avery Gordon's seminal *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* raises another bone of contention. For Gordon, “Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we

separate the past, the present, and the future. . . . The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us."²³ Here is the tension between flesh-in-this-world and Derridean or Gordonian haunting: the specter manifests not outside the body but within it. Black flesh is its own source of trepidation without a "transformative [encounter]."²⁴ This is to say not that antiblack terror is sustained by its victims in psychic encounters with suffering but rather that the antiblack world's horizon of possibility requires flesh to intuit the function of being a corporeal riddle, the "suffocating reification" that precedes its human form without permitting that experience to be gathered back into a self-possessive subject, and the sense of an ongoing atmosphere of possible terror.²⁵ Even when pleas for empathy are spoken, that sense of being grasped stalks our day-to-day.

Flesh is its own hauntology, its own ghostly matter that does not require an image-object or external appearance on the horizon to remain unsettled by the spirits that cry out from within. It is for this reason that the mirror, for Kenan's Horace Cross, and the mirror stage, for Frantz Fanon, evoke the dread of perpetual terror that seethes in its seeming absence only to be found when the thing peering back at oneself exceeds ordinary constitution and assumes the burden of history. In the case of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, subject to analysis in *Ghostly Matters*, we cannot distinguish 124 Bluestone Road from the haunted body

of Sethe, for whom time is "out of joint" and to whom the accumulated burden of history unfolds spectrally as constitutive discomfort. The novel's expression "rememory" best captures the nature of time in our gothic phenomenology—time that is always converging on the present despite being indicative of the past. The flesh of Sethe, of Horace, of X answers not to linear periodical time but to terror without end. Our initial account of the gothic phenomenology of flesh cannot proceed, therefore, without a temporal counterpart to what I have called nowhere. To say that antiblack terror is perpetual is to say that it was, is, and is to come. If not to flesh, then to flesh's kin—a perpetually catastrophic anagram of death.

No initiate to the subject of oppressive regimes of sensing and doing, filmmaker Bill Gunn mobilizes cinema to probe the question of black existence in its most mundane and spectacular forms that haunt the American cinematic imagination. Many works under his direction—from *STOP!* (1979) and *Personal Problems* (1980) to the cult horror classic *Ganja & Hess* (1973)—refuse to adhere to hegemonic stereotypes of black gender and sexuality, in particular, while experimenting with audiovisual poetics that locate blackness in paradox: representable and unrepresentable, tangible and intangible, pain and pleasure. For Gunn, a continuity rather than a dialectic emerges through the paradoxes, and this continuity raises a methodological and spectatorial ethics that acknowledges a simultaneous impossibility to capture the totality of black lifedeath—in the case of *Ganja &*



FIGURE 2. Bill Gunn, *Ganja & Hess* (1973). Frame grab.

Hess—and a desire to proliferate characters whose appearance and narratives refuse capture. Diawara and Klotman observe, to this point, that “the film manipulates many kinds of ‘doubles’—scenes that deliberately match other scenes; objects and gestures that either repeat or contrast with elements of each other, depicted in linear or circular relations. Characterization, in particular, abounds in these contrasts and contradictions.”²⁶ The star-crossed vampires of Gunn’s black horror, whose supernatural doubling occurs in the postproduction dissolve technique of overlapping shots, are situated in the blur of time and space—everywhere and nowhere—often accompanied by the image of their necromantic power’s source, the Queen of Myrthia, portrayed by Mabel King (fig. 2).

In these cinematic moments, the past encroaches upon the present and the present upon the future as a reflection of terror and possibility without end. For our purposes, seeing doubles and contradictions without a unitary mimetic product conjures a queer mode of intuition otherwise known as *necromantic vision*.

To see with Gunn’s register of blackness as necromantic vision is to see with the dissolve’s nonuniformity: its mimetic discomposure that does not emulate the discrete temporalization of appearances grasped by the phenomenological attitude (fig. 3). Necromantic vision corresponds to our inability to construe alternate modes of black being, embodiment, and sensation by ignoring the *unheimlichkeit* that haunts



FIGURE 3.
Bill Gunn,
*Ganja &
Hess* (1973).
Frame grab.

us. It simultaneously reveals and conceals apparitions of black lifedeath by calling forth ruptural gnoses predicated on discomposure and beyond proper representation—a Lordean and Spillersian thaumaturgy of chaos.²⁷ This intimates the haunting of flesh-in-this-world where black gender and sexuality seethe in their own ghostly matter, dissected without suture by the tools of a gothic phenomenology, which it cannot contain in frame or plot. Ganja and Hess’s “becoming” vampires through Afro-Indigenous magic—not unlike Horace’s attempt to become a bird—indexes these modes without fully exorcizing them from the object of constitutive discomfort. To that end, necromantic vision would perceive Ganja’s ambiguous endurance beyond the plot as a fluid negotiation be-

tween life and death, everywhere and nowhere without a proper mimetic cost. To hover between these contradictions is Myrthia’s finest power.

Black Necromancy: “Nowhere” in *Moonlight* and *A Visitation of Spirits*

To think and read with a gothic phenomenology of flesh—outlined in the previous section as the nowhere in which we cannot locate a proper body-subject, a discrete temporalization of appearances, a comfortable thereness, a clear mode of visual representation, or a sensorium without originary constitution—forces us to reckon with impasse at the mimetic level. This article has not taken a Fanonian psycho-phenomenological account of the systematic

experience of nowhere—or of being grasped—in order to firstly mirror the dissolve of necromantic vision and to secondly eschew any semblance of a proper method. Black unbelonging compels us to forgo any grotesque reenactment of this incantation. Instead I contend that Randall Kenan's novel *A Visitation of Spirits*—as an offshoot of Southern gothic literature and black speculative fiction—attempts to conjure from an opaque and paradoxical enterprise that I call “black necromancy.”

Following Sharon Holland's *Raising the Dead*, black necromancy, a term that also appears as a section title within Kenan's narrative, indexes a profound alignment with the socially, physiologically, and phenomenologically dead that allows them to speak to our present, however fragmentarily, about their (non-) presence, desires, and defeat.²⁸ For Holland, the very presence of these dead, multiply determined outcasts from proper subjectivity registers as nonsense in the Western grammars of human being—phenomenology being such a grammar that traffics solely in physiological and biopolitical life. Black necromancy, therefore, does not negate death in all its forms but stages an intervention with the dead; and in doing so the necromancer may realize that they are also, in a sense, dead or moribund. Kenan's novel literally raises the spirits of the departed, while Jenkins's *Moonlight* enacts an allegorical foray into black necromancy. To read with a Gothic phenomenology, we must look beyond the given script into the allegorical, anagrammatical, and impossible dissolve of black lifedead. Kara Keeling would call this the “impossi-

ble possibility [behind] the witch whose flight we have been following” into nowhere.²⁹

Black (sexual) lifedead does not proceed from solipsism, logocentric representability, or self-possession. Without assuming a proper phenomenological or sexological subject, black necromancy brings us into communication with the dead—read via Horace's visitations and initiatory desire for *carne vale*, as well as via Chiron's scripted question “What is a faggot?” in the first act and his recurring proximity to the color blue—in the literal and littoral sense.³⁰ Whereas *Visitation's* littoral zone might be located emblematically in the penetrable veil between the living and the dead, *Moonlight's* literal littoral depicts an emblematic site of paradox and plenitude where our witch takes flight. That *Moonlight* begins with the sound of crashing waves and ends with a young Chiron staring back from the littoral zone re-asks what Warren calls this “metaphysical question” not as a violent foreclosure but as a negotiation of black flesh and otherworldly erotic possibility through which we might animate sexuality without orientation, desire without possession, and belonging without self-possession.³¹ The underside of this fluid negotiation—the queerness of our queer visitation—revels in the necromantic power to animate possibility without representation; magic without a mimetic cost.³² Black necromancy reanimates, remembers, and reflects the legacy of an unholy science in our day-to-day.

Kenan's fictional town of Tims Creek, North Carolina, harbors the perfect conditions for a Southern

Gothic tale inflected by sexual repression, social taboos, religiosity, and a subtle violence emanating from the past converging on the present and future. Unable to assimilate into this town by virtue not of his race but of his homosexual desires, Horace Cross embarks on a nightmarish journey into his own and the town's past after attempting to summon a demon to transform him into a bird of prey. Horace's desire to exceed the body(-object) intimates a corresponding need that cannot be described solely with the tools at our disposal. For Horace, like many Gothic antiheroes who cannot fit within the identitarian or moral confines of the surrounding populace, all options have been exhausted, and he dwells in the constitutive discomfort of that doubly defeated body. Consequently, when Horace's spell goes awry and Tims Creek drops its facade as a sleepy country town to become a hell on earth complete with demons emerging from bushes, dead women singing in empty cars, apparitions materializing in the schoolyard, and grotesque figures appearing in church pews, it becomes clear that Horace's eventual suicide is not an isolated event but a continuity in the town's struggle with black unbelonging. Even so, for *Visitation*, the backfired spell does not wholly obliterate the possibility that Horace's recourse to magic harbors against constitutive discomfort.

Kenan plays upon the Gothic leitmotif of a hidden family curse in the homophonic last name "Cross," who are cursed by the history of slavery in their close proximity to the white Cross family and cyclical dependence upon a religion that could not liberate

KENAN'S NOVEL LITERALLY RAISES THE SPIRITS OF THE DEPARTED, WHILE JENKINS'S *MOONLIGHT* ENACTS AN ALLEGORICAL FORAY INTO BLACK NECROMANCY

them in the direct way that Horace desires: "And while reading the Bible one day it suddenly came upon him. Sorcery."³³ Horace is, in a way, the family secret and the unfortunate outcome of that secret. *Visitation* establishes a direct relationship between the psychological baggage of slavery—symbolized by the ritual hog killing that begins the novel—and the repression of Horace's homosexual desires. He questions himself while chanting into the rainy night, "calling on ancient demons to save him from—from what?—from himself? He noticed he was crying; hot tears stung his eyes."³⁴ The inability to name precisely the cause of his torment is a function of black unbelonging's excision from the realm of phenomenological sensibility; Horace cannot distinguish the source of his pain from the sensation of it. Hence there is a delay in recognizing the tears as his own.

Turning to his flesh after hearing the “voice” emanating from nowhere, he “tear[s] off his clothing as though he were afire, wallowing like a hog” that was slaughtered earlier that day. This voice instructs him to enter his house, obtain his grandfather’s antebellum rifle—the eventual weapon of his flesh’s destruction—and walk in no particular direction, into nowhere. What is left of Horace ruminates on the pastor’s declaration that “wicked spirits possess us and force us to commit unnatural acts” of sin and cannot help but think that this voice emanating from nowhere belongs to one such spirit leading him to a “doomed, delicious fate.”³⁵

Seeing visions of the former plantations at Tims Creek, visions of his descendants’ lives lived in constitutive discomfort, and visions of his own past marred by religious trauma, Horace ultimately destroys his flesh or is destroyed by his flesh because he “don’t like life, see. Too many fucking rules. Too many unanswered questions.”³⁶ Kenan’s protagonist incarnates a certain fluidity between subject and object, body and flesh, life and death, black and gay that renders him grotesque to the plot of the Gothic narrative and repulsive to the citizens of Tims Creek. Horace’s grotesquerie manifests not as a performance of resistance but as an ability to ask questions about the nature of his suffering and seek unrealized modes of (black) being—hence, “What to become?” Horace’s fear of his own body ventriloquizes the town’s condemnation of grotesquerie and impedes his struggle to embrace that fluidity. When the voice finally compels Horace to turn the rifle to his head, he experi-

ences a necromantic vision of the *longue durée* of black unbelonging:

Men and women hunted by their own kind on the shores of a great land where the sun burns hot and the ground bears up bountifully, fully, It’s gonna rain, it’s gonna rain, and they are shackled up and loaded onto ships like barrels of syrup and made to sit there crouched in chains, to defecate and urinate and choke on their own vomit, in the heat, in the stench of days and weeks and months, and they will bring forth children who will die, who should die, rather than be born into this wicked world.³⁷

Horace’s dilemma lies in the accumulation and anticipation of terror that grows out of constitution in an antiblack world wherein black flesh-in-this-world bears only a devastating function. No redemptive humanism can circumvent the constitutive discomfort of this moribund body-object. What *A Visitation of Spirits* makes clear at the outset, however, is that in spite of the destruction of the protagonist’s literal and allegorical flesh-in-this-world, something persists and even revels in its queer indomitability—life irreducible to proper representation.

The final section of the novel (“Old Gods, New Demons”) begins with an epitaph containing the definition of subjunctive: “a mood or mode of the verb that may be used for subjective, doubtful, hypothetical, or grammatically subordinate statements or questions, as the mood of *be* in ‘If this be treason.’”³⁸ Kenan stresses *be* in this definition to channel and speculate on a strange mood/mode of hypotheti-

cal being that exceeds the “Old Gods” of this world. This subjunctivity expressed in the ensuing “Confessions” of poor Horace gestures toward a necromantic practice of simultaneously remembering the anagram of black death and re-membering otherworldly possibilities of existence outside the grammar of representation. Nearly every sentence in his “Confessions” begins anaphorically—as in “I remember music” or, in its poignant conclusion, “I remember me.”³⁹ Whereas, on the surface, we read the disembodied voice of Horace recounting his quotidian coming-of-age in the Cross household, a subjunctivity manifests around the paradoxical nature of black life persisting in the midst of black death. Horace is without beginning or end. This is a mood/mode of hypothetical being given momentary detectability through an Afro-Gothic reading practice that appreciates its necromantic potentiality, its intransience, and its excess to mimetically “proper” life. This plot cannot be contained within the logic of the frame.

Adapted from Tarell Alvin McCraney’s play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, Barry Jenkins’s *Moonlight* (2016) has been heralded as a cinematic masterpiece in the form of a black-queer bildungsroman, even though few critics read the film as attending to philosophical questions about black experience and terror. Befitting its situation in Miami, Florida, the film opens with soft music accompanied by the nondiegetic sound of crashing waves. While the sound is considered tranquil and made light-hearted by Boris Gardiner’s accompanying music, it is evident that, in *Moonlight*, this sound does not

aim to achieve the effect of tranquility. Reminiscent of the oceanic crossing in transatlantic slavery, this sound recurs at many points throughout the film when the subject of transgression is broached or when it is clear that Chiron embodies a grotesque figure in the plot. I would like to extend here the idea of the sonic operating on the physical—as in sonic energy resonating with an object and causing it to vibrate—wherein the sound of waves crashing is Chiron’s unbelonging operating on his daily life in the form of necromantic vision.⁴⁰ The audiovisual frame cannot itself contain blackness’s nondiegetic plot: the ways in which it has, is, and will continue to strip black body-objects of corporeal sovereignty and representational transparency in an antiblack world. Black unbelonging cannot be contained within the frame, even using our most powerful mimetic technologies. The nondiegetic sound-plot maps Chiron’s physical body as the site of constitutive discomfort and paradoxical plenitude—a queer visitation of black lifedeath.

The scenes in which Chiron is physically brutalized, enveloped by the color blue, or has wet dreams all reenact the convergence of waves upon land and aestheticize his constitutive discomfort. The audience is met with the nondiegetic sound not only during Chiron’s wet dreams of Kevin but also at the end of the film, when Kevin and Chiron caress. Likewise, in these (homo)erotic scenes, Chiron is generally positioned near or in the nowhere of the littoral zone. Young Chiron’s (Little’s) physical movements even seem to be in tune with the shorebound waves as a metonym for



FIGURE 4. Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight* (2016). Frame grab.

this nowhere: when Juan drives Chiron home for the first time, Chiron lets his hand ride the wind outside his window, signing waves into the air around Juan's blue car (fig. 1). In the film's first act, "Little," the audience sees that the walls of Chiron's middle school are painted cerulean; and in the next act, behind Kevin and Chiron's first exchange as adolescents, the shutters on their high school are also cerulean. During the movie's initial escape-capture scene, Chiron first appears wearing a blue backpack (fig. 4). This scene converges the question onto Chiron's body, which is thereafter anathematized by the bullies who seek to capture and contain the question itself—not unlike Horace's family members who would exorcize the presence of black (homo)sexuality from their religious, post-slavery town. Recurring blues illustrate the convergence of terror on the everyday and signify the audiovisual motif of waves upon the shore. The color itself being attached to black boys indexes both a sense of gothic potentiality in visual difference and an emotional connotation

as what John-Paul Ricco identifies as melancholia.⁴¹ In *Moonlight*, Chiron rarely transcends his melancholic disposition marked by the unanswered question of black sexuality.

When Juan repeatedly asks young Chiron for his name during the first diner scene, we witness how Chiron withholds the question literally and figuratively, as the nickname "Little" corroborates the gothic setting's naming its transgressor "faggot" just moments before. Later, at her dinner table, Juan's partner, Teresa, breaks Chiron's muteness with "That's all right, baby. You ain't gotta talk 'til you get good and ready." Chiron then divulges his name and nickname, to which she responds, "Well imma call you by your name, then." *Moonlight* later provides a similar sentiment through Juan: "At some point you gotta decide for yourself who you gonna be. Can't let nobody make that decision for you." In fact, Chiron's swimming lesson with Juan brings Chiron into a geographical nowhere to ponder who or what Chi-

ron is in the unmappable “middle of the world,” following Juan’s original diction (fig. 5). The audience sees clearly in the final act of *Moonlight* the extent to which Chiron attempts to contain the question of black sexuality by way of adornment: to keep the question “What is a faggot?” unanswered as a drug dealer in Atlanta, he has traded the awkward shape of his adolescence for a tall, hypermasculine build; he dons gold grills studded with diamonds; he speaks degradingly about sex workers with his co-dealer. Certainly this Chiron comports to hide grotesquely within the gothic setting of *Moonlight*. This “Chiron” recalls his Greek counterpart, the centaur who tutored Achilles and numerous other warriors: a perfect specimen of the human male body above the torso and of the stallion below the waist. In this way, the Chiron of *Moonlight* is also a Gothic hybrid creature forged above by an attempt to displace the question and below by the *longue durée* of black unbelonging that prevents him from truly answering that question. This hybridity does not provoke fear or revulsion on the part of the onlooker; rather, following a heteronormative script, Chiron’s appearance is natural if not desirable—quodidian if not habitual.

If in moonlight, following Juan’s Cuban madrina’s folk expression, black boys look blue, then there is something about the cover of darkness that allows such beings to assume multiple dimensions and colors that daylight forecloses. I want to think of daylight as the realm of phenomenological thinking—illuminating and deducing from the essence of all self-possessive experience (rational humanism)—and



FIGURE 5. Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight* (2016). Frame grab.

moonlit darkness as the nonplace where it falls apart. This nonplace simultaneously marks a hindrance to the secular means of self-possession in this world and a rapturous liquidity in the absence of self-possession as given. While the littoral zone also memorializes the Middle Passage and its chorus of skeletons crying out from the ocean floor, there is something necromantic about the dark shore for Chiron that allows him to interface with his sexual desires outside the bounds of orientation or representation (as constant and unnegotiable). This dark and terraqueous nowhere creates a necromantic plane on which death, eros, and sub-junctivity converge in the unfolding of our queer visitation, our magic without a mimetic cost.

The eros of black souls summoned from nowhere (from the shadow of black lifedeath) without a clear mimetic product coincides with our gothic phenomenology as a subjective mood/mode of paradoxical possibility beyond ordinary constitution or sexual self-possession. Kevin broaches this rapturous,



FIGURE 6. Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight* (2016). Frame grab.

unrepresentable magic that *Visitation* would trope in the power of flight and *Moonlight* in the littoral nowhere:

Kevin: That breeze feel good as hell, man. . . . Yo, sometimes around the way where we live, you can catch that same breeze. It just come through the hood and it's like everything just stop for a second. 'Cuz everyone just wanna feel it. Everything just gets quiet, you know?

Chiron: And it's like all you can hear is your own heartbeat.

In a moment of necromantic plenitude, of finally sensing the heartbeat emanating nowhere and everywhere around the cadaver of flesh, Kevin breaks his facade to interface with Chiron: "You just roll out into the water, right? Roll out into the water like all these

other mofos out here tryna drown their sorrows? . . . I never said it don't make sense." The two then caress for a rare moment within and beyond the haunting of black unbelonging. Chiron grabs a handful of sand when he reaches orgasm from this feeling of temporary relief from constitutive discomfort, and Kevin wipes his hand on it thereafter. The second and final caress between these two embattled souls forged in excess to flesh—*Moonlight's* indefinite denouement—rightly precedes the last image of the film. In this beautiful blue *mise-en-scène*, young Chiron faces the shore once more, with waves crashing at his feet and skin wet with ocean spray—enveloped by the liquid negotiation of terror, possibility, and pleasure. He then turns to face the camera, breaking the fourth wall, as though beckoning the onlooker to join him everywhere and nowhere (fig. 6). ■

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Notes

- 1 Kenan, *Visitation of Spirits*, 11.
- 2 Kenan, *Visitation of Spirits*, 11–14.
- 3 Where Merleau-Ponty investigates and famously coins the term "flesh-of-the-world" as deindividuated sensorium and perceptual capacity intersubjectively experienced where one's "volubility dies away" (*Visible and the Invisible*, 61), I posit the flesh-of-this-world as the flesh created specifically by the meta-physical apparatus (world) of antiblackness, following Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror* in particular. I insist that phenomenology simpliciter needs to be distanced from both flesh-in-this-world and flesh-of-this-world in order to survive as a rational humanistic enterprise.
- 4 Wilderson, "We're Trying to Destroy the World," 54.
- 5 I distinguish between black bodies and black body-objects—arguing that the latter is the object of antiblack terror and the object to be "grasped" by the antiblack subject empowered by rational humanism. This rational humanism is compatible with the self-possessed, rational subject of Hegelian and Husserlian phenomenologies.
- 6 Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 55.
- 7 Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 5–6.
- 8 Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 6.
- 9 Ahmed, "Phenomenology of Whiteness," 152.
- 10 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.
- 11 Husserl, *Crisis*, 166.
- 12 Husserl, *Crisis*, 152.
- 13 Husserl, *Ideas*, 168.
- 14 Merleau-Ponty, *Le monde*, 110.
- 15 Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, *Visible and the Invisible*, 61.
- 16 Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, *Visible and the Invisible*, 123.
- 17 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 91.
- 18 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 93.
- 19 In "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," a chapter in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon builds upon the work of Merleau-Ponty: "The image of one's body is solely negating. It's an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty" (90).
- 20 In this article I am primarily interested in meditating on the object of antiblack terror (black flesh-in-this-world) through a "gothic phenomenology of flesh," but such a study in the general sense must address the otherworldliness surrounding the paradox of black lifedeath: glimpses of plenitude, joy, pleasure, and relationality entombed by the symbol of sociopolitical death.
- 21 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 161.
- 22 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 254.
- 23 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.
- 24 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 55.
- 25 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89.
- 26 Diawara and Klotman, "Ganja and Hess," 303.
- 27 Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 341.
- 28 Holland, *Raising the Dead*, 12.

29 Keeling, *Witch's Flight*, 138.

30 My undergraduate adviser, Karima Jeffrey, whose work often theorizes through the littoral zone in Caribbean literature, reaches a similar conclusion in her compelling article "Littoral or Littoralia as Trope: Developing a Paradigm of 'Post-coloniality.'"

31 Warren, "What Is a (Black) Faggot?," 122.

32 What I call "magic without a mimetic cost" embedded in our "queer visitation" might be compared to the epistemic and speculative enterprise behind Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman's *black grotesquerie*: "a mode and practice of 'formal disintegration and recombinant gathering—the assembly and aestheticization of remains—that opens pathways for as-yet-unrealized and as-yet-unimagined black futures'" ("Black Grotesquerie," 694). I also draw connections between nowhere, consequence, and lifedeath via my familiarity with versions of the *Necronomicon*—a purportedly ancient grimoire popularized by H. P. Lovecraft.

33 Kenan, *Visitation of Spirits*, 240.

34 Kenan, *Visitation of Spirits*, 26.

35 Kenan, *Visitation of Spirits*, 27–28.

36 Kenan, *Visitation of Spirits*, 252.

37 Kenan, *Visitation of Spirits*, 232.

38 Kenan, *Visitation of Spirits*, 243.

39 Kenan, *Visitation of Spirits*, 251.

40 Arzu Karaduman mobilizes a similar reading in her *liquid blackness* article "Hush-Hush, I Will Know When I Know."

41 Ricco, "Mourning, Melancholia, *Moonlight*," 22.

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