

| INTRODUCTION |

Unfit for History

A communitarian impulse runs deep within black studies. It announces itself in the assumption that in writing about the black past “we” discover “our” history; it is implied in the thesis that black identity is uniquely grounded in slavery and middle passage; it registers in the suggestion that what makes black people black is their continued navigation of an “after-life of slavery,” recursions of slavery and Jim Crow for which no one appears able to find the exit; it may even be detected in an allergy within the field to self-critique, a certain *politesse*, although I have no doubt that this last may be a bridge too far for some. My goal, at any rate, is to encourage a frank reappraisal of the critical assumptions that undergird many of these claims, not least and certainly most broadly the assumed conjuncture between belonging and a history of subjection, for as much as attempts to root blackness in the horror of slavery feel intuitively correct, they produce in me a feeling of unease, the feeling that I am being invited to long for the return of a sociality that I never had, one from which I suspect (had I ever shown up) I might have been excluded. Queer theorists have tended to bemoan the omnipresence of futurism in queer politics. I

view black studies as burdened by a contrary malady: the omnipresence of history in our politics.¹ Disencumbering queer studies of its investments in the future, while not an easy task, at least retains a sense of the possible to the extent that it involves reassessing the optimistic hopes and visions of utopia to which queers find themselves attached.² Black studies, on the contrary, confronts the more difficult task of disarticulating itself, if it should so seek, after years of a quite different form of debate, from the historical accretions of slavery, race, and racism, or from a particular *commitment* to the idea that the slave past provides a ready prism for understanding and apprehending the black political present. In spite of the many truths that follow our acceptance of slavery as generative of blackness, as productive of the background conditions necessary to speak from the standpoint of blackness, *None Like Us* begins in the recognition that there is something impossible about blackness, that to be black is also to participate, of necessity, in a collective undoing, if not, on the occasion that that should either fail or seem unpalatable, a self-undoing.

I know that that last line reads a bit cryptically, so an example would seem to be in order. If I were to say to you, whoever you might be, that “I am not *your* Negro,” it would have to be admitted, in spite of the disavowal, that I must be someone’s—perhaps, meaningfully, only as I relate to myself.³ Not surprisingly, as that example and others to follow will suggest, James Baldwin inspires the difficult leap that a knowledge of belonging disarticulated from the collective requires.

I was not . . . a Black Muslim,
in the same way, though for different reasons,
that I never became a Black Panther:
because I did not believe that
all white people were devils,
.....
I was not a member of any Christian congregation
because I knew that they had not heard
and did not live by the commandment
“love one another as I love you,”
and I was not a member of the NAACP
because in the North, where I grew up,
the NAACP was fatally entangled
with black class distinctions,

or illusions of the same,
which repelled a shoe-shine boy like me.

I did not have to deal with
the criminal state of Mississippi,
hour by hour and day by day,
to say nothing of night after night.

I did not have to sweat cold sweat after decisions
involving hundreds of thousands of lives.

.....

I saw the sheriffs, the deputies, the storm troopers
more or less in passing.

I was never in town to stay.

This was sometimes hard on my morale,
but I had to accept, as time wore on,
that part of my responsibility—as a witness—
was to move as largely and as freely as possible,
to write the story, and to get it out.⁴

I find in Baldwin's formulations, tentative as they are, a model for thought and those difficult leaps of which I earlier spoke. This book seeks to break the hold on black studies that the oscillation between subjection and belonging has taken in the interest of the pleasures of a shared sense of alienation understood, in the first instance, as an unfitness for the world and history as it is. This introduction will, if nothing else, offer my reasons for advocating such a break.

I think it is important, for a start, to give an account of my first memory of where that break may lie. It would be more accurate, in truth, to say that it was felt rather than known, that feeling now hardwired into my critical nervous system, although the details remain sketchy.

I can remember how we were seated, but not where. The occasion was my last meal as an undergraduate, the night before my graduation. On my left sat my mother; to my right, my father; across from me, a favored political science professor, Grenada's former ambassador to the Organization of American States.⁵ My motives for including her now feel expedient, short of beneficent. I had a sense that she might like them, and they her, liberating me to some degree from having to take full ownership of the evening. I feared the night would be celebratory for them, mournful for me. Perhaps their shared Caribbean origins would occasion a sense of

mutual affinity. My parents might feel anchored, at long last, to my college experience, invited into that experience, though on the brink of its closure.

The conversation feels normal to me; at least, as I experienced normal at that time: across a chasm with my parents, and familiar in that regard; free-flowing and animated with my professor. My father excuses himself from the table, as if to lubricate the conversation by way of his absence, but after a time I am made uncomfortable by the fact that he is not here, like a splinter one might feel but not see. Eventually, we all feel it. Turning to my mother, her facial expression conveying a simple “I don’t know,” I turn back. I hear my professor: “The pride he feels for you, which he can’t speak, can’t say to you, is making him sick.”

Her words are to this day far from easy to absorb. At first, they stirred in me an almost bitter confusion. In our black West Indian demimonde, carved here and there across suburban Connecticut, the message had always been that it was cool to be smart. This day was certainly one we had all contemplated and anticipated, and for which my father had prepared me: summer science and math courses, internships at the medical school, advanced placement courses; long drives to attend music and choir camps at elite New England private schools. And yet, by the time the day arrived, my father wasn’t ready.

Whenever I mull over those words “pride” and “sick,” I can feel all over again their mutual repulsion. They name so many dimensions of the relation between my father and me, not least our mutual alienation or, better, our mutual aversion. I think of that gathering as the moment that we slide into open retreat from our kinship—when a story begins to be told, a story in which my academic achievements feed the disaffiliation that keeps us in relation. The dinner, intended as a celebration, instead marks this aversiveness as our future condition, offers it not as a state to be overcome but as a condition of our moving on. (Even now, I hesitate to tell my father when I go on sabbatical, such perks sounding too much, to a man who worked for a wage, like getting paid not to go to work.) At the same time, the professor’s words attune me to the strange gift that haunts my father’s act of self-abnegation. It is as if the goal of reproducing the child is to *not* reproduce yourself.

I am reminded, though not entirely comfortably, of Baldwin’s account of his own relationship to his father, as described in his essay “Notes of a Native Son.” Baldwin is keen to show that his father, much like other

blacks of his generation, bore an impossible duty: “how to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to create in the child . . . a stronger antidote to this poison than one had found for oneself.”⁶ Of course, from Baldwin’s perspective, it doesn’t appear that his father developed anything of the sort, having instead chosen to fight poison with poison: “In my mind’s eye I could see him, sitting at the window, locked up in his terrors; hating and fearing every living soul including his children who had betrayed him, too, by reaching towards the world which had despised him.”⁷ Baldwin slides along an arc from inheritance to isolation to underscore his father’s failure at the paternal function. The father, unable to pass on the defenses his children need, remains “locked up in his terrors”—paranoid, alienated, ashamed — his children abandoned to the world.

Baldwin wants us to focus on the pathos of this situation, marking it from the very first line of the essay as the disjuncture between death and life (father and child): “On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born.” He doesn’t shy from weaving this simultaneity throughout the essay: “The day of my father’s funeral had also been my nineteenth birthday”; “Death . . . sat as purposefully at my father’s bedside as life stirred within my mother’s womb”; “When planning a birthday celebration one naturally does not expect that it will be up against competition from a funeral.”⁸ He makes little effort to muffle a sense that the simultaneity between black death and black life, which is also their mutual and aversive divergence and distinction, has about it a perfume of literary embellishment; every reader’s task, however, is to figure out what it *means*.

I largely concur with Ismail Muhammad that Baldwin’s figurations of his father challenge the idea of familial lineage and “the logic of perpetual trauma.” Muhammad writes, “Baldwin’s writing often looks askance at biological family ties, with language that figures generational bonds as a problem, laden as they are with oppressive histories. These bonds always threaten to become chains for Baldwin, and lineage seems coextensive with numbing repetition.”⁹ In Muhammad’s reading of “My Dungeon Shook,” Baldwin’s letter to his nephew, which opens *The Fire Next Time*, “The paternal relationship means incessant repetition.” One feels the force of repetition even in “Notes of a Native Son,” an essay presumably intent on breaking it: “It seemed to me that God himself had devised, to mark my father’s end, the most sustained and brutally dissonant of codas.

And it seemed to me, too, that the violence which rose all about us as my father left the world had been devised as a corrective for the pride of his eldest son.”¹⁰ That reference to God’s “corrective” focuses our attention on Baldwin’s efforts to distance himself from his father and interrupt the line of descent. Wanting to exit the paternal function and to supersede his father, Baldwin proposes in this essay, if I might hijack Muhammad’s language, “a queered definition of reproduction.”

Muhammad and I share the view that Baldwin’s figurations of his father and the paternal relation, across his writings, represent as much a sustained working out of his relationship to history as a statement of personal biography. Baldwin resists “a traumatic model of black history” in which the present is merely an endless, Oedipal repetition of slavery and Jim Crow; a rigid relation to temporality or “narrative stiffness,” in Eve Sedgwick’s phrase, which feels like the generations marching in lockstep: “It happened to my father’s father, it happened to my father, it is happening to me, it will happen to my son, and it will happen to my son’s son.”¹¹ Muhammad and I share, too, a sense of Baldwin’s queer divergence from that inheritance, although we differ on its origin and locus. For Muhammad, Baldwin’s letter to his nephew is itself “an interruption in [the] line of descent, a familial relation not premised on the paternal.” For me, that queer exemption originates, paradoxically, in the father’s disdain. In other words, the queerness isn’t Baldwin’s alone, isn’t his either to own or to introduce. A sense of kinship shadowed by severance resides, in addition, in his father’s orientation toward the world outside and his figuration as betrayal of his children’s orientation toward that world.¹²

For me, to read Baldwin’s “Notes” is to gaze into a mirror, though one in which everything has been reversed. The disdain for which he felt he was being prepared feels so removed from the support and privileges of my own world — the cruelty that his father directs at him (“his cruelty, to our bodies and our minds”) a far cry from my father’s wordless love. It is not the feelings here that have captured my interest, mind you; it is the structure—a structure of paternal self-exemption. The immediate question is this: why should Baldwin’s father’s disdain be so closely *structurally matched* with my father’s pride?¹³ From my understanding of this structure, in what I want to propose about it, the father inhabits the pathos of a necessary social condition, preparing his son for a social situation, a world, for which he all along knows himself to be unfit.

The anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli celebrates Baldwin’s ability to

capture the pathos of a “subjective suicide” that is for her a condition of all progressive politics, or of any politics based on social rupture: “how bodies and minds can remain at once in the world and out of sequence with the world it is seeking to create or has successfully created.”¹⁴ Readers of Baldwin will recall that he often uses the word “apocalypse” to signal this simultaneity of creation and destruction, a language that reflects his earlier decision to leave the world of the church, as he once said, to preach the gospel. Povinelli prefers the term “extinguishment”: “When I extinguish I am making a world in which I no longer make sense, and I am making it without the capacities that I am trying to bestow on the subsequent generation and without certain knowledge of the subsequent world.”¹⁵ Whatever the term of art, the father finds himself in the situation, in the existential condition, of seeking to create a world that will not have him.

In narratives of the closet, however, the specter of the breakup (the anticipation of severance) is assumed to be the child’s alone. This affect haunted me throughout my adolescence: if I come out as gay, I will die in the eyes of my father, but I realize that a part of me is already gay and that he cannot not see that, so there must be a part of me that is already dead. I could choose to stay in the closet and pursue more socially sanctioned forms of achievement (I was no stranger to counterinvestment), but to become an intellectual is just another declension of becoming gay. We both know that; the affect is shared.¹⁶

My father was as much queered by the sting of disaffiliation as I was. Our familiarity (Lat., *familiaris*, of the family) threatened with rupture, it startles how easily queerness percolates out of the condition of blackness. Father and son find that they’ve arrived at a moment in which they *both* inhabit a queer time, their kinship shadowed, from both ends of the relation, by the specter of its obliteration and extinction, by its imminent severance. “Son looks at son, son at father, mother at daughter, and subsequent generations to antecedent ones with the same painful alienation.”¹⁷ The pathos may initially have belonged to my father, but in the end it becomes ours to share, as we are both living as insider outsiders, living outside the norm—father against the backdrop of the academy; son against the backdrop of family. Povinelli wonders why this pathos is so infrequently the focus of critical theory, and so do I, but with this one difference: I can see there are pleasures to be found in a shared sense of alienation, a shared queerness, emerging from a shared blackness that is

still understood, in the first instance, as an unfitness for the world and history as it is.

It would be a misstep on my part to suggest that the mutual alienation between father and son is uniquely black, or specifically cultural or ethnic, even as my narration lends that alienation all the characteristics of an immigrant story. But it would be no less of an error to imply that blackness is not here. It is, but not as we might expect. I have chosen to begin in conversation with Baldwin, in an autobiographical meditation on fathers, sons, and the intimate kinship shadowed from both sides of the relation by its imminent severance, because I am seeking a way to understand the filial world of subjects and the ethics of subjectivity (etymologically, a “thrown-downness” [Lat., *subiectivitas*], the condition of being placed after something or someone else). In considering Baldwin’s father’s orientation toward the world outside as a betrayal of his children’s orientation toward that world, and asking why Baldwin’s father’s infamous disdain for his son should be so structurally matched with my own father’s pride in me, my intention is to chart a relay in the subject and in intersubjectivity between disdain and pride, shame and exaltation, cynicism and expectation, which the criticism of black art and the historiography of black life often seem unwilling to acknowledge even as black art and black life are so richly burdened with resources to illumine that relay.

Let me be blunt, at the risk of oversimplifying my claim. I want to force the question of whether there is something unique—or, rather, too tragically conventional and absorbed—about what surely must be understood as Baldwin’s father’s *antiblackness*.¹⁸ In ways that should be obvious to anyone, and that I cannot ignore, that question is already present in the righteousness and vengeance of David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1833), from which this book takes its title: “I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more.”¹⁹

Walker’s “none like us” bears a set of alternatives that it also liquidates, in the manner of litotes, or “antenantiosis,” implying a meaning by denying its semantic opposite. These alternatives constitute a “we” in the very moment of marking its apparent impossibility. I note three:

- 1 First, there is an impulse toward the *minor* in Walker’s attempt to constitute the collective. Why not pray that none like them shall ever live again—“the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings”? What is it about “us” as we are right

now that prompts this prayer “that none like us ever may live again,” a prayer that must also be understood as an invocation of an absolute right to life? Is there a situation in which we could consolidate self-extinction and the right to life, such perfectly contradictory impulses?

- 2 I sense, as well, an opposing drive toward the *universal* in Walker’s turn of phrase. Perhaps the term “us” is not so easily interpreted as black people. Perhaps there is an assumed and impossible universality to Walker’s “us.” If that is so, the challenge of discerning the collective nominated by the term “us” presents a problem of interpretation all its own.
- 3 All the same, I feel the prick of a *personal* address every time I read the opening lines to Walker’s *Appeal*. When I read his prayer that “none like us ever may live again,” I find it impossible to avoid a sense that he is praying that one like me might never have lived at all. Can “our” disappearance from history preserve “me”? (Is that, as the phrase goes, my condition of possibility?) Or does that disappearance also constitute another continual advent given in the refusal rather than the achievement of the self?

These tensions bely resolution, yet the myriad concerns I wish to take up in this book converge in the grammatical complexities of Walker’s prayer, in his fraught semantic attempt to constitute a collective first person: my concern for the ethics of history written against the consequences of slavery, the articulation of blackness and belonging, the involution of rhetoric and identity. Walker’s “none like us” cannot be read as simple affirmation or negation, an expression of belonging or alienation. Rather, the very condition of possibility, the origin, of that “us” renders it impossible. In his grammar I hear the difficulty, pathos, desire, anguish, and frustration entailed in the effort to constitute the “we” of blackness. Black collective being finds itself acknowledged and refused in the same rhetorical act. What is more, in the very moment that Walker prays a black people—a “we”—into being, he leaves us in serious doubt as to whether that “we” can exist in history. The implication is not that black people have been excluded from history (although that will be a concern in what follows), rather their very blackness derives from bearing a negative relation to it. *None Like Us* finds purpose in sitting with this imponderable.²⁰

In the longstanding debate over “the antisocial thesis”—particularly, say, Leo Bersani’s view of sex as a “shattering” of the subject, as “the locus of the social’s disarray”—the invitation to extend that negativity to include the black case has been met with something short of enthusiasm (largely on the grounds that a certain “shattering” experience, the object of political *resistance*, already defines the condition of being black).²¹ Quite to the contrary, Robyn Weigman argues, race has been “the figure of a difference inscribed in, not against, the social.”²² Weigman asks, “Does race, conceptually speaking, ‘belong’ only to one side of queer theory’s contentious distinction between the negativity of social differences that arise from histories of racial and gendered negation and the negativity that repels and annuls sociality as such?”²³ It will be my position that the answer to that question is a strenuous “no.” In what follows then, I set about the task of drawing out the connections between a sense of impossible black sociality—the simultaneity of black exception and black exemption that Walker gives us to ponder—and strains of negativity that often have operated under the sign *queer*: on the one hand, what registers with and in me, concerning art and life, as the minority subject’s sense of *unbelonging* (e.g., forms of negative sociability such as alienation, withdrawal, loneliness, broken intimacy, impossible connection, and failed affinity, situations of being unfit that it has been the great insight of queer theorists to recognize as a condition for living); on the other hand, my critical interest in what Valerie Traub has termed “unhistoricism,” an animus toward teleology and periodization in queer studies of which she remains skeptical but that, in my view, appears rooted in the insight that we are all always outside of history, always inside the gap between that which can be eternally remembered and that for which the future will give account, inside “that divided site that must look both ways at once . . . between the writing of history as prediction and as retrospection,” prolepsis and analepsis, if you will (more on that gap in the next chapter).²⁴

Walker can stake a claim within this line of thought. His hope lacks hopefulness. His prayer reads like the hope of someone firm in the belief that black people will never have their moment in time; a peculiarly agonistic description of black life lived in proximity to its irrelevance, of black identity disarticulated from time, or, as I will be in the habit of saying, unfit for history. Walker gives us blackness as a condition of genealogical isolation.

Walker's prayer on behalf of the "coloured citizens of the world"; Baldwin's figuration of his father, and me of mine. I am certainly not blind to the fact that these men exist in three distinct social and economic situations. (It would offend to pretend otherwise.) But an anti-communitarian undertone vibrates within these examples, and only with effort can I resist hearing it. Walker's "none like us" accrues critical analogs over the course of this book: the sense of being held and rejected by a tradition, or what it means (will mean in these pages) to have a queer relation to it; the recognition that separation, fearful estrangement, is what makes relationship (makes relationships) possible; the challenge of calling an object into being without owning or being owned by the call of identity or identification, of recognition or acknowledgment. *None Like Us* makes use of that undertone, extracts from it a sense of both the joy and the pain in genealogical isolation. It stands at the ready, a tool to break the hold on black studies that the oscillation between subjection and belonging has taken.

The Scholar's Sacrifice

It seems right to inquire into when this oscillation may have gotten its start, as one of its effects has been the production of that "we" of black history, which effect continues to exert its hold on us. I would hazard that some of the first ripples were felt upon G. W. F. Hegel's assertion, in 1831, in *Philosophy of History*, that Africa "is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. . . . What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit . . . presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History."²⁵ Hegel's is arguably the most prominent in a long line of disavowals of black history and black culture, each of which, in its turn, has prompted a search for the black past.

If Hegel stands as the most prominent figure in the disavowal of the black past, as well he should, then the historian, law clerk, and bibliophile Arthur Schomburg can claim title to its signature rebuttal. His essay "The Negro Digs Up His Past," from 1925, captures the terms of what would become a century-long attempt to recover archival traces of black life. The opening paragraph reads:

The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole

becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, and pride of race the antidote for prejudice. History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset. So among the rising democratic millions we find the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively than the rest, and apt out of the very pressure of the present to become the most enthusiastic antiquarian of them all.²⁶

Credit Schomburg with outlining the practice of historical inquiry posthumously termed “the recovery imperative,” a critical ethic that has prevailed in black studies since at least the publication of his essay.²⁷ Schomburg’s essay bears the marks of this imperative—the idea that “history must restore what slavery took away,” that recovered black traditions “repair” “the social damage of slavery” and “compensate[e] for persecution.”

It is not hard to see in the recovery imperative a powerful and compelling theory of how history works—not simply the theory that the past persists in the present, or the proposition that the past has to be made relevant to the present, but the idea that history is at its core a fundamentally redemptive enterprise, the idea “that everything that has eluded [the subject] may be restored to him.”²⁸ It is the promise, Michel Foucault once wrote, that “one day the subject—in the form of historical consciousness—will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find in them what might be called his abode.”²⁹ This isn’t simply a matter of history arrayed as teleology; it is, rather, the ethic of an empathetic historicism fundamentally recuperative in its orientation. It marks, in Foucault’s words, “the founding function of the subject.”³⁰

Imperatives calling for the Negro to “dig up his past” were meant to found just such a subject, a collective subject, as is evident in Schomburg’s talk of “the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively” (far from a throwaway line). A collective is born of this inquiry into the past (what he calls “group credit” and “credible group achievement”), although the logic that connects the collective’s formation to thinking about the past is simultaneously implied and obscured. Schomburg’s recovery imperative is the manifestation of a command we have *all* obeyed since Hegel’s regrettable move to exclude Africans from narratives of historical progress—to regard the recovery of archival evidence of black histori-

cal being, on the one hand, and recovery in “the ontological and political sense of reparation . . . recuperation, or the repossession of a full humanity and freedom, after its ultimate theft or obliteration,” on the other, *as belonging the same order of thought*.³¹

Recovery has been the subject of considerable debate, particularly within the broad critical reorientation described as the “archival turn.”³² Some of the sharpest questions have emerged from the field of Atlantic slavery and freedom, particularly work focused on the crime of slavery, and the return to the scene of the crime—return not to its scenes of violence but, rather, to what is represented more often as the crime of “the archive.” In this vision of the archive, everything from state archives (e.g., records of trial, orders of execution, coerced testimony, gallows confessions, provincial gazettes) to the records of commercial transactions (e.g., account books, planters’ journals, ships’ logs, colonial correspondence) “threaten to obscure the humanity of the people they describe.”³³ The archival turn is thus born of a generative tension between recovery understood, on the one hand, as “an imperative that is fundamental to historical writing and research” and, on the other, as a project that is essentially impossible “when engaged with archives whose very assembly and organization occlude certain historical subjects.”³⁴ Let me state as bluntly as I can the fundamentals of my claim regarding the recovery imperative. I contend that, where the doubled imperative persists (in which recovery from the slave past rests on a recovery of it), it is not too difficult to see the search for lost or absent black culture as substituting for the recovery of a “we” at the point of our violent origin. That imperative has a way of persisting even in the case of the recent archival turn, where recovery itself has been viewed with the greatest skepticism.

Particularly eloquent statements in the archival turn include:

Death and Power. Vincent Brown—“It is thus less revealing to see the extravagant death rate in Jamaican society as an impediment to the formation of culture than it is to view it as the landscape of culture itself, the ground that produced Atlantic slavery’s most meaningful idioms.”³⁵

“If people looked to the past to find the roots of contemporary forms of inequality, domination, and terror, rather than the origins of freedom, rights, and universal prosperity, they might see early colonial Jamaica as home to the people who made the New World what it became.”³⁶

Tradition and Modernity. Stephan Palmié—“Even though we may never physically recover the product of José Antonio Aponte’s imagination and artistic creativity, we are left with the paradoxical record of an eloquent absence. Created and preserved by the same machinery of power and knowledge production that annihilated Aponte, the archival record has become the medium through which his ghostly voice—warped and distorted, to be sure, by the noise of multiple interferences—now speaks to us about a world of images that we will never see. . . . The remnants of the strange dialogue . . . may be taken as evidence of . . . the symbolic order on which the power of Aponte’s executioners rested and that they reaffirmed by liquidating . . . him along with his book. Part of this gesture of affirmation by violence was the creation of a record that involves us—if we engage it at all—in an almost hallucinatory mission to recover a history that never was and whose creator was killed in the act of its enunciation. . . . Aponte speaks to us first and foremost as a self-appointed historian of a past that is, in the true sense of the word, a *vision*: a record of histories rendered impossible, unreal, fictitious, and fantastic by the obliterating agency of a regime of truth that, in a perverse but consistent gesture, preserved the excess of its own operation.”³⁷

Slavery and the Archive. Saidiya Hartman—“The stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.”³⁸

Sexuality and the Colonial Archive. Anjali Arondekar—“The archival responsibility of this book, if you will, is to propose a different kind of archival romance, one that supplements the narrative of retrieval with a radically different script of historical continuation. . . . The critical challenge is to imagine a practice of archival reading that incites relationships between the seductions of recovery and the occlusions such retrieval mandates. . . . Through my readings, (lost and found) figurations of sexuality . . . are not objects that are lost and can be recovered, but subject effects sedimented through the enactments of disciplinary discourses.”³⁹

These responses to the conundrum of the archive share a figure of thought: an emphasis on discipline as the dynamic that produces historical knowledge, which is an idea with roots in the thinking of Foucault. It can be heard in Arondekar's talk of the archive's "sedimented . . . subject effects"; in Brown's focus on death as generative of "the landscape of culture," on terror as what made Jamaica "home to the people who made the New World what it became"; and in Palmié's "affirmation by violence," his vision of the archive as a site that "liquidat[es]," "obliterate[es]," and "preserve[s]." Foucauldian discipline has certainly sharpened perception of the epistemic violence transmitted via the archive in work on colonialism and Atlantic slavery.⁴⁰

No one wants to be erased from history, of course. Obliterated. Snuffed out. And most scholars of slavery are drawn into the vortex of lives lost in the very moment in which they are found, quite in earnest, out of a longing to bear witness to violent extermination and in the hope that such witness may occasion compassionate resuscitation. Still, these repeated returns to the scene of the crime, a crime imagined as the archive itself, in practice have mirrored the orientation that Sigmund Freud called "melancholy," and these keen attunements to archival disfiguration within recent Americanist cultural criticism might then be filed under the term "melancholy historicism."⁴¹ The turn toward melancholy has been propelled by the publication of a trove of important books in the field by Ian Baucom, Anne Cheng, Colin (Joan) Dayan, Paul Gilroy, Saidiya Hartman, David Kazanjian and David Eng, Stephanie Smallwood, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, among others, and finds its identity in adherence to a particular structuring of the racial other, as Cheng describes it, "whereby his or her racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-possible perfection, an inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual's sense of his or her own subjectivity."⁴² Frequently underwritten by traumas of slavery and middle passage that appear unknowable and irrecoverable and yet account for history's *longue durée*—the "root identity," in Édouard Glissant's phrase, "sanctified by the hidden violence of a filiation that strictly follows from [a] founding episode"—melancholy historicism provides for the view that history consists in the *taking possession* of such grievous experience and archival loss.⁴³ The massacre aboard the slave ship *Zong* and the Margaret Garner infanticide have proved the more memorable examples of this archival loss, although crimes of the archive at reduced scales of history have often also left their mark. Mel-

ancholy, whether in its Freudian or post-Freudian declensions, according to Baucom, “serves to preserve, safeguard, or protect the dead by offering them an unsurrenderable, interminable, commemorative lodging within the social, political, and psychical imagination of the living,” but it does so in “profound mistrust of representation,” aiming “to pass itself off not as a representation of the lost thing but as that lost thing itself.”⁴⁴ Thus, the melancholy text tends to take on a “cryptic” quality and manifest a “paradoxical and anxious reiterativity” in its attempt “to reduce representation to the exclusive domain of the nominative, to the speaking, over and over again, of the secret name of the dead.”⁴⁵ The vanished world of the black Atlantic comes into existence through loss and can be sustained only through more tales of its loss. To frame history in this way preserves faith in the lost object as a counterpoint to the past’s irrecoverability. The injury of slavery engenders a loss that requires abundant recompense, which is never (can never *be*) achieved.⁴⁶

Baucom’s account of the occlusions that mark the circum-Atlantic archive is exhaustive, detailed, and compelling, as is his sense of the problems such occlusions present for both eighteenth-century abolition discourse and any cosmopolitanism that moves in its wake: “the problem of the unseen, the problem of nonappearance, the problem of blocked vision.”⁴⁷ The task of any cosmopolitan politics, of any melancholy act of witnessing, is “to render the unseen visible, to bear witness to the truth of what has not been (and what cannot have been) witnessed”; a task that, as the language suggests, verges on the impossible. Melancholy weds “an inability to forget what cannot be remembered” to an “obligation to see what has not been seen.” In short, melancholy’s problem is the possibility (or, again, the impossibility) of obtaining a view for the interested observer understood as a problem of knowledge. Baucom continues: “The witness (and, by implication, humanity) . . . requires some theory of knowledge by which to render the invisible visible, some technology of displaced knowledge by which to make the work of witness possible, some way of authenticating the credibility of the melancholy facts it brings imaginatively into view.”⁴⁸ One such technology, one answer to these problems of “nonappearance” and “blocked vision,” has been a dark brood of “negative allegory” that melancholy repeatedly engenders, an obsession with “displacement, erasure, suppression, elision, overlooking, overwriting, omission, obscurantism, expunging, repudiation, exclusion, annihilation,

[and] denial”; an obsession, in essence, with the *failure* of something that was lost to history ever making an appearance.⁴⁹ The sustained focus on the irretrievable within the archive has been phenomenally intellectually generative, and the mutual attunement between archival disfiguration and melancholy affect strikes me as neither a problem nor a surprise.

Arondekar’s search for a link between “the seductions of recovery” and “the occlusions such retrieval mandates,” and Hartman’s accent on “the archive [as] death sentence,” suggest one source for these scruples regarding blocked vision, erasure, and annihilation in Foucault’s essay “The Life of Infamous Men” (1977).⁵⁰ It would not stretch the truth to say that “The Life of Infamous Men” provides a template for how a current generation “digs up [its] past” on account of how frequently the essay has been cited.⁵¹ More to the point, the essay sinks into questions of attunement, witnessing, and the complex entanglements of the archive with such unparalleled nuance, it figures so centrally in the way a number of scholars have seen themselves bound to their work and to the historical subjects about which they write, and it plays such a pivotal role in advancing the archive as a method of inquiry in queer and black studies, that we avoid exploring the terms of its influence at great peril.⁵²

The introduction to a book he never wrote, “The Life of Infamous Men” was conceived as an unsystematic anthology (“a kind of herbarium”) of the lives of obscure men he encountered in the prison archives of the Hôpital Général and the Bastille; individual lives that medical and juridical authorities sought to consign to oblivion through laconic statements which, in something of a paradox, preserved the very lives that would otherwise have vanished:

All those lives destined to pass beneath any discourse and disappear without ever having been told were able to leave traces—brief, incisive, often enigmatic—only at the point of their instantaneous contact with power. So that it is doubtless impossible to ever grasp them again in themselves, as they might have been “in a free state.” . . . Lives that are as though they hadn’t been, that survive only from the clash with a power that wished only to annihilate them or at least to obliterate them. . . . The return of these lives to reality occurs in the very form in which they were driven out of the world. Useless to look for another face for them, or to suspect a different greatness in them; they are no longer anything but that which was meant to crush them—neither more nor less.⁵³

In line with his thinking on disciplinary regimes of power, Foucault focuses attention on how lives that were putatively outside of history could be made to shine for a brief moment in their clash with the very power that would relegate them to oblivion—“lowly lives reduced to ashes in the few sentences that struck them down” as if “they had appeared in language only on the condition of remaining absolutely unexpressed in it.”⁵⁴ By writing in a prose that mirrors these inverse movements of power in the archive, Foucault also gives us to know something of what it felt like to encounter these “flash existences”—“a knot of conflicted interdependence,” as Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt observe, between the paradox of the anecdote and the pathos of the anecdotalist, between a disciplinary power that allows these lives to “shine blindingly with a dark light” and the (counter) historian’s attempt to clutch the life of the anecdote, which leads it to expire in his or her grasp.⁵⁵

Foucault describes his somatic response to the archives as a “resonance” (*cette vibration*), conveying by that term a sense of the scholar’s personal involvement in the lives of others. The language of resonance gathers many paraphrases throughout the essay, amplifying the sense of an affective continuum linking scholar and subject. *Seriatim*: “an emotion . . . a certain dread or some other feeling whose intensity I might have trouble justifying, now that the first moment of discovery has passed”; “it would be hard to say exactly *what I felt* when I read these fragments”; “one of *these impressions* that are called ‘physical’”; “it was doubtless because of *the resonance* I still experience today when I happen to encounter these lowly lives”; “*I brooded* over the analysis alone”; “*the first intensities* that had motivated me remained excluded”; “it’s a rule- and game-based book, the book of *a little obsession* that found its system”; “*the shock* of these words must give rise to a certain effect of beauty mixed with dread.”⁵⁶ Foucault’s talk of “dread” and “shock,” his “brood[ing]” over fragments, far from a symptom of scholarly misadventure, models a sensorium for his readers in which scholar and subject coexist in a kind of archival “nervous system.”⁵⁷

It is not hard to see the appeal of these affective tremors to those who lack “some vantage on history, some view from the window by which to witness the melancholy facts of history.”⁵⁸ Certainly, queer and slave historiographies appear to be on the same page with respect to what this nervous system affords. For Saidiya Hartman, the appeal of this language and method lay precisely in its suggestion of personal involvement—the

sense of being empathetically connected to the lives of those about whom she wishes to write. One discerns this order of attachment when Hartman reflects that “this writing is personal because this history has engendered me, because ‘the knowledge of the other marks me,’ because of the pain experienced in my encounter with the scraps of the archive.”⁵⁹ One detects it, too, when Heather Love describes the double-edged “cross-historical touch” she experiences in the archive, one caught between “the caress of a queer or marginal figure” and the “brutal touch of the law.”⁶⁰ For Carolyn Dinshaw, this touch of the archive affords the sense of “de-subjectified connectedness” necessary to the writing of queer history, a queer community “constituted by nothing more than the connectedness (even across time) of singular lives that unveil and contest normativity.”⁶¹

Foucault has been accused of tending to overdramatize his situation, of protecting and projecting an “exaggerated sense of immediate moral brinkmanship” and “imagining [his] research to be implicated in the life-and-death struggles of . . . these unsung offenders.”⁶² These critics risk something of the same. Still, they draw our attention quite compellingly to the project of thinking through affective intimacy in the archive, specifically for queer theory, not because the archive’s brutal energies “either transcend or disguise the coarser stuff of ordinary being, but because those energies are the stuff of ordinary being.”⁶³ Hartman longs to extend a bit of what she feels to those locked in archival obscurity and (to quote Gallagher and Greenblatt on Foucault) “to bring something back to life that had been buried deep in oblivion.” Love’s subjects tend to recoil from our touch (“untouchability runs deep in queer experience”), but it is Dinshaw who gets closest to affirming the broader truth coursing through all of this work, the sense in which, in the energy running back and forth across this affective circuit, the mutual implication between scholar and subject is barely to be distinguished from the sense of community across time.⁶⁴

The jolt of the archive (*cette vibration*) welds its figuration as scene of the crime to the scholar’s implication in that figuration. And through these complex figures of entanglement, we have, in fact, made for the possibility of a “we” (whether queer or black), for the emergence of centripetal social bonds formed “at . . . the impact point of a collective disaster, one at which witnessing is mutually witnessed and so forms a momentary social encounter and joint world.”⁶⁵ Witnessing promises mutuality, and that mutuality, in turn, a kind of intimate acknowledgment. The paradox

is that, through the shock of the archive (the force with which these “few sentences . . . struck them down”), we experience “the joy of finding counterparts in the past.”⁶⁶

That touch of the archive is no small matter, as it turns out, certainly not a simple matter of the scholar reaching out to touch a recalcitrant subject, certainly not innocent. But I wonder whether there are different stakes in that touch for queer and black studies. For Love, the sensation is negative (“as much a mauling as a caress”), a jolt that spurs recoil, one that is “queer” in the sense that it flags the ways the sexual past is nothing like the sexual present (again, see Traub on queer “unhistoricism”). For Hartman, it is a sign of life at the point of expiation, a symptom of what links lives prone to premature death across time and, arguably, as another scholar of the slave past suggests, a circuit in which “the continuum between past and present [is] made to be deeply felt.”⁶⁷ I suppose that I am less ecumenical than Love, less hopeful and optimistic than Dinshaw, and more cynical than Hartman.

Sensitive of playing a hand in the expiation the archive effects, I am led to a more astringent take on affective history. Over the course of researching and writing this book, I have often felt undone by the archive, unable to find the subjects (the precursors) that I seek. Time and again, I would set out to recover something from the archive and fail in the attempt. But what seemed to be affirmed in each attempt was not the recalcitrance of the past but, rather, the extent to which I am drawn into being ecstatically dispossessed. Facing up to this fact, I am inspired to craft a historicism that is not melancholic but accepts the past’s turning away as an ethical condition of my desire for it. I try to reframe the jolt of the archive—its refusal, its rebuff—as a call to sacrifice, seeing no reason not to put such failure to some use.

To sharpen the distinction I am attempting to draw, I find it helpful to rescript Foucault’s “knot of conflicted interdependence” into two distinct types of scholarly sacrifice, torqued in each case by race and the ghost of slavery. Think of the first sacrifice (the melancholic) as a kind of debt: *As a scholar, you owe that other something by virtue of the fact that you exist and the other does not. This involution is what binds us, what ties our present to the past, our present to their past; but, on account of this involution, in writing about the past, we execute our debts not in living, but in reanimating the other.* Think of the alternative as more astringent, a version of Walker’s “none like us”: *I must acknowledge that were it not for*

*the other's obliteration, I would not exist; the relation is self-eclipsing, but, by the same token, there is no alternative past that would still result in the production of me.*⁶⁸ This book makes every effort to predicate its thinking within the latter astringency.

I earlier spoke of “the scene of the crime” and “return to the scene of the crime,” and now seems the right time to make explicit my reasons for stressing return. I mean to focus on an understanding of melancholy historicism as a kind of crime scene investigation in which a specifically *forensic imagination* is directed toward the archive. “Forensic” in my use of the term indicates not the police procedures of criminal law or the analysis of evidence and the examination of crime scenes, but (following the thinking of Michael Ralph) a political calculus, a power of translation.⁶⁹ I track the movements of this forensic imagination with the goal of drawing attention less to what searching finds (to what can or cannot be held, has or has not been retrieved from the archive) than to what searching itself brings about, what is born of the understanding of the archive as a scene of injury.

Now, between my interlocutors and me, in the pages to follow, the scene of the crime as a scene of origin is, in a sense, agreed upon. What remains in dispute is the question of what is born of that scene. Were I to reprise my earlier statements, this time with a bit of reverb, the nature of the dispute should become abundantly clear. Melancholy historicism is a kind of crime scene investigation in which the forensic imagination is directed *toward the recovery of a “we” at the point of “our” violent origin*. It participates in a broader intellectual matrix within black studies that assumes slavery as the point of origin of this we. Bryan Wagner writes,

Perhaps the most important thing we have to remember about the black tradition is that Africa and its diaspora are older than blackness. Blackness does not come from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black during a particular stage in their history. It sounds a little strange to put it this way, but the truth of this description is widely acknowledged. Blackness is an adjunct to racial slavery. . . . Blackness is an indelibly modern condition that cannot be conceptualized apart from the epochal changes . . . that were together made possible by the European systems of colonial slavery.⁷⁰

The origin he calls forth generates a blackness that cannot and must not be understood as transcendent or as a positive negation of its origins in

chattel slavery. Hartman's arguments on "dispossession" and those of Jared Sexton on "Afro-pessimism" yield further extraordinary leaps in our thinking on blackness and slavery, but the underlying assumptions in this matrix shore up a notion of black selfhood that is grounded in a kind of lost black sociality, in black sociality's groundedness in horror. We are given to understand slavery as the scene of the crime and that scene of the crime as a scene of origin. But it will be my intention to show, in *None Like Us*, across a range of materials and archival encounters, that there is and can be no "we" in or following from such a time and place, that what "we" share is the open secret of "our" impossibility. Walker's and Baldwin's prose, as I have already suggested, gestures toward this secret—and their turns of phrase offer a map, or sonar, in my search for a selfhood that occurs in disaffiliation rather than in solidarity. Whatever blackness or black culture is, it cannot be indexed to a "we"—or, if it is, that "we" can only be structured by and given in its own negation and refusal.

Aesthetic of the Intransmissible

In *None Like Us*, I set about drawing limits around the imperative toward melancholy in the historiography of slavery by building a new set of relations between contemporary criticism and the black past on the basis of aesthetic values and sensibilities that I espy in works of literature and art that, in my understanding of them, strive to forge critical possibilities by way of a kind of apocalypticism, or self-eclipse. The shimmering throwaway-aluminum constructions of the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, the layered paper canvases of the Los Angeles artist Mark Bradford, Gwendolyn Brooks's free-verse poems, and (somewhat surprisingly) the recent novels of Toni Morrison: I have settled on these particular artworks, and foreground them in the first half of the book, not solely because that is what an "aesthetics of existence" calls for (Foucault: "We have to create ourselves as a work of art"), but because each appears to take on a self-consuming form in which the work itself strives to either close itself off or use itself up.⁷¹ What is more, when taken as the manifest expression of an *aesthetics of the intransmissible* these works of art inspire me to the view that contemporary artists are in the process of enacting a kind of thought that literary critics are not yet willing to entertain, that they may be enacting a "style" of freedom: freedom from constraining conceptions of blackness as authenticity, tradition, and legitimacy; of his-

tory as inheritance, memory, and social reproduction; of diaspora as kinship, belonging, and dissemination.

Chapter 1, “My Beautiful Elimination,” makes the case for a philosophical project of self-divestiture. It spies both an invitation to and a model for this project in the aesthetic tendencies at work in Anatsui and Bradford, which have been read by most critics of their work as moving toward the opposite goal of a kind of recognition, remembrance, and striving after cultural dignity and respect—a consolidation of diasporic identity. For example, in the case of Anatsui, the work is often taken as linking globalization to the ghost of slavery (Africa’s liquor market merely extending the terms of the triangular trade). But in the case of Anatsui, it appears that a contrary sort of invitation is being issued in the form of a *trompe l’oeil* error (the mistaking of trash for gold) by which the work encourages the viewer unwittingly to take part in the perceptual effect of its own undoing. In the case of Bradford, this invitation typically arrives by way of the canvas provoking the viewer’s curiosity as to what has been either erased from its once legible surface or immured within its stacked layers, a curiosity that the scholar, in any case, would be in the habit of satisfying by way of the recovery of meaning, context, or history, but that remains effectively foreclosed, an object of perpetual failure. In thus setting up the conditions for its final irrelevance, attributing its effects not to art but to a world without art (trash), or, alternatively, in creating the very object that must then go on to be destroyed, these artworks actively lose sight of their own forms. In Adorno’s words, they “immolate themselves . . . , rushing toward their perdition” and conscript those who experience their effects in a similar and companionate act in which they lose sight of the coherence that goes by the name of the self.⁷² Rather than accept critique as the adversarial inversion of terms of historical exclusion, these objects afford a view of critique as assimilation, appeasement, and leave-taking (the capacity to “*sich anschmiegen ans Andere*,” as Adorno phrased it in *Dialect of Enlightenment*: “to mold oneself to the other”).⁷³ The more muted, contingent, and relativistic selfhood I seek is both held and conveyed in this array of disappearing artworks. Why should we think we can see anything else in a work of art besides the forms in which we see ourselves and see ourselves disappear?

In chapter 2, “On Failing to Make the Past Present,” I argue that a similarly disintegrative impulse can be discerned in the recent writings of Toni Morrison (against the arguments of both boosters and detractors

of the project of melancholy historicism that was inaugurated with the publication of her *Beloved*). The chapter questions whether the recovery imperative that motivates much critical melancholy offers the only way to either have or do slave history and ponders the possibility that the unforthcomingness of the past may be the fount of its deepest political (if not human) significance. The chapter makes the case for the writing of a history of discontinuity, the model for which is again provided by Morrison, in her novel *A Mercy*, which by way of its ungenial textual effects expresses its author's apparent turn away from the affective history project she earlier so capably inspired.

The third and fourth chapters offer examples of what this history of discontinuity might look like by exploring suicide and rumor in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archives of slavery as the kind of evidence often made to serve the goals of historicism, i.e., an idea of criticism as a redemptive project that continues, reanimates, or completes the political projects of those who were defeated by history. I argue for the need to shift from a historical to a rhetorical mode, from a mode of writing that keeps reintroducing the sense of loss that necessarily haunts any attempt at retrieval to one that, in the words of Michel de Certeau, "succeeds in failing," much like the tropes of metalepsis and litotes, which involve a negation or an awareness of moving "from a *can not say* . . . to a *can say* . . . by way of a *can say nothing*."⁷⁴

Chapter 3, "The History of People Who Did Not Exist," presents another example of the kind of writing this shift toward rhetoric requires, taking up death as both the most persistent object of contemporary criticism and, in the form of slave suicide, an ideal object of metaleptic history. In the chapter I draw on slave suicide to fracture some of the presumed intimacies between our critical present and the historical past. In the struggles over slavery and the slave trade at the turn of the eighteenth century, nothing signaled what was at stake more than black death, and there was no more potent representation of those stakes than the image of slave suicide. Abolitionists often invoked the suicides of slaves as a barometer of the institution's horror while also glorifying such acts in their own romantic literature as forms of the "good death" (e.g., Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*; Thomas Day's "Ode to a Dying Negro"). In the abolitionist cult of death, slave suicide was taken up as evidence of culture, as the sign that slaves possessed a code of honor that gave suicide meaning, and in nineteenth-century medical literature, slave suicide was often labelled

“nostalgia.”⁷⁵ In the recent rehabilitation of death and melancholy in the study of slavery, the imperative once again has been to make death in slavery mean (social death, civil death, necropolitics, necrocitizenship), which carries with it the demand that these acts be evidence of something—of a culture of resistance or of nihilism and social death. In this chapter, I argue that the slave’s suicide is less to be interpreted than to be pondered as a problem for interpretation, drawing on the insight of historians such as Constantin Fasolt, who sees his discipline as uniquely challenged when it comes to writing about people who “consciously suppressed themselves in acts of self-immolation.”⁷⁶ The chapter asks what it would mean to write about figures who resist our attempts to restore them to wholeness, who resist our projects of historical recovery—figures for whom our present does not (and cannot) represent the future they imagined. What they would require is certainly not history writing as we know it but a writing in full awareness of the negativity that labors to undo any historical project. This would be a writing predicated on knowing what withholds itself from the possibility of being known, one that sought to acknowledge without actually knowing. The chapter takes slave suicide as the theoretical object of this gossamer writing.

Chapter 4, “Rumor in the Archive,” marks the intellectual origins of this project: the evidentiary problem of rumor in the archive and the tendency of Americanist/black studies critics to enshrine voice as the apotheosis of minor history. The chapter examines the first-person testimony of slaves recorded in the proceedings of various select committees that were appointed (as directed by the British House of Commons) “to inquire into the origin, causes, and progress of the late insurrection[s]” in the Caribbean.⁷⁷ These inquiries were noteworthy for providing a subject where initially there was none, and retrieving an intention from language that could have none, with the effect that a voice comes to be engendered in its repression. (Historians of slavery will often make the error of taking these forms of utterance as the “voice” of their subjects.) My primary interest is in the attempt to preserve rumor as speech—or, to be more precise, to turn what functioned for all intents and purposes as a kind of “writing” into a “voice”; to turn everyday prattle (which circulates anonymously, as many commentators at the time noted, between dominator and dominated alike) into the confessional “voice” of conspirators. Focused in particular on the slaves’ testimony that they believed the British monarch had freed them, I view their words neither as evidence irre-

deemably corrupted by the sovereign power that extracted them nor as verbatim speech through which we can recover subjects lost to history. These words are, rather, exactly what they appear to be: “impossible speech” that oscillates between loyalty and insurgency, speech and paraphrase, fact and prophesy, confession and coercion. In that sense, it reflects back to us the deeply felt uncertainty of the enslaved. Attention to the rumors on the surface of the archive challenges our conception of the latter as a repository of latent voices and “hidden transcripts” and requires that we reconsider whether the story of slavery can ever be narrated “from below” if our aim is to register what is inaccessible in the voice of the enslaved. Attuned to the component of meaning that is wanting in speech, the chapter performs what Brent Hayes Edwards has described as a “queer practice of the archive,” or “an approach to the material preservation of the past that deliberately aims to retain what is elusive, what is hard to pin down, what can’t quite be explained or filed away according to the usual categories”—a method that in practice involves, as he has shown, making multiple approaches toward one’s object, never arriving at it.⁷⁸

These essays will have their life. They are offered on the understanding that it is neither the recovery of an impossible community, nor the making of a utopia or dystopia that is at stake. They are offered out of a wish that, if some part of what I say here should catch, if any argument I make should find adherents, I may in that case have ended up creating a world that will no longer have me, as would be the point.