

Opacity, Narration, and “The Fathomless Word”

If I find that, despite my best efforts, a certain opacity persists
and I cannot make myself fully accountable to you, is this ethical failure?
—Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*

We remember that Plato, who understood the power of Myth,
had hoped to banish the poets, those who force obscurity,
far from the Republic. He distrusted the fathomless word.
—Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

My body is opaque to the soul.
—Jean Toomer, *Cane*

I.

Any narrative critic will perk up at the point in *Giving an Account of Oneself* where Judith Butler suggests an affinity between the “speculative philosopher” and the “fiction writer.”¹ This affinity occurs, Butler claims, when both become engaged in the paradoxical act of speaking the preconditions of a speaking subject into existence. The writer does so through an act of world-building, a world in which their invented characters can then act and speak. The speculative philosopher (in whose company we may include Butler herself) does so through a procedure that is, in the technical language of their discipline, *antifoundationalist*. To be without foundations: to therefore be always in the act of worlding (*verb*) worlds. The narrative critic, especially in their guise as an affect theorist, will be drawn to such a self-reflexive and open-ended account of worlding.² Butler abets this project when they propose a shared ethics between the speculative reconstruction of the accountable subject and the creative invention of the semiautobiographical narrator. While the aims of the novelist and

philosopher differ in important ways to be sure, they meet at the point where we become strangers to ourselves and have to grope our way back into intelligibility without either a guide or a guarantee of mutual recognition.

The crossroads between theory and fiction that Butler identifies is also the moment in the “prehistory” (Butler’s word) of the subject where their fellow philosopher Henri Bergson located the emergence of fabulation, or the myth-making function.³ This mythic ground for personal and communal being, Bergson posited, was a “virtual instinct” held over in humanity from an earlier stage in evolution, tethering intelligent life to its instinctual predecessors in animal and even vegetal life. To this extent, the modernist Bergson inherited the Platonic distrust of poets and could not make a full peace with fabulation, which he saw as an atavism disrupting the rational mind. Fabulation and intelligence intertwine in the conscious mind, and fabulation has redemptive aspects for Bergson, even as he chastens it. “Fiction,” the good philosopher noted, “when it has the power to move us, resembles an incipient hallucination.”⁴ Whether as virtual instinct or incipient hallucination, fabulation is inextricable from human being, a shadow cast across our capacity for transparent and sovereign reason. While this doesn’t sound like a very sympathetic account of the motives for the invention of quasi-fictional selves, I linger with Bergson’s notion of fabulation in part because it cautions against any overly affirmative reading of the imagination in culture. It is not the limits placed on rationality that draw me to fabulation, in other words, but the implication that it serves as a veil of opacity drawn over the transparent subject.⁵

As Donna V. Jones has noted in her study of Black vitalism, it would only take the imagination of the *négritude* poets to invert this hierarchy of transparency over opacity and to embrace the instinctive virtuality Bergson had resisted.⁶ Édouard Glissant, a poet-philosopher whose formation took place amid the flowering of *négritude* in Martinique and France, would underscore this right to opacity in his treatise *Poetics of Relation* (1990), at least as one moment in a complex process through which relation can be remade on more egalitarian grounds. We can thereby draw a line between the “power to move” in Bergson and the capacity of words to “force obscurity” in Glissant. But where fabulation in Bergson mostly serves a “static” and superstitious form of life, for Butler and Glissant fabulation is the very opaque ground upon which a poetics of relation can manifest. Such a poetics does so insofar as it resists transparency and instead produces an image of the self fruitfully engulfed in its opacity.⁷

But why exactly does fabulation force us to move in obscurity? Must we follow Bergson’s intimations that fictions, with their will to opacity, require the corrective work of the philosopher in order to restore reason to its full

transparency? Or can we find another version of Bergson, one perhaps more convergent with the antifoundationalism of Butler's account of the self, in which opacity is an inextricable moment in what Bergson called *duration*?

Reading Butler for the presence of duration brings us to the full passage from *Giving an Account of Oneself*:

You may think that I am in fact telling a story about the prehistory of the subject, one that I have been arguing cannot be told. There are two responses to this objection. (1) *That there is no final or adequate narrative reconstruction of the prehistory of the speaking "I" does not mean we cannot narrate it; it only means that at the moment when we narrate we become speculative philosophers or fiction writers.* (2) *This prehistory has never stopped happening* and, as such, is not a prehistory in any chronological sense. It is not done with, over, relegated to a past, which then becomes part of a causal or narrative reconstruction of the self. On the contrary, that prehistory interrupts the story I have to give of myself, makes every account of myself partial and failed, and constitutes, in a way, my failure to be fully accountable for my actions, my final "irresponsibility," one for which I may be forgiven *only* because I could not do otherwise. This not being able to do otherwise is our common predicament.⁸ (my emphasis)

Butler's larger argument concerns psychoanalysis rather than Bergson's life philosophy, but their reference to the "prehistory" of the subject suggests the usefulness of Bergsonism, inasmuch as it can be prized away from the primitivist discourse in which Bergson himself tarried.⁹ This is because, as both theorists show, the prehistory of the subject is precisely *not* prehistorical, but rather repeats at every step in the development of the subject, a repetition that is not chronological or causal so much as it is of the order of the timeless (this atemporality links the Freudian unconscious to Bergsonian duration).¹⁰

But the emphasis on temporality that a concept like duration leaves us with is perhaps finally insufficient to encompass the breadth of the metaphor of opacity, also deployed as a geophilosophical category, which directs our attention away from the funhouse mirror of games of recognition and toward the landscapes and seascapes of a churning planet. In taking up Butler's antifoundationalist account of subjective accountability in a Black literary context, I am thus exploiting a shared diction between Butler and Glissant, their joint turn to "opacity" to write through the predicament of becoming accountable to each other—in Glissantian terms, moving toward relation—without any transparent grounds of certainty upon which such an operation should supposedly occur. In setting up this pairing of opacity/*opacité* I do not mean to claim the existence of a shared theory of opacity between the two thinkers, insofar as the "we" of "our common predicament" is perhaps not yet, only aspirationally, a "we" who clamor for the right to opacity from the gaze of the West. Rather than a shared theory, I look to opacity as itself a "fathomless word," one that enacts what it

describes, insofar as opacity always seems to index the uchromatic black out of which all fictions and fabulations of the self emerge, and into which they ultimately return.¹¹ In *Poetics of Relation* Glissant writes:

Transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image. There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of *not* experiencing.¹² (my emphasis)

I will return in my conclusion to this “we” who experience the opacity of the populous world from outside rather than from within. But at this stage I want to enlist the minidrama of the subject Glissant mounts here—the subject who abandons the transparency of Western humanity to pursue a “denied or insulted” life lived “at the bottom of the mirror”—as a method for reading Jean Toomer’s “Kabnis.” I value both *Poetics of Relation* and *Giving an Account of Oneself* for giving me an ethics that doesn’t require either self-transparency or consistent action. “Kabnis,” I will suggest, also offers this, insofar as its protagonist’s failed attempt at ethical adequacy to the demands of his situation is forgivable, as Butler puts it, only because he could not have done otherwise. But the requisite self-knowledge Ralph Kabnis lacks is not of his individual history, even though this is indeed the personal history mostly veiled from the reader. It is rather a full acknowledgment of the self’s imbrication within the “whole alluvium” of the segregated US South, which I read here as also indexing the endlessly violent plasticity of blackened life in an antiblack world.¹³ Jean Toomer’s mystifying response to this imbrication as a historical figure, his withdrawal into esoterics and then quietism, may have provided personal survival, but it does not point the way toward social transformation. While *Cane* can hardly supply a sufficient system of ethics, it can repay the close reader of the “prehistory” of the subject racialized as Black.

Against the common-sense notion that the subject must be self-knowing from the standpoint of certainty in order to be held accountable for her or his actions before the law, the antifoundationalist philosopher understands all such attempts at certain self-knowledge to be quixotic. Without abandoning the goal of personal accountability, *Giving an Account of Oneself* alerts its readers to the irreducible moment of “irresponsible” invention at the heart of every attempt at seeking responsibility. The “I” who is engaged in giving an account of himself is, as Toomer once put it, “queer to myself as I am to you.”¹⁴ The shared project of the philosopher and the fabulist, then, bespeaks a felt need toward correct conduct, that is to say, toward accountability and self-narration in a chaotic world in whose violence one is,

perhaps, complicit. In this project of ethics, both philosopher and fabulist must display a sympathy for the opacity in themselves, insofar as this sympathy is, in Butler's deconstructive argument, the only possible route toward forgiveness for one's actions.

In what follows, I want to fathom this fathomless word through the tortured predicament of Ralph Kabnis, the protagonist of the semiautobiographical short story "Kabnis" by Jean Toomer. Because blackness was invented as a violent imposition, the pursuit of selfhood has been a major theme in Black life and letters. The terms of this self-fashioning, however, are themselves premised on both quotidian and exceptional violence, as Saidiya Hartman has shown.¹⁵ "Kabnis" is the third and final section of Toomer's experimental novel *Cane*, which did not find a popular audience upon publication in 1923, but has since become a touchstone in the canon of African American modernism. The problem that *Cane* presents to the philosopher of self-accountability lies in Toomer's famously vexed relation to his Black heritage. Even as *Cane* has been canonized, Toomer has himself been held to be a persistent disappointment for his refusal to be a "race man," and for his subsequent turn to Gurdjieffian mysticism (for which he was savagely lampooned by Langston Hughes in *The Big Sea*) and then to Quaker silence. The claim that "Kabnis" is semiautobiographical rests on contextual similarities in the stories of the fictional Ralph Kabnis and the historical Jean Toomer. And it is underscored, as we shall see, in the ordeal to which both are subjected (an ordeal they, in different ways, fail). This ordeal—which Hughes named "the racial mountain"—was for Toomer/Kabnis a series of nightmarish images outpacing every human effort to outrun them.¹⁶

Butler's account of subjective opacity as the precondition for compassion can be enlisted, I will suggest, in a reparative reading of Toomer as a fabulist of these Southern horrors.¹⁷ Why so? If a common investigation into the sources of the self and its conduct leads, by necessity, into a speculative quagmire, then Butler's account might help us understand why the writer of fictions chooses to linger there, building imaginary worlds, whereas the critical theorist is bound to depart for more systematic terrain. Linger in the negative, lurking in the subsoil of personality, risking incipient hallucinations: what role, if any, does all this have in the living of an ethical life? Fiction here helps answer a question that theory can only pose rhetorically.

Rhetoric is indeed an important theme in "Kabnis," which concerns a group of folks involved in the education and uplift of Black folk in rural Georgia, far from the New Negro Renaissance in Washington, DC, and New York City. Ralph Kabnis, a Northerner among them, comes from a line of

rhetoricians. But when this lineage is conflated by others with the effusive shouting of the country preacher, he is withering in his response:

Na. Preachers hell. I didnt say wind-busters. Y misapprehended me. Y understand what that means, dont y? All right then, y misapprehended me. I didnt say preachers. I said orators. ORATORS. Born one an I'll die one.¹⁸

We encounter Kabnis here in one of his states of inebriation, his slurred speech dramatically showcasing the declension from any family line of orators in the distance between that eloquence and his own ineloquent speech acts in this particular moment. His haughty repetition of “misapprehended” performs what it presupposes: a radical disconnect between his elevated social station and the group he has come to uplift. Kabnis will refuse, over the course of the story, to provide a full account of himself or otherwise justify his presence as a light-skinned, Northern man, teaching in this Black school in rural Georgia. But he does here make a distinction between preaching and oratory that clues us into some quasi-autobiographical elements in his fictional makeup. Jean Toomer also came from a line of orators, the most prominent of whom, his grandfather P. B. S. Pinchback, was the first Black governor of the state of Louisiana. To note this is not to conflate Toomer with his literary creation Kabnis (the ironic distance from whose speech Toomer could hardly have produced if he had too closely identified with him). It is rather to point out how Toomer, through Kabnis, associates rhetoric with the recent trauma of Reconstruction and specifically with the careers of Black politicians. The recent past is opaque to Kabnis, in short, because he is pursued by an unspeakable terror, a terror that is underscored early on in the story when a stone is thrown at his window, with a note attached that reads, in so many words: *nigger you better run*.

Kabnis, drunk and traumatized, cannot give an account of himself. But delirium tremens is not the primary source of either his nightmares or the fractured narrative structure of his tale, which holds at its center the revelation of a horrific lynching of a Black woman and her child. It is just after the men tell him what happened to Mame Lamkins, assuring him that the local whites don't care if Black folk talk among each other about the lynching, “jes so long as nothing comes of it” when the stone lands. This sets Kabnis fleeing in panic, pursued by imaginary bloodhounds, until he is cornered in a cabin. His friends Halsey and Laymen find him and have to talk him down from the traumatic flashback to slavery he has just had. Halsey is hardly that reassuring when he tells Kabnis:

These aint th days of hounds an Uncle Tom's Cabin, feller. White folks aint in fer all them theatrics these days. Theys more direct than that. If what they wanted was t get y, theyd have just marched right in an took y where y sat. (125)

How does one give an account of oneself when the prehistory that disrupts it is of the order of a secondary trauma? When the consolation that hounds are not really on your trail is that, if the white folks really wanted to get you, you would already be dead?

II.

When Butler, in my epigraph, asks anxiously whether or not the price of opacity is a certain dereliction of ethical duty, the question is almost but not quite rhetorical. Or rather, its rhetoric is of the variety that identifies a permanent mark or stain at the heart of the rhetorical enterprise: the place where the orator is potentially subject to a crisis of faith, his persuasive speech breaking down in the face of the intractable demands of living an ethical life. That is to say, it is a question that eats at Ralph Kabnis, or should. But for Kabnis, the demands of ethical living surface both in his responsibility toward the other but also, closer to the knives, in the awareness that this responsibility springs from the other as the target of gratuitous violence.¹⁹ His predicament as a blackened subject is not so much to justify himself, but to have been prejudged to be a dangerous irritant to white supremacy and to experience his life as, in that very moment, forfeit. The interpellation “run nigger” is ontologically different from “Hey you!” even when both are spoken by someone voicing the police power of the state.²⁰

When Kabnis darts off in alarm at the only warning he ever expects to receive, Toomer writes that he turns into a “scarecrow replica” of himself, “awkwardly animate” as he “caroms” down the road. This replica of a human, reduced not just to his skin but to the manner in which it is “fantastically plastered with red Georgia mud,” has been violently reduced to an object among objects, a killable object (123). What consciousness manifests is reduced to the consciousness of prey. He is rendered plastic, or infrahuman.²¹ As prey, he cannot consider his ethical duty while in flight from this cynegetic (manhunting) power.²² The incapacity to formulate an ethical response to unethical violence leaves him without coherence by the end of the story, an unredeemed man. The formal challenge for Toomer is how to convey the pressure that this prey consciousness places on efforts at stable and coherent self-narration. His achievement lies in rendering the fractured and disjointed tale of the high-minded Ralph Kabnis’s descent into drunken promiscuity as a powerful indictment of the segregation and racial terror that stunted Black lives under Jim Crow.

Kabnis travels to Georgia to uplift his race, only to find himself losing his sense of identity in a wash of terror and self-loathing. Neither Black nor white folk want the race to be uplifted to the nonplace Kabnis seems to

occupy, tethered by race to a folk culture from which he must at all costs hold himself aloof. Thwarted masculinity figures centrally in this crisis, both in the humiliation of Black men failing to protect “their” women and in the loosening of Kabnis’s chastity when faced with sexual temptation. It would be wrong to gloss over those passages in this story that ring glaringly patriarchal now. Toomer’s imagism risks conflating the violated body of the Black mother with nature, in lines like “Night, soft belly of a pregnant Negress, throbs evenly against the torso of the South” (140). This line, which appears to render the landscape as a white male rapist of the Black sky, figures morning itself as another trauma.

But Toomer’s language is also an attempt—at the formal level—to evade the constraints of the protest novel (“these aint the days . . . of Uncle Tom’s Cabin”) and to give a thicker account of the self as untrustworthy narrator of itself. If Kabnis’s opacity appears as the story begins in a certain reticence to stoop to the level of the community he has arrived to uplift, it ends in the sodden blankness of a would-be “artist” and bohemian rejecting work for bouts of drink. Willed opacity becomes the route both to moral degradation and a *via negativa* of poetic insight. While it would be wrong to read this simply as a morality tale, the tragic dimensions of Kabnis do presage the subsequent career of Toomer, who does not end up a sodden wreck like Kabnis, but only at the cost of projecting onto that wreck all the characteristics that a repudiation can conjure.²³ That Toomer presents so naked a confession is almost devastating, except that his painterly command of prose never leaves the careful reader in doubt that every effect produced in the story has been patiently placed there by its writer.

The last thing Toomer intends, then, is to offer up Kabnis as his own “true” self. And yet there is a truth produced by his story nonetheless. What is this truth, and how does it relate to the account of the subject that Butler prescribes as the vehicle for an ethical life? Ethics here should be understood as the conduct of conduct, rather than as a rigid grid of moral rules followed out of superstitious obedience. But ethics cannot take flight above morality entirely, and ultimately does not so much abandon the principle of consistency as project onto an elsewhere. The novelist and the philosopher differ, that is to say, less in their devotion to the truth than in the audience their rhetoric addresses. Novelistic fabulation addresses the people who are missing, whereas moral philosophy must address the people who are present, address their aspirations toward self-consistency.

I value *Giving an Account of Oneself* for its representing an unaccountably accountable subject, a subject who must be, somehow, “forgiven” for appearing before the law without first getting her story straight. But how can the prehistory of this scandalously speaking subject be spoken? Only through a stuttering interruption: “That prehistory interrupts the story I

have to give of myself, makes every account of myself partial and failed, and constitutes, in a way, my failure to be fully accountable for my actions, my final ‘irresponsibility,’ one for which I may be forgiven *only* because I could not do otherwise” (78, my emphasis). I linger on that *only*. The sole forgiveness, the passage infers, comes through a constitutive failure to “do otherwise”: a sterile ground of involuntary compulsion seemingly found at last, at the bottom of performative antifoundationalism.

What role does race play in this rock bottom of subjectivity and performative antifoundationalism? To look for the truth of race is surely a fool’s errand. But to ignore the place of blackness in the genesis of any subject whatsoever would be equally unwise. Toomer, notoriously, had a complicated relationship with his Black heritage. The child of a former slave father and a mother from the Black Washington elite, Toomer saw himself as a harbinger of a new race beyond Black or white, while often passing, for practical purposes, as white or, at the very least, not Black. Ralph Kabnis shares biographical details with Toomer: he is a light-skinned Northerner teaching in a Black school in Georgia, grappling with the tension between the folkish beauty of his surroundings and the horrors of white supremacy and lynching. Like Toomer, Kabnis is at one point in the story marked as a “queer bird” by another character, a term that connoted shiftiness, suspicious designs, and an inexplicable background as much as it did the presence of same-sex desire. Kabnis explodes at one point at the demand that his presence in this community be accounted for:

Whatsha keep lookin for? I’m Ralph Kabnis. Aint that enough f y? Want th whole family history? Its none of your godam business, anyway. Keep off me. Do y hear? Keep off me. (145)

Kabnis defiantly asserts the right to opacity in the context of a community so terrorized by lynch law that the agenda of outside do-gooders like himself is automatically suspect. But he does so in ways that only underscore his queerness, his lack of fit, within the community he ostensibly wishes to enter. The gaze of the community on Kabnis (a Black gaze, perhaps, following Tina Campt) is a gaze that Kabnis experiences as intolerable.²⁴ It’s a gaze that is not satisfied with his name, his “Ralph Kabnis,” his “I am.” That gaze demands something deeper, which he cannot or will not give, and which therefore produces a violent counteraction: “keep off me.”

It is hardly enough to point out the optical resemblance of opacity and blackness, which is in any case not quite an identity, insofar as an opaque physical substance can but need not be black. The right to opacity, it therefore follows, includes but is not limited to Black folk, even as we who are dark possess, are dispossessed by, a peculiar relationship to opacity. This peculiar relationship to (and pecuniary interest in) opacity begins but does not end

with the metaphorical extension of blackness to some but not all human beings, resulting in the phenomenon of what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson has helpfully specified as *blackened* life.²⁵ What does it mean to be not just Black but *blackened*, to experience one's Black being—which Calvin Warren would claim can only ever be a being under erasure—as the consequence of a violent imposition that is both arbitrary and ineluctable, the result of a historical and ongoing doing, in other words, as much as a being?²⁶

If we reflect on the violence of blackening as a quite literal *denigration* (blackening) of Black life, the right to opacity appears quite specifically as the right of the rightless—not simply the right to have rights, which are embedded (however problematically) within the procedures of civil order, but a right to remain outside of and opaque to the civil order that demands, as its price of entry, the presentation of a transparent subject. The right to opacity is a distortion and even an etiolation of the philosophy of rights, a wound that keeps reopening in the febrile heart of liberalism.²⁷

The phenomenology of the nonsovereign self that Butler mounts in *Giving an Account of Oneself* is one that strives toward a common ground for ethics, indexed by the “we” in one of their most well-known maxims: “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.”²⁸ While it’s tempting to attend to the rhetoric of “undoing” here—insofar as it corroborates the rhetoric of forgiveness in Butler’s account of opacity—I want to instead focus on the “we.” The “we” who must “face it,” we who are drawn into this exercise of recognition, must already expect mutuality, if not universality. The thing we are missing, when we miss out on that mutuality, is the richness of a full, human life, no easy wealth to relinquish. But for this full human life to be possible, even conditionally, for the blackened, another opacity must enclose and bedevil it: a nonreflective opacity that is uchromatic, a blackness outside the dialectic of self and other. This blackness also forms the prehistory of the subject of which Butler must give an inevitably partial account. In suggesting this, my intention is neither to take Butler to task from the perspective of blackness, nor to reconcile the scandal of the speaking Black body with the fallibilistic account of the subject that Butler has so compellingly provided. Foregoing these two facile options, I suggest we instead pursue, like Ralph Kabnis, the *via negativa* of embracing the opacity that exceeds any account of the subject, including my own.²⁹

Notes

1. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York, 2005), 78. For purposes that will hopefully become apparent, this essay does not distinguish between

- poetry and fiction. Rather than investigate their differences, it studies their shared origins in (i) the visionary faculty and (ii) the exercise of world-building. It is fully granted that much (most?) actually existing poetry and fiction will fall well outside the assumed forms of fabulation as it is presented in this model, the power of which lies, I would counter, not in its exactitude, but precisely in its approximation. On autotheory, see Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York, 2017).
2. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC, 2007).
 3. Henri Louis Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (London, 1935).
 4. *Ibid.*, 89.
 5. In other words, I endorse Gilles Deleuze's remark that we must learn to give Bergson's concept of fabulation a *political* meaning; Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis, 1997), originally published as *Critique et Clinique* in French in 1993.
 6. Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity* (New York, 2010).
 7. On the transparent versus the engulfable subject, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis, 2007). The engulfable subject is the subject of opacity, understood here as the subject whose only source of protection from the violence of transparency is its potential immersion into opaque terrain.
 8. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 78–79.
 9. Ronald Bogue, *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History* (Edinburgh, 2010).
 10. The simplest way of explaining the distinction is to understand the unconscious as pertaining to the individual human subject, and duration as a property shared in common among living and nonliving objects persisting in time.
 11. François Laruelle, "On the Black Universe in the Human Foundations of Color," in *Hyun Soon Choi: Seven Large-Scale Paintings*, trans. Miguel Abreu (New York, 1991), 2–4.
 12. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, 1997), 111.
 13. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York, 2020).
 14. As quoted in Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC, 2000), 136.
 15. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997).
 16. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *Nation*, 23 June 1926.
 17. On reparative reading, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC, 2003).
 18. Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York, 2019), 149. All subsequent references will be parenthetical in text.
 19. Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC, 2010).
 20. Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).
 21. Jackson, *Becoming Human*; Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race* (London, 2004).
 22. Grégoire Chamayou, *Manhunts: A Philosophical History* (Princeton, 2012).
 23. What I mean here is that Toomer and his autofictional surrogate part ways at the end of the story and its publication, and in this sense Toomer is not, nor

- does he become, Kabnis. Rather, his literary career is haunted by his own thwarted immersion in the folk, a subject handled expertly in Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr, *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History* (Philadelphia, 1998).
24. Tina Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, MA, 2021).
 25. Jackson, *Becoming Human*.
 26. Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham, NC, 2018).
 27. Fred Moten has done more than almost anyone in recent letters to give this wound a poetics, inheriting (however agonistically) Frantz Fanon's intention to conduct a "lysis of the morbid body" of the full pathology of sovereign and singular being; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, 2008), xiv. See, for example, Moten's trilogy, *consent not to be a single being* (Durham, NC, 2017).
 28. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York, 2006), 23.
 29. I am arguing here, in other words, for a convergence of theories of opacity and theories of blackness. I recognize that this cuts against the thrust of Glissant, whose oeuvre moves from an early exposure to négritude to a mature championing of créolité, before culminating in a poetics of relation in which opacity appears as a "right" of the minor subject that must be "respected"; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 194. Unfortunately, aspects of this right then acquire culturalist associations, and then, finally, the whole matter is reduced to the anthropocentric question of literary translation and translatability. Restoring the radical and uchronic usage of opacity could afford Black study the opportunity to restore its usefulness as an account of what blackness "is," which is to say, a tentatively ontological or, better, a paraontological account of blackness that is stripped of any lingering consolations of culture. On paraontological blackness, see Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York, 2014).